

Is the boy-child suffering at the hands of patriarchy in advertising?

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Katlego 'Flocart' Dithokwe, senior strategist at Brave Group, shares his analysis on the representation of the boy-child in advertising.

When I started writing this article, I actually wanted to review three adverts that I find to be very similar in terms of concept:

All the above-mentioned commercials are about fathers raising their daughters and were pretty much launched within less than a year from one another. The first to be released was #BornWithMomentum, then #ThereWhenItMatters, and #MomentsOfLovin. Though the TVCs are selling different products/services I couldn't help but wonder how the concepts could be so similar. Was it a coincidence, or are single fathers raising the girl-child part of the zeitgeist now? I like the idea of encouraging fathers to be present in their children's lives, especially in a country where over 65% of households are parented by single mothers; however, following the same concept is what I wanted to question as the work becomes wallpaper.

The trend reminded me of when the 'Black Middle Class' report (*4 Million and Rising* by UCT Unilever Institute) was first released and stated that black people were aspirational. Brands started making their commercials so aspirational you would have thought black consumers **lacked** aspiration. The industry was producing commercials that were better in execution but not necessarily different from their competitors. Can you think of a recent commercial that was shot in the villages? I bet you'd struggle to count even three. However, villages/homelands are where most people in South Africa come from. Therefore, as an industry we're losing out on some of the emotional triggers that we could be tapping into to reach the minds and hearts of our consumers in terms of their backgrounds.

Moving on... Although one might argue that the Momentum commercial concept is different in that the father is not so involved relative to the other two, the ad still appears similar to the Absa 'CIB Reel'. Which begs my question: As an industry, are we just producing 'better' ads based on others, or are we aiming to create different, original ads?

When I further analysed the three above-mentioned commercials, I wondered if the commercials would have been different and even better if one of them used a boy-child instead or a mother/grandmother. I then started searching for a commercial that features a boy-child, and the one that comes closest to a father-son relationship is McCain Slap Chips (2014), where a father emulates how he used to eat slap chips with his father. The only other recent father-son commercial that I found is SANRAL's '*Set a good example*' TVC, which still features a mother-daughter relationship. Also, one might suggest that Allan Gray's '*Father's Share*' is another father-son TVC that deserves a mention, but the ad is about both the father-son and -daughter relationship to some extent.

As I unpack my analyses, I also have an ask: the industry needs to research their concepts before going into production. An idea that you've seen can be stored in your subconscious mind and later surface as a new idea in your mind. Also, it has always bothered me that as an industry we sell our ideas using references of other people's work a lot – there is a difference between a reference and stealing of intellectual property – let's all be cognisant.

So, if the relationship between father and son is not something that we as advertisers necessarily hero in communication as an industry, how are we then showing up?

Disclaimer: My analysis is based on the commercials that I've seen and could find when doing my research. If there is more that I left out, please add to the discussion.

1. A boy-child is represented as a flirt/a girl-child is portrayed as a reward.

As much as advertising is not targeted at kids, children still consume content with their parents and they are bound to see these adverts. The narrative of a boy-child is sometimes represented as being attracted to a young girl, but the reverse narrative of a girl-child being attracted to a boy-child is not something that we're exposed to. Not that I'm saying the girl-child should be represented in the same manner, I'm saying we should just kill the approach. Yes it's cute, but what message are we communicating? Could this be adding to the entitlement that men have over women when they grow up? Let's just think of the consequences before we create scenes without any necessary objectives. An example of how young attraction was narrated strategically and creatively is when Postbank did it back in 2004 with their 'Lobola' advert; where a boy wanted to start giving the girl's father steak in bits and pieces so that when he grows up he would have saved enough to pay lobola for the daughter! What made it work is the intention of the boy that is innocent and admirable, plus the concept fits the product/service being sold.

Where is the parental love for a boy-child?

You think of commercials such as the Oreo '*Princess*' where a little girl is teaching the dad how to eat Oreo cookies; Volkswagen Golf '*For the love of the drive*' where a dad fetches her daughter from school and they sing to their favourite song on their way home in the car, and even the McDonald's *#MomentsOfLovin* where dads take their daughters out on McDonald's dates religiously and you can't help but adore the cuteness of kids (girls) bonding with their fathers. Am I wrong to ask, what about the boy-child? When casting, what is the decision-making process that takes place? Why are we not seeing more positive boy-child relationships with parents?

A reference of more love that we need to have for the boy-child is the MTN "*Travel far | Stay close*" TVC for the Nigerian market. The advert is something we need to see often in South Africa where many fathers are distant. The ad shows that fathers can still be present in their kid's lives even though they are not present physically. I also wondered if the ad could have been inspired by the 2012 *Thula Thula* TVC, still by MTN, which was showing a dad singing a good-night song to her daughter to advertise MTN's free night calls.

A boy-child represented as independent. Good thing, or not so much?

Boys tend to be represented as independent in commercials. Seeing them bonding with their parents is something rare - they even have imaginary friends. Remember KFC's *'Imaginary friend'* where a boy visits his grandmother with his imaginary friend who's considered part of the family until the boy claims that his friend is not hungry when eating KFC, then takes the imaginary friend's portion of the chicken?

Independence is a good thing, but interdependence is also something that makes relationships work, and we need to start showing the boy-child as part of a community.

Boys also need a share of #GirlPower attitude communicated in advertising

When you look at TVCs such as the Sanlam “*See this spot*”, Sasol #ThisIsGlugGlug and Consol “*The best things come in glass*” you get to realise how intellectual and smart a girl-child gets to be represented in communication. Based on the analyses of the recent communication featuring a boy-child, how many represent a boy in that light?

- I am not in any way saying a girl-child is privileged in the advertising industry; I adore how they are represented and would like the same to be projected to boys.
- I am aware that women are still catching up to the inequalities created by patriarchy and I agree with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie with regards to “*We should all be feminists*”, men and women, but all I’m asking for, based on the above patterns, is let’s allow kids to be kids, boy or girl, and let’s look to inspire both.
- Lastly, success for me with regards to this article is to make the industry tap into their consciousness when casting kids. Why a girl-child or why a boy-child? What’s the objective? If telling a story of a single parent... why a mother and not a father, or vice versa? Why not a grandmother... In my opinion, these realities and alternative narratives haven’t been told enough.

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