

An open letter to British American Tobacco

 By [Banele Rewo](#)

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Dear British American Tobacco



Banele Rewo

In the advent of a series of open letters going around lately, especially regarding racism, I also have decided to use this opportunity to write to you while the social media hashtags on racism are still hot.

Your current campaign aimed at halting the trade of illegal cigarettes is eye-opening, educational and drives home the message of what one may be unconsciously propagating through illegal cigarettes. The radio campaign is fantastic and very creative.



Well, until one sees the billboards in Gauteng (M1 north towards Malboro/Sandton and M1 South towards Soweto). The billboards are derogatory, backward, racially biased and stereotypical of a British-American racist's perspective of what an African young man represents in society.

Unfortunately, you cannot also claim what an illegal cigarette smoking person would claim before the campaign... "I was not aware". You have consciously used the faces of young African men wielding guns and even dared to solidify and confirm your racist perceptions by placing a white blonde woman as a victim.

As a burgeoning marketing and communications apprentice, I am fully aware of the responsibility I owe to future consumers. I would be crucified on a world-class scale should I set one wrong image in the right place.

This may sound confusing now but here is what I am already preparing for. It's a little more than just hiring a translator to regurgitate and carbon-copy campaigns to fit and, most of the time, sounding much like the original campaign...

For example, some Germans understood YouTube's "Broadcast Yourself" as "Brotkasten" or "Breadbox Yourself". Chocolate company Magnum's slogan "World's Pleasure Authority" was understood by some as "For an Authoritarian World" and Levi's "Live Unbuttoned" became "Life without Buttons".

The advantage at the moment is that such information is retrievable by research and does not go viral, as it will by the time I sit at the helm of a communications global conglomerate. But you have nothing to worry about yet as I am still rising up the ranks, so you have a bit of time. Maybe.

But I would not underestimate the power of my (iGen) generation as you did. Gone are the days when you could just rely on the physical borders, political sensitivity or low levels or even lack of literacy of a country. The world is smaller and physical borders no longer exist. What you do right in the context of one country may be totally derogatory once it lands on a laptop deep in the Saharan desert. The term "global brand" is now closely followed by global criticism.

In a comment under a [News24.com article](#), John.Davies.uk already thinks "[t]he current campaign tries to differentiate between 'illegal' tobacco, as a driver for racist crimes by dangerous black men upon white women and 'legal' tobacco that apparently does not result in such social catastrophe. This presents the tobacco problem as 'illegal' cigarettes rather than any other problem that might be the consequence of tobacco use. Big Tobacco is contending that unknown

and organised criminal forces are assailing our society with 'illegal' cigarettes..."

In the case of this crime of which I am accusing you, this letter may yield three unforeseen results.

- 1. In the best-case scenario, it might go viral and drive traffic to your websites and in turn exposure to the brand and its message by double to triple; which is good for brand and customer equity.*
- 2. In the second scenario, this may go viral, negatively resulting in a plethora of blogs digitally "picketing" your website and emails to the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) and resulting in you having to remove the billboards. It's bad positioning in African segments within South Africa eg Black Diamonds but great for challengers or new entrants who might capitalise and place themselves as legitimate brands defeating your attempt.*
- 3. In the supposed last scenario, this letter will remain cold and forgotten in cloud servers, only to immerge eight years later on a desktop in a fledgling African country where you planned to expand into - bad for market growth, expansion and positioning into new markets, even though your [marketing practices](#) are "designed to attract adult smokers to our brands. It is not intended to persuade people, whether adults or youth, to begin or continue smoking..."*

But, anyway, it's only an open letter with hashtags #BritishAmericanTobacco and #RacistAdvertising.

Yours sincerely

Banele Rewo

ABOUT BANELE REWO

Banele Rewo is group marketing executive at Mofswako Media Group and editor of *Motivisi* magazine. He is currently studying integrated marketing communications at the AAA School of Advertising and has completed copywriting at the same institution. He contributes to various online and print publications, including JHBLive and onesmallseed.com. Email Banele at rewobanele@gmail.com, find him on Facebook at www.facebook.com/Baniroquai and follow him on Twitter at @Baniroquai.

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