

A Critical Investigation of an Animated South African Advertising Campaign: Vodacom's *Mo the Meerkat* Campaign 2005-2007

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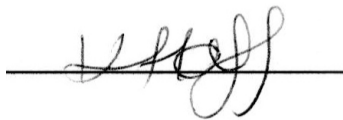
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Abstract

This critical investigation of the relationship between animation and advertising in South Africa provides both a historic overview and analysis of Vodacom's *Mo the Meerkat* campaign. This campaign is documented as extensively as possible, by investigating all relevant aspects and decisions made by Vodacom, their advertising agency, Drafftcb, as well as the creative influence and participation by the animation studios and film companies involved in the campaign. A textual and stylistic analysis of all six advertisements produced as part of this campaign is conducted and explores issues of personality, performance and brand identity relating to the *Mo the Meerkat* character. This documentation and analysis establishes that a major South African advertiser chose to use an animated character in their campaign to act as a "spectacle" (as the term is defined by Andrew Darley in his text *Visual Digital Culture. Surface Play and Spectacle in New Media Genres*).

Declaration

I hereby declare that this dissertation is my own work. It is submitted for the degree of Master of Arts at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been previously submitted for any degree or examination at any other university.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'K Hoffmann', is written over a horizontal line.

Kim Hoffmann

8th day of August, 2011

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Chapter One: Animation and Advertising - An Overview

1.1 History of An Animated Television Commercial

This section of the chapter will give a brief history of the animated television commercial in America and Britain, where these first emerged, as well as in South Africa. The remainder of this chapter will then consist of an introduction to advertising as a mode of practise and related issues, which will serve as a theoretical framework for the animated television commercial.

1.1.1 Internationally

The use of animated commercials in the United States dates as far back to the beginning of the cinematic era, in which animation legends such as Walt Disney and Ub Iwerks started their careers creating commercials using “cut-out¹” animation for the Kansas City Film Ad Company in 1918 (Maltin 30). Animated commercials were shown in cinemas accompanied by a 6-7 minute animated theatrical short film and the main live-action feature. Other famous names included Otto Messmer, who worked on short animated commercials in 1914 before being hired by Pat Sullivan to create the animated character *Felix the Cat* (Maltin 55). However, the early history of the American cinema industry was dominated by America’s participation in the two World Wars, which established animation as the medium of choice for propaganda and information films which were also shown in cinemas and served as a public relations tool for the

¹ ‘Cut-out’ animation is a technique that makes use of flat characters, props and backgrounds cut from materials such as paper, card, stiff fabric as well as photographs, which are then animated using stop frame animation.

American government ("Episode 1: The Art of Persuasion"; *Walt Disney Treasures*).

Animation, as a graphic medium, made it possible to illustrate ideas by simplifying these to a set of pictures and therefore made this medium ideal for propaganda films, as they were able to present serious information in an entertaining and palatable form ("Episode 1: The Art of Persuasion."). Propaganda films in America ridiculed Hitler and his government which aided in building the morale of soldiers and civilians. Information films were used by different Government departments to deliver important public messages and urged civilians to support the war effort by participating in various initiatives (such as recycling and paying your taxes, for example) ("Episode 1: The Art of Persuasion."). The Walt Disney Studios emerged as the primary producer of American Propaganda films during World War II. These films starred well known characters such as Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, Pluto and Goofy and were extremely popular amongst cinema goers (*Walt Disney Treasures*).

However, even though the Disney Studios emerged as the forerunners in animated propaganda production in America, they did not make the same impact on the animated television commercial market. This was believed to be because Walt Disney felt uncomfortable with the fact that he did not hold the rights to characters created for advertising purposes and because the studio was reliant on the clients approval at different stages which slowed down production (Korkis 1).

The introduction of the television set and the commercialisation of the National Broadcasting Commission in the United States of America at the beginning of the 1940s marked a shift from animated commercials and the traditional animated theatrical short shown in cinemas, to animation in a television context (Cohen 36). Successful network radio programmes that had previously been broadcast by the Radio

Corporation of America were moved to television and marked the inception of commercial television broadcast in the United States of America (Roman 27). Even though television commercials date back as far as 1941, the animated television commercial business only started to flourish after World War Two, towards the end of the 1940's. This can be directly attributed to the fact that television set production was abandoned during war time, as aluminium, which was used to build sets was rationed. However, television did not cease to exist, but was allocated mainly to broadcasting news, sport and safety information (Cohen 38).

Similar to the animated cinema commercial, the television medium forced animators to communicate ideas to audiences in much shorter time spans, as the duration of an animated commercial was seldom longer than a minute, as opposed to the six to seven minute theatrical short that animators were more familiar with. The television medium also forced animators to work without the use of colour and on a smaller screen. This resulted in animators who worked in TV commercials developing a simple graphic language with thick outlines and exaggerated features (such as large heads and facial features and accentuated actions and emotions) (Amidi 12). Another outcome of the television era was that animators started using limited animation, which sacrificed fluid, lyrical movements, as the traditional, full animation used for theatrical animation in the past had become too time-consuming and expensive ("Episode 1: The Art of Persuasion."). This was seen not only in animated television commercials, but even more so in animated television series produced towards the end of the 1950's and during the 1960's as budgets for such series were extremely meagre (Amidi 13). Animation studio Hanna Barbera, founded in 1957, became synonymous with such limited animation produced for television, creating memorable shows such as *The*

Huckleberry Hound Show (1958), *Quick Draw McGraw* (1959), *The Flintstones* (1960) and *The Yogi Bear Show* (1961). Characters from these shows, such as Huckleberry Hound, Yogi Bear and Quick Draw McGraw, also featured during the advertising breaks worked into the shows and served as brand ambassadors for various products, mainly Kellogg's' children's cereals. The founders, Bill Hanna and Joe Barbera, understood that for these shows as well as the accompanying advertisements to be successful, the limited animation style needed to be compensated for with a distinct graphic style and characters with personality (Amidi 40).

Animation was regarded as an ideal medium for advertising as it had the intrinsic ability to grab audience's attention because animated characters stood out from the other live-action commercials (Cohen 42). As a result, the demand for animated television commercials rose to the extent that more than 35 commercial animation studios in the mid 1940's and the end of the 1950' were formed to cater for advertiser's needs. In addition, the established major studios such as Disney and Terrytoons created in-house units to deal with the demand for animated commercials. Furthermore, during the mid 1950's when animated commercials were at their peak, one-minute animated commercials were typically awarded budgets of between eight and nine thousand dollars, which was more per minute than the six to seven minute theatrical short had ever seen. By the end of the 1950's, *Television* magazine estimated that four out of the six favourite commercials on television were animated (Amidi 12).

Animated television commercials in Britain followed a similar course. Animation was also used for propaganda and information films by the British government and the Ministry of Information and were shown in cinemas during the Second World War ("Episode 1: The Art of Persuasion."). However, it was the first British animated feature

film, an adaptation of George Orwell's political allegory, *Animal Farm*, animated by the British company Halas & Bachelor between 1952 and 1954, that drew advertisers' attention to the British animation industry (Bendazzi 153). Thus, when ITV, Britain's oldest commercial television network, was launched in 1955, animation was suddenly in demand to fill the newly introduced advertising breaks ("Episode 1: The Art of Persuasion."). Even though Britain was at the forefront of broadcast experiments during the 1930's and launched regular public broadcasting as early as 1936, the publicly-funded and government-regulated British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) was not in favour of 'sponsored television' (advertisements), as they called it, in fear that advertisers would be able to dictate the programming content (Crisell 28; Curry 35).

Again, as seen in America, animators had to adapt the style they used previously for propaganda and information films, as television commercials allowed them much less time and less sophistication with which to get their messages across ("Episode 1: The Art of Persuasion.").

1.1.2 South Africa

As discussed in the previous section, the animated television commercial in both Britain and the United States originated from animated commercials for cinema as well as both countries' strong tradition of animated war-time propaganda. However, animated television commercials became commonplace when 'advertising breaks' were introduced when commercial television broadcast launched in the United States after the Second World War, towards the late 1940's, and in Britain in 1955. However, the animated television commercial in South Africa did not follow the same course. For

political reasons, television in South Africa was only launched in 1976, which meant that cinema remained popular until well into the 1970's and that South Africa's primary means of animation production was for advertising purposes (Kersh 1-3).

Unlike in Britain and the United States, local production for cinema release in South Africa was limited to a live-action newsreel and animated commercials, which were added to pre-packaged bundles (consisting of an animated short and live-action feature film) purchased from overseas (Kersh 2). During the 1940's two major animation studios, which produced animated content for cinema, emerged in South Africa: Killarney Film Productions and Alpha Film Studios (Kersh 3). Killarney Film Productions established itself as the leader in special effects animation, working on optical illusions, titling sequences and transitions for feature films and newsreels (Kersh 1). This tradition, it can be argued, laid the foundations of the current day South African Special Effects industry headed by companies such as BlackGinger, who specialise in visual effects and animation for the local and international commercial and film industry ("About us." *BlackGinger.tv*)

Alpha Film Studios, unlike Killarney Film Productions, focussed on traditional celluloid animation, producing mostly animated commercials. This choice of technique may be attributed to the influence the British animator, Dennis Purchase, who relocated to South Africa in 1947 to start production on animated commercials known as 'drawtoons'. These commercials were a combination of American animation pioneer, Stuart Blackton's 'lightning sketch' and stop frame animation. They consisted of a hand drawing an image at a fast pace which was created by lightly drawing the outlines of an image and then inking sections at intervals in front of a camera (Kersh 2).

Another key player in the South African commercial animation industry was

Dave McKay. McKay worked as a camera man for Alpha Studios during the late 1950's, before starting his own company, Dave McKay Productions, with Dennis Purchase as the animation director. Dave McKay Productions was granted the sole right to supply Ster Films' (South Africa's major cinema chain at the time) advertising company, Adfilms, with animated commercials during the late 1960's and 1970's. These commercials were termed 'Animads' and described in *The Clarion News' Press, Advertising and Film Review* of April 1970, as relatively inexpensive and thus were accessible to the majority of South African businesses. *The Clarion News' Press, Advertising and Film Review* also stated that these commercials, being "short animated colour films with sound track" ("Ster Adfilms get all Animated") of no longer than thirty seconds, adopted the same techniques as were being used for television commercials abroad and thus prepared Dave McKay Productions for the introduction of television in 1976 ("Ster Adfilms get all Animated" 1).

South African animation was greatly influenced by American and European models of production as their primary knowledge was gained from visiting animators and thus were generally keeping pace with animation developments globally. Because South African animation had already established a niche for itself in the commercial market during the cinematic era, the transition from animation in cinema to television context went smoothly.

South African animators that had been involved in animation production for cinema such as Denis Purchase, Gerrard Smith and Butch Stoltz joined producer Gretchen Wilsenach to form Annie-Mation Studios in 1978, which worked closely with the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) to supply the South African public broadcaster with animated programs and television commercials (Kersh 3). Before

closing down in 1981, Dave McKay Productions also created content for television which included commercials and the animated series “Tale From The Valley of Thousand Hills” which aired at the beginning of 1977 (“Eerste tekenverhaal op Compass te sien”).

1.2 Key concepts

The foregoing account of the history of the animated television commercial in the United States of America, Britain and South Africa revealed that animation was the medium of choice for propaganda films and cinema and television advertising. This establishes that there has been a mutual attraction between the mediums of animation and advertising, dating as far back as the early cinema era of the late 1910's. The remainder of this chapter will provide a theoretically informed introduction to advertising as a mode of practise and related issues. This introduction should be considered in conjunction with the foregoing account of animated commercials history to provide an overview of and insight into the relationship between commercial animation and advertising.

The remainder of this chapter will not only look at advertising as a mode of practice but also at semiotics and its relation to advertising, postmodernism and the visual and its stylistic similarities to advertising, as well as the strategies of representation used by advertisers to further strengthen the reader's knowledge about the workings of advertising. The knowledge gained from this chapter in regards to animation in an advertising context will serve as a contextual and theoretical

framework essential for the analysis of Vodacom's *Mo the Meerkat* campaign. This research will argue that the campaign can be considered an example of the above mentioned relationship between commercial animation and advertising.

1.2.1 Advertising as a Mode of Practise

In their book *Persuasive Signs: the Semiotics of Advertising*, Beasley and Danesi describe advertising as a form of public announcement made with the intention to direct consumers' attention to a certain product or service to increase the likelihood that this product or service will be purchased (Beasley & Danesi 1). This is a very simplistic definition of the phenomenon, yet I find it appropriate here, as it is effective. They elaborate on this matter, noting that contemporary advertising makes use of a combination of art and science to successfully market a product (Beasley & Danesi 2). 'Art' in the sense that advertisers employ certain "aesthetic techniques" (Beasley & Danesi 2), such as, for example, visual imagery to influence how consumers perceive a product or service. 'Science' is used, not necessarily in literal terms, but to denote a more fact-based approach, where tools of psychology and market research are used to establish how consumers will respond to the product and how advertisers can influence consumer behaviour to their benefit (Beasley & Danesi 2).

This relationship between the 'art' and 'science' is reflected in the strategic and creative divisions within contemporary advertising agencies. The 'strategic division' within an advertising agency is responsible for determining the target market of a product or service as well as defining the brand 'ideology' which the advertisement to be created must sustain. The 'creative division' works with these prerequisites to come up with an advertisement, which is, not only a vehicle for this ideology, but is also entertaining enough for consumers to take notice of it. Finding the balance between

strategy and creativity is important, because even if the advertisement is entertaining enough to be popular amongst consumers, if it does not convey the correct message it can possibly do the brand a disservice (and consequently influence sales negatively).

These “aesthetic techniques” (Beasley and Danesi 2) include the juxtaposition of specific signs to create an ‘image’ for the product. The word ‘image’ here refers not exclusively to a visual representation, but rather to the presence of the product or service as a whole, also known as brand identity. This may include any possible interface the product or service shares with consumers: brand name, logo, package design and print, radio or television commercial, also known as branding. The purpose of branding is, not only, to give the product or service a personality (Beasley & Danesi 20), but also form a framework with which advertisers can make the product or service mean something to consumers.

However, the ultimate goal of such branding is to place this product or service in the consumer’s consciousness; to ensure that consumers recognize the product in a retail environment and purchase it (Beasley & Danesi 17). Yet, as Heidi Brauer notes in her article “People love brands that don’t let them down” published in the 2006 Sunday Times’ Business Times *Top Brands Survey*, sales are mainly reliant on a brand loyalty which combines two factors. The first she calls “behavioral commitment” (2), in other words, whether consumers are planning to use the product or service more than once, and keep using it, as well as “attitudinal commitment” (2), or whether consumers feel that the brand is important to them. Therefore it is not only important for branding to elicit spontaneous awareness or recognition of the product or service, but also feelings of trust, confidence and commitment towards the product (Brauer 2-3).

Market research is what Beasley and Danesi call the “scientific enterprise” (103)

that attempts to determine the likely users of a product or service. This is done by dividing possible consumers into “market segments” (3) based on their age, sex, income, occupation and other factors (Beasley and Danesi 132) and analysing them psychologically to predict their possible reactions to the product or service and to find ways in which consumer behaviour can be influenced to benefit sales. The ‘segment’ of possible consumers deemed most susceptible to purchase the product or service are called the ‘target audience’ (Beasley and Danesi 132). Defining the target audience is an important tool for advertisers as it is generally found that, even though branding may have some unconscious effect on consumers, a brand will only be accepted by consumers if it suits their already pre-conceived preferences (Beasley and Danesi 157). Thus, it is usually more profitable for advertisers to optimise their branding for a certain target audience, than to attempt to appeal to all consumers across the market segments equally. This is because the reception of the visual differs amongst individuals and groups of people based on their cultural predispositions and personal experiences. People from different cultures and walks of life also have different preconceived values, which the advertisement needs to uphold to be successful.

1.2.2 Advertising and Semiotics

Semiotic analysis in an advertising context serves as an important tool used to decode the underlying meaning this brand ‘image’, mentioned above, presents. In her book, *Decoding Advertisements: Ideology and Meaning in Advertising*, Judith Williamson describes advertising as being responsible, not only, for promoting the inherent qualities and attributes of products they are attempting to sell, but also for making these products have meaning to consumers to achieve their goal of selling the product (Williamson 12).

In advertising, the brand identity (in other words the brand name, logo, package design, commercials and any other display) of a certain product or service functions on two levels: an “overt level” (Williamson 19), in other words, the imagery and scenarios advertisements are presented to consumers at face value, and on a “latent level” (Williamson 19) in other words, what these advertisements are actually suggesting. The function of the “overt level”, although it may seem to simply be promoting the qualities and attributes of product, is to generate less obvious meanings, namely the ‘latent meanings’. These ‘latent’ meanings cannot be deduced by simply reading the advertisement, and are usually connotative, determined to a large extent on the consumers’ subconscious (Williamson 19).

The goal of applying semiotic analysis in an advertising context is to unmask this ‘latent’ meaning in order to reveal the true functioning of an advertisement. This multi-levelled framework of creating meaning is what advertising semioticians refer to as a signification system, which might be elucidated by a brief overview of semiotics.

Present-day semiotics was founded on the writings of the French linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and American logician Charles Pierce, in the 19th to early 20th century. The term ‘semiotics’ is derived from the Greek word for sign, ‘semeion’, and was first used in a medical context (Beasley & Danesi 21). A sign, according to Saussure, is something which itself is absorbed by the senses (visually or audibly) but also brings to mind something else in form of a “mental representation” (35). A sign is something which has a particular meaning to a person or group of people. However, a sign represents neither the physical entity it was created to represent mentally, nor the meaning which this physical entity generates. It is a combination of the two. The physical entity, in other words, the letters or sounds that make up a word, visual

symbols or gestures is known as the “signifier” (Beasley & Danesi 23). The mental or conceptual aspect, in other words those aspects including the object, idea, event, or belief the physical dimension was created to stand for is known as the “signified” (Williamson 17). The meanings that are generated through the association of the signifier with the signified are what Saussure referred to as the “signification system” (Beasley & Danesi 23).

What also needs to be noted at this point is that the connection between the signifier and signified is not sequential and is seldom generated by a line of argument or narrative presented within the advertisement. The advertisement relies on the consumer to make this link, based on their own interpretation of the subject at hand (Williamson 19). Such interpretation is also known as a “connotation”. Connotations, more often than not, are influenced by our personal experiences and cultural biases and Beasley and Danesi note that “from a psychological standpoint, the human mind seems predisposed to link meanings together in some way that has its own culture-specific logic” (103). Connotations are thus affected by our cultural and personal predisposition. This non-sequential connection between the signifier and signified, as well as the connotations generated by this connection, also plays a significant role in the concept of the ‘spectacle’.

1.2.3 Advertising and the Spectacle

This non-sequential connection between the signifier and signified, as well as the connotations generated by this connection, also plays a significant role in the concept of the ‘spectacle’. In his article “Don’t give me what I ask for, give me what I need,” published in the *South African Visual Culture* anthology, Michal Herbst discusses the role signification plays in advertising. According to Herbst, advertisers manipulate the (non-

sequential) logic that connects the signifier, signified and thus the connotations which are generated, by removing signs from their original or common context, combining them with other signs and arranging them in such a way as to “attract, intrigue, impress and humor” (18) viewers.

Andrew Darley identifies similar issues to these discussed by Herbst in his book *Visual Digital Culture. Surface Play and Spectacle in New Media Genres*. Darley highlights the “new level of preoccupation with signifiers at the expense of the signification” (83) in contemporary advertising. This means that advertisers are no longer interested in the original meaning of signs or symbols but instead, use these signs purely due to their visual nature and effect it might have on the audience. Signs are combined and re-arranged to make new meaning, whereby the original meaning is lost (Darley 89). Darley reflects on this in the following quote that defines advertising as: “the cultural space where in, for the most part, non-functional meanings and connotations. . . are generated and arbitrarily attached” (89).

This is done to create, what Darley calls, a “spectacle” (81). A “spectacle”, in this case, being something exciting and entertaining, something that will attract audience’s attention to the advertisement. This may take the form of special effects, unusual animated characters or eye-catching visuals. He goes on to suggest that the tendency of contemporary advertisers to create spectacles is largely due to “the enabling powers of digital technology” (81), in other words, largely the result of certain means now available (81).

1.2.4 Postmodernism and the Visual

The foregoing analysis of the sign in an advertising context revealed that

advertisers manipulate the relationship between the different elements within a sign (the signifier and the signified), as well as the connotations this relationship generates. The sign is used purely due to its visual nature to create entertaining scenarios, also known as 'spectacles'. This manipulation creates a situation where the visual should not be accepted at face value but needs to be met with some measure of playful mistrust. This mistrust of the visual is not a phenomenon associated exclusively with the effects of advertising, but is also prevalent within the 'visual crisis' of postmodernism.

Postmodernism is by no means an easily definable term, possibly because the concept to which it refers is so elusive and multi-faceted and thus can have no single, concrete, meaning. I will, for the purpose of this section, refer to Nicholas Mirzoeff's definition coined in his anthology *The Visual Culture Reader*, as I feel it is most relevant to my concerns in this study. Mirzoeff defines postmodernism as the crisis caused by modernism and modern culture (thus defining the prefix 'post', in postmodernism, as more than simply happening after the period of modernity) relating to its "strategy of visualizing" (4), in other words its modes of representation (Mirzoeff 4).

This crisis has to do with the fact that "seeing is no longer believing" (4) as stated so simply, but effectively, by Mirzoeff. This is because our understanding of the visual world, as it is represented to us by advertisers, is not a true reflection. In other words, the visual information we are presented with on a daily basis, can no longer automatically be considered a true or accurate reflection of reality. This is partially due to the fact that as soon as one form of representation is no longer considered favourable or 'accurate', the next form of representation appears without the previous disappearing. This can be seen, according to the German philosopher Martin Heidegger, in the shift from painting used as the most accurate reflection of the world, to

photography and later film, as discussed in his book *The Age of the World Picture* (Heidegger 7). This phenomenon can also be attributed to a large extent to the practise of advertising. Advertisers re-appropriate specific images to create a montage of images which might mean something to the viewer and so motivate them to buy the product or service. These scenarios might be based in reality but are always manipulated in some way, which makes it difficult for consumers to distinguish between the real and the constructed.

Further, the idea of reproduction is also of concern to this crisis of representation. This issue was most famously debated from a modernist perspective by the German intellectual Walter Benjamin in his work *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. Benjamin preceded the postmodernist movement and was referring to the crisis of mechanical reproduction in connection with the outburst of propaganda and state media before World War Two, that was made possible by the modern technologies of lithography, photography and cinema at the time. Despite the fact that Benjamin was not referring to the crisis of mechanical reproduction in a contemporary context, his insights are still of relevance to the crisis of the visual within postmodernism, as will be demonstrated below.

According to Benjamin, reproduction has always been possible (paintings, for example, are reproducible by hand). However, the mechanical age, or the invention of imaging technology such as lithography, photography and cinema, (which were the most advanced technologies at the time Benjamin was writing), raise this phenomenon to another, mechanical, level, as the relative ease with which this technology operates make manipulations of reproductions near limitless (Benjamin 217). Regardless of how accurate such reproduction may be, Benjamin notes that the artwork's authenticity or

'aura' is sacrificed through reproduction. Benjamin defines 'aura' as an artwork's presence in time and space, its unique existence (Benjamin 218).

This lack of 'aura' as defined by Benjamin, is still problematic within a postmodernist context, due to the fact that imaging technologies have become even more sophisticated since the time Benjamin was writing. The personal computer and digital technologies, as well as digital printing and scanning technologies have enabled, not only, the convenience of reproduction but also ease with which the visual can be manipulated. This manipulation of the visual is especially prevalent in advertising practise. Therefore, Benjamin's insights applied to a postmodernist context reveal that the advertising image is completely devoid of a 'unique existence' and 'aura'.

This lack of aura also means, according to Benjamin, that an artwork is no longer functional in the traditional sense, as an important participant in culture and ritual (Benjamin 220). Instead, an artwork finds value based on entirely different criteria: its "exhibition value" (220). 'Exhibition value' is defined as the value an artwork generates, not simply based on its existence as is true in a cultural environment, but rather on its ability to be exhibited and viewed (Benjamin 221).

Benjamin also noted, that this shift in value system means that the function of an artwork has changed from an entity produced solely for the sake of artistic expression, to a creation which holds viewership as its foremost priority and artistic expression may simply be a coincidence (Benjamin 222). According to Benjamin, the function of art solely as an object to be viewed highlights another problem in contemporary society: the role of the critic. Traditionally, the role of an art critic was reserved for those individuals, whom possessed the education and insight to make informed and constructive value judgements about artwork. However, due to enabling technology of

mechanical reproduction, artworks such as photography and film, are available to a mass audience, which means that the general public takes over the role of the critic (Benjamin 222). Benjamin finds this to be problematic as the public is “absent-minded” (222) and remain oblivious to the subtle messages and agendas which artworks might have.

The idea of the general public as absent-minded critics, as highlighted by Benjamin, becomes even more problematic in an advertising context, where it is essential for consumers to fully comprehend the strategies behind visual information to avoid being manipulated by advertisers. Further, Benjamin found the mediums of photography and film to be exemplars of the new function of art as political tools. This is an interesting observation, considering that these mediums are currently being used for advertising production (print advertisements which rely heavily on the combination of images and text, as well as filmed television commercials). Additionally, the use of photography and film in an advertising context, or the ‘advertising artwork’ if it can be called so, embodies the idea of an artwork which primary function is to be viewed (to create awareness for the brand being advertised) and that the content being shown and its meaning is the second priority. This echoes what Benjamin termed the ‘exhibition value’ of a work of art.

In his book, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, David Harvey explores postmodernism as originating from a cultural shift in sensibility in the modernist architectural discourse of the early 1970’s. Harvey notes that at this time a rupture occurred that rejected the modernist idea that urban design should be planned on a large scale, be functional, efficient and shaped to fulfil social purposes. Instead, a sensibility arose that favoured the urban landscape as a palimpsest of past forms,

designed according to aesthetic aims and principles, something which showed individualism, rather than a design built to serve an all encompassing social need (Harvey 66).

This sentiment revealed a shift in contemporary culture's practise of thinking, which most noticeably rejected the modernist aspiration to represent the world as a unified whole (Harvey 5). This meant the disillusionment of a singular reality or perception of the world as having one unified voice, resulting in the promotion of previously marginalised people and opinions (also known as 'the other') (Harvey 42). This rejection of authority or known wisdom, is termed 'the grand-narrative' by French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard, in his text *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Lyotard urged society to reject authority and wisdom received from previous generations as well as to be critical of assumed cultural and political norms (Sim 3).

This alternative practise of thinking started in the architectural discourse of the early 1970's and soon spread to other realms such as art, literature, film, social theory, psychology and philosophy (Harvey 98). Harvey notes that within the arts, postmodernism meant that instead of producing fictional subject matter (as was common with modernist artists such as Manet) postmodernist artists create their subjects by reproducing, repeating and re-contextualising already existing images (55). This practise raises similar concerns to those discussed in connection with Benjamin in his discussion of the artwork in the age of mechanical reproduction. Due to the reproduced nature of the artwork used in this pastiche, the images used have, not only, lost their aura, but are being used as a new form of cultural artefact. They are a reference to something else, and their value is not based on their existence, but in the

relation to other works.

Another important aspect Harvey raises in his discussion of postmodernism is the alternate way of thinking in regard to language and communication (Harvey 49). Harvey explores the deconstructivist idea of reading and thinking about the written form. According to deconstructivist philosophy, a text and words can never exist in isolation, but always draws reference from other words and texts to make meaning. This interrelation means that the meaning made in a text is based on a variety of personal references made by the reader (each person draws different connotations from words and scenarios) and thus can never be controlled by the author and is therefore also not the exclusive property of the author (Harvey 49). This leads to the cultural producer having less authority as in previous times, as his word is no longer considered the ultimate truth. According to Harvey, this phenomenon empowers the voice of the critic above that of the author in defining cultural values. This shifts the debate of cultural values into the public arena as the public is considered the audience of the critic (Harvey 51).

This raises similar concerns to those raised by Benjamin in his discussion of the artwork in the age of mechanical production and again shows the trend towards the general public as critic of, not only, the artwork and the visual, but in this case also the written form. This is problematic because the interpretations made by the public are often 'unstable', as Harvey terms it, as they are uncritical and oblivious of the full meanings and nuances presented in these works. This oblivion of the general public to the written and the visual message presents an important opportunity for advertisers as they often rely on manipulation visuals and words or text. Thus, it is important for the general public to be aware of the full meanings encoded in the visual stimuli in their

daily life, as highlighted by the concerns of visual culture studies, but also the written text.

Thus, it may be possible that the postmodernist practise of thinking which emerged in 1970's architectural design and rapidly spread to all realms of life, may have provided the opportunity for advertising to blossom. Due to the general mistrust of ultimate truths and authoritarian opinions on subjects such as art and literature (the visual and the written), a society was created in which everyone was valued as a cultural critic. As Benjamin and Harvey pointed out, this may have resulted in a society where most people are absent minded, oblivious and uncritical of the visual and written around them (Benjamin 220; Harvey 49).

This condition (of postmodernity, perhaps) presents the ideal environment for the advertiser, as the consumer is more likely to accept advertisements at face value, rather than questioning their validity and purpose. In light of this, advertising may simply be the symptom of what Mirzoeff called the 'crisis of the visual' which emerged during postmodernism. Consequently, through its cynical manipulation of the essentially arbitrary relation between signifier and signified, advertising may well be contributing to this visual crisis and be one of the major factors why this crisis still exists.

The following chapter will serve as documentation of a practical example of such advertising, which has been the concern of this historically and theoretically informed chapter. The following chapter will be important in establishing the relevance and usefulness of the advertising related concepts that have been discussed in this chapter, in a contemporary, practical advertising context.

Chapter Two: An Animated South African Advertising Campaign: A Case Study

The previous chapter served as a contextual and theoretical framework around the phenomenon of animation in an advertising context. Knowledge gained from discussions of advertising as a mode of practise, semiotics in advertising, the spectacle as well as the visual crisis manifest in advertising will be used to analyse the campaign and character at hand, deeming them the product of the relationship between commercial animation and advertising and thereby attempt to reach an understanding of why an animated character was chosen for this campaign.

2.1 Background of the Campaign

The first section of this chapter will give a brief history of the inception of the mobile telecommunications industry in South Africa, focusing on the roles played by two of the three mobile telecommunications providers, Vodacom and MTN. An overview of Vodacom's engagement with advertising, as well as a brief history of their advertising partners, Draftfcb, will also be given, which will include Draftfcb's engagement with the medium of animation. This will provide a historical and situational context for the campaign in question: Vodacom's *Mo the Meerkat* campaign, which will be documented in the remainder of the chapter.

2.1.1 History of the South African Mobile Telecommunication Industry

According to Vusi Silonda, the driving force behind the introduction of mobile telecommunication providers in South Africa was the acknowledgement by the state in 1993 that the parastatal fixed line provider, Telkom, which serviced only ten percent of the population, was no longer meeting the needs of the country's economy (Silonda 57). As the country's era of white minority rule drew to an end, providing all South Africans with access to telecommunications was now considered a priority and seen as vital in stimulating the country's economy (Interactive Africa 13). The cellular telecommunications infrastructure was envisioned, not only for the affluent user who could afford a cellular telephone (which at the time cost between R1000 and R4000), but also as a means of providing poorly serviced areas with a basic telephone infrastructure, which would allow previously disadvantaged communities to make calls at subsidised costs from local pay phones. Both providers made it a priority to aid development in poorer, previously neglected parts of the country, not only by expanding infrastructure, but also by granting previously disadvantaged communities access to affordable telecommunications by subsidising these payphones from their general operating profit (Interactive Africa 8 & 11).

In 1993, Two licences were awarded (at a cost of R100 million each), one to the Vodacom Group and the other to the Mobile Telephone Network (MTN) Group. The Vodacom Group is a joint venture between Telkom (50% ownership), the world's leading mobile communications group, Vodafone (35% ownership), and the investment holding company, Ven Fin (15% ownership). Vodacom was awarded the first license in June 1993, nine months before the MTN Group were awarded their license (Koenderman 2). The swift allocation of Vodacom's license was speculated to be due to

Telkom's ties with the South African government, as Vodacom, unlike MTN did not have to take part in the tender process ("Reputations on the line as phone switch-on looms"). Despite this, both providers commenced service on the 1st of June 1994, and unlike any other country in the world, the cellular system begun operations with 10 000 pre-registered subscribers across both networks on the first day (which had signed up prior to this date) (Silonda 67-8).

However, despite both operators commencing their service at the same time, Vodacom, having been granted a license prior to MTN, had more opportunity to prepare by working on infrastructure, choosing service providers and advertising, amongst other things. This resulted in what Silonda terms a 'first-mover advantage', which explains Vodacom's significantly higher market share in the South African market (Silonda 70). From inception to present, Vodacom has had a market share of between 54 and 61%, while MTN's has been between 32 and 41 percent, with the third cellular operator, Cell C, introduced in 2001, making up the remainder (Koutras 26 & 55). According to Eleni Koutras, this advantage can also be attributed to the influence of the Vodacom Group's shareholders, Telkom and Vodafone, which gave them access to technology and large amounts of capital to invest during the early years (27). Added to this was the cost and inconvenience implicated in switching between providers, as it was impossible for subscribers to retain their numbers when switching operators, thus making subscribers reluctant to move away from the operator they had chosen at first (Silonda 70).

The demand for cellular telephones was vastly underestimated by the government and cellular providers alike. An estimated 150 000 to 200 000 subscribers per operator in the first five years, turned out to be 2 000 000 subscribers for Vodacom

in 1999. MTN ended 1999 with 290 000 subscribers, which was substantially less than Vodacom's subscribers but nevertheless 90 000 subscribers more than they expected (Sergeant 2; Silonda 65, 76, 86). This phenomenal demand showed, in South African advertising expert, Tony Koenderman's opinion, the insatiable desire of the South African population to communicate and thereby also the fundamental need for mobile telecommunication in the country (Koenderman 3). This demand, together with Vodacom's competitive advantage due to their head start, places their business success as well as their popularity amongst consumers in a different light. Koenderman comments on Vodacom's success as follows:

“In a brand new market, with a brand new product that people wanted, no matter what, you couldn't fail” (13).

In other words, what Tony Koenderman is suggesting is that, Vodacom's success, in his opinion, should not be attributed to their business strategy or marketing ingenuity, but rather to the fact that they were in 'the right place at the right time' (Koenderman 12).

To date, the cellular telecommunications market in South Africa is reaching saturation, resulting in only minor growth in subscribers annually (Koenderman 15; Koutras 1). However, a new growth area has been recognized in cellular infrastructure being used for mobile Internet access rather than voice calls. Internet access can be achieved by connecting a wireless modem with a SIM card to your computer, or by connecting directly to the Internet via your mobile handset. The WAP (Wireless Application Protocol) feature on handsets has proven popular, especially amongst business subscribers and younger users, and initiated the move towards 'Smart Phones'. A 'Smart Phone' is a handset of improved quality and sophistication, which allows users

to access the internet through browsing interfaces, to download data and applications from the internet and to communicate with other users more easily and cheaply, via 'chat' and social networking applications. Smart phones were initially most prevalent amongst business people who used them to send and receive e-mail and for other features which enabled subscribers to conduct business 'on the move'. However, due to the handsets reduced price they are now also popular amongst younger subscribers who use them for social networking and 'chat' applications.

Vodacom attempted to address this trend by introducing Vodafone Live! in 2005. Vodafone Live!, which is a multimedia portal service, allows Vodacom customers access to a range of content, news and information, such as music, pictures and ring tones, via an user-friendly browsing interface on their mobile phones. This service incurs charges only for the content that is downloaded, not for the time spent browsing ("Vodafone live! - Mobile Internet Advertising Platform"). The Vodafone Live! multimedia portal concept is not unique to South Africa, but is, as the name suggests, the property of Vodacom's British parent company, Vodafone. The concept was initially developed by the Japanese mobile operator J-Phone under the name *J-Sky* and had been operational in Japan since 1999. However, *J-Sky* was renamed Vodafone live! in 2003 after *J-Phone* was acquired by Vodafone ("J-Phone to rename J-Sky Web Service Vodafone live."). The portal is still in operation in South Africa at present, having gained 3 million unique users monthly, and has gradually improved the quality of the content available, which was relatively unsophisticated at first ("Vodacom Mobile Media" "Vodacom's Vodafone live! pass two million user-mark").

2.1.2 Vodacom's Engagement with Advertising

As established at the beginning of this chapter, Vodacom was in an privileged

position in regards to their initial market position as the more popular mobile telecommunications provider. This popularity was partly due to the fact that they had an advantage over MTN and also because they were selling a product that consumers desired: mobile telephones and communication. In light of this, Koenderman is of the opinion, that it was not necessary for Vodacom to advertise, especially not as vigorously as they did or needed to do, as by-word-of-mouth would have been a sufficient marketing tool (Koenderman 3, 7). This statement might be partially true, as Vodacom did have a substantial advantage. However, it can be speculated that Vodacom's advertising was beneficial for retaining this advantage by increasing brand awareness and thereby subscriber numbers.

Vodacom decided to position themselves as the cellular provider for everyone, whether users could afford a cellular telephone or not, Vodacom was marketed as the brand for them. This contrasted with MTN's approach, whom had already made a name for themselves as the brand for tech-savvy achievers and attempted to attract high-value users (Britten 256; Koutras 44).

The *Yebo Gogo* campaign, the brainchild of Draftfcb's executive creative director at the time, Francois de Villiers ("SA Academy of Science & Arts honours Draftfcb's De Villiers"), launched in October 1994 and depicted the escapades of a white Johannesburg 'Yuppie'² (played by Michael de Pinna) and a black, fatherly, laid-back man presumably from the rural areas of South Africa (played by Bankole Omotso) (Britten 254).

In the first of these advertisements, the character played by Omotso sits at the

² The Oxford English Dictionary defines the term yuppie as a young professional individual working in or around a city ("Yuppie").

roadside, in a rural part of the country, surrounded by the toy wire windmills he has made and is attempting to sell. A white three series BMW cabriolet pulls up, and the yuppie and his girlfriend get out. The yuppie greets the black man by saying: “Yebo Gogo”, which means “Yes Grandma” in Zulu, in an attempt to humour him by showing knowledge of the other man’s native language. Yet, the yuppie is so arrogant and oblivious that he is completely unaware that he has made a mistake (using ‘grandma’ instead of ‘grandpa’) and is in fact patronising and insulting the other man. Zulu culture is a strictly patriarchal one, and thus referring to someone as grandma, a frail old woman, is seen as highly insulting and richly humorous here (Britten 263). His girlfriend admires the windmills, yet the yuppie is not willing to pay the R100 the other man demands for one, calling it a ‘rip off’. The yuppie turns around and attempts to get into his car, only to notice, to his embarrassment, that he has locked his keys in the car. Gogo pulls out a cell phone and smiles. The camera cuts to the a sign with the number of a locksmith and then to Gogo counting a wad of cash and finally to the white BMW driving off with a backseat filled with toy windmills (“SA Academy of Science & Arts honours Draftfcb's De Villiers.”) (Britten 254-257).

This advertisement made light of the recent change of power relations in the country following the democratic elections and poked fun at the often awkward reconciliation process between black and white South African’s. Although this advertisement was contentious at first, it generally received a positive response from consumers, where it easily could have been seen as offensive. Koenderman attributes the positive reception it received largely due to the fact that the black character was portrayed as the humble and witty individual, while the white character was portrayed as arrogant, shallow and disrespectful (Koenderman 2). This portrayal reflected the

general sentiment in the country at the time that black individuals were now of a newly elevated status and were no longer seen as the underdogs.

However, more importantly, this advertisement showed Draftfcb's ability to evaluate public sentiment and develop an advertisement that, not only, captured the zeitgeist, but also was humorous and entertaining. Vodacom's advertising has largely retained this ability, and even though their more current advertisements (such as the *Mo the Meerkat* campaign) are perhaps not as comedic and commentators of the time, but they are entertaining, and more importantly, always ring true with consumers. This ability to judge exactly what consumers want and design advertisements aimed at a mass audience may account for Vodacom's popularity. Vodacom has been voted the 'Favourite Telecoms Provider' and 'Favourite Advertiser' and featured in the top ten in the 'Overall Favourite Brand' categories in the Sunday Times Business Times' Top Brands Award for numerous years. The same popularity is found amongst the youth market, with Vodacom being voted the 'Coolest Telecoms Provider' and featured in the top ten in the 'Coolest Top Company' and 'Coolest Brand' categories of the Sunday Times' Generation Next Youth Brand Survey ("Top Brands Survey" 2005-2007; "Sunday Times- Generation Next Youth Brand Survey" 2005-2007).

Vodacom's approach of being the "biggest and the best", in other words the most popular, contrasted with MTN's strategy of attracting higher-end business customers (customers that spend more) by offering innovative and competitive products (Koutras 44). MTN dominated the higher-end prepaid (a payment plan introduced in 1998 which allowed users to load credit onto their accounts in advance rather than making calls on credit) and contract section of the market, while Vodacom was most popular amongst low-income users. MTN also prided themselves in providing superior customer service

and satisfaction (Silonda 73).

Thus, although Vodacom may have been in a very fortunate market position and did not really have to advertise, their marketing certainly proved valuable for brand awareness and popularity. Further, Vodacom made substantial profits and could afford to advertise vigorously and did so on a fairly casual basis, relying on instinct rather than strategy (Koenderman 12; Doherty 2).

MTN, on the other hand, made a conscious effort to strategize their position in the market and relied on strategic advertising in an attempt to increase their subscribers and thereby increase their market share. However, according to Koenderman, this was largely unsuccessful, possibly due to the fact that MTN repeatedly changed their leadership, strategy and advertising agency (Koenderman 13).

This rivalry between Vodacom and MTN meant that these companies have relied on advertising as an attempt to portray themselves as the 'better' cellular operator. combined with the extremely lucrative nature of the cellular telecommunications industry in South Africa, this meant that very large advertising budgets were available to both companies. In recent years, both companies have been amongst the top six advertising spenders in South Africa annually (as defined in the "The Big Spenders" table in Tony Koenderman's *Adreview* publication), spending in excess of R440 million³. This generally means that advertising agencies which are fortunate enough to have cellular operator's business do well financially (Koenderman 9).

Vodacom's *Mo the Meerkat* campaign was the first major campaign launched after the *Yebo Gogo* campaign and can be seen as an example of Vodacom's casual, mass-

³ Interestingly, MTN is above Vodacom in this list, even though they generally see fewer results in terms of market share (Koenderman 9).

appeal based advertising style. Further, it is also an example of a campaign that enjoyed a massive budget and was thus able to penetrate the majority of the country and is recognizable to a large part of the population. From an animation perspective, this mass appeal and penetration can only be beneficial to the animation industry in South Africa, as any exposure the medium gets helps promote and develop it (Treves & Hofmeyr 13).

2.1.3 Draftfcb

The previous section highlighted the advertising success Vodacom has generally enjoyed thus far, as well as the ability of their advertising to capture the public sentiment at the time. This ability can to a large extent be attributed to their advertising partners, Draftfcb. This section of the chapter will give a brief history of Draftfcb, before moving on to an overview of their engagement with the medium of animation in the next sub-section.

Draftfcb Johannesburg, which was responsible for the campaign in question, has been Vodacom SA's advertising partner for the past 16 years. The relationship began when the mobile telephone company launched their first advertising campaign in October 1994 ("SA Academy of Science & Arts honours Draftfcb's De Villiers."). This long-standing relationship between the agency and Vodacom is in contrast to that of their main rival, MTN, who have used several different advertising agencies and followed several strategies over the years (Koenderman 13). However, the longevity of the relationship with DraftFCB may possibly be attributed to the success Vodacom's advertising campaigns have generally enjoyed and thus presented no need for Vodacom to make any changes.

Draftfcb Johannesburg is part of the global advertising network Draftfcb, which

has 167 offices in 94 countries, with headquarters in Chicago and New York, and is ranked as one of the top 15 advertising agencies worldwide based on annual revenue (Draftfcb.com) (“Draftfcb- Agency Profile.”)(“Top 15 Consolidated Agency Networks”). The company was formed by a merger between direct marketing firm, Draft Inc. and creative agency FCB Worldwide (“Draftfcb- Agency Profile.”). FCB Worldwide, formerly known as Foote, Cone & Belding, or FCB, one of the world’s oldest advertising agencies, was founded during the early 1900’s as an offshoot of Albert Lasker’s agency Lord and Thomas in New York.

FCB South Africa was founded in 1926, when FCB Worldwide bought out an advertising agency belonging to Lindsay Smithers in Johannesburg, and was thus initially known as Lindsay Smithers FCB. Lindsay Smithers-FCB is the longest-established advertising agency in South Africa and has been among the top three agencies in the country for the past eight decades. In 2006, FCB South Africa was renamed to Draftfcb after the international merger and now consists of three branches: Draftfcb Johannesburg, Draftfcb Cape Town and Draftfcb Durban.

On the one hand, Draftfcb’s American history resulted in Draftfcb Johannesburg being established as a full service agency, combining both direct marketing and creative advertising in one agency. On the other hand, Draftfcb’s well established history as one of the oldest players in the American advertising industry also means that Draftfcb Johannesburg has a strong backing in terms of industry experience as well as financial security. Added to this advantage is the fact that Lindsay Smithers FCB was one of the first advertising agencies in South Africa, thereby providing Draftfcb Johannesburg with substantial local experience. With both of these factors in mind, both FCB South Africa and Draftfcb’s success in the country, more success can be expected. This success

includes having been responsible for three out of ten favourite advertisements in South Africa. Millward Brown Adtrack ⁴ reports also found that Draftfcb had produced the favourite advertisement of the past decade, as well as the favourite advertisement of the last 25 years (Koenderman “Likeability Champions” 54) (“TV ads we’ve loved for 25 years”).

2.1.4 Draftfcb’s engagement with Animation

The previous section established the complex and long-standing history of what is now known as Draftfcb Johannesburg. Due to the many mergers and acquisitions that form part of this history, it becomes difficult to establish whether the agency has a history of using animation. When asked on the subject in a personal interview, Brett Morris, Draftfcb’s Group Chief Creative Officer, noted that the agency had definitely used animation in their campaigns before, but that he was unsure to the extent of this. He mentioned the three main applications of animation he could recall Draftfcb’s involvement in over the years, namely: *The Oros Man*, *Simba the Lion* and *Chappy the Chipmunk*. *The Oros Man* is an animated character used to promote the South African product, Oros, an artificial orange squash produced by the Tiger Brands Group. *Simba the Lion* is the brand icon of the South African potato chips company, Simba Chips. *Chappy the Chipmunk* is the brand icon for Chappies, a South African chewing gum brand.

This account of Draftfcb’s practice of using animation by their chief creative

⁴ Adtrack is research company Millward Brown’s advertising research system that asks a panel of viewers to rate the liking and notability of all television commercials aired annually to be discussed in the next section (Koenderman “Likeability Champions”)

officer is fairly vague and unsubstantial, but can be attributed to a number of factors:

- A visit to Draftfcb's head offices in Johannesburg revealed that they do not have an up to date and well organized archive. Completed commercials are captured on DVD before being distributed to different broadcasters. In the past one copy of the DVD was placed in storage. Recently, however, all DVD's in storage have been converted into a digital format and are now stored on a computer system. This system can be searched for commercials by name or keyword, but is not organized according to date, client or content. This means that there is no clear overview of work that has been done over the years.
- Advertising agencies generally have a high staff turn over, which means that individuals usually do not have a long history of working within the same institution. For example, as was discovered during the documentation of this campaign, there was more than one creative director working on the *Mo the Meerkat* campaign (Grant Middleton and Gerhard Myburgh). The creative director responsible for most of the campaign, Gerhard Myburgh, has since immigrated and no longer works for Draftfcb. This means that there generally also is no extensive personal recollection of work that has been done.
- Industry surveys and publications such as Millward Brown Adtrack Report and Tony Koenderman's Adreview, focus on the success of commercials and campaigns. This means that only the top ten or twenty commercials (by consumer vote, creative awards or revenue achieved) are noted, recorded and published. This means that there is no independent archive of South African commercials available to the public. Therefore there is also no

extensive and reliable ‘public’ recollection of advertising produced.

Morris further noted that they never consider animation in isolation, but rather as a ‘means to an end’, in other words, as a device that is occasionally suitable or ideal for a certain brief given to them by clients (Morris 3). Thus, even though Draftfcb Johannesburg have used two-dimensional animated icons as well as human icons (such as Bankole Omotso and Michael de Pinna of the *Yebo Gogo* campaign) to create brand identities, there is no institutional memory, in DraftFCB’s practice preceding *Mo the Meerkat*, of a fully developed animated character. This means that, as far as can be established, there has been no animated character with clearly distinguishable personality traits which were developed within the commercials to benefit the brand image. Having established this, the remainder of the chapter will serve as a documentation of what can be considered Draftfcb’s first attempt at featuring a fully developed animated character in their advertising.

2.2 Vodacom’s *Mo the Meerkat* Campaign, 2005-2007

2.2.1 Vodafone Live!

The animated character in question, *Mo the Meerkat*, was developed as part of a commercial for the launch of a Vodacom product: Vodafone Live! (Doherty 5; Morris 4). This product was developed by Vodafone for international markets initially and introduced to the South African market towards the end of 2005. Vodafone Live! is a youth product that targets Vodacom customers who use their mobile phones to access the internet (Doherty 11; Morris 5). Thus, the target market for this product, (as defined by the advertisers information platform on the Vodacom website) are mainly male,

employed persons between the ages of 19 and 34 years. Matric (a term used to describe the final year of high school in South Africa) is listed as minimum education and a living standard measure of between 7 and 10 (on a scale from 1 to 10) is identified as common amongst these individuals.

As one of Vodacom's shareholders, Vodafone was responsible for launching the Vodafone live! concept in the South Africa. Vodacom handled the making of the first commercial despite the fact that the commercial advertised a Vodafone product. The character was envisioned by the creative team at Draftfcb Johannesburg as an embodiment of entertainment coming to life on consumers' mobile phones (via the Vodafone live! portal) (Doherty 3) and symbolised that this portal brings entertainment to you, regardless of your physical location (Morris 4). An animated character was chosen as it enhanced the fact that this entertainment was not from the real world and therefore also the reason the animated character finds itself in a live-action environment (Morris 7). This character was initially going to be based on a dog, but a meerkat was chosen instead to make it a more authentically South African character (Andreotti 3; Morris 7).

The Vodafone Live! launch commercial featured *Mo(Maurice) the Meerkat* shown stripping, by pulling off his skin, for a rather mortified female character in her living room. This theme was chosen due to the fact that even adult content could be accessed through the Vodafone Live! portal (Andreotti 2). The commercial was directed by Peter Pohorsky at Plank Film Productions, who was in favour of the technique of motion capture being used. This was because he had experience as a performance director, and motion capture, unlike keyframe animation, allowed him to direct an actor's performance. This was important, in his opinion, as it would allow him to ascertain if

certain moves worked and if they were humorous or not (Pohorsky 1). At the time, there was only one company in South Africa that had motion-capture facilities: AnimMate! located in northern Johannesburg, who were then awarded the job for the Vodafone live! launch commercial.

Thus, production went ahead and the data captured from the actor's performance by the motion capture facilities was translated on to a basic 'wireframe' model of Mo. Such 'wireframe' models usually consist only of the character's basic shape rendered in greyscale without any colour, texture or lighting information. This 'wireframe' model was then composited into the live action footage of the female figure sitting in her living room and showed to Vodacom for approval. Vodacom was satisfied with the unfinished version they had seen and gave permission for the commercial to be finished (Pohorsky 1).

An anonymous source involved in the technical aspect of the animation production indicated that Mo initially was supposed to have computer generated fur which would allow for him to pull something off while stripping. This fur would be created by an application that simulated real hair and would allow for the computer generated hair to be styled (to resemble the fur of real animals) and would also move realistically. However, Pohorsky was unhappy with the character's appearance with the fur as he felt that it detracted from the character's mischievous look and made him look creepy. AnimMate! assured him that the character would look better once he was completely lit. However, when shown this version, Vodacom decided to cancel the job because they felt that the finished character lacked the basic charm that the wireframe model had shown (Pohorsky 1).

Instead, AnimMate! managed to convince Vodacom to give them a chance to

remodel the character and they were given three days to remove the fur and make Mo look more charming and ‘cartoon-like’ (Pohorsky 1). Regardless of this production crisis, when finally aired, the Vodafone Live! launch commercial took the public by storm and was exceptionally popular (Andreotti 4). Andreotti noted that, in her opinion, the character that had been created was not ideal, as the majority of the viewers did not realise it was a meerkat (Andreotti 4). This recognition was considered important as the creative team had deliberately chosen a character based on a meerkat (rather than a dog as they had initially planned) due to the fact that it was an authentically South African character. However, Andreotti’s slight dissatisfaction with the character might be due to the production difficulties that were experienced.

2.2.2 Vodacom

Due to the popularity of this Vodafone Live! launch commercial, *Mo the Meerkat* then evolved into a character used for Vodacom branding purposes and starred in five additional commercials between November 2005 and November 2007 (Morris 4). Because Vodafone at the time only had a minority (35 percent) share in Vodacom, Vodacom management was able to annex the *Mo the Meerkat* character and decided that he would be used to advertise the Vodacom brand rather than the Vodafone live! portal.

This shift was not welcomed by advertising professionals due to strategic concerns. Mo’s function, as Vodacom property was about Vodacom’s relationship with their customers, and how Vodacom, as a telecoms provider, gives their customers more opportunity to connect with others and be entertained (Morris 4). This is echoed by Dulile Sowaga in his article “Maurice the Meerkat steals show, is likely to be around for some time” for *City Press* newspaper:

“For the brand, it communicates that Vodacom is there every moment, not only with cellphones but making users enjoy unlimited entertainment” (4)

However, from a strategic perspective this analogy for the brand was not ideal, as *Mo the Meerkat* had been conceived through a strategy for Vodafone Live!, a specific product, rather than a brand as a whole (Doherty 5). One of the implications of this was that the target market for the subsequent commercials was no longer defined by age, gender and race. Vodacom, similar to Coca Cola, has an extremely large and diverse customer base: 27 million customers from all races, gender and from any Living Standard measure (Doherty 4; Morris 4). This means that Vodacom’s advertising needs to appeal to a mass audience rather than a specific group of people as had been defined the target market for the Vodafone Live! portal. Vodacom’s motivations for retaining this character, however, may have had to do with the consumer popularity the character had already shown, as well as their tendency to favour characters with entertaining narrative (as seen in the *Yebo Gogo* campaign) in their advertisements.

The next commercial which aired in November 2005, was a collaboration between director Jeremy Goodall from Feel Good Films based in Johannesburg and AnimMate!. Peter Pohorsky was not interested in taking the project any further, as he felt that he would not be able to redesign the character to what he had originally envisioned as Mo was already in the public domain. He was also unhappy with the animation production aspect of the campaign because he felt that he was not able to supervise every aspect of the production and thus make timely changes or improvements to the outcome if needed (Pohorsky 1).

The next commercial was themed around the up and coming summer holidays in South Africa and proved to be even more popular, scoring 9,2 out of 10 on the Millward

Brown Adtrack System, against an average score of 6,2 (Sowaga 4).

Hereafter the campaign underwent a change. Draftfcb awarded the film contract for the next three commercials to CAB films in Cape Town. Rachel Andreotti, head of broadcasting at Draftfcb at the time of the campaign could not recall whether this had to do with unavailability of Jeremy Goodall or personal preference of the creative director at the time (Andreotti 10). Director, Bruce Paynter at CAB Films was critical of the use of motion capture in the previous commercials, and felt that, while it was very accurate, did not portray any of the “comedic elasticity” (2) that the character lacked (Paynter 2). In other words, what Paynter was suggesting, was that while Mo’s movements were realistic and fluid, he could benefit from some comedy and personification, instead of simply being “a man in a meerkat suit” (Hofmeyr & Treves 5; Paynter 2).

These issues are common concerns in the debate between motion capture and traditional keyframe animation and dates as far back as the 1920’s when rotoscoping was introduced. Rotoscoping is a mechanical animation technique, developed by animation legend Max Fleisher and showcased in his *Out of the Inkwell* series, in which animators trace movement, frame by frame, from live-action footage (Telotte 291).

While the technique of motion-capture allows for a sequence of moves to be captured accurately from actors and translated to a computer based model, performance animation places more emphasis on expressing the emotion and intention contained in movement than on accuracy (Kerlow 2). This performance is especially important in non-human characters, as viewers often find it uncanny to watch these characters behaving exactly like humans. However, motion capture could be used as a reference and combined with performance animation to create realistic, yet expressive movement. The lack of performance or personality noted in the *Mo the Meerkat*

character by Paynter in the first two commercials, can be attributed to his limited range of facial expressions and lack of bold, exaggerated and expressive movements or gestures. Mo's movements should not simply serve to execute certain actions, but also reveal his feelings and disposition.

Based on these concerns, Paynter suggested that Black Ginger, a keyframe animation and special effects company, in Cape Town be used for the animation for the next commercial. Vodacom subsequently approved and awarded them the contract for the remaining commercials, which meant that AnimMate! was no longer involved in the campaign.

Both Bruce Paynter and Black Ginger had objections to the initial character design of *Mo the Meerkat* (Hofmeyr & Treves 4; Paynter 4). This was partially due to the fact that the character was initially only going to be used for one commercial, and not an entire brand campaign, and thus no effort was made in creating a fully developed character with an individualistic personality (Paynter 4).

The most noticeable result of this was that the audience failed to recognize Mo as a meerkat initially, but instead likened him to a rodent (Andreotti 4). This lack of effort also meant that the quality of animation and character design was less than satisfactory at first and only reached its full potential in the fourth commercial, after Black Ginger had familiarized themselves with the character and made gradual changes to his design and raised the sophistication of Mo's animated performance (Hofmeyr & Treves 6). *Mo the Meerkat* might have become the first truly iconic animated brand icon in South Africa if his character had been carefully designed from the start and if his performance and the resulting personality had been planned in advance.

The same advantage would have applied to an advertising context, possibly resulting in the campaign gaining creative recognition (through creative awards). Listing brand icons (characters that are associated with a brand) with a distinguishable personality off hand is a difficult task. Characters that are truly synonymous with the brand they represent are at a short supply, even on a global scale. An example of such character is Chester Cheetah for Cheetos, a local corn snack.

Pat Sullivan's *Felix the Cat*, which was created and animated by Otto Messmer during the 1920's, can be considered the first ever animated character with a consistent and individualistic personality. This does not mean that Felix's personality is instantly evident when watching a short featuring the famous cat, or that the essence of this personality can be summarised in a few sentences, as is also the case with humans (Crafton 321). Instead, a vocabulary of gestures, mannerisms, idiosyncrasies and themes were consistently used by Messmer over the years to define Felix's personality

Messmer is said to have modelled *Felix the Cat's* mannerisms and general behaviour on Charlie Chaplin's comedic screen persona, which perhaps accounts for his expressive and unique performance (Crafton 308). Arguably the most appealing of these mannerisms is Felix's expressive use of his body parts, especially his tail and ears. His ears click together when he walks and his tail twists and curls, often forming a question or exclamation mark to reflect his sentiment at the time. Although these gestures have no apparent function from a narrative perspective they help to convey a "nervous energy" (Crafton 327) which Felix is believed to have shared with his creator, Otto Messmer. Felix's movement is unlike the smooth and realistic motion we have become accustomed with through other animated characters. His movements are abrupt and choppy, his walk following a staccato rhythm of sorts (Crafton 293).

Certain idiosyncrasies have also become synonymous with Felix's escapades in each animated short. Most notably of these is his tail's ability to be transformed and used for what ever purpose is currently required by its owner: be it as an umbrella, a cane or sword (Crafton 327). This ability extends to Felix's environment as well: any onscreen figure is at his disposal and can be used and moulded to suit his current pursuit. For example, the number four, from a sign saying "478 miles", is converted into a chair, the number seven into a pipe and the number eight into spectacles enabling Felix to read his newspaper (Crafton 329).

The same flexibility is granted to Felix's character: he often displays fully anthropomorphic behaviour, yet at the same time reminds viewers that he is a cat (Crafton 327). This behaviour includes his famous pensive pacing or need for 'human' creature comforts (such as a warm house or a cigar), while we are reminded that Felix is a carnivore every time he opens his mouth and bares his sharp incisors, eats mice or is chased by dogs. Certain themes are also re-occurring and become associated with the character. These include Felix's victimisation by his environment (or his many misfortunes), Felix as an outcast, Felix as a starving animal and Felix as the philanderer (Crafton 295, 329).

These themes display Felix as having the most fundamental needs for food, shelter, and love as humans do. The universality of these concerns and the familiar domestic situation Felix finds himself in allows viewers to project their own concerns into these situations. This invites viewer's empathy with Felix which plays a fundamental role in the likeability of any character.

Thus, viewers see Felix as a living being due to his shared concerns and emotions, his mannerisms and idiosyncrasies as well as the reoccurring themes which

define his existence. This is strongly opposed to seeing him as a living being because his movement is to a large degree an indication of real movement. Thus, Felix is real because he thinks, not simply because he moves, which can be directly attributed to Mesmer's definition of a unique personality for Felix (Crafton 338).

Looking back at Chester Cheetah, the brand character for Cheetos, the corn snack produced by the Frito Lay group, has been featuring in commercials since the late 1980's. This character can be used as an example of how personality can be achieved in an animated advertising character. Similar to Felix, Chester Cheetah displays unique mannerisms, idiosyncrasies and narrative themes, which are always somehow related to the product at hand.

As seen in "Cheetos 1988", Chester Cheetah is a composed and slick character that always wears sunglasses, has a goatee and speaks in rhymes with his slight Southern American accent. He reminds viewers of an aged rock star. His long, spindly arms and legs move with calm and fluidity and his demeanour in general is reminiscent of the Pink Panther's jazzy confidence.

The narrative of the commercials featuring Chester Cheetah is always product related. Chester is either in pursuit of Cheetos as in "Chester Cheetah Cheetos Puff Commercial 1989", running various tests and experiments on Cheetos as seen in "Cheetos 'Any Lengths.' " or is educating the public about 'laws' pertaining to Cheetos as in "Cheetos Paws Commercial 1993". Chester Cheetah shares Felix the Cat's 'anything goes' attitude pertaining to his body parts, often using his tail for various purposes (such as a hand crank an abseiling rope in "Cheetos 1988", a spring in "Chester Cheetah Cheetos Puff Commercial 1989" and a paddle in "Chester Cheetos Crunch Commercial"). Chester's most distinguishing mannerism is his overt reaction when he does eventually

come across his much loved Cheetos. He loses his calm composure, his body and neck goes into a twist, his hair stands up, his eyes and tongue pop out and he is generally uncontrollable.

This reaction is usually what leads to his other most distinguishing theme in the commercials: he is clumsy and accident-prone. Chester always gets injured on his pursuit for Cheetos. He reminds viewers of the Warner Brother's Roadrunner and Willie E Coyote characters who inevitably either fall to the ground from high above as Chester Cheetah does in "Cheetos Train Chase", involuntarily lunge themselves at something, get smacked in the face or sustain a variety of other impact-driven injuries. These injuries are followed by Chester shaking his head and saying "ai-i-ai-ai-ai."

Chester also uses reoccurring phrases such as "Chester Cheetah here" at the beginning of the commercials, "It ain't easy, being cheesy" (usually in response to his injuries), "the cheese that goes crunch" and "Dangerously Cheesy" in later commercials. The 'crunch' in "the cheese that goes crunch" is always used as an intended pun on the sound the corn chips make when being eaten, as well as the sound Chester Cheetah's impact with the ground (or which ever object relevant) makes when he injures himself. In "Cheetos Train Chase", Chester says "the cheese that goes crunch" while he falls off a train track sloping down the side of a mountain and the word 'crunch' happens to coincide with his impact with a train driving below.

Thus, even though Chester Cheetah's mannerisms and idiosyncrasies are not as plentiful and unique as Felix's, they do still make a decent attempt at giving him an individualistic personality. The themes arising from the narrative (Chester as an accident-prone martyr of sorts) are slightly more frivolous and light-hearted than those associated with the Felix character. However, this can be attributed to the nature and

limitations of the advertising form. Viewers are more likely to respond to a humorous, light hearted commercial than a serious one, and commercials also governed by a time restriction (they are rarely longer than 30 sec) which limit the development of complex themes. However, the Chester Cheetah character shows that it is possible to create an advertising character with an individualistic and authentic personality that viewers can identify with and feel positive about. Thus, this indicates that, with the correct planning and character development, the same could have been achieved in the *Mo the Meerkat* character.

According to Darrin Hofmeyr, animator at Black Ginger, who animated Mo in the remaining commercials, the character's rig⁵ had not been designed effectively. AnimMate! used a quadruped rig, usually used for four-legged characters, which meant that the character effectively walked on his toes, as dogs and cats do (Hofmeyr & Treves 5). This might have been suitable for traditional animation, as meerkats do in fact walk on their toes. However, the actor used for the motion capture process walked on flat feet, resulting in the data from this process not transferring accurately to the animated character (Hofmeyr & Treves 5). The reason for this oversight is not clear, but could possibly be attributed to the rushed production process for this commercial. Many industry professionals are of the opinion that motion capture data should only be used as a means of 'primary' data capturing to be used for basic actions and timing, and that the animation should also been tweaked by an animator to achieve subtleties and character personality. (Hofmeyr & Treves 4-5). This did not happen for the first two commercials, resulting in *Mo the Meerkat* coming across as "a man in a meerkat suit" (Hofmeyr & Treves 5). Hofmeyr also noted that for appeal, animated characters should

⁵ A 'rig' refers to a skeleton-like structure used to control the movements of a three-dimensional, computer-based model during animation.

be more anthropomorphic (Hofmeyr & Treves 5) and Paynter felt that the character should have been based on the personality of an actor, to get accurate proportions, actions, gestures and facial expressions but not copied directly through motion capture (Paynter 4).

Based on this, Black Ginger improved the character design, model and rig of the character, to what they felt was more appealing (Hofmeyr & Treves 6). However, Vodacom did not approve this improvement fully, and pulled the design closer to the original, as they were afraid of alienating the viewers who already loved Mo, as Mo had by this time become synonymous with the Vodacom brand as it was used extensively for print, television and in store promotions, for sports sponsorships and Vodacom events and had effectively become the ‘face of Vodacom’ (Hofmeyr & Treves 6).

Keeping this in mind, Black Ginger gradually evolved Mo over the four commercials that they did, to get people comfortable with his behaviour as a character (Hofmeyr & Treves 8). They also refined his design gradually to make his face softer and friendlier and improved his rig to be more flexible (Hofmeyr & Treves 6). The figures below show the changes made to Mo’s design from his initial design in *Meerkat Stripper* to his partially adjusted design in *Can’t Touch This* and the final design in *Can’t Touch This*.



Figure 1-3: Film stills from *Meerkat Stripper*, *Can’t Touch This* and *Rollerskate Mambo*.

Further, Black Ginger also increased the sophistication of animation, because according to Hofmeyer & Treves, for Mo to be appealing, he had to be driven by character performance as audiences are familiar with in animated films (9). Black Ginger also introduced an additional character, the female meerkat, *Moita*, to function as Mo's love interest. These improvements and additions resulted in what Black Ginger felt was the most successful and well developed commercial of the campaign, namely the 'Rollerskate Mambo' which aired in April 2007 (Hofmeyer & Treves 7). However, Hofmeyer noted, that Vodacom insisted on substantially more animated action for Mo in each commercial and that the burden of choreographing these additional moves fell on them. This burden and a general lack of ideas for these moves by the Black Ginger staff meant that Mo's actions became clichéd, boastful and slightly ridiculous (Hofmeyr & Treves 8). Paynter commented on this, saying that "the result was more airtime for him but significantly less finesse." (4). This was also because more airtime for Mo meant that more needed to be animated in the allocated time which made producing quality work challenging.

2.2.3 Audience Reception – Awards and Surveys

The Vodacom commercials featuring Mo from a consumer vote and business perspective, were hugely successful (Doherty 8) and were popular across all ages and races (Andreotti 13; Doherty 3). The extent to which they had mass appeal was also astonishing, as advertisements are generally focused on a specific target market, and even if they do appeal to consumers outside this group, it is usually to a lesser extent. Brett Morris summarises this in his statement:

"You can't be all things to all people. Certainly a mantra we hold true, but ironically Mo was able to do that" (5).

Further, Mo also had appeal across all race categories, which could be attributed to the fact that he is an animated character and thus does not align himself with a specific race group. However, according to both Brett Morris, creative director at the time of the campaign, and Rita Doherty, head of strategy at the time of the campaign, this was not a factor in his creation and was purely coincidental (Doherty 5; Morris 8).

Considering that Vodacom's advertising displayed a general lack of strategic planning, as discussed in the previous section, and that this campaign was intended, at inception, for a much smaller, mainly white target audience (the Vodafone live! target market) this may well have been a coincidence ("Vodafone live!- Mobile Internet Advertising Platform"). However, it is important to mention, at this point, that the lack of direct reference to any race or ethnicity in the *Mo the Meerkat* character may well have worked in Vodacom's favour. Since the *Yebo Gogo* campaign first launched at the end of 1994 and when the *Mo the Meerkat* campaign aired more than ten years later, it is ironic that the South African public has become much less tolerant of and more sensitive to racial references.

The South African Institute for Race Relations recently published a study entitled *The Long Shadow of Apartheid: Race in South Africa* which was written and compiled by Lucy Holborn. This study looked at the way racial incidents were reported on in the press from 1994, at the end of Apartheid until 2010 when the study was completed. These racial incidents included cases of alleged racism (some of which including violence) as well as racial debates conducted mostly in the political sphere (Holborn "Re: The long Shadow").

Findings of this study indicated a slight decrease in the number of racial

incidents being reported in the latter years, but noted that such incidents tended to provoke a bigger response or sense of outrage from the public. According to Holborn, this would indicate that South Africans might have become more sensitive towards racial references and racism in general since 1994. However, although this can be interpreted as a positive sign, as it indicates that racism is becoming increasingly socially unacceptable to South Africans. It also shows that South Africans may be becoming increasingly aware of race in general. Holborn speculated that this awareness may not have increased since 1994, but that it has not fallen away either, despite the opportunity for racial reconciliation over the past sixteen years (Holborn, “Re: The long Shadow”).

Holburn notes that reasons for this may include the introduction of positive discrimination laws such as employment equity and Black Economic Empowerment, which have legally entrenched the concept of distinct races and thus may have made people more aware of race in their day to day lives. Furthermore, continuing socio-economic divisions between races, mean that backgrounds and life experiences tend to differ between races, all of which may also contribute to the fact that racial differences are still present in the minds of many South Africans (Holborn “Re: The long Shadow”).

In light of this, a campaign that placed emphasis on different races and that ridiculed the awkward reconciliation process between black and white South African’s would likely have generated less enthusiasm from the public than at the time of the *Yebo Gogo* campaign. Therefore, the fact that viewers were not able to draw any racial or ethnic references from the *Mo the Meerkat* character may well have been a positive feature to many South African’s and may have contributed to the campaign’s popularity.

To give an overview of the campaign's popularity from a business and consumer point of view I have listed the campaign, *Mo the Meerkat* and Vodacom's the major achievements and awards during the three years that the campaign ran.

Marketing Excellence Award

In 2006, at the height of the campaign, Draftfcb won a 'Grand Prix' award for the Vodacom *Mo the Meerkat* campaign in the 'Brand Marketing Campaign' category of the Sunday Times Business Times' Marketing Excellence Awards. To be nominated for this award, Draftfcb compiled a case study which showed how *Mo the Meerkat*, as a brand icon, lifted Vodacom's brand equity (Doherty 8; "Meerkat Dances off with Grand Prix"). 'Brand equity' is measured by the value of a brand, where the value of a brand outweighs the value of the company to which the brand belongs ("Top Brands Survey").

Millward Brown Adtrack

Adtrack is Millward Brown's advertising research system which tracks the likeability and notability (level of recognition) of all television commercials aired weekly. Commercials are given a score (on a scale of one to ten) by a panel of viewers. These scores are then used to compile an annual report which names each month's top scorer as well as the top 20 commercials each year (Koenderman "Likeability Champions"; "TV ads we've loved for 25 years"). These results are provided in two categories: LSM (Living Standard Measure) 5-7 and LSM 8-10. The Living Standards Measure is a means with which advertisers segment the market (instead of relying purely on factors such as age and race) based on criteria such as living conditions and ownership of cars and major appliances ("Living Standards Measure").

Below is a table showing the Millward Brown Adtrack results for 2005, 2006 and

2007 for each of the commercials, in both LSM categories. This includes their overall ranking for the year (if they featured in the top 20) as well as their likability score (on a scale from one to ten if featured in the top 20).

Commercial & Year	LSM A (5-7)		LSM B (8-10)	
	Likability Score (out of 10)	Annual Ranking (from 1-20)		Likability Score (out of 10)
2005				
<i>Meerkat Stripper</i> (April)	8.6	4	(Not in top 20)	
<i>Meerkat Congaline</i> (November)	9.4	1	3	8.6
2006				
<i>Dance King/ You Can't Touch This</i> (August)	8.2	10	(Not in top 20)	
<i>Mo's Girlfriend/ Meerkat Whip</i> (November)	8.5	3	2	8.3
2007				
<i>Rollerskate Mambo</i> (April)		1	9	
<i>Meerkat Cruise/ "Mo Watch"</i> (November)		(Not in top 20)	(Not in top 20)	

Table 1: Millward Brown Adtrack Results, 2005-2007

Sources:

"Best Liked ads 2007 from Millward Brown's AdTrack." *Bizcommunity.com*. Bizcommunity.com, n.d. Web. 12 Dec. 2010.

Foster, Charles. "You Can't Touch This. Millward Brown – Best Liked Ads." *The Financial Mail* 1 Jun. 2007: 118. Print.

Koenderman, Tony. "Die Leeuloop loop. Verskeie groepe hou ál meer van dieselfde advertensies." *Finweek* [South Africa] 15 Feb. 2007: 82. Print.

"Mooi skoot, Mo. Draftfcg slaag weer met innemende advertensie." *Finweek* [South Africa] 1 May 2008: 70. Print.

These figures indicate that the improvements made to the character after the second commercial did not significantly increase consumer likeability. Likeability in both LSM categories peaked in November 2005 with *Meerkat Conga Line*."

Generation Next Youth Brand Survey

The Sunday Times Generation Next Youth Brand Survey is published in the Sunday times towards the middle of the year and is the youth equivalent of the Top Brands Survey. The 2005 survey was published in May, before the *Mo the Meerkat* campaign was launched and thus will not be mentioned here.

Mo the Meerkat was named the third 'Coolest Brand Icon' (after David Beckham and Simba the Lion) in 2006 and 2007 ("Generation Next Youth Brand Survey 2006" 15 "Generation Next Youth Brand Survey 2007" 19).

Although the campaign and *Mo the Meerkat* as a character were very successful from a business and consumer point of view, the campaign and character did not enjoy the same attention in creative and professional circles. The campaign did not win any awards for creative excellence (Doherty 8) (Andreotti 13) and was widely disliked by industry professionals (Doherty 3). When asked about this, Rachel Andreotti attributed it to the fact that the creative industry were simply harsher judges and judged the

character some what unfairly (Andreotti 13) (Morris 10) and that industry professionals were perhaps unimpressed with the quality of animation in the first two commercials and the grotesque nature of the first commercial (the meerkat pulling his skin off) (Hofmeyr & Treves 10-11).

However, after showing the commercials to various staff members at Bugbox Animation Studios in Johannesburg, they generally agreed on the following critique. The character design was unappealing because it was a badly designed and executed combination of an atomically correct meerkat and simplified cartoon character. The most problematic feature of the character design they found was the characters' nose which in their opinion appears as though it is a black knob with two cavities at the centre of the character's face, which directly faces the viewer and attracts most attention. Further, they noted that the character had sunken cheeks, buck teeth, no lips or lip movement, a jaw that does not function well, a pot belly as well as unconvincing tail movement.

They agreed that although the character design and execution of the animation improves gradually from the third commercial onward, the factors mentioned above give rise to a skeletal, grotesque-looking character which comes across as sleazy and slightly disconcerting. They noted, however, that the grotesque nature of the character was acceptable and justified for the first commercial as it contributed to the storyline of the commercial. Yet, thereafter, Mo as a character, is taken out of context and changes from an intentionally grotesque and unappealing character to something that is presented as 'cool' and 'sexy' (a staff member pointed out that Mo is juxtaposed with characters that are sexually attractive such as girls in bikinis which suggests that Mo is also 'sexy').

They also found that the ideas behind the commercials steadily deteriorated in that there was no longer any storyline or humour displayed, and that Mo's performance becomes stale and uninteresting and reveals nothing new or concrete about the character. On a more general note they found that from the second commercial onwards, it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish the purpose of the commercials, as they do not directly promote any product or service, and that if the customer is not familiar with the Vodacom brand, this can be highly confusing. They also commented that consumers are generally more willing to appreciate a brand that laughs at itself through its advertising (as was done in the first commercial) and are less impressed by a brand that portrays themselves as appealing and fashionable.

This analysis of the commercials raises a valid critique of *Mo the Meerkat* as an animated character in terms of the execution of the character, the concepts and strategic thinking behind each commercial as well as Vodacom advertising in general. This point of view also gives a good indication of why industry professionals were unimpressed by the campaign and thus also an indication as to the lack of creative awards granted to the campaign. However, it does lead to questions of why the campaign was so successful from a consumer vote which will be discussed in the next chapter.

2.2.4 In Conclusion

However, the end of the campaign had less to do with the characters' popularity or lack thereof. After having produced six commercials, the campaign came to a point where Vodacom could either "[T]urn it into a Mickey Mouse" (Doherty 3), in other words, make Mo the ultimate icon by merchandising and franchising him, or simply let the campaign, and Mo, come to an end (Doherty 3). Ultimately, what influenced this

decision was the following strategic considerations. Vodacom, under the leadership of chief executive officer Alan Knott-Craig and chief marketing officer, Andre Beyers, favoured an populist approach, in other words, advertising based on human instinct, following the mantra “We just rolled with it” (Doherty 2). And while Vodacom advertising in the past had always connected to people, it was not pro-active in building a considered brand identity (Doherty 5). In contrast, Vodafone, (who from 2006-2009 increased their stake in the Vodacom Group to become majority shareholders) placed more value on strategy and brand building (Doherty 5).

Thus, even though consumers loved Vodacom advertising, the brand attribute that the *Mo the Meerkat* was associated with was fun: Mo was an easy-going, fun-loving bachelor. This resulted in Vodacom becoming a ‘cool and fun’ brand, but not necessarily a brand which was empathetic and that cared for the well-being of their customers and the service they received (Doherty 4). Vodacom wanted to show that they understood and cared for their customers and that they connected (sic) with them on a more responsible level (Doherty 4). And, unfortunately, as indicated by Rita Doherty, head of strategy at Draftfcb at the time of the campaign: “Mo wasn’t that vehicle.” The following chapter will serve as an analysis of the animation created as part of the campaign, as well as *Mo the Meerkat* as an animated character, in an attempt to establish the effectiveness of Mo as a ‘vehicle’ for Vodacom’s brand identity.

Chapter Three: An Analysis of *Mo the Meerkat*

The previous chapter served as an empirical documentation of the campaign in question as well as any trends that emerged during the course of the campaign. This chapter will place more emphasis on analysing the animation created as part of the campaign, rather than the circumstances surrounding this animation production. This will include a short description of all advertisements created as part the campaign as well as an analysis of each commercial to establish the trends and failings of Mo as a character as well as the campaign as a whole. This analysis will serve as a basis of knowledge, to be used in the next chapter, from which conclusions can be drawn in an attempt to establish why an animated character was used for this campaign.

3.1 Brief Description

A brief description of each of the six commercials created as part of the campaign will be given. These descriptions are ordered chronologically corresponding to the dates when the commercials were first aired. Chronological treatment was chosen to correspond to the analysis of the commercial in the second part of this chapter, which need to be discussed in chronological order to document changes during the duration of the campaign.

3.1.1 *Meerkat Stripper* (See DVD)

Date: September 2005

Creative Director: Mike Barnwell

Director: Peter Pohorsky of Plank Film Productions
 Animation: AnimMate!
 Post Production: Lung Animation
 Song: Hot Chocolate's *You Sexy Thing*

A female character is shown sitting on the couch in her living room, fixated on the mobile phone in her hand. She hears something and looks up to find Maurice (Mo) the meerkat with his rear end facing her way, twirling his tail in his hand and winking at her over his shoulder. He performs a series of seductive dance moves, while the female character looks on in astonishment. His seductive moves culminate in him tearing off his skin, first from his upper body and then from his bottom, like an impromptu striptease act. He leisurely throws the skin torn from his bottom, only to knock a vase off a shelf on the wall. The female character's expression has since turned to a combination of disgust and disbelief. A mobile phone appears on screen, flashing a series of symbols (a music compact disc, a soccer ball, a dice and an envelope) and finally the video footage of Mo dancing, as seen earlier in the commercial, on its screen, while a male voice-over recited the following: "Music, sports, games, pictures and just about anything else come alive on your mobile phone with Vodafone Live! only from Vodacom." The commercial ends with the Vodacom and Vodafone Live! logos.

3.1.2 *Meerkat Conga Line* (See DVD)

Date: November 2005
 Creative Director: Gerhard Myburgh
 Director: Jeremy Goodall from Feel Good Films
 Animation: AnimMate!
 Post Production: Lung Animation

Song: Body Rockers' *I like the way you Move*

Mo, wearing blue board shorts and an unbuttoned shirt with a blue, 'Hawaiian' floral pattern, is shown dancing to the music coming from his 'boom box' (placed on the railing of what seems to be a bridge) on a pavement in the inner city. The music attract the attention of two basketball players, a waiter, a taxi driver and a series of other people in the surrounding city who rush to join in on the fun. Mo, accompanied by his portable stereo, continues dancing while people from all directions come streaming towards him. They form a Conga line on a courtyard between buildings and move through the city with Mo in the lead. Well known South African sport celebrities, Brian Habana and Ryk Neetling are shown up close while they participate in the Conga line. The commercial ends with a male voice-over reciting: "Yebo Fever, make every moment count this summer with Vodacom, South Africa's leading cellular network" and the Vodacom logo.

3.1.3 *Dance King/ Can't Touch This* (See DVD)

Date:	August 2006
Creative Director:	Gerhard Myburgh
Director:	Bruce Paynter from CAB Films
Animation:	Black Ginger
Post Production:	Tim Goodwin from Premiere Post Production
Song:	MC Hammer's <i>U Can't Touch This</i>

This commercial takes place in a club at the 2006 'Dance King' competition.

Onlookers form a circle around two contestants who are trying to 'out dance' each other. Mo enters the circle twirling his tail and wearing a golden chain with the word 'Mo' as a pendant. One of the contestants, currently in the lead, smirks at the sight of Mo. Mo however, puts him to shame by impressing onlookers with his diverse and flexible moves such as doing the splits, walking on one hand and standing on his tail. Mo's opponent lands himself in a tangle while performing a 'break dance' move, Mo, however, instead of gloating, helps him up and everybody starts dancing together. A logo featuring the words 'Can't Touch This' appears on screen. A blue background closes in around Mo's face to reveal the Vodacom logo and the words 'Can't Touch This.'

3.1.4 *Meerkat Whip/ Mo's Girlfriend* (See DVD)

Date:	November 2006
Creative Director:	Gerhard Myburgh
Director:	Bruce Paynter from CAB Films
Animation:	Black Ginger
Post Production:	Tim Goodwin from Premiere Post Production
Song:	Daddy Yankee featuring Lil Jon and Pitbull <i>Gasolina</i>

Mo, wearing blue board shorts and the same golden chain as in the previous commercial, 'cruises' down to the beachfront in his blue Cadillac convertible, bobbing his head and meeting waves from onlookers on the pavement. Mo parks his Cadillac, flips a switch and presses a red button which transforms his backseat to reveal huge speakers. He jumps out of the front seat, flinging himself over the windscreen, landing on the bonnet of the car, where he starts dancing to the music blaring from the speakers. A crowd forms around the car while Mo performs his daring dance moves. While dancing, Mo spots his female counterpart, *Moita*, dancing along on top of a beach

side bar. Their eyes meet: it's love at first sight for Mo. Unfortunately, though, Moitia jumps off the bar and disappears out of Mo's sight. A blue background closes in around Mo's face and Mo winks. The camera cuts first to a female character in her bikini dancing on the beach at sunset and then to the Vodacom logo on a blue background, throbbing to the music.

3.1.5 *Rollerskate Mambo* (See DVD)

Date:	April 2007
Creative Director:	Gerhard Myburgh
Director:	Bruce Paynter from CAB Films
Post Production:	Tim Goodwin from Premiere Post Production
Animation:	Black Ginger
Song:	Lou Bega's <i>Mambo No. 5</i>

This commercial is set in a bustling park, with people cycling, walking and doing yoga, amongst other things. Mo appears, skating along a footpath, wearing short blue running shorts, a sleeveless white shirt with turquoise-blue ribbing and the letter 'M' on the chest, green earphones connected to an antenna as well as green roller skates. Mo jumps, spins in the air, only to land on his feet again, back to front. He starts skating backwards, past two female characters in tennis gear, who meet him with smiles and waves. He blows them a kiss and continues skating, this time facing forward. He skates past a female character sitting on a bench, reading. He picks a rose from a bush, which he hands to her and winks. He continues along the foot path, where he catches a Frisbee coming his way and throws it back to its owner, who delights at the small roses now

covering the Frisbee. He comes across a female character wearing a dress, and skates around her so quickly that her dress lifts. Finally he spots *Moita*, the female meerkat, he came across in the previous commercial wearing a matching outfit. He skates towards her as fast as he possibly can and they start dancing a mambo on roller-skates. The commercial ends with both characters lifting from the ground against the city skyline and the sun on the horizon, surrounded by small hearts. The camera cuts to the Vodacom logo on a blue background and a smaller, pink logo of the words 'Vodacom by your side.' The camera cuts again to a shot of the Johannesburg skyline at night time and numerous small hearts and the 'Vodacom by your side' logo flowing around.

3.1.6. *Meerkat Cruise/ 'Mo Watch'* (See DVD)

Date:	November 2007
Creative Director:	Gerhard Myburgh
Director:	Mike Middleton from On Camera Productions
Animation:	Black Ginger
Post Production:	Sabrina O'Sullivan from Sabrina O'Sullivan Post Productions
Song:	Bob Sinclar's <i>Rock This Party (Everybody Dance Now)</i>

This commercial opens with a shot of a yacht 'cruising' along the ocean and then cuts to Moitia onboard the yacht, leaning over a railing, admiring Mo's golden necklace. The camera then zooms out from the yacht, pans across an aerial shot of the ocean and beach line and cuts to a beach, filled with people, where Mo is on lifeguard duty, wearing red board shorts and sunglasses. Mo pulls out his binoculars and notices the yacht in the distance and Moitia onboard. He grabs his rescue board, runs across the beach, throws his board up into the air, where it transforms into a wind surfing gear. He

jumps on the board, and windsurfs to the yacht surrounded by dolphins. On arrival he throws the captain his iPod to put on some music. He grabs *Moita* and the two start dancing while the rest of the people join in. The commercial ends with Mo and Moitia walking to the bow of the yacht, where *Moita* gets on the railing and spreads out her arms, with Mo behind her which parodies the famous scene from the 1997 James Cameron film, *Titanic*. A blue background closes in around their faces to reveal the Vodacom logo.

3.2 Analysis

3.2.1 *Meerkat Stripper*

The viewer is introduced to *Mo the Meerkat*: the male striper, who happens to be a bipedal meerkat. The sign here functions by linking the image of a meerkat, as is presented in the commercial, to our mental representation of the animal. Under normal circumstances, this mental representation would signify a wild animal originally from the Kalahari desert and generate a variety of connotation: It is an animal that occasionally stands on its hind legs, but mainly walks on all fours. Most of us think of a cute, rodent-like animal, which is skittish, but generally peaceful and naive.

The discussion of advertising semiotics in connection with Judith Williams' *Decoding Advertisements: Ideology and Meaning in Advertising* in chapter one, highlighted that the logic that links the signifier to the signified in advertising is non-sequential and can thus not be deducted by a logical argument presented in any commercial. This is also the case with the campaign at hand, as *Mo the Meerkat* (as a signifier) is not linked to the signified (a cute wild animal) by logic. This link is further manipulated when Mo starts performing seductive, yet somewhat sleazy dance moves

and rips his skin off. Because this is behaviour not normally associated with the animal, Mo can no longer simply be seen as a meerkat, but finds new signification with this added dimension in play. This move forces viewers to generate new connotations based on their experience of strippers, sexual dancing and perverted individuals. These connotations are combined with and contrasted to those already established in connection to the wild animal to create an entirely new, yet somewhat pleasantly entertaining, experience.

Thus, for the above mentioned scenario to work it is important that Mo as a character resemble a real life meerkat and draw on the same connotations in the viewer's mind. Keeping this in mind, his character design is not ideal as it seems to be a combination of a simplified cartoon character meerkat and a human and is somewhat oddly shaped. His face is fairly unappealing, in particular his nose, which reads like a dark cavity at the centre of his face, attracts most negative attention, followed by his protruding front teeth, sunken cheeks and disproportionately large eyelids. This facial structure is not really reminiscent of a meerkat's which is a lot rounder and more petite, as can be seen below.

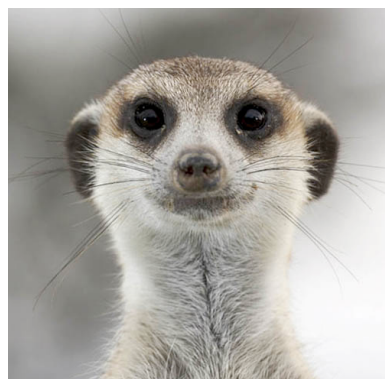
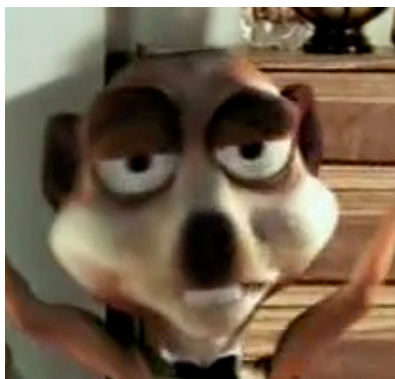


Figure 4-5: A cropped still from *Meerkat Stripper* and an image of a meerkat taken from the Meerkat Manor page on the *Animal Planet* website.

Mo's body is also not well shaped: he has a pot belly and lumps on his chest which come across as breasts as well as scrawny arms and legs.

Yet, Mo's unappealing face and flawed build does not entirely do the character a disservice. His pot belly and flabby chest and unappealing face reminds the viewer of an middle-aged man, or an perverted uncle, which together with the seductive, slightly clumsy moves and him pulling his fur off, makes the entire scenario grotesque and slightly bizarre: a 'freak show' of sorts. This is reflected in the female character's utterly mortified face and thus gives the viewer an indication that this is the response the creators were looking for. Yet, despite the grotesqueness, or possibly because of it, the viewer can not help but find the scene at least slightly humorous, even if it is only out of shared embarrassment with the female character.

A mobile phone appears on screen, re-playing the video footage of Mo dancing, as seen earlier in the commercial, on its screen, and a voice saying: "Music, sports, games, pictures and just about anything else come alive on your mobile phone with Vodafone Live! Only from Vodacom." This places the scene in context by classifying Mo as one of the many forms of entertainment available on the Vodafone Live! portal. This also links the character to the Vodafone Live! portal and Vodafone Live! by association. Thus, on an overt level Vodafone Live! (through its association with Mo) is portrayed as a fun and cheeky brand that doesn't mind laughing at itself.

3.2.2 *Meerkat Conga Line*

In this commercial, *Mo the Meerkat*, as he was introduced to viewers in the Vodafone Live! launch commercial, is placed in an entirely new, seemingly unrelated

context. Mo is transformed from being a sleazy and grotesque male stripper, to a beach-goer or typical South African holiday-maker (suggested by his choice of clothes: blue board shorts and an unbuttoned shirt with a blue, 'Hawaiian' floral pattern), this time flaunting entirely different dance moves in an urban setting, but still wearing the same bow tie.

However, the storyline of this commercial does not establish why Mo is wearing a holiday outfit in an inner city context or why he is wearing a bowtie. The choice of clothing may be attributed to the summer theme this commercial claims to have which is revealed at the end of the commercial, when the narrator says: "Yebo Fever, make every moment count this summer with Vodacom". However, this still does not explain why the commercial is shot in the inner city rather than on the beach or some where synonymous with summer leisure-time activity. The only explanation a South African viewer may find for this, if they are observant enough, is that the commercial was shot in the Cape Town inner city (recognizable by the buildings and urban environment) and that the Conga line that has been formed might be heading towards the beach. However, there is no possible explanation for the bow tie within the storyline and it may thus simply serve as a reminder of where viewers first met Mo: as a male stripper in the previous commercial.

This reference, however, is slightly problematic. Mo is no longer portrayed as a 'freak show' but is now shown dancing (this time performing dance moves reminiscent of rock music rather than the seductive kind displayed in the previous commercial) and having fun on his own accord and thereby inadvertently drawing a crowd of admirers which he then 'leads' around the city. This response is much different to that of the mortified female character in *Meerkat Stripper* and Mo is transformed from a grotesque,

bizarre character to a popular and stylish one.

No adequate context or explanation is established for this change and Mo's performance reveals little about his character other than that he can motivate a crowd, seems to be enjoying himself and that he is popular. This change in character makes his design problematic as well, because a 'hero' character generally needs to be visually appealing and loveable to the viewer, feelings that Mo's design do not convey. Further, an important factor that plays a role in character appeal is personification and show of a more human-like range of emotions. Yet, Mo's design overlooked lip and lip movement, which makes it impossible for the character to smile convincingly. Additionally, the mechanics of Mo's jaw are very stiff and the movement of his pupils too rapid which translates into a facial expression that doesn't convey happiness explicitly but simply denotes a lack of specific facial expression all together.

More importantly, though, unlike *Meerkat Stripper*, the purpose of this commercial is unclear, as there is no evident link between Mo and any Vodacom product or campaign and thus the link between Mo and Vodacom can only be assumed. Further, this commercial also lacks a storyline or real humour, and the only cohering factor that can be found is the summer theme. Yet, other than Mo's holiday or beach attire and the narrator announcing "Yebo Fever, make every moment count this summer with Vodacom, South Africa's leading cellular network" at the end of the commercial, this theme is also not really relevant. The term 'Yebo Fever', other than being a reference to the earlier *Yebo Gogo* campaign, and translating directly as meaning 'Yes Fever' is not very meaningful and is relatively confusing.

In light of the above criticism, it becomes evident that it is increasingly unclear what Mo as a character signifies in this commercial. Neither Mo's actions nor

the narrative of this commercial provide any guidance for viewers to connect Mo as a signifier to a convincing identity or meaning. Ordinarily, as mentioned in connection with the discussion of advertising semiotics in chapter one, Williamson notes that individuals make a connection between signifier and signified based on their culture-specific, learnt knowledge on the subject (Williamson 19). Thus, under normal circumstances, as discussed in connection with *Meerkat Stripper*, the image of a meerkat would signify a wild animal that lives in the Kalahari Desert and various connotations would be drawn from this mental representation. However, in this case, this signified has already been compromised when Mo displays (relatively shocking) human behaviour in *Meerkat Stripper*. Thus, in *Meerkat Conga Line* Mo draws reference to the stripping, bipedal meerkat viewers met in the previous commercial and to connotations associated with this performance (Mo is clumsy and his moves slightly sleazy which reminds viewers of an perverted and grotesque individual). However, these connotations are no longer applicable either, because Mo is now being portrayed as stylish and popular, which contrasts his previous identity.

Thus, on an overt level, Mo's behaviour in *Meerkat Conga Line* generates connotations of being individualistic and dynamic (he attracts, motivates and leads the crowd). He is popular, stylish (as showcased by his dance moves) and fun-loving. However, these connotations are non developed because Mo's character design does not lend itself to a popular, hero-like character and because there is no justification in the storyline to support this new identity Mo displays. Williamson states in her text *Decoding Advertisements: Ideology and Meaning in Advertising* that the function of the overt level of an advertisement, although it may seem to simply be promoting the qualities and attributes of product, is to generate less obvious meanings, the 'latent'

meanings (Williamson 19). Mo as a signifier, however, fails to signify anything on this 'latent' level: He is not a wild animal because he walks on all fours and wears clothes. He no longer is a male stripper which happens to be a meerkat because he is now being portrayed as stylish and popular. There is also no clear link between him and any Vodacom product or service and he thus does not appear to be attempting to be a brand mascot either. This means that Mo as a signifier can no longer be linked to any functional meaning or identity which results in the absence of one clear identity. This is because Mo makes reference to too many conflicting identities such as a grotesque and slightly sleazy stripper as well as a stylish and popular holiday-maker. Thus, Mo essentially is an inconclusive or 'empty' signifier.

3.2.3 *Dance King/ Can't Touch This*

This commercial, which marks the change from motion capture to keyframe animation within the campaign, addresses certain issues raised in regard to the character design and Mo's facial performance. Mo's nose has been modified to be more accurate and detailed, slightly smaller and thus no longer attracts unwanted attention. His mouth has also been refined: His front teeth no longer protrude and due to an updated design which allows for lip movement, he occasionally reveals a full set of teeth (which make his front teeth seem less isolated and noticeable). Mo no longer has sunken cheeks, but plump ones which make him resemble a chipmunk ever so slightly, but are effective from a character appeal perspective. His eyelids are no longer big and disproportionate and these changes in collaboration make for a rounder, more adorable and friendly-looking face. The rest of Mo's body has also been re-worked: He no longer has a pot belly and his body has been adapted to resemble a human's and generally

comes across as more anatomically correct.

The second aspect of the character refinement pertains to enhanced performance and more convincing facial expressions. As Mo's improved design allowed for lips and lip movement, Mo can now smile and show a larger variety of facial expressions which include movements of his eyes and eyebrows. His tail is now integrated into his overall performance and is used more as an accessory rather than as something that simply lags behind him. Due to these improvements, Mo comes across as more lively and cheeky. The animation and performance as a whole is well executed and his movements are now more natural, fluid and elastic.

However, regardless of these improvements, Mo's performance in this commercial does not reveal anything new about Mo as a character and does not considerably enhance his personality. The renewed cheekiness that is revealed in this commercial reminds us of the Mo viewers met in *Meerkat Stripper*. Yet, Mo's actions are very similar to those in *Meerkat Congaline*. He is performing dance moves (Hip Hop moves this time), he seems to be enjoying himself, he is again portrayed as being in the lead (he 'out-dances' his opposition) and is very popular amongst the crowd and invites them to start dancing.

Although Mo is shown briefly as being humble, by helping the other contestant up after he fails the competition, this point is disregarded by the 'Can't touch this' slogan at the end of the commercial, which suggests that Mo (and possibly, by connection, Vodacom) is better than the opposition. This is a fairly arrogant statement and Mo is ultimately still portrayed as popular and stylish, unlike the Mo' viewers met in *Meerkat Stripper*.

The biggest disappointment in this commercial (and in *Meerkat Conga Line*) is that there is no effective humour or storyline to tie the commercial together. The only reason provided to find Mo appealing is because he is stylish, because he can dance, he is popular and better than his opposition, which is not only a very shallow and arrogant assumption, but also possibly a reason not to like Mo (consumers are more likely to appreciate a brand that mocks itself than a brand that blows its own horn). Furthermore, this commercial again seems to be devoid of clear purpose and only presents an indirect link between Mo and Vodacom.

In light of the above observations, it becomes evident that Mo as a signifier is visually more appealing in this commercial. Improvements to Mo's face and character design in general, as well as his enhanced performance and show of emotion, make for an appealing character which is more entertaining to watch. Thus, on an overt level, Mo's lively performance in this commercial generates connotations of being cheeky, confident and in control which are consistent with and enhance connotations drawn from his earlier performance in *Meerkat Conga Line*.

However, incongruities still persist. Mo takes on a new identity again, this time as a Hip Hop dancer, without there being any suggestion in the storyline of how this identity connects to his previous identities as male stripper in *Meerkat Stripper* and holiday maker in *Meerkat Congaline*. There is also no clear link presented in the commercial between Mo and any Vodacom product or service and it can therefore only be assumed that he is their brand mascot of sorts. This commercial presents nothing new about Mo that could explain his differing roles in each commercial, develop his personality and point viewers towards a specific identity for him.

Mo, as a signifier, generates numerous signifieds (in form of different roles Mo

has filled and the connotations drawn from these) and thus in absence of a logical, central identity for Mo supported by the narrative is left with a non-functional and superficial one. In light of this, viewers are forced to accept Mo as a signifier at face value without considering what he signifies on a latent level, which makes viewers reliant on the superficial connotations drawn from his performance to find meaning. Thus, although Mo is more visually appealing and entertaining in this commercial he is still is an 'indefinite' signifier as he does not have a functional identity.

3.2.4 *Meerkat Whip/ Mo's Girlfriend*

This commercial is little more than a rehash of *Meerkat Conga Line* and *Can't Touch This*, with a slight variety in choice of music (this time making use of a Latin-American inspired soundtrack) and location. Mo again starts dancing and attracts a crowd which he wows with his flexible dance moves and modified car. He inspires the crowd, this time to the extent that they start copying his moves. The commercial again makes reference to a summer theme. This time, however, unlike in *Meerkat Conga Line*, this theme is substantiated as the commercial is set at the beach front and Mo is wearing board shorts and sunglasses and his onlookers are wearing swim gear. The ambiguous term 'Yebo Feva' is used again as in *Meerkat Conga Line*.

However, this summer theme and showcase of girls in bikinis, including Mo's new love interest, Moitia, the female meerkat (also in a bikini), tells us little about Mo that we have not already seen, except perhaps that he is now also being portrayed as 'sexy', by association, and that he is interested in 'sexy' girls. The commercial again displays no real humour and only a very superficial storyline as well as a lack of clear connection to the Vodacom brand.

This commercial is also heavily reliant on visual gags, rather than a humorous storyline, to create entertainment. The first such gag comprises of Mo opening the roof of his modified cabriolet and pressing a button which sets the transformation of the backseat into giant speakers, in motion, leaving the entire car thumping to the beat of the music. The commercial also features local celebrities briefly to get audiences attention. Schalk Burger and JP Pietersen who play for the South African national rugby team are shown sitting at a street side café watching Mo's car while it transforms. The second such gag is that Mo's eyes pop out of his head and his pupils turn into hearts when he sees *Moitia*, the female meerkat. These gags are used to create a situation which, as noted by Michael Herbst in the discussion of the advertising spectacle as mentioned in chapter one, attract and impress viewers. Further, these gags (in combination with the music) may be visually appealing and enjoyable to watch, but do not signify anything about Mo as a character or contribute to creating a functional personality and identity for him.

As has become common in the three previous commercials featuring Mo, he is again portrayed in a new situation in *Meerkat Whip* as a holiday maker on the beach, without any substantiation for how this role relates to those seen in previous commercials. Even if viewers by this time have accepted or concluded that Mo is a multitalented meerkat and is involved in fun activities all across South Africa, his performances still do not provide any information as to who this meerkat is, where he is from and what his personality is like. Thus, even though Mo as a signifier generates visual appeal and entertainment, he does not generate functional signification (the confusion around Mo's identity persists) and viewers have no choice but to accept him at face value as no deeper meaning is presented.

3.2.5 Rollerskate Mambo

This technically well executed commercial of Mo and his love interest, *Moitia*, roller skating the Mambo presents the viewer with a slight variation in the 'tale of Mo'. The location has changed and the theme of the commercial is more orientated towards 'love' and flirting than summer and dancing. This change, however, still doesn't account for a well conceived storyline or substantial information about Mo other than that he likes flirting with girls.

This commercial, similar to *Meerkat Whip*, makes use of cheap gags for entertainment and sees an increase in such stunts. These gags listed chronologically include:

- Mo skating past a bush which instantly grows beautiful roses for him to pick.
- Mo throwing a Frisbee back to its owner which is suddenly covered in small roses when she catches it.
- Mo skating around a female character at lightning speed resulting in a gush of air which blows her skirt up.
- Mo activating the 'rocket function' on his roller skates that propels him forward at an increased speed.
- Mo and Moitia floating up into the air at the end of the commercial, surrounded by a swarm of blue and pink hearts.

This last gag is accompanied by the slogan 'Vodacom by your side' in pink lettering. It is not quite clear what this statement means exactly, other than being a pun on the lyrics of the sound track. Is Vodacom proposing their love for their subscribers or

are they vowing to 'be there' for their subscribers, in other words, be more reliable and improve their service? It does seem like an attempt by Vodacom to portray themselves as a brand that cares for its customers, possibly motivated by MTN's service-based marketing strategy. This attempt comes across as fairly insincere, considering that this is not part of the ideas their campaign, and Mo, is endorsing.

This commercial is technically very well executed, showcasing fluid and elastic movement and an appealing character design (Mo's face is adorable and expressive). Mo comes across as cheeky and fun-loving and is enjoyable to watch. The storyline, however, is entirely driven by the gags listed above, instead of making use of a cohesive narrative structure. Although viewers are reasonably familiar with Mo as a character by this stage, he shows no development or sincere emotional response that could give insight into his personality. Mo is portrayed as a superhero revealing no character flaws, and is never faced with any problem to solve (he is always in control of the situation). Even though this might make him look like Superman, it also results in a 'flat' and one-dimensional but relatively boring character. Further, the confusion around Mo's identity persists as viewers are still not presented with any information as to his changing identity in each commercial or his personality or identity beyond these roles. Thus, on a latent level, the signification generated from Mo as a signifier is still is superficial and inconclusive.

3.2.6 *Mo Watch*

This is the third, and final, summer themed commercial of the campaign which relies heavily on various visual gags and extravagant, yet ridiculous, moves by Mo. Mo is shown surveying the beach through binoculars as part of his lifeguard duties. When he spots Moitia on a yacht, his binoculars miraculously turn into bigger and better ones so

he can get a better look at her. He then grabs his rescue board and is shown sprinting across the beach in slow motion, which is a reference to (or mockery of) the clichéd signature scene from the American drama series, *Baywatch*.

When he reaches the water, Mo's rescue board transforms into Kite surfing equipment and he rides the waves to the yacht accompanied by playful dolphins. The extravaganza does not end here. Mo lets go of the kite in mid air, lands on the yacht and slides down its windscreen. While doing this he throws the captain his iPod (which presumably has been in his pocket all along) which turns miraculously into a sound system with huge speakers. The commercial ends with Mo holding Moitia from behind while they balance on the railing at the bow of the yacht and sail into the sunset. This heavily clichéd scene is a recreation of a scene featuring Leonardo DiCaprio and Kate Winslet in the 1997 James Cameron film, *Titanic*.

This commercial is not driven by a believable storyline or character performance and is nothing more than an uninteresting series of visual stunts. These stunts can be considered another attempt to attract, impress and intrigue viewers, which is an advertising device noted in the discussion of the advertising spectacle by Michael Herbst in chapter one. Even though it is technically well executed, the implausibility and ridiculousness of the featured events comes across like another pompous display of Mo's talents. This commercial again does not develop Mo's personality or reveal anything about his identity. Mo as a character is reduced to nothing more than a visual stunt without real meaning or identity.

3.3 In Conclusion

3.3.1 Personality in the *Mo the Meerkat* Character

Analysis of the campaign has revealed that Mo as a character displays no consistent gestures, unique mannerisms or idiosyncrasies. It can be deducted from Mo's actions and interaction with the crowd that he has a calming and confident demeanour, as this is what crowds often look for in a leader. Yet, there are no subtleties in his performance or movement to suggest this explicitly. This can be contrasted to the abrupt and abstract movement of Felix the cat, which together with his expressive and energetic tail and ears denoted a kind of "nervous energy" (Crafton 327) that surrounded him. In contrast, Mo's movements suggest only that he is dancing, not what the mood of these movements is and how this mood impacts on his disposition.

Mo makes only very limited use of his body parts as tools for unique and expressive gestures. Unlike Felix the Cat and Chester Cheetah, Mo only once makes use of his tail as an 'extra limb' of sorts in *Can't Touch This*. Mo here uses his tail as a lasso rope and as a plinth which is contrasted to the use of his tail simply as an attachment affected by gravity, in other commercials. Further, the realistic leniency seen in Felix the Cat's ability to mould his environment to suit his need at the time, referred to as "polymorphous plasticism" (329) by Donald Crafton, is here replaced by gags. Instead of making creative use of his environment, Mo relies on incredulous transformations (rocket fire behind his shoes in *Rollerskate Mambo*, his rescue board turning into kite-surfing equipment in 'Mo Watch' to name a few). Although these gags are visually impressive, they deprive viewers of unique idiosyncrasies that could be associated with Mo as a character.

Further, Mo's performance does not lend itself to the formation of any themes or reoccurring concerns to be associated with the character. This is because the narrative

of the commercial lacks any problem or problem solving aspect, and thus displays nothing that could be of concern to Mo or be used to develop mannerisms and idiosyncrasies. Furthermore, the characterisation of Mo as stylish, arrogant and always in control also distances the viewer from forming empathy with Mo, since he is never faced with any problem viewers can identify with.

The result of this lack of mannerisms, gestures, idiosyncrasies and any theme or concern associated with Mo, results in a character that does not come across as thinking and feeling, but instead is seen as living simply because of the realistic human movement it portrays.

3.3.2 Character Design and Performance

Analysis of the campaign at hand revealed that the initial Vodacom Live! launch commercial is quite far removed in style from the subsequent five commercials for Vodacom. The Vodafone Live! commercial seems to make use of a successful combination of a reasonably humorous and quirky storyline and an unusual character. Even though Mo was badly designed and his performance was unsatisfactory, his design was sufficient to give the story credibility and to portray Vodafone as a cheeky and likeable brand. The character in this commercial may be slightly disconcerting, but has appeal due to his cheekiness and the humour of the storyline.

The subsequent transformation of Mo, from a male stripper in *Meerkat Stripper* to the holiday maker and party animal in *Meerkat Conga Line*, however, proved to be problematic. This was partially because the connotations that Mo's performance in *Meerkat Stripper* generated (he reminded viewers of a clumsy, slightly sleazy and somewhat grotesque individual) clashed with those generated by his stylish and

popular persona in *Meerkat Conga Line* and the following four commercials.

In contrast to *Meerkat Stripper*, the subsequent commercials lacked convincing narrative, humour and character driven performance which developed a unique personality and identity for Mo. Later commercials were more reliant on visual gags to create humour and entertainment than on narrative. Mo's repetitive dance moves in each commercial and his increasingly stale performance through out the campaign gave rise to a superficial, seemingly flawless and slightly pompous character. The subsequent commercials also lacked purpose, as the narrative presents no clear link between Mo and any Vodacom product or service.

The improvements that were made to Mo's character design and his performance (giving him a cuter face, atomically stable body and more convincing display of facial expressions) enhances his character appeal on a visual level and makes it more enjoyable to watch him. However, these improvements did not resolve any of the issues listed above (lack of narrative, convincing character performance, purpose of the character and commercial) leaving the character flawed on a conceptual level.

3.3.3 Mo as a Signifier

Since Mo is an anthropomorphic character, *Mo the Meerkat* draws signification from more than one source. Anthropomorphism in animation dates as far back as the 1920's with Otto Mesmer's *Felix the Cat* and further blurs the line between nature and culture with people often more familiar with animated animals than their real counterparts. As discussed in connection with *Meerkat Stripper*, Mo as a signifier, in this commercial, generated meaning through implied, culture-specific mental connections to a meerkat, as we are familiar with the animal in its natural habitat, and to a male

stripper (by displaying human behaviour associated with this profession). Therefore, the identity created for Mo here is a combination of these the two signifieds, and is shaped by the connotations that they generate.

In considering the above, it can be concluded that Mo as a signifier in each commercial draws reference to the wild animal as well as which ever human persona is relevant (be it a male stripper, a holiday maker or party starter, a hip hop dancer, a beach bum, a roller skater or lifeguard). However, signification starts to become problematic from *Meerkat Conga Line* onwards. This is because Mo as a signifier automatically also draws reference to the identity created for Mo as a sleazy, stripping meerkat, because this is what viewers came to know him as first. Because connotations generated from Mo's performance in *Meerkat Stripper* (he is clumsy, sleazy and grotesque) clash with those created by his subsequent performances (he is popular and stylish) these differing personas can not be consolidated. Thus in the absence of one clear signified, Mo's identity becomes muddled and inconclusive, with viewers unsure about which role Mo actually embodies.

Thus, because viewers are unable to connect Mo to a meaningful and logical identity, they are forced to identify with the superficial personas created for him by his performances in each commercial. Mo as a signifier and his actions as signified generate only very shallow characteristics, such as that:

- He is able to perform contemporary and popular dance routines with confidence and flair and always seems to be enjoying himself doing so.
- He is popular amongst a crowd and is able to motivate and entertain them.
- He is cheeky and confident.

- He is always at the top of his game and in the lead, never revealing any flaws and coming across as pompous at times.
- He enjoys flirting with girls.

Thus, these characteristics signify that Mo as a character is fun-loving, popular, confident, yet slightly arrogant and is a 'flirt'.

In conclusion, the analysis of each commercial created as part of the campaign at hand revealed that the *Meerkat Stripper* was the most successful commercial from a conceptual perspective. Even though Mo as a character was appealing on a visual level and was enjoyable to watch in the subsequent commercials, he did not generate functional and meaningful signification on a conceptual level. This was because the commercials from *Meerkat Conga Line* onwards did not make use of convincing narrative, character performance that developed a unique personality for Mo and because the commercials did not present any clear link between Mo and any Vodacom product or service. This combination gave rise to a superficial and self-congratulatory character which displayed repetitive and increasingly overworked performance. The following chapter will further develop and assess issues such as those listed above in regards to the *Mo the Meerkat* character. This assessment will attempt to establish why *Mo the Meerkat* as an animated character was chosen in this campaign.

Chapter Four: Assessment & Conclusions

This chapter will look at issues that emerged during the documentation and analysis of the campaign. These are:

- The contradictions in the brand identity created for Vodacom via *Mo the Meerkat* as a character.
- The concerns that arose due to a shift in strategy from Vodacom Live! to Vodacom.
- Findings that can be deducted from the campaign's Millward Brown ratings.

Lastly, certain factors that arose during the analysis of the campaign have revealed the possibility that *Mo the Meerkat* as an animated character was used as a 'spectacle'. These factors include Mo's lack of individualistic personality and the lack of convincing narrative in each commercial. This will also be discussed here.

4.1 Assessment

4.1.1 Animated Characters and Brand Identity

According to Beasley & Danesi, a brand identity is the 'image' or framework of meaning created for a brand, which acts as a consumer interface to place this product or service in consumers' consciousness by creating a link between its advertisements and the product or service in a retail environment. The goal of this is to ensure that customers recognise the brand and hopefully purchase it (Beasley & Danesi 17- 20). Ideally, this brand identity should also generate feelings of trust, confidence and

commitment towards the brand. This is important to ensure that consumers feel that the product or service plays an irreplaceable role in their daily lives resulting in the product or service being purchased repeatedly (Brauer in “Top Brands Survey.”).

A brand identity is usually created by manufacturing a personality for a brand by generating certain connotations (via advertising semiotics) which represent the brand favourably in consumers’ minds. In this instance, when an animated character is used, this is achieved by creating a likeable personality for the character who then becomes synonymous with the brand. Rita Doherty describes successful advertising as being able to captivate consumers’ attention and give them an immediate sense of what the brand is about (Doherty 8). Characters, in her opinion, are ideal in achieving this objective as they combine numerous “rich character elements” (Doherty 8) into a small and dynamic package with which consumers can have a relationship and generate feelings towards (Doherty 8).

Even though there is no direct link between Mo and any Vodacom product or service presented in the narrative of any of the commercials from *Meerkat Conga Line* onwards, the character is still associated with the Vodacom brand. This is because Mo is seen as the main ‘actor’ in the Vodacom branded commercials and thus a link between Mo and the Vodacom brand forms in consumers’ minds. If this association or link was reflected and emphasised in a clever manner in the narrative of the commercials as was done in *Meerkat Stripper*, this association might automatically become a positive one. However, regardless of how this association is formed, this also means that Mo’s personality and actions are a direct reflection on the Vodacom brand.

This also means that Mo’s characteristics are transferred to or are synonymous with the brand. As established during the analysis of the campaign in the previous

chapter, Mo's performance through-out the campaign generated only shallow personality for Mo on an overt level, and non-functional signification on a latent level. He is portrayed as fun-loving 'flirt' who is popular and confident, yet slightly pompous. This means that, by association, Vodacom becomes known as a fun-loving, confident brand which sees itself as popular amongst its subscribers and which is arrogant and aware of its position as leader in its market. These characteristics are not necessarily ideal for a brand, because they do not promote consumer's confidence in the brand, all of which may jeopardises brand loyalty. Thus, Vodacom portrays itself as fun, yet slightly arrogant, instead of as responsible and concerned for the well being of their customers.

4.1.2 'Art vs. Science': Strategy and Creativity in an Advertising Context

In their discussion of semiotics in an advertising context in their book *Persuasive Signs: the Semiotics of Advertising*, Beasley and Danesi describe advertising as a combination of 'art' (aesthetic techniques) and 'science' (market research) used to successfully market a product or service, as reflected in the modern day division of creative and strategic departments within advertising agencies. Art, or "aesthetic techniques" generally denotes the visual aspect of an advertising campaign: a combination and manipulation of various visual symbols used to entertain the viewer in order to sustain their attention. By contrast, "science" refers to the research employed to market this 'entertainment' to the right individuals and to ensure, or at least attempt to ensure, that it has an effect on its viewers.

Keeping this in mind, an important factor that emerged during the

documentation of the campaign, was the shift from Mo as a character advertising the Vodafone Live! portal to Mo being inaugurated as the Vodacom's brand mascot, without having been intended for this role at inception. This shift meant the following:

- The strategy conceived for Mo as an embodiment of entertainment coming alive on consumer's mobile phones, aimed at the portal's fairly limited target market (white males between the ages of 19-34 years, matric minimum qualification, LSM 7-10) fell away and that Mo, as a character, became a representative of Vodacom as a whole, targeted at their consumer base of almost three million people from all walks of South Africa.
- Mo took on a different role and was transformed from an 'embodiment' of entertainment coming to life on consumers' mobile phones via Vodafone Live! portal, to Vodacom's brand mascot. This meant that Mo had to be adapted from a somewhat grotesque and disconcerting character to a popular and stylish one.
- That the purpose of the commercials changed from specifically advertising what the Vodafone live! portal had to offer to simply being an extravagant, seemingly purposeless display of Vodacom as a whole with no direct link to any product or service.

Regardless of these changes, as established during documentation of the campaign, the *Mo the Meerkat* campaign was extremely successful from the perspective of consumer perceptions even though the campaign did not win any creative awards and was generally disliked by industry professionals. Thus, even though consumers loved Vodacom advertising, the key brand attribute that *Mo the Meerkat* was associated with was fun: Mo was seen as an easy-going, fun-loving bachelor. This resulted in Vodacom becoming a 'cool and fun' and slightly arrogant brand, but not necessarily a

brand which was empathetic and that cared for the well-being of their customers and the service they received (Doherty 4). Once Vodacom wanted to show that they understood and cared for their customers and that they connected with them on a more responsible level (Doherty 4) they could no longer use Mo as a mascot.

This shows the importance of using a combination of creative instincts and strategy (which includes research) in an advertising campaign, as well as the importance of planning the campaign in advance, as the lack of such consideration resulted in Vodacom no longer being able to use Mo as a brand mascot. What it also shows, is that an animated character was not chosen, in this instance, as a result of careful consideration of what the character, through character performance and personality, could achieve for branding purposes, but was chosen quite spontaneously.

According to Brett Morris, chief creative officer of Draftfcb at the time of the campaign, an animated character was chosen simply because it fulfilled the brief given to them by Vodafone Live! to create a scenario where entertainment comes to the consumer 'from another world', and an animated character in a live-action scene was ideal to symbolise this 'other world' (Morris 4). Additionally, of course, the scenario presented in the Vodafone live! commercial would have been physically impossible with live-action.

4.1.3 Audience Reception

The following observations can be made from the Millward Brown ratings and likeability scores listed in Table 1:

- *Meerkat Conga Line* was the most popular advertisement of the campaign in both LSM

categories. It was voted the number 1 advertisement for the year 2005 in the LSM 5-7 category, with a likeability score of 9.4 out of 10. It was voted the number three commercial of 2005 in the LSM 8-10 category, with a likeability score of 8.6 out of 10. Even though *Meerkat Whip* was voted the second-most favourite commercial of 2006 it only achieved a likeability score of 8.3.

- *Meerkat Conga Line* was more popular than *Meerkat Stripper* despite the fact that *Meerkat Stripper* was the first commercial featuring Mo and pre-dated the *Meerkat Conga Line* commercial.

- *Can't Touch This* rated significantly lower than *Meerkat Conga Line* (it slumped from position one to ten in LSM A and from 3 to not in top twenty in LSM B) despite the improvements to the character design and performance in this commercial by Black Ginger.

- *Rollerskate Mambo* made a sudden come back in the LSM 5-7 category and was rated the number one commercial of 2007 in that category.

The slump in ratings towards the end of campaign suggests that the popularity of this commercial with audiences was most driven by novelty: the more unfamiliar and unusual the commercial is the better. However, two exceptions to this finding were noted in this instance. The first finding was that *Meerkat Conga Line* was ranked higher than *Meerkat Stripper*. This can possibly be attributed to the fact that viewers recognised Mo from *Meerkat Stripper* and because viewers prefer a 'hero' type character to a controversial and grotesque one. *Rollerskate Mambo* proved to be the second exception to this finding in the lower LSM category. This can be attributed to the overall visual impressiveness of this commercial. The structure of the commercial was

almost completely gag driven, design improvements made Mo's face the most appealing yet (see Figure 1-3) and his performance was expressive, fluid and elastic.

These findings also show that Mo and the campaign's popularity were not affected by the quality of the narrative each commercial displayed. *Meerkat Conga Line* achieved a higher ranking than *Meerkat Stripper* despite the fact the *Meerkat Conga Line* lacked a convincing and humorous narrative. Findings also showed that ratings were not affected by any critical evaluation of the character design or performance. *Meerkat Conga Line* was rated higher than *Can't Touch This* despite the improvements made to Mo's character design and his performance from this commercial onwards by Black Ginger.

These observations and conclusions reflect the concerns raised by Benjamin and Harvey about the general public as 'absent-minded' and oblivious critics, as was highlighted in the discussion on this matter in chapter one (Benjamin 222). Harvey finds "unstable interpretations" (51) of cultural productions (such as advertising) by the general public to be problematic, because these interpretations are not based on educated, informed, and constructive evaluations of the subject matter. This is also the case with the campaign at hand, as ratings are most affected by frivolous factors such as novelty, social standing of the main character and the visual impressiveness of the commercials as a whole. Ratings were not affected by constructive and informed evaluations such as the improvements made to the character design and performance.

An important factor that needs to be mentioned at this point is that the campaign was successful from a consumer vote perspective but did not win any creative awards, indicating that critics from creative backgrounds did not consider the campaign a success. Brett Morris, the chief creative officer of Draftfcb, noted that he considered

consumer popularity to be the deciding factor in the success of a campaign (Morris 10). This may be a valid judgement from a financial point of view, as a campaign that is popular amongst audiences does, in theory, leads to increased sales, which is the purpose of most advertising and will keep clients of advertising agencies satisfied.

This evaluation indicates that the cultural producer has less authority in contemporary society than the consumer or general public does, as the creative vote is no longer considered the ultimate truth or deciding factor as far as success of a campaign is concerned. This phenomenon was raised by Harvey's in his discussion of postmodernism as an alternate way of thinking with regard to language and communication, as was referred to in chapter one. Harvey notes that a text and words never exist in isolation, but rely on references to other words and texts to make meaning. Because these references are governed by the personal interpretations of individuals, the reader, not the author, is in control of the meaning made. Ultimately, this means that the public (the reader) has a greater impact in determining cultural values than the cultural producer (the author) does.

Thus, audience ratings show that consumers remain oblivious of or unaffected by Mo's flaws and the flaws of the campaign as a whole from a creative perspective. Ratings also showed that the general public took the most notice of novelty and visual impressiveness rather than excellence on a narrative level and in creating a unique character.

4.1.4 Re-contextualisation and the Spectacle

Thus far the following can be noted and concluded from the documentation and analysis of the campaign:

- Analysis revealed that even though Mo as a character as well as his performance was visually impressive (and gag driven) his personality was superficial and not necessarily impressive from a moral perspective (in other words, he is a pompous show-off).
- Mo as a signifier draws non-functional signification. This is because Mo as a character did not generate functional and meaningful signification on a latent level and because the differing personas he displays can not be consolidated conceptually.
- Documentation and analysis of the campaign revealed that *Mo the Meerkat*, as a character, was not ideal for developing Vodacom's brand identity. This was because Mo portrayed the brand as fun and 'cool' rather than responsible and caring, which ultimately resulted in the campaign being ended. However, Mo as a character, did contribute to successfully improving brand recognition and popularity. This allows us to conclude that an animated character, in this instance, was not chosen for brand building purposes, but was instead chosen for its potential to represent 'another world' as was required for the initial brief by Vodacom, on behalf of Vodafone.
- Ratings show that consumers and viewers were most impressed by novelty, visual grandeur and preferred a 'cool' and pompous, superficial character over grotesque yet conceptually stable one.

This reveals that Mo as a character was functional purely on a visual level, that he was most suited for promoting brand recognition and that he was conceived in an attempt to represent the surreal and impossible ('another world' according to Brett Morris). Mo was also not ideal for brand building due to his superficial and grandiose personality which conveyed negative brand attributes. He also did not generate functional signification on a conceptual level and, as ratings suggest, was most popular

due to the novelty he initially displayed and the aesthetically pleasing visual displays the commercials presented.

These factors suggest that *Mo the Meerkat*, as an animated character, was chosen as a 'spectacle'. A spectacle is something exciting and entertaining, something that will attract audience's attention to the advertisement. This may take the form of special effects, unusual animated characters or eye-catching visuals. The concept of the spectacle in advertising was discussed in chapter one based on the findings of Michael Herbst and Andrew Darley. Herbst identified the practise in contemporary advertising of manipulating the different elements of a sign (the signifier and the signified) and combining them with other signs to "attract, intrigue and impress" the viewer (Herbst 18). The same practise can be noted in the Vodacom *Mo the Meerkat* campaign as will be demonstrated below.

Because there is no sequential link between the signifier and signified presented or supported in the narrative of the commercials it is possible for advertisers to take signs out of their original context to create entertaining scenarios. Advertisers rely on the culture-specific and subjective logic of viewers to make this connection and this subjectivity, rather than logic, allows for nonsensical and implausible scenarios. For example, as can be demonstrated with the *Meerkat Stripper* commercial, Mo as a sign is taken out of its common context: he looks like a meerkat but is shown in an urban, indoor environment (rather the desert or the bush were people would expect to find meerkats) and he definitely does not behave like a meerkat but behaves like a human (by performing sleazy dance moves and pulling his skin off). By combining two signifieds (a meerkat, the wild animal, and a male stripper) and combining this with interesting narrative, the situation that is created is slightly disconcerting and

grotesque but is never the less intriguing and humorous. Further more, even though this scenario is nonsensical and impossible (logic would suggest that animals can not strip because they are 'naked' to begin with) it is still entertaining.

Darley notes the preoccupation with the signifier at the expense of signification, in contemporary advertising, which leads to the generation of non-functional and arbitrary meanings which are attached to signifiers (Darley 83). This practise, according to Darley, is the result of such advertising 'spectacles'. The problem of Mo as a signifier generating non-functional signification was one of the factors noted during the analysis of the campaign.

In each commercial, Mo as a signifier, draws reference to a meerkat as well as which ever human persona is relevant (be it a male stripper, a holiday maker or party starter, a Hip Hop dancer, a beach-bum, a roller skater or lifeguard). However, signification starts to become problematic from *Meerkat Conga Line* onwards. This is because Mo as a signifier automatically also draws reference to the identity created for Mo as a sleazy, stripping meerkat, because this is what viewers came to know him as first. Because connotations generated from Mo's performance in *Meerkat Stripper* (he is clumsy, sleazy and grotesque) clash with those created by his subsequent performances (he is popular and stylish) these differing personas can not be consolidated deeming the signification non-functional and is to some extent arbitrary.

Therefore, it can be concluded, that an animated character was used in this instance, as a 'spectacle', something which would attract viewer's attentions and impress and intrigue them for long enough to see the Vodacom logo and thus promote brand recognition. Rita Doherty describes successful advertising as being able to captivate consumers' attention and give them an immediate sense of what the brand is

about (Doherty 8). This is exactly what the *Mo the Meerkat* character was able to do, yet unfortunately the connotations the brand generated via *Mo the Meerkat* were superficial and not very constructive in a brand development sense.

4.2 In Conclusion

Documentation and analysis of the campaign revealed that this campaign was an example of Vodacom's populist advertising style at the time, which did not rely on strategy or carefully considered scenarios or ideas to market their brand. However, findings also indicated the need for what Beasley and Danesi term the "scientific enterprise" (103) of contemporary advertising, in other words, strategic thinking, as the lack of such strategic thinking and planning was to the detriment of Vodacom's brand identity. This is because Mo as a character generated brand attributes relating to fun and popularity, rather than portraying the brand as responsible and empathetic, which was the main consideration behind the campaign coming to an end.

Thus, these findings confirm Beasley and Danesi's notion that advertising should consist of the correct balance between 'art' and 'science' or creativity and market research as discussed in chapter one (Beasley & Danesi 2). However, with this in mind, it becomes important to mention at this point that this campaign also disproves these findings to some degree. This 'science' of advertising, according to Beasley and Danesi, also includes market research and the definition of a 'target audience' (Beasley and Danesi 132). This campaign, however, was popular across all market segments despite the fact that it was originally intended for only a small target audience, which suggests that defining a target audience was not essential in this case. This campaign, however, may have been an exception to the rule.

Analysis of the campaign has highlighted the importance of developing brand identity, not only from a strategic perspective, but also from a semiotic stand point. Judith Williamson's guide to semiotics in an advertising context as presented in her text *Decoding Advertisements: Ideology and Meaning in Advertising*, as discussed in chapter one, has also proven valuable to the analysis of this campaign. Williamson notes that the brand identity of a certain product or service being advertised functions on two levels: an 'overt' or superficial level, and a 'latent' level which generates meaning through connotations suggested in the 'overt' level (Williamson 19). This approach to semiotic analysis of the brand identity has proven essential in establishing that *Mo the Meerkat* as a Character is visually impressive on an overt level but does not generate functional signification on a latent level. This finding contributed to the conclusion that *Mo the Meerkat* as an animated character was chosen as a 'spectacle' not as a character with personality.

The *Mo the Meerkat* campaign, similar to the *Yebo Gogo* campaign, starts off with one good idea which is then subsequently re-used and re-contextualised. This may partially be due to the nature of the product being advertised: a telecommunications service, which does not carry any distinctive characteristics in itself, and thus any advertisement for Vodacom could easily have been applied to their competitors and vice versa.

This factor may have contributed to the fact that *Mo the Meerkat* did not become Vodacom's character as such (similar to how 'Snap, Crackle and Pop' have become characters which are an essential part of the Kelloggs' brand identity), but rather a character that starred in Vodacom advertising. This highlights another important finding that emerged during the documentation and analysis of the campaign: the use of animation. Animation in this instance, was used simply as a 'spectacle' rather than for

the potential it presented for brand building through character performance and story.

This means that animation was not used to its full potential but simply as a gimmick. This use of animation based entirely on its visual value echoes the changing function of the artwork in contemporary society which Walter Benjamin describes in his work *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, as discussed in chapter one. Benjamin notes that the value of an artwork is determined by its “exhibition value” (220), in other words, the value that it generates based on its ability to be exhibited and viewed, rather than simply based on its existence as is true in a cultural environment (Benjamin 221). This concept of the ‘exhibition value’ as identified by Benjamin has proven useful in identifying the same trend in the *Mo the Meerkat* campaign, with an animated character being used as a ‘spectacle’.

Mo the Meerkat, as a ‘spectacle’, was highly successful from a consumer vote perspective, but was not bestowed the same honour from creative and animation circles. This finding echoes what David Harvey highlights regarding cultural producers in his text *The Condition of Postmodernity*, as discussed in chapter one. Harvey notes that the cultural producer has much less authority as in previous times, as his word is no longer considered the ultimate truth (Harvey 49). This finding has proven to be highly relevant to the campaign as it is echoed in this advertising context. The *Mo the Meerkat* campaign showed that consumer vote and brand recognition in advertising (as this is what is translated into sales and revenue) is what is considered an unwritten ‘law’ in an advertising industry.

However, this ‘law’ is what in this case sacrificed the quality of the animation production. This presents a conflict of interest of sorts and makes it difficult to term the campaign an overall success as it did not successfully combine advertising and

animation. This is because the campaign did not give rise to a unique, thinking character which audiences could relate to and that would have contributed to developing Vodacom's brand identity. Regardless of these shortcomings, the campaign did contribute to the South African animation and advertising industries in various ways.

The campaign introduced motion capture as a viable production technique in South Africa, as motion capture had thus far not been used for advertising purposes. Further, the campaign also gave film directors such as Peter Pohorsky and Bruce Paynter the opportunity to 'direct' an animated character and to manage a project that demanded the combination of an animated character with a live action environment.

From an advertising perspective, the campaign gave Draftfcb insight into what animation production and character development entails. Thus, even though this campaign was not successful from a creative vote perspective, and despite the fact that the *Mo the Meerkat* character was not ideal conceptually, the campaign did provide the South African advertising industry with experience to draw from for future animated character.

Appendix A

Interview Transcripts

Rachel Andreotti

A Critical Investigation of an Animated South African Advertising

Campaign: Vodacom's *Mo the Meerkat* Campaign, 2005-2007

Interview Transcript

Interviewer: Kim Hoffmann

Interviewee: Rachel Andreotti

Date: 18/05/2010

26/11/2010

Place: Rachel Andreotti's Office

Draft FCB Johannesburg

Pin Mill Farm

164 Katherine Street

Sandton

Johannesburg

South Africa

18 May 2010

Persons Present: Kim Hoffmann

Rachel Andreotti

HOFFMANN: At this point I am still trying to set the scope of my research, as I still have to pitch my project to the faculty. My topic, in essence, is looking at the relationship between advertising and animation in South Africa. So I'm looking at the Meerkat campaign as a model or case study of this relationship and trying to establish why you used an animated character?

ANDREOTTI: I will be honest with you I was not really involved in the strategy, but it was for Vodafone live!, it was the first time Vodafone live was launched in South Africa, if I remember well, you could actually even access things like porn.

HOFFMANN: Oh really?

ANDREOTTI: And that's why they came up with a Stripping Meerkat. Ok, I'm not a 100 percent sure, I stand to be corrected. I can find out for you though.

HOFFMANN: I'm sure I'll find out.

ANDREOTTI: So, as I say, I don't know what the strategy really was behind it, but you could access a million things. And the creative's came up with this idea that it actually first of all was going to be a stripping dog.

HOFFMANN: Oh, ok.

ANDREOTTI: And then somebody said, I don't know if it was the client, no let's make it something more South African. He wanted something like a Meerkat, something more

South African. So the Meerkat came about. But it was going to be a stripping dog. It was only supposed to be for that one campaign, for Vodafone live!, the launch. I don't know if you remember it?

HOFFMANN: I remember the ads.

ANDREOTTI: And what happened was, you know, the client didn't really realize that there are serious time restrictions if you do animation. There's not a quick turn around time. Especially the rendering time takes so long, you would know what I'm talking about. We came up with this Meerkat, it was rushed, it was live-action combined with animation.

HOFFMANN: Yes they used motion capture?

ANDREOTTI: Apart from the motion capture, the actual plates and the backgrounds and the things like that. Like the cushion being thrown and the clothes being thrown and the vases coming down. I don't know how familiar you are with that?

HOFFMANN: I remember it vaguely.

ANDREOTTI: Ok, so as I say, we had to shoot the plates, then we shot live animation, and motion capture. And in those days there was only one company that pitched themselves to us and that was Werner, I don't know what Werner's surname is, but it was called AnimMate!. Do you know them?

HOFFMANN: Yes, they're still around.

ANDREOTTI: And Werner came to us and said he's got motion capture and we did it, we got this dancer, who did it for us. And it was the first time ever that they used motion capture for any commercial as far as I know. And what happened was because it was

like very rushed, we actually presented to the client and he said he didn't like it, its scary, children are going to scare. So we changed it, and I don't think it was the ideal Meerkat we wanted because not a lot of people realised it was a Meerkat. But we had to quickly change it to make it a more friendly character, because of time constraints and everything. And, as you know, that ad went down a storm, to such an extent, that the client insisted, that it become one of his icons. Vodacom always have their icons. It was first Bankole and Michael de Pinna, the guy in the leopard print

HOFFMANN: Oh, yes, and the Yebo Goggo man.

ANDREOTTI: That's right, the Yebo Goggo man and his mate. So, as I say, he liked the icons and all of a sudden, we in a way, forced into the Meerkat campaign, because it was only specifically for that launch of Vodafone live!

HOFFMANN: I heard there were calls to change the character design?

ANDREOTTI: Yes, what happened, I think that was from a creative point of view, not from the client's point of view. So what happened was, I think Werner even did the second one, I can't remember how many he did. And then they wanted, the creative's felt, what happened was, because we always had to combine live-action with animation, and the director felt, that had shot the first one, Peter Pohorsky, that it takes too much of his time, to sit there, he wanted to shoot in camera stuff. He was not interested in animation. It was too slow for him. So he didn't want to shoot the second one. So the second one we had to move to another director, and then eventually we got locked in with the director that became the director on all our shoots, Bruce Paynter. He felt that the motion capture was limiting,

HOFFMANN: Yes, you should ideally combine motion capture with hand animation.

ANDREOTTI: As I say, it came from the director's side, and then they wanted to move it away from Werner, because Werner was more on the motion capture side. Then it went to a company called Black Ginger. Do you know them?

HOFFMANN: Yes, I do.

ANDREOTTI: Have you ever spoken to them.

HOFFMANN: They are on my list, but not yet.

ANDREOTTI: To Hilton. They based in Cape Town. But they eventually opened a branch here, especially to work on Meerkat.

HOFFMANN: So the subsequent ad's used no motion capture at all

ANDREOTTI: No motion capture. It was all animation.

HOFFMANN: But animation is even more time consuming than motion capture?

ANDREOTTI: Yes, it is. But they felt that, I don't know if they could bring more humour about with real animation. That's where I fall short, that's more creative. I'm just on the production side.

HOFFMANN: Yes, I've made an appointment with Brett.

ANDREOTTI: Oh, ok. So as I say, he was involved, unfortunately both the other guys that worked on it, Gerhard Myburgh and what's his name, can't remember his name, they immigrated. They're in Australia. I can give you Gerhard's number, he will help you. He was very involved.

HOFFMANN: Maybe I can email him?

ANDREOTTI: Yes.

HOFFMANN: Ok, that would be great.

ANDREOTTI: He was really the creative involved in the end. He started from the second one. The first one was probably still Brett, no it was not Brett, and it was Mike Barnwell. He's immigrated also to Australia. But Gerhard definitely, he was involved from the second one. He was the creative on everyone right through. And then we gave it to Bruce Paynter and Black Ginger did the animation for us. And then it evolved from there. Then we introduced Moitia.

HOFFMANN: The female Meerkat?.

ANDREOTTI: Because the Meerkat was called Mo and the girlfriend was Moitia.

HOFFMANN: I didn't even notice the connection in the names.

ANDREOTTI: Yes, they even had names. As I say it moved, we didn't take the wireframes across because obviously those were intellectual property from AnimMate!

HOFFMANN: So they had to remodel it?

ANDREOTTI: Yes. So they didn't part with their wireframes.

HOFFMANN: Were there hard feelings from AnimMate's side?

ANDREOTTI: Ag, you know, if you know Werner you'll know he's just the nicest guy under the sun. He did feel a bit hard done by. He never showed it.

HOFFMANN: It's business?

ANDREOTTI: Yes. So it's not because we felt he did a bad job. In fact, he did such a good job that it became an iconic character for Vodacom after that. So as I say, obviously you loose business and if you loose something you always feel hard done. If we loose an

account we also feel a bit hard done by. But the reason was that the director who became involved wanted to go pure animation.

HOFFMANN: And as far as target audience goes, what target market were you aiming at?

ANDREOTTI: You know, as I say, because I'm only on the production side, I don't really know. All I know, having worked on Vodacom for so long, probably across all ages. And it entertained everybody.

HOFFMANN: And it got very good ratings?

ANDREOTTI: Fantastic ratings. Rita should be able to help you with that.

HOFFMANN: Apparently she is also overseas but I will be speaking to her.

ANDREOTTI: She should be able to help you because in those days she was on the strategic side.

26 November 2010

Persons Present: Kim Hoffmann

Rachel Andreotti

HOFFMANN: I think I've got the basic facts down, I just want to ask you some specific questions and more opinion based ones.

ANDREOTTI: Ok.

HOFFMANN: But then also, one thing I haven't been able to establish is the dates when each commercial aired? Roughly maybe just the month and year? Do you keep that on record?

ANDREOTTI: I don't, but you know what, it won't be under renewable's because there where no actors in it. Are you talking about the first one, the stripper?

HOFFMANN: No, I'm just looking for a rough date for each commercial

ANDREOTTI: For each commercial?

HOFFMANN: Yes.

ANDREOTTI: You know who would be able to do that is Edna, now she's not here. Remember I called Edna last time?

HOFFMANN: Yes, I remember.

ANDREOTTI: She would have those dates. Can I ask her to, she's taken the day off today,

HOFFMANN: If you give me her e-mail address I'll mail her?

ANDREOTTI: It's edna dot brunido at draftfcb dot co dot za.

HOFFMANN: Thanks. And then also, why did they, I don't know if it was Draft FCB or Vodafone, but why did they choose AnimMate! initially? Where they looking to use motion capture specifically?

ANDREOTTI: Yes, I think, we were sold on the motion capture idea.

HOFFMANN: Why motion capture? Did you consider the two? Did you consider other, traditional animation companies? Or did you specifically want to use motion capture?

ANDREOTTI: You ask me now to thing back very far,.

HOFFMANN: Sorry.

ANDREOTTI: Um, I remember what happened. It was not us, it was Peter Pohorsky, who shot the first one. From Plank.

HOFFMANN: Ok, so you approached them?

ANDREOTTI: Plank Productions, as a director, because it was live footage with the Meerkat dancing in between. So we approached them to shoot the commercial. And they went to AnimMate!

HOFFMANN: Oh, ok, that makes sense.

ANDREOTTI: When they pitched, I can't remember where they pitched again, but we probably called in three production houses, and said here's the idea, come back. And in part of their treatment, when they came back to pitch to us, they said: "Listen, these guys called AnimMate!, they've got this motion capture thing, it'll look like real dance moves and whatever the case is and we were very much sold on that, we quite liked it. It

was new,

HOFFMANN: It was quite new in South Africa at the time. So then, after the first two commercials did you approach CAB films because you were unhappy with what AnimMate! did?

ANDREOTTI: No, what happened was, Peter Pohorsky shot the first one, and because he's a live footage person, he shoots stuff on camera, it's a very long process, animation, as you know, and he wanted to be involved right to the end. It kept him out of the loop to shoot other commercials, because he was so involved in the postproduction on this commercial. So when the second one came up we asked him to shoot it and he said, he doesn't want to do the animation. He's far more into live stuff, it's not that it was a bad experience, he just doesn't want to be involved.

HOFFMANN: Ok, I see.

ANDREOTTI: It didn't go straight to CAB, the second one was shot by a guy called Jeremy Goodall.

HOFFMANN: Still at Plank Films?

ANDREOTTI: No, it was not Plank, it was shot by Jeremy Goodall but we used AnimMate! for the animation. The motion capture again. And then I then I think by the third one. You see, each time it's the creative's prerogative to choose a different director, if they want to. I can't remember if Jeremy was not available, for the third one, what the reason was, or if the creative director thought he needed to give it to someone else, if it was a different creative working on it. Then it went to CAB films. And then CAB Films said, ok fine, it was the moment it moved from, I think there were two shot already, and the third one came up, that they said ok fine, they don't like the motion

capture.

HOFFMANN: Ok, so they pulled out?

ANDREOTTI: It was Bruce Paynter.

HOFFMANN: Yes, I spoke to him. I was just wondering if you, or Vodacom were unhappy with the work that had been done?

ANDREOTTI: No, not at all. It was like kind of a new director and he had a new take on it. He said he far more preferred the over exaggerated movements of real animation, opposed to the real movements of motion capture.

HOFFMANN: Makes sense.

ANDREOTTI: And we indulged him, basically. And we said if you're the director, we'll indulge you. And that's when it went to Black Ginger. Because they felt they preferred them, as a supplier because they were also in Cape Town and CAB were in Cape Town and the guy didn't have to sit up here for a whole month being involved in the post, he could pop in every single day at Black Ginger. That was part of the reason.

HOFFMANN: I asked Hilton who did the initial character design and he said he wasn't sure if it was AnimMate! or if it was Draft FCB? Who did the concept sketches and the initial character design for the Meerkat?

ANDREOTTI: It was probably, it was a combination of a guy called Mike Barnwell, who was the creative on the job at that stage, he worked for Draft FCB, Peter Pohorsky, who was the director on the first commercial, and the guys at AnimMate!

HOFFMANN: So it was collaboration?

ANDREOTTI: It was a combined thing, yes.

HOFFMANN: Did Vodafone have anything to do with the Meerkat being canned after they took over the majority share holding?

ANDREOTTI: No, it had absolutely nothing to do with it. They, still until today, allow us nothing, none of our commercials get approved by Vodafone.

HOFFMANN: So the decisions were still made by Vodacom?

ANDREOTTI: Yes, still today, if we do a commercial today, whatever we do. The first one, we had to show them, purely because it was for Vodafone live! because we used their name in the commercial, we used the Vodafone live logo. So we had to show them as a courtesy. But none of our commercials get approved by Vodafone.

HOFFMANN: So they don't have a say in it?

ANDREOTTI: No.

HOFFMANN: Do you have any theories to explain the Meerkat's popularity? Everybody's been telling me that what was so amazing is that it appealed to so many people and generally you don't manage to do that? As an advertiser do you have any theories behind that?

ANDREOTTI: As a producer I have but they can probably, if you ask Edna about that, because they did Millward Brown studies. She will have access to those Millward Brown studies, which will actually point out to you exactly, where they probe the people and ask them why it is that they liked it. Edna will be able to give it to you. But it is true that it was likeable across the board. From children, to adults, to old people, across all races.

HOFFMANN: And generally you can't appeal to everyone?

ANDREOTTI: From that point of view but Edna will be able to give you those insights.

HOFFMANN: If I contact Millward Brown directly would they give it to me? Or is it confidential?

ANDREOTTI: They would probably not give it to you because they are contracted by us to do it.

HOFFMANN: Ok, thanks. And then, why do you think Mo didn't win any creative awards? There seems to be a big gap between the consumer and creative's opinion?

ANDREOTTI: Very much so. It's an industry thing; it's very much that your peers are far harsher judges than you. They look at different things than what the consumers look at. They look at; it's hard to say. I should probably take you to Grant Jacobsen to answer that question.

HOFFMANN: Was there possibly any criticism about the first two ads?

ANDREOTTI: They probably did, have criticism, yes. It was not because of AnimMate!, the second ad that we did, the Conga Line, there was far more criticism against the second one than the first one.

HOFFMANN: Oh really?

ANDREOTTI: Yes, it wasn't about the actual animation, it was more the concept.

HOFFMANN: Wasn't the first one more shocking than the second one?

ANDREOTTI: Yes, but it wasn't the shocking element, you know what I'm saying. Why creative's are so critical of their peers work remains a mystery.

Rita Doherty

A Critical Investigation of an Animated South African Advertising

Campaign: Vodacom's *Mo the Meerkat* Campaign, 2005-2007

Interview Transcript

Interviewer: Kim Hoffmann

Interviewee: Rita Doherty

Date: 16/09/2010

Place: Fournos Bakery
The Zone of Rosebank
177 Oxford Street
Rosebank
Johannesburg
South Africa

16 September 2010

Persons Present: Kim Hoffmann

Rita Doherty

HOFFMANN: Was the Vodacom 'Mo the Meerkat' campaign Draft FCB's first campaign that made use of animation? Or are you the wrong person to ask?

DOHERTY: Yeah, I mean, the best person to ask would probably be Brett, Brett Morris, he was there longer than me, as far as I know this is probably, this is certainly, our principle one. If there was anything before it wasn't anything significant.

HOFFMANN: And afterwards? Did the campaign change Draft FCB's outlook as far as animation is concerned? Did the campaign make an impact due to its success?

DOHERTY: I don't think it stimulated any particular consciousness around animation. Also, you know, Meerkat had a life of its own, so, it started off as something small, grew massive in a kind of inadvertent way, and always had on the outskirts of it an enormous amount of contention and dislike and I don't think we fully, sort of, ever really engaged with the idea of what we were doing we just rolled with it.

HOFFMANN: I guess that's the way it goes.

DOHERTY: No, I don't think a particular consciousness developed around animation it was more just I think we, sort of, almost vowed not to do that again.

HOFFMANN: Really? That's interesting? So it wasn't along the lines of it went down quite well lets try its again?

DOHERTY: It went down very, very well but you must understand the sort of complexities around it was, it took the public by storm, so South African's loved it and I think what was also amazing about it is that it really sort of crossed all kind of race, age, you know, but the creative industry hated it, hated it. So this thing grew and grew and grew, and the people who loved it grew and the people who hated it grew. And I think by the end there was kind of two paths available, one was kind of turn this into a Mickey Mouse, franchise it, merchandise it, you know, create a whole story around it, go really, really big. And the person who was in favour of that was the marketing director of Vodacom at the time, Andre Beyers. And then there was a Facebook fan page of people who hated Meerkat and people did their own animations of him being roasted, quite bad. So that was the context, but ultimately the decision to can Meerkat was because it was strategically incorrect. So what happened Meerkat was created as an icon of Vodafone live! And he was the embodiment of new age entertainment come to life. Vodacom loved it and took it as its own icon.

HOFFMANN: Was the first ad for Vodafone live! And thereafter it was Vodacom?

DOHERTY: Yes, it was designed for Vodafone live! That was the first one with the Meerkat stripping, he was quite skanky and there where complaints, a lot of complaints. One woman apparently phoned in to say his fingers where penis shaped and that offended her. And, yes, what happened is that he became hugely successful: Vodacom, which at the time had majority share holding, its now changed, Vodafone has now got, and essentially they took the icon for themselves. And what started to come back after, I think, about a year or two of it was that people loved the Vodacom advertising, far more than they did any of the other brands, and that the kind of brand attributes that Meerkat gave was a sense of fun and all of that. But what the other brands where building,

especially MTN, was not fun, but a sense of empathy and compassion. And Vodacom started to become a brand that was really cool and fun, but it was not necessarily a brand that cared for me.

HOFFMANN: So how long did this campaign run? I was under the impression that it was only about a year?

DOHERTY: Meerkat ran from 2005 through to about 2007 or 2008, because there was about 6 of them.

So eventually the decision to abandon Meerkat wasn't driven around conversations around the character or animation or anything like that, it was purely that, in the end, Mo the Meerkat was this fun-loving bachelor who loved to have fun and everybody thought Vodacom was a fun brand but the brand wanted to start showing that it understood people, that it connected with them. And Meerkat just wasn't that. That vehicle.

HOFFMANN: So, I read on Vodacom's website that they were targeting young people, 'fun-loving' people, that sort of thing?

DOHERTY: Yes, they call it the young at heart, which is just a marketing jargon.

HOFFMANN: So the target market was not necessarily age defined?

DOHERTY: No, Vodacom, like Coca-Cola, is a mass brand so the brand will always have to have mass appeal.

HOFFMANN: So it wasn't necessarily aimed at the youth?

DOHERTY: No, they say it's not aimed at young people, but the young at heart.

HOFFMANN: And the target audience as far as race is concerned? Was it aimed at a mixed-race target market?

DOHERTY: It wasn't conscious. Meerkat did not come out of a strategy for the brand, remember. It came out of a strategy for Vodafone live!. So you are not going to find a lot of very careful thinking behind it, but what you will find are surprises on the effects. It wasn't consciously created to be any kind of transcendent character or anything like that. The effect it did have was to be transcendent so while MTN was trying very consciously to be new South African and Black and white Mo the Meerkat was just loved by everyone.

HOFFMANN: So the character design for Mo the Meerkat was not created from a creative rather than strategic point of view?

DOHERTY: Very much so. Vodacom as a culture has undergone a change. Under Alan Knott-Craig and Andre Beyers, who were very much the guys who took Vodacom from the start to about two years ago, it was a cowboy organisation. People had instincts, they went with it and they loved the creative. Strategy was there to back rationalise to a large degree. So a lot of the work that came out of there was work that connected to people but was not necessarily the brand deciding how am I going to Since Vodafone have become majority share holders you've had a change in culture now. And now you have a much more strategic marketing led thing. Meerkat doesn't come from there.

HOFFMANN: Vodacom's previous campaigns had made use of a black icon, the 'Yebo Goggo' man (Bankole Omotso) as well as a white one, Michael de Pinna, was Vodacom using an animated character not to align themselves with a particular race group?

DOHERTY: Not consciously, but that was the effect. And that was one of the things I

found fascinating: There was a lot of debate at the time around the fact that MTN was more black and Vodacom was more white. And there was a lot of criticism around; initially the view was that Meerkat would perpetuate that. So it was quite a surprise when the measurement of it was, I don't know if you have heard of Millward Brown?

HOFFMANN: I've heard the name.

DOHERTY: Millward Brown is just a research agency and what they do is they measure liking, how much people like ads. They now just release one list a year, but up until about two years ago they had two lists, one with what they called the developed market, which is sort of upper and middle class, and your developing market which is sort of working class. And Meerkat scored top on both. It was the first, as far as I know, I could be wrong; it was certainly one of the first that spanned both. And the nice thing for me is the way in which it showed that connecting with South Africans, certainly on that fun level, you don't have to stick with identity politics. So for me it was quite nice because it was a ways of escaping the very narrow ways in which people thought of connecting with different races in South Africa. It was like, if you want to connect with black people then you must have black people in your ad, and do certain things, and if you want to connect so for me the love there surprise Meerkat was to show that you can transcend all those things, certainly on an entertainment level. I don't know of animation characters, I haven't thought of their context on a broader, more serious level, but on a fun level.

HOFFMANN: So that brings me to my next question of why an animated character was chosen? Again out of coincidence?

DOHERTY: I think Brett would probably be the best person to answer that because I

wasn't actually at FCB when Meerkat was born. My feeling was that it was, once again, that it was not a strategic thing. It wasn't like we are going to do an animated character because this and that, I can imagine the idea was around entertainment coming alive on your phone. Now it seems kind of cheesy but at the time was the launch of the Vodafone live! Portal. It was the beginning of the interactivity enriched media phones. So I think the idea was to bring some kind of character from the other world into our world. Why it ended up being a Meerkat it was a crazy way of people thinking.

HOFFMANN: So none of the campaign was based on target market surveys?

DOHERTY: The one thing for me, that intrigued me enormously was, I hadn't see Meerkat yet, when it first launched I was working at Herdboys, another agency, and a young intern with me, Dikaledi, she was the one who told me about it. She said: "Have you seen the new Vodacom ad?" I was like: "no". She said it was amazing, when her mom saw it she burst out crying. Obviously that's a most unusual response. It has always intrigued me why there was this huge, huge sense of kind of excitement, beyond excitement, for some reason this bizarre little rat, mouse, monkey, as different people called it, certainly had a massive connection and I have absolutely no grounding in this, it feels to me, there was a sense of, from an African perspective there was just a sense of, I don't know, its almost like animation came from the US, that it was about other people's worlds. Meerkat was almost our first explosion of an African character. That's the only answer I have to explain why like black, old women would burst out crying when she saw it, otherwise it seems utterly bizarre.

HOFFMANN: Are you familiar with the reception on a more formal level? I came across a mention of a Generation Next Survey by the Sunday Times?

DOHERTY: Yes, it was hugely, hugely successful in any kind of consumer vote. And also very, very successful from a business perspective. And disastrous from a creative award perspective, Meerkat won nothing in terms of Louries, Cannes, nothing. In fact, there came a time where the creators of Meerkat just wanted to hide because they were ripped off so much. It also shows how dysfunctional aspects of the whole Awards System is. So in terms of consumers, Millward Browns most liked ads, many of them were the most liked ads of the year, the Generation Next Awards which is the youth awards and then from a business perspective it won the Sunday Times' Business Times Marketing Excellence Grand Prix in 2006 or 2007 at that was literally a case study we put together to demonstrate how Meerkat had radically lifted the brand equity certainly in the earlier years. And of the big things I think it did was very spontaneous differentiation. If you walked into, if you just think of signage, you would have the logos MTN, and Cell C and they are kind of very conventional and expected, and then there was Mo and he was just the first thing. So from a pure just you know advertising is kind of being able to grab your attention and give you a strong, immediate sense of brand and Meerkat was exceptionally good. The characters generally do that. If you think of other characters in South Africa, they're not necessarily animated. On Toyota now we have Buddy the Dog, Castrol it was Boet and Swaer that might have been before your time. Characters have the very powerful sense of taking a lot of rich character elements and putting them in a very small icon that people can have a very strong relationship with. That's the power of using characters. The negative side is that you create very simple stereotypes, once again, so it's a kind of balance between the two.

HOFFMANN: Christo mentioned that you compiled a report on the campaign was that what you were referring to earlier?

DOHERTY: Yes, it was the case study for the marketing excellence report. I'm just trying to think why I did it. I was head of strategy at the time so I was responsible for putting together some case study.

HOFFMANN: So the case study in question was requested by Vodacom?

DOHERTY: No, that case study was an award case study, put together for the marketing excellence award. I think the reason I wrote it at the time was because we were sort of between strategists so I just filled in. Then we got a strategist on the business who absolutely hated Meerkat with absolute passion. I would say he was certainly not responsible, but was part of the reason why we abandoned Meerkat.

HOFFMANN: What was your involvement in the campaign?

DOHERTY: Nothing directly, I'm strategy director so I oversaw the department and then we had specific strategists who worked on individual pieces of business. So I was never the Vodacom strategist.

HOFFMANN: Does FCB handle the entire Vodacom account? Are you familiar with their general strategy or does the strategy change from campaign to campaign depending on what they were trying to achieve?

DOHERTY: At that time yes. As I've already said there has been quite a big shift in the past two years. Vodafone culture is now coming in and Vodafone culture is much more about planning and 3 year strategies. So now we have a brand idea and a campaign that builds towards it. But at the time it was cowboy marketing.

HOFFMANN: If it worked, it worked, if it didn't, it didn't?

DOHERTY: Yes. Alan Knott-Craig who headed up Vodacom had an incredibly strong

instinct for popular culture and what would make people like you. So Vodacom always spent a lot on music, so part of Meerkat's success was very, very expensive, you pay an enormous amount of money to use popular soundtracks. Alan Knott-Craig's thing was if kids like it its good.

HOFFMANN: Kids? Any age?

DOHERTY: Yes. He had a very controversial character, but some of his positive qualities, he just had very good human instincts. So, for example, urban legend, I have no idea if this is historically correct but the legend goes that he was the one who invented 'Please Call Me's'. And that was based on the experience of his children giving him 'Dutch Calls' because they had no money. The kind of person who sees human behaviour and says: "I like this", "I want to do this", "I can use this", "People need this, they like it". So Meerkat came out of that. It worked, so we ran with it.

HOFFMANN: In conclusion, I'm not completely sure what I am looking for but mainly I'm trying to establish why they used an animated character as well as the choice of target audience? But it seems these choices weren't as complex as I had thought?

DOHERTY: I would say, if I had to answer simply, choice of animated character is because we were trying to bring the idea of entertainment to life. Animation, entertainment, it was also the idea of multimedia coming to the phone; it was a character from another world, from the virtual world into the real world.

HOFFMANN: That would explain the live-action environment?

DOHERTY: Yes, that for me the birth of Meerkat was in Vodafone live!. It was a portal, entertainment based character so I think those things kind of work. Target market there would have definitely been, once again, the distinction between how it was born

and what it became would definitely been young. If you think about it

HOFFMANN: Who uses their cellphone to connect to the internet?

DOHERTY: Yes. So I mean in South Africa the profile of sort of, now, I don't know exactly what it was then, but right now, the profile of people who use their mobile to connect online and stuff like that is 16-34. That would be the same target market.

HOFFMANN: Did this campaign have any impact on FCB's thinking as far as animation is concerned?

DOHERTY: It was useful for us in the sense, at the time; the industry was still struggling with what it meant to do integrated work, integrated in the sense across different mediums.

HOFFMANN: What mediums where used?

DOHERTY: Everything, except for radio. Meerkat was used in store, for sponsorship.

HOFFMANN: And that was only after Vodacom took over?

DOHERTY: Yes. You will find Mo the Meerkat wearing rugby uniforms, soccer uniforms, Durban July. He became the face of Vodacom.

HOFFMANN: For how long about?

DOHERTY: For about two to three years, it was a very long, enduring campaign.

Tony Koenderman

A Critical Investigation of an Animated South African Advertising

Campaign: Vodacom's *Mo the Meerkat* Campaign, 2005-2007

Interview Transcript

Interviewer: Kim Hoffmann

Interviewee: Tony Koenderman

Date: 07/02/2011

Place: Tony Koenderman's Office

Finweek

Media Park

69 Kingsway Avenue,

Auckland Park

Johannesburg

South Africa

02 February 2011

Persons Present: Kim Hoffmann

Tony Koenderman

HOFFMANN: I have spoken to a few people at Draft FCB as well as people from the animation companies involved in the campaign, I do however, need to place the campaign in a broader context.

KOENDERMAN: That particular Vodacom Meerkat?

HOFFMANN: Yes, that's why I am interested in, not the history of Vodacom as such, but their history in advertising?

KOENDERMAN: Right, well, for the first ten years they were totally dominated by the Yebo Gogo Campaign. They had produced, basically, just one new ad a year.

HOFFMANN: Yes, it ran until something ridiculous like 2004?

KOENDERMAN: Yes, and then the Vodacom Meerkat was the first break away from that, which makes it very significant. And ever since that they have been going for, in fact, they haven't been doing anything lately, come to think of it.

HOFFMANN: They have had those "Yebo Summer" commercials, but they change quite regularly.

KOENDERMAN: Yes, those sort of things, but they are not, sort of, brand orientated, they just take advantage of the seasonal interest. But, the Yebo Gogo thing was quite interesting because it was fairly contentious when it started, because of political and racial sensitivities.

HOFFMANN: Yes.

KOENDERMAN: And one of the reasons, people assumed, they got away with it, was making a joke of relationships between black and white, they depicted the black guy as the smart guy and the white guy as the dumb palooka. The first one was the best of the lot, I think, but there were some pretty good executions and it was certainly loved by everybody. But ten years went by and it was really time to bring it to an end. I think it had probably went on too long by then.

HOFFMANN: Do you have any thoughts about why this campaign was so successful? Because it was their first ever campaign, it was a new brand was it related to that? Are brands more successful when they launch? Because under normal circumstances products change minimally over many years and in this case the product and brand were completely new?

KOENDERMAN: Well, I don't think they needed to advertise at all because it was a brand new product that everyone wanted. When they first launched cell phones in the market they first said maybe there is a market for about 250 thousand, now it is 35 million. They had no concept of what the need was. It is an interesting reflection on how society is viewed and understood or not understood. But here was an absolutely fundamental need of people to communicate. People who couldn't afford to put a decent three meals on the table would have a cellphone.

HOFFMANN: Initially wasn't it criticised as a toy for the elite businessman? Very few people could afford cell phones? Did they market it to everyone?

KOENDERMAN: Well, I don't remember it being, I don't recall a lot of criticism about elitism. And very quickly, it was surprising when you started seeing gardeners and all

sorts of people with low incomes wandering around with cellphones. And lots of people who were richer than them didn't have cell phones because they were quite conservative. So there was some surprise that it was so universal, but again that exposes how little we know about ourselves as people. There is an absolutely fantastic demand for communication as we are now seeing continued with Facebook and Twitter and all these things. They're just proving this absolutely insatiable desire to communicate. I think that's the most interesting thing about that period for me. When they started, they didn't have a level playing field because Vodacom came first, they got the license first.

HOFFMANN: Didn't they get the license at the same time but they didn't launch at the same time? Am I mistaken?

KOENDERMAN: I can't remember the exact details, but they launched nine months ahead of MTN. And I don't think it was because they had a level playing field, MTN had to do a lot of catching up. They definitely, in my memory, got the license after Vodacom. So they were not able to launch at the same time. By the time they launched they were saying, everybody thought now we will have some competition, but we didn't have competition because they were so far behind that they just had to go with the flow. They didn't have to, they thought they had to. Then along came Cell C and the same thing again, no level playing field. They made the mistake, for them it was a mistake. When MTN got into the market place, it was satisfactory from a business point of view, if not from an ethical point of view, for them to just, more or less agree, they didn't collude openly, but the one says these are our rates, the other says well we'll match those rates. And they both into the market with similar high rates, outrageously high rates. And they both made plenty of money. And MTN eventually became bigger but by extending into

the rest of Africa. So they are now bigger than Vodacom

HOFFMANN: But not in South Africa?

KOENDERMAN: Not in South Africa. They are bigger overall, but smaller in South Africa. So they have done wonderfully well out of this and then along comes Cell C, the third one. And they make the mistake of also kind of trying to become a passive partner of this cartel. And they got nowhere. Because by then, the others were well entrenched, all they could do was pick up the dregs, and they dregs weren't very good. They weren't the best users, they were the people who didn't have money

HOFFMANN: And swopped between providers?

KOENDERMAN: Yes. So they got nowhere. What they are now doing, which makes some sense, and that position being very aggressive, very proactive in terms of their marketing and they are sort of like the Nandos of the cell phone business. Irreverent and cheeky

HOFFMANN: And forward.

KOENDERMAN: And upsetting people all the time, but making themselves known. And once they have that position where people are actually paying attention to them, they are offering some quite good offers which are competing on price. Which they never dared to do before. This new guy is an absolute genius at marketing. Reichelt.

HOFFMANN: Lars, I think.

KOENDERMAN: Yes, he is a German who was done similar things for the group internationally in places like Bangladesh. He went in there, and I don't know the details, but did something similar, rescued a moribund organisation and made them the hero's.

And there's quite a few people who are favourably disposed towards them even though they are not using them because they are bringing genuine competition to the market. The trouble is the others can also match their prices because they have made such a fortune in the past.

HOFFMANN: So probably more so?

KOENDERMAN: Yes, so if they tried, what they are now doing is they are competing on price but the main effect is that they are bringing the prices down and Cell C is not gaining the subscribers that it needs. It is getting some, but probably not enough. Not as many as it might otherwise would have gotten. I was often left wondering how many companies do you need to get true competition. I think you need at least three.

HOFFMANN: Yes.

KOENDERMAN: But that is not very many. You probably need more than that but you can get it with three. As long as you have someone who is willing to position themselves aggressively. As Reichelt has done. He is an experienced person in this field, and he has done it in other developing markets. And I believe he will probably succeed because he knows what works. And they investing heavily, they're clearly here to stay. They are investing 50 billion, or whatever it is, some enormous number, on building their own network because they have been piggy backing on the Vodacom network. And they have had to pay a fortune. For the use of it, for the interconnect fees. Those are now being controlled by the government so it is no longer a problem. But it is better to have your own network anyway.

HOFFMANN: So do you think Vodacom still has an advantage because they launched first and started advertising first?

KOENDERMAN: They're so big, its hard for anyone really to put a dent in their armour. I think they have gotten quite complacent, inevitably, with size, that happens. You become so big you think you're invincible. But everybody can be beaten, sooner or later. So I think, they are going to have to pull themselves together, buck up their ideas a bit. I would like to see that happen. It is one of the most infuriating things as a consumer, to be taken advantage of. They can cut their prices in half and still make massive profits. They spent on promotions, much more than they needed to, sponsorship of sport and stuff. They didn't need to. But they had this money and they were to embarrassed to admit that, we have to spend some of our profits so that it doesn't look embarrassing. So they sponsored everything under the sun, now they have started pulling back because

HOFFMANN: Competition is rife?

KOENDERMAN: yes, they have to watch these costs. It created an artificial market in sponsorship as well because that grew more than it should.

HOFFMANN: If the Yebo Gogo campaign had been less successful do you thing Vodacom would have been less successful as a whole?

KOENDERMAN: No, I don't. I think, because it was a new product, never been seen before, Word of Mouth would have done the trick, very, very quickly. I don't think they needed to advertise it at all. Maybe, initially, just a bit of awareness. Maybe they could have just gone by spending a lot less than they did. They spent it because they had it, they didn't know what to do with it and they were to embarrassed to admit that their profits were outrageous.

HOFFMANN: What kind of impact did the cellular providers as new players make on the South African advertising industry since Vodacom's inception in 1994? Did anything

change in the industry since 1994?

KOENDERMAN: The advertising agencies that had their business obviously did very well. Draftfcb has had Vodacom all this time, the others have changed. MTN never really have had a successful advertising strategy. One of the reasons was the success of the Vodacom positioning. They tried all sorts of things, but they didn't manage to match it. So, I mean, they have still got quite a big slice of the market. Do you know what the slice is at the moment?

HOFFMANN: I can't remember the exact number right now.

KOENDERMAN: At some stage it was about 60% Vodacom and about 36% MTN and the remaining three or four percent was Cell C.

HOFFMANN: I think Vodacom definitely has less than 60% at this point, its around 55% percent.

KOENDERMAN: I wonder why that is, what do you think?

HOFFMANN: I'm not sure, maybe people started getting frustrated with their service, or the novelty is starting to wear off with there being more competition.

KOENDERMAN: Another thing about it, one has to remember, is their measurement is very inaccurate because a lot of those phones are inactive.

HOFFMANN: Yes.

KOENDERMAN: And they don't seem to know, exactly, how many are inactive. There is quite a big percentage. You take registered users and it gives you one figure and then you take active users and you get an entirely different figure. I think they may have the numbers but they do not disclose them.

HOFFMANN: Yes, they are not very forthcoming with such information I have learnt.

KOENDERMAN: Go to a stock broking firm?

HOFFMANN: A Stock broking firm? I tried to get the Millward Brown Adtrack reports for 2005-2007 from Draftfcb, but I couldn't get it without Vodacom's permission. And they gave me the run around.

KOENDERMAN: Its all very competitive information.

HOFFMANN: Yes, I'm not quite sure what information these reports contain.

KOENDERMAN: But this is in the 2004 year [referring to the 'The Big Spenders' table in the 2004 Adreview publication], this gives you the top spenders: Unilever was number one. National Government was number two, that, of course was an election year so they spent heavily, they are not normally up there. Then Shoprite Checkers, then MTN, then Pick an Pay, then Vodacom.

HOFFMANN: So MTN spent more than Vodacom?

KOENDERMAN: Yes, and they have done for much of the time spent more but got less results. So the two of them are in the top six there and pretty much always are in the top six these days. Just to warn you, there was a mistake in these two issues, we managed to carry the same table in both years. The 'Big Spenders' tables are the same in both two years [referring to the 2009 and 2010 Adreview publication]. So it's not the 2010 figure, it's the 2009 figure.

HOFFMANN: oh, ok.

KOENDERMAN: So this year [referring to the 'The Big Spenders' table in the 2009 Adreview publication], but this year: Unilever, Shoprite, MTN, Vodacom, National

Government, Pick and Pay.

HOFFMANN: So it's the same

KOENDERMAN: It's the same, but in slightly different order. And that was in 2004 and this is in 2008. Yes, so they have been up there with the big spenders but have they influenced anybody else? I don't think so. A lot of people have been inspired by this Yebo Gogo campaign because it was so effective and it went on for so long and it just, as they say, had legs.

HOFFMANN: Do you think that that was just coincidence? The right campaign at the right time?

KOENDERMAN: With a great idea no one ever knows quite for sure how big it is going to be. The great idea was this relationship between the two guys, the smart black guy and the dumb white guy. And that sums up the idea. The first one was the best ad in terms of how it was done and credibility and even the little joke about Yebo Gogo and he didn't realise it meant hello granny. But all of that was an in joke that everybody appreciated even if they didn't know it to begin with. It felt part of the humour that wasn't obvious. But then they kept the same relationship going and it was never as good again. Having said that, that wasn't the highest rated of their ads.

HOFFMANN: Not?

KOENDERMAN: No, I think the highest rated came several years later. I didn't think it was as good an ad. But the public did. That's what counts. Do you want something on the history of that?

HOFFMANN: Yes, any information could potentially be useful.

KOENDERMAN: Petra Peacock is the public relations consultant at Draftfcb. I know she produced a history of that particular campaign, which is quite interesting and is worth getting a copy of. So try her.

HOFFMANN: Ok.

KOENDERMAN: Where is my book? It's 794 4665.

HOFFMANN: And her name again?

KOENDERMAN: Petra Peacock. And, you know, you can say you have spoken to me. And she, just say that I remembered the history she produced, I think it was on the 10th anniversary of this campaign. It will, sort of, if nothing else, give you the dates and timings of various things. They've got information about how successful each campaign was, measured by, there are various ways of measuring it, I'm not sure. If she still has got it, people throw these things away, they don't keep them forever. But that will be worth getting your hands on. I had it but I threw it away, there is just a limit to how much you can store. Right.

HOFFMANN: Do you have any insights about Vodacom as a client? I have heard that under Alan Knott-Craig and Andre Beyers, the previous marketing manager, they weren't very concerned with strategy? They just, sort of, just pulled things out of their hat? If it worked it worked, if not they tried something new? And that they were actually quite difficult clients?

KOENDERMAN: For the agencies?

HOFFMANN: Yes.

KOENDERMAN: Yes, they were extremely difficult clients. Alan Knott-Craig is a very

arrogant person. He wrote a book about his business philosophy. He used to work for Telkom. So he was a kind of civil servant. So it was quite amazing because civil servants are usually not very dynamic business men. It was absolutely amazing how he came out of that background and he was an engineer by training, I think. And became a successful marketer. But that I think, shows the point, no matter what you did, you were going to make money in that market.

HOFFMANN: So it wasn't Knott-Craig's ingenuity as such?

KOENDERMAN: I don't think so. I mean, he certainly allowed this campaign to run and it was effective. But while this campaign was running the other short term campaigns would also be used for different purposes. But that was the fundamental overriding thing. And, I mean, he was quite corrupt. There was a lot of nepotism. He had set up little businesses that his nephew and his son and his daughter.

HOFFMANN: Yes, I heard about that, but not in too much detail.

KOENDERMAN: You can Google him.

HOFFMANN: Yes, I have.

KOENDERMAN: There is a company, a South African sponsorship and promotion company, and it manages their sponsorship programmes. Its main client was Vodacom, I don't think it had any other significant clients, and it was run by a relative of his [Alan Knott-Craig]. But he is now gone from that business and I don't think we'll hear from him again. Well, MTN was equally bad. But they actually did make an attempt, I could be wrong, my impression is that MTN made more of an attempt to strategize their position because they were number two. They wanted to catch up.

HOFFMANN: That's why they relied on strategy? But Vodacom was doing well so they didn't feel the need?

KOENDERMAN: Yes, exactly. But having said that, they never were very successful with it. They kept chopping and changing. They kept chopping and changing their leadership and their ad agency. And they didn't have any of the answers. One answer they had, which was a good one, was to go into the rest of Africa. And they dominate cell phone operations in sub-Saharan Africa.

HOFFMANN: And they are ahead of Vodacom in Nigeria?

KOENDERMAN: Yes, well Vodacom isn't in much of Africa.

HOFFMANN: Only in five countries.

KOENDERMAN: Five is it?

HOFFMANN: Yes.

KOENDERMAN: So that was a good strategy. But the rest was just floundering around.

In a brand new market, with a brand new product that people wanted, no matter what, you couldn't fail. It's a classic example, I think, of a situation where you just can't lose.

HOFFMANN: So, do you think, it was not to Vodacom's detriment that they did not rely on strategy? Because, I believe now, with Vodafone's majority share, they are now using three year strategies?

KOENDERMAN: Yes, well, Vodafone is a major player internationally. And they would have strategies. And they have had a lot of experience in the market place. They can see what they are doing here that is wrong or right. That's no surprise to me that they introduced strategic planning. But we haven't seen any results. The only thing that is

happening in the market is what Cell C is doing. The other two

HOFFMANN: Are stagnant?

KOENDERMAN: Yes, they don't know what to do about it. So they are doing nothing.

And maybe they are right, probably best not to react all the time. They keep suing them, or taking them to the Advertising Standards Authority, for making false claims.

HOFFMANN: Does that cost Cell C money?

KOENDERMAN: No, I think every time someone complains Cell C benefits. Because people now are rather sceptical of the ASA. They are not great supporters. And they like the underdogs. Like Nandos. I don't know if you have noticed this, but its become an international name that is written into scripts of television programmes. There was one just the other night, once upon a time people would say get me a quarter pounder from McDonalds, now they say, lets go to Nandos. And it happened last night because someone I was with noticed it. And this little group of people was saying lets go to Nandos.

HOFFMANN: Was this an international production?

KOENDERMAN: Yes, British, wasn't a South African thing. I was watching on DSTV, the BBC channel. That just shows you how successful they have been on a global scale. And people over there don't realise it's a South African thing. They think it is Portuguese, but English, you know, because obviously the staff are all English. There is nothing that identifies it as South African. And they think it is one of their own. Which makes it successful. We're not here to talk about Nandos but it is an interesting story. So I think, every time the big companies, its interesting to contrast it again, the big suppliers in the fast food and chicken outlets, there is Mc Donalds and Chicken Licken

HOFFMANN: And KFC

KOENDERMAN: And KFC, I suppose KFC is number one in chicken.

HOFFMANN: Yes, it is.

KOENDERMAN: I think they have been more careful not to attack Nandos.

HOFFMANN: Because it would look unfavourable?

KOENDERMAN: They would just look like the big bully boys and the public's sympathies with the underdog already meaning that it brings more attention to them. I think in the cell phone business they are making a mistake, taking them to the ASA. It doesn't do them [Cell C] any harm, whatsoever. They just laugh all the way to bank. I think it would probably be a bit wiser just to ignore Cell C.

HOFFMANN: So do you think Vodacom's future is looking less prosperous than it was in the past 15 years?

KOENDERMAN: Well, they have had enormous growth and they won't ever match that percentage growth again because the market is now saturated. But there is still some growth in it. Particularly in search and data, rather than voice calls. And that is what Cell C has identified, and that there are opportunities and they are absolutely right. Especially with smart phones. Everyone is going to be using it for a search. I mean that's the kind of thing that people. Do you remember the Guinness book of records?

HOFFMANN: Yes.

KOENDERMAN: The Guinness Book of Records was started by the Mc Guerta Brothers in the UK, and they got Guinness, a mayor beer manufacturer

HOFFMANN: I didn't even make that connection.

KOENDERMAN: they sponsored it, because, Where do people get arguing about sports results? In the pub. Then in the bar, if they had these things, they would have a copy of the Guinness Book of Records and it would find the answer. Now with cellphones you do a quick search. It is the same need, but met in a different way. A much better and faster way. So that's going to be the big growth area.

HOFFMANN: And that was marked by the launch of the Vodafone live! portal, where you could access news and entertainment on your phone. And the campaign that I am looking at launched this portal but was then taken over by Vodacom. But the content that this portal tried to promote was quite primitive at first.

KOENDERMAN: Now the move, and this is where the growth is, is in terms of handsets. Its into smart phones. And to underestimate that potential would be a big mistake. It's got the same growth potential. There will be a new growth surge, not in total usage, but in improved quality of handsets. They have come down in price. They are talking about R1500 or R1000.

HOFFMANN: The bottom of the range Blackberry is about R2000.

KOENDERMAN: Well, there you are. Not long ago your cheap phone was costing that.

HOFFMANN: That's true. So do you think, as in the case of the Yebo Gogo characters, brand icons are successful from an advertising perspective? I have read that if you do find the right character for your brand is like striking gold? Do you agree with that? Is it profitable from an advertising perspective to use brand icons?

KOENDERMAN: Yes, what are you thinking of?

HOFFMANN: The Meerkat and Buddy the Boxer. The Chappies Chipmunk comes to mind, but he wasn't really a character, he didn't really have personality. Associating a certain personality with a brand?

KOENDERMAN: Well, I think the problem with it is, it's a kind of living creature, even if it is animated, you see it as a living creature. And, there is a danger that it can just run out of steam.

HOFFMANN: Or be a bit too stereotypical.

KOENDERMAN: Yes. And you have to keep coming up with relevant ideas. It's a hard thing to do. If you look at a brand, say like Nike, their symbol is that 'swoosh'. Now that will never die out because it is merely an identifier. It doesn't jump out and do things. But it stands for a kind of mindset: 'Just Do It'. Outgoing and positive. And that's always been their thing. Go for it, don't be stopped by anything. Be active and aggressive and positive and so on. It stands for those kinds of values. And they are eternal values. They don't suddenly lose their appeal. And then, within the context of that you can do all sorts of things. They have lots of people. They use boxers and footballers and so on as their spokes people. But they change them they don't keep the same ones on for long. They would never have the same one on for ten years. So it is an interesting contrast between that kind of symbol and a living symbol.

HOFFMANN: Something with personality?

KOENDERMAN: Yes, the two guys, the Yebo Gogo guys, were also going to get too old at some stage.

HOFFMANN: And I think they actually got sick of it.

KOENDERMAN: Yes. So they did have a wear out factor which the swoosh never does. Pick and Pay for example, like Virgin, is interesting, because the founder of it is a equally strong part of the brand. Raymond Ackerman, although he is now semi-retired, it has begun to fade, but in his hey day, he was closely identified with Pick and Pay. Everyone knew who Raymond Ackerman was and that Pick and Pay is his business. And if they liked Raymond Ackerman, they liked his brand. And that is a strong position to be in. But, you know, what happens if he gets run over by a bus?

HOFFMANN: Or if he does something he shouldn't have?

KOENDERMAN: Yes. And Branson is the same sort of thing, but a different image. Irreverent and youthful. He is going to get too old to do all those things as well.

HOFFMANN: So I'm trying to establish the value of using a character, animated or not, would be in advertising. Is it favourable for advertisers? Is it valuable to associate your brand with a certain character?

KOENDERMAN: Well, yes, I think, maybe, an answer would be, if you use a living, breathing personality you have all sorts of problems. He could get killed, change his nature, be convicted of paedophilia or something. Anything is possible. So that's the danger. Whereas if you have a static symbol, that obviously can't happen to it.

HOFFMANN: Or an animated character?

KOENDERMAN: Yes, but even an animated character can start doing the wrong things because the people behind it are doing the wrong things. But those are strong symbols, they work well, but those are the greater dangers of something going wrong. The static symbol works well if it is nice and strong. Like that Nike thing is fantastic. The whole look of it is just right. It looks positive, it looks like a tick, which is a favourable thing.

And it stands for these values.

Brett Morris

A Critical Investigation of an Animated South African Advertising

Campaign: Vodacom's *Mo the Meerkat* Campaign, 2005-2007

Interview Transcript

Interviewer: Kim Hoffmann

Interviewee: Brett Morris

Date: 23/09/2010

Place: Brett Morris' Office
Draft FCB Johannesburg
Pin Mill Farm
164 Katherine Street
Sandton
Johannesburg
South Africa

23 September 2010

Persons Present: Kim Hoffmann

Brett Morris

HOFFMANN: Was the Vodacom Meerkat Draft FCB's first campaign using animation?

MORRIS: No, it definitely wouldn't have been.

HOFFMANN: First major animated campaign?

MORRIS: Its hard to say, you know, this agency and this group has been around for 80 years.

HOFFMANN: From a South African perspective?

MORRIS: There's the Oros character, he was developed in South Africa, as far as I know. Draft FCB also handled Simba at one point, Simba the Lion was animated. In fact they also handled Chappies at some point, remember Chappy the Chipmunk?

HOFFMANN: Oh, yes, I do.

MORRIS: That was also animated. So it's certainly not a recent thing.

HOFFMANN: Did the campaign's success and Mo's popularity change your consciousness around animation? Did you consider animation in a higher regard or vow to use it again? Was it an effective tool from an advertising perspective?

MORRIS: Yes, its definitely effective. I don't think we ever look at a campaign or any sort of executorial devise and say: "That was successful, we'll use it again." It really depends

on the brief, on the client, and also, the fact that we've that we've done it in that way, prevents us, in a funny way, from doing it again. Because our job is too come up with fresh stuff and re-invent all the time.

HOFFMANN: So you don't think your or FCB's opinion of animation changed in any way due to this campaign? Or do you consider it an isolated incident?

MORRIS: No, look, considering the fact that we were constantly looking for new ways to do things the really interesting thing about Mo in particular is that he was an animated character interacting with the real world, which, as you know, is not a new thing. Look at Roger Rabbit, that's kind of what that was. But I suppose its how it was used in this instance that made it so successful. So, I suppose it made us look at animation in a different way but not necessarily animation in its self, if that makes sense. It's difficult to say if it fundamentally changed the way we see animation, it's really dependant on what's good for the brief.

HOFFMANN: So you use animation if it is useful or necessary for the brief?

MORRIS: Yes, I do think perhaps animation does tend to get over looked, it's not like it is on our radar screens all the time. But its not that its, you know people often think that animation is going to be cheaper than shooting a live action commercial, that's definitely not the case. Certainly if you want to do it properly, and do it well.

HOFFMANN: And it also takes time.

MORRIS: Its very, very time consuming. So I suppose we learn lessons along the way.

The more we do these kinds of things as an industry we constantly, as I say, pushing the boundaries, we learn about the benefits and the pit falls of various devices, animation is obviously one of them.

HOFFMANN: And then more specific to the campaign, I'm trying to establish what Vodacom was looking for from the campaign and how you implicated it? I believe the campaign was not really based on market surveys or research?

MORRIS: That's not entirely true. The inception of the campaign was for a Vodacom product called 'Vodafone live!', and the idea, the strategy behind that was that Vodafone live! brings entertainment into your world where ever you are because you have entertainment on your cellphone.

HOFFMANN: To clarify, you handled the account through out its entirety, from the first commercial for Vodafone live! and the succeeding commercials for Vodacom?

MORRIS: Correct. So Mo basically was a representation of entertainment coming into your world. So what was interesting was that it was an animated character in a live-action environment. But it was a strategic thing, a metaphor, for saying entertainment will be with you wherever you are. So he jumps out of the phone, literally, and does this dance for this woman. Mo then evolved into a character that became a Vodacom property because he was so successful. And then his function was about Vodacom's relationship with you and how Vodacom brings you, being a telecoms provider, gives you the opportunity to connect more, to be entertained, to do all of those things and he was the embodiment of that.

HOFFMANN: Who was the campaign aimed at in terms of target audience?

MORRIS: That's a tricky one. Not tricky in describing it, because the target audience is everyone. Vodacom has an incredibly large base, over 20 million people, spanning from every LSM [Living Standards Measure] you can think of. So it's incredibly diverse. And that's a challenge in itself because

HOFFMANN: It will never appeal to everyone equally?

MORRIS: Correct. You can't be all things to all people. Certainly a mantra we hold true, but ironically Mo was able to do that. A lot of Vodacom's ads are able to do that.

HOFFMANN: So it wasn't aimed at a young audience specifically?

MORRIS: I suppose initially it was in that Vodafone live! was a youth product. So could say that, initially, he actually was more targeted.

HOFFMANN: But due to his popularity?

MORRIS: Yes, as often happens with these things, there was a huge spill over to the point that 99 percent of the population absolutely loved him.

HOFFMANN: What was the thinking behind the different scenarios in each ad? The scenarios ranged from Mo in a club with a hip hop track to him roller-skating to a Lou Bega , more Latin track. Was that done to align more with certain audiences?

MORRIS: No, not necessarily. The music has to be, it's obviously going to be a specific genre, but it has to appeal across segments. So again, in the realm of entertainment and connection and adding more to your life, we found a song and built the story

HOFFMANN: So you chose the song first?

MORRIS: Not always, but sometimes. It's a bit of a chicken and egg thing, it's hard to say. Music is a very important part of communication. Sometimes it would be the song, in some cases it wasn't, in some cases it was. The story was built and we found a song to go with it.

HOFFMANN: Your thinking behind each scenario, was it impromptu or did it serve a

specific aim?

MORRIS: Definitely not impromptu, there's a strategy behind it. The strategy was determined up front. The entire campaign was based on the same strategy, it wasn't different for each one.

HOFFMANN: What was the overall strategy if I may ask?

MORRIS: As I said to you, initially it was for Vodafone live!, about bringing entertainment into your world, and by extension Vodacom is that. Being telecoms, connecting you to your friends, to entertainment, everything that you need. It was about bringing a little bit of entertainment, embodied by Mo, into your life.

HOFFMANN: So each scenario was an example of such entertainment?

MORRIS: Yes, and also, I say it was based on the same strategy, but they were seasonal, so some were themed around Vodacom's end of year campaign, summer. Some were based on other, I can't remember off hand what they all were.

HOFFMANN: There was the first one the Stripper, actually I still need to establish the chronological order, but it was the stripper, then I think it was the one in the club, and then the one on the beach with the speakers, the roller skating one.

MORRIS: The second one was the Conga line.

HOFFMANN: Yes.

MORRIS: So now, I mean, it's not vastly different, some of them would have been summer themed and some would be mid-year themed.

HOFFMANN: But its basically fun, entertainment, that kind of thing?

MORRIS: Correct.

HOFFMANN: So each scenario was then specific to the season or just slightly different?

MORRIS: Ja.

HOFFMANN: Ok, that makes sense. And then, as you said, the main reason you used an animated character was because it was supposed to embody another world? Was that the main function?

MORRIS: Well, look, it could have just as easily been a person that came out the phone, metaphorically, to come and entertain you. But felt it would be more interesting if it was an animated character because it amplified the fact that it was not the real world. It was taking something out of your phone and bringing it into your life.

HOFFMANN: The choice of a Meerkat?

MORRIS: Meerkat was because we wanted to make it something South African.

HOFFMANN: The choice of an animated animal character, did it have anything to do with Vodacom not wanting to appeal to a mixed race target audience? The 'Yebo Gogo' campaign made use of a black icon, Bankole Omotoso, and a white one, Michael de Pinna.

MORRIS: Yes, I would say that is a definite benefit, but that's not the reason for being for the communication.

HOFFMANN: So was this just a benefit realised afterwards or was this considered during planning stages?

MORRIS: Again, it's a chicken and egg thing. These are all considerations to have in mind when developing the work.

HOFFMANN: So that was a consideration when you developed the character?

MORRIS: Its not the reason we came up with animation, but animation has that benefit.

HOFFMANN: I've heard that at the time MTN were portraying themselves as a 'new South African' telecoms provider, where as Vodacom was still seen as having a majority white market. Did that play any role when you were designing the character?

MORRIS: No. I don't know how much truth there is to that. You know, Vodacom had a certain brand personality, MTN had a certain brand personality. Initially, as you've said, it was actually a Vodafone live! thing that was targeted at the youth. So it was more about youth than it was about race.

HOFFMANN: Did you perhaps use an animated character as opposed to an actor to draw audience's attention? Because an animated character is more 'exciting' in itself?

MORRIS: I don't think so. I think our jobs in communication and advertising is to draw people in. And you can do that in many, many different ways.

HOFFMANN: So animation is not necessarily beneficial for that?

MORRIS: You can do bad animation that will have the opposite effect or you can do great animation that will do what it needs to do, like Mo was able to do. So its more about hoe its done than what it is. Its more about, were in the business of storytelling, drawing people in and communicating something to them than it is about an animal versus a person. Look, the truth is there are certain things that people gravitate towards, the cliché of animals and babies, that's true. I'm not sure if the same

necessarily applies to animation, I think that's more in the craft. But I would imagine it has something to do with it, if its done well. Are you taking about animation as in CG special effects as well as animated characters?

HOFFMANN: Both, but a character can also have that effect.

MORRIS: But I see those as very different disciplines.

HOFFMANN: I'm looking at it broadly, but characters mainly.

MORRIS: CG has the same potential, to do things not possible in the real world. But CG is so advanced these that people aren't impressed by it anymore. So the story has to be compelling, and how you tell the story has to be amazing rather than "Oh, look, we using CG." Same applies to characters.

HOFFMANN: Lastly, as an creative director, your opinion of the campaign? Mo also drew somewhat negative attention, was the campaign successful overall?

MORRIS: It was hugely successful. When you say negative, you're literally talking about 99 versus 1 percent?

HOFFMANN: Yes, but I've been met with some negative responses when mentioning this project and I've also been told that this campaign did not win any Louries or such awards?

MORRIS: Is this in the world of animation?

HOFFMANN: Yes.

MORRIS: That's what I mean. I'll be more specific, so where this character drew a lot of criticism, is in the creative and animation industry. And I would take that with a pinch of

salt, because people tend to detest other creative people's success, that's the truth of it.

I'm not saying that, it's not about politics, but creativity is fuelled with all sorts of egos.

And the bottom line is, regardless of what creative people think of him

HOFFMANN: From an advertising perspective?

MORRIS: It was hugely successful, off the charts successful. So the percentages you are talking about are miniscule, they tend to have a louder voice and bigger opinion because it is their industry.

Bruce Paynter

A Critical Investigation of an Animated South African Advertising

Campaign: Vodacom's *Mo the Meerkat* Campaign, 2005-2007

Interview Transcript

Interviewer: Kim Hoffmann

Interviewee: Bruce Paynter

Date: 22/11/2010

Place: Not Applicable- Electronic

HOFFMANN: Which of the Vodacom Meerkat commercials were you involved in/did you direct? Excluding, of course, the first two done by Plank Films. Here are the titles for

easier reference: 1. Meerkat Stripper (Plank Films)

2. Meerkat Conga Line (Plank Films)

3. Meerkat Bling

4. Meerkat Whip

5. Rollerskate Mambo

6. Meerkat Cruise

PAYNTER: I directed 'Bling', then the Miami Beach-style film after that ('Whip'?) and 'Roller-skate Mambo'.

HOFFMANN: Are you familiar with the circumstances that led to the Vodacom

Meerkat contract being moved from AnimMate! and Plank Film

Productions to Black Ginger and Cab Films?

PAYNTER: Yup. When we (CAB) were asked to pitch on the 'Bling' spot I used 'The Incredibles' as a reference. In my opinion, the characterisation in that film showed how conventional animation using 3-D technology delivered the best of both worlds. I was critical of the motion capture technique because, while being very accurate, that process delivered none of the comedic 'elasticity' that true animation has. I argued that the Meerkat's character could do with more inherent comedy in him, instead of merely being a drawn-on 'fancy dress' over a human figure. The agency agreed and we brought Black Ginger in. The client also wanted the Meerkat's face to change to be a little 'softer' and more friendly. Darrin Hofmeyer (the animator and inventor of Moitia) then built a proper 3D model of, first Mo then Moitia, and began producing animated 'walk cycles' much the way characters would be developed for a Disney film. We nevertheless, still used a human dancer as a template and shot multiple angle references, exactly as John

Lassiter's team did with the Incredibles. The Ad agency and Vodacom must have been happy with the results because they hired me for the next two spots!

HOFFMANN: If so, did AnimMate!'s use of Motion Capture play a role in this?

What were the objections (if any) around the use of Motion Capture in the first two commercials?

Paynter: See above.

HOFFMANN: As the director, how did you feel working with an animated character in an live-action environment? Were you familiar with this process/ had you ever directed an commercial featuring animated characters previous to the Vodacom Meerkat campaign?

Did you use actors as 'stand-ins' for Mo and Moitia on set?

PAYNTER: Although I have placed independent CG objects into Live Action backgrounds before, this was the first time I had integrated conventional Animation and Live Action. As a process it is obviously odd because the central character is not on set when you shoot. Thankfully the scripts provided me with a number of interesting people and objects to aim my camera at. My intention was to blend them more convincingly than in the previous two spots by placing Mo 'in' the scenes. By this I mean placing objects and people between him and the camera creating a real sense of three-dimensional space (rather than simply creating space for him to be 'stuck on' to the live backgrounds in post production). To this end, I shot extra foreground elements (people and props) against blue screen and composited them over Mo in post. We also used the silver ball technique so that the lighting on the animated figure would match the ambience of the Live Action scenes. We had a Mo 'puppet' which we used to shoot scale references for Mo's size in the final scenes.

HOFFMANN: What was your opinion of Mo as an animated character? Do you think he was a well designed character? In your opinion, would an actor have served the campaign better?

PAYNTER: At the outset, I don't think that Vodacom had any intention of Mo being anything more than he appeared in the Stripper spot. So I'm not sure he was developed thoroughly enough to begin with. Then Vodacom went mad for him. We always worked under extreme time pressures and the client kept taking more Live Action out of the cuts and putting more of Mo in. The result was more air time for him but significantly less finesse. I had hoped that we would create a character that was really well-developed in personality as well as a physical entity. Whilst it is well documented (by Vodacom) that Mo was incredibly popular, most people I knew thought he was terrible. Perhaps if he had been based on a real actor (like all the famous modern animated characters are), he would have been better realised. Instead the client told us who he was and how he should behave. Pity.

HOFFMANN: Lastly, on a more general note, as a director having worked on numerous television/film commercials, do you consider animation a valuable tool for film commercials? Does animation provide something that actors can't or is it simply more effective from a cost perspective?

PAYNTER: Freshness and novelty are the life blood of good communication. At the moment I am working with an animation company called Shy the Sun on a very big

campaign. Last year I made another blend of Live Action and Animation with them (Bakers Biscuits). They are absolutely brilliant, their work is world class and truly memorable. The merging of comic book characters and real life has seen a growing number of amazing films e.g. Hell Boy and Batman. Animated movies per se have become a highly sophisticated genre of entertainment, aimed at all ages and to great acclaim. I don't think animation is ever a case of replacing 'real' actors with 'created' ones... and my experience proves that it is not cheaper, by any stretch of the imagination. If anything it is the very opposite!

Hilton Treves & Darrin Hofmeyr

A Critical Investigation of an Animated South African Advertising

Campaign: Vodacom's *Mo the Meerkat* Campaign, 2005-2007

Interview Transcript

Interviewer: Kim Hoffmann

Interviewee: Hilton Treves
Darrin Hofmeyr

Date: 18/11/2010

Place: Hilton Treves' Office
Black Ginger
InfinArt Building
81 New Church Street
Tamboerskloof
Cape Town
South Africa

18 November 2010

Persons Present: Kim Hoffmann

Hilton Treves

Darrin Hofmeyr

HOFFMANN: I've been speaking mainly to people at Draft FCB, I'm trying to get both sides of the campaign, from an advertisers' as well as animators' perspective.

TREVES: Who did you speak to at Draft?

HOFFMANN: To Rachel Andreotti, Rita Doherty and Brett Morris.

HOFFMANN: Would you consider Mo the Meerkat as South Africa's token animated character?

TREVES: Token?

HOFFMANN: The biggest campaign using an animated character?

TREVES: It was an icon, it became an icon. It was very iconic in what it was and it was very recognizable with the Vodacom brand. It became integral to the Vodacom brand.

HOFFMANN: Do you think Mo, as a character, did the animation industry justice? Do you think it was a good representation for the average South African to associate animation with?

HOFMEYR: That's a tricky one because it was initially, you've got the back story of how it came about and everything, have you?

HOFFMANN: Yes, from being an advertisement for the Vodafone live! portal to being taken over by Vodacom?

HOFMEYR: No, how the character came about?

HOFFMANN: No, I don't actually.

TREVES: I think, that you need to understand, it's very important.

HOFFMANN: Ok.

HOFMEYR: There was a launch of Vodafone live! And they needed an advert very quickly to have the launch of this product and that was the initial one. They went to this company

HOFFMANN: To AnimMate! ?

HOFMEYR: Ja, and which they used motion capture and the design, I forget where the design came from

HOFFMANN: So do you know if the advertising company did the design or if it was AnimMate! ?

TREVES: No, the initial design came from the agency.

HOFFMANN: Ok.

TREVES: The initial design, as a concept sketch.

HOFMEYR: Ja

TREVES: But then, from that, they animated an interpretation of it.

HOFFMANN: Ok so they did consult AnimMate! ?

TREVES: Ja.

HOFMEYR: Ja. They made this commercial, which was supposed to be a very quick, once-off, throw away commercial where the Meerkat was just going to do the striptease and take off his skin. So no love and effort was put into making a character that had legs that could be used for three or four years they just made this thing, which in most people's respect in the industry is quite hideous. To the lay man, to the people who first saw it, they thought it was either grotesque and frightening or they loved it, they thought it was so funny and amusing. So then the next ad that was made, animate did it again, it was the Conga Line one, where they're in the streets of Cape Town. That, they had the motion capture again and, they just slapped it out, used the same Meerkat, got all the Bryan Habanas and Ryk Neetlings and everything into the ad. And that was great because he was now in a summer shirt, and he started appearing on people's cellphones and wall papers as soon as you bought the cellphone you would have his picture there. And they started to market all the sports around him. On the website, if it was rugby season or soccer season they started putting him, Meerkat, the original design Meerkat, into all these outfit's. Then in March 2006, they wanted to do another one with him. This would've been his third ad now, they approached director, Bruce Paynter, from CAB films. He was very keen to do the job, but he wanted to re-invent the Meerkat.

HOFFMANN: And he wasn't into motion capture?

HOFMEYR: Yes, that's right, exactly. He wanted the appeal of character animation done by an animator, not by motion capture.

HOFFMANN: But surely motion capture is used only for capturing the primary animation and then it's tweaked by an animator?

HOFMEYR: Absolutely.

TREVES: That's the theory, that's what didn't happen on the other characters. So they used it and it looked like a man in a Meerkat suit.

HOFMEYR: Ja. And they also, in their design had the dog leg, which is, you know, the back dog leg, so it has that

HOFFMANN: So the character basically walks on its toes?

HOFMEYR: So it should be a man on a toe but the motion capture was a guy with a knee and flat feet.

HOFFMANN: Oh, so it didn't translate from the motion capture to the rig?

HOFMEYR: So it doesn't translate so that was the first thing, plus, if you want appeal you want a character as anthropomorphic as possible, not Pan's Labyrinth goat legs and stuff, which is quite scary. So Bruce wanted to re-invent it and improve on it. He got the buy in of Vodacom, at the time Andre Beyers was the marketing manager. And came to Hilton because he had worked with Hilton before, and I had just started Joburg Black Ginger and they came to us. And we then worked on redesigning the Meerkat

HOFFMANN: Did you redesign it character wise or just the rig and model?

TREVES: Everything.

HOFMEYR: We started character wise and we pushed it to where it was very, for all of us and everybody involved, appealing, and made a Marquette which we've still got up there. But they pulled us closer to the original one because they didn't want people to get confused. Those Marquettes up there are sort of what we based Mo and Moisha on eventually.

HOFFMANN: So am I correct in saying that you had objections with the original character design?

HOFMEYR: Ja, everybody did. The agency, although they did not say it in front of their client

HOFFMANN: They didn't want to change the face that worked?

HOFMEYR: Ja, they didn't totally want to loose the audience that loved it by suddenly changing it so much they . Then we did our first ad and it was fine. Bruce did his second one which was September/October 2006, which was the one we shot in Strand, on the beach, dancing on the car. And then at that stage, we were getting, we were slowly improving the render and everything and trying to fix his rig so that he had cartoony arms, he could stretch a bit and we were pushing that further. So then came 2007, April, when we introduced the girl for the first time, still with Bruce Paynter, this was our third one now. This is when we then tried, ok we've done a year now, let's push the design a little bit further, refine him a bit more. And it was getting to a much nicer place in all our heads, in all our opinions. And then, we shot that one in Burgerspark in Pretoria, with the roller skating with the Blue Bulls girls and stuff. And that I think, was our favourite one.

TREVES: That was our favourite.

HOFMEYR: Ja. Because everything just worked, by that time Bruce and myself and Brett and Gerhard Myburgh, creative director on the ads at the time.

HOFFMANN: Yes, I contacted him as well.

HOFMEYR: I think he's in Australia now?

HOFFMANN: Yes, I emailed him.

HOFMEYR: It was a great, collective, sort off, working environment with everybody.

We'd been on three big ads and lots of print campaigns and lots of small little ads and squeeze backs for the rugby and stuff . We also did a lot of work for Afri-Kings because they were the retail stuff, they handled the A1 Grand Prix and a whole bunch of other stuff. The roller-skating one is all our favourites because we were just so used to working with each other and everyone knew their part and stuff. And then September 2007, we were going to do our fourth big commercial, the summer for 2007, which was the one on the boat, and that was with Mike Middleton was the director of that one. And that was his first one, and edited. All the other three that we'd done were edited by Tim Goodwin. Its Goodwin, hey? From, um,

TREVES: Premiere Post.

HOFMEYR: This one was, the fourth one we did was completely different. Sabrina from Sabrina

TREVES: Sabrina O'Sullivan Post Production

HOFMEYR: And Mike Middleton was the director. And they kinda just let us do most of it because we'd done three before. But then that was it, that was the last one. In the beginning we were getting direction for the kind of dance moves he was going to do, in the very first one we did, by the end of it they were just like "Go for it, Darrin, you can do whatever." So I was chatting to my mates and stuff , that teach dancing, and asking for some suggestions, because I was also out of ideas.

HOFFMANN: Choreographing?

HOFMEYR: Ja, it was just getting a bit like, what the hell can he do now. Because he always had to do bigger, better. Every ad, you know, he had to do bigger, better. So he was starting to do stupid things. Really crazy stuff.

HOFFMANN: More action, more animation?

HOFMEYR: Ja, so that was sort of the story, then he died out as soon as Vodafone bought out Vodacom they killed him off. Vodafone apparently didn't, I don't know what you've heard from Draft FCB, but from what we heard

HOFFMANN: They said Mo longer worked for the brand image.

HOFMEYR: Ja.

TREVES: I think it's evolution of the brand. I think particular Vodafone came in with a slightly different positioning where they wanted to take it to. More in terms of the focus on the personalities of the sports people rather than an icon. And I think that the one thing that Mo was, Mo was very iconic for South Africa, he was part of the whole culture, he filled this particular cultural sort of branding and niche. And he was incredibly popular in the Afrikaans circles more so than the other circles around. He was very iconic in that regard. And one of the things that we were doing on this at each stage we couldn't go to what we did on the end level, right at the beginning, we had to evolve him, we had to slowly grow him and get people comfortable with his behaviours, and stuff like that, and if you look at the different stages of animation through it you'll see that the animation and sophistication of animation grew dramatically over his performance levels as he went through the campaign. In terms of the quality of animation, there is no doubt that motion capture did the character a disservice, because he is a character, not a human. So, if he was a human, fine, and he was a human

character, that's fine. But he was a character in a real Shrek sense, or the Disney type sense, he was a character. And as such, he needed to be driven by that kind of performance which people are comfortable with. So that was the idea to get him in that kind of zone to make him feel in that space.

HOFFMANN: I realize this campaign was very successful from an advertising perspective, it did extremely well as far as consumer votes are concerned. From an animation perspective would you consider it one of your successful campaigns?

TREVES: Absolutely. The Meerkat gave us a lot of insight into certain types of things for examples. We ended up doing a big campaign for Pepsi and in parallel, Meerkat was running at the same time, this character called Fido Dido. Fido Dido was for 7up. And in terms of a character type reel, things we were learning on the one we were applying on the other. So as things evolved, as things moved, it certainly was there. From an international marketing point of view, the level of sophistication in terms of animation. In New York, Meerkat was seen as a really good piece of work. So it was taken and seen on an international level. There is absolutely no doubt.

HOFFMANN: Was it one of the few opportunities where you got to do full character animation?

TREVES: No, we've done a lot of stuff.

HOFFMANN: Have you?

HOFMEYR: Ja.

TREVES: Ja, we've done quite a lot of stuff. I mean, Black Ginger is very focussed in different aspects visual effects and animation work and character is one of our strong

point.

HOFFMANN: Many people I encounter in the animation industry cringe when I mention this project. Do you think that has got to do with the character design initially?

TREVES: That's originally to do with the two front end characters.

HOFMEYR: I think what happened was and then Vodacom it was just everywhere, people were getting sick of it.

HOFFMANN: they might not have been from the exact target market?

HOFMEYR: Yes, I mean, I'm from Pretoria and when I was still living in Pretoria and this thing was everywhere. They put the Meerkat on two Afrikaans songs, Robbie Vessels Liewwloop music video and Dosi's Ryperd. They put Meerkat in those things because the Afrikaans community loved it. They'd watch a rugby game at Lofters they'd have the Meerkat on the big screen or I'd be at a pub in Pretoria and this Meerkat ad would come on TV and the crowd would get all excited and stuff. So you have those people loving it and then you've got the other people just hating it for, I guess people just get annoyed by some marketing campaigns, you know. And this thing was everywhere. You couldn't drive in this city or any city in South Africa without seeing him and his girlfriend or him and his bad Hawaiian shirt.

TREVES: I think if you ask people in the animation community, you say to them, ok have a look in terms of work, you say to them, ok, what is it about the Meerkat campaign that you hate and you ask them about it

HOFFMANN: They wouldn't be able to tell you?

TREVES: A few of them might turn around and say, based on the one taking his skin off,

it was terrible, it was grotesque, it was shocking. Because of the motion capture type approach to it. We've got a motion capture studio, let's do this with a motion capture studio, but not giving it personality. If you compare that the last two of the Meerkats and said to anybody, there it is, ok what's wrong with that? Nobody can turn around to you and say why they don't like it. Is the animation good? Everyone will turn around and say the animation was brilliant. It was more to do with the initial phase, it was a shocking thing initially when you saw it. Funny enough the bad stuff sticks with you more than the good stuff. Cos the good stuff, you're comfortable with it.

HOFFMANN: That's true. And maybe by that time people started losing interest.

TREVES: Yes, a lot of people did. Every campaign has its day. I mean we did in one year for Pepsi we did 26 commercials for Fido Dido. And eventually after three years they decided that was it. The character has had its life and it is no longer going to become an iconic brand part of the Pepsi campaign. The same thing with Vodacom, after 5 years, nearly six years

HOFFMANN: Did it run for 6 years?

TREVES: Nearly six years that the character was in the market. Eventually people get tired of it. Very few brands around the world have an animated character that has sustained such a long period of time. And the one is Cheetos. The Cheeto's Character which is part of the whole is part of Frito Lays group of things for the Cheetos product. But it only applies, funny enough, in certain countries where they've now dropped it in other countries because people got tired but in other countries they still loved it. So the characterisation and animation association with a particular brand evolves. Even McDonalds dropped their initial character and ended up going to the clown in a clown suit.

HOFFMANN: So was Ronald McDonald animated initially?

TREVES: At one point he was an animated character, as a pencil animation. So years and years back. So he evolved and they took him to a different road. The Kellogg's Rice Crispies characters, those are still one of the few that have stayed, that have sustained their longevity over the years. The Frosties Tiger, you know, also Kellogs. Some brands do have that but who's the target? It's the kids. In this case, for Vodafone its adults, it's a totally different target market.

HOFFMANN: How long did you have on average have to produce each ad?

TREVES: Six weeks.

HOFFMANN: Do you have any thoughts as to why as opposed to an actor?

TREVES: No, no idea, no reason other than that they wanted something that was different, that would stand out, that is easy from a cost perspective.

HOFFMANN: Is it really better from a cost perspective?

TREVES: Much better, because your not paying royalties on their pictures, their faces on posters, all of that kind of thing. So your not paying artist fees. So if we get a character, like Vodacom had those characters for the Yebo Goggo campaign, the old man and the guy in the leopard suit.

HOFFMANN: Yes.

TREVES: Just the royalties on those people are enormous. So, on an animated character, and he becomes so iconic that he becomes the face of a brand, you're not paying those absolutely outrageous royalties.

HOFFMANN: Do you think the South African public are more aware of animation after the campaign?

TREVES: I think so. I think that any kind of exposure that the animation industry gets helps to go there. And I think because you have something that becomes so iconic, whether you love it or hate it, you can't forget it, it stays in your head. And you know that it is South African in its own right. If you look now, there's the Telkom Heita campaign that's out there. There's a lot of interesting things that are going to develop out of that. You are now going to end up going down the whole graffiti road, because of the way in which they positioned their type of characters, that their animating. And they've got a very, called it an emo -type marketing perspective. The sort of like edgy animated type theme to things. So it just takes it to another level and a different position. So, yes, I think its important and the more type of stuff one gets out there the better.

HOFFMANN: Do you think the animation industry in South Africa is dependant on advertising revenue to survive?

TREVES: Yes.

HOFFMANN: Do you have any thoughts on what draws advertisers to animation?

TREVES: It actually comes down to cost at the end of the day.

HOFFMANN: Does it?

TREVES: It really does. Its cost, its quick, its re-purpose able.

HOFFMANN: But if it cost you six weeks to produce, for example, isn't it more expensive than a day or two of filming?

TREVES: A day or two of filming costs you half a million rand a day to film.

HOFFMANN: So filming is a lot more expensive than six weeks of animation?

TREVES: Absolutely. Its not necessarily. Let me rephrase it. There's both sides. There's an argument for certain things. On certain types of stuff, animation, if you take a look at the Baker's Biscuits commercial,

HOFFMANN: Yes.

TREVES: What we did on that, was about twelve weeks of work, that went into that campaign. Each character was beautifully designed, but that campaign is going to run for three years. And royalties are not renewed each year. In that particular scenario, yes. Everything is gotta have its place. It's relative costs. Is animation in South Africa reliant on the animation industry? My answer to that is yes, but, the primary problem that South Africa has is we do not have a very large feature film animation industry at this point. There are a couple of companies who have embarked on that roads, who have put their soul's on the line to try and get this thing to happen. And if they do happen it will be great for the South African industry, it will help to grow it. Because the more of that that happens, the bigger the industry becomes. The commercials industry, is currently the biggest consumer of visual effects and animation at any point anywhere in the world. So it doesn't matter if you are in New York or Australia, or whether you're here, they are the ones that are constantly updating and refreshing and doing things.

HOFFMANN: And that have the budget?

TREVES: Correct, the budget and things are better there. Feature films and things are very few and far between. We don't have a big enough industry in South Africa for features. So from a visual effects perspective. We do a number of feature films every

now and then, but it's not sustainable.

HOFFMANN: For an over seas market?

TREVES: Over seas. We've done for Warner Brothers, we've done for China, we've done for Technicolor. So there's a couple of different markets. But advertising is certainly going to be the biggest consumer of animation and visual effect.

Appendix B

Description of Attached DVD

There is a DVD that has been included with this document. All six commercials discussed in chapter three have been placed on this DVD. This DVD is region free and should play on any DVD player in the world, as well as on computers with DVD playing software installed.

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