

WHEN THE UNIVER- SITY OF GENEVA CONDUCTED RE- SEARCH ON CHILDREN FOR PHILIP MORRIS

Research on risk perception conducted
in the 1990s by the Faculty of Psychology
on behalf of the tobacco company

BRIEFING-PAPER

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FIRST CONTACTS

Our story begins in French-speaking Switzerland, on a winter day in 1993. Three people sit around a table. On one side, Elsa Schmid-Kitsikis, full professor of clinical psychology at the University of Geneva (UNIGE), and her assistant Helga Kilcher. Opposite them, Mitchell Ritter, a former student of Schmid-Kitsikis, who has worked since 1991 as a scientist at the “Fabriques de tabac réunies” in Neuchâtel, owned by the cigarette giant Philip Morris.

Ritter hasn't come just to reminisce with his former professor from his master's degree in psychology. He's there to talk business. He represents the Science and Technology (S&T) department at Philip Morris Europe. Part of his job is to establish contacts with academics to fund research that will serve the company's commercial interests.

The general objectives of the S&T department are outlined in a 1994 document¹:

“To overcome hostile anti-smoking attitudes which could have an adverse impact, frequently via the scientific community, on the political and commercial environment. To gain access to the ‘inside track’ so as to be able to work, as far as possible, in a time frame that allows for a rational rather than panic treatment of critical issues.”

The strategic areas defined to achieve these objectives are divided into three categories:

- Physics/chemistry/pharmacokinetics
- Biology/toxicology/epidemiology
- Psychology/sociology

It was within the third category that Ritter contacted Schmid-Kitsikis. Within this category, the priority research topics were identified by the S&T department as follows¹:



“Psychology/Sociology: Risk Perception, Social Acceptance, Individual Lifestyle, Benefits of Habituated Behaviour, Structure of Personality, Decision Mechanisms, cognitive and Behavioural Development.”

The proposal Ritter submitted to the professor and her assistant was, however, rejected a few days later by the professors of the faculty’s psychology section. The tobacco company had in fact sought to fund a study on “the possible effects of passive exposure to smoke on children’s cognitive development,” but the faculty board determined that this would raise too many “ethical issues”².

📄 A similar proposal from Philip Morris had also been rejected by the University of Lausanne shortly before.

📄 FAPSE Archives, University of Geneva. PO/PA/PT College meeting of February 18, 1993, Item 9 (Miscellaneous).

Although the matter might have ended there, Professor Schmid-Kitsikis contacted Ritter again a month later, on 29 March, to propose a different study²:

📄 **“We would be willing to explore another research topic, provided, of course, that you are interested in collaborating on its implementation. [...] In brief, the study would examine how children and adolescents perceive the smokers in their social circles. Three age groups would be considered: children aged 5 to 8; 9 to 12; and adolescents aged 13 to 16.”**

📄 Quote in original language : « Nous serions prêts à aborder un autre thème de recherche, si naturellement vous êtes intéressé à entrer en matière pour sa réalisation. [...] Brièvement, il s'agirait d'étudier la perception qu'ont l'enfant et l'adolescent de leur entourage de fumeurs. Trois groupes d'âges seraient considérés : Enfants de 5 à 8 ans ; de 9 à 12 ans ; Adolescents de 13 à 16 ans »

In short, a professor holding the highest research and teaching position at UNIGE voluntarily offered her expertise to a tobacco company, proposing to conduct studies on children as young as 5 years old.



A STUDY ON RISK PERCEPTION

Although the new project described by Schmid-Kitsikis did not match the tobacco company's initial request, it nevertheless demonstrated her flexibility and willingness to propose a research topic that aligned with one of the S&T priority areas: risk perception³. Ritter and Schmid-Kitsikis met again on 4 June 1993, and agreed on a new direction for the proposed research:

☑ ***“It was agreed to examine the concept of risk perception from a developmental perspective, focusing on three age groups (5–8 years, 10–14 years, 16 years and older) [...] with a particular focus on smoking initiation.”***

☑ Quote in original language:
« Il a été convenu d'examiner la notion de perception du risque d'un point de vue développemental, en se concentrant sur trois groupes d'âge (5-8 ans, 10-14 ans, 16 ans et plus) [...] avec un focus particulier sur l'initiation au tabagisme.»

This time, it worked. In November 1993, Helmut Reif, Ritter's supervisor, informed Richard Carchman, director of scientific affairs at Philip Morris USA in Richmond, that a meeting had taken place in October with Schmid-Kitsikis “to finalise plans for the research project she will be undertaking for [them] on risk perception seen from the developmental perspective”⁴. The contract was signed in January 1994. Philip Morris allocated 30,000 CHF to the professor for a pilot study, intended as the starting point for a long-term collaboration^{3,5}.

The aim of the study was to assess perceptions of risk, based on the hypothesis that these would vary according to the participants' age, the child's family background, and the product being smoked (cigar, pipe, or cigarette)⁶.
Ultimately, the pilot study was conducted with 186 children aged 9 to 17 and concluded as planned in July 1994⁷.

Before the funding was approved by Ritter and his superiors, Schmid-Kitsikis sent them a review of the scientific literature on risk perception.



🔍 ***“In this regard, Babando (1993) notes that the habit of smoking is generally acquired during preadolescence or adolescence; this implies, among other things, that smoking is linked to this stage of life. This observation is of interest, since the study population in our research consists of children and adolescents. [...] While 13- to 14-year-olds continue to follow certain parental and social norms, a rebellious streak begins to emerge during adolescence.”***⁸

It is easy to see why such data would be of interest to the tobacco company, particularly information on the development of risk-taking behaviour and its relationship to smoking among adolescents.

The full contract was made available to us through the release of Philip Morris’s internal documents following the 1998 🔍 **“Master Settlement Agreement.”** The contract³ like the majority of the documents we examined for this study, comes from files originating in Ritter’s office. It is a particularly revealing document that details the “collaboration” between UNIGE and Philip Morris Europe. **In it, UNIGE commits to developing “a precise methodology and [...] a feasibility study, particularly regarding access to a population of children and adolescents.”**

On 25 August 1994, Schmid-Kitsikis’s “preliminary” study was completed. The professor summarised the results of her research in a written report to Philip Morris:

🔍 ***“Based on the results obtained from the survey and the visual materials, it appears that the hypotheses we had formulated are confirmed:***

- I. The age of the subjects is a highly significant factor in explaining their perceptions and attitudes towards risky activities in general, and toward tobacco in particular. [...]***
- III. Subjects from families with parents who smoke assign lower risk levels to cigarette smoking than subjects from non-smoking families. Conversely, subjects with non-smoking parents assign higher risk levels to cigarette smoking.”***⁹

The study thus provided the tobacco companies with insights into

🔍 Quote in original language:
« Dans ce sens, Babando (1993) signale que l’habitude de fumer est prise généralement à la préadolescence ou à l’adolescence, ceci vient signifier, entre autre [sic], que le tabagisme est lié à cette étape de la vie. Cette remarque est d’intérêt, puisque la population d’étude de notre recherche est composée par des enfants et des adolescents. [...] Si les 13-14 ans continuent à suivre une certaine morale parentale et sociale, un mouvement de contestation se dessine à l’adolescence. »

🔍 The Master Settlement Agreement is the financial settlement reached between the largest U.S. tobacco companies and 46 U.S. states, acknowledging the harm caused by the industry and requiring it to pay billions of dollars and hand over its internal documents to the courts. See <https://truthinitiative.org/who-we-are/our-history/master-settlement-agreement>

🔍 Quote in original language:
« D’après les résultats obtenus à l’enquête et aux planches, il s’avère que les hypothèses que nous avions formulées sont confirmées:
I. L’âge des sujets est un facteur fortement explicatif sur les représentations et des prises de position des sujets par rapport aux activités à risque en général, et de manière particulière pour le tabac. [...]
III. Les sujets appartenant à un type de famille avec des parents fumeurs attribuent des degrés de risque moins importants à l’activité de fumer la cigarette que les sujets de famille non-fumeur. Et inversement, les sujets avec des parents non-fumeurs donnent plus de degrés de risque à l’activité de fumer la cigarette. »



minors' attitudes towards various dimensions of risk, all directly related to smoking. But that was not all. The professor and her assistant also collected data on smoking initiation. The results showed that risk held a certain appeal for young people, particularly those aged 13 and older. Moreover, smoking was viewed more favourably when practised by adults.

“When a ‘young’ person is shown smoking, the judgments made by the subjects are generally negative. If the image depicts an ‘adult’ smoking, the act of smoking is judged less negatively.”

Quote in original language:
« Dans le cas où un personnage "jeune" fume, les jugements faits par les sujets sont plutôt négatifs. Si l'image représente un "adulte" qui fume, l'activité de fumer est jugée moins négativement. »

Finally, Schmid-Kitsikis and Kilcher noted that perceived social status also played a role in risk perception.

“High social status, as depicted in one of the images, appears to reduce the perceived risk associated with smoking.”

Quote in original language:
« Le statut social élevé, qui est représenté sur l'image d'une planche, produirait une diminution du degré de risque attribué à l'activité de fumer. »



FROM CHILDREN TO **YOUNG** ADULTS

Once the pilot study was completed, the two researchers approached Ritter for a second round of funding to support a new phase of research. They took the initiative by contacting the Canton of Neuchâtel to **secure access to children and adolescents in cantonal schools**, and budgeted the project at 105,000 CHF.

📄 *“The results obtained in the study conducted during the 1993–94 academic year provide us with numerous options for future research. The developmental study we would like to conduct, beginning next academic year, would focus on a population of children and adolescents. To this end, we have obtained authorization from the Department of Public Education of the Canton of Neuchâtel, which would allow us immediate access to a part of this population.”⁹*

📄 Quote in original language:
« Les résultats obtenus, dans l'étude réalisée l'année 93-94, nous donnent de nombreuses possibilités de choix pour une future continuation de recherche. L'étude développementale que nous voudrions réaliser, dès la prochaine rentrée universitaire, porterait sur une population d'enfants et d'adolescents. Pour ce faire, nous avons une autorisation du Département de l'Instruction Publique du Canton de Neuchâtel qui nous permettrait d'accéder de suite à une partie de cette population. »

After further discussions, Ritter and Schmid-Kitsikis ultimately agreed on different terms: the study would focus on adolescents and young adults aged 18 to 24, with a total budget of 60,227 CHF from 1 December 1994, through the end of 1995¹⁰⁻¹². A formal agreement was signed.

The archival records concerning the continuation of the collaboration and its results are incomplete. We know that Philip Morris budgeted 40,000 CHF annually for a study on “decision-making among adolescents” for 1996 and 1997¹³. Records of actual payments to Schmid-Kitsikis, listed under “professional services and consultants,” show 63,280 CHF in 1995, 58,891 CHF in 1996, and a final known payment of 37,180 CHF on 26 August 1997. **This amounts to a total of nearly 190,000 CHF over four years.**



Why, then, did the tobacco company suddenly lose interest in minors? The answer likely lies in an internal audit mentioned in October 1994 by Reif in a message to Kenneth Houghton, Vice President of Research and Development at Philip Morris USA¹⁴. The message indicates that a “principal decision” was expected from U.S. management regarding Schmid-Kitsikis’s research. This audit took place in 1994, just as the multinational came under legal challenge from attorney Mike Moore, who initiated the first wave of lawsuits by U.S. states against tobacco companies¹⁵. Thus, Philip Morris management began scrutinizing activities and partnerships that could be used against the company in legal proceedings. From that point on, there was no longer any question of funding studies on children — or at least not as openly.

On May 23, 1994, attorney Mike Moore filed a lawsuit on behalf of the State of Mississippi in the Chancery Court of Jackson County against thirteen tobacco manufacturers. The aim was to recover damages for medical expenses incurred by the state in treating smoking-related illnesses. In the years that followed, more than forty states followed suit and brought their own legal actions against the tobacco industry, ultimately leading to the “Master Settlement Agreement.”

The incomplete nature of Philip Morris’s records concerning the continuation of the research may also reflect a shift in strategy. A 1996 report suggests that the company subsequently turned to the Swiss Cigarette Industry Association (CISC) to conduct its studies¹⁶. The internal documents of this association are shielded from public scrutiny, as their archives remain closed to the public.

The CISC is now known as the “Swiss Cigarette” association, which has three members: Philip Morris Switzerland, Japan Tobacco International, and British American Tobacco Switzerland.

Contrary to the terms of the agreement, Schmid-Kitsikis did not publish the results of this study in scientific journals. According to UNIGE, however, some findings from this collaboration were included in her 2001 book *La passion adolescente*¹⁷, including one subsection on “becoming an adult” and another on the “deadly passions” of adolescence.



A PROFESSOR FOR WHOM MONEY HAS NO SMELL

Elsa Schmid-Kitsikis was not the only professor at UNIGE doing business with Philip Morris at the time. The case of medical professor Ragnar Rylander, who served as a consultant in a secret laboratory run by the multinational for three decades, was even more significant¹⁸. After revelations in 2001 about one of its prominent professors' ties to Philip Morris, UNIGE was forced to respond. It published an investigative report titled "Relations between the Tobacco Industry and the University of Geneva," which also addressed Professor Schmid-Kitsikis's research¹⁹.

🔍 ***"In 1992, Professor Schmid-Kitsikis was approached by one of her former students, who had become an executive at Philip Morris, to potentially conduct university research on the possible effects of passive exposure to smoke on children's cognitive development. Opposed to this proposal on ethical grounds, Professor Schmid-Kitsikis referred the matter to the faculty's board of professors, which confirmed that such research could not be undertaken at the university. Having remained in contact with her former student, she negotiated funding from the company for another academic research project [...] While surprised that externally funded research might, even after completion, not be published in a scientific journal or book, the committee has no doubt whatsoever that, contrary to the highly tendentious allegations that appeared in the press, Professor Schmid-Kitsikis did not violate ethical rules."***

🔍 It is interesting to note that UNIGE does not mention children as research subjects at any point.

Quote in original language:
« En 1992, la professeure Schmid-Kitsikis a été sollicitée par l'un de ses anciens étudiants devenu cadre chez Philip Morris pour mener éventuellement une recherche universitaire sur les effets possibles de la fumée subie passivement par l'enfant sur son développement cognitif. Opposée à cette proposition pour des raisons d'éthique, la professeure Schmid-Kitsikis a saisi le collège des professeurs de sa faculté, qui a confirmé que cette recherche ne pouvait être envisagée à l'université. Etant restée en contact avec son ancien étudiant, l'intéressée a négocié le financement par cette entreprise d'une autre recherche universitaire [...] Tout en s'étonnant qu'une recherche financée de l'extérieur puisse, même achevée, ne pas faire l'objet d'une publication dans une revue ou un ouvrage scientifique, la commission n'éprouve pas le moindre doute que, contrairement aux allégations fort tendancieuses qui ont paru dans la presse, la professeure Schmid-Kitsikis n'a pas violé les règles éthiques. »



The university's account reflects favourably on Schmid-Kitsikis, but it does not appear to match the facts as presented in the tobacco industry's documents. Indeed, these documents:

- Do not indicate any reluctance on Schmid-Kitsikis's part to respond positively to Philip Morris's initial request. Instead, it was the faculty that put a stop to the project.
- Point to a proactive attitude on the part of the professor and her assistant. They proposed continuing the collaboration after the first study was completed and even took steps to secure access to children for the tobacco company before the second agreement had been signed.

During the same period, in 1992, the University of Lausanne ended all collaborations with the tobacco industry and asked its academic community to do the same²⁰. In Geneva, however, it was not until the fallout from the Rylander affair in 2004 that such collaborations were prohibited²¹. The university also took this opportunity to emphasise the "culpability" of the tobacco industry, whose objectives and interests were seen as incompatible with both public health and medical science:

"The fate of one individual must not, in fact, obscure the fact that the greatest culpability lies with this institutional and commercial force, whose objectives and interests are at odds with both public health and medical science. As such, the university now prohibits all members of its community from seeking research grants or consulting positions, whether direct or indirect, from the tobacco industry."²¹

Quote in original language: «Le destin d'une personne ne doit en effet pas faire oublier que la culpabilité la plus grave est celle de cette force institutionnelle et commerciale, dont les objectifs et les intérêts sont en contradiction à la fois avec la santé publique et avec la science médicale. À ce titre, l'université interdit désormais à l'ensemble des membres de sa communauté de solliciter un subside de recherche ou une fonction de consultant, directe ou indirecte, auprès de l'industrie du tabac.»

Nevertheless, collaborations with the tobacco industry remain frequent at many Swiss universities even today, as a recent investigation by OxySuisse has shown²².



LEARN AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE ABOUT TEENAGE ATTITUDES

Philip Morris is not the kind of company that funds research for philanthropic reasons. Revelations about the “Tobacco Industry Research Committee” in the United States²³ and the scientific committee of the Swiss Association of Cigarette Manufacturers (ASFC)²⁴ illustrate the system established by the industry to steer, fund, and use science to serve its interests²⁵.

There are at least two reasons why the tobacco company funded Schmid-Kitsikis’s research:

- an economic dimension: marketing
- a political and strategic dimension related to the company’s image and reputation.

RISK PERCEPTION: A SUBTLE MARKETING TOOL

Aware of the need to replace the millions of consumers its products send to an early grave each year, the tobacco industry has long made young people a priority target of its marketing strategies²⁶. One objective of Philip Morris’s investment in academic research was therefore to gather data on minors in order to refine and optimise its targeting.

As Myron Johnston, an economist at Philip Morris, stated in 1981:

“It is important to know as much as possible about teenage smoking patterns and attitudes.”²⁷

We do not have documents proving the direct use of Schmid-Kitsikis’s findings in marketing operations. However, the way Ritter presented the project before the contract was signed reveals how Philip Morris intended to use the results. A copy of Schmid-Kitsikis’s 29 March 1993 letter informing Ritter that the faculty had refused to proceed with the initial project was indeed filed in the office of Reif,



Ritter’s supervisor, annotated with the following handwritten note:

“It would need more discussion for us to focus it on a specific subject we could use.”²⁸

This objective would be achieved through the study on risk perception, which allowed Philip Morris to collect data on smoking initiation among adolescents and to develop arguments against advertising restrictions.

Indeed, a handwritten comment on the research proposal submitted by Schmid-Kitsikis noted: *“Ads do not have a strong influence”²⁹* The study’s results highlighted the importance of social and family factors in shaping perceptions of smoking. In this way, Schmid-Kitsikis provided the multinational with grounds to challenge the need for stricter regulation of tobacco advertising.

From a marketing perspective, the findings of Schmid-Kitsikis and Kilcher suggest that the most favourable attitudes among adolescents aged 13 to 17 occur when smoking is perceived as a risky activity associated with adulthood. These observations align with the recommendations by French marketing consultant Clotaire Rapaille, found in other Philip Morris archives³⁰. In the early 1990s, Rapaille advised the company to present cigarettes as a “morally ambiguous” product, “reserved for people who enjoy taking risks,” and as a “rite of passage into adulthood”³¹. These ideas would, twenty years later, play a central role in Marlboro’s global “Don’t Be a Maybe” marketing campaign. > Figure 1.

Figure 1 – Posters from the “Be Marlboro” campaign³². Launched in the 2010s by Philip Morris, this campaign skilfully leveraged themes of rites of passage and risk-taking to appeal to adolescents³¹.



A STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

Philip Morris's decision to fund research at UNIGE was also driven by political considerations. The multinational had much to gain from partnerships with universities, and it knew it. As a report by Ritter dated February 1993 indicates, contact with Schmid-Kitsikis was viewed by the S&T department as a test to gauge how tobacco industry funding would be received within a prestigious institution:

“Met with Professor E. Schmid-Kitsikis, Clinical Psychology, U. of Geneva, and her research assistant, to discuss the possibility of working together on an ETS' project in the childhood/women's field. This initial discussion enabled us to focus on a few key areas, and a few concrete proposals will be provided before mid-April. It will be an interesting test to see if the Rectorates of the Universities of Geneva and Lausanne will try to enforce a strict ban in working with the tobacco industry.”³³

This excerpt contradicts the university's official account, which claimed that Schmid-Kitsikis had opposed the tobacco company's proposal from the outset.

For Philip Morris, the goal was therefore not only to produce usable results, but also to build a network of prestigious partners and to appear publicly alongside them. A handwritten note on Ritter's report makes this explicit:

“Even acceptance of fund is success.”³⁴

The partnership with Schmid-Kitsikis should be understood within the broader context of Philip Morris's interest in academic collaborations. This is illustrated by the “White Coats” project launched by the multinational in 1988, which aimed to recruit scientists to cast doubt on the harmful effects of passive smoking. The project was conceived by Helmut Gaisch, a Philip Morris Europe employee in Neuchâtel^{35,36}.



THE TOBACCO INDUSTRY'S OFFICIAL POSITION ON RESEARCH INVOLVING MINORS

The collaboration between Philip Morris and Professor Schmid-Kitsikis illustrates the tobacco company's strong interest in collecting data on children³⁷. Philip Morris invested nearly 190,000 CHF for results that were ultimately never published in scientific journals. From the outset, the tobacco company sought data on a topic that it could "use."

At the same time, however, such research needed to remain as discreet as possible, both in the eyes of the public and of most of the company's own employees.

In 1978, the vice president of marketing at the tobacco company Brown & Williamson reminded the company's vice president that:

"It is appropriate at this time to reaffirm this policy to everyone involved in the marketing function. We will not collect data about persons under 21 years of age, nor will we accept such data from outside sources. Our advertising and sale programs likewise will not promote cigarettes to underage persons."³⁸

In 1995, while Schmid-Kitsikis and Kilcher's research was still being funded, Philip Morris went further, stating in a memo to its employees that it had never conducted marketing research involving minors:

***"Q. 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.
Q. Has Philip Morris ever conducted marketing research on children?
No. In the 1970s, Philip Morris did conduct research into why some adults choose to smoke while others do not. This was 'pure' research, and not undertaken with any marketing goals in mind. As part of one study, a group of children with attention deficit disorders was observed to see whether they were more likely than children without such disorders to become smokers later in life. Minors were not given cigarettes as part of this study, and none of the data obtained was ever used for marketing purposes."***



This was an obvious and misleading cover-up.

The explanation likely lies in the tobacco companies' fear of potential legal consequences and reputational damage if such research became public. A 1970 memo from the management team of the tobacco company R.J. Reynolds provides guidance on this point:

“Mr. Roemer [company lawyer] continues to feel [...] that it would be unwise to obtain the data about teenagers on any cigarette study we may want to do. Apparently, the Legal Department [...] continue[s] to believe that our position with Congress would be seriously worsened if we were to provide evidence through our records of a serious interest in minors. A study in which we would obtain smoking characteristics of minors would cause grievous concern to the Legal Department.”³⁹

Today, Philip Morris assures us: the multinational conducts no research on minors⁴⁰. But given its track record, can we really believe it?



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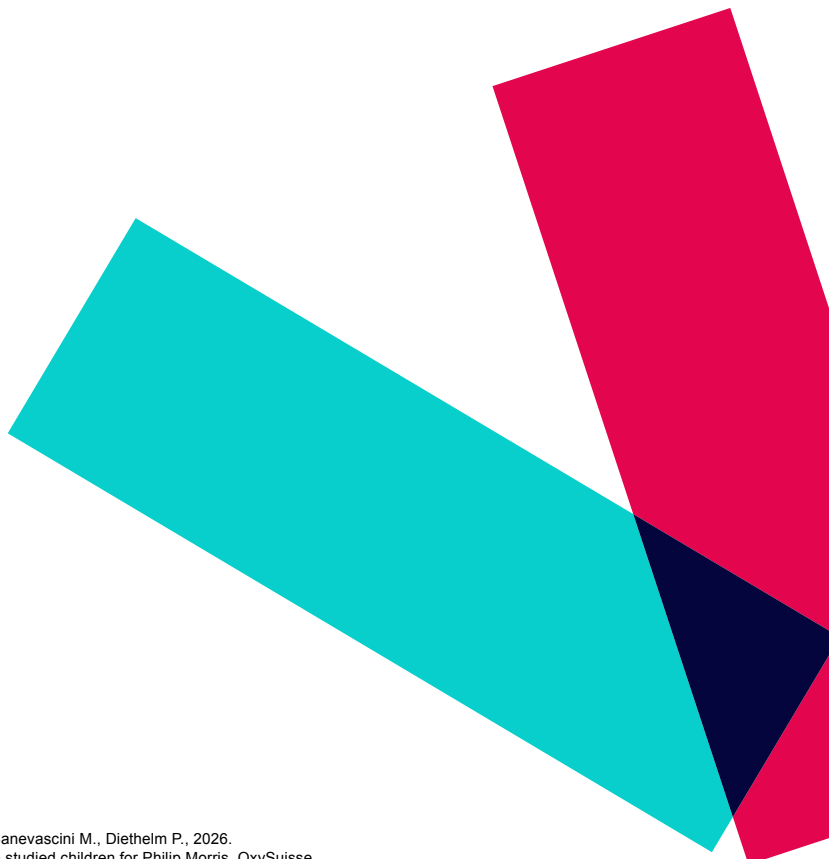
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