

WHAT ARE WE WAITING FOR?

DISCUSSION

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

AUGUST 2026



The tobacco and nicotine industry claims to exclusively target adults. Yet it uses sophisticated tactics to reach teenagers, a customer base essential to its long-term survival. In this final episode, we look back at the key points of the “For Adults Only” series and open the discussion on the obstacles and opportunities involved in protecting young people from a deadly addiction.

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KEY MESSAGES FROM PREVIOUS EPISODES

WHY DOES THE TOBACCO INDUSTRY TARGET YOUNG PEOPLE?

“Today’s teenager is tomorrow’s potential regular customer.”¹

- **Teenagers are the primary source of new smokers:** Minors represent the main source of new smokers, as the vast majority of people who smoke started before the age of 21, with an average age of initiation at 15^{2,3} [🔗 Episode 1](#).
- **Starting early leads to addiction:** The earlier a person starts using tobacco, the more likely they are to develop a strong dependence on nicotine [🔗 Episode 1](#).
- **A vulnerable brain:** During adolescence, the brain is still developing. Emotions and thrill-seeking often take precedence, while the ability to assess long-term consequences is not yet fully developed. This makes young people more drawn to immediate rewards and can encourage them to initiate tobacco and nicotine use [🔗 Episode 1](#).



HOW DOES THE INDUSTRY TARGET YOUNG PEOPLE?

“One of the very things that are attractive is [the] mere fact that cigarettes are forbidden fruit.”⁴

→ Exploiting psychological mechanisms specific to adolescence Episode 2

- By presenting cigarettes as a product intended for adults only, thereby enhancing their appeal to younger people
- By presenting them as a rite of passage into adulthood

→ Exploiting themes that resonate with teenagers Episode 2

- Experience and novelty
- Risk-taking
- A spirit of rebellion
- A sense of belonging and friendship

→ Developing products attractive to them Episode 3

- Product and packaging design
- Sweet flavours
- Attractive pricing⁵

→ Promoting products where young people are Episode 3

- Strong social media presence
- Use of influencers
- Product placements in movies, TV shows, or music videos
- Sponsorship of festive events
- Retail locations near schools
- Free sample giveaways at festive venues⁶

→ Studying teenagers to better target them Episode 4

- Neurobiological studies
- Psychological profiling



THE TOBACCO INDUSTRY'S DOUBLESPEAK



What the industry claims

"Our Marketing is responsible, accurate and aimed exclusively at adult consumers."⁷

"Those under the legal age should NOT use any tobacco or nicotine-containing product."⁸

"Does Philip Morris conduct marketing research on minors? No."¹⁰

What the industry actually does or says behind closed doors

The tobacco industry deliberately targets minors by developing products that appeal to this demographic and by increasing its presence in places they frequent [👁 Episode 3](#).

"If younger adults turn away from smoking, the industry must decline just as a population that does not give birth will eventually dwindle."⁹ [👁 Episode 1](#).

"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."¹¹ [👁 Episode 4](#).



AN INDUSTRY WORKING AGAINST PUBLIC HEALTH

Beyond its marketing strategies, the tobacco industry deploys another equally troubling tactic to continue promoting its products to young people and thereby preserve its profits: **it systematically opposes public health policies designed to protect young people from tobacco use**. This phenomenon is especially pronounced in Switzerland, where laws aimed at preventing addiction among young people are relatively weak by international standards, while the influence of the tobacco industry remains especially strong¹².

The industry regularly lobbies against evidence-based preventive measures, such as flavour bans, nicotine regulations, tax increases, and advertising restrictions¹³. It justifies this opposition by invoking a defence of economic freedom and individual responsibility.

In Switzerland, the tobacco industry does not hesitate to intervene in the legislative process, either directly or through its political and economic allies (Swiss Union of Arts and Crafts USAM, *economiesuisse*¹⁴, Alliance of Economic Circles for a Moderate Prevention Policy AEPM, KS/CS Communication Switzerland, etc.). Alongside these partners, it has notably opposed the “Children Without Tobacco” initiative as well as Switzerland’s ratification of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC). The industry has also challenged bans on disposable e-cigarettes (“puffs”) in the cantons of Geneva and Valais.



Examples of interventions by the tobacco industry and its allies in the Swiss legislative process:

- In 2019, the AEPM argued that it was up to the National Council  “not to be intimidated by either the Federal Council or the WHO” and to support a “balanced” law on tobacco products, thereby avoiding any advertising ban deemed “general and excessive.”¹⁵
- The 2022 approval of the “Children Without Tobacco” popular initiative sparked a strong reaction from the same alliance. In a press release, the industry criticised the outcome of the vote, arguing that the initiative was, in fact, aimed at  “a general ban on advertising for legal consumer goods.”¹⁶
- The umbrella organization Swiss Cigarette has also opposed the strict implementation of this initiative. In an email sent to the newspaper 24heures in 2024, the organisation stated that the revision of the Tobacco Products Act no longer allowed adult consumers to freely inform themselves¹⁷.
- In 2025, the cantons of Valais and Geneva banned the sale of disposable e-cigarettes (puffs), a product popular among young people, prompting a strong reaction from tobacco manufacturers. Philip Morris filed legal proceedings against these decisions, which has already resulted in the temporary suspension of the ban in Geneva¹⁸.

 Quote in original language:
« Il appartient à présent au Conseil national de ne se laisser intimider ni par le Conseil fédéral ni par l'OMS et d'adopter une loi mesurée sur les produits du tabac, sans interdiction générale et excessive de la publicité. »

 Quote in original language:
« L'initiative vise en fin de compte une interdiction générale de la publicité pour des biens de consommation légaux. »



SWITZERLAND DOES NOT ADEQUATELY PROTECT ITS YOUTH

The tobacco industry is not the only one to blame. In Switzerland, protections for young people against tobacco use remain largely inadequate and lag significantly behind international standards. In 2025, the country ranked second to last on the Tobacco Control Scale, a European index that measures the effectiveness of tobacco control policies across European countries¹⁹.

This situation is partly due to the presence in Switzerland of the international headquarters of two of the largest cigarette manufacturers: Philip Morris and Japan Tobacco. Their economic clout translates into a particularly powerful lobbying machine, which hinders the adoption of measures widely recognized as effective in protecting public health. For example, it was only in 2024 that a nationwide ban was introduced on the sale of cigarettes to minors. In 2025, Switzerland ranked second to last on the global index measuring the tobacco industry's interference in public policy, highlighting the sector's continuing influence¹².

Moreover, Switzerland remains today the only European country that has not ratified the World Health Organization's Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC). It is also an outlier in Europe by continuing to allow products that appeal particularly to young people, such as flavoured cigarettes.



WHAT ARE WE WAITING FOR TO TAKE ACTION?

POLICY AND STRUCTURAL MEASURES

To protect the younger generations (as well as the wider population), it is essential to build a society in which tobacco use is denormalized. Achieving this goal requires the implementation of ambitious regulatory measures that are in line with the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC), in particular the measures below, which have been identified as the most effective for reducing and denormalizing tobacco use: ^{20,21}

Most of these measures enjoy broad public support. See : unisante.ch/fr/propos-dunisante/actualites/marketing-industrie-du-tabac-population-romande-souhaite-renforcer

- **Higher taxes on tobacco and nicotine products:** One of the most effective measures to reduce consumption, particularly among young people, who are sensitive to price. In high-income countries, a 10% increase in price leads to a 3–6% decrease in consumption. This effect is especially pronounced among young people²².
- **Comprehensive ban on the advertising, promotion, and sponsorship for all tobacco and nicotine products:** In accordance with Article 13 of the FCTC, this ban must be comprehensive and cover both direct and indirect promotion (discounts, product placement, influencer marketing), the display of products at points of sale (which normalizes their use and encourages impulse buying), sponsorship activities, and their presence in digital media. The ban must be accompanied by robust monitoring systems and effective, dissuasive penalties for violations.
- **Introduction of plain and standardized packaging for tobacco and nicotine products:** In accordance with the provisions of Articles 11 and 13 of the FCTC, packaging (a marketing tool through colours and logos) must be standardized (for example,



without logos or brand colours) and accompanied by large health warnings. This measure reduces the attractiveness of the products, particularly among young people, and limits their promotional appeal.

- **Ban on smoking in public places**, particularly in cafes, restaurants, and outdoor terraces: In accordance with Article 8 of the FCTC, the creation of smoke-free and aerosol-free environments protects the public from second-hand exposure and contributes to the denormalization of tobacco use. The less young people are exposed, the less likely they are to start using these products themselves. In Switzerland, establishments that allow smoking are still permitted in many cantons, provided they meet certain conditions set out in legislation²³.
- **Strict regulation of new products**: The WHO has highlighted that e-cigarettes and similar products are often designed and marketed to appeal to young people (flavours, design, digital marketing). In line with the precautionary approach promoted by the FCTC, these products must be regulated in the same manner as tobacco products, including through restrictions on flavours, advertising, and accessibility, in order to prevent the normalization of nicotine use^{24,25}.
- **Smoking cessation support**: Raising public awareness and providing accessible cessation support through the use of evidence-based methods that have been proven to be safe and effective²⁵.
- **Ban the online sale of nicotine products**: To strengthen control over the supply chain and prevent purchases by minors²⁵.
- **Transparency and protection from industry influence**: Public policies should be protected from any influence by the tobacco industry. Public authorities should not rely on data or research funded, directly or indirectly, by the tobacco industry, and any entities linked to the industry should be excluded from public procurement and public funding schemes²⁶.



EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

The knowledge base on the strategies deployed by the tobacco industry to target young people can be leveraged and repurposed to design prevention campaigns or interventions that are truly effective, targeted, and tailored to the intended audience.

We consider the following points to be essential:

- **Precisely segment target audiences:** It is essential to go beyond generic approaches by clearly identifying the target audience and tailoring communication accordingly. To do this, it is necessary to understand the audience's cultural references, motivations, and aspirations.
- **Target priority audiences:** Prevention campaigns must primarily focus on the groups most likely to use tobacco and nicotine products, rather than being directed mainly at young people who already enjoy a supportive and protective social and family environment, as is still too often the case today.
- **Use the target audience's language and cultural references:** To be heard, messages must draw on the language, cultural references, and communication channels specific to the target audience, while also involving young people in the co-creation of prevention campaigns.
- **Use credible role models:** Feature inspiring young people who embody values such as autonomy, boldness, social recognition, or charisma, without linking these qualities to tobacco use.

Regarding the themes to be addressed, two elements deserve particular attention:

- **Debunking the myth of freedom:** The goal is to demonstrate that tobacco is not a vehicle for independence and freedom, but rather the product of sophisticated marketing strategies designed to create and sustain addiction.
- **Avoiding the transgression effect:** Reminding people that tobacco is for adults only can paradoxically enhance its appeal as a symbol of prohibition and of rebellion.



CALL TO ACTION

IF YOU WORK IN THE FIELD OF PREVENTION

You are on the front lines: every interaction is an opportunity to debunk the tobacco industry's manipulation tactics.

- **Spread the word:** Share and repost our content on your professional networks.
- **Incorporate issues around the tobacco industry's manipulation strategies** into your work, particularly in the context of smoking cessation, in schools, or when engaging with local or national policymakers.
- **Use ready-made educational tools**, particularly those listed on the Free. Fair. Future. Ecole (in French or German)²⁷.
- **Expose the industry's strategies in your campaigns** by highlighting targeted marketing practices, the appeal of tobacco products, and the use of influencers to promote tobacco and nicotine products. Contact us if you'd like to collaborate on developing resources.
- **Contact us:** to request materials, organise an intervention, or co-create a joint activity.
-  **Stay informed:** follow us on social media and subscribe to our newsletter.

 You can follow us on Instagram ([instagram.com/transparencytruth](https://www.instagram.com/transparencytruth)) or LinkedIn ([linkedin.com/company/transparency-and-truth](https://www.linkedin.com/company/transparency-and-truth)) or subscribe to our newsletter at transparencyandtruth.ch/en.



IF YOU ARE AN ELECTED REPRESENTATIVE

Take action today to protect public health.

- **Take concrete action** to protect the health of children and vulnerable people by ensuring smoke-free and nicotine-free spaces.
- **Support and strengthen public health policies** in line with international standards.
-  **Get informed:** check out our booklet on the industry's rhetorical strategies.
- **Remain vigilant** against the industry's influence strategies: Follow our analyses on our social media and through our newsletters, as well as those from AT Switzerland²⁸.
- **Exercise discernment** in the face of lobbying and defend the public interest with full transparency.

 Check out our booklet at: transparencyandtruth.ch/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/260317_TNT-RHETORIQUE_EN_WEB.pdf.

IF YOU ARE A PARENT

An informed parent means a better-protected child.

- **Talk openly** with your children and explain how the industry targets young people.
- **Raise awareness** among those around you: Share our content with family, friends, and colleagues.
- **Take action** at local schools by encouraging the adoption of policies that promote smoke-free and nicotine-free environments.
-  **Stay informed** by following our news and updates.
- **Support public health policies** by voting responsibly at the local and federal levels.

 You can follow us on Instagram ([instagram.com/transparencytruth](https://www.instagram.com/transparencytruth)) or LinkedIn ([linkedin.com/company/transparency-and-truth](https://www.linkedin.com/company/transparency-and-truth)) or subscribe to our newsletter at transparencyandtruth.ch/en.



IF YOU ARE A YOUNG PERSON

Don't let the industry manipulate you, get involved!

- **Stay curious** and learn about industry strategies: Flavour profiles, social media, influencers... nothing is left to chance (see the online resources at the end of this document).
- **Spread the word** by sharing our content and talking about it with those around you (friends, school, family).
- **Take action at your school** by advocating for the implementation of policies that promote smoke-free and nicotine-free environments and by opening a dialogue with teachers or school leaders.
- **Make your voice heard**, for example by writing to an elected official or to the Youth Parliament, or by calling out influencers who collaborate with the industry.



WEB RESOURCES

TO STAY INFORMED

Transparency and Truth

- transparencyandtruth.ch/en/our-dossiers
- transparencyandtruth.ch/en/our-booklets
- transparencyandtruth.ch/en/our-infographics
- transparencyandtruth.ch/en/our-videos

AT Switzerland

- at-schweiz.ch/en/knowledge

Addiction Switzerland (in French or German)

- addictionsuisse.ch/faits-et-chiffres/nouveaux-produits-nicotines/
- addictionsuisse.ch/faits-et-chiffres/cigarettes-co/

Befreelance (in German)

- be-freelance.net/de/unterrichtsmaterialien/tabak-nikotin

Video Reports (in French)

- rts.ch/play/tv/temps-present/video/attention-ce-parlement-peut-nuire-a-votre-sante?urn=urn:rts:video:9825086
- rts.ch/play/tv/temps-present/video/les-nouveaux-pieges-de-lindustrie-de-la-nicotine?urn=urn:rts:video:14688268
- rts.ch/play/tv/documentaire/video/enfumes-jai-infiltre-lindustrie-de-la-vape?urn=urn:rts:video:63baf67c-d7bf-324a-967a-4ea9b-d3de528

Unisanté (in French)

- unisante.ch/fr/promotion-prevention/tabagisme/produits-du-tabac
- unisante.ch/fr/promotion-prevention/tabagisme/consommation-prevention-industrie
- unisante.ch/fr/promotion-prevention/tabagisme

Free. Fair. Future. School (in French or German)

- freefairfuture.ch/fr



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IMPRESSUM

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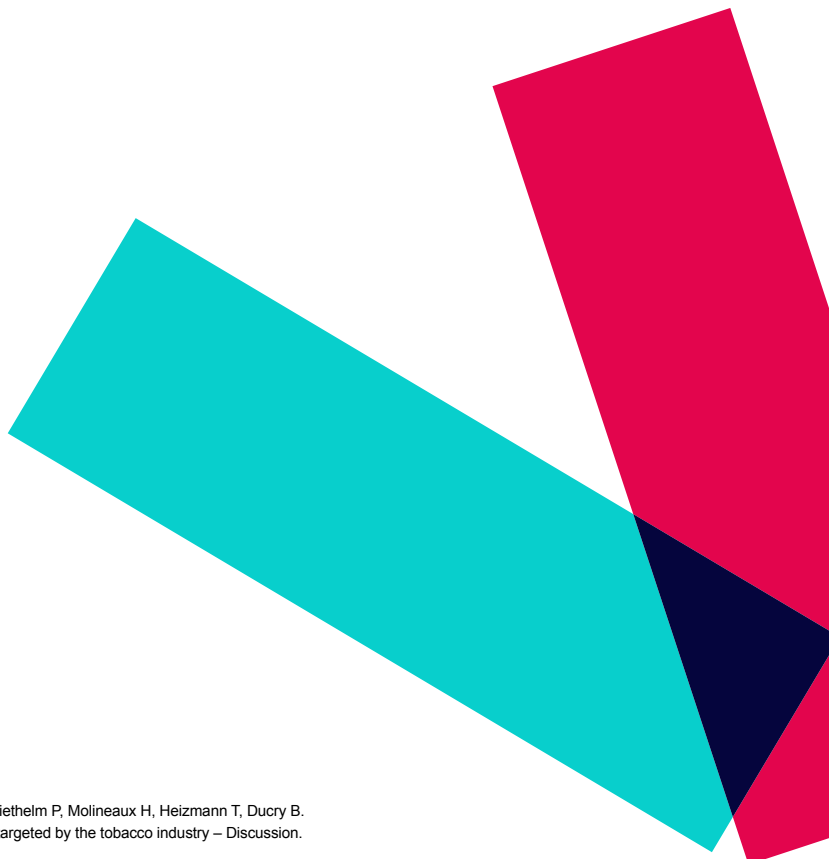
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