

# Tobacco corporation attempts to gain public trust in its science are having success, new research finds

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A new study suggests that the tobacco company Philip Morris International (PMI), is successfully increasing public trust in industry-

funded science by portraying itself as a generous supporter of scientific research while simultaneously concealing its involvement through third parties.

The paper, [published](#) in *Frontiers in Communication*, was co-authored by researchers in the Tobacco Control Research Group (TCRG) at the University of Bath, University of Colorado and University of Bristol.

In 2017, while publicly [proclaiming itself to have transformed into a transparent organization funding robust science](#), tobacco producer Philip Morris International (PMI) launched a new scientific organization: the Foundation for a Smoke-Free World (FSFW). On 13th May 2024, FSFW rebranded itself Global Action to End Smoking.

The new study aimed to understand the extent to which the public trusts PMI's involvement in science, and whether channeling funds through the third-party organization, FSFW, affected levels of trust in its science. 1,580 UK residents were asked to rate their level of trust in: PMI, FSFW, or Cancer Research UK (CRUK), on a scale from 1 (no trust) to 7 (complete trust). CRUK was selected as a [control group](#) as a highly trusted scientific organization, wholly independent from the [tobacco industry](#).

#### Key Findings:

- Overall trust in PMI was 4.66 on a scale from 1 (no trust) to 7 (complete trust), compared to 5.79 out of 7 in Cancer Research UK, indicating moderate trust in PMI's scientific endeavours.
- Overall trust for FSFW was 5.04 out of 7. After participants were informed that FSFW is funded by the tobacco industry, the overall trust rating dropped to 4.77 out of 7. This suggests that when research is funded through a third-party scientific group such as FSFW, people are more likely to trust the science that

emanates.

Dr. Tess Legg, Research Associate from the University of Bath's Department for Health and lead author of the paper, said, "This work is important because tobacco companies use their involvement in science as 'proof' that they are credible research organizations. They also funnel research funds through third-party companies and historically this has involved attempts to obscure their involvement in the resulting science."

Up until now, there has been no clear understanding of whether— and to what extent—these two strategies work to build trust in the industry and its science. This study is the first in the UK to try to gain quantitative evidence of how effective these tactics are at making people trust the tobacco industry and its science.

The study's authors warn against the ongoing acceptance of tobacco industry funding and dissemination of scientific findings. They call for increased efforts to educate the public about the subtle yet harmful tactics employed by these industries.

Dr. Legg notes, "As it stands, FSFW still has an immense amount of money from PMI at its disposal and so [the risk of it continuing to further the industry's interests is high](#). Our findings suggest that more needs to be done by the [tobacco control](#) and public health communities to help the UK public understand how underhand the tobacco industry's attempts to rebrand really are, and to stop scientific front groups from muddying the water by lending the industry an air of credibility.

"While the findings don't make particularly happy reading for those of us working to counter the tactics used by the tobacco industry, it's important to build up a quantitative picture of the effects the strategies used by industries to influence science are having.

"Beyond this, at a time when the tobacco industry continues its abhorrent attempts to infiltrate science as part of its pseudo-transformation,' we need to focus efforts on reforming science to ensure it works in the public interest."

This work builds on TCRG's previous work mapping the tactics that the tobacco industry (and other industries) use to influence science. It also builds on the group's work on the FSFW which has demonstrated that the tobacco industry continues its attempts to influence the [evidence base](#) on its products and paint itself as a credible partner in [science](#).

**More information:** Tess Legg et al, The UK public's trust in tobacco industry involvement in science – an experimental survey, *Frontiers in Communication* (2024). [DOI: 10.3389/fcomm.2024.1360277](https://doi.org/10.3389/fcomm.2024.1360277)

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