

RAINBOW SMOKE

**How the tobacco industry exploits
the LGBTIQ+ cause for its marketing and
public relations strategies.**

DECODING

JULY 2025



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This analysis was conducted prior to a significant change in the spring of 2025. Bowing to the Trump administration’s anti-DEI policy, cigarette manufacturers removed pages describing their commitment to LGBTIQ+ people from their websites. They also stopped communicating on this topic on social media. Their support for the LGBT movement therefore appears to have been an opportunistic communication tactic, which could be discarded as soon as it no longer served their commercial interests.



INTRODUCTION

In Switzerland, as elsewhere, the tobacco industry is playing a double game with the  **LGBTIQ+ community**. On the one hand, it presents itself as a defender of this largely discriminated community^{1,2}: by getting involved in diversity initiatives and by generously funding events aimed at LGBTIQ+ people. On the other hand, this same industry specifically targets this community in its marketing campaigns and financially supports a political party that expresses hostile opinions towards LGBTIQ+ people.

This is an example of pinkwashing, a public relations tactic designed to improve a company's image and reputation by promoting a welcoming attitude towards LGBTIQ+ people. The tobacco industry does everything it can to give itself an aura of respectability, and pinkwashing is just one of its many manoeuvres to normalise its activity, while its products continue to cause the deaths of millions of people around the world every year.

 The acronym LGBTIQ+ refers to lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex and/or queer people. The "+" refers to the various gender identities and sexual orientations not included in the acronym.



A RAINBOW TOBACCO INDUSTRY?

In Switzerland, there are several examples of tobacco companies' interest in the LGBTIQ+ community. For instance, tobacco companies support and finance pride marches organised in Switzerland. In Geneva in 2021, Philip Morris International (PMI) and Japan Tobacco International (JTI) each contributed CHF 10,000 to the organisers of this event. However, in 2023, Geneva Pride has decided to stop accepting money from the tobacco multinationals. This decision was motivated by the fact that "the financial contribution [from the multinationals] was no longer in line with [its] project, which promotes inclusiveness and the defence of human rights".³

Two other examples, detailed below, illustrate the links between the LGBTIQ+ community and the corporate social responsibility programs of the tobacco companies: the Swiss Diversity Awards and the Swiss LGBTI-Label.

 'Corporate social responsibility' consists of private programmes that claim to contribute to philanthropic or charitable social objectives.

SWISS DIVERSITY

Swiss Diversity is a Swiss association set up in 2019 to promote diversity and inclusion, particularly in favour of LGBTIQ+ people.⁴ The association organises the Swiss Diversity Awards and the Swiss Diversity Forum, an event that brings together diversity and inclusion managers from different companies. JTI is a partner of the Forum and one of the main partners of the Awards, along with companies such as Swisscom, Allianz, Coca-Cola and Estée Lauder, and public institutions such as the City of Berne and the University of St. Gallen. The tobacco company's logo featured prominently in photos of the event, particularly on the main stage  **Figure 1**, underlining the close links between Swiss Diversity and JTI. But it doesn't stop there. JTI does not just support the



association financially: it is directly involved in its structure, but in a much more discreet way. Until 2023, two of its employees held key positions in Swiss Diversity, without it being made explicit that they were linked to JTI.

Figure 1 – Photo of the Swiss Diversity Awards ceremony in Berne in September 2024. Note that the JTI logo appears in a central position⁷



Christiane Bisanzio, Vice President Diversity & Inclusion at JTI (until March 2023), was a member of the Board of Directors of the Swiss Diversity Awards and now appears on the website as a “supporter” of the event.⁵ Aleks Damchevski, Global Diversity & Inclusion Manager at JTI (until December 2023), was also a member of the 2023 and 2024 Swiss Diversity Awards jury. However, on the Swiss Diversity website, Bisanzio and Damchevski’s affiliation with JTI was not mentioned under their profile pictures. On the JTI website, on the contrary, the company’s support for this organisation is portrayed as a selfless act aimed at promoting a “a more colourful and diverse Switzerland”.⁶ In an interview, the founder of Swiss Diversity, Michel Rudin, praises the tobacco company’s “exemplary commitment” without revealing the multinational’s direct involvement in his association.

“We stand for a more colourful and varied Switzerland.”

“JTI’s commitment is exemplary in this respect.”



SWISS LGBTI-LABEL

The Swiss LGBTI label is another opportunity for tobacco manufacturers to present themselves as committed to LGBTIQ+ issues.⁸ This label was created by the professional networks WyberNet and Network, with the support of the  Swiss LGBTIQ+ umbrella associations. Since 2019, it has been awarded on the basis of a voluntary questionnaire assessing companies' inclusion practices. To obtain the label, a company must also pay a fee of between CHF 500 and CHF 3,000 to the labelling organization.

 Transgender Network Switzerland - TGNS, Pink Cross (of which Michel Rudin was co-president until 2022), Swiss Lesbian Organisation - LOS, WyberNet Gay Professional Women, Network Gay Leadership, Familles Arc-en-ciel and InterAction Suisse

JTI obtained this label in 2020 and 2023⁹ and PMI in 2021 and 2024.¹⁰ This places tobacco companies on the same level as other large companies that have also been awarded the label, Amazon, Firmenich, Helvetia, Julius Bär, Nestlé and Novartis, as well as more institutional or state entities such as the Red Cross Museum, the Swiss Federal Railways (SBB) and the Canton of Geneva.

Cigarette companies have also created dedicated employee groups and positions, to address inclusivity and diversity issues within the company. In 2019, JTI launched the PRIDE group in Geneva, aimed at strengthening the inclusion of people from the LGBTIQ+ community within the company. For its part, PMI has set up the STRIPES GLOBAL group in 2021, with similar objectives: to promote an inclusive working environment, free from discrimination, and to make the LGBTIQ+ community visible within the company.

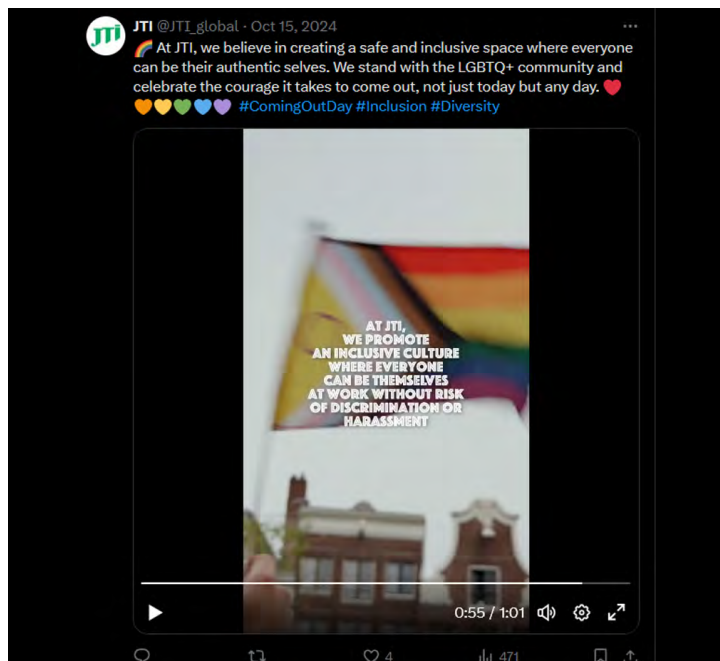


INTERESTED SUPPORT

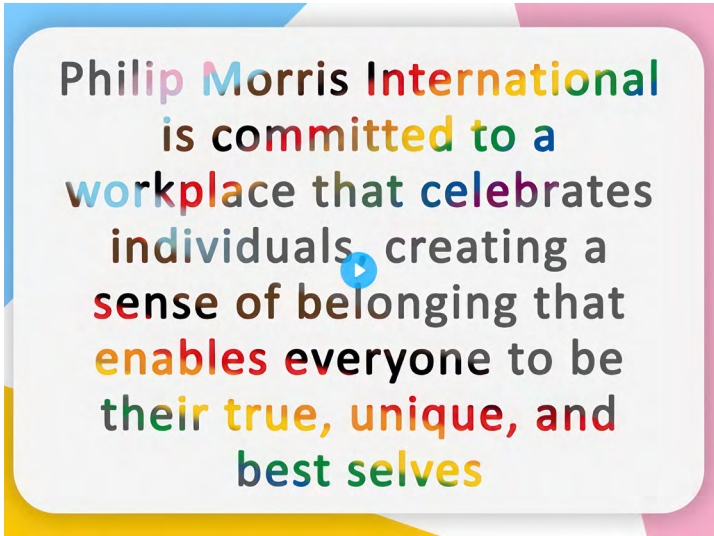
There is no questioning that all these initiatives are part of inclusive policies that benefit the employees of these companies. However, they are also widely promoted on company websites and relayed on their social networks  [Figure 2&3](#). The period leading up to  Pride Month in June is particularly popular with cigarette companies. The same applies to 11 October, celebrated as “coming out day”.

 June is the month commemorating the Stonewall riots, with several events planned to celebrate the struggles of the LGBTIQ+ community.

 [Figure 2](#) – Extracts from JTI's X feed (ex-Twitter), October 2024 ¹¹



 **Figure 3** – PMI's visual presentation of its support for diversity¹²



Behind this apparent willingness to embrace the LGBTIQ+ cause, however, overt commercial interests. One of the promotional arguments put forward on the Swiss LGBTI-Label website concerns the economic benefits that the label can bring to companies: “As a standard of best practice, the Swiss LGBTI label [...] has been proven to bring economic success.”¹³  Aleks Damchevski, from JTI, already mentioned above, confirms that certification constitutes a “commercial advantage”.⁹ For most companies, this could be considered a win-win situation. However, the outcome is radically different for tobacco manufacturers, whose main product, cigarettes, kills one in two regular customers.

 “Diversity & Inclusion is a business advantage at JTI, and our employees can perform at their best when they are free to be themselves.”



MARKETING TARGETING OF A COMMUNITY WITH HIGH SALES POTENTIAL

Despite its alleged support for the LGBTIQ+ cause, the tobacco industry has not hesitated to specifically target members of this community for years in order to sell its deadly products. In 1985, an internal PMI document noted a change in society's perception of homosexuals, who could thus become a marketing target: "It seems to me that homosexuals have made enormous progress in changing their image in this country. [...] A few years back they were considered seen as damaging, bad and immoral, but today they have become acceptable members of society. There must be a considerable body of social science in existence which could tell us how a group such as the homosexual movement has been able to change its public image so dramatically. We should study this material and perhaps learn from it."¹⁴

The links between the tobacco industry and the LGBTIQ+ community were forged in the 1990s in the United States. At that time, PMI began donating money to AIDS research programmes in an attempt to end the boycott imposed on it by ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) in protest against the company's donations to Senator Jesse Helms, who was openly homophobic.^{15,16} An internal PMI document shows that the company first sponsored gay and lesbian events in 1997. These sponsorships took place in New York, Chicago and California: "Philip Morris has led the competition in the gay and lesbian market, first with advertising, and second with participating/sponsoring events. [...]"



📄 A large percentage of Gay and Lesbians are smokers. In order to increase brand share and brand awareness [...] it is imperative to identify new markets with growth potential.”¹⁷

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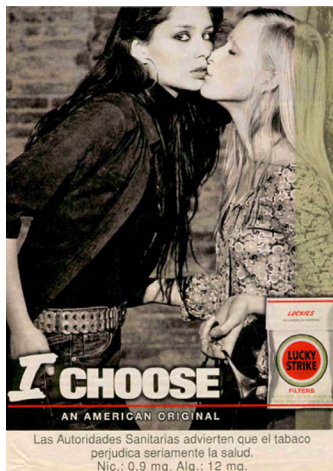
IN A MESSAGE ADDRESSED TO PHILIP MORRIS TO HELP THEM CHOOSE THE MOST PROMISING GAY NEWSPAPER FOR THEIR ADVERTS, THE AGENCY LEO BURNETT DESCRIBED THE “GAY MARKET” AS “FORMIDABLE”.

The industry's financial participation in LGBTIQ+ community events was preceded by targeted marketing to sell its products. Since 1992, advertisements have appeared in gay newspapers. In a message addressed to PMI to help them choose the most promising gay newspaper for their adverts, the agency Leo Burnett described the “gay market” as “formidable”.¹⁸ Two months later, in a striking example of duplicity, PMI nevertheless took the liberty of writing to the Washington Post to deny any specific targeting: 📄 “We do not track the gay market nor do we care about the sexual orientation of our customers”¹⁹ In fact, the company targets the community with specific cigarette brands associated with certain LGBTIQ+ identities. The terms “freedom” and “choice” are often used to promote them, drawing a parallel between the freedom to smoke and the freedom to live one's life as one wishes 📄 **Figure 4.**

📄 “We do not track the gay market nor do we care about the sexual orientation of our customers”



Figure 4 – Advertisement for Lucky Strike (BAT) cigarettes, 1990s.
In this advertisement, choice is clearly emphasised.
The freedom to smoke is associated with the freedom to “choose” and the freedom to love²⁰



In 2000, confidential documents from tobacco company R.J. Reynolds were leaked, revealing a marketing strategy called Project SCUM (Sub-Culture Urban Marketing, “scum” also meaning “riff-raff”). The aim of this cynical project was to increase cigarette sales by targeting gay men and homeless people through advertisements and displays strategically placed in areas frequented by these communities in the gay Castro district and underprivileged Tenderloin neighbourhood of San Francisco. It also included gift offers and the organisation of events such as LGBT Bar Nights to promote certain cigarette brands.²¹

TO THE **DETRIMENT** OF HEALTH

This targeting of the LGBTIQ+ community, combined with other specific problems experienced by its members, such as minority stress caused by LGBT-phobia,^{22,23} is associated with a higher smoking prevalence. According to data from the Lucerne School of Social Work, in Switzerland, gay (36.1%) and bisexual (41.8%) men are more likely to use tobacco than heterosexual men (33.5%). Lesbian (39.0%) and bisexual (49.9%) women also smoke significantly more than heterosexual women (25.4%).^{24, 25}



A POLITICAL COMMITMENT **AT ODDS** WITH THE VALUES ADVOCATED

While the tobacco industry presents itself as defending a world that is inclusive, free and open in terms of sexual orientation and gender identity, it has at the same time funded political parties and candidates that favour private economic interests over public health measures and oppose the extension of LGBTIQ rights.

**THE TOBACCO INDUSTRY
WAS AMONG THE LARGEST
CORPORATE DONORS
TO DONALD TRUMP**

In the 2024 United States presidential election, the tobacco industry was among the largest corporate donors to Donald Trump,²⁶ known for his hostility to the rights of LGBTIQ+ people. In Switzerland, transparency rules concerning the funding of political parties have led the FDP (Liberal-Radical Party) and the SVP ("Schweizerische Volkspartei". - Swiss People's Party), the two main right-wing parties in Switzerland, to declare that PMI paid them CHF 35,000 each in 2023. Historical data indicates that this was not the first donation to these parties, which each received tens of thousands of francs during the 1980s and 1990s.²⁷



THE FDP AND THE SVP, THE TWO MAIN RIGHT WING PARTIES IN SWITZERLAND, DECLARED THAT PHILIP MORRIS PAID THEM CHF 35,000 EACH IN 2023.

The SVP has always opposed the interests of the LGBTIQ+ community. In 2005, the SVP called for the rejection of the law on registered partnerships between people of the same sex.²⁸ In 2020, it recommended rejecting the inclusion of homophobia in the penal code.²⁹ In 2021, the party took a stance against “Marriage for All”, the Swiss same-sex marriage referendum.³⁰

🔍 The Young Swiss SVP are very active in combating the demands of the LGBTIQ+ community, as shown by their activities on social networks 🔍 [Figure 5](#)

🔍 The FDP has supported the extension of rights during these three votes.

🔍 [Figure 5](#) – 🔍 Extracts from the X feed (ex-Twitter) of the Young SVP Switzerland, 29 July 2023³¹



🔍 “Bern flies flags that represent censorship and exclusion, decadence and ruin. We, the young SVP, display the flag that represents freedom and strength, cohesion and our future. Free Switzerland - vote Young SVP!”



By funding this party, the tobacco industry is showing that its political commitments are motivated more by its commercial interests than by the principles it claims to have when presenting itself as a champion of the LGBTIQ+ cause. Claiming to be progressive and colourful, the tobacco industry does not hesitate to promote diametrically opposed political positions.

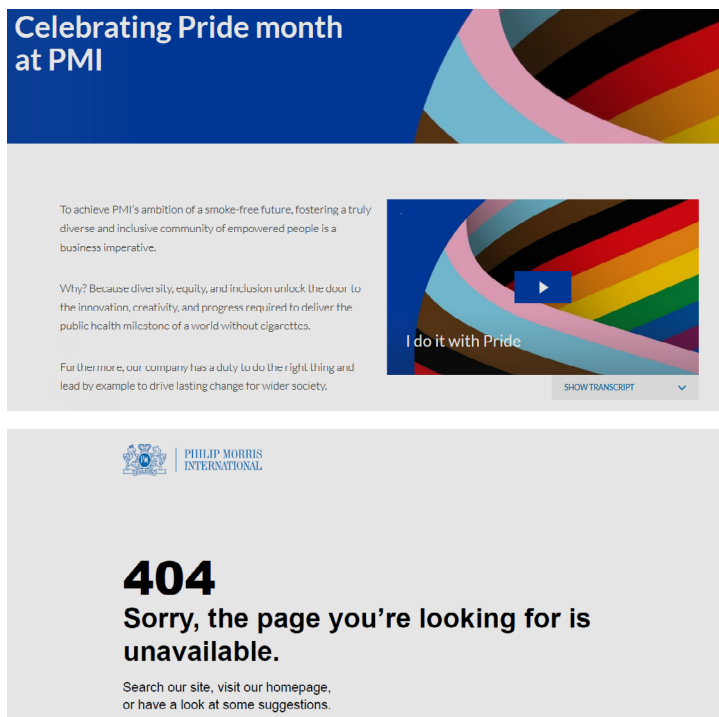
EXPLOITATION OF DIVERSITY

The tobacco industry's direct and overt involvement in the LGBTIQ+ cause is a flagrant example of pinkwashing. The industry uses the image and demands of LGBTIQ+ people to promote the sale of tobacco products targeting them, thereby contributing to harming the physical and mental health of members of the community while pretending to help them.

Following the global offensive against diversity policies launched by the Trump administration, PMI quietly removed pages referring to the Swiss LGBTI Label and Pride Month from its website. For its part, JTI has stopped all communication on X about its commitment to inclusivity. These withdrawals illustrate the opportunism of the tobacco industry: inclusivity is only promoted when it serves its commercial interests  **Figure 6**.



Figure 6 – PMI website page 'Celebrating Pride Month,' February 2025 to the top and June 2025 below.^{34, 35}



As recommended in the implementation guidelines of the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control,³² Switzerland should prohibit the social responsibility practices of tobacco companies and therefore put an end to all financial support and communication about the alleged commitment of tobacco companies to the LGBTIQ+ cause. Inclusiveness and respect for the rights of LGBTIQ+ employees should be minimum standards and not dependent on the goodwill of an industry that prides itself on its supposed exemplarity. Worldwide, 116 countries have banned publication of the tobacco industry's CSR measures³³ and it is time for Switzerland to start catching up on tobacco prevention policies.



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