

Decision of the ADVERTISING REGULATORY BOARD

Complainant	Ms Christelle Wessels
Advertiser	Vodacom (Pty) Ltd
Consumer/Competitor	Consumer
File reference	726 – Vodacom – Christelle Wessels
Outcome	Dismissed
Date	20 March 2020

The Directorate of the Advertising Regulatory Board has been called upon to consider a complaint lodged by Ms Wessels against a television commercial promoting Vodacom's Father and Son Campout event scheduled for 28 March 2020.

Description of the advertising

The commercial opens with a son engaged in virtual reality gaming, while his mother is preparing supper. The mother receives a video call from the father, who appears to be sitting in a boardroom or office. The mother calls the son over to join in the conversation. As the father apologises for having to work late again, he informs the son that "... there's a surprise for you, outside". The mother and son make their way outside to see the father, who drops his fake office background to reveal a tent and two Blue Bull rugby players standing beside two camping chairs.

The excited son rushes to hug his father, while the voice-over states, "Vodacom gives fathers and sons the opportunity to camp out at Loftus. Brought to you by Vodacom ONE

Family. Register today”. Details about the date of the event and where to register then appear on-screen.

Complaint

The Complainant submitted that this exclusive event excludes any other potential parent-child combination than that of father and son. However, it is a South African reality that many, if not most, families are single-parent households. The commercial perpetuates gender stereotyping by showing the mother busy with domestic chores while the father spends time outside with his son.

Response

Marketing and communications agency Openfield, on behalf of the Advertiser, explained that the commercial forms part of a broader “present father” initiative, which seeks to leverage the positive impact a father has on a boy’s prospects for success. It is not only for biological fathers, but for any person who plays a positive “father” role in the life of a young boy. Previous campaigns have incorporated uncles and other positive male role models.

Practically, this campaign does not cater for a blended attendance, because the safety and privacy concerns for women are different to those for men. This is, however, the only reason why women are not specifically targeted as part of this campaign, and is a justifiable and reasonable approach.

The Advertiser also runs campaigns targeted specifically at women such as, for example, its upcoming Durban July campaign, which targets women exclusively, and will only allow female participants to win the prize.

The commercial does not dictate any stereotypical gender role. Both mother and father are clearly “in” on this surprise, which ultimately results in a son enjoying a camping trip

with his father. Objectively speaking, it is not in breach of the relevant provisions of the Code.

Application of the Code of Advertising Practice

The following clauses were considered in this matter:

- Discrimination - Section II, Clause 3.4
- Gender - Section II, Clause 3.5

Decision

Having considered all the material before it, the Directorate of the ARB issues the following finding.

The Directorate firstly notes that the event itself has, of course, been cancelled due to the Covid 19 crisis. However, as the event will be rescheduled and the advertising may be used again, the Directorate still needs to make a decision on the issues.

It was also noted that the Directorate cannot make a decision on the event itself – only on the advertising thereof.

The Complainant took issue with the fact that this campaign focusses exclusively on fathers and sons, when the South African society has very high incidences of single-parent households. She also argued that the mother is portrayed as “busy doing domestic chores” while the father gets to spend time with his son outdoors, which perpetuates negative gender stereotyping.

Clause 3.4 of Section II reads as follows:

“No advertisements may contain content of any description that is discriminatory, unless, in the opinion of the ARB, such discrimination is reasonable and justifiable in an open and democratic society based on human dignity, equality and freedom”.

Clause 4.15 of Section I defines “Discrimination” as any act or omission, including a policy, law, rule, practice, condition or situation which directly or indirectly imposes burdens or obligations, or withholds benefits or privileges from any person on the basis of, *inter alia*, race, gender, sexual orientation, language or culture.

It appears that the Complainant is firstly concerned with the fact that the Advertiser appears to be excluding single mothers from this event.

The Advertiser explained that this campaign supports a broader “present father” initiative, intended to encourage fathers or father-figures to positively influence the lives of young boys or sons. It also explained that it limits this event to males for reasons of safety and privacy concerns, and that it balances this with other events which focus exclusively on women.

While it would certainly be unfortunate for advertisers to actively alienate or exclude a particular gender in advertising purely for the sake of excluding such a gender, the Directorate is not convinced that this is the case here.

The Advertiser explained that this forms part of a larger “present father” initiative, which specifically seeks to entrench the role of fathers (or father-figures) in the lives of young boys. While it is a pity that the advertising does not make it clearer that the event was open to father-figures, as well as actual fathers, the Directorate felt that against the backdrop of South Africa’s excessively high gender-based-violence and femicide rate, the advertising for such an event does not seem inappropriate or unjustifiably discriminatory.

The commercial conveys this message in an endearing manner, by surprising a young boy with the prospects of this camping event when he was expecting to have to eat dinner without his father present. It does not exclude women in a vindictive or arbitrary manner and does not appear to discriminate against them in a manner that contravenes the Code.

Accordingly, the commercial is not discriminatory or in contravention of Clause 3.4 of Section II of the Code.

The Complainant also took issue with the roles the parents take in the commercial.

Clause 3.5 of Section II reads:

“Gender stereotyping or negative gender portrayal must not be permitted in advertising, unless in the opinion of the ARB, such stereotyping or portrayal is reasonable and justifiable in an open and democratic society based on human dignity, equality and freedom”.

The Complainant appears to be of the view that the mother’s actions of preparing supper while the father gets to enjoy outdoors activities with his son entrenches the stereotypical role of mothers and women as those who cook and clean, whereas the fathers either have to work late or get to relax.

The Advertiser disputed this narrative and submitted that the mother was “in” on the surprise and the resulting excitement. It added that the commercial does not dictate to viewers how they should perceive any specific gender, and that the ARB should not be put in a position where it is called on to dictate which genders and artists may be used in commercial executions.

The Directorate is expected to consider the commercial from the perspective of a viewer who is not oversensitive or hypercritical in deciding whether the gender stereotypes portrayed are harmful or demeaning. It has also been accepted that the use of negative gender stereotypes in advertising may contribute to the ongoing and systemic gender inequality so prevalent in South African society.

Members of the Directorate did have a slight discomfort with the clear traditional gender divide shown in the roles of the parents. The mother was, for example, busy with the house and dinner and showed no evidence of any other abilities such as a career, while the father slaved away at the office with no participation in child care or house work. Advertisers need to start being more creative in how they depict family situations.

This said, reasonability dictates that a distinction needs to be drawn between instances where a particular gender happens to be doing something, and instances where the advertising appears to coerce a particular gender into behaving in a stereotypical way, which serves to reinforce such a stereotype. In the matter at hand, the possibly stereotypical actions of the mother and the father are necessary for the story in the commercial to play out. The gender roles could not be turned on their heads, as the advertisement is for a father-son sleep out, so it was necessary that the father be the one who plays the trick on the child, and the mother be the one who managed the pretence in the house.

The Directorate therefore does not believe that this commercial communicates a negative gender stereotype in a manner that contravenes Clause 3.5 of Section II of the Code.