

STUDYING TEENAGERS TO TARGET THEM BETTER

EPISODE 4

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

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The tobacco industry claims that it has no interest in minors. Yet, since the 1950s, it has studied them closely to understand, among other things, what motivates them to smoke and what image they associate with cigarettes. Such information is key to targeting them more effectively in marketing campaigns.

“Intended for adult smokers”: this is how the industry presents its “new” products, such as e-cigarettes and nicotine pouches. However, a closer look at the marketing surrounding these products gives reason to question this claim [↗ Figure 1](#).

Thanks to a precise targeting, [👤](#) minors have become the primary consumers of these products. But how did the industry become so adept at understanding (and exploiting) the psychology of young people?

[📊](#) In Switzerland, in 2024, 2.8% of 15–17-year-olds regularly use nicotine pouches, compared to only 0.6% of the general population. Similarly, 8% of 15–17-year-olds regularly use e-cigarettes, compared to 4% of the general population.²²

[↗ Figure 1](#) – Who are these ads really intended for? On the left, an ad for Juul brand e-cigarettes¹. À droite, publicité On the right, an ad for Velo brand nicotine pouches, owned by British American Tobacco².



LEARNING AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE ABOUT **TEENAGERS'** **HABITS**

“Does Philip Morris conduct marketing research on minors? No. We do not approve of smoking by minors and we have compiled no data on minors’ smoking habits. Has Philip Morris ever conducted marketing research on children? No.”³

In 1995, Philip Morris stated in an internal communication to its employees that it had never conducted marketing research on minors. This was a logical strategy: by admitting an interest in young people, cigarette manufacturers risked legal consequences and significant reputational damage.

Yet studying young people has always been essential to the survival of this market, particularly given that the vast majority of smokers start smoking before the age of 18⁴.

As Myron Johnston, an economist in the Research and Development Office of Philip Morris stated bluntly in 1981, data on adolescents is particularly valuable to the company:

“It is important to know as much as possible about teenage smoking patterns and attitudes. [...] The smoking patterns of teenagers are particularly important to Philip Morris”⁵



In a 1962 memo, a polling institute advised UK cigarette manufacturers to study minors, a population they were still struggling to understand.

“[...] we suggest you consider undertaking a study into the effects of social and personal influences on:

- a) causing children below the age of sixteen to smoke and not to smoke;***
- b) causing young adults between the ages of say sixteen and eighteen similarly to smoke and not to smoke, and also to differ in their smoking habits, for example to smoke greater and lesser amounts, to smoke tipped and nontipped cigarettes and to smoke in different circumstances as at work or at leisure or at set times a day.”⁶***

Note: the use of the term “young adults” to describe individuals aged 16 to 18, who are, in fact, minors.



CIGARETTE MANUFACTURERS, EXPERTS IN ADOLESCENT BEHAVIOR

And that is exactly what the industry has done.

Research conducted by the tobacco industry on young people from the 1950s onward has enabled it to construct a detailed portrait of adolescent consumers, based on an in-depth psychological analysis of their vulnerabilities and their relationship to smoking.

In [Episode 1](#), we saw that the tobacco industry had closely analyzed the behavior of young smokers and drawn three major conclusions:


- Minors are the main source of new smokers, since the vast majority of people who smoke started before the age of 18⁴.
- After initiation, consumption increases rapidly; it is in the years following the first cigarettes that daily consumption becomes established, reaching adult levels⁵.
- The decision to start smoking is driven primarily by psychological and social motivations: identification with a peer group, stress reduction, enhancement of self-image, a taste for experimentation, and an anti-establishment attitude⁷.


However, these were by no means the only studies conducted by the tobacco industry on young people. In her article “The Tobacco Industry and Underage Youth Smoking”⁸, Professor Cheryl Perry shows, drawing on internal documents to support her claims, that the tobacco industry has conducted numerous studies targeting young people since the 1950s. These studies include large-scale surveys



of children and adolescents, conducted either in schools or directly in their homes, in order to assess the prevalence of smoking by age, gender, academic performance, and brand.

Starting in the 2000s, a shift occurred. Following a series of lawsuits brought against the tobacco industry, it adopted even more discretion about targeting minors. During this period, the industry continued to collect data on adolescents, but now under the guise of smoking prevention. For example the “Teenage Attitudes and Behaviors Study” conducted by Phillip Morris tracked the smoking habits and motivations of approximately 20 000 young people aged 11 to 17 each year, amounting to a total of 180 000 adolescents surveyed between 1999 and 2007⁹. All the while claiming that this data was **“a valuable source of information and an integral tool for continuing to implement Philip Morris USA’s commitment to help prevent youth smoking.”**

In practice, however, all these datasets correspond exactly to what the marketing department needs, and what the industry had already been collecting for decades. As Professor Stanton Glantz, a leading figure in the fight against smoking at the University of California, San Francisco, explains: **“Although these data nominally are collected as part of a ‘youth smoking prevention’ effort, they contain precisely the same information tobacco marketers need to sell their products to young people.”**¹⁰ He also points out that Philip Morris used the same advertising agency to design both its  **“youth smoking prevention” programs and its cigarette advertising campaigns.**

 In the next episode, we will analyze the nature of the youth smoking prevention programs implemented by the tobacco industry.

NONCONFORMISTS SET THE TONE

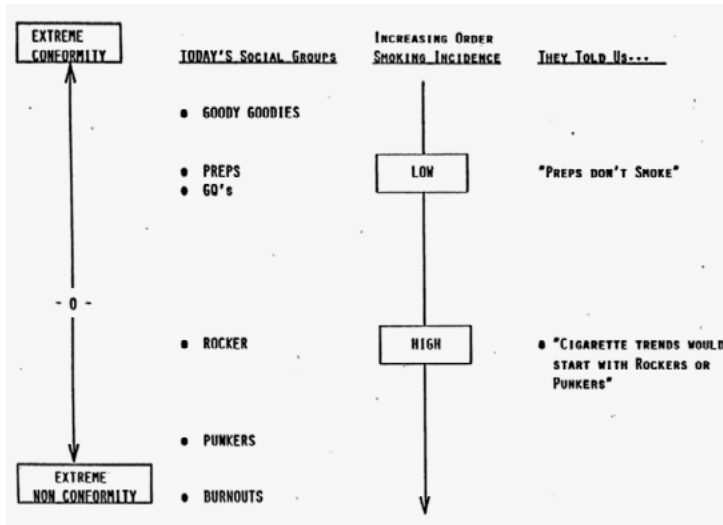
One of the key aspects of marketing to teenagers is segmentation. In the 1990s, cigarette manufacturers observed that teenagers were not a homogeneous group: they could be divided into subgroups with distinct profiles, each displaying a different motivation to start smoking.

“At these ages, every generation has a spectrum of about 5-6 groups, each of which has a unified approach to life. Each group adopts a way of dressing and talking, our kind of music, and other cues and symbols of their common ground. Smoking is one of these cues.”¹¹



According to cigarette manufacturer R.J. Reynolds, teenagers can be classified into different subgroups, ranging from the most conservative, the “Goody-Goodies,” described as rule-abiding and almost invariably non-smokers, to the most liberal, the “Burn-outs” or “Punkers,” characterized as non-conformists and generally smokers¹².

Figure 2 – Spectrum of youth social groups according to R.J. Reynolds, 1989¹³



Nonconformist youths are often perceived by their peers as setting the tone by defining what is considered “cool.” As such, they serve a source of inspiration for other young people. Based on this logic, marketing segmentation aims first to target a core group of nonconformists, “planting a seed” designed to generate buzz. To gain momentum, this buzz must then be taken up by leaders of other subgroups. Once legitimized in this way, it can gradually spread until it is adopted by all teenagers.



WHEN PUBLIC RESEARCH INSTITUTIONS **COLLABORATE** WITH THE TOBACCO INDUSTRY

The fact that the tobacco industry conducts studies on young people is deeply cynical, yet entirely consistent with its desire to ensure its own survival. More troubling, however, is the fact that academics have put their expertise at the service of this strategy, thereby becoming complicit in efforts to draw young people into an addiction from which they will later struggle to free themselves. Two particularly revealing examples of this phenomenon are presented below.

I. A Canadian neuropsychologist has a long-standing relationship with the tobacco industry

A neuropsychology researcher at the University of Ottawa, Verner Knott began collaborating with the tobacco industry as early as 1977 on research into smoking-related behaviors in both young people and adults, a collaboration that continued at least until the 2000s. He is still employed at the university to this day.

In 1979 he proposed, for example, that British American Tobacco fund a longitudinal study: recruiting children, making a baseline assessment, and then following them for many years (5, 10, 15, 20 years, etc.)¹⁴. Entitled “Identifying Psychophysiological Predictors of Tobacco Use in Children: A Five-Year Prospective Longitudinal Study,”



the study tracked 300 children aged 11 in order to **“investigate predisposing psychophysiological parameters in the acquisition of the tobacco habit [...]”**¹⁵

In 1982, British American Tobacco expressed concern about the potential reputational damage that could result if it were discovered that the company was studying the psychology of children. However, Verner Knott and the Ottawa Hospital offered a form of institutional cover. This was highlighted by a British American Tobacco employee following an exchange with Verner Knott:

“One of the advantages of carrying out contact research is that any ethical problems become those of the University/Hospital rather than of the funding organization. In the present case this is particularly important since children are to be studied, and their smoking/non-smoking habits determined. [...] Within these provisos, and providing the C.T.M.C. [Canadian Tobacco Manufacturer’s Council] fund the Royal Ottawa Hospital (rather than Knott directly), the project should be as well isolated from the tobacco industry as can be reasonably expected.”¹⁶

In addition to assisting cigarette manufacturers in studying child psychology, Verner Knott’s research was also used for pro-tobacco lobbying purposes. In 1987, called to testify at the request of the tobacco industry during the review of a law aimed at protecting non-smokers, particularly young people, he asserted that smoking was **“an effective coping instrument for dealing with life’s daily exigencies”** and that **“the recent surge of worksite smoking cessation initiatives would seem to undermine the smoker’s productivity, creativity and self-fulfillment in the working environment.”**¹⁷

II. A psychology professor at the University of Geneva in the service of Philip Morris

On this side of the Atlantic, some researchers have likewise shown themselves receptive to tobacco industry funding. Between 1994 and 1997, Philip Morris paid nearly CHF 190,000 to Elsa Schmid-Kitsikis, a professor of clinical psychology at the University of Geneva. She and her assistant Helga Kilcher were contracted to collect data from children and adolescents on their perceptions of risky behaviors, including smoking.



What is particularly striking about Professor Schmid-Kitsikis' study is the age of the children included in her sample and questioned about their appetite for risk and their relationship to cigarettes:

☑ ***“Smoking produces two types of attitudes depending on the age of the subjects. From 9 to 12 years old, the subjects say they do not want to engage in this activity; older subjects have less radical and more tolerant attitudes towards these activities.”¹⁸***

☑ Quote in original language :
« Les activités de fumer produisent deux types de position selon l'âge des sujets. De 9 à 12 ans, les sujets disent ne pas vouloir pratiquer cette activité ; les sujets plus âgés ont des attitudes moins radicales et plus tolérantes face à ces activités.»

A psychology professor at the University of Geneva is therefore being paid by Philip Morris to assess the degree of social acceptability of smoking among a population that includes children as young as 9.

Philip Morris's objectives are clear: to gather data on children's perception of risk, to associate itself with a reputable university in order to project an image of a responsible company, and to build relationships with prominent members of the scientific community in order to expand its influence and strengthen its network of allies¹⁹. Studying young people as mere guinea pigs in order to better sell them a deadly product: what an edifying program.

As our investigation into Swiss universities has shown²⁰, the tobacco industry continues to collaborate with academic institutions in Switzerland and elsewhere. The research it funds or supports is then used to serve its own interests²¹.

In the next episode, we will examine how the tobacco industry has set up smoking “prevention” programs aimed at minors which, far from being philanthropic initiatives, have in fact been used to advance and consolidate its own interests.



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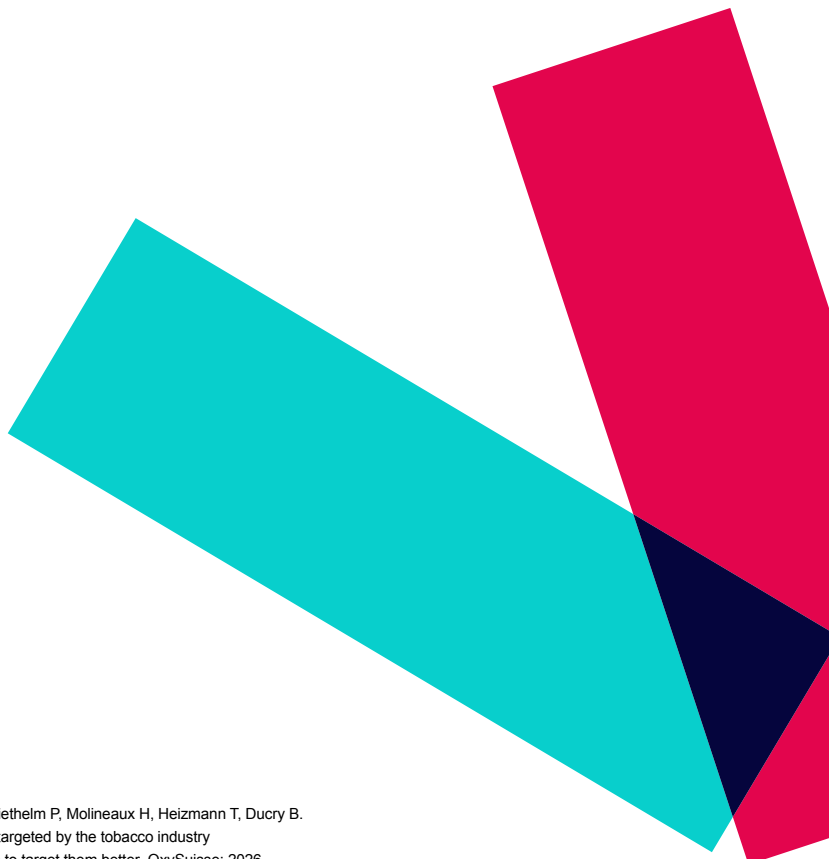
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