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## HOW KOO BEAT COKE: BUILDING A BRAND NARRATIVE VERSUS TRADITIONAL ADVERTISING

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The 2011 annual top brand survey, conducted by Sunday Times in South Africa, provided a representative cross-section of 33 brands from various categories in the general consumer space, and 13 in the business landscape. The overall favourite brand in South Africa in that year was Koo, owned by Tiger Brands in South Africa. This brand, which has a relatively small advertising budget, was a surprise winner in the category that had been dominated by brands such as Coca-Cola and KFC. These brands spent far more on advertising to a lesser effect than Koo, a significantly smaller company. Koo had in fact spent R12 million on advertising versus Coke's R193 million, yet Koo's final ranking was the highest of all brands surveyed. The brand's relatively simple outdoor marketing as well as the Mama Koo Radio Hour, a daily radio show featuring the various dishes homemakers can cook using Koo products, helped bring the brand to all South Africans and eclipsed its larger American-based rivals. This article considers the Koo example as illustrative of the power of simple, traditional advertising in the multi-modal context.*

**Keywords:** top brand survey, *Sunday Times*, Koo, Coca-Cola, multi-modal context, advertising, marketing, brands

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## INTRODUCTION

“For what is food? It is not only a collection of products that can be used for statistical or nutritional studies. It is also, and at the same time, a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behaviour” (Barthes 1997: 29).

Koo, a fast-moving consumer goods company and brand owned by Tiger Brands South Africa, is the best-known canned food brand in South Africa. The company was founded in 1940 as a farmer cooperative, and now offers a product portfolio that spans ten categories. With 1320 employees and headquartered in Bryanston in South Africa’s Gauteng province, the company posts R3.6 billion (approximately \$327 million USD)<sup>1</sup> in yearly revenue (Davies 2011). One of the company’s primary means of advertising its products is via billboards sending simple messages to consumers that bring to mind Barthes’s contention that food is, above all, a protocol and a collection of situations and behaviour. A Koo billboard in isiZulu exhorts the viewer to “Qinisa umdeni wakho” or “Give your family strength” while an isiXhosa billboard shows a plate of grated beets set on a napkin and placemat. Beneath this image is the tagline “Kumnandi Ekhaya” or “The joy of home”, further outlining the link between the canned product and the creation of a satisfied home. Another billboard shows the Koo product with the isiXhosa “Fudumez’uziteke” or “Indulge yourself”. Taken together, that indulgence must be aimed again at the homemaker. The tinned goods, in other words, bring “joy”, create “jealousy”, offer “indulgence” and provide a family “strength”.

Barthes (1997: 29) opines that in modern society food is no longer consumed as nutrition. There is more involved in the selling and the consumption of it, especially with regard to how it is presented to consumers and the rituals around how it is consumed:

Finally, the development of advertising has enabled the economist to become quite conscious of the ideal nature of consumer goods; by now everyone knows that the product as bought [that is, experienced] by the consumer is by no means the real product; between the former and the latter there is a considerable production of false perceptions and values (*ibid.*).

However, in the mind of the academic, food is considered a frivolous study, “for we do not see our own food, [...] we assume that it is insignificant” (Barthes 1997: 28). For the scholar, food “connotes triviality or guilt” (Barthes 1997: 30). On the contrary, Barthes asserts that food is an important means of reflecting people’s values and fundamental perceptions about themselves. An interesting point to note is that 50 years after the publication of the Barthes text upon which this discussion is based, a “frivolous” canned good product managed to unseat the

biggest brand name in South Africa, Coca-Cola, another food brand, for two years in a row as the number one brand in the country.

### **South African domination of Koo**

In the 2011 and 2012 *Sunday Times* Top Brands Awards ranking, Koo took the top brand position over Coca-Cola. This ranking is according to *Sunday Times*' Top Brands adjudication, which is circulated nationally in South Africa (TNS Global 2011a; 2012). It is acknowledged as one of the primary markers of brand value in the country, and is also the most highly publicised. This was a true David and Goliath story given the relative size of each company, and especially given the proportional advertising spend each company invested in the South African market. Both brands are ubiquitous, but Coca-Cola managed to outspend its closest rival by 94% in advertising outlay (TNS Global 2011b). Both Koo and Coca-Cola have been in the South African market for the same amount of time, having both been introduced in 1940 (Coca-Cola Sabco n.d.; Koo 2015). Despite spending 6.4% of Coca-Cola's budget in 2011, and close to that in following years, Koo seems to have created a greater perception of quality and customer loyalty (Coca-Cola Sabco n.d.).

Since 2012, Koo has retained a favourable brand positioning in regard to *Sunday Times*' Top Brands measurement. It was ranked second to Coca-Cola for *Sunday Times*' Overall Favourite Brand Award in 2013 (Bizcommunity 2013) and 2014 (Media Update 2014). It also retained its position as the top tinned food brand in the country in both years. The brand's relatively small size in comparison to Coca-Cola makes it a worthwhile, if not a direct, product-level competitor, for Koo does not produce consumer beverages that compete with Coca-Cola's products. Its 2011 and 2012 awards were notable because the company's strategy was, very simply, to use traditional narrative branding methodology to attain impressive consumer penetration and knowledge about the brand. The strategy behind the company's initial dominance over Coca-Cola in 2011 is the research focus of this article.

### **Koo and the *Sunday Times* Survey**

The annual *Sunday Times* Top Brand Survey was in its 13th year in 2011 and provided what was called a "representative snapshot" across various categories: 33 in the general consumer space and 13 categories in the business landscape (TNS Global 2011b). To offer further insight into the survey, brands are rated by ranking "brand familiarity", where respondents are allowed to rate brands they feel comfortable giving an opinion on, and by rating user experience. This enables people who know about certain brands to rank, on a scale from 1 to 10, their experience with the brand. These results are further broken down, and are scrutinised according to consumers who actually use the brand, and respondents who

simply know a great deal about it. This allows for inferences to be made regarding how users *respond* to the brand as opposed to how non-users *perceive* the brand. Finally, the brand's relative size in its market is considered. More specifically, there were 3000 face-to-face interviews in the seven major metropolitan areas of South Africa, using the random sampling method (by suburb). Males and females, over the age of 18, of all racial groups were involved. In addition to this, 500 face-to-face interviews in the non-metropolitan areas using random suburb sampling were conducted using the same social categories (TNS Global 2011b).

The winners in the national category were divided into 24 sections with the top prizes or "grands prix" going to companies with the best marketing personality organised into classifications such as "South Africa's overall favourite brand", the brand involved in the greatest "community upliftment", and the "best green company" (TNS Global 2011c). The respondents who identified themselves as users of the brand had to have bought it in the last month in the tinned goods category, and in the soft drink category, the brand had to have been consumed in the past month. The winning index score was calculated using the brand's "relative advantage on the delivery scale" by comparing ratings within the category. Additionally, all character categories were anchored within a specific time. In the case of canned food and soft drinks it was one month (*ibid.*).

Using this "relative advantage" index score, Koo ranked at a score of 93.96 as opposed to Coca-Cola at 92.85 (TNS Global 2011c). Koo could boast that 72% of the respondents in the category had actually used the brand in the last month, while non-users were "aware enough to rate [the brand]". This means that 100% of those interviewed are knowledgeable enough about the brand in order to rank it. Users ranked Koo at an average 9.05, while non-users rated it at 7.84 (*ibid.*). Of those interviewed for Lucky Star, Koo's nearest tinned goods competitor, only 58% of the respondents were users. These users only rated the brand at 8.93 (*ibid.*).

The methodology employed by the TNS Research Surveys was meant to examine "a brand's or retailer's penetration in the marketplace" (TNS Global 2011b). The index comes from three variables derived from the questions above: The actual usage of a brand or outlet in a specified time period, the rating it receives from its users relative to others in the category, and the rating it receives from those non-users aware of it, also relative to competitors in the category. The non-user rating carries only half the weight of the user rating in the final algorithm (*ibid.*). The variables that the index measures are meant to reflect the "actual usage of a brand or outlet in a specified time period, the rating it receives from its users [compared] to [...] the rating it receives from those non-users aware of it, also relative to competitors in the category" (*ibid.*).

According to the research findings of a TNS Global survey, “a winner occurs in one of three situations” (TNS Global 2011b):

- ◆ if it is big AND rated above average by both its users and its non-users;
- ◆ if it is truly big but perhaps only rated as average by its users and non-users; or
- ◆ if it is smaller but very well loved by its users and is strongly aspired to by its non-users.

Thus Koo, a brand with far less invested in itself than Coca-Cola and hardly known outside of the confines of Southern Africa, had nonetheless had tremendous penetration within South Africa. It boasted 100% recognition, and a high value by both users and non-users. Koo’s brand, therefore, seems to have outshone Coca-Cola’s, at least according to the (well-respected) methodology of the *Sunday Times* competition and ranking.

As indicated above, research into the methodology of how Koo managed to upset Coca-Cola indicated that the Koo brand itself spent only 6.4% of Coca-Cola’s direct advertising spend in South Africa (Coca-Cola Sabco n.d.). Or, more specifically, R12 million (approximately \$1.09 million USD) compared to the R193 million (\$17.5 million USD) of Coca-Cola (Coca-Cola Sabco n.d.). Whereas Coca-Cola spent significant amounts on advertising in weekly newspapers, committee news, consumer magazines, financial magazines, television, radio, outdoor advertising, daily newspapers, cinema advertising, and Internet advertising, Koo chose to focus only on weekly newspapers, consumer magazines, radio, television, and, significantly, outdoor advertising. It is also significant that Coca-Cola spent more money on outdoor advertising than Koo (R34 559 445 versus R3 776 710) (Mabaso 2011). These numbers hardly present what an advertising giant Coca-Cola represents in South Africa and indeed outside of the country’s borders. Coca-Cola’s spending in South Africa is immense, and its presence stretches across the African continent. Africans buy 36 billion bottles of Coke per year; one study conducted by the University of South Carolina suggested that 1% of South Africa’s entire economy (R17.5 billion/\$1.5 billion) was in some way connected to Coca-Cola’s operations (Moore School of Business 2005). During the 2010 Soccer World Cup, which was held in South Africa, estimates pointed to the company putting as much as \$600 million or R6.6 billion into World Cup advertising alone, including paying \$124 million (approximately R1.3 billion) for sponsorship rights and spending \$475 million (over R5 billion) on worldwide advertising (Bauerlein 2010). Coca-Cola’s annual revenue worldwide is \$47.51 billion (or R500 billion) and it has been estimated that 96% of the world’s population recognises the Coca-Cola logo. According to the United States-based Interbrand Best Global Brands Report, as of

2013, Coca-Cola was ranked the number three brand in the world behind Apple and Google after holding the number one position since 2000 (Interbrand 2013). It comes as no surprise, then, that Coca-Cola has traditionally been the number one brand in South Africa, winning the *Sunday Times* Grand Prix every year since the rankings were instated in 1998, apart from 2011 and 2012 when Koo received this accolade. Coca-Cola's dominance as the top brand in South Africa is clearly owed to its massive advertising budget and its immense presence worldwide.

The means through which Koo dominates, not only its own sector of tinned goods but also the top overall rankings in South Africa, is illustrative of how a brand can capture the so-called hearts and minds of consumers using a portion of the advertising cost of a competitor. Koo's strategy to unseat Coca-Cola was the carefully targeted use of a narrative branding campaign. Its avowed purpose, according to the Managing Executive of Tiger Brands, Zinn Mabaso, was to present itself as "partnering with homemakers" to help them create "mouth-watering meals" (Mabaso 2011). The various advertisements were meant to "help" homemakers in tough times. The brand worked carefully to foster an "intimate" relationship with its target market. This did not mean embracing a high-tech, online approach to brand management. As Mabaso (2011) says, "We at Koo are just learning about the SMS". Nonetheless, through focusing on print, radio and outdoor advertising, this brand managed to create 100% brand recognition for itself and dominate its category.

## **STRATEGIC NARRATIVE BRANDING**

### **Outdoor advertising**

Narrative branding at its most basic level is literally and figuratively telling a story that involves the brand as a character and invites involvement from the consumer. It differs from traditional branding in that it does not simply repeat the same message over and over. Instead, it fosters a personal engagement on the part of the consumer. This is a departure from the advice offered by Ogilvy (1962: 22): "But never give up a campaign just because you have grown tired of it; housewives don't see your advertisements as often as you do. The best thing is to get a great campaign, and then continue it for several years."

Instead, narrative branding is best suited to a brand that is looking for methods to keep consumers attached to an ever-developing narrative around the brand. Furthermore, it creates entertainment out of the brand by making the brand a character in the story that reflects the personal narratives told by consumers about themselves. It engages consumers by entertaining and involving them. Understanding narrative branding, however, is only useful if the manner in which a brand actually sets out to appeal to a target market is identifiable. In the case of

South Africa, the company identified that homeowners across the buying spectrum, but with a particular concentration at the lower Living Standards Measures (LSMs), were looking for assistance in providing “mouth-watering meals” for their families. There was a cultural resonance that equated using the brand with providing for the family and gaining accolades from family members. Most of the outdoor advertising that Koo spent its money on was concentrated around the end-of-the-year holidays, when many of the country’s urban Africans travel to rural homes. The billboards placed on both sides of the roads communicated concepts of home and good cooking. More than that, the signs were in all of the 11 official languages of South Africa. This, according to Mabaso (2011), is the company’s answer to this question: “Does the brand speak my language?”. According to Mabaso, “South African consumers trust brands that communicate to consumers in their own language”. Interestingly, the belief on the part of Koo was that “English does not ‘connect’ to non-first language speakers... [as] people ‘own’ the brand through language” (*ibid.*). The taglines that are used in the outdoor advertising campaigns, for instance, lose a great deal of meaning when translated into English, but resonate in local languages and cultures. This purposeful move away from a coherent single-message brand campaign to a diverse campaign, designed to appeal to various cultural backgrounds, is at the heart of the narrative branding campaign. Therefore, a campaign that speaks the right language will be more effective.

An example of this is the billboard that reads “Jealous down”. Under the prominent Koo can is the tagline “It’s the best you can do”. The picture is of a woman serving a bowl of beans to an older and a younger male, who look suitably impressed. The “Jealous down” statement is a colloquialism favoured among the isiXhosa community that could be translated as “I am so impressed that I am jealous, and my eyes are down in appreciation”. Indeed, foregrounded in the advertisement is the concept that the serving of the food will result in appreciation from the receivers of the food, even though the beans are relatively difficult to see. The “It’s the best you can do” tagline reinforces that by using Koo, the female homemaker (women are almost always shown as serving food to males in Koo advertisements), will earn praise for her excellent cooking. The narrative invites the viewer to strive for that same recognition, for doing “the best you can do”, from those who receive the relatively simple meals provided. It posits a clear understanding that the point of serving the meals is to gain familial standing. It also shows the woman as the server, who is able to wield considerable influence within the advertisement because she creates the feeling of “jealous down” from the receivers of the food. In other words, to serve Koo is to gain the upper hand in the familial setting. The advertisement shows the reaction from the men at the table, and the pleased, yet respectful, expression on their faces is an illustration of what creates the “jealous down” feeling on the part of another woman who might also be at the table, or

be witnessing this social and familial victory. It allows the viewer to experience vicariously the feeling of giving respect to the woman who has served the mouth-watering meal to her family, and to be a part of the family's homage.

## Television

This sentiment is further underlined in the Koo television advertisement entitled "Love Story"<sup>2</sup>, as part of the "Everyone has a Koo story: What's yours?" campaign. It shows a woman, once again, telling a story about meeting Thabo as a child and winning his heart by serving him Koo (Mabaso 2011). The story then progresses to the woman as a married, successful woman who still retains Thabo's heart because of her buying and serving the Koo product. The two subjects in the advertisement have moved from a township environment (there is even a pennywhistle soundtrack to this part of the story), to what appears as a more middle class lifestyle. Through this change in LSMs, Koo has remained, and the woman has grown in stature in the eyes of her husband and family. This narrative continuity informs most of Koo's advertising and positions the brand itself as an enabler of a dynamic whereby the server managed to gain the admiration of those served. The simple narrative of the outdoor advertising encourages the consumer to equate the serving of Koo with the building of a family, and in turn with the rise of the homemaker's status within the household. The product taps into a much larger narrative of "home" and "respect" that is already ongoing, especially during the holiday season.

Of course, the story that is told in the "Everyone has a Koo story: What's yours?" campaign has been carefully scripted and filmed to appear as if it is a kind of archival memory from an average black South African family. The story opens with a shot of what looks like a township house, made of cinderblocks, with an adult female voiceover while two black children, a male and a female, play outside. The narrator says, "I remember the day I stole Thabo's heart...", followed by laughter. The girl serves the boy the product from a Koo tin, and the boy samples it. He then turns to her and says in Setswana "re a leboga moratoa waka", or "Thank you my respected love" (Ndlela 2014).

The almost courtly language of the boy to the girl indicates that she has literally won his respect, and therefore his love. The television advertisement is not given subtitles for the non-Setswana speaking audience as the narrative, presumably, would be lost on them. It is easy to see that whatever the boy is saying is a romantic endearment, but the target audience that equates serving food with winning the admiration of the family, and winning the respect and love of a husband, is picking up a slightly different but important narrative. Winning the respect of the family in order to gain a man's hand in marriage is almost universal, yet the interesting element of the commercial is that it additionally enhances the narrative of respect.

It accomplishes this by suggesting that the brand can help a woman capture a man's love and maintain it over the years as she cares for her family. More importantly, the carefully chosen words of the boy indicate that the girl's means of illustrating the respect due to her is through serving Koo. It also suggests a maturity and strength beyond her years, as later we see her serving the exact same product as a grown woman with a family. This is a clear overture to female customers. The serving of Koo marks a woman as extraordinary, worthy of respect, and worthy of marriage. Later, the narrative will carry over into a woman's role as the maternal provider.

Superimposed upon this narrative of romance and respect is the narrative of upward mobility. As the scene changes in the advertisement, a subtitle flashes on the screen saying "years later..." as South African jazz plays. The two children have grown into their thirties and have their own children who come running into a much more lavish, but still middle class, house to be served the same Koo product. Interestingly, the man is sitting down and looking up adoringly at his standing wife as she serves him the same delicious beans that won him over in the first place. Foregrounded, just outside the shot with her back to the camera, is another woman sitting, presumably one of the grandmothers, looking on approvingly. The narrator says, "Everyone has a Koo story, what's yours?" hereby inviting the audience to participate in the narrative, or to see themselves in this story. The picture then shrinks to a framed photo on the mantelpiece of what looks like a fireplace, and on the wall, once again, we see printed in neat handwriting "Everyone has a Koo story, what's yours?" along with the Koo logo and tagline "It's the best you can do".

This purposeful positioning of the video's story as not merely an advertisement, but instead a re-enactment of the story, and presumably sent in by a consumer, is a sly and purposeful invitation to inclusion in the Koo narrative. This is a reflection of the social narrative of food in South Africa. The woman is seen as being wily, intelligent, and in a sense, winning over the hapless male with the help of Koo. From the moment the product is shown in the advertisement we see her as the dominant figure on the screen. Using the documentary/archival film style, the audience is led to believe that this story really happened. The perception created in the advertisement is a re-enactment, or possibly a home movie, of a "real" interaction and romance. The humble tinned food takes prominence in the advertisement, and retains its usefulness as the characters move up in the world. This reflects the ubiquitous presence of the product throughout the South African market. Research by TNS Global (2011c) indicated that buyers of the product covered every age group with a concentration of buyers between 18 and 49 years old. LSM 5 and 6 consumers made up the majority of Koo customers; LSM 7 and 8 consumers took up 24%; and LSM 9 and 10 shoppers represented 15% (*ibid.*). Indeed, the advertisement accurately reflected the hold the product has on the

lower level buyers in the country, as well as those in the middle. More specifically, the advertisements were directed at black consumers in light of the language used and the narrative codes employed.

### **Radio and print media**

The narrative of building a home, which begins on the billboards across South Africa and then migrates almost seamlessly to television, where homemaking is acted out, is continued on radio and in print. Koo tailors its strategy to each medium. In line with Barthes' work, a chapter from *Mythologies* titled *Wine and Milk*, the meaning of the Koo product can be reframed. Koo acts as a "resilient totem" as wine does to the French, and "supports a varied mythology which does not trouble about contradictions" (Barthes 1957: 58). This product allows many narratives to hang upon it, ranging from narratives of growth and respect, to love and family.

The Mama Koo Radio Hour is produced by Johannesburg agency Creatrix (2013) and was first aired in 2005 on selected radio stations. A character named Mama Koo gives listeners who call in multiple opportunities to share recipes and discuss how they use Koo products in their homes. Radio itself is one of the most effective forms of mass communication in South Africa. The SABC estimates that as of 2012 its 18 radio stations attract 25 486 million weekly listeners, comparable to its 30 248 million weekly audience for its three television stations (South Africa Government Online 2014). According to Mabaso (2011), this show is a part of the strategy that Koo has embraced as the "brand does not dictate to the consumer". Instead, "we just air what you say" as this is "intimate and empowering for stay-at-home moms". The innovation around the radio show is that Koo consistently asks listeners how they improve a simple recipe and "make it mouth-watering". Despite hard economic times, Mabaso (2011) says, Koo tells listeners that "you can still make a mouth-watering meal at an affordable price". The popularity of the radio show has solidified Mama Koo's association with the brand itself. Mama Koo is a character in an ongoing, inclusive drama that involves listeners and gives them a means of agency. Mama Koo in effect acts as the personification of the brand itself, and the brand is consistently reaching out and seeking to include consumers in the all-pervasive journey to gain status and respect in the household through providing "mouth-watering" meals. The show has gone on to create its own Facebook presence, a spinoff television feature, and, according to Creatrix (2013), "continues to be loved by audiences who perceive [the show] as programming and not as advertising". This perception of the show as entertainment rather than advertising illustrates the power of this kind of narrative branding.

Part of the effectiveness of this element of the advertising campaign is its simplicity. The figure of Mama Koo even finds her way into print advertising.

Advertisements that appeared in print show a mock letter from Mama Koo. On the adjacent page, recipes are set in index cards that have been appropriately aged to look as if they have come from a well-used kitchen. The letter is effective in that the Koo logo is placed at the top of the letter, and is printed in simple italic comic font to replicate freehand writing. The letter contains an appeal to readers to send in their stories. The letter reads as follows (Mabaso 2011):

Hello beautiful Koo Mama's, Mamasutsa's, Nosibillboco's (sic) and Bobaaskokke

Since I've been hosting the Mama KOO radio show, I've been captivated by your letters and recipes. So many of your stories are so special, it's really hard to choose which ones to feature. I truly appreciate you taking the time to share your special KOO moments and recipes with me.

I'd like to invite you to be part of my show every week, and connect with women who inspire each other to prepare mouth-watering meals for their families. I believe that everyone has a KOO story. Write to me to share your KOO stories, memories and secret recipes. If your story is chosen to be featured on my show, I'll send you a Mama Koo hamper worth R1500.

Listen to my show on the following radio stations: RSG, Lotus FM, Ukhozi FM, Umhlobo Wenene FM, Motswedding FM and Lesedi FM.

It's that time of year again. The festive season is here and you are going to be receiving lots of visitors and spending quality time with friends and family. No gathering is complete without mouth-watering soul food, so I've shared some of my listeners' secret recipes to help you create even more KOO memorable soul moments.

I look forward to reading your stories. Please post them to: Mama Koo, Private Bag X18, Rivonia 2128

Happy memories,

Mama KOO

In this letter, we see the basic taglines of KOO being promoted: The concept of "mouth-watering meals", as well as the "inspirational" women who "prepare mouth-watering meals for their families". More interesting is the invitation to consumers to include themselves on the show by sending in stories and indeed memories and secret recipes. It is not enough for listeners to enter the competition with their name and address. The letter solicits the listeners to actually provide their own stories in order to gain inclusion in the Mama KOO narrative, which is, of course, the KOO narrative of women finding ways to provide for their families.

The call for “secret” recipes is a call for a kind of confession – the sharing of private information with an older, more experienced character (Mama Koo). In this case, Koo has created an initial “story” that invites consumer participation. However, if one considers the main ways through which it tells the story, one sees how “traditional” media can work incredibly effectively against larger, wealthier competitors that can easily dominate the high-tech landscape.

### **TRANSMEDIA STORYTELLING AND ‘THE LAST SALESMAN’**

Koo depends primarily upon outdoor advertising, print advertising, and radio to promote its tagline “It’s the best you can do”, and to help consumers produce “mouth-watering meals for their families”. The brand’s story is perhaps best encapsulated in its television commercial. The girl wins the respect and admiration of the boy through serving Koo. Koo has thus “helped” her not only to feed her friend, but also to capture his respect, engendering the “jealous down” reaction we have seen in the billboards. Koo then assists the woman in retaining the man’s affection and respect over the years, and as a by-product, the woman’s living standard is raised as well as her stature in the eyes of her family. Koo helps to make this happen. Scolari (2009: 587, quoting Jenkins *et al.* 2006) says that transmedia stories such as these have unique, powerful features, for this is a narrative that is told across three different mediums, and transmedia stories “are stories told across multiple media. At the present time, the most significant stories tend to flow across multiple media platforms.” The salient point, however, is that (*ibid.*)

Each medium does what it does best — so that a story might be introduced in a film, expanded through television, novels, and comics, and its world might be explored and experienced through game play. Each franchise entry needs to be self-contained enough to enable autonomous consumption. That is, you don’t need to have seen the film to enjoy the game and vice-versa.

Because each media essentially works to its strengths, the whole picture of the Koo story can only be absorbed through a bird’s eye view of the entire story (i.e. the campaign). Each consumer, however, enters into the “story” through whatever media they consume, and each layer of the story expands simultaneously with the media platform. The story of the Koo brand helping the homemaker resonates in different ways with different consumers. Though if the characters in the television commercials and advertisements represent the consumers, and invite their inclusion in the story itself, then Mama Koo is the embodiment of the Koo brand. Herein lays the effectiveness of the Koo strategy: Their entire brand is constructed on a narrative of building a family using a recognisable character, like Mama Koo, who addresses consumers on a personal level in print and radio media.

In the case of Koo, there is also the actual space on the labelling of each can itself that acts as a place holder where the brand can speak to consumers. Wasink and Se-Bum (2004, in Keller 2012: 176) provides the following insight into the consumer psychology of labelling:

Packaging can be such an important brand building tool that it is sometimes called the '5<sup>th</sup> P'. Since it is estimated that the majority of brand choice decisions are made at the point of purchase, the right package can instantly catch a consumer's eye, communicate value, reinforce the brand's equity, and provide key comparison information.

According to Keller (2012: 176), "Many managers think the package's main purpose is to encourage purchase. For many consumers, the package keeps on marketing the brand and influencing consumers long after it is purchased." It has been called "the last salesman" and is an integral part of keeping customers aware of the brand after the sale. Its importance can hardly be underestimated as a means of continuing the customer engagement cycle. The packaging of the product, and the attendant labelling, is a means through which consumers can hold a conversation with the brand. An example from the United States might be the immense success of Spanx, a womenswear brand that specialises in tights and form fitting undergarments. Sara Blakely, the founder of the brand, is one of the world's youngest self-made female billionaires at the age of 41 (O'Connor 2012). In 2012, *Forbes* magazine profiled the brand, noting that it eschewed digital and above-the-line advertising in favour of word of mouth and the effect of the packaging (*ibid.*). The packaging worked at two levels: it was bright and eye-catching in an otherwise dull shelf space of pantyhose, and it even had cardboard inserts with cartoons "like in Bazooka bubblegum" that was meant to encourage women to collect all of them. The jokes inside the packaging were risqué but maintained the consumer's engagement with the brand after the purchase (*ibid.*).

In the case of Koo, the consumer engagement worked even when the company was not making an effort to interact with consumers. In 2011, according to Mabaso (2011), an announcement of a forthcoming competition, placed on the packaging of the product, garnered over 300 000 letters sent directly to the company address enquiring about how to enter. This kind of customer engagement is the aim of hosting a competition. The can itself is a space where the company shares information with consumers who may not have access to the Internet or even the radio.

Studies into the effectiveness of packaging as a brand building tool, an underrepresented segment of the branding field, have found that information about the product on the packaging in the food retail environment can create desire for the product at the point of sale and keep customers interested in the long term:

For products such as food items, where the product is often not in its final form, the shopper frequently has to rely on the package to develop an impression of the product in its prepared state. Product managers and design firms therefore seek to create packages that break through the clutter of the marketplace and communicate positive aesthetic, experiential, functional, symbolic and or informational benefits to the consumer (Underwood & Ozanne 1998: 208).

In Southern Africa, Coca-Cola has stuck with its highly recognisable packaging scheme, and has depended on its massive presence throughout the world to carry off its brand recognition. Additionally, the company has embraced multi-platform narrative branding. In 2013, the company embraced a “storytelling” strategy, encouraging customers to become part of the Coca-Cola *Journey* (Van Bael 2013). A 2013-2014 South African initiative asks users to “Share a Coke” with other users. The company created a range of individual standard size and colour Coke cans using 600 of the most popular South African first names imprinted where the Coca-Cola logo is traditionally placed (Fastmoving 2013). The same font and typography was observed, essentially co-opting each name into the company’s marketing. There is a related online initiative at [www.shareacoke.co.za](http://www.shareacoke.co.za) that allows one user to type a name on a virtual Coke can and share it on the various social networking sites. At a series of events throughout South Africa, the company gave away personalised cans to consumers. This is a notable change for a company that has been highly protective of its packaging, and is perhaps an affirmation of the ways in which South African consumers interact with their favourite brands via their packaging. This initiative was implemented at the same time as Coca-Cola’s retention of its number one position as South Africa’s top brand in the 2013 *Sunday Times* Top Brands ranking (TNS Global 2013).

Jonathan Middenhall, Coca-Cola’s global head of advertising, referred to the campaign as the “very best” of the company’s innovative advertising (Fastmoving 2013). A television advertisement followed that featured a dog searching for his name in lights. South Africa was the first African country to air this campaign, called “Share a Coke with Bobby” (Fastmoving 2013). Of course, these are campaigns with a technologically advanced feel, and that depend greatly on “content marketing”, or online sharing of entertainment. While Coca-Cola’s signage throughout South Africa is ubiquitous, these signs do not tell a story behind the simple emblazoning of the Coca-Cola name.

Koo, on the other hand, notably has a comparatively small online presence. It might be posited that despite Coca-Cola’s dominance in terms of the sheer amount of signage and advertising it uses to bombard consumers across all advertising spaces available to it, Koo’s approach was focused, consistent, and more emotionally

moving to a select and large target market. The research illustrates that it is true that all South Africans have a Koo story to tell, and the much smaller brand has offered to let them tell it. Importantly, Koo is a genuinely South African brand in character and language, a brand that manages to be all things to all people, whether they are listening to the Mama Koo Radio Hour, reading the signage in their own language, or simply buying out of passive habit. The signage and the packaging of the Koo brand manages to appeal to all demographics with much less fanfare and bombast than Coke, and with almost equal effect.

## CONCLUSION

Koo's strength lies in the fact that it "tells a [consistent] story" about respect and family over all of the media at its disposal. Koo does not use a blanket media strategy, but instead uses traditional, inexpensive media to link its brand narrative to the consumer. Its efficacy is clear. The brand uses only a fraction of the advertising budget of Coca-Cola to get essentially the same result. Notably, the respondents for each sector, namely tinned foods and soft drinks, offered a clustering of population around the same LSM levels. In other words, it cannot be argued that Coca-Cola is attempting to appeal to a lower LSM that might not have ready access to movie theatre, television and Internet advertising, for example. This is simply not the case. The Koo product clearly has a large presence across the buying spectrum in South Africa, and has garnered immense customer loyalty across the entire population.

The narrative itself, however, clearly has a myriad of different meanings to different consumers. While the outdoor signage and the radio show clearly are aimed at the black consumer, the printed advertising and the actual packaging tell the same story to those consumers who may love the Koo product but who may be unaware of the meanings behind much of the advertising. It can be argued, in fact, that there may not be any one set of consumers in South Africa who is exposed to all of the Koo advertising in all of its formats. All of the advertising is linked in terms of its theme and general narrative, but it might come as a surprise to even a loyal Koo buyer in one of the higher LSMs that the Mama Koo Radio Hour, the brand's strongest and most expensive platform, even exists. By the same measure, those exposed to the outdoor advertising, and who buy the Koo product loyally, may never visit the company's website or read its print advertising. The point of sale may be the only interaction some consumers may have with the brand. According to Underwood and Ozanne (1998), this is a standard element of the branding of fast-moving packed goods: the split-second decision a customer makes in the aisle to purchase the product out of loyalty or recognition. Herein lies the strength of narrative branding, the creation of a set of characters and an ongoing, evolving story that lends multiple entries into the narrative. The meaning

of the product is utterly elastic. Like Barthes's French wine, the humble Koo tin of food is "essentially a function whose terms can change" (Barthes 1997: 29). The many connected, but still varied, representations of the Koo product echoes Barthes's contention that food or drink might have "apparently plastic powers: it can serve as an alibi to dream as well as reality, it depends on the users of the myth" (*ibid.*). The myth here is obvious: Koo cannot guarantee familial or social success, its role in the courtship between township people two decades ago is hard to gauge, and Mama Koo, as endearing as she might be, is a fictional character.

It cannot be said that South African consumers prefer more traditional types of advertising, but it can be asserted that the effectiveness of this advertising cannot be denied in the South African retail climate. The pictures of delicious food on the packaging, though far removed from what is actually in the tin, can actually lend a part in the narrative itself, showing the buyer what is possible through buying the product. Koo, it should be recalled, tries to "help" homemakers create "mouth-watering" meals. What is pictured on the can is what is possible, not what is inside the can itself. Thus, Koo sidesteps the "duplicity" of communication mentioned by Habermas (1984) in his theory of communicative competence. Underwood and Ozanne (1998: 207) posit that there is a degree "distortion" in the most "postmodern marketplace". However, in this case, the distortion is in fact part of the narrative of mouth-watering meals that in turn is part of a narrative of family, respect and social mobility that is integral to the narrative of the New South Africa. Coca-Cola, of course, has ensured that its brand is shown in even more proportion than Koo. Coca-Cola advertisements are aired on a grand scale on millions of outdoor signs, on radio and on television. Nevertheless, this may be the reason that Coca-Cola's narrative is simply not as compelling as Koo's.

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*Endnotes*

- <sup>1</sup> All the figures are cited according to the rate of exchange between the South African rand and the America dollar at the time of writing this article (August 2014).
- <sup>2</sup> To view this advertisement see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RliuPURhNYE>

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