

ARTICLE



Polar fried chicken? Tensions between public engagement and fast-food marketing in KFC South Africa's *Beyond the Sea* campaign

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ABSTRACT


In this article, we offer a slightly sideways approach to polar science communication and public engagement by focusing on a recent marketing campaign by fast-food restaurant chain Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) in South Africa. KFC's *Beyond the Sea* campaign prominently features Marion Island – part of South Africa's southernmost territory and the site of significant long-term scientific research and monitoring programmes. It tells the story of two fictional overwintering expeditioners at the South African research station on the remote sub-Antarctic island who miss home (or rather, the taste of KFC) so much that they head out in a rigid inflatable on the 2,000 km journey back to the fast-food chain's nearest outlet on the mainland. The integrated advertising campaign – which includes radio teasers, a filmic commercial, vox pop reels and a mobile game – blends promotional material and 'unbranded' science communication. This article provides a thematic analysis of the *Beyond the Sea* campaign within the context of South Africa's polar histories and existing public engagement programmes. The campaign raises key questions about whether, and if so how, corporate advertising can contribute to or detract from public awareness of and engagement with the polar regions, particularly in relation to the objectives of 'science communication for social justice' and encouraging Antarctic artistic and cultural production from Africa.

KEYWORDS

Public engagement;
corporate advertising;
science communication; sub-Antarctic; Marion Island; South Africa

'This speck of South Africa in the middle of the ocean': KFC at sea

Antarctica and the sub-Antarctic islands are usually relatively far from public consciousness in South Africa. Their geographic and historical context provides some sense of the reasons for a lack of wider public awareness. Situated around 2,180 km southeast of Cape Town and 1,770 km south-southeast of Gqeberha in the Indian Ocean sector of the Southern Ocean, the Prince Edward Islands (comprising Marion and Prince Edward

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Island) are not only the most southerly and remote part of South Africa's official territory but also the only land masses between its south-facing coastline and the Antarctic continent.¹ Marion and Prince Edward Island were formally annexed by the then Union of South Africa in December 1947 and January 1948, respectively.² The country's early involvement with the Far South was linked first with British colonial interests and thereafter Apartheid politics, and its polar histories have predominantly been presented as the legacy of pioneering white men.³ These racist and exclusionary links have no doubt contributed to a lack of awareness and interest by the majority of South Africans. Nonetheless, the democratic dispensation inherited an established Antarctic research infrastructure in 1994, including the *SA Agulhas* polar research and supply vessel, as well as three stations which accommodate overwintering field researchers, meteorologists and support personnel on Marion Island, Gough Island (part of a British Overseas Territory in the South Atlantic Ocean) and the South African National Antarctic Expedition (SANAE) III base in Dronning Maud Land (a sector in East Antarctica claimed by Norway). Currently, 18 to 22 expeditioners overwinter annually on Marion Island, 8 to 10 on Gough Island, and 9 to 10 at the SANAE IV base; the stations support far greater numbers during the busy annual relief (takeover) voyages. Research programmes range across the physical, geological and life sciences; Marion Island, in particular, is a site of significant long-term studies including weather and climate, terrestrial and marine systems and ecosystems, and biological monitoring programmes.⁴ However, much of the research remains siloed in scientific journals that do not reach the general public.

Into this context, between March and June 2024, Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) launched an integrated advertising campaign, created by Ogilvy South Africa, which is set on and prominently features Marion Island. The *Beyond the Sea* campaign's focal point is a 2 minute 40 second filmic commercial, directed by Kim Geldenhuys and produced by 0307 Films.⁵ Cinematic and atmospheric, it initially aired as a television commercial and can still be viewed online.⁶ The short film tells the story of a fictional overwintering team at the South African base on the remote sub-Antarctic island. Its main location is the imagined research station, recreated through a combination of production sets and computer-generated rendering. The film starts with one of the fictional researchers (identified in pre-release radio teasers as Mzuli Ntuli) entering the station's marine biology laboratory and receiving a video call from home. He becomes emotional, presumably homesick. This longing for home is soon revealed to be, in fact, a longing for KFC, as he replays a recording of the call to a colleague (Samantha Arendse). Both miss KFC so much that they devise a plan to escape the island in the middle of the Southern Ocean winter. A humorous montage shows the pair preparing and training for this journey, then enlisting the help of one of the boat crew who reluctantly gives them the keys to a rigid inflatable. As they are about to head out on the 2,000 km sea voyage back to

¹Chown and Froneman, "Global Context," 4; Terauds et al., *Marion & Prince Edward*, 22; Department of Environmental Affairs, "Management Plan," 1-3, 2-1, 3-1; De Villiers, Chown, and Cooper, *Conservation Handbook*, 4.

²Marsh, *No Pathway Here*, 75-77, 86.

³van der Watt, "Out in the Cold"; van Sittert, "Ironman"; van der Watt and Swart, "Falling Off the Map"; van der Watt and Swart, "Whiteness of Antarctica"; Department of Environment, Forestry and Fisheries, "ASOS," 5-6.

⁴"SANAP - Stations."

⁵"#BehindtheCampaign"; KFC, "Ends of the Earth."

⁶While the original upload to the KFC YouTube channel is no longer available, the video can be viewed on other channels.

See: <https://vimeo.com/935371565>. ('KFC "Beyond the Sea" by Kim Geldenhuys').

the fast-food chain's nearest outlet on the mainland, other expeditioners arrive with grim expressions on the beach. Instead of stopping the pair from leaving the island, they hand over a handwritten list with their long KFC order.

The film works by juxtaposing some characteristics of Marion Island's remote sub-Antarctic setting – distance, isolation and deprivation – with KFC's marketed associations – accessibility, sociability and satisfaction. But the desired effect could only be achieved if its intended audiences knew about the existence of the island, and its connection to South Africa, in the first place. According to KFC Africa's Chief Marketing Officer, Grant Macpherson, while conceiving the advertising campaign, the marketing team 'realised that many South Africans had never heard of Marion Island' and that, without some introductory content, the branded components of the campaign would not be understood.⁷ They therefore devised a prior 'unbranded' phase to introduce the public to Marion Island, for instance by giving field researchers the opportunity to talk about their work and experiences on the island.⁸ Macpherson notes that social media responses to the campaign indicated that people were 'captivated by the idea of scientists choosing to put their lives on hold for a year to go there, and genuinely interested in learning about the work that's done on this speck of South Africa in the middle of the ocean'.⁹ The *Beyond the Sea* campaign received several accolades at the annual Loeries Africa and Middle East advertising and brand communication awards in October 2024, including gold awards for film direction and commercials longer than 90 seconds.¹⁰ Ogilvy's Loeries submission claims that the campaign had more than 301 million impressions (views), with 77% purchase intent and an over 118 million total reach.¹¹ These figures suggest an impressive new audience for information about Marion Island and South African activities in the sub-Antarctic.

In this article, we examine some of the tensions raised by KFC's advertising campaign and ask to what extent it served or harmed the project of promoting engagement with the Antarctic and sub-Antarctic by the South African public. We do so through a critical discussion of the campaign and its messaging, as well as by situating it in the context of pre-existing national engagement efforts. Our approach is first to provide a description of the content of the filmic commercial – in which we highlight narrative and aesthetic strategies, and some of the key themes that emerge – and then to describe the various components of the integrated cross-platform campaign. We go on to consider the *Beyond the Sea* campaign within the context of South Africa's involvement in the Antarctic and sub-Antarctic region, outlining the various official programmes designed to produce awareness in South African publics, limited as they are. We end with a discussion of whether, and if so how, corporate advertising can contribute positively to public awareness of and engagement with the polar regions in South Africa.

⁷KFC, "Ends of the Earth."

⁸"Chilly Marion Island"; "#BehindtheCampaign"; KFC, "Ends of the Earth."

⁹KFC, "Ends of the Earth."

¹⁰"Loeries Winners Archive." The campaign received Craft Gold for Film: Direction; Gold for Film: TV & Cinema Commercials longer than 90s; Silver for Integrated Campaign; Silver for Digital: Games & Gamification; Craft Certificates for Film: Performance and Film: Music. It was also a finalist in the categories of Cinematography, Production Design, Special Visual Effects and Mobile Media.

¹¹"Loeries Finalists."

Beyond the Sea: distance, isolation, deprivation

The short film (commercial) is the central and most memorable part of the campaign. According to the Loeries entry, it had over 5 million views on YouTube at the time.¹² Following the release of the film, advertorials appeared on various local online news platforms, presenting KFC South Africa as going ‘to the ends of the earth’ in its new campaign for which ‘chilly Marion Island is the rugged setting’.¹³ Catchy headlines announced that ‘Researchers on remote island voyage over 2,000 km for the taste of KFC’, ‘South African scientists go to extreme lengths to get a KFC’, and ‘Scientists sail across the seas to satisfy their KFC craving’.¹⁴ On the one hand, Macpherson positions the campaign as inspired by the South Africans ‘who spend a year in the middle of the Atlantic [sic] Ocean on remote Marion Island, South Africa’s farthest-flung territory, in service of science’.¹⁵ On the other, promotional texts stress that the campaign ‘amplifies the message that people are willing to do just about anything for South Africa’s favourite taste’.¹⁶ The film’s director, Kim Geldenhuys, describes being briefed with a ‘very brave, very unique story ... a world with no KFC’, and explains that the production was approached ‘like a feature, not an ad’.¹⁷ Marion Island thus offers both the backdrop and springboard for an epic, dramatic plot. In the sections below, we discuss some of the film’s narrative and aesthetic strategies, as well as some of the key themes that it simultaneously invokes and produces.

Distance and determination, courage and adventure

The film’s opening and closing scenes highlight the key theme of distance. The opening sequence starts with a view across a dark expanse of ocean, the wind howling and rain pelting down. In the distance, an island peak comes into view. It switches to a shot of Marion Island – similar to what expeditioners see when approaching the island on South Africa’s polar research and supply vessel, the *SA Agulhas II* (see [Figure 1](#))– with the highly recognisable base visible against the rugged, snow-covered landscape. A location caption reveals: ‘Marion Island, South Africa. Antarctic Research Facility’. The action begins with a shot of a figure battling against the storm to open a weatherproof entrance. A sign on the door reads: ‘Marion Island, South African National Antarctic Programme, 46°S 37°E’. These textual location markers point to the latitudinal distance of the island from South Africa, underscored by the film’s *mise-en-scène*, rendered in cool, dark and muted tones which suggest the faded light and cold, harsh weather of the high-latitude winter.

Similarly, the final sequence of the film is a long aerial shot of the boat’s departure from the island in which it becomes smaller and smaller, all but disappearing into the vast ocean. Its smallness and vulnerability are accentuated by an ominous thunderstorm brewing on the horizon, emphasising that a rigid inflatable is a boat entirely unsuitable

¹²“Loeries Finalists.”

¹³“Chilly Marion Island”; “#BehindtheCampaign”; KFC, “Ends of the Earth.”

¹⁴Phiri, “Researchers on Remote Island”; Nice Shirt Films, “Extreme Lengths”; Seery, “Scientists Sail.”

¹⁵KFC, “Ends of the Earth.”

¹⁶“Chilly Marion Island”; “#BehindtheCampaign.”

¹⁷“Loeries Finalists.”



Figure 1. Marion Island as viewed from the *SA Agulhas II*, 2024. Photo: Adrienne van Eeden-Wharton.

for crossing the Southern Ocean in winter – waters which are uniquely wild and dangerous.¹⁸ The closing title sequence reiterates the starting point of the journey: ‘Marion Island, South Africa. Over 2000 km from a KFC’. Given that South Africa has over a thousand KFC outlets, even in small rural towns, the island is represented in both explicit and implicit ways as the furthest possible point on South African territory from one of these quick-service restaurants. Significantly, Marion Island is both part of home, but markedly as far away from home as one can get.¹⁹

Beyond the Sea not only plays on a well-established genre of island adventure narratives – the film is described as an ‘epic island story’ and advertorials claim that it ‘pays homage to the spirit of adventure and exploration’²⁰ – but also associates itself, even if ironically, with portrayals of the so-called Heroic Age of Antarctic exploration. Here, Ernest Shackleton’s epic Southern Ocean voyage of 1,300 km in a small boat, the *James Caird*, from remote and uninhabited Elephant Island to South Georgia to get help to rescue his shipwrecked crew, springs to mind. South Africans were recently reminded of these historical events since the *SA Agulhas II* icebreaker was the vessel used in finding Shackleton’s sunken ship, *Endurance*, in March 2022. The discovery of the *Endurance* gained widespread international media coverage and cultural traction.²¹ For instance, a 2024 eponymously titled National Geographic film weaves the story of Shackleton’s expedition, the loss of his ship and the treacherous homeward journey with the search for the wrecked ship on the deep ocean floor.²²

¹⁸For a description, see Lavery, “Southern Ocean,” 307.

¹⁹For a discussion of a related, although significantly different, interplay between remoteness and familiarity, see Wainschenker and Leane, “Alien Next Door.”

²⁰“Epic Island Story”; “KFC Beyond the Sea.”

²¹For example: Amos, “Shackleton’s Lost Ship”; “Explorer Ernest Shackleton’s Ship”; Fawcett, “South African Ship.” The eNCA broadcast segment features a live interview with Captain Knowledge Bengu, Captain of the *SA Agulhas II*, linking the find to South African interest and expertise. Fawcett highlights the importance of the research and training conducted on board this vessel, a ship which ‘belongs to the people of South Africa.’

²²National Geographic, “Endurance.”

Isolation and sociality, desire and fulfilment

Distance from home is frequently associated with isolation from friends and family; in the film, the isolation of the Marion Island overwintering team is contrasted with the sociability of life on the mainland, linking the latter to the shared meals provided by KFC. The message is clear: KFC facilitates and symbolises social belonging, warmth and friendship, which are relatively scarce on the island. The first protagonist is a young researcher, Mzuli Ntuli, who is shown coming in from the cold, heading down a passage and entering the marine biology laboratory. While examining a specimen under a microscope, he receives a video call, the ‘Accept or Decline’ message flashing on his laptop screen. The focus shifts from the specimen jars on the desk to the welcome interruption of his work routine, such that the social displaces the scientific. His face initially lights up as he answers, ‘hey, my love’; the video call shows a lively get-together and a friend exclaims, ‘we miss you’. The marine biologist looks saddened, even as in the next scene he appears in the more populated but still dim and quiet dining hall. He is served a meal of mismatched and colourless foods, and the chef makes a half-hearted ‘island joke’ about ‘Marion/marryin’ the flavours together’. Taking his tray to an empty table, Mzuli is about to eat alone, but gets up to look through the window at the bleak, stormy scene outside. The view across the ocean expanse, with only a distant cliff-face to suggest the island perimeter, adds to the sense of geographic and social isolation. A concerned colleague, Samantha Arendse, comes to check on him.

The film cuts to a night-time landscape where a small building with a communication mast is dwarfed by the unfamiliar landscape, a barely visible South African flag reminding viewers that this is both *home* and *not home*. When Mzuli shows Samantha the recording of the video call, what he is truly missing is revealed – the table full of KFC, followed by a shot of a friend biting into a chicken drumstick. Samantha gets up and heads out, into the icy night, while Mzuli replays the shot of this tasty mouthful on repeat. We catch a glimpse of Samantha back inside the base, playing scrabble with another colleague. As she forms K-F-C with the tiles, she jumps up and rushes to the sleeping quarters, map in hand. Excited whispers follow as an escape plan is devised.

Here, the yearning for social interaction, a lover’s embrace, and the familiarity of home is conflated with a craving for KFC which not only stands in for a taste of home but is offered in place of that ideal. In another example, the enticing close-ups of the shared KFC meal in the recorded video call finally convince Mzuli and Samantha’s colleague to hand them the boat keys. The immersive sound design – ranging from the general lack of dialogue to elements such as the howling wind and deserted corridors – accentuates the sense of social isolation, with a contemporary remix of *Comin’ Home Baby* amplifying the mounting anticipation.²³ In addition to the sound, contrasting colour palettes increase the comparison. The drably depicted setting of the base appears as a stark contrast to the vibrant, saturated colours and appealing, diverse sociality associated with KFC’s advertising and the friends-and-family values the brand purports to promote.²⁴

²³Originally an instrumental jazz piece written by Ben Tucker, the first vocal version (with lyrics by Bob Dorough) was recorded by Mel Tormé in 1962. See: “Comin’ Home Baby.”

²⁴For instance, on its website, KFC South Africa proudly announces that it wants to be a ‘home filled with Bucketloads of Good for all’ and invites us to ‘Imagine a table where everyone has a seat’ – a world where everyone is equal and can thrive, one based on ‘Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, Belonging’. See: “KFC Purpose.”

Deprivation and pleasure, sacrifice and satisfaction

Closely linked to distance and isolation, the film also suggests a contrast between deprivation and pleasure, sacrifice and satisfaction. On Marion Island, expeditioners have to make do without friends and family, but also without taste and other sensory pleasures. The island appears as a symbolic site of deprivation and sacrifice – for the overwintering team in their pursuit of science, and even more so for the brave protagonists who journey back to the mainland in their small boat in pursuit of KFC. The themes of exile and marooning, escape and rescue, too, are intertwined in the film's imagery. The final scene where Mzuli and Samantha's colleagues see them off at the beach evokes visual imagery of a marooned party sending representatives in search of help and supplies. Perhaps unintentionally, the imagery is reminiscent of Frank Hurley's iconic photographs, taken on Elephant Island in 1916, of Shackleton and five crew embarking on a seemingly impossible Southern Ocean voyage to reach help for their stranded shipmates.²⁵ This emphasises the determination and bravery of the two Marion Island expeditioners in their quest for KFC. The *Beyond the Sea* campaign, more generally, draws both literal and figurative analogies between the sacrifices of overwintering teams and the 'devotion' of KFC's loyal customers who will 'go to great lengths for our finger-lickin' good food'.²⁶ Yet, at the same time, for most South Africans 'pining for KFC', 'the irresistible taste of KFC is never far away'.²⁷ This is the promise of fast-food: its immediate availability and frictionless accessibility, as well as its pleasurable and satisfying taste.

The film's allusions to the well-established genres of epic island adventure and survival narratives contribute to the overall sense of deprivation and endurance that, through contrast, accentuates the plentifulness and ease of KFC. In another historic example, in *No Pathway Here* (1948), John Marsh introduces the events around Apartheid South Africa's annexation of the Prince Edward Islands as a heroic 'story of the most gripping adventure'; likewise, J.C. Smuts, then Prime Minister of the Union, describes Marsh's book as a 'true story of modern pioneering and adventure', of successful occupation 'against the almost unbelievable fury of the elements'.²⁸

Humour

All three of these themes – home (or, belonging), sociality and pleasure – are underlined by the film's use of humour: the chef's attempt at a joke, the bathos of revealing that the main protagonist misses not so much his lover and friends but KFC, the other expeditioners arriving on the beach not to stop the pair from escaping but to hand over their long KFC order (with a 'don't 4get the chilli salt!' reminder). There is also slapstick humour in the montage of the two protagonists training for their escape: the accidental detonation of a flare in a workshop, an attempt to go for a run aborted when a walrus bull gives chase (which should be a southern elephant seal, as there are no walruses in the

²⁵National Gallery of Victoria, "Frank Hurley." See, for example, the photos *Setting Out for South Georgia 750 Miles Away and Rescued*.

²⁶"Chilly Marion Island"; "#BehindtheCampaign"; KFC, "Ends of the Earth."

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Marsh, *No Pathway Here*, 5, 7.

Southern Hemisphere) and submersions in ice-water tanks that reference popular social media challenges. The humour in the film points to a sense of fun, adventure and relatability – characteristics which are usually noticeably lacking from official public awareness initiatives, discussed below. These features, as well as the other central themes noted above, are accentuated and developed by the many other components of the campaign – including a playful social media exchange with the National Sea Rescue Institute (NSRI) and a scrollable mobile game – which are described in the next section.

KFC's cross-platform branding of Marion Island

In keeping with broader industry moves to cross-platform branding,²⁹ KFC's integrated advertising campaign – strategically launched in the weeks building up to the *SA Agulhas II*'s departure on its annual relief voyage to Marion Island in mid-April 2024 – also included radio teasers, extensive social media posts, vox pop reels, a mobile game, directional signage and online geo-targeted banners.³⁰

The unbranded radio teasers produced unexpected responses to the campaign. At the beginning of April 2024, radio teasers designed to resemble maritime distress calls were placed on various South African radio stations as part of the build-up to the television commercial's release. Interrupting radio broadcasts, the messages featured the voices of the two fictional expeditioners journeying from Marion Island. Concerned listeners contacted the South African NSRI, who afterwards took KFC to task for diverting their limited resources in a playful exchange of messages on social media.³¹ The NSRI eventually received a R50,000 donation, while Ogilvy's Loeries submission proudly presents what was likely an unintended sequence of events as a central part of the campaign: 'A distress call captures the nation's attention ... At the height of concern we released an extraordinary film'.³²

Several other facets of the cross-platform campaign demonstrate its reach and impact. A mobile game, released in May 2024, allowed viewers and consumers to imagine themselves as also travelling, even as adventurers, by scrolling the equivalent of 2,000 km on their mobile phones in a virtual homeward journey from Marion Island to the mainland.³³ Ogilvy claims that the game generated over 13 million scrolls and close to 250,000 km travelled (virtually), with the winner scrolling 2,000 km in 286 h – amounting to about 11 days of scrolling.³⁴ 'I just can't stop scrolling', 'I've been playing this game everywhere I go' social media users announced.³⁵ Alongside the mobile game, directional signage reminded commuters just how close the nearest KFC really was, and online geo-targeted banners ensured that the KFC taste was 'just a click away'. Connecting the fictional to the real, KFC capitalised on the *SA Agulhas II*'s departure by posting vox pop

²⁹Hardy, *Cross-Media Promotion*, 3.

³⁰The original *Anything for the Taste* campaign (2022) is another example of KFC South Africa's cross-platform advertising. The campaign follows a private investigator on the trail of a man impersonating a KFC food inspector. It included a hotline, web series documenting the investigation, wanted posters, as well as radio and television appearances in the build-up to the launch of the television commercial. See: Ogilvy, "Anything for the Taste."

³¹"Do You Read Us?"; "Ahoy @searescuesal!"; "Clever Response"; "Mayday! Mayday!"; "Escape Messages"; "#BehindtheCampaign"; KFC, "Ends of the Earth."

³²"Loeries Finalists."

³³"How Far."

³⁴"Loeries Finalists."

³⁵"Daily Vlog"; "Loeries Finalists."

reels captured on the day,³⁶ and later urged returning overwintering expeditioners to visit KFC as an ‘apology to your tastebuds’, offering them a 21-piece bucket if they replied to the social media prompts.³⁷

Interestingly, the *Beyond the Sea* campaign sparked independent content creators to post short videos about #MarionIsland, usually ending with the conclusion that the creators would not be able to ‘survive’ over a year without KFC.³⁸ Others compared their own quests for KFC (or the inspiration provided by the possibility of KFC) with the journey of the researchers on #MarionIsland, or even offered imaginary takes on returning from #MarionIsland to the taste of KFC.³⁹ While KFC’s relationship to the content creators is unclear,⁴⁰ the campaign appears to have captured young South Africans’ interest and imagination, with Marion Island going from being largely unknown to becoming a popular hashtag.⁴¹

The real Marion Island: fact-checking the production

Since the television commercial could not be filmed on Marion Island, recreating the sub-Antarctic setting was an important aspect of this large, high-budget production. The recreation was based on existing photographs and video footage of the island, although with considerable poetic licence. In addition to the live-action footage captured on the production set, the film also relied on computer-generated visual effects (VFX). On the VFX company’s website they describe the complex process of ‘creating a believable Marion Island, without ever traveling there’ through multiple modelling, animation, compositing and rendering applications.⁴² This included the 3D build of the research base, sky replacements, digital matte painting and the 3D-animated walrus (#animation #vfx #3Dwalrus).⁴³ While there is always a juggling act with what works conceptually and creatively, the production included some startling inaccuracies – the most obvious is, of course, that there are no walruses in the Southern Hemisphere. The film’s opening sequence features the decommissioned base alongside the current one, a view familiar to visitors to the island, but some of the interior scenes suggest facilities which are far more high-tech than the reality; the vegetation differs significantly; and the beach from which the protagonists launch is represented as far more accessible than any on Marion Island – transfers to and from the island are mostly made by helicopter due to the danger of landing boats.

In the film, the fingerprint access point outside the marine biology laboratory, for example, amplifies Mzuli’s social isolation. Whereas the current Marion Island research station, completed in 2010, has three laboratories (wet, dry and analytical), there is no technologically sophisticated access control. Importantly, digital communication from the island is very limited, and expeditioners mainly rely on intermittent WhatsApp text message exchanges; video calls are impossible at the time of writing. Most of the station is lit by bright overhead

³⁶“Our Brave #MarionIsland Researchers”; “I Didn’t Even Know.”

³⁷“Welcome Home”; “Your Unsatisfied Cravings.”

³⁸“Have Y’all Heard”; “Join Me”; “2000kms Away”; “Tough Mission”; “Exploring Islands.”

³⁹“No Obstacle”; “Get Me Out”; “What Better Way.”

⁴⁰Unlike the other TikTok videos mentioned above, these two were identified as partnerships with KFC: “Super Fascinating”; “Single Tear.”

⁴¹For interesting parallels, see Nielsen, *Brand Antarctica*, 182–85, on campaigns that have asked ‘What’s your Antarctic?’

⁴²Chocolate Tribe, “Beyond the Sea.”

⁴³“#NEWWORK!”

lights, but the corridors and enclosed connecting walkways rely on ambient light from outside. To avoid bird strikes at night, all blinds in the building are closed before sunset and the corridors and connecting walkways lit only by floor-level green lights, indeed giving those sections of the modular station a science-fiction look at night (see [Figures 2 and 3](#)). This futuristic aesthetic is disrupted, however, by empty tote bins and other plastic containers positioned throughout the station to catch rainwater dripping from numerous leaks in the roof. The decommissioned base, which had been lying disused since 2011, was dismantled between November 2023 and February 2024, and the remaining building materials from the



Figure 2. Marion Island station with the SA Agulhas II in the background, 2024. Photo: Adrienne van Eeden-Wharton.



Figure 3. A corridor in the Marion Island station at night, 2024. Photo: Adrienne van Eeden-Wharton.

old infrastructure removed during the April 2024 relief expedition via hundreds of helicopter cargo loads. In addition to environmental pollution and other dangers posed by the derelict structures, they also provided a haven for invasive house mice.⁴⁴ All traces of the ever-present mice are noticeably absent from the (science) fictional island base and landscape.

Vegetation on Marion Island changes considerably with altitude and other factors such as nutrient availability, temperature and exposure – ranging from peaty coastal habitats and fellfields as altitudes increase to the polar desert of the island's interior.⁴⁵ Conditions are much too harsh for trees and shrubs, and the coastal planes and slopes are dominated by mires, grasses, mosses, small succulent-like plants, fernbrakes and cushion plants.⁴⁶ The vegetation in the film sequence of Mzuli's training run, however, is typical of the dry regions of South Africa's mainland coast. On Marion Island, nobody ventures outside the base without rubber boots (called 'gumboots' by South Africans) as this is the only footwear with which it is possible to negotiate the waterlogged landscape; no one, as a result, goes jogging.

Most glaringly, Mzuli would not have been chased by a walrus bull (easily recognised by their long, distinctive tusks, and typical only of Arctic and sub-Arctic ecosystems) but instead by a massive southern elephant seal bull, to possibly even greater comedic effect. There are multiple ironies in this misrepresentation, especially given the time and budget devoted to rendering the 3D-animated pinniped. Large southern elephant seal bulls weigh between 3,000 and 4,000 kg – more than twice the size of walrus bulls – and are very recognisable, too, due to their proboscis (elongated part of the head).⁴⁷ Not only are southern elephant seals one of the charismatic marine mammal species that have been extensively studied in long-term monitoring and observational research programmes on Marion Island,⁴⁸ but the *Beyond the Sea* campaign's unbranded science communication articles focused almost exclusively on the experiences of overwintering 'sealers'.⁴⁹ While the 3D-animated walrus may seem like a fairly innocuous mistake given the humorous tone of the commercial, the wider implications of this type of misrepresentation within the context of climate denialism, cherry picking evidence and the spreading of misinformation – especially via social media – can be harmful, as we discuss later.

The oceans surrounding Marion Island are treacherous, so much so that the island was the site of several shipwrecks, strandings and rescue attempts, especially during the nineteenth and early twentieth century when sealing expeditions frequented its shores.⁵⁰ The beach from which the film's protagonists depart presumably references Boulders Beach at Transvaal Cove – Marion Island's official entry and exit point for small boats until helicopter flights from the resupply ship become possible. Unlike the calm shore in the film, this stretch of shoreline is much less accessible, and small boat launches and landings are notoriously dangerous (see [Figures 4 and 5](#)). In fact, during the early

⁴⁴Informal personal communication with members of the Mouse-Free Marion (MFM) project team during the 2024 relief expedition. See: "Conservation Campaign" regarding the threat that introduced house mice pose to the long-term survival of many species on the island, especially vulnerable seabirds, and the importance of MFM's large-scale conservation effort.

⁴⁵Terauds et al., *Marion & Prince Edward*, 76, 81–84, 92–93, 97, 99.

⁴⁶Terauds et al, 76, 81–84, 92.

⁴⁷"Southern Elephant Seal."

⁴⁸The other species are sub-Antarctic fur seals, Antarctic fur seals and killer whales. From 2024, the management of Marion Island Marine Mammal Programme (MIMMP) projects was transferred to the South African Polar Research Infrastructure (SAPRI). See: "MIMMP – Overview."

⁴⁹Ross, "Sealer Diaries"; Carnie, "Researching Giant Seals"; "Lump of Rock"; "Research Island."

⁵⁰Marsh, *No Pathway Here*, 44–52; Cooper, "Human History," 334–35.



Figure 4. Damaged cargo after a storm on Boulders Beach, Marion Island, 1948. Photo: Allan Crawford; reproduced with permission from the Antarctic Legacy of South Africa.



Figure 5. The loading stage to the left of Boulders Beach, Marion Island, 1955. Photo: Department of Public Works; reproduced with permission from the Antarctic Legacy of South Africa.



Figure 6. A wooden cross marks Joseph Daniels' gravesite on Marion Island, 2024. Photo: Adrienne van Eeden-Wharton.

years of South Africa's occupation of the island, two deaths by drowning occurred here: Joseph Daniels, a black⁵¹ boatman, drowned in 1948 shortly after the official annexation while landing part of the 300 tons of cargo required for setting up what was to become the island's first base (see [Figure 6](#)), and in 1956, J.G. Bold, a Petty Officer in the South African navy, also drowned while offloading cargo.⁵²

Antarctic public engagement in South Africa

While South Africa is known as an Antarctic gateway nation, and Cape Town a gateway city, the level of public awareness of this role is far lower than any of the other gateways, as Gabriela Roldan established in her PhD thesis.⁵³ All the Antarctic gateways except Cape Town are located in claimant nations – countries that have laid territorial claims to parts of Antarctica – but the city is also an exception in other ways. It is much further away from the icy continent than any of the other gateway cities (even though conveniently located directly south of Europe for their Antarctic expeditions). It features very little public awareness or memorialisation of Antarctic connections, there are no annual Antarctic events on the city's calendar, and the city's museums have limited displays on Antarctic natural or social history.⁵⁴ In fact, the only significant dedicated

⁵¹Most editors and publishers in South Africa do not capitalise the word 'black' due to its history as a pernicious legal category under Apartheid legislation. However, we are aware of the political importance of doing so for an international audience.

⁵²Marsh, *No Pathway Here*, 178–80, 182; Cooper, "Human History," 337–38; van Sittert, "Ironman." Crucially, van Sittert points to the role of institutionalised racism in Daniels' death.

⁵³Roldan, "Antarctic Identity," 116–120, 191.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*

museum exhibit in Cape Town is the *Sentinels of the South* exhibition at the Iziko South African Museum which opened in December 2019 and has since become a permanent display.⁵⁵ Overall, South Africa has a much lower GDP than the other Antarctic gateway nations and expensive research is difficult to prioritise over other national budgetary categories such as housing and social grants.

This lack of public awareness has been a subject of concern for policy-makers and scientists for many years.⁵⁶ The arts and humanities have an important role in bridging this gap and strategy documents acknowledge that ‘art, architecture and literature of the region remain largely unexplored from a research perspective’ and that ‘there is little information on artistic and literary works which reflect the human endeavours of the Southern African Antarctic region’.⁵⁷ Importantly, the challenge is not only an openness to research on the production of creative work that ‘engages with the far South’⁵⁸ but also, as Ansorge and colleagues put it, ‘to engage with non-scientists, creating opportunities for artists (such as writers, poets and musicians) and social scientists to partake in voyages to see for themselves the region and to be involved with South Africa’s activities within it’.⁵⁹ They point out that the region ‘provides excellent opportunities for raising public awareness and engaging with the future generation of polar scientists’, highlighting the allure of spectacular, extreme environments and similarly extreme ‘scope of science from space research to deep sea exploration’.⁶⁰ The *Prince Edward Islands Management Plan*, likewise, notes the importance of environmental awareness and education, acknowledging that ‘education of the general public of South Africa about the Prince Edward Islands can play an important role in furthering an ethic for sustainable environmental practices’ and that ‘the public of South Africa must have an opportunity to experience the special attributes of the Prince Edward Islands through a public awareness programme’.⁶¹ There is a mandate to ‘raise public awareness, appreciation and support’, and to communicate the uniqueness of the country’s southernmost territories.⁶² But while South Africa’s strategy documents all agree that polar awareness initiatives are important, very few of the proposed projects, such as the establishment of an Antarctic Centre and Precinct and an Antarctic community and logistics network, have been realised.

Research in the Antarctic and sub-Antarctic region is managed and supported by the South African National Antarctic Programme (SANAP).⁶³ There are a number of agencies and projects in South Africa whose mandates include aspects of outreach and awareness, and which have achieved some realisation of these goals despite considerable resource and personnel constraints. The Antarctic Legacy of South Africa (ALSA) project aims to preserve and promote the legacy of South Africa in the Antarctic region and

⁵⁵“Sentinels of the South.”

⁵⁶See: Department of Environmental Affairs, “Management Plan,” 2–10, 4–14–4–16; National Research Foundation, “Research Plan,” 14, 45; Ansorge et al., “Southern Frontier,” 5; Departments of Science and Technology and Environmental Affairs, “MARS,” 26–27; Department of Environment, Forestry and Fisheries, “ASOS,” 16, 18.

⁵⁷National Research Foundation, “Research Plan,” 11.

⁵⁸National Research Foundation, “Research Plan,” 39; Departments of Science and Technology and Environmental Affairs, “MARS,” 23.

⁵⁹Ansorge et al., “Southern Frontier,” 4–5.

⁶⁰Ansorge et al., 5.

⁶¹Department of Environmental Affairs, “Management Plan,” 27, 72.

⁶²Department of Environmental Affairs, 27.

⁶³National Research Foundation, “SANAP Framework”; “SANAP – About Us.”

offers online access to digitised archival material, as well as related information and news.⁶⁴ The South African Polar Research Infrastructure (SAPRI), established in 2021, provides the infrastructure for the country's marine and polar research, specifically for continuing and expanding established long-term observational research.⁶⁵ In addition, SAPRI aims to 'transform the access to, and perception of, South African polar research'.⁶⁶ School outreach activities are shared between SAPRI and ALSA but, given a shortage of capacity, are very limited. Another form of public outreach is the annual *SA Agulhas II* Open Days, arranged by the Department of Forestry, Fisheries, and the Environment (DFFE), who also administer the three SANAP research stations. Open Days are restricted to Cape Town and, on occasion, another of the country's port cities. One highlight on the *SA Agulhas II* voyage schedule is the successful *SEAmester* programme, which offers a select group of postgraduate science students from across South Africa the opportunity to learn on board.⁶⁷ For the most part, posts on social media (Facebook, Instagram and X) and newsletters (or news sections on websites) are the main forms of outreach and awareness for the majority of South African programmes.

In response to this, the authors launched a pilot Antarctic Artists and Writers Programme (AWP) for South Africa in January 2024. Funded by a three-year SANAP grant, the project's aim is to enable artists, writers and humanities researchers to access the sub-Antarctic and Antarctic regions to produce creative and critical work that will reach a wider public audience than scientific publications alone. Although the pilot project is modelled on similar programmes elsewhere in the world, a key difference is that countries such as Australia and the United Kingdom have a much higher GDP and a concomitantly higher budget for their overall Antarctic programmes. *Sur Polar Art in Antarctica*, founded by artist Andrea Juan from Argentina and active from 2005 to 2016 (when the Argentinean Antarctic Bureau withdrew support for this dynamic programme), provides perhaps the closest model as the only Southern Hemisphere and developing country to undertake such a project.⁶⁸ Given that South Africa is also currently the only African country with an Antarctic programme and a seat on the Scientific Committee on Antarctic Research (SCAR), the pilot also aims to build the foundation of a programme which could serve as a link connecting creative practitioners and writers from the rest of Africa to the Far South, via South Africa, in the future. The release of the KFC campaign has both made this task in some ways a little easier but also thrown its goals into relief.

Fast-food advertising and South African consumer culture

KFC is, of course, a global fast-food franchise. Unlike McDonalds and Burger King – which did not operate in South Africa during Apartheid and entered the country with great popular enthusiasm in 1995 and 2013, respectively – KFC launched its first outlet in South Africa in 1971, purportedly after its holding company's CEO visited the country on

⁶⁴"About the Antarctic Legacy of South Africa."

⁶⁵National Research Foundation, "SAPRI Framework"; "SAPRI – Overview."

⁶⁶"SAPRI – Overview."

⁶⁷Ansorge et al., "SEAmester"; "SEAmester Cruises – About."

⁶⁸"Sur Polar."

safari in the late 1960s.⁶⁹ The racist laws of Apartheid South Africa meant that the early KFC restaurants would not have served black customers. Today, KFC South Africa presents itself as the ‘most inclusive brand in Africa’, and KFC Africa as a truly pan-African business.⁷⁰ It is perhaps also worth noting, in line with the themes of the *Beyond the Sea* campaign, that KFC’s podcast introduces its ‘remarkable 50-year journey into the southern tip of Africa’ as an ‘exhilarating adventure, brimming with imagination, innovation and lasting passionate impact’.⁷¹

Fast-food advertising is one of the key genres on South African television and has been observed deploying ‘pester power’ in targeting children as consumers.⁷² Fast-food companies use the notion of home to construct the idea that fast-food is equivalent to the love of families, in the context of what foodways researchers call the ‘slow violence of malnutrition’ – partly produced by the prevalence of fast-food availability at the expense of better nourishment options, particularly protein, in under-served communities.⁷³ Chicken is a popular foodstuff in South Africa, and a number of fast-food chicken brands operate in the market and are big spenders when it comes to advertising. KFC South Africa’s main competitors in the chicken retail sector include Chicken Licken and Nando’s, both of which were founded in South Africa and have gone on to become global brands with outlets across the world. Nando’s is well-known for the clever and comedic political commentary in its South African advertising.⁷⁴

KFC occupies a specific niche in the South African economy and cultural landscape, and the brand is recognisable and available almost everywhere in the country – it has the ability to capture considerable public attention through its advertising campaigns. Aspiration plays a central role in the consumer economy of South Africa, which is infamously one of the most unequal countries in the world, with luxury and poverty in consistent, tragic juxtaposition.⁷⁵ The ‘good life’ that so many South Africans aspire to is displaced through poor governance and failing public services. The main route through which many South Africans are able to experience improvements in their material conditions is therefore through consumption.⁷⁶ Brands like KFC are perfectly positioned to capitalise on these aspirations: they offer products that are tasty, enjoyable, associated with global brands and cultures and, crucially, affordable even for those with few economic means – a shortcut to a happy moment.⁷⁷ At the time of writing, the popular ‘Streetwise Five with Chips’ (five pieces of chicken and a small packet of chips) costs just under R100.⁷⁸ The National Minimum Wage (NMW) in South Africa is close to R30/hour,⁷⁹ which means that even those in the most low-paid jobs may be able to afford a KFC meal once in a while and experience, albeit briefly, its pleasures. Still, to many communities, a bucket of KFC is a luxury item – so much so that the famous *izikhothane*

⁶⁹Maritz, “KFC’s African Adventure.”

⁷⁰KFC Purpose – People.”

⁷¹“KFC Podcast.”

⁷²Lewis, Bhoola, and Mafofo, “Fast-Food Advertising,” 62.

⁷³May et al., “Slow Violence,” 24.

⁷⁴Irwin, “Santam and Nando’s,” 513, 519–20; Tshuma, Msimanga, and Tshuma, “Satire, Humour,” 795–96, 799–800, 802.

⁷⁵Iqani and Kenny, “Critical Consumption Studies,” 98; Iqani, “Better Life,” 90, 93, 99–101; Iqani and Kenny, “Inequality, Humour.”

⁷⁶Iqani, *Consumption, Media*, 44–47.

⁷⁷Iqani, “Consuming Happiness,” 2–5.

⁷⁸“Streetwise.”

⁷⁹“National Minimum Wage.”

in the townships of the East Rand region of Gauteng have been known to symbolically destroy buckets of fried chicken alongside their ritual disposal of high-end Italian fashion items.⁸⁰

The advertising and branding sector in South Africa is well established, with the industry emerging along with the rise of white-owned media and corporate power in the late twentieth century. Although television was introduced to South Africa relatively late compared to the rest of the world, the cultural boycott during Apartheid meant that the local advertising industry developed endemic expertise and became a significant socio-economic player alongside other forms of economic activity. Indeed, the advertising industry played a crucial role in constructing public discourses about Rainbow Nationalism and the New South Africa.⁸¹ With the fall of political Apartheid, the advertising industry purportedly expanded and diversified to integrate black players and voices, working harder to explicitly reach black audiences and markets.⁸² This is relevant because KFC is a brand that is well loved amongst lower- and middle-income black South Africans.⁸³

Adam Arvidsson, in his pivotal writings about brand value, points out that the value that is produced by branding is, in fact, garnered through the attention, aesthetic labour and regard deployed by the consumers and admirers of that brand.⁸⁴ In other words, the very acts of looking, liking, swiping, sharing and discussing that consumers undertake in relation to the brands constitute the substance from which the real, material value of a brand is constructed. For these reasons, and especially in the age of ‘like-follow-show’, brands are constantly searching for new social and cultural resources to integrate into their messaging.⁸⁵ Brand identities need to skate the thin ice between maintaining strong and consistent central imagery and constantly entering into new affiliations and liaisons that create emotional resonance with their communities (the consumers they want to buy their products and buy into their identity).⁸⁶

The discourses of consumer culture operate dialectically: they neither whack us over the head with top-down, manipulative narratives nor grant complete freedom to shape brand identities as we please.⁸⁷ This tension between manipulation and empowerment is key to understanding the complex appeal of consumer discourses: they offer us something to plug in to, to aspire towards, to be a part of, while usually leaving space (just enough!) to imagine our own version of that inclusion. KFC’s Marion Island narrative offers more than the usual amount of space – literal, in terms of the vast ocean expanses and island wilderness, as well as figurative – to consumers to imagine themselves as agents, perhaps even vicariously exploring the sub-Antarctic world alongside the

⁸⁰ *Ukukhothana* is a South African urban youth subculture characterised by playful, extravagant displays and ‘destructive conspicuous consumption’ in defiance of historical and ongoing marginalisation (Ngcongo and Mnisi, “Izikhothane”). See also: Howell and Vincent, “Licking the Snake”; Chipp, Kapelianis, and Mkhwanazi, “Ukukhothana”; Mnisi, “Booty on Fire.”

⁸¹ Britten, “One Nation.” See Britten (117, 132, 252) on the rise of the slighting neologism ‘rainbowism’, which refers to a superficial subscription to and representation of the rainbow nation myth of racial reconciliation.

⁸² Klemz, Boshoff, and Mazibuko, “Emerging Markets,” 591–93, 596–98.

⁸³ Chevalier, “Food, Malls,” 122.

⁸⁴ Arvidsson, “Critical Perspective”; Arvidsson, *Meaning and Value*, 10, 124–37.

⁸⁵ Carah, “Brand Value,” 346–48, 363–65.

⁸⁶ Muniz and O’Guinn, “Brand Community,” 412–15, 426–28; Marzocchi, Morandin, and Bergami, “Brand Communities” 93–99.

⁸⁷ Iqani, *Consumer Culture*, 25–40.

expeditioners on the island. From this perspective, therefore, the campaign leveraged Marion Island as a strategy to strengthen KFC's own brand community and consumer loyalty.

Tensions between polar engagement and fast-food branding

If we consider the historical and ongoing environmental exploitation and commercialisation of the Antarctic and sub-Antarctic regions, the Far South, as Hanne Nielsen argues in *Brand Antarctica*, has always been at least partly 'for sale'.⁸⁸ Similarly, the exponential growth of Antarctic tourism – an industry premised on visiting 'pristine', 'untouched' spaces – threatens the fragile ecologies it purports to promote.⁸⁹ The main function and effect of the *Beyond the Sea* campaign is the production of brand recognition and customer loyalty. The scientists, researchers and communication specialists concerned with building public awareness have very little, if any, control over commercial narratives, which leads not only to mistakes in representation such as those described above but also more insidious narratives of distance and disconnection which may undermine, rather than promote, a sense of care and stewardship.

KFC's *Beyond the Sea* campaign may, however, also have in certain more minor ways benefited the project of public engagement – even if only as a collateral effect. The so-called unbranded phase of the campaign, in particular, achieved legitimate science communication without cost to limited public funds. Via PR Agency KAMuses, sponsored articles (in which KFC's identity remained obscured) were placed in the media in late March and early April 2024. This included articles focusing on the experiences of overwintering expeditioners and introducing readers to some of the environmental research being conducted on the sub-Antarctic island.⁹⁰ Informal communication with researchers who have worked on Marion Island suggests that, since the KFC campaign was released, many South Africans understand expeditions to and activities on the island largely in relation to its depiction in the filmic commercial. The commercial features a diverse overwintering team in terms of race, gender and age – providing a sense of ownership and involvement for a much wider section of the South African public than is usually the case for the country's Antarctic research, and potentially contributing towards a more inclusive next generation of polar researchers and expeditioners. Likewise, social media videos posted by independent content creators suggest that the campaign captured young South Africans' interest and imagination, something that official public engagement programmes try but often struggle to achieve.

In addition to legitimate and necessary critique of commercial initiatives, polar science communication and public engagement programmes can learn from the popularity and reach of campaigns like this. As one example, science communication can tend to be serious and exclusionary, whereas the *Beyond the Sea* campaign demonstrates the value of humour and inclusivity in planning future awareness initiatives. Brands seeking to develop their value through associating themselves with places like Marion Island, the Southern Ocean and Antarctica should forge collaborative approaches that integrate science communicators into

⁸⁸Nielsen, *Brand Antarctica*, 25.

⁸⁹Nielsen, *Brand Antarctica*, 155–87; Tejado et al., "Tourism in Antarctica." For an extreme example of Antarctic over-tourism, see: Pinnock, "Sex Cruises."

⁹⁰Ross, "Sealer Diaries"; Carnie, "Researching Giant Seals"; "Lump of Rock"; "Research Island."

their efforts, both to avoid factual errors and harmful associations and to better serve the public interest aspects of the campaigns. Similarly, researchers and public representatives should exert their full authority when interacting with advertising and branding executives seeking to leverage relationships with the sites and practices of their research.

Primarily, the *Beyond the Sea* campaign invites us to consider what polar awareness and science communication could (and should) look like within a contemporary South African context. Recent work in the field of science communication in South Africa urges scholars in media and communications, and researchers in general, to heed a call to work towards decolonial frameworks and methods. ‘Science communication for social justice’ aims to connect science with society through critical media and communication research on issues-driven topics to which scientific evidence is central.⁹¹ Advertising campaigns, paid for with the much larger budgets of private multinational corporations and ultimately aimed at generating more brand value and more profit, are not necessarily best positioned to contribute to the public values that animate a ‘Science communication for social justice’ agenda.⁹² Instead, the various national programmes including SANAP, SAPRI, ALSA and the pilot Antarctic AWP should receive more support in their efforts to promote public engagement with the polar regions in South Africa and Africa.

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⁹¹Dawson, Iqani, and Lock, “Social Justice,” 1–3.

⁹²Wilmot, Iqani, and Madondo, “Science and Language.”

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