

Brands: Check your cultural, diversity and inclusive blind spots

By  Khangelani Dziba

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The year has just bagged its first month and South Africa's brand advertising community has taken up arms against a BMW billboard at Cape Town International Airport.



Moreover, many of the consumers for whom this billboard was intended did not resonate with its sentiments.

The integrated campaign comprised a 90" showcase on YouTube, TVC spots (60" and 30"), digital and social (15" and 6" clips), radio and out-of-home. (Note that this video has been removed from YouTube.)

Generation Joy - #Nextgenjoy

The BMW Generation Joy campaign launched in September 2022, its concept is premised on the idea that 'joy' for the next generation is a choice, not just a feeling.

This was expressed through its integrated campaign which conveyed bold and meaningful joyous movements that the brand believes represent its Millennial and GenZ target market.

According to BMW, it challenges the world to see an expanded definition of joy and encourages its consumers to live in the now, owning their agency and autonomy to build a destiny that they are ultimately in charge of.



New BMW brand campaign embodies rebellious joy

Wunderman Thompson 20 Sep 2022



The bone of contention

The campaign is aspirational and draws on themes that Millennials and GenZ are indeed grappling with, such as the design and crafting of futures they will be proud of and celebrating with those who are pivotal to their success.

The friction arose when audiences started paying close attention to some of the campaign assets created to support the campaign and land its narrative.

Drawing most of the attention is a billboard that shows a Black woman assuming a bold stance, backdropped by a landscape featuring the BMW vehicle, the campaign tagline ('We are our Ancestors' wildest dreams'), the campaign hashtag (#generationjoy) and the BMW logo.

Upon closer analysis, the striking of the word 'Ancestors' in the copy is prominent. This is what sparked, and then fuelled, the debate online across social media platforms. Many South Africans suggested this approach erased a belief and cultural identity that forms part of an integral component of their journey towards the actualisation their dreams.

Key questions that have been raised include: "How did this go unnoticed and who could have possibly signed off on this?" and "Would the same approach have been adopted had words, themes and tropes relating to Christianity been involved?"

Semiotics: signified & signifier

Semiotics is an interdisciplinary paradigm that studies signs and symbols insofar as the meanings associated to them. In other words, a sign is anything that can convey meaning. So, words can be signs, drawings can be signs, photographs can be signs, and even street signs can be signs.

Signs and sign systems can be looked at in three ways namely:

1. Semantics – refers to the 'how' of semiotics and is concerned with the relationship between a signified and signifier – the sign and what it stands in for.
2. Syntactics – refers to structural relations in semiotics. It does this by referring to the formal relationship between signs that lets them build into sign systems.
3. Pragmatics – refers to the relationship of signs to the person reading or understanding that sign.

If semantics is concerned with the relationship with the signifier (in this case the billboard advertisement and the contents thereof) and the signified (which is the meaning that can be denoted from it) we can arrive at two sets of meaning:

1. That of individualism, agency and autonomy which may be what BMW was advocating for.
2. That ancestors are not necessarily an integral element of or contributor to Black People in actualising their dreams.

If syntactics refers to the relationship between the signs and the sign systems then the syntax meaning of this billboard advertisement can be read as Women and Black people do not need anyone else to achieve their dreams, especially their Ancestors. All they need is themselves.

Lastly, if pragmatics is concerned with how a person reads and understands a sign, we can agree that for Black People, this advertisement erases an integral part of their individual and cultural identity that forms part of their history.

A history that breathes life into their dreams and aspirations; hence the saying 'I am my Ancestors' wildest dreams'.



Africa needs to do campaigns like *Lesso Lessons* again and again

Danette Breitenbach 23 Jan 2023



Highlighting the importance of diversity and inclusion

The importance of diversity and inclusion in agency and marketing teams is highlighted in instances such as the one BMW South Africa and its ad agency now find themselves in.

Because when its need is identified and practical solutions are applied meaningfully to achieve its highest manifestation, many of the intersectional issues relating to marginalised groups in advertising would be prevented from surfacing and making it to the public domain.

It is no lie that advertisements are created to influence the bottom line and reflect society by challenging the ways in which we do things and have come to accept certain truths in and of society.

However, this cannot be done outside of the context of the people being targeted through acknowledging their history and what matters to them, which is what this brand advertisement failed to do.



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Gugulethu Khojane 26 Jan 2023



Strength-testing our advertisements

A major learning that we must take from this case study is the importance of strength-testing our advertisements with different types of people outside of the boardrooms we occupy. We should not try to speak on behalf of people's histories and cultural identities we do not fully understand (be it intentionally or unintentionally so).

Whilst the future of advertising is exciting and vibrant, we as advertisers should not forget to check our blind spots to prevent us from repeating history.

ABOUT KHANGELANI DZIBA

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