



Ilana Breedt

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1. Mapping the Brand Story

During the initial development process of crafting a brand story, gathering information about *what* the story is and *why* it exists is a vital starting point to build a solid foundation for the story arc (Rodriguez, 2023).

Story Topic

Rodriguez stresses that every brand's story must start with the brand's mission, and as the story unfolds, the narrative should always reflect the brand's core values (Rodriguez, 2023). Dove South Africa's home page (Dove ZA, n.d.) features a bold statement: "Call Me Confident" and encourages viewers to revisit the way in which they compliment their girls. "Girls are so much more than just beautiful", adds Dove (Dove ZA, n.d.). Dove's mission for the past two decades has been to help girls and women build self-esteem and body acceptance, ultimately leading to increased self-confidence (Dove ZA, n.d.).

The proposed brand story to further complement Dove's Real Beauty campaign evolves around teenage self-harm as a repercussion of bullying, especially related to physical appearance. The anticipated message is to make young girls realise that external validation is irrelevant, and that the uniqueness of their personalities defines them in a greater sense.

Story Mission

Even though the story mission should align with the brand's mission, the two should not be confused (Rodriguez, 2023). The mission of the story is the ultimate goal a brand aims to reach by telling it, be it brand awareness, showcasing new products, or simply to gain social media or website traffic (Rodriguez, 2023).

The aim of this brand story is to create further awareness of Dove's Real Beauty mission statement and to touch the lives of young girls in such a way that they develop self-love and confidence.

Brand Positioning

Every brand story needs to stay on point and align with the brand's personality in terms of tone and identity, and other physical attributes unique to the brand (Rodriguez, 2023).

During this 30-second commercial, emphasis will be placed on the signature white space Dove has managed to incorporate in all the Real Beauty campaign advertisements to date. Strong taglines and statistics will be used in its iconic blue typeface on white, aligning with the Dove corporate identity. Real people will be featured, committing to their vow not to distort or create a false sense of beauty in their advertisements (Dove ZA, n.d.). Finally, the payoff line will appear with the Dove icon placed at the top right to keep the advertisement in line with the rest of the Real Beauty series.

Key Audiences

Rodriguez states that it is important from an early stage to keep the targeted audience in mind when developing a brand story and to make sure the story appeals to them (Rodriguez, 2023). Equally important is to keep this audience in mind throughout the narrative to ensure they do not lose interest (Rodriguez, 2023).

The key audiences for this proposed Real Beauty campaign are young girls and women who have a strong influence on them. It is important to note that the older audience of this campaign is not necessarily the mothers of these girls, but could be any influential individual.

Feelings

Evoking emotions and feelings in brand storytelling is critical. Resonating with an audience on an emotional level makes a story memorable and enables a brand to convey its desired message (Rodriguez, 2023).

Sympathy is the first emotion this campaign wishes to attain. Once the audience can empathize with the characters on a sympathetic level, the theme of the campaign will resonate at a deeper level, and Dove's brand message will be conveyed coherently. Even though the campaign has a sombre tone, the concluding emotion should ideally be that of hope and confidence.

Make it Believable

To convince an audience that a brand's story is plausible, the narrative must be supported by reliable sources, such as testimonials, case studies, and credible resources (Rodriguez, 2023). Dove has numerous resources available to mentors, parents, youth leaders, and teachers, addressing low self-esteem through quality confidence kits and The Dove Self-Esteem Project (Dove ZA, n.d.). Considering this campaign, the Beat Bullying section from The Confidence Kit by Dove (Dove ZA, n.d.) will be referenced specifically.

2. Story Designing

2.1. Finding the Universal Truth and Emotional Connection

Customer Persona

Lewrick, Link, and Leifer (2018) suggest imagining the ideal customer as an actual person and visually mapping out their interests, preferences, and experiences. Exploring these insights will give a brand a better understanding of the customer's thoughts and feelings, making it easier to create empathy with them (Lewrick, et al., 2018).

Please see Appendix 2A for the customer persona.

Consumer-Centric Issue

The main consumer-centric issue Dove will address with this commercial is the effect bullying because of physical appearance has on adolescents, specifically focusing on self-harm. Dove's Confidence Kit (Dove ZA, n.d.) dedicates an entire section to bullying, and it is clear that it is an important issue the brand empathizes with and supports.

Studies show that globally, approximately 20% of young people have injured themselves purposefully (Mental Health Foundation, 2023). In South Africa, there are approximately 460 self-harm cases daily, including statistics covering all ages (Alabi, 2022). DistrictMail and Helderberg Gazette (2023) quotes Dr Terri Henderson: "The age of onset is approximately 12 years, although there is a stronger association with puberty rather than chronological age" (District Mail and Helderberg Gazette, 2023). This is alarming to young teenagers and their parents, and being open about the issue is not the norm. Although there are various reasons a young teen might harm themselves, bullying and poor self-image are two definite causes (SA Federation for Mental Health, 2024). Psychology Today (n.d.) reports that girls are more likely to self-harm than boys, including that these incidents also occur at an earlier age (Psychology Today, n.d.).

Universal Truth

The universal truth of a brand refers to the customer's feelings about the brand as a reaction to the emotions provoked by it. This is not what a brand claims to stand for, but how the customer perceives it by the way it makes them feel (Rodriguez, 2023). Rodriguez adds that brand storytelling should evoke emotions, trigger physical reactions, and then reveal the feelings a brand manifests with its customer (Rodriguez, 2023).

This Dove brand story will predominantly focus on the mental health issues caused by bullying based on physical appearance, which often results in self-harm. Young female adolescents, whether they are victims of self-harm or not, will relate to the story no matter which side of the struggle they are: bullying or being bullied. Dove's message within this campaign will encourage girls to listen to the opinions that matter and to pay attention to the positive voices, building their self-esteem and confidence.

The emotions the brand wishes to trigger through this campaign are sadness and sympathy. Once the viewer's attention is focused on the commercial, the anticipated physical reaction is concern and involvement in the story. This should make the viewer feel understood and inspired to make a drastic change in how they perceive other people's opinions about themselves.

Empathy Used to Connect

When a brand wants to tell a compelling story, it needs to empathize with its audience. Kyle DeGuzman (2025) explains: "Empathy is more than a feeling; it's a potent tool that allows us to understand and share the feelings of others." He adds that there are three types of empathy: cognitive, emotional, and compassionate (DeGuzman, 2025).

Cognitive empathy in brand storytelling is to see customers as humans and having the ability to communicate as a human as opposed to a product or brand (Rodriguez, 2023). When a brand is aware of the consumer's vulnerability and exposes itself in the same way, emotional empathy is achieved, and a personal relationship between the brand and its customer is established (Rodriguez, 2023). The deepest level of empathy is compassion. Compassionate empathy is not just about relating to a customer and exposing a brand's vulnerability, but it is the ability to act benevolently to relieve a consumer from their burden (DeGuzman, 2025).

During this commercial, Dove will carry through all three levels of empathy. On a cognitive level, the brand will portray itself as human by telling an unspeakable story that will resonate with individuals in similar situations. Emotionally, Dove will empathize with its audience through a vulnerable narrative that touches a sensitive topic many are hesitant to discuss. This will reveal the intensity of the brand's understanding of the seriousness that lies in teenage self-harm. Once Dove has emphasized with its audience both cognitively and emotionally, its interest in the consumer's mental well-being and its willingness to support them will make compassionate empathy evident.

2.2. Ideating the Creative Story Concept

Please see Appendix 2B for the story concept.

Brand Storyline

This story is about a young teenage girl struggling with severe low self-esteem because she is being bullied about her appearance by her peers at school. As a result of the bullying, she injures herself. Her mother notices this and is devastated that her daughter is experiencing this level of trauma at such a young age. The mother addresses the issue in a self-assured, composed manner and reassures her daughter that she is more than just physically beautiful. She accentuates that her creativity and uniqueness make up so much more of her beauty than her physical appearance ever will and reassures her daughter that she is supported and loved.

The Beginning

Yadira Gonzalez Muñoz (2025) suggests in her article, *How to Create a Powerful Opening That Keeps Your Audience Hooked* (Muñoz, 2025), that a story needs to have a powerful beginning to create interest and establish resonance with an audience.

The opening scene of this brand story will introduce a young teenage girl applying her mother's makeup in the mirror while crying. Subtly, the girl looks at her arms, pulls down her jersey's sleeves, and leaves the room.

This is an effective first act of the commercial since it creates anticipation and curiosity. The emotional character will evoke empathy with the viewer and will resonate with the target audience.

The Middle

The middle of the story, often referred to as the second act, serves as the crisis discovery (Three Brains, 2025). Alex Cattoni (2023) calls the second act *The Discovery*, and explains that it serves as the big realisation and where a brand introduces itself (Cattoni, 2023).

The viewer will briefly see the same girl walking down the corridor at school while hearing the voices of her peers insulting her physical appearance. The school scene will fade out to the girl standing in front of her mirror, crying again. As she pulls her hands from her face, blood is seen on her jersey's sleeves, and the scene slowly fades out to white.

Fading in line-by-line, will be the dreadful statistics in Dove's iconic blue typeface:

20% of teenagers have harmed themselves purposefully.

Fading in to the scene where the girl injured herself, the girl's mother walks into the room and notices the blood on her sleeves. Alarmed, she embraces the sobbing girl. "I hate myself," whispers the girl. "I love you. Everything about you. Your creativity. Your personality. Especially your personality," responds the mother. The scene fades out to white again.

As explained by Three Brains (2025), crisis is crucial to make the brand story come to life (Three Brains, 2025). First, the girl is insulted by her peers, followed by the upsetting event of the girl harming herself. Since self-harm is a very sensitive topic not often discussed, the viewer's full attention will be focused on the character's story. Slightly less dramatic, the second character makes an appearance, and the mother's reaction to the scene creates more crisis. Finally, the Dove brand is subtly introduced by the plain white screen with the crisis written out.

The End

The final act of a story is when all the loose ends are tied together and the character overcomes the crisis (Hahn, 2024). The main aim of the end of a story, as Hahn (2024) explains, "is to convince your customers to take action" (Hahn, 2024).

Fading in from white, the girl is seen playing her guitar with her mother sitting next to her. The viewer will notice a significant shift in the mood of the commercial. The mother smiles and says, “I am your biggest fan.” The commercial concludes when the final scene fades to white and the closing line appears with the Dove icon on the top right: “Tune in to the voices that matter.”

The conclusion of the advertisement is effective because it shows how the character has developed to overcome her problem. Dove’s brand becomes a support system to the customer’s challenge by encouraging the viewer to listen to and focus on what matters most. It ties in perfectly with the rest of their Real Beauty campaign series by consistently sticking to the brand’s positioning.

Character Development

A character arc plays a pivotal role in storytelling. It adds value to the structure of a story and makes the story more enticing (Zavala, 2025). A positive character arc shares a protagonist’s journey of self-discovery as they evolve from personal struggles to exploring solutions, and finally, overcoming these obstacles, resulting in triumph (Zavala, 2025).

The teenage girl in this brand story (the protagonist) is burdened by low self-esteem caused by her peers’ bullying her (the antagonist) about her appearance. This has a radical effect on her mental well-being as she starts injuring herself. Her mother steps in as a significant supporter, and her admiration for her daughter causes a shift in character as the girl overcomes her self-image issues. The girl’s journey towards self-discovery and self-acceptance becomes the foundation of a captivating story that would not have been possible without a strong and positive character arc.

Creative Elements Used

The use of high key lighting throughout the advertisement is a deliberate decision to make the heavy undertone of the commercial appear lighter. High-key lighting, according to Adobe (n.d.), results in brighter, less dramatic footage, creating an uplifting overall mood (Hara & Waltz, n.d.). Even though the article suggests low-key lighting for more serious scenery, the undertone of the advertisement is already sombre, and Dove’s brand positioning throughout the Real Beauty campaign, both online and print, is presented in a lighter tone.

The choice of music in film is an important element in creating the right mood for a scene (Winter, 2024). Winter explains that music is “a fundamental element that bridges the gap between the audience and the narrative, creating a richer, more immersive experience” (Winter, 2024). The song featured in the commercial, Looking Too Closely performed by Fink (OpenLab Radio, 2019), ties in with the underlying theme and connects to the end of the advertisement where the girl is playing guitar. The lyrics are very apt and complement the commercial.

The characters featured in the commercial represent South Africa’s diversity and inclusivity. The girl, specifically, is very young to indicate that teenage self-harm not only occurs in older adolescents but is also common amongst younger teenagers.

Technological Considerations

With the rise of video streaming platforms like Netflix, YouTube, and Disney+, airing video commercials has become a challenging medium. Even though many of these platforms have ad-free subscription options, there are still technological aspects that are advantageous to brands. Smart televisions are used in most households, and the Automatic Content Recognition (ACR) feature of these televisions allows tracking analytics of viewers' preferences and engaging behaviours, which is essential for advertisers (Marketing Architects, n.d.).

Considering this, Dove will showcase this commercial on both television and their social media platforms, including Facebook, YouTube, LinkedIn, and Instagram. These platforms have insight data available, and the performance of the advertisement can easily be measured.

Motivating the Brand Story Structure

Due to the delicate nature of this commercial, it could be best described as The Mountain brand story structure. The Mountain, as explained by Rodriguez (2023), is an escalation of tension that builds up to the story's climax and finally reaches a sensational ending (Rodriguez, 2023). Even though this commercial has a heartwarming ending, the audience might not anticipate the story to end that way due to the sensitivity of the theme.

This brand story structure was specifically chosen with attentiveness and emotional interest from the audience in mind. "This structure can be used to capture and keep your audience's attention in a very emotional way," states Rodriguez (Rodriguez, 2023).

Early in the story, the girl looks at her arms, and the viewer might anticipate that she has already harmed herself. Especially since pulling down her sleeves may come across as if she is hiding something. When the girl walks between her peers at school, the possibility is there that she has, in fact, injured herself. The Mountain story structure requires tension followed by more tension (Rodriguez, 2023), and this commercial effectively implements that.

Self-harm is an exceptionally sensitive subject, and, because the viewer might feel uneasy at the beginning of the story, curiosity will keep their attention. A significant characteristic of The Mountain is to introduce an extreme event right after the beginning of a story (Rodriguez, 2023), and this is exactly the aim of the storyline when the self-harm incident is revealed.

Rodriguez (2023) suggests that The Mountain is a risky story structure to use within brand storytelling and stresses that it should be well considered during the prototyping and testing phase (Rodriguez, 2023).

2.3. Prototyping and Testing the Idea

Prototyping

Meegle (n.d.) defines storytelling prototyping as “a preliminary version of your narrative or campaign elements to test their effectiveness,” and explains that it is a visual representation of the concept (Meegle, n.d.).

Furthermore, Meegle (n.d.) includes that the main purpose of prototyping is to constantly review and implement feedback on the campaign, and to ensure that the story remains customer-centric (Meegle, n.d.).

During the prototyping phase of crafting a brand story, all the ideas are put together to finalise the structure. Rodriguez (2023) suggests creating a four-quadrant model (the napkin pitch) that will help with refining the story before going into the testing phase (Rodriguez, 2023). Inside the four quadrants, the following questions need to be asked: What is the story’s theme? From a stakeholder’s perspective, what are the benefits? How and where can the story live? Why does this story make business sense? (Rodriguez, 2023). Considering these questions, this Dove commercial’s “napkin pitch” can be illustrated as explained below.

1. What is the story’s theme?

The main theme of the story is to carry through Dove’s mission to make girls and women feel confident about their self-image. It is about creating awareness about the repercussions of bullying and providing support to individuals affected by similar incidents.

2. From a stakeholder’s perspective, what are the benefits?

The most prominent benefit of this campaign is to support consumers who relate to the overall theme of Dove’s brand story. Evidently, this will result in generating additional traffic to its digital platforms and building brand awareness.

3. How and where can the story live?

With advancing technology, digital implementation of the campaign will benefit the story most. Dove can circulate the commercial on social media platforms and air a television advertisement after it has received feedback about how the advertisement was received.

4. Why does this story make business sense?

Predominantly, the story supports Dove’s mission and values. It is on-target with the rest of the Real Beauty campaign Dove has devoted themselves to for the past 20 years, which has proven to be successful on both brand awareness and revenue fronts.

Testing

Testing the brand story can be considered a “soft launch” of the commercial to gather metrics on how it was received amongst consumers (Rodriguez, 2023). It is vital to pay close attention to the feedback from consumers to know if changes are required or whether the story will not suffice at all (Rodriguez, 2023).

Technology allows for gathering insights and statistics that will be a concise indication of the commercial’s performance. It also allows for targeting specific audiences, narrowing down the testing phase. With additional social media tools such as likes, comments, and social shares, further information will be at Dove’s disposal to evaluate the potential success of the campaign.

3. Sense Checking

3.1. How This Dove Brand Story Differentiates Itself from NIVEA

Comparing NIVEA's South African website landing page (NIVEA, n.d.) to Dove South Africa's (Dove ZA, n.d.), the core messaging differs significantly. The main focus on NIVEA's home page is its products and benefits, whereas Dove's draws attention to their brand values and mission.

NIVEA's latest advertisement on NIVEA South Africa's YouTube channel (NIVEA South Africa, 2025) showcases young women embracing glowing skin because of the NIVEA product they use. The brand and the featured product are prominent within the commercial, with reliance on special effects to illustrate the benefits. The tone of this NIVEA advertisement is upbeat and happy, but it fails to connect with its consumers on an empathetic level.

On the contrary, this Dove brand story tells a heartwarming tale about how girls are affected by bullying. No computerised special effects are used within the commercial, and the Dove brand is not explicitly showcased. The absence of a featured product is also noteworthy. It is evident that this Dove brand story speaks to consumers with an empathetic tone, raising concerns about serious matters and reassuring them that the brand offers support.

3.2. Three Reasons Why This Dove Brand Story Builds the Brand

The Story Aligns with Dove's Values

Rodriguez (2023) stresses the importance of bringing across a brand's values and purpose through its storytelling. This will ensure a strong emotional connection between the brand and its consumers (Rodriguez, 2023). This Dove brand story portrays the brand's values by sharing a story that illustrates Dove's concern for young teenage girls' mental well-being. The story's fundamental purpose is to connect with consumers and resonate with individuals experiencing related issues.

Dove's Brand Promise is Supported

A brand's reputation is dependent on the promises it makes and its ability to fulfil these promises (Young Entrepreneur Council, 2023). "That's why Dove is renewing its vow to champion real beauty, with a commitment to never using AI to create or distort women's images", promises Dove on their website (Dove ZA, n.d.). The characters within this Dove brand story are ordinary people without AI-enhanced features or excessive makeup to create an unrealistic beauty standard.

Dove's Purpose is Fulfilled

The Dove Self-Esteem Project focuses on empowering girls to embrace themselves for who they are as opposed to what they look like and how they are perceived by others (Dove ZA, n.d.). Dove's aim to help girls build confidence is supported in this brand story. The mother supports her child wholeheartedly and accentuates the things she loves most about her daughter. Dove's closing line, *Tune in to the voices that matter*, becomes a call to action for young girls and their mothers to stand up for themselves and embrace what matters most – their personalities.



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