

Brands and belonging

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Can brands be part of the journey to satisfy our need to belong?

How can brands reach young audiences at a time of uncertainty? We can't predict the changes that Covid-19 will bring. But we can be proactive and form strategies based on the things that are unlikely to change, no matter what happens: the fundamental needs of all human beings, and the behaviour we engage in to satisfy our needs.

The most familiar way of thinking about needs is that of Abraham Maslow, which divides human needs into five categories: physiological, safety and security, belonging, self-esteem, and self-actualisation. Yellowwood conducted a survey, the Ask Y Study, which found that South Africans are not satisfied with their sense of safety and security, which is not surprising and are most satisfied in their sense of self-esteem, which is encouraging.

The study also shows that the need to belong is more important than any of the other needs. In other words, if a South African feels that they belong – to a family, a peer group, a community, an identity group – and if they are recognised and valued for their contributions to society, they are more likely to feel satisfied in their other needs.

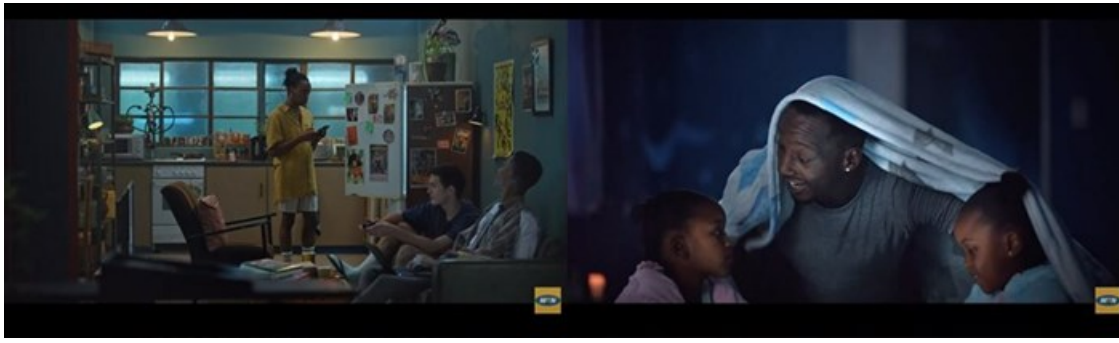
The pandemic is a shock to our physiological need for health. However, the scientifically approved ways of 'flattening the curve' – societal lockdown and social distancing – have a negative effect on our sense of belonging. Our inability to connect with friends and family outside our homes is taking a toll on our mental health. When we emerge from the lockdown, we will be seeking out ways to connect, perhaps more than usual. Presenting an opportunity for brands to play a part in satisfying people's need to belong.

The obvious is for brands to create opportunities for young people to connect with each other. The lockdown and social distancing have shown us the potential of technologically driven ways to communicate and connect. This has been most beneficial for communications technology and social media, but other businesses can capitalise on this trend. The Africa Youth Survey 2020 shows that African youth are highly connected; 86% own a smartphone and 89% say that their most-used apps are social media.

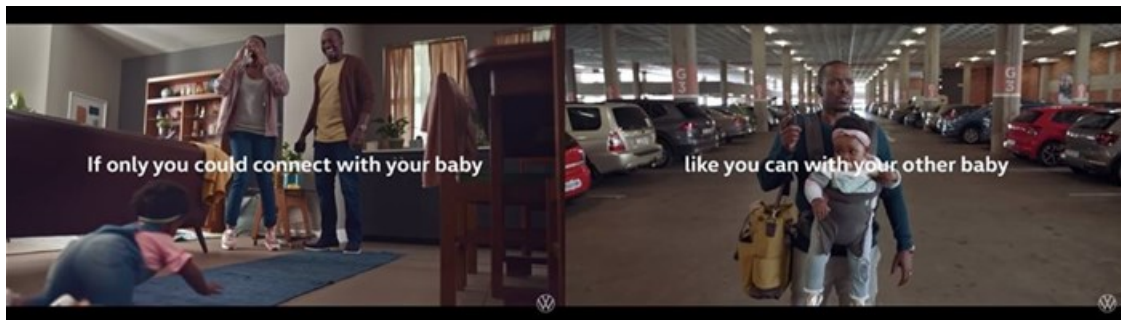
A striking example is TikTok, which is the most downloaded app of 2020 so far and has six million users in South Africa. The South African Social Media Landscape report for 2020, by World Wide Worx and Orinico, suggests that TikTok has a higher and a faster rate of engagement than Facebook or Twitter because their model is one of shared creativity making it hardwired for engagement.

Aside from facilitating actual connections, brands can create messaging that resonates with the 'metaphor' of connection. Studies in marketing have shown that all cultures have deep mental constructs or metaphors that recur constantly in our speech and thinking. One of our core metaphors is belonging, making images of connection resonate with us on an instinctual level and creating positive and compelling associations.

One way to activate our associations with belonging is to emphasize archetypes of connection – families, friend groups, couples. The MTN "Mathata Towers" advert, emphasises the human connections made possible by communications technology, even during enforced social distancing.



Another way of provoking emotions that an audience associates with belonging is to emphasize the *human* elements of connection in your imaging: touching, personal contact, the elements of our social interaction that happen 'offline'. A good recent example of this approach is the Volkswagen advert for their We Connect Go app, which shows a man's connection with a baby, which in turn enforces the emotional connection he (and thus the viewer) has with the product.



The most authentic way to engage with the universal need to belong is to embed a brand in a broader community, acknowledge and accept social responsibility, and make connection a core part of the brand's identity. Brand South Africa, the official marketing and PR agency of the country, has taken this approach with their 2020 advert, "South Africa, the home of humanity". It does this by positioning locals as being open and caring towards others and defines the 'brand' of South Africa as one of belonging, acceptance and community.



While young people are less at risk of being seriously affected by the virus. Their lives are being shaped by the changes the pandemic is visiting on the world and, particularly, on the country. Changes that are likely to have an effect far into the future, forcing young people to ask questions they didn't have to before: When will I see my friends and extended family again? When will I be able to go back to school or university? Will I be able to get a job one day, with businesses closing all around me?

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