

Decision of the ADVERTISING REGULATORY BOARD

Advertiser	Coca-Cola Africa (Pty) Ltd
Consumer/Competitor	Consumer
File reference	4316 – Coca-Cola
Outcome	Dismissed
Date	10 December 2026

The Directorate of the Advertising Regulatory Board has been called upon to consider a consumer complaint against Coca-Cola Africa’s “Be a Bok” advertising campaign.

Description of the advertising

The campaign appears in multiple formats, including billboards, television commercials, in-store activations and packaging. Some examples are:





Complaint

The Complainant stated that the Advertisement is for an unhealthy product, endorsed by celebrities, which, she says, contravenes the social values and endorsement portion of the

Code on Food and Beverages. She states that the Advertisement creates the expectation of unattainable product benefits – that by drinking a Coke, a consumer can “Be a Bok”.

She highlights that the billboard was placed at the escalators near the movies, arcade and food court in Rosebank, and was thus targeted at children.

The Complainant further stated that consuming sugary drinks would more likely than not undermine an effort to become a world-class athlete like the Springboks. “There is a well-documented health-halo effect that comes from associating products with athletes and sports people,” she said. “It creates the impression in consumers that the product is associated with healthy athletes.”

She further noted that the Advertisement contains no qualifications about the consumption and the health harms of sugary drinks, nor does it mention that excessive consumption of sugary drinks would undermine health.

Response

The Advertiser responded, *inter alia*, that the assertion that the slogan “Be a Bok” misleads the public into believing that consuming Coca-Cola would turn them into professional athletes is unfounded and misinterprets the campaign’s intent. The Advertiser stated: “The ‘Be a Bok’ campaign is rooted in South Africa’s deep national pride in the Springboks and the unifying power of rugby. The slogan is not a literal health or performance claim, but rather an aspirational call to fans to share in the Springbok spirit.”

The campaign offers fans a “unique, immersive experience that celebrates their connection to the team”. This experiential opportunity was intended to let fans “live a day in the life of a Springbok player” and included: chauffeured transport to the venue, flights and premium accommodation, behind-the-scenes access including the players’ tunnel and seeing their jerseys displayed in the locker room, meeting the team, and sitting alongside the Springboks during the game.

The Advertiser stated: “The campaign does not suggest that consuming Coca-Cola would transform someone into a professional athlete.”

The placement of the campaign near cinemas, arcades, food courts and other entertainment areas does not amount to the deliberate targeting of children, as these are mixed-used public spaces commonly frequented by adults, families and individuals of all ages. The Advertiser added that it is common industry practice to place advertisements in high-traffic areas to maximise visibility and engagement, and that this placement does not suggest any intent to market to children.

The Advertiser further stated that: “It should be noted that the Company places the highest importance on strict compliance with all national regulations, and its own Global Responsible Marketing Policy particularly in relation to communications that may reach children. The company exercises strict internal controls to ensure that this policy is consistently and rigorously applied to ensure that every marketing activity is fully aligned with applicable laws, industry pledges, and internal standards.”

The campaign makes no attempt to conceal nutritional information or sugar content, which appears on all Coca-Cola products, nor does it make the claim that Coca-Cola is a performance-enhancing beverage that will make consumers into athletes, and therefore does not contravene the Food and Beverage Code.

Finally, the Advertiser adds that the Company’s terms and conditions for the “Be a Bok” campaign expressly stipulate that participation is restricted to adults aged 18 and older. It notes that Clause 8.1 of the Code prohibits the use of celebrities in television advertising aimed at children under 12, but states that the campaign was clearly aimed at the broader South African public. The Advertiser states: “The Springboks were presented as symbols of unity and heritage, not as marketing devices directed at children. The Company therefore remains in full compliance with the Code.”

Application of the Code of Advertising Practice

The following clauses were considered in this matter:

- Clause 4.2.1 of Section II – Misleading claims;

- Clause 7 of Appendix J (Food and beverage code) – Social values;
- Clause 9 of Appendix J (Food and beverage code) – Inexperience and credulity.

Decision

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

The Complainant has stated three major areas of concern. The first is that the Advertiser's campaign promises unattainable benefits. The second is that it is targeted at children, and the third is that the association of an "unhealthy" beverage with athletes is not accompanied about any kind of disclaimer that its effects would probably undermine health.

The Directorate is therefore called upon to assess whether these areas of concern about the Advertising Campaign are in any way in contravention of various aspects of the Code. As a major area of concern is that the Campaign is targeted at children, the Directorate will rule on that aspect first.

Two sections of the Food and Beverage Code (Appendix J) were considered. Clause 7, which deals with "Social values" states: *"As it is recognised that children of twelve years old and under are impressionable, food and beverage advertising should not mislead children about product benefits from use of the product. Such benefits include, but are not limited to, the acquisition of strength, status, popularity, growth, proficiency and intelligence. Food and beverage product advertising should not undermine the role of parents or others responsible for a child's welfare in guiding diet and lifestyle choices. Food and beverage product advertising should not directly appeal to children of twelve years old and under to persuade their parents or others to buy advertised products for them; or suggest any negative consequences of not purchasing the product."*

And Clause 9, which deals with "Inexperience and credulity" states: *"Advertising directed towards children of twelve years old and under for food and beverage products should not create a sense of urgency. Subject to the provisions of Clause 9 dealing with product*

endorsement, it is recognised that fantasy, including animation, may be appropriate in communication with children. Care should, however, be taken not to exploit the imagination of a child of twelve years old and under in a way that could create expectations of unattainable product benefits or exploit a child of twelve years old and under difficulty in distinguishing between real benefits and fanciful benefits.”

The Directorate accepts that marketing of foods high in sugar and fats to children is a sensitive area, and one that should be approached with caution. The Directorate certainly experiences some discomfort with the association of the advertised product with sporting excellence and aspirations. However, it must also be accepted that the limitations on marketing to children cannot be so strictly applied that they amount to an outright ban on the Advertiser’s advertising, and the campaign must be carefully assessed to determine its likely target.

In the material at hand, the Advertiser notes that the terms and conditions of the campaign state that participation in the competition is limited to those 18 years of age or older. While this is not shared in the advertising itself, it is indicative that the Advertiser is in fact targeting adults.

Further, the Advertiser states that the placement of the escalator advertisement in proximity to a movie theatre, food court and arcade is not targeted at children, but at “adults, families and individuals”. The Directorate is not entirely comfortable with this particular argument. The placement, even on the Advertiser’s own version, is targeting families. The areas that they have chosen to place the campaign are certainly not chosen with the intention of minimizing the under 12 audience, and target those areas of a shopping mall that one would most likely find unsupervised groups of tweens.

That said, there is nothing in the wording of the campaign to suggest that the Advertiser is speaking to children, and that no children are featured in the campaign itself. Nothing in the material is crafted to particularly appeal to or attract the attention of under 12s, except in so far as this group may have an interest in sports. Overall, the Directorate concludes that while the advertising placement is not ideal, the campaign is not targeted at children.

Given this, it is not in breach of Clauses 7 or 9 of Appendix J.

Clause 4.2.1 of Section II of the Code, which deals with “Misleading claims” states: “Advertisements should not contain any statement or visual presentation which, directly or by implication, omission, ambiguity, inaccuracy, exaggerated claim or otherwise, is likely to mislead the consumer.”

The Directorate must therefore assess whether the campaign statement, “Be a Bok”, is likely to mislead the adult consumer

The Advertiser notes that the claim is aspirational, and that the concept behind “Be a Bok” is the opportunity to win an experience to live a day in the life of a Springbok. While the Directorate notes that the wording of the campaign says “Be a Bok” rather than “Live like a Bok”, which would perhaps be clearer, the Directorate ultimately believes that the average reasonable consumer (a hypothetical reasonable person who exercises average care, understanding and foresight in a given situation) will understand that there is no possibility of becoming a Springbok through participation in the “Be a Bok” campaign.

The Complainant further raised concerns about the “halo effect” of the positive association of athletes with a sugary beverage. While the Directorate notes this concern, it finds that there is no explicit claim in the campaign of any health benefit associated with drinking Coca-Cola, and again believes that the average consumer is well aware of the health risks associated with such beverages, and will not be led to believe otherwise as a result of the campaign.

The advertising is therefore not misleading in terms of Clause 4.2.1 of Section II.