Redefining Beauty: The Impact of Shade and Size Inclusivity on Consumer Perception and Brand Equity in the Fashion and Cosmetic Industry

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ABSTRACT

This conceptual research study examines the impact of shade and size inclusivity on consumer perception, brand equity, credibility, and trust by drawing on contemporary global brand models and relevant theories such as Social Identity Theory, Cultural Shift Theory, and Authenticity Theory. The research formulates a framework that illuminates the interrelationship among the key variables. This study intends to present marketing managers and brands with insights on leveraging shade and size inclusivity to strengthen customer relationships and market positioning in India by providing a holistic understanding of the factors that drive competitiveness and brand performance in the current market context.

Keywords: Skin colour inclusiveness, Body Positivity, Fashion Industry, Cosmetic Industry, Indian Market.

Introduction

India is a land of varying cultures, traditions and languages (Umer, 2027) and one would assume that it would be a pioneer in the revolution of inclusivity in fashion and beauty sectors; however, that is far from reality.

Ancient Indians were not keen toward prejudice based on skin color or tone and did not idealize or promote a specific body type (Vaid, 2009). Today the socially accepted normal for skin (Sharda, 2020) and body is a reflection of India's 200-year-long colonial history and the subsequent liberalization of the economy (Gelles, 2011).

The influence of Imperialism in India is seen in the prevalent poor self-esteem (Malone, 2025) among the majority of Indians (Sharda, 2020) (Anukriti, 2024). Individuals possessing a body silhouette or type that is not extensively advertised or acknowledged frequently encounter criticism, as media and companies have established a standard for how someone looks (Gelles, 2011).

Globally, the beauty and fashion industry is experiencing a revolution (Shukla, 2025). Although some may contend that businesses are striving for inclusivity, consumers continue to perceive their attempts at advertising as significantly unrelated and unrelatable (Mintel, 2022).

Brands are gradually adopting a "Skinclusious" approach (Al-Mukhtar, 2022) and promoting inclusivity; yet they frequently fail to recognize that inclusivity is multifaceted and frequently grapple with balancing their claims of inclusivity with authenticity (Suradkar& Chanana, 2024).

Brands that attain an optimal harmony of authenticity, inclusivity, and engagement with consumers (Jin et al., 2025) (Joo & Wu, 2021) emerge as the industry leaders and frequently stimulate competitiveness.

This study investigates the diverse elements within the globally operating fashion and cosmetic business and analyzes the influence of shade and size inclusivity on consumer perception, brand equity, and credibility. It further enhances the limited literature concerning the effects of body positivity and skin tone inclusivity within the Indian context and offers actionable recommendations for cosmetic firms, fashion and apparel companies, and marketing executives to promote diversity. The study also emphasizes how inclusivity can serve as a strategic tool for long-term brand differentiation in the competitive Indian market.

Review of Literature

The review of literature synthesizes prior academic and industry research related to shade and size inclusivity, highlighting how brands' evolving representations of beauty influence consumer perception, engagement, and overall brand equity. This section is structured thematically to connect body positivity, skin-colour inclusion, and strategic marketing shifts with core brand-building outcomes such as trust, credibility, and competitive advantage. The literature reviewed draws from global brand case studies, conceptual models, and theoretical perspectives that together provide a foundation for the proposed conceptual framework. By organizing the review into three themes, the study offers a logical progression from individual consumer perceptions to broader market dynamics.

Theme 1: The Influence of Body Positivity Representation on Consumer Engagement and Brand Credibility

IV – Body positivity representation

DV – Brand trust and credibility, Consumer engagement

Today, body positivity is more than just a social media buzzword (The Luupe | 11 Fashion Brands Doing Body Positivity Right, n.d.). It garners significant consumer engagement as brands that adopt body positivity in their values have witnessed growing, genuine and interactive communication with their consumers (Flemming et al., n.d.).

The model-sized body moulds were far from reality and often depicted the facade of the fashion industry leading to a lack of brand trust and credibility (Pratik, 2022). As a result, companies started to promote body positivity and models with diverse body types, ethnicity and more in their high-value brand communications (Body Positivity in Fashion: How Plus Size Clothing Brands Are Leading the Change, 2024).

Leading brands like Victoria's Secret (in their 2025 Show) have witnessed positive brand engagement and credibility due to their evolving brand message and communication (Tetteh-Martey, 2025). Brands like Nexus by Lifestyle (Pratik, 2022), Universal Standard (Trope, n.d.), and Savage X Fenty (SxF) lingerie line (Ajami & Szabó, 2024) are some examples of how body positivity representation has influenced consumer engagement. Shoppers today do not wish to associate with brands that do not share similar values and do not seem authentic (Moran, 2025; Kashti, 2025).

Consumers are starting to spend their money and time on brands that seem more authentic in their efforts and message and are compelling brands to be more genuine and transparent (Micheletti, 2021). This reinforces that body positivity is not merely an ethical choice but a strategic branding element that builds consumer trust and long-term relationships. The world is slowly but surely witnessing change and inclusivity in which body and skin are not mere aesthetics but a statement that affects the world around (Jess, 2021).

Thus, body positivity representation acts as a mediator between brand communication and consumer engagement, where authenticity determines whether the message is perceived as credible or tokenistic.

Theme 2: Skin Colour Inclusion as a Catalyst For Market Competitiveness and Brand Trust

IV – Skin colour inclusion

DV – Market competitiveness and Brand Trust

The industry is witnessing a historical shift and growth. It is slowly but surely embracing different skin tones, shades, and conditions (Shukla, 2025). Contemporary consumers are growing aware and conscious about their cosmetic choices, pushing market competitiveness (ELT Admin, 2025).

Inclusion today is more than just a marketing strategy; it is crucial as everyone is unique and deserves to feel so. Brands like Fenty, Flesh Cosmetics, Mented Cosmetics (Magazine, 2024), and Korean beauty brand Tir Tir have understood that diversity and inclusivity can lead to brand trust and act as drivers of competitive advantage (Jin-hai, 2024).

Inclusive brands offer a safe environment where minorities can demonstrate their creativity and, more crucially, obtain products that meet their requirements (Alli, n.d.). Every advertisement is a means to communicate and grow market share. Consumers are believed to spend their money on brands that win their trust by reflecting their identity (Ryan, 2025).

When brands like Fenty and P&G (Petro, 2020) embrace inclusivity, it leads to a butterfly effect, pushing competitors to keep up and benefitting the market and the consumers alike (Zharova et al., 2025; de Castro, 2024).

Thus, helping the brand gain consumer trust and lead the beauty revolution (Dugal, 2025) because inclusivity isn't just a fad but is a movement, a revolution that also leads to a strategic marketing shift and ultimately benefits the brand (Zobha, 2025).

In other words, skin colour inclusion functions as a market differentiator that enhances both brand trust and industry innovation. Brands that truly reflect diversity through their product range and messaging cultivate deeper consumer connections and long-term loyalty.

Theme 3: Strategic Marketing Shifts as Drivers of Competitive Advantage

IV – Marketing strategy shifts

DV – Competitive advantage

Contemporary fashion and beauty brands are witnessing a shift in their marketing strategy. Marketing and communication are no longer restricted to single-mode traditional methods but are rapidly witnessing a digital shift with the integration of AR, VR, and AI (Rathore, 2019).

Brands like Nykaa, Tira, Myntra, Ajio, and Tata CliQ have set market standards with their "virtual try-on" technology, which is not a mere marketing gimmick but a revolution in itself (Verma, 2025).

Fashion brands like Victoria's Secret, Aerie, and Adore Me enjoyed a competitive advantage in the market due to their marketing strategy shift from being simply fashionable to being size and body-type inclusive (Nemirovsky & Asgari, 2025).

However, in the beauty service industry, there are three major marketing factors: management innovation, brand management, and customer satisfaction, which drive competitive advantage. Customer satisfaction is positively impacted by brands that have a strong social media marketing strategy as it ensures customer engagement (Sawasdichan et al., 2024).

Brands that provide a community experience as their strategy often enjoy an edge over their rivals, as a community experience helps build positively influential consumer-generated content which serves as a market advantage (Tracey Hicks-Kearse, 2024).

The Korean business Tir Tir utilizes community comments and constructive criticism to refine its products, engage consumers, and create enduring impressions. The brand's "Find Your Shade" marketing masterclass demonstrates how a strategic move fosters competition, enhances consumer engagement, and establishes market leadership (HOM Team, 2025).

Thus, strategic marketing shifts that integrate technology, community-building, and authentic consumer participation can create a sustainable competitive edge. Brands that embrace digital personalization and inclusive storytelling are better positioned to achieve enduring market leadership.

Research Gap

Ancient India wasn't inclined to favor light complexion over dark skin, nor did it stigmatize individuals with varying body types (Vaid, 2009); nevertheless, contemporary society's entrenched history of colonization and preference for fair skin and model-like physiques is well-documented.

Body shaming has adversely affected the mental well-being of youth, significantly diminishing their self-esteem (Vijaykumar et al., 2023). Apparel brands frequently neglect varied body shapes and their needs, owing to prejudices and an incessant preoccupation with the ideal physique and dimensions. The fashion and entertainment sector in the country has progressively endorsed a standard body size and type that does not correspond to the typical population (Vision IAS Community, 2025; Ram, 2025).

In a nation characterized by a rich cultural tapestry (Umer, 2020), colorism knows no limits. It pervades all strata of society, particularly within the nation's cosmetic industry. Brands such as Lakme and Maybelline provide a restricted selection of hues for darker skin tones in India (Beatty, 2018). The selection of skin hues in cosmetics is frequently restricted to lighter tones, neglecting the variety of Indian skin tones and undertones.

Modern marketing brands are increasingly adapting to changes in societal expectations; nonetheless, there exists a disparity between market comprehension and the accessible literature in context to the Indian market and consumer preferences.

While there are various past studies that help understand the impact of inclusivity, this study seeks to evaluate the significance and impact of body positivity and skin color acceptance within the Indian market through comprehensive literature review and market analysis.

This research aims to underscore the imperative of redefining beauty standards nationwide and the impact of accepting diverse complexions and body types on brand trust and credibility. However, limited empirical research exists that specifically analyses these factors in the Indian context using a structured theoretical framework. This creates a crucial gap that this study aims to address.

This study will examine the dominant beauty standards in India, providing valuable insights for marketers seeking to target a diverse consumer demographic. The findings are expected to contribute to existing literature by bridging the disconnect between global inclusivity trends and their adoption in the Indian market.

Research Objectives

- To examine the influence of body positivity representation on consumer engagement and brand credibility.
- To understand the effect of skin colour inclusion as a catalyst for market competitiveness and brand trust.
- To analyse the strategic marketing shifts as drivers of engagement and competitive advantage.

Additionally, the study aims to synthesize these three dimensions into a coherent conceptual framework that links inclusivity initiatives with brand equity outcomes. By doing so, it seeks to provide marketing professionals and researchers with a holistic view of how inclusivity shapes consumer perceptions and long-term brand success.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws from various psychological, consumer behavioural, branding and marketing theories that help us understand how shade inclusivity, body positivity and strategic marketing shifts influence consumer engagement, market competition and brand credibility and trust, fueling the reshaping of the normals and redefining beauty as a concept for both the consumer and the companies.

The Social Identity Theory helps us understand that consumers often prefer brands that align with their self-esteem, values, and social identity. Their preferences can shape brand credibility and loyalty (Wang, 2017; Barutçu, 2024; Keener, 2022). This helps us understand that brands that communicate the values of body positivity in their brand communication are often seen as genuine and preferred by consumers who identify with similar values. Hence, social identity theory provides the psychological basis for explaining consumers' inclination toward brands that reflect their self-concept and social group membership.

The Cultural Shift Theory emphasizes the vitality of inclusion, as failing to include in assortment diminishes customer interest and adversely impacts their self-esteem (Vipulbhai, 2025). This adversely

impacts market growth and competitiveness. Culture shift serves as the primary impetus for change and consumption in India; hence, organizations that comprehend the significance of this shift frequently act as market catalysts (Manoj et al., 2025; Nautiyal & Chakraborty, 2023). in this study, cultural shift theory offers a macro-level perspective on how societal values, historical influences, and consumer expectations drive the adoption of inclusivity in fashion and beauty marketing.

The Authenticity Theory proposes that authenticity is integral to consumer purchasing decisions and essential for fostering competitiveness (Gilmore & Pine II). Brands that make excessively bold assertions of authenticity yet fail to uphold their values are frequently regarded as lacking trustworthiness and credibility (Beverland et al., 2008; Morhart et al., 2025). Thus, authenticity theory anchors the brand dimension of this study, emphasizing that consumers value brands whose actions align with their communicated promises and values.

Together, these theories create a multi-dimensional lens that links individual-level perceptions (social identity theory), cultural context (cultural shift theory), and brand behaviour (authenticity theory). This integration forms the conceptual foundation upon which the present framework is developed.
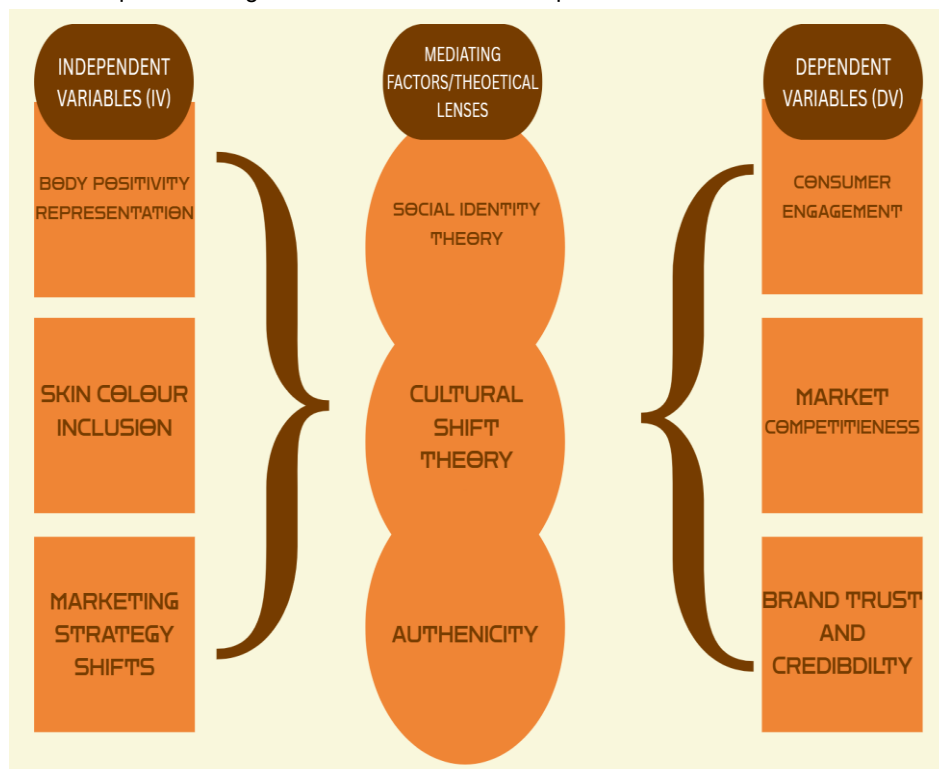
Conceptual Framework

Based on the theoretical insights derived from social identity theory, cultural shift theory, and authenticity theory, this study proposes a conceptual framework that integrates the three core themes discussed in the literature review.

The framework suggests that body positivity representation, skin colour inclusion, and strategic marketing shifts act as independent variables (ivs) influencing consumer engagement, brand credibility, and market competitiveness, which function as dependent variables (dvs).

Customer engagement also operates as a mediating variable, strengthening the connection between inclusivity initiatives and brand performance outcomes.

This framework posits that inclusivity—when perceived as authentic and culturally relevant—drives stronger emotional connections, brand trust, and competitive advantage. The model provides a basis for future empirical testing to validate these relationships in the Indian context.

Discussions

The study, through its extensive literature review, elucidates that brands embodying body positivity values are more inclined to resonate with consumers. This can foster loyalty and achieve favorable consumer engagement across all channels, inevitably resulting in enhanced sales and brand success.

Social Identity Theory has an impact on how consumers perceive a brand and why they favour it (Barutçu, 2024) because modern consumers value embracing and outwardly expressing variety. Diverse body forms are broadly accepted and are not considered taboo in society. This alteration in consumer behavior has compelled firms to reevaluate their marketing methods and emphasize diversity in their campaigns and collections.

Prominent companies such as Victoria's Secret, Skims (Khanpara, 2023), Smart Glamour, and ModCloth (The Trollsen Twins, 2016) have recognized this shift and integrated body positive principles into their marketing strategies and products. By endorsing body positivity, brands can establish a robust emotional bond with their audience and position themselves as socially conscious entities in the perception of customers.

The study elucidates the significance of incorporating individuals of diverse skin tones in contemporary society. Brands such as Jouer Cosmetics, Fenty, Uoma Beauty, Morphe, and Mac (Ilchi, 2019) that provide a broader array of choices emerge as industry leaders and catalysts for transformation. Conversely, businesses that neglect to offer diverse options and fail to embrace the increasing emphasis on inclusivity may jeopardize their relevance and competitiveness in the sector.

This highlights the significance of embracing diversity and providing products for a broad spectrum of skin tones to remain competitive and engage with customers increasingly demanding representation and inclusivity in the cosmetics industry. India is acknowledged for its many cultures, languages, religions, and traditions. Nonetheless, the fashion and entertainment industries have established detrimental benchmarks for physical appearance. The current generation of digital natives is transcending established norms, compelling brands to adapt.

Brands such as Manish Malhotra, Sabyasachi, Nexus by Lifestyle, Blissclub, Bewakoof (Ali, 2023), Salt Attire, and Poppi (Valecha, 2025) are producing and curating goods that accommodate many body types and sizes. Nonetheless, these products are not extensively accessible.

In the cosmetics sector in India, brands like Kay Cosmetics, Lovechild by Masaba, Blurr Cosmetics (Madan, 2025), Type Beauty, and Color Chemistry (Kader, 2023) promote inclusivity. These brands insist that inclusivity is not merely a trend, but rather the new norm that is here to stay.

These companies produce items for a diverse array of skin tones and types while promoting messages of self-acceptance and empowerment. Indian companies must engage with consumers and differentiate themselves in a saturated market by aligning with these ideals.

Many global corporations maintain their market leader status in the industries they serve due to their commitment to inclusivity. But there exists a plethora of opportunities for growth for Indian companies, since India boasts one of the largest populations globally and ranks among the foremost consumer marketplaces. By acknowledging and adopting the principles of inclusivity, Indian firms may thrive and prosper in the fashion sector.

Prioritizing diversity and inclusion will enable Indian enterprises to meet the diverse needs of their clientele while simultaneously establishing new trends and standards in the global fashion industry. Nonetheless, numerous obstacles exist in doing this.

The discussion thus reinforces that inclusivity operates at multiple levels — as a social imperative, a strategic marketing tool, and a brand differentiation mechanism. When inclusivity is perceived as genuine, it builds consumer trust, whereas superficial attempts can backfire and damage brand credibility. This underscores the need for integrated, authentic brand communication that aligns with consumer values and cultural context.

Implications

For Cosmetic Companies

The research suggests that businesses have traditionally offered a limited range of options for various skin tones in India. The main recommendation is to invest in product development that properly

addresses the diverse range of Indian skin tones and undertones, rather than focusing just on a limited selection of lighter tones.

The success of numerous international brands illustrates that diversity and inclusivity foster brand trust and enhance competitiveness. Companies ought to perceive skin color inclusion not merely as a marketing fad, but as a catalyst for market competitiveness and a means to pioneer the beauty revolution.

A solitary brand's authentic commitment to diversity might initiate a butterfly effect, compelling competitors to maintain pace. Companies should strive to be the first movers in this space, becoming the vanguards of this transformation in the Indian market to secure consumer trust and enhance market share.

Furthermore, cosmetic companies should prioritize consumer education campaigns that normalize all skin tones and highlight their product range's versatility. Such educational initiatives can strengthen brand reputation and differentiate them from tokenistic competitors.

For Clothing and Fashion Brands

The research indicates that conventional, unrealistic imagery results in an erosion of brand trust and credibility. Brands must proactively advocate for body positivity and feature models with different body types in all significant brand communications and marketing initiatives.

The analysis indicates that although certain Indian firms are adopting size inclusivity, their products remain not easily accessible. It is insufficient to merely display varied models in advertisements; firms must guarantee the availability of a broad spectrum of sizes for purchase and expand their reach nationwide.

Brands like Aerie and Adore Me possessed a competitive advantage by transitioning their fundamental strategy from merely fashionable to inclusive of various sizes and body types. This indicates that inclusivity should be a sustained strategy shift rather than a transient initiative.

In addition, indian fashion brands should invest in supply chain and inventory optimization to ensure that inclusive product lines are consistently available. Inaccessibility of sizes undermines the authenticity of inclusivity messages and reduces consumer trust.

For Marketing Managers

Consumers are increasingly spending their disposable income and time on brands perceived as authentic, while distancing themselves from those lacking authenticity. On the basis of Authenticity Theory, brands that overtly assert their authenticity yet do not adhere to their ideals are often perceived as untrustworthy. Marketing communications must be authentic and supported by actual corporate beliefs and offerings.

Marketing must transition from unilateral communication to fostering a communal experience. This strategy fosters the creation of positively impactful consumer-generated content, which provides an important competitive edge.

Social Identity Theory elucidates that customers frequently favor products that correlate with their self-esteem, values, and social identity. Marketers must ensure that their marketing efforts embody their identity to cultivate consumer trust. This indicates that inclusive messaging is now imperative; it is crucial for establishing brand trust and credibility.

Marketing managers should also leverage digital analytics and social listening to monitor consumer sentiment around inclusivity campaigns. By continuously evaluating consumer responses, brands can align their communication strategies with genuine expectations and prevent perceptions of "performative inclusivity."

Conclusion

This conceptual study highlights that shade and size inclusivity have evolved from marginalized marketing tactics to essential components of contemporary marketing strategies within the fashion and cosmetic industry. The extensive literature review presented in this paper substantiates that a substantial cultural transformation is necessitating brands to "redefine beauty" or face obsolescence. The paper suggests that body positivity representation and skin colour inclusion have become principal determinants of consumer engagement, market competitiveness, and, ultimately, brand trust and credibility.

The analysis concludes that inclusivity is not merely a trend, but rather the new norm that is here to stay. This paper presents a framework that proposes the idea that brand success is fundamentally connected to a brand's capacity to authentically embody its consumers' values and identities, supported by Social Identity Theory, Cultural Shift Theory, and Authenticity Theory.

This research therefore affirms that the future of brand differentiation lies in genuine inclusivity. Brands that embrace diversity as a core value rather than a commercial strategy will cultivate stronger consumer relationships and enduring equity.

This gives the Indian market many opportunities to grow. Indian brands that prioritize diversity and inclusion will be best able to differentiate themselves in a saturated market and build lasting brand equity, despite the disparity between market comprehension and accessible literature.

Moreover, this conceptual framework can serve as a foundation for future empirical studies that examine the statistical significance of these relationships. Validating the framework through quantitative analysis would enhance the theoretical contribution and practical relevance of this research in the indian context.

Limitations

This conceptual research work is limited by its philosophical and qualitative nature.

The key drawback is the lack of empirical data; the conclusions are derived from a comprehensive assessment of current research, paradigms, and market assessments, rather than the collection and evaluation of real quantitative data.

The suggested conceptual framework linking independent variables (IVs) such as body positivity to dependent variables (DVs) like brand trust has yet to be empirically validated. The strength and statistical value of the correlations among these factors have not been empirically confirmed.

The study's conclusions rely on the accuracy and thoroughness of the current literature. This literature may not fully represent the intricate, real-time perceptions of the varied Indian customer, highlighting the "disparity" noted in this research.

This study focuses on the Indian setting while citing numerous global brand examples. The notion that these worldwide techniques and consumer reactions may be immediately implemented in India's own cultural and socio-economic context remains merely theoretical.

Furthermore, this research does not account for potential regional differences within India that may influence attitudes toward body positivity and skin inclusivity. Future studies could consider segmented analysis across geographic or demographic groups to enhance the generalizability of results.

Another limitation is the exclusion of industry-specific performance data that could offer stronger evidence of inclusivity's impact on brand equity. Incorporating longitudinal or mixed-method research in future work would strengthen the validity of findings.

Note to Future Researchers

The limitations of this conceptual analysis provide a clear framework for future empirical research. The essential subsequent action is to evaluate the provided conceptual framework in practical settings. Future researchers are recommended to:

Develop and execute quantitative studies (such as questionnaires, empirical research, or controlled experiments) to statistically evaluate the impact of independent variables on dependent variables.

Obtain primary data from a diverse array of Indian consumers rather than relying solely on secondary sources. This would provide marketers with valuable insights and assist in bridging the gap between individuals' comprehension of the market and the information available to them.

This would be particularly beneficial for discerning individuals' perceptions of authenticity and distinguishing between genuine inclusivity and superficial tokenism.

In addition, future studies could incorporate modern data analytics and sentiment analysis to track consumer responses to inclusivity campaigns over time. This would allow researchers to quantify changes in consumer trust, brand perception, and engagement levels.

Researchers may also consider comparative studies between indian and global brands to understand how cultural contexts influence the effectiveness of inclusivity strategies. Such cross-cultural insights can enhance the global relevance of future findings.

Finally, future research can focus on identifying the role of digital innovation—such as ai-driven personalization and augmented reality—in strengthening inclusivity perceptions among consumers. This would help extend the conceptual framework into new technological dimensions.

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