

"YOU'RE TOO YOUNG, KID": THE TEMPTATION OF FORBIDDEN FRUIT

EPISODE 2

**"FOR ADULTS ONLY": YOUNG PEOPLE
TARGETED BY THE TOBACCO INDUSTRY**

NOVEMBER 2025



The tobacco industry knows that openly targeting young people is out of the question, both ethically and legally. So, it finds ways around it. Behind seemingly harmless campaigns, the industry plays on the unique vulnerabilities of teenagers to subtly draw them into using its products.

You've probably noticed that teenagers have a certain tendency to rebel and reject the rules established by authority. Parents know this all too well... And so does the tobacco industry: a 1973 memorandum from R.J. Reynolds noted that:

"Today more than ever, young people tend to reject everything that is accepted by the 'over-30' establishment, which includes their parents."¹

So when mom and dad keep saying, "Don't smoke, it's bad for your health!" or "Children shouldn't smoke!", it may actually pique their curiosity. As an other internal tobacco industry document pointed out, ***"one of the very things that are attractive is the mere fact that cigarettes are forbidden fruit."***² What could be more tempting for a teenager seeking to assert themselves than to hear over and over again that cigarettes are "not for them," that they are "too young" or "not mature enough"? As the Tobacco Institute of Australia rightly noted in 1980:

"The statement 'only grown-ups are allowed to smoke' provokes them. They want to know why parents, older brothers and sisters or acquaintances smoke whereas they themselves cannot, and receive evasive answers to questions or simply hear that 'smoking is not for little children'. In this way children may acquire an early interest in smoking with the desire to try it themselves."³



"FOR ADULTS ONLY"

This psychological reversal has been exploited for decades by the tobacco industry to target young people seeking independence and rebellion. This strategy is described in particular in the document "Archetype"⁴ by Clotaire Rapaille, a psychologist and marketing expert commissioned by Philip Morris in the 1990s to develop a marketing plan specifically designed to appeal to teenagers. In this document, he makes several specific recommendations, including: *"stress that smoking is for adults only", "make it difficult to obtain", "continue to have smoking perceived as a legitimate, albeit morally ambiguous, adult activity", and "stress that smoking is for people who like to take risks".*

And what could be more effective in creating the illusion of a responsible company than declaring that minors should not smoke? Cultivating a positive image is not only intended to reassure the general public: the real objective is to delay or hinder the adoption of overly strict regulations against the company, as Philip Morris pointed out in a confidential document dating from 1995:

*"Acting in a manner that draws the clearest, sharpest possible line between who should and who should not have access to cigarettes will reinforce the right of adults to obtain and enjoy a legal product, and thus prevent marketing bans down the road that are driven by the youth access issue."*⁵

It is easy to see, then, why cigarette manufacturers have never opposed the inclusion of the phrase "prohibited to those under 18 years of age" on cigarette packs, and are even in favor of prohibiting the sale of tobacco to minors, even though they usually oppose any public health measure that could reduce their profits. In 1978, the Federal Council highlighted this manipulative tactic:



"Advertising specialists are too subtle to address young people directly in their advertising. One of the main reasons minors start smoking or drinking is that they see it as a symbol of adulthood. This is why the people featured in advertisements are always adults, but young enough for minors, the target group, to identify with them."⁶

Some even wonder whether the health risks associated with smoking might actually be a boost to sales... As we saw in the previous episode, enjoying risk-taking and pushing boundaries are indeed characteristics of adolescence.

The tobacco industry knows full well that a "healthy" cigarette brand will have little success with young people:⁷ **"the alleged risk of smoking may actually make smoking attractive."** [...] **"In this sense, the warning label on the package may be a plus"**, noted R.J. Reynolds in a 1984 document entitled "Effective Marketing to Young Adult Smokers."

Quote in original language:
"Les spécialistes de la publicité sont trop subtils pour s'adresser formellement à la jeunesse dans leur réclame. L'un des motifs importants qui pousse les mineurs à commencer de fumer ou de boire, c'est qu'ils voient là un symbole de l'âge adulte. C'est d'ailleurs pour cette raison que les personnes présentées dans la publicité sont toujours des adultes, mais assez jeunes pour que les mineurs, le groupe visé, puissent s'identifier à elles."

Figure 1 – Cartoon by Patrick Chapatte published in Le Temps in 2000. Reproduced with the author's permission. Translation: "Caution: Smoking kills"; "Nice! What brand is it?"



In 2012, the Liggett & Myers brand, owned by Philip Morris, launched an advertising campaign fo-cused on the theme of transgression, titled "Défie la norme" ("Defy the Norm"). The OxyRomandie association subsequently filed a complaint with the Swiss Commission for Fairness, arguing that the campaign encouraged young people to smoke. Indeed, on the posters, the slogan "Defy the Norm" appeared right next to the warning "Smoking Kills"  **Figure 2**. This strategic placement suggested that the health warning itself was simply another norm to be defied.

 **Figure 2** – Liggett & Myers (Philip Morris) advertisement and detail, 20 Minutes Suisse, July 30, 2012. Translation: "In general, it's either the terrace or swimming." ; "Defy the Norm".



Rauchen führt Ihnen und den Menschen in Ihrer Umgebung erheblichen Schaden zu. Fumer nuit gravement à votre santé et à celle de votre entourage. Il fumo danneggia gravemente te e chi ti sta intorno.



THE FRIEND GANG

But even more than transgression, it's the need to feel included that drives most teenagers. As we saw in the previous episode, if the majority of a group smokes, young people are likely to feel com-pelled to smoke too, driven by a desire to fit in.⁷ At an age when they are distancing themselves from their parents, they feel a need to belong to a group of peers they can relate to.

"Belonging" to a group is, in fact, the very first value mentioned by R.J. Reynolds in its 1984 marketing analysis of the different characteristics of a FUBYAS ("First Usual Brand Younger Adult Smoker", i.e., young smoker who begins to regularly consume a particular cigarette brand).⁸

The other characteristics identified are "individuality" ("**belonging to a selected peer group requires being different from: family; other peer groups**"), "ambition," "excitement" ("**have fun in every way possible at every time possible**"), and finally "sex".⁸

The  **Figure 3** taken from that same document, describes in very simple terms what teenagers mean by "fun" (notably: "**No fun = parents**").

To target young people in its advertising, the tobacco industry readily plays on this need for belonging. After all, who wouldn't want to be part of the cool groups of friends featured in the ads below ( **Figure 4**)?



Figure 3 – Screenshot from the 1984 R.J. Reynolds document.⁸

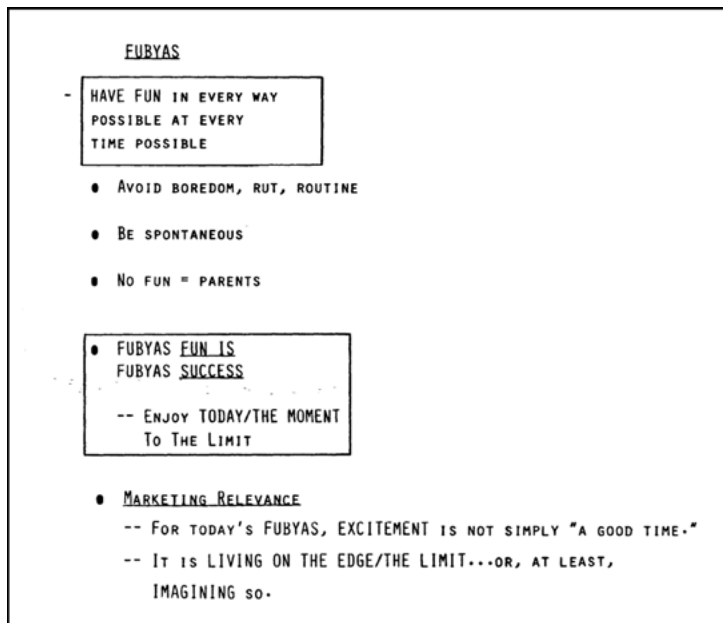


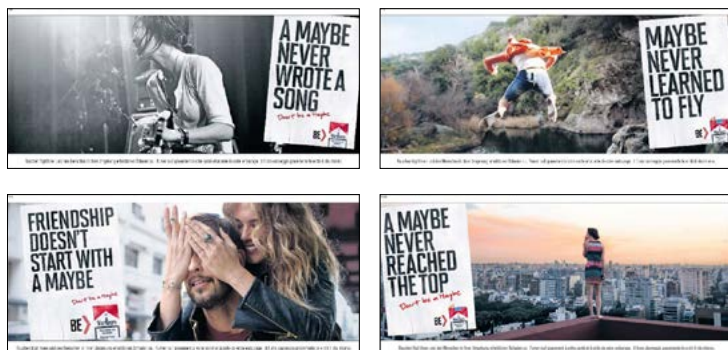
Figure 4 - Then and now: friendship exploited by the tobacco and nicotine industry. On the left, a 2002 advertisement for the Newport brand, owned by Lorillard Tobacco Company.⁹ On the right, a 2025 Instagram post by a Swiss influencer, created as part of a sponsored partnership with VELO, British American Tobacco's nicotine pouch brand.¹⁰



"DON'T BE A MAYBE, BE MARLBORO"

The "Be Marlboro" advertising campaign, launched by Philip Morris in the 2010s, perfectly illustrates the exploitation of themes central to adolescence, such as risk-taking, a taste for adventure, and friendship.

Figure 5 - Marlboro advertisements, Swiss newspaper 20 Minutes, between June 2012 and March 2013.



In this campaign, young people who do not smoke are implicitly labeled as a "Maybe," someone nobody wants to identify with: lonely, friendless, and uninteresting. The industry thus links cigarettes with a positive image: **to smoke is to be one of those who dare, who live life to the fullest, who take risks, and who have fun.** The goal is clear: to encourage young people to smoke in order to join the "Marlboro" group, individuals who are presented as "cool" and daring.

Despite Philip Morris's claim that the "Be Marlboro" campaign was aimed exclusively at people of legal smoking age,¹¹ it has been met with fierce criticism. Several stakeholders filed complaints, notably in Brazil, Colombia, and Switzerland. In Germany, the campaign was banned in 2013, with authorities deeming that it encouraged children to smoke. Nevertheless, it continued to run in many countries, particularly in low- and middle-income nations.¹² "Be Marlboro" is not the only campaign to use such tactics, but it clearly illustrates how the tobacco industry exploits themes that are



popular with teenagers in order to better appeal to young people.

In the next episode, we'll take a closer look at the techniques used by cigarette manufacturers to target children and teenagers, from the "cartoons" of the past to today's social media.



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