

CORPORATE SOCIAL ADVOCACY AND RACIAL JUSTICE: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS  
OF DOVE'S CROWN ACT CAMPAIGN

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# CORPORATE SOCIAL ADVOCACY AND RACIAL JUSTICE: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF DOVE'S CROWN ACT CAMPAIGN

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis explores how Dove's CROWN Act campaign utilized corporate social advocacy (CSA) to challenge or reinforce dominant racial, gender, and cultural norms while positioning itself as an advocate for Black women. A critical textual analysis was conducted of Dove's web-based campaign materials, and Critical Race Theory (CRT) was used as a framework, focusing on core tenets such as: counter-storytelling, interest convergence, whiteness as property, and intersectionality. The findings demonstrate that Dove's campaign actively works to disrupt Eurocentric beauty standards and hair discrimination by centering the lived experiences of Black women and girls, supporting and promoting legislative action and engagement, and using multimedia storytelling and statistical research to inform and raise awareness about hair discrimination. However, the analysis also reveals moments where Dove's advocacy efforts reinforced dominant narratives and reflected corporate interests. This suggests the presence of interest convergence. Although Dove's campaign represents a notable example of corporate involvement in racial equity, it also highlights the complexity and limitations of corporate driven change.

## Introduction

“Gender, race, and cultural differences, resulting in inequality are among the real-world problems today’s corporate organizations must confront” (Waymer & Logan, 2021, p.2). While many brands engage in surface level advocacy, only few companies have gone as far as supporting legislation in their advocacy efforts to tackle social issues, and even fewer have succeeded in driving legislative change. Dove’s CROWN Act campaign is a notable exception. By actively supporting efforts to end hair discrimination, Dove co-created policy at both state and federal levels, showcasing how corporations can leverage their platforms for meaningful societal impact. Additionally, Dove’s campaign exemplifies a commitment to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) by challenging narrow beauty standards and advocating for the rights and representation of marginalized communities.

However, corporations do not always represent women or people of color equally within their media. López (2020) analyzed the images posted on fashion brands platforms such as Nike, H&M, and Dolce & Gabbana, and discovered that the visual and textual elements used in promotional material can perpetuate and reinforce White supremacy and power structures and ignore the culture and history of people of color. For example, Dolce & Gabbana posted an ad on social media that was deemed explicitly racist, sexist and derogatory towards Chinese lifestyle by Internet users. The study details that the ad's voiceover mocked Chinese speech, ridiculed Chinese women in a sexual manner, and portrayed the female main as submissive and dumbfounded. In the ad, she is using chopsticks while being taught how to eat pizza properly by the male narrator. Sexual connotations are being implied as she is laughing and submissively obeying orders from the narrator. This ad was heavily criticized and disrespectful to the Chinese community, the intended audience of their advertisement. “The point of view of this ad is

mocking Chinese culture and reproducing White supremacy by showing Italian culture as more educated than the Chinese one” (López, p. 39, 2020). The study pushes brands to conduct research on the portrayals of cultural identities to better represent people of different ethnicities.

Previous studies such as (Fairchild & Petrzelka, 2020) have also highlighted the lack of representation on organization’s social media sites such as USDA. The study analyzed the USDA’s Facebook and found significant racial and gender disparities on the social media platform. One of the analyses revealed that 58% of the primary individuals in the photographs were white males, 25% white females, and 8% focus equally on males and females of color (Fairchild & Petrzelka, p.5, 2020). Another analysis revealed that white men were approximately three times as likely as white women to be represented in an agency representative role, 11 times more likely than a male of color, and 13 times more likely than a female of color (Fairchild & Petrzelka, p.6, 2020).

It is imperative that organizations leverage such insights to align their corporate social advocacy (CSA) strategies with the expectations of their audience (Aydin et al., 2021). Dodd and Supa (2014) define corporate social advocacy as a company’s public stance on a contentious social-political issue unrelated to their business operations. Corporate social advocacy (CSA) has become more prominent and demanded in the last several years (DiRusso et al., 2022). Consumers are now choosing to support brands that align with their core beliefs and push brands to take a stance on sociopolitical issues (DiRusso et al., 2022). Corporate social advocacy efforts can take various forms. Companies like Ben & Jerry’s have created new product launches, released press statements, and hosted events in support of causes like racial justice and climate change. Many corporations have engaged in CSA, voicing their stances on social causes via several media platforms. However, not all CSA practices are effective. “Contentious social

issues need more concrete actions, instead of cause promotional efforts, to achieve meaningful changes for marginalized communities” (Shi, 2022, p.19).

Corporate social advocacy is a practice that comes with significant challenges. It is a relatively new practice that brands are wary of engaging in because of the impact it can have on an organization’s image and sales revenue (Park & Jiang, 2020). When companies unsuccessfully address marginalized communities, this can negatively impact a brand’s reputation, image, and relationship with consumers (Shao et al., 2022). CSA can influence stakeholders’ thoughts, emotions, and actions, and may entail potential benefits and risks due to the controversy of CSA-related issues (Hong & Li, 2020). Some companies have previously faced backlash when trying to address sensitive issues such as abortion, racial inequality, and LGBTQ+ rights. A notable example is Pepsi’s Kendall Jenner commercial that attempted to address racism and police brutality. The commercial was released in 2017 during the heights of the Black Lives Matter movement, notably after several high-profile cases of police brutality. The company’s commercial was viewed as inaccurate and out of touch. Many critics took to social media to voice their complaints about the commercial, deeming it exploitative of the movement. On the day PepsiCo's commercial aired, 53.3% of social media sentiment was negative, which increased to 58.6% the following day. Furthermore, in 2016, PepsiCo's brand value declined by 4%, as reported by MarketWatch (WPSU - Penn State Public Media). Pepsi apologized and immediately pulled the commercial, costing PepsiCo millions of dollars (Adams, 2020).

Much research such as Hong and Li (2020), Dodd and Supa (2014), and Waymer and Logan (2021) have addressed the risks of CSA but less is understood on how websites are used as a medium for companies to promote CSA efforts. Schulz (2017) identified gaps in

understanding how brands authentically engage with sociopolitical issues and how CSA influences societal attitudes. Additionally, there is a lack of research on the communication strategies organizations utilize to advocate sociopolitical issues (Shi, 2022) and represent diverse consumer segments.

PepsiCo serves as an example of missteps in CSA efforts aimed at addressing marginalized communities. These missteps can impact a brand's reputation, image, and relationship with consumers. More scholarly research should be done so companies can understand how marginalized communities perceive and engage with CSA efforts. Such research will also demonstrate how companies can best advocate for, represent, and communicate with these consumers. Having a deeper understanding of marginalized communities will help companies better address nuanced systemic issues. It will aid companies in how to amplify their marginalized customers' voices. In general, CSA communication deserves more scholarly attention due to its impact and cultural significance.

Dove's CROWN Act campaign is one of the more successful examples of CSA as it produced tangible results in the form of legislation. By actively supporting legislative change to end hair discrimination, Dove directly influenced policy at both state and federal levels. This represents a shift in how corporations can utilize their platforms for societal impact, demonstrating the potential for CSA to move beyond awareness and into actionable change (Shi, 2022). In 2019, Dove initiated The CROWN Act campaign to generate global support for its mission of prohibiting hair discrimination. The CROWN ACT campaign was launched to tackle the issue of hair discrimination faced by many Black people in workplace and education institutions. The campaign aimed to create a world where people are not judged or discriminated against based on their natural hair or protective hairstyles, such as braids, locs, and twists. The

company partnered with the CROWN Coalition, which includes organizations like the National Urban League, Color Of Change, and the Western Center on Law & Poverty to end race-based hair discrimination in workplaces and schools across the United States and aimed to drive legislative change at the state and federal levels to ensure legal protections against hair discrimination. “Collaboration between businesses, nonprofit organizations, and government entities is expected to play a pivotal role in driving DEI initiatives through marketing channels” (Trkulja et al., 2024), which emphasizes how Dove’s coalition building approach was critical to amplifying their CSA.

The CROWN Act, which stands for "Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair," represents a significant effort to challenge and reshape societal norms surrounding Black hair. Dove actively lobbied for the passage of The CROWN Act, a law designed to prohibit race-based hair discrimination, initially in California and eventually in other states. To raise public awareness and galvanize support, Dove utilized call to action campaigns, educational resources, and collaborations with influencers and activists. Through strategic storytelling, Dove amplified the voices of those affected by hair discrimination, while also providing a platform for broader conversations about race, identity, and self-expression.

This thesis explores how Dove's The CROWN Act campaign exemplars how corporate social advocacy can highlight the experiences of marginalized communities to shift narratives and societal norms. Dove is associated with beauty and personal care products. However, their advocacy of social justice illustrates the evolving relationship between corporate interests and social responsibility. Dove's campaign reflects a deeper commitment to driving systemic change through legislative advocacy and disrupting social norms.

This research answers the following questions: How did Dove's CROWN Act campaign reinforce or challenge racial, gender, and cultural norms through corporate social advocacy? How does Dove's CROWN Act position itself as an advocate for Black women? The goal of this study was to uncover how corporations can utilize their CSA campaign material to counter dominant culture norms with an emphasis on narratives that disproportionately impact women and people of color. It also aimed to understand the strategies Dove employed to position itself as an advocate for marginalized communities i.e. Black women and contribute to shaping the public discourse on hair discrimination.

One of the goals of Dove's CROWN Act campaign was to bring awareness to the issue of hair discrimination. Hair discrimination is a nuanced systemic issue faced by many African Americans. "Hair discrimination is a social injustice characterized by unfairly regulating and insulting people based on the appearance of their hair" (Mbilishaka et al., 2020). It acts as a negative bias towards "Black natural or textured hairstyles typically worn by people of African descent" (Nkimbeng et al., 2023). Dove's CROWN Act presents as an example of the importance of generating awareness for a cause. The purpose of this study is to help companies become better advocates and practitioners of CSA without damaging the attitudes towards social issues and adequately give voice to communities who tend to go unheard. This knowledge could help amplify marginalized communities' voices and shift society's values. The results of this study shed light on the role of corporate social advocacy and its effects on public legislation and policy engagement. Through a critical analysis of Dove's campaign, this study highlights the intersecting dynamics of power, representation, and influence that arise when brands take a stand on social issues. This study ultimately contributes to the ongoing conversation about the role of corporations in the fight for societal change.

## Literature Review

### Corporate Social Advocacy

Corporate social advocacy (CSA) is a relatively recent framework that stems from the overlap between corporate social responsibility and corporate political advocacy (Lim & Young, 2021). Dodd and Supa's (2014) defined corporate social advocacy as a company's public stance on a controversial social-political issue unrelated to their business operations. Consumers are now more likely to support a brand that aligns with their core beliefs and push brands to take a stance on socio-political issues (DiRusso et al., 2022).

Brands increasingly use CSA to engage with their consumers on issues from climate change to racial justice. "By aligning marketing strategies with ethical and socially conscious principles, companies have the potential to signal their commitment to DEI values and contribute meaningfully to societal progress" (Trkulja et al., 2024). Many corporations have employed CSA initiatives that have been deemed successful like Nike's 2018 "Dream Crazy" campaign. Many, on the contrary, have failed like Pepsi's 2017 "Live for Now" campaign. Nike's campaign advocated for racial justice through the sponsorship of Colin Kaepernick, who lost his NFL career due to his advocacy for racial justice and police brutality. When Waymer and Logan (2021) examined Nike's social justice campaign, they found that the public's perception of a corporation's motives is what legitimizes a CSA campaign. Heffron and Dodd (2021) expressed that previous studies have overlooked the possible reciprocal influence that corporate involvement in social issues could have on the stakeholders themselves, and the broader societal-level consequences that may occur because of the involvement.

The term CSA is sometimes used interchangeably with corporate political advocacy (CPA) (You & Hon, 2022). Baur and Wettstein (2016) conceptualized CPA as the act of a

company to publicly take a stance and demonstrate their support for certain ideals and values via politics with the goal of convincing and persuading others to adopt the same values. Although used interchangeably, prior literature focuses on different outcomes for the concepts. Much of CSA literature focuses on the economic benefits and risks of CSA. In contrast to CSA, the “main concern of CPA is contributing to social change through advocacy for political issues” (You & Hon, 2022, p.1). CPA aims to change public policy in a public manner (Wettstein & Baur, 2016). For this research, both definitions are relevant.

Corporations engaging in CPA have the potential to influence society and help it progress. When corporations engage in CSA/CPA and political discourse, they are contributing to democracy (Dodd, 2018; Auger, 2013). When corporations engage in CPA, they have the potential to impact stakeholders’ attitudes and awareness of an issue, and their voting behaviors (Heffron & Dodd, 2021). The latter study investigated voters’ awareness and behaviors in a 2018 Midterm Election after being exposed to a company’s CSA. The study’s findings revealed that participants believed that their voting was influenced by CSA. Additional research should be conducted on corporations’ influence on public policy making.

CSA can “affect stakeholders cognitively, affectively, and behaviorally, and it is inherently both beneficial and risky” (Hong & Li, 2020; Shi, 2022, p.5). Companies are expected to stake a stance on societal issues, such as race equality, abortion rights, and LGBTQ+ rights (Masrlich & Bernet, 2024). With this expectation comes the great responsibility of getting it right. When companies unsuccessfully address marginalized communities, this can negatively impact a brand’s reputation, image, and relationship with consumers (Shao et al., 2022). When companies create CSA that doesn’t effectively convey their message, it can lead to negative consequences. Ineffective CSA initiatives can also potentially damage the revenue of an

organization and social issues. Despite consumers' increasing criticism and skepticism regarding CSA (Chatterji & Toffel 2015, 2019), their expectations of a business role in society have only continued to grow (Dodd, 2018; Gelles, 2017), and with this, corporations take a financial and reputational risk when participating in these often-polarized issues. Most research on CSA has mainly concentrated on its impact on a company's financial outcomes (Park & Jiang, 2020; Dodd & Supa, 2014, 2015; Chatterji & Toffel, 2018; Nalick et al., 2016). Only a few studies have focused on the reputational gains or risks associated with a company's CSA actions (Lim & Young, 2021; Hong & Li, 2020). Pepsi's 2017 "Live for Now" campaign, which featured Kendall Jenner, is a notable example of failed CSA. In 2017, Pepsi launched a commercial that included Kendall Jenner handing a Pepsi to an officer during a protest. The campaign was a failed attempt at advocating racial justice and was immediately scrutinized on social media for being tone deaf. As a result, Pepsi saw a loss in revenue due to their CSA misstep (Allan & Falgiatore, 2018).

Since corporations have significant influence in our society, their method(s) of addressing contentious social issues has the potential to either exacerbate or mitigate political polarization (Parcha, 2023). Bludau (2010) claims that companies must realize that their actions dictate the success of their CSA efforts more than their words. Parcha and Westerman (2020) reveals that a company's advocacy can change someone's attitude toward an issue depending on how relevant the issue is to the person and if the company's actions are supported by other organizations. The study analyzed how CSA impacted individual's stances on issues like gun control and transgender rights. Due to many social issues directly targeting certain groups within society, additional research should be done to investigate how failed CSA can negatively impact the affected counter public. For example, Bud Light's collaboration with, transgender TikTok star,

Dylan Mulvaney received negative backlash from its consumer base. The transgender community is a marginalized community in the United States who is susceptible to extreme discrimination. It is a possibility that Bud Light's campaign placed the transgender community in a more vulnerable position. Companies potentially put these groups at risk when their CSA receives a negative reaction.

Several scholars have used Nike as an example of effective CSA. Nike's 2018 "Dream Crazy" campaign, which features Colin Kaepernick, promoted racial equality calling out police brutality. The campaign's goal was to bring awareness to the police brutality happening in America. When brands engage in CSA, they have the potential to bring widespread attention to an issue. "Attention is important, because without substantial awareness, issues of discrimination and oppression often endure, unchallenged, as an invisible status quo (Waymer & Logan, 2021, p.4)."

Marginalized communities are the most vulnerable to stigmatization and misconceptions regarding social issues that impact them. In "How Support for Black Lives Matter Impacts Consumer Responses on Social Media," Wang et al. (2020) found that companies that supported Black Lives Matter (BLM) saw a negative impact on consumer responses such as followers, comments and likes. The study analyzed nearly 400,000 social media posts from 435 major brands all who participated in the social media trend Blackout Tuesday, which was in support of Black Lives Matter. This study suggested that consumers' political affiliations, and the brand's prosocial history on social media contributed to the negative effects. However, to further explain this study, Chintagunta and Thomas (2020) argue that the negative reactions to BLM stemmed from some people interpreting the movement to suggest that only Black lives matter or that Black lives are more important than other lives. "The findings of 'How Support for Black Lives

Matter Impacts Consumer Responses on Social Media’ must carefully be interpreted because some of the responses reflected on social media may likely reflect these misconceptions,” (Thomas & Chintagunta, 2020, p.1046). Ineffective CSA could amplify the misconceptions that surround sociopolitical issues. Future research could explore whether CSA can diminish stigma.

Seelig et al. (2019) reveals that advocacy occurs on social media platforms and websites. Social media is a community building tool and gives people a voice. According to You and Hon (2022), many social media users actively engage in socio-political discourse on social media platforms, addressing various social issues and advocating for diverse social groups. Many of these users believe their online engagement is a meaningful contribution toward driving societal change. “According to a study by Anderson et al. (2018), 71% of U.S. adults believed that being engaged in sociopolitical activities on social media made them feel they were making a difference” (You & Hon, 2022, p.3).

Many corporations have engaged in CSA, voicing their stances on controversial issues via digital outlets. In Shi (2022), the study addressed CSA on social media platforms and how marginalized publics engaged in the CSA social media messaging. The study reviewed 41 top companies CSA messaging on Facebook and Twitter. The data was collected for the entire year of 2020. Due to this timeframe, it encompassed CSA messaging that supported racial justice, due to the murder of George Floyd, and promoted the celebration of Pride Month. Social media has played a pivotal role in enhancing the visibility of CSA efforts, drawing greater public attention to companies’ involvement with specific issues and their stances on contentious issues (Austin et al., 2019). A notable example is Starbucks who utilized social media to bring awareness to racism via their 2015 “Race Together” campaign. The campaign garnered public attention and was scrutinized on social media for taking a misguided approach at addressing such a volatile

issue (Shah, 2018; Kettunen, 2020). Social media offers platforms for dialogue to occur, so socio-political issues can gain global attention within a matter of minutes (Zulli, 2020). Social media has given users the platform to curate community, share their personal experiences, and generate awareness about issues (Seelig et al., 2019).

Along with social media, companies have used websites to advocate for social issues and promote activism. Seelig et al. (2019) mentions examples like YouTube who used their site to platform the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning/queer (LGBTQ) to advocate against bullying and harassment. Through a content analysis of 100 non-profit organizations websites, the study found that organization use websites to facilitate engagement and “share content with supporters through social media” (Seelig et al., 2019, p.21). The study also revealed that organizations utilized call to actions to ask the public to support issues, shared digital petitions, and create online advocacy toolkits to mobilize supporters. This research highlights the role websites can play in CSA and spreading awareness. Additional research should be conducted on the use of websites in corporations’ CSA efforts. Most studies focus on brand’s CSA messaging on social media.

### **Critical Race Theory (CRT)**

Critical Race Theory emerged in the 1970s by a coalition of lawyers and activists who realized that the progress made by the civil rights era of the 1960s was becoming obsolete. To combat subtle forms of racism, the group formed the CRT movement to study and transform the intersections relations of race, racism, and power (Delgado & Stefancic, 2022). The core principles of CRT include (1) racism is not rare, but a part of everyday American life, (2) racism is hard to tackle due to color-blindness in society, and (3) race is a social construct, and racial

difference is “invented and reinforced by society (Gillborn, 2015). Pitts (2021) also states that “the five major tenets of CRT are (a) counter-storytelling, (b) permanence of racism, (c) whiteness as property, (d) critique of liberalism, and (e) interest convergence (Pitts, 2021, p. 3).”

“Although CRT began as a movement in the law, it has rapidly spread beyond that discipline” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2022, p. 7) mainly into various academic disciplines. According to Jung et.al (2019) CRT is a framework that offers guidance to further understand the relationship between foundations and racial equity. Scholars have applied CRT to analyze representation in media and its implication for marginalized communities. Brooks and Hebert (2006) explored how media representations shape societal perceptions of race. More recently, Garcia and Goodman (2024) used Critical Race Theory to examine social media messaging regarding race to showcase how racism permeates Greek life. Although the movement has grown into other disciplines, the application of CRT in CSA research is limited. Tarin et al. (2021) attempted by utilizing corporate responsibility to race (CRR) which draws from CRT and CSA to understand the role organizations play in racial justice or injustice. Their study showcases the potential for CSA to either reinforce systemic racism or act as a platform for meaningful racial justice. CRT could help facilitate CSA research to address system inequities, amplify marginalized voices, and further assess the impact of public discourse.

Hair discrimination is one of the many forms of systemic oppression towards Black people especially Black women. Anti-Black hair sentiments and laws dates to slavery when Africans’ hair was compared to the wool of sheep, associating them with animals (Pitts, 2021; Byrd & Tharps, 2014; White & White, 1995). The 1768 Tignon Laws forced Black women to cover their hair in public, because their beauty was viewed as a threat to White women (Pitts, 2021; Griffin, 2011). The discrimination and stigmatization of Black hair led Black women to

adopt Eurocentric and American beauty standards. It became common for Black women to adopt these standards to integrate into American society in efforts to become visually acceptable to their White counterparts (Pitts, 2021). In the 90's, many Black women became empowered to take legal action towards their employers after the case of *Rogers v. American Airlines* sparked national media attention (Caldwell, 1991). "The plaintiff, a black woman, argued that American Airline's policy discriminated against her specifically as a black woman" (Caldwell, p. 365, 1991) and she based her argument on race and sex discrimination. This case is important because it is "the seminal case on the issue of black women's hair in the workplace and grooming policies" (University of Missouri, 2017). In the case, the court ruled in favor of American Airlines stating that braids are a changeable trait, is not tied to race, and do not fall under the protection of Title VII (University of Missouri, 2017). Caldwell's (1991) highlights that the decision of this case acts on the premise that racism and sexism are unrelated. In the study, the author, a Black woman, used herself as an example to showcase an everyday hair experience of a Black woman along with critiquing the *Rogers* case to highlight the intersection of race and gender. The study pulls from Critical Race Theory to highlight that Black women are subject to different forms stereotypes, discrimination, and experiences based on the culmination of their race and sex. "Given the courts' confusion about intersectionality and claims that involve both race and gender-based discrimination, Black women often get the short end of the stick when it comes to grooming cases" (Robinson & Robinson, p. 283, 2020). Black women face public degradation because of their hair texture even when conforming to the dominant American culture (Caldwell, 1991). "Most black women adhered to the dominant culture's grooming and hairstyle codes-when many black women sought escape from grinding racist oppression by

ritualistically straightening their hair-black women were disparaged because of their artificially straightened hair” (Caldwell, p. 392, 1991).

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Black women and men are challenging the normative standards and styling their hair in more Afrocentric ways including locs, braids, and afros (Mbilishaka, 2019). However, anti-Black hair rhetoric has continued despite the efforts of redefining Black hair. In 2023, research showed that more than 60% of Black girls in majority White schools face experience hair discrimination compared to 45% of Black girls in all school environments (Dove, 2023). Black women’s hair is 2.5x more likely to be perceived as unprofessional (Dove, 2023).

Most recently, Thompson (2024) utilized CRT to research cultural and Black hair discrimination in school dress code policies. “The theory argues that discrimination on the bases of gender and race has been historically evaluated as two separate, but mutually exclusive entities within the legal and political systems” (Thompson, p. 19-20, 2024; Crenshaw, 2013; Smith, 2013). Critical Race Theory is a mechanism to disproving racial and gender-based stereotypes, shifting social systems and beliefs, and deconstructing racism. The core tenets of CRT provide a framework to analyze race-based CSA efforts and how corporate advocacy can challenge culture norms. CRT is an analytical framework that provides explanatory possibilities for perpetual racial inequality (Jones, 2024). CRT offers guidance to unpack the history of hair discrimination and analyze the ways it is perpetuated in society. Hair discrimination is an issue that falls under intersectionality. Studies have shown Black women experience gendered and racialized dynamics (Annamma et al., 2019). Intersectionality is a concept that specifies how race and gender shape our social and political lives (Goertz & Mazur, 2008). Few-Demo (2014) explain critical race theorists and feminist theorists cultivated a framework known as intersectionality. “Critical race theories inherently provide a guiding theoretical framework for

conducting any type of intersectional analysis” (Few-Demo, p.8, 2014). The article reviews the nuanced challenges families face through the lens of intersectionality.

## **Dove**

Dove has championed themselves as an advocate for inclusivity since their 2004 *Campaign for Real Beauty*, which challenged American beauty standards and featured everyday women who represented a range of ages, body types, ethnicities, and races (Goins, 2016). Ever since, Dove has created campaigns championing their values of body image positivity and female empowerment. Although Dove positions itself as a champion for inclusivity, its troubling racist past, raises questions about the authenticity and consistency of this value. In 2017, Dove released an ad for their body wash that showed a Black woman pulling up her brown shirt to reveal a White woman in a white shirt. This ad “unwittingly nodded to an ugly theme of personal care advertising original to the 19th century, when blatantly racist messages suggested that “dirty” people of color could be purified to white with soap” (Dove, 2021, p.3). This advertisement parallel to Dove’s 19<sup>th</sup> century ad that included Blackface to equate Black with dirty and white as clean. McCall (2019) argues Dove’s advocacy “normalizes Whiteness, disregards the material realities of racism, eschews diversity, and is performative and embodied” (McCall, 2019, p.1). The study critiques Dove’s *Campaign for Real Beauty* and claims that it pushes a post racial rhetoric that does not acknowledge the dominant ideology of Westernized beauty norms that date back to colonialism and slavery. The author interprets post racial rhetoric as “the circulation of textual, visual, and bodily discourses that (in)directly suggest the eradication of racial preference, discrimination, and prejudice” (McCall, 2019, p.3). The study calls out Dove’s tone deaf and racialized soap ads, misrepresentations of Black women bodies

without considering the social or cultural dimensions of stigma, and references to impure Black skin.

McCleary (2014) criticized Dove's *Real Beauty* campaign from a feminist perspective. The study argues Dove appropriates feminist themes to sell their beauty products, at the cost of female consumers. The study analyzes one of the ad videos and claims the advertisement "diminishes the importance of diversity" (McCleary, p. 15, 2014). In the video, the women with longest speaking parts and airtime were the white women compared to their non-white counterparts. 3 out of the 4 white women were blonde with blue eyes. "The lack of diversity only serves to reinforce the glorification of thinness, whiteness, and bloneness" (McCleary, p. 15, 2014). In the ad, the women are being sketched by a male, meaning the women are being viewed from the male perspective. Removing women from the male gaze is a primary concern for many feminists. "The fact that the Dove ad chose to have a male figure essentially tell the subjects in the video how they should think and feel about their own bodies speaks volumes about the true nature of the *Campaign for Real Beauty*" (McCleary, p. 16, 2014).

Jewell (2017) also used Dove's 2017 ad to use as an example to call out the beauty industry for continuing to create racist advertisements. The study reveals Dove is part of an industry that consistently displays a lack of sensitivity about racial issues. The author found Dove's lack of cultural and historical awareness maddening when considering the company had to apologize for a similar ad in 2011.

Despite Dove's troubled past the company persists in its efforts of advocacy and societal change. In 2019, Dove co-partnered with several organizations to tackle hair discrimination on a systemic level. Dove's CROWN Act campaign acts as an unique example of CSA driving legislative change. Dove actively lobbied for the passage of anti-hair discrimination laws at the

state and federal levels (DiRusso et al., 2022). The CROWN Act stands for Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair and has been passed in several states, making it illegal to discriminate against people based on their natural hair textures and styles. Dove's CROWN Act campaign leveraged their digital spaces like their website to generate awareness and mobilize support around hair discrimination. This study answers the following research questions:

1. How did Dove's CROWN Act campaign reinforce or challenge racial, gender, and cultural norms through corporate social advocacy?
2. How does Dove's CROWN Act position itself as an advocate for Black women?

### **Methodology**

Through Dove and other organizations' collaborative efforts, the CROWN Act, which was created to prohibit racial hair discrimination in schools and the workplace, was first passed in California in 2019. To answer the proposed research questions, a critical textual analysis was conducted based on Dove's The CROWN Act website materials. "Textual analysis is generally a type of qualitative analysis that, beyond the manifest content of media, focuses on the underlying ideological and cultural assumptions of the text" (Fürsich, 2009, p. 240). In textual analysis, "cultural artifacts are considered texts and documentary evidence that helps us make sense of our lives" (Brennen, 2017, p. 204). A textual analysis is a systemic analysis and interpretation of a set of materials aimed at uncovering underlying patterns, themes, and constructed meanings (Lune & Berg, 2016). Qualitative analyses can be helpful in revealing covert or subtle racial messages because it calls for an inclusive examination of texts (Shabbir et al., 2014, Jung et al., 2022). In this study, analysis of the content allowed for the identification of patterns and themes in the texts, especially related to covert or nuanced racial messages. This method generated a deeper understanding of how the campaign's messaging engages with social

and political discourse, while also revealing specific strategies used to advocate for legislative change and amplify the voices of Black women.

In similar studies, scholars have utilized textual analysis frameworks to uncover racist messaging in philanthropic foundations response to BLM protests (Jung et al., 2022), expose institutional racism within an educational context (Barnes et al., 2016), and reveal guidelines for companies to follow when creating CSA social media messaging to avoid receiving negative reactions (Bludau, 2019). Similarly, Waymer and Logan (2019) employed a critical analysis to examine and interrogate Nike's corporate social advocacy efforts. In the case of this study, the analysis focused on Dove's CROWN Act campaign website which includes content such as: links to educational toolkits, statistics about hair discrimination, and other available documents. The critical textual analysis identified how Dove advocated against the contentious issue of race-based hair discrimination in the workplace and public schools that led to the passage of The CROWN Act. This analysis helped identify specific themes and patterns that Dove employed to advocate for Black women and the CROWN Act. "Media content is a site in which current societal debates and representations are played out. Producers of media texts can act as cultural intermediaries reverberating cultural trends within audiences and bringing them to the forefront of debate" (Fürsich, 2017, p. 245).

The critical textual analysis was analyzed from a sociological perspective. According to Fürsich (2009), applying a sociological approach to a textual analysis can help distinguish a link between media discourse to societal impact. In this context, Critical Race Theory (CRT) was applied to analyze the ways Dove's campaign challenged narratives around hair norms and confronted systemic racism. The theory helped explain how the campaign acted as a mechanism of advocacy. Heilig et al. (2012) similarly utilized a textual analysis through the lens of CRT to

uncover how Texas social studies standards address racism and communities of color. By utilizing CRT, this analysis critically examined if and how Dove's campaign centered the experiences of Black women and aimed to dismantle structural inequalities in school and workplace environments. This approach uncovered the strategies used to influence societal change through raising awareness and the passing of The CROWN Act, while also revealing how the campaign amplified the voices of communities of color and mobilized support for anti-discrimination laws.

### **Data Collection**

A critical textual analysis approach with an emphasis on CRT was used to examine the materials on Dove's CROWN Act campaign website. The website is a central platform for Dove's corporate social advocacy initiatives addressing hair discrimination and systemic racism. I analyzed the website's textual, visual, and multimedia elements, including videos, and educational tool kits.

"The purposive method is consistent with the goals of qualitative research, which aims for depth rather than breadth" (Freeman et al., 2017, p. 11). Purposive sampling was chosen to focus on specific sections of the website that are most relevant. The purposive sampling technique limited the data selection to identify key themes and patterns. In qualitative research, purposive sampling is often used to identify and select cases that provide rich and relevant information to maximize the efficient use of limited resources (Patton, 2002). This technique highlighted information rich sections of the website that emphasized Dove's CSA messaging and visual elements key to the CROWN Act. The website was first manually coded to identify general patterns and strategies present in the website materials. This manual identification

focused on Dove’s language, thematic elements, imagery, and framing of Black culture and identity issues. The identification of themes and patterns emerged in the second stage of coding. In the third phase, the themes and patterns were manually categorized based on the five tenets of CRT. Since the study solely focused on Dove’s website, the findings were restricted to that digital space. This scope will not uncover the specific strategies and themes applied to other digital spaces or outside spaces.

The critical textual analysis of Dove’s CROWN Act website materials resulted in the emergence of several recurring themes. These themes illustrate how Dove participates in CSA and positions itself as an advocate for Black women. The Dove has nine webpages and two websites where they support and promote the CROWN Act. Dove has a main webpage dedicated to the CROWN Act and a co-branded website with the other co-creators of the bill and movement. Each of the digital spaces were manually coded and analyzed for key textual, visual, and multimedia content, which provided a rich dataset of images, statements, and storytelling elements. After the initial analysis, I created the following code names:

**Table 1**

*Codes Generated After Initial Analysis*

- Code Name
- Corporate Advocacy
- Legislative Advocacy & Policy Engagement
- Call to Action
- Emotional Appeal
- Black Hair Representation
- Intersectionality
- Awareness
- Educational Toolkits
- Disrupting Norms
- Implicit Reinforcement

From the data collected, ten code names were developed and grouped into five thematic categories: corporate social advocacy, community engagement and mobilization, representation and inclusion, educational advocacy and awareness, and reinforcing vs. challenging norms. These themes form the foundation of the findings and provide insights into the mechanisms Dove utilized to combat race-based hair discrimination and advocate for Black women. They directly contribute to the study's research questions by revealing how Dove's campaign both reinforces and challenges racial, gender, and cultural norms, and how the brand positions itself as an advocate for Black women via storytelling, activism, and coalition building. These themes reflect how Dove's campaign challenges white Eurocentric beauty standards, promotes inclusive representation, empowers communities with tools for advocacy and education, and supports systematic change via legal and policy engagement. Simultaneously, Dove's campaign occasionally reflects common critiques of corporate activism, because of their subtle reinforcements of dominant social norms. Through the lens of Critical Race Theory, the following sections further explore these themes in depth.

## **Discussion**

### **RQ 1: How did Dove's CROWN Act campaign reinforce or challenge racial, gender, and cultural norms through CSA?**

#### **Representation and Inclusion**

Representation and inclusion are central to Dove's CROWN Act campaign and serve as the foundation for how the brand attempted to disrupt dominant norms. Representation refers to the fair portrayal of marginalized groups, and inclusion guarantees the appreciation, incorporation, and valuation of diverse communities (Hodkinson, 2011; Eisend et al., 2022).

“Companies often enhance equity and social justice within communities through DEI efforts” (Gould et al., 2024). Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) have become integral to many corporations’ missions to combat discriminatory practices and engage various populations (Ngassa, 2024). Diverse, fair, and equal representation of marginalized groups in advertisements and CSR has been widely discussed and studied. Trkulja et al. (2024) explores the role socially responsible marketing or CSR plays in fostering DEI. The study stresses the need for aligning marketing efforts with inclusivity, and addresses systemic, institutional, cultural, and societal challenges related to DEI to highlight the importance of CSR marketing in overcoming these challenges. “By aligning marketing efforts with DEI values, companies can strengthen their brand reputation and resonate more effectively with diverse consumer segments” (Trkulja et al., 2024).

Following the 2020 murder of George Floyd, many corporations publicly committed to DEI efforts and pledged to give back to Black businesses and the Black community through monetary donations and advocacy. The social expectations of CSA placed increased pressure on brands to move beyond performative activism and demonstrate genuine inclusion and support. In this environment, Dove’s CROWN Act campaign emerges as an initiative aimed at advancing legislative and social change, but also authentically representing Black women and girls. The following section will explore how Dove translated its commitment to representation and inclusion into practice by utilizing counter-storytelling strategies rooted in CRT to challenge dominant racial, gender, and cultural norms.

#### *Racial Framing & Counter-storytelling*

The themes drawn from Dove’s CROWN Act websites were also placed into groups based on the core tenets of CRT. Critical Race Theory’s core tenets provided a framework to

answer the research questions. Counter storytelling has historically been utilized as a strategy against racism, oppression, and White supremacy. Counter storytelling highlights the experiences and voices of underprivileged communities whose stories tend to go unheard. Baszile (2014) highlights that counter storytelling has been strategically used politically in pursuit of racial justice. Counter storytelling “can be used to amplify and emphasize minoritized voices, perspectives, and experiences” (Solórzano; Yosso, 2002).

In their fight against hair discrimination, Dove has promised a commitment to racial equity and amplifying Black voices. Dove explicitly states the goal of the CROWN Act campaign and their commitment amongst their digital spaces. A few of the initial statements on Dove’s websites states “we’re helping to end race-based hair discrimination—because Black hair is beautiful, and all hair deserves respect”, “We’re taking action to stop it”, and “It’s time to do everything in our power to confront this.” These declarative statements set the tone for the campaign’s purpose and affirm the value of Black hair. Prominently positioned on the landing pages, they signal Dove’s acknowledgment of racial injustice but emphasizes the moral importance of their campaign.

Dove’s campaign actively incorporates narratives from Black women and girls about their experiences with hair discrimination. Dove uses their website as a space to platform and represent Black women’s experience. On their main page, Dove included a video of several Black girls and women telling stories about the discrimination they encountered at school and work. Additionally, Dove included quotes from Black women and girls telling their stories and expressing how hair discrimination impacts them. On one of their digital spaces, Dove highlighted the story of a little girl named Faith who experienced hair discrimination in elementary school. Dove included quotes from Faith such as: “I had so much fear and anxiety

because I couldn't figure out what I had done wrong", and "It was one of the most difficult things that I've gone through. The whole thing made me feel like there was something wrong with me." Dove highlights the stories of Black women and girls to showcase the negative impact it has on their self-esteem and everyday lives. This emphasis on lived experiences directly challenges dominant narratives that dismiss, ignore, or perpetuate the realities of hair discrimination. Giving Black women and girls the platform to voice their lived experiences acts as counter storytelling. This storytelling mobilizes and positions Black female voices as central to their campaign. Through their storytelling, dominant social norms about Black hair and beauty are being challenged and opposed.

Dove's CROWN Act campaign showcased counter storytelling via the imagery selected to represent Black women and Black hair. Darker skin tones and a range of natural hair styles are prominent in Dove's campaign, which actively engages in counter-storytelling to challenge cultural norms and addresses Research Question 1. Black women and girls are also shown in positive manners within school, home, and professional settings. In doing so, Dove is counter-storytelling the harsh dominant narrative that Black women and girls are faced with. Historically, Black women are typically portrayed as mummies, jezebels, welfare queens, and matriarchs in media (Griffin, 2013). "This "double jeopardy" of being both Black and female in society has continued to create and reinforce a U.S. culture satiated with derogatory representations of Black women and girls" (Muhammad & McArthur, 2015, p. 136). Showcasing Black women and girls in positive settings acts as counter storytelling, because the visuals directly oppose the dominant gender, social, and cultural narratives that stereotype Black women.

Black hair has been scrutinized based on hair texture and length. Colorism has also contributed to the stigmatization of certain hair types. "Colorism is the systematic preference for

lighter skin tones over darker tones and stems from larger racial systems impacting education, income, marriageability, job placement, housing and social status for Black Americans” (Hunter, 2002; Perkins, 2014). Colorism and hair texture bias can influence the professional and social lives of Black women professions (Perkins, 2014). Characteristics such as darker skin and highly textured, curly, and coily natural hair do not fit white Eurocentric beauty standards and are not appreciated in majority White spaces (Morrison, 1990; Perkins, 2014). It was imperative to analyze the imagery with these systemic imbalances in mind to measure whether Dove reinforced or challenged dominant norms and how they represented Black women. Each image on their websites was collected and analyzed based on the skin tone, hair length, and hair texture. 19 images in total were analyzed. Out of the 19, 24 Black women and girls were shown. Skin tones were evenly spread from light to dark skin, with a more emphasis on dark skin tones. This serves as an example of disrupting dominant norms, because it challenges light skin preferential treatment which typically excludes or marginalizes darker skin tones. Highlighting darker skin tones as prominent and desirable disrupts Eurocentric beauty standards and actively engages in counter-storytelling by centering individuals who are normally excluded from mainstream beauty narratives.

In their imagery, Dove incorporates varying hair textures, skin tones, and ages throughout their campaign to present a more comprehensive representation of Blackness. The campaign features many Black hair textures such as coils, curls, locs, braids, and afros, showcasing the diversity of Black hair. This diverse representation disrupts dominant societal narratives that have historically stigmatized Black hair while privileging White standards of beauty.

Analyzing the images based on hair style, there were around 7-10 different hairstyles showcased. The variety of hairstyles represented demonstrates Dove's attempt to showcase the

diversity of Black hair. While Dove includes a variety of hair texture, skin tones, and styles there was underrepresentation for women with protective styles and shorter hair styles. Of the twenty-four women in the images, only two had shorter hairstyles and one with a protective style. This limited representation can imply an implicit bias towards longer hair, which is often perceived as more desirable and feminine. The underrepresentation of shorter hair could reflect internalized biases or reinforce dominant societal standards that equate longer hair to beauty and femininity. Historically, short, coarse, and coiled hairstyles have been the most stigmatized under Eurocentric beauty standards. Given the historical context, this omission is significant, making this a missed opportunity for the disruption of a dominant norm. This is an area Dove could improve to further dismantle societal norms and Eurocentric beauty standards.

### **Intersectionality**

Intersectionality, a core tenet of CRT, emphasizes how multiple aspects of identity such as race, class, gender, and age intersect to create unique experiences of oppression or privilege (Crenshaw, 1991). Intersectionality is relevant to this study, because Dove's CROWN Act campaign addresses race-based hair discrimination, a form of oppression that uniquely impacts Black women and girls. "Intersectional paradigms remind us that oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type, and that oppressions work together in producing injustice" (Collins, 2000, pg. 18; Perkins, 2014, pg. 11). Research has explored the gendered-racism Black girls face within school systems. Katz (2021) uses intersectionality to understand how Black adolescent girls make sense of their K-12 school experiences and their identities in relation to their school experiences. Black girlhood is erased through adultification, meaning Black girls' behaviors are linked to the stereotypes adult Black women face (Katz, 2021; Epstein et al., 2017).

Groundbreaking survey research revealed that adults view “Black girls as less innocent and more adult-like than white girls of the same age, especially between 5–14 years old” (Epstein et al., 2017). Instead of being perceived as childlike, Black girls are viewed as “hypersexual, loud, and less innocent and feminine than other girls” (Katz, 2021; Carter Andrews et al., 2019; Epstein et al., 2017). This adultification means Black girls are often treated older than they are, which can result in harsher disciplinary outcomes and less protection in school or justice settings. Epstein et al. (2017) notes that this bias exposes Black girls to adult levels of scrutiny and punishments. These findings reveal how Black girls at a young age face a nuanced intersection of racism, sexism, and ageism prejudice.

In later life stages, Black women continue to face unique biases based on their identity in professional and social contexts. Smith-Tran (2022) highlights how “gendered racism and ageism intersect” for Black women in the workplace. The study documents that perceptions of youthfulness for Black women can trigger age-based prejudice alongside racial stereotypes. Due to racism and ageism, Black women must combat racialized gender stereotypes about their age or experience level and assumptions about their age or experience level (Smith-Tran, 2022). Perry (2023) and Harris and David (2023) explore the gendered racism Black women face in corporate America. According to Perry (2023), Black women experience challenges in career advancement because of microaggressions that “perpetuate stereotypes, invisibility, and limited access to gatekeepers and decision-makers” (Perry, 2023). Harris and David (2023) explored the “intersection of being Black, a woman, and wearing natural hair.” The findings detail the “daunting measures” Black women must employ to navigate discrimination within the workplace when wearing their natural hair. “The findings in this study support the proposition that racial discrimination against wearing natural hair negatively affects the availability of professional

opportunities to Black women as well as their career trajectories and overall self-esteem” (Harris & David, 2023, p.40). These studies indicate how Black women and girls navigate layered forms of oppression and stereotyping that begin in early childhood and persist into professional adulthood.

There is limited research in intersectionality studies that incorporate age as a component (Holman & Walker, 2021). Research is even more limited, incorporating this phenomenon into CSA research. Dove attempts to capture the nuanced experiences that arise from the intersection of race, gender, and age. Dove’s campaign recognizes how the intersection of race, gender, and age shapes the experiences of Black women and girls who disproportionately face hair discrimination. Dove echoes this acknowledgment in their statement “Black women continuously face scrutiny and discrimination based on their hair texture and style in both educational and professional environments.” This reinforces how intersecting identities create layered barriers for Black women and girls across life stages. The acknowledgement of intersectionality is also evident in Dove’s strategic visual inclusion of Black female identities ranging from children to adults.

On their websites, Dove showcases the experiences of both Black women and girls, acknowledging the systemic nature of hair discrimination that begins in childhood and persists into adulthood. Dove’s CROWN Act website features videos of young Black girls discussing their experiences with hair discrimination in schools. Platforming the voices of children aims to demonstrate how systemic oppression affects Black girls from an early age, which is an important aspect of intersectional oppression. This strategy is directly aligned to Research Question 1, which asks how Dove’s CROWN Act campaign challenges racial, gender, and cultural norms through corporate social advocacy. Dove acknowledges that hair discrimination is

an issue influenced by both race and gender, beginning in childhood and continuing into adulthood, as demonstrated by their focus on the unique experiences of Black girls.

### **Educational Advocacy and Awareness**

In 2021, Dove conducted several research studies to examine the prevalence of hair discrimination amongst Black women and girls. Dove prominently featured these statistics across their websites to educate and bring awareness to highlight the disparities Black women and girls face in both schools and professional spaces. Dove found that a Black woman is 80% more likely to change their natural hair to meet social norms or expectations at work (Dove, 2021).

For example, Dove's websites display messaging such as: "53% of Black mothers, whose daughters have experienced hair discrimination, say that their daughters have experienced race-based hair discrimination as early as five years old." This strategic use of research not only uses data to legitimize lived experience but emphasizes how race and gender biases are institutionalized through workplace and school norms. Dove uses statistical research to shed light on the unfair treatment Black women and girls face at school and in the workplace. These statistics strengthen the legitimacy of Black women and girls' lived experiences and broadens public understanding of hair discrimination. Dove legitimizing Black women experiences and exposing the systemic nature of hair discrimination challenges and disrupts race, gender, and cultural norms, which addresses Research Question 1.

Along with statistics, Dove incorporated multimedia elements for storytelling purposes and to humanize the research data. One prominent example is the series of short films hosted on their websites, which highlight true stories of Black girls experiencing hair discrimination across different grade levels. These visual narratives function as educational tools, evoke emotional

resonance, and contextualize the data within real life experiences. Through these short films, Dove emphasizes the pervasiveness of systemic bias from early childhood through adulthood, stressing the need for legislative and social support.

Dove frames hair discrimination within the context of systemic racism, describing grooming policies and social norms as extensions of “narrow beauty standards rooted in systemic racism” (Dove, 2022). This framing directly opposes dominant narratives that portray Eurocentric beauty standards as ideal and aligns with CRT’s emphasis on dismantling inequality. Through the integration of research and storytelling visuals, Dove utilizes these tools to demonstrate how to elevate public understanding of hair discrimination as a systemic issue. Therefore, Dove contributes to broader cultural and legislative change, directly addressing Research Question 1.

### **Reinforcing vs. Challenging Norms**

The CRT tenet, whiteness as property, serves to reveal the ways institutions or individuals uphold the status quo of whiteness as being superior. It allowed the further investigation of how Dove’s campaign challenged or reinforced white Eurocentric beauty standards. The dominant culture reveres whiteness and lighter skin complexions as beautiful, deeming darker skin tones as undesirable. Amongst research, whiteness is considered a cultural sign of “beauty and virtue” even in mostly nonwhite countries (Mady et al., 2022; Stefan, 2019). Studies have also shown, despite Eurocentric beauty standards impacting female beauty perceptions, Black women have adopted their own standard of beauty and deliberately avoid the white ideal (Mady et al., 2022).

Dove's CROWN Act campaign directly confronts the long-held notion of "whiteness as property" in beauty culture. Eurocentric beauty standards consider white features as default commodities that provide privilege while excluding others. Historically, Eurocentric beauty ideals have dominated mass media and marketing, positioning light skin and straight, long hair as the pinnacle of beauty (Mady et al., 2022). Dove's campaign challenges this dominance by naming and legislating against racialized beauty standards that have marginalized Black women and girls. On Dove's CROWN Act websites, the company highlights how institutions have policed Black hair to uphold "narrow beauty standards" that privilege whiteness (Aggarwal, 2022). The campaign frames dominant white beauty norms as an unjust element of the status quo, which the brand is aiming to dismantle.

Dove uses their websites as central hubs to center and highlight Black experiences. The campaign's storytelling features Black women and girls recounting the bias they've endured, thereby opposing against the dominant narrative that hair is just a "personal preference" or "professional policy" (Cumberbatch, 2021). For example, Dove's 2021 study with the CROWN Coalition discovered that 53% of Black mothers reported their daughters faced hair discrimination by the age of 5 (Dove, 2022). Black girls are susceptible to internalize the message their natural hair is inherently "wrong". 81% of Black girls in predominantly white schools reported they occasionally wished their hair was straight instead (Dove, 2022). One of Dove's websites included a short film that visualizes true stories of Black girls facing hair bias in different grade levels, and in adulthood. Displaying these narratives, humanizes the experience of race based hair bias, and undermines the tropes that privilege white features i.e. straight, blonde hair as the ideal standard of beauty. Through their storytelling, Dove counters dominant narratives by reframing natural Black hair as beautiful, desirable, and worthy. Dove's visual and

textual elements reject the “property value” of whiteness by affirming the beauty of Black hair and asserting that Black hair does not need to change to meet professionalism or white standards of beauty. In their own words, Black women and girls “should have the freedom to wear their hair how they choose without fear of job loss or education” (Dove, 2022). This is a direct challenge to the systemic norm of hair discrimination.

Dove seems to take a careful balanced approach with their website materials, being mindful of their own history. Although the CROWN Act content emphasizes Black empowerment and the bias of Eurocentric norms, it negates to explicitly name “whiteness” as the sole perpetrator. Dove uses delicate rhetoric like “narrow beauty standards” and “societal bias” to address the cause of hair discrimination without directly confronting the racialized systems that uphold it. This chosen rhetoric echoes how whiteness maintains its power by remaining invisible and unnamed. This delicate wording reflects the palatability of corporate messaging. One example is Dove’s education toolkit designed to build children’s hair confidence. In the toolkit, Dove educates the audience on the experiences and prevalence of hair discrimination. Dove exemplifies this with statements like, “65% of young girls view their hair as a form of self-expression” and “50% of young girls say their hair can make them feel self-conscious”. Despite being well-intentioned, the toolkit places the burden on Black children to educate their peers about stereotypes and bullying, rather than providing non-Black children resources to confront their biases. The toolkit is framed to teach Black children how to love and appreciate their hair in despite of hair bias and stereotypes. Instead of explicitly naming specific hair stereotypes that Black girls experience, it places the burden on the audience of presumed children to answer questions like: “Pretty hair is...”, “Ugly hair is...”, and “where do these stereotypes come from?” It also includes affirmations for Black girls but presents hair bias as something they must

navigate, instead of centering the responsibility of dismantling bias within white dominated institutions. This framing correlates with how whiteness maintains its status by placing the educational or emotional labor on marginalized communities.

Additionally, the toolkit features images of children mostly with longer hair or locs, overlooking the representation of coarser or shorter hair textures. This exclusion can reinforce norms that prioritize features that are more aligned with white beauty ideals. While the toolkit signals allyship, it lacks a component to guide non-Black children and educators toward confronting their role in perpetuating the harm. This reveals how whiteness can subtly operate, even within campaign designed to oppose it. The toolkit serves as an example of how whiteness as property can be implicitly reinforced, through subtle omissions that maintain whiteness as the unspoken norm.

Dove's CROWN Act campaign contributes to the resistance and subversion of white Eurocentric beauty norms; however, it also contends with the brand's troubled history of prioritizing these same norms. Historically, Dove, like majority of the beauty industry upheld lighter skinned, Eurocentric standards of beauty. In much of their advertising, only images of white and light-skinned individuals with whiter features were shown. As mentioned earlier, Dove has faced public scrutiny as recently as 2017, for creating a racially insensitive advertisement. The advertisement showed a Black woman removing her shirt and transforming into a white woman after using Dove's soap. The ad seemed to literalize whiteness as ideal. Critics noted it reflected Jim Crow era ads where Black skin was depicted as "dirty" (Picchi, 2017). This incident reinforced the underlying truth of how ingrained whiteness is within beauty marketing, even in a brand that proclaims "Real Beauty" for all. This additional context complicates Dove's credibility in renouncing white dominated beauty standards. Although Dove must contend with

its history, the CROWN Act campaign reflects Dove's newer purpose driven branding, aligned with Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI).

This core tenet helped address Research Question 1 by uncovering how Dove's CROWN Act campaign challenged and on occasion inadvertently reinforced racial, gender, and culture norms through their CSA. Dove's strategy of representation, visual storytelling, and educational resources disrupted Eurocentric beauty ideals and systems that place whiteness as the standard of professionalism or beauty. Simultaneously, Dove's softened rhetorical choices illustrate how dominant narratives can persist even within advocacy efforts. This dichotomy highlights the complexity of corporations attempting to impact structural change. Dove centered the experiences of Black women, amplified their voices, and helped to pass legal protections such as the CROWN Act. However, the brand's selective representation also complicates its position and suggests, while significant, Dove's efforts are on the boundaries of whiteness as property that both empower it and constrain its impact.

## **RQ 2: How does Dove's CROWN Act position itself as an advocate for Black women?**

### **Corporate Social Advocacy**

#### *Interest Convergence*

Interest convergence is a CRT principle that claims the advancement of marginalized groups is only achieved if it aligns with the interests of the dominant group, in particular white individuals or institutions (Bell, 1980). In other words, systemic or social progress in terms of race often occurs when such progress also benefits those in power. As Bell explains, "Racial justice - or its appearance - may, from time to time, be counted among the interests deemed important by the courts and by society's policymakers" (Bell, 1980, p. 524). Bell (1980) used the

Supreme Court case *Brown v Board* (1954) to illustrate this idea. In the analysis, Bell argued that although the *Brown* decision ended segregation and provided equal education to Black children, it also helped improve the United States' global image and influence during the Cold War.

Interest convergence provides a critical lens for examining Dove's CROWN Act campaign especially as the brand engages in corporate social advocacy (CSA). This tenet of CRT is instrumental in analyzing the motivations behind Dove's CSA. Dove's advocacy of the CROWN Act aligns their goals of ending race-based hair discrimination with its corporate interest in brand identity, consumer trust, and market expansion. In other words, Dove's commitment to racial justice is not solely altruistic. However, it simultaneously enhances its brand reputation, fosters deeper brand loyalty with socially conscious consumers, and creates new market opportunities. This dual benefit reflects Bell's (1980) interest convergence theory, that outlines racial progress tends to move forward only when it aligns with the interests of those in power. Corporate social advocacy can benefit an organization's brand image, credibility, and revenue (Lim & Young, 2021; Dodd & Supa, 2014). Through their support for the CROWN Act, Dove taps into the growing public support for racial equity while simultaneously positioning itself as a socially conscious brand. Dove's legislative advocacy efforts reflect an intersection where Black community interests and corporate brand equity converge. This alignment of corporate image and public interest reflects what Bell (1980) identifies as the conditional nature of racial progress, advancing only when it serves broader institutional or societal goals. The application of interest convergence offers a critical perspective for understanding how Dove positioned itself as an advocate for Black women. By aligning racial justice with corporate benefit, the brand was able to engage in meaningful advocacy while simultaneously benefitting from these strategies.

Dove's campaign integrates corporate advocacy, emotional storytelling, and legislative engagement to generate public awareness, support, and corporate credibility. Dove signaled its commitment to systemic and legislative change by co-founding the CROWN Coalition with organizations like Color of Change and the National Urban League. This positioned Dove to reinforce their position as a leader in corporate advocacy and as an advocate for people of color. Dove's advocacy not only attempts to advance racial equity, but it also protects and contributes to Dove's brand equity.

Dove's strategic use of research and statistics also indicates interest convergence. Promoting data such as "According to our newest Dove research, even though 90% of Black girls believe that their hair is beautiful, the microaggressions and discrimination that they endure impacts their self-esteem" positions Dove to build legitimacy and trust. Besides educating the public, the framing of this data also reinforces Dove's image as a corporate leader in racial justice. In this way the brand capitalizes on data-driven advocacy to support its policy goals and consumer engagement efforts simultaneously. Dove's corporate advocacy and legislative engagement uncovers the racial bias behind "professional" or "polite" appearance culture. Dove's use of phrases like "race-based hair discrimination" calls out the dominant norms that upholds white beauty standards. Dove's conducted research discovered that Black women's hair is 2.5 times more likely than white women's hair to be deemed "unprofessional" (Payne-Patterson, 2023). These findings expose how "professionalism" and "whiteness" go hand in hand to undermine Blackness and showcases the pressure Black women feel to straighten their hair to accommodate to white standards. Dove also reports 66% of Black women change their hair for job interviews and 41% specifically straighten their curls to conform (Mady et al., 2022; Dove & LinkedIn, 2023). These numbers emphasize the notion that workplace appearance has been

engineered to center white beauty and hair standards. According to the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, hair discrimination is “rooted in systemic racism” and meant “to preserve white spaces.” Policies have been set in place banning afros, braids, or locs forcing Black people to either acculturate or face exclusion from schools and jobs. The CROWN Act campaign directly labels this a “multi-generational impact of narrow beauty standards in America” (Aggarwal, 2022), linking everyday grooming culture and practices to the broad systemic discrimination they perpetuate.

Despite the campaign’s dedication to authentic change, it is important to acknowledge the benefits Dove receives from being seen as a leader in diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) and social justice. From a CRT lens, this convergence raises questions about the authenticity of Dove’s CSA. Dove’s support of the CROWN Act positions the company as a brand committed to DEI and social justice efforts. This support happened during a time when consumers increasingly expect corporations to speak out on social issues (Waymer & Logan, 2021; Shi, 2022). Through its alignment of advocacy efforts with public interest and legislative momentum, Dove secures consumer trust and favorable media and press coverage. While Dove’s efforts contribute to legislative progress and increased awareness, they also contribute to Dove’s brand equity and consumer engagement strategy.

Dove’s advocacy plays a crucial role in supporting Black women and driving legislative change, the interest convergence theory reminds us that this advocacy also serves corporate goals. However, this convergence should not diminish the value of the CROWN Act or the social progress it represents. Instead, it highlights the need for continued critique of corporate motivations and demands that brands go beyond surface-level support.

## **Legislative Advocacy and Policy Engagement**

Dove's CROWN Act campaign utilized legislative advocacy and policy engagement to advocate for the interests of Black women. In 2019, the brand worked alongside civil rights groups and policymakers to co-found the CROWN Coalition to outlaw hair discrimination. Through their partnership with Black state senator Holly Mitchell to draft the original CROWN Act, Dove moved into policy engagement which is rarely attempted by beauty brands. Their policy engagement acts as a direct conflict to whiteness as property, which treats white hair as the norm. This normative now faces legal invalidation due to this legislation. By 2022, 14 states had passed the CROWN Act urging a nationwide law to protect Black people's rights to their natural hair. Dove demonstrated a strategic use of its corporate influence to drive legislative momentum, by actively promoting the CROWN Act through public awareness campaigns, educational toolkits, and petitions, helping to bridge public activism with formal policymaking procedures.

On the contrary, from a CRT perspective, it is imperative to acknowledge that Dove's legislative advocacy also serves corporate interests by boosting brand legitimacy and reinforcing its socially conscious image. The theory of interest convergence reminds us that even efforts aimed to dismantle systemic injustices can still contribute to the sustenance of corporate power. By framing hair discrimination as systemic oppression and leveraging coalition partnerships, Dove attempted to disrupt dominant social norms, not just through brand messaging. Dove leveraged its corporate influence to help "make hair discrimination illegal" (Aggarwal, 2022) and take away the legal protection from the unspoken privileges of whiteness in workplaces and schools. Thus, this section reveals how Dove positions itself as an advocate for Black women through legislative and policy engagement.

## **Community Engagement and Mobilization**

In the codebook, the categories Call to Action and Legal Support capture the strategies Dove used to engage the public, mobilize grassroots support, and encourage legislative action. For instance, Dove includes calls to action on their website for the public to contact their senators, sign petitions, and support legislation banning hair discrimination. These are clear examples of generating legislation support and coalition building, however they also serve to enhance Dove's corporate reputation and visibility. One webpage states, "*Join us in creating more inclusive and equitable spaces for Black women in the workplace*", "*The time to act is NOW*" while linking to action toolkits hosted by Dove. Dove's urgent messaging pulls from activist rhetoric and frames hair justice as a moral imperative. Dove presents itself as an advocate and ally, therefore boosting its brand appeal among socially conscious consumers while working toward systemic change. While Dove's mobilization efforts contribute to collective action for legislative change, they also ensure brand loyalty and market expansion because of their strategic alignment with consumers' expectations for socially conscious branding.

Dove uses mobilization and engagement tools like petitions and calls to action to garner public support and awareness towards the CROWN Act. By forging strategic alliances with nonprofits, policymakers, and the broader public, "organizations can amplify their impact and foster collective action towards achieving DEI goals" (Trkulja et al., 2024). This illustrates how Dove's collaborative strategy mobilized grassroots support and contributed to legislative successes. Dove has several petition entries throughout their digital landscape. Dove's campaign highlights the collective power of community and encourages continued support by showcasing petition counters "536,428 of 600,00 signatures" and prompts like "*Signed the petition? Stay*

*involved.*” This call-to-action messaging frames hair discrimination as a cause that demands advocacy and participation. Through the garnering of support around hair discrimination, Dove actively positions itself as advocate for Black women.

## **Conclusion**

In America, where the white body is the paragon of beauty, one pays for having the “wrong hips, lips, noses, skin texture, skin pigmentation, and hair texture” (Yancy, 2005; West, 1999). This study explored how Dove’s CROWN Act campaign utilized corporate social advocacy (CSA) to challenge or reinforce racial, gender, and cultural norms, while positioning itself as an advocate for Black women. Through critical textual analysis grounded in Critical Race Theory (CRT), this research uncovered that Dove’s campaign largely disrupted dominant norms by centering and legitimizing the lived experiences of Black women and girls, advocating for legislative change, and challenging white Eurocentric beauty standards. Dove’s corporate social advocacy utilized strategic tools to advocate for Black women and racial equity and to disrupt dominant cultural and social norms. Dove’s integration of CRT elements like counter storytelling and tools like educational advocacy, legislative engagement, and community mobilization served to affirm Black women and oppose systemic hair discrimination. However, this study also found that Dove’s efforts simultaneously reflect interest convergence, emphasizing their advocacy is aligned with corporate interests in brand loyalty and reputation, market expansion, and social capital.

This duality reflects a conflict within CSA efforts led by corporations. While campaigns like Dove’s promote racial equity, they are also shaped by capitalistic motives. As a subsidiary of Unilever, Dove’s primary obligations remain to shareholders, to ensure profitability and long-term brand growth. Interest convergence allows corporations like Dove to engage in advocacy if it

advances corporate goals. This raises questions about the authenticity of such efforts and highlights the limitations of pursuing justice within a system where advocacy is prioritized if profitable.

The findings of this study provide corporations valuable insights into creating CSA that represent. These findings contribute to scholarship by illustrating how CRT tenets can be applied to CSA campaigns to contribute to societal progression and expose the limitations of corporate driven social change. While Dove's CROWN Act campaign challenges the invisibility of whiteness and repositions Black hair as beautiful and professional, it also demonstrates the constraints of maintaining consumer trust, that corporate advocacy operates within.

This research amplifies the significance of intersectionality by demonstrating how Dove acknowledged the nuanced barriers Black women and girls encounter across their life stages. By integrating intersectionality into their CSA, organizations can more effectively challenge systemic inequities, create inclusive representation, and drive meaningful social change. Addressing race, gender, and age collectively allowed Dove to create a more nuanced narrative that better reflects the lived realities of Black women and girls.

This research is significant because it shows how CSA campaigns, when rooted in authentic storytelling, can act as powerful catalysts for social change. Dove's campaign contributed to public awareness around hair discrimination and mobilized grassroots and legislative support, resulting in the passage of the CROWN Act. This data underscores the powerful role corporations can play in both reflecting and shaping societal values when their efforts move beyond performative activism.

However, to maximize the impact of CSA efforts, communities must remain centered in the work. This study shows that when brands center the stories and lived experiences of marginalized communities, they not only disrupt dominant narratives but to advance the interests

of the community. However, centering these voices must go beyond representation and demonstrate a true effort in being an advocate. This involves partnering with community organizations, investing in policy reform and systemic change, and ensuring that diverse voices are reflected in CSA efforts. CSA efforts should be backed by clear commitments and transparent goals to ensure that advocacy leads to meaningful and sustained progress. These practices move CSA beyond symbolic gestures and toward meaningful, equity-driven impact.

Future research should continue examining CSA through a critical race lens, particularly across a wider range of industries and campaigns. Given the scope of my study, only one issue (i.e, racial hair discrimination) was analyzed. Additional research can consider various social issues advocated by companies to gain a more comprehensive outlook on CSA's influence. The focus on the website could overlook the public sentiment and other mediums used, which might provide a more holistic view and wider sampling of Dove's CSA materials. Ultimately, while CSA campaigns like Dove's serve as powerful tools for combating dominant norms, this study highlights the need for crucial assessment to ensure marginalized communities remain at the center of both representation and structural change.

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