

1 **Manuscript Title:** Sports, Gigs, and TikToks: Multi-channel advertising of oral nicotine
2 pouches

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16 **Data Availability:** The data that support the findings of this study are available from on an
17 online repository: <https://osf.io/27cen/>

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19 **Implications:** This commentary highlights the aggressive advertising strategies being used to
20 market oral nicotine pouches, including through online media, motorsport sponsorships, and
21 out-of-home adverts. We underscore the need for balanced policy measures that increase access
22 to reduced harm alternatives for existing tobacco and nicotine users while minimising exposure
23 to youth and non-users.

Background

Oral nicotine pouches are increasingly marketed and sold globally (1). The global nicotine pouch market was valued at \$2.04 billion in 2023 and is projected to increase (2). These pouches likely contain fewer harmful constituents than other tobacco and nicotine products because they are non-combustible, do not contain tobacco leaf, and unlike e-cigarettes and heated tobacco products, do not use heating or inhalation methods that deliver potentially harmful chemicals to the lungs (3). Nicotine pouches likely have similar or lower health impacts compared to snus — a smokeless tobacco product which is substantially less harmful than combustible cigarettes (4). Nonetheless, they still deliver high levels of nicotine, which can lead to dependence (3). As such, their use should be discouraged among youth and individuals who would otherwise avoid nicotine entirely (5).

To determine the overall public health impact of nicotine pouches, one must consider the extent to which current nicotine and tobacco users completely switch to nicotine pouches, the potential for former users to relapse and take up nicotine pouches, and the likelihood of nicotine naïve individuals experimenting with nicotine pouches and subsequently transitioning to more harmful products (6). Assessing the net effect on public health requires a comprehensive analysis of these concurrent trends, the relative scale of each, as well as the absolute and relative risks of nicotine pouches compared to other tobacco and nicotine products. Positive public health outcomes may occur if nicotine pouches serve as a harm reduction tool that encourages people using cigarettes, e-cigarettes, or heated tobacco products to switch completely. However, negative impacts could emerge if marketing strategies, particularly those targeting youth-accessible channels, attract young people and those who would otherwise be nicotine naïve (7).

In the UK and many European Union (EU) countries, nicotine pouches fall outside the scope of tobacco or e-cigarette regulations and are only subject to general consumer product

safety regulations (8). This regulatory gap allows manufacturers to market their products on various channels, mirroring those historically employed by the tobacco industry (9). This raises the question: *How are nicotine pouch manufacturers advertising and marketing their products under the current regulatory framework?* To address this, we explore three key channels — online media, sports sponsorships, and out-of-home advertising. We use images collected by authors in Great Britain between 2021 and 2023, and data derived from a snowball sampling procedure of corporate nicotine-pouch accounts on Instagram and related hashtags on TikTok, conducted in October 2023 (10) (data and illustrative examples available at <https://osf.io/27cen/>).

Online marketing. Online marketing of nicotine products can emerge from corporations that directly advertise their products on websites, social media platforms or by sponsoring online influencers. It can also arise from regular social media users who are not paid, but who generate content about products that may unintentionally be promotional (11). Both VELO (manufactured by British American Tobacco; BAT) and Nordic Spirit (by Japan Tobacco International; JTI) use corporate media strategies by actively promoting their products through their respective Instagram accounts (11, 12). Our scan revealed that VELO operates 17 official Instagram accounts across countries both within and outside the EU, with @*velo.pakistan* and @*velo.global* being the most followed accounts, with 50,500 and 40,500 followers, respectively. In addition, VELO has a significant presence on YouTube through its channel in Pakistan "Velo Sound Station," which features live studio-recorded music performances. With over 1 million subscribers, this channel allows VELO to associate its brand with popular music and culture, potentially reaching a large audience of young adults. These accounts predominately display visually appealing images of nicotine pouches and young adults, often integrated with lifestyle appeals such as travel, sports, and music (see Fig 1. in the online repository for illustrative examples).

In addition to visual advertising, these corporate accounts host competitions that offer Instagram users the chance to win holidays, tech gadgets, and event vouchers in exchange for engagement activities such as liking or sharing their posts, following their account, and tagging friends in posts. Although these accounts implement age verification and nicotine addiction warnings, they still engage in paid partnerships with influencers who have thousands to millions of followers and are not age restricted (5). These approaches resemble the Juul phenomenon, which increased the product's appeal among youth and individuals who would have otherwise avoided nicotine (13).

TikTok, with its substantial young user base, serves as another social media platform for nicotine pouch marketing. As of October 11, 2023, *#zyn* had 459.4 million views, followed by *#nicotinepouches* at 83.8 million views⁵. Videos under these hashtags feature themes of nicotine addiction, celebrity sightings (e.g., famous sports players spotted with nicotine pouches), product reviews and comedy skits. Similar to vaping-related content on TikTok (14), most videos portray nicotine pouch use positively and are available without age verification or content warnings. Exposure to such content is associated with use. Nicotine pouch advertisements also extend to web-based online platforms, including newspaper websites, International Association Football Federation (FIFA) video game community platforms, and crossword puzzle websites (see Fig. 2 in online repository).

Sport sponsorship. Tobacco industry sponsorship of sports teams, events, or individual athletes, most notably Philip Morris's Marlboro sponsorship of Formula One racing (F1), began in 1968 (15). Although the 2005 EU Tobacco Advertising Directive (16) and the 2006 Federation International Automobile's banned tobacco advertising in F1, Phillip Morris adapted its marketing strategies, transitioning from explicit branding to subtle, suggestive designs (see Fig. 3 in online repository). These designs mimicked the appearance of the distinctive red and

white Marlboro logo, serving as a form of 'alibi' marketing (15). Though the barcode design was phased out in May 2010, alibi marketing continues in the industry.

BAT's VELO has adopted a similar strategy by sponsoring the McLaren F1 team and featuring their trademark on team apparel and vehicles (17, 18). In the Netherlands, where nicotine pouch sales are prohibited and health organisations advocate for removing of such branding, "VELO" is reworded to "LOVE" on the McLaren vehicles (18). Like social media marketing, these sports sponsorships gain extensive global reach as races are broadcast worldwide, including on digital platforms (9). For example, the popular Netflix series "Drive to Survive" provides behind-the-scenes access to F1 teams and drivers, attracting a wide global audience. Consequently, VELO's sponsorship of the McLaren F1 team gains exposure through digital streams and the show's international viewership which further blurs regulatory jurisdictions and makes it challenging to enforce domestic marketing laws, even for countries with strict advertising policies (5).

Beyond motorsports, professional e-sports and football players have been increasingly seen using these products, often citing leisure, relaxation and their perceived performance enhancing effects as reasons for their use (19, 20). In the U.S., similar patterns are observed with smokeless tobacco products long entrenched within baseball culture (21).

Out-of-home marketing. Out-of-home marketing refers to any promotional materials or activities that target consumers in public spaces, such as billboards, posters, transit advertisements, point-of-sale displays and pop-up stalls at music festivals or other events. Public spaces in the UK have become key advertising avenues for nicotine pouches, as evidenced by billboards placed in high-traffic areas, such as near convenience stores and busy train stations (Fig. 1). Events attended by youth and young adults are also targeted; both Nordic Spirit and VELO set up pop-up stalls at major music festivals and distribute free samples (22).

At the point-of-sale, nicotine pouches are often displayed alongside candies and snacks, clearly visible to youth.

Conclusion

Nicotine pouch manufacturers are employing a wide range of marketing strategies across multiple channels, including online media, sports sponsorships, and out-of-home advertising in Great Britain and other global markets, such as Pakistan, where their use has been increasing (23). Many of these advertising strategies closely resemble those historically used by the industry to promote other tobacco and nicotine products like heated tobacco products and e-cigarettes (7, 13). Despite industry claims of targeting only adult smokers, the evidence often indicates a broader appeal to non-smokers and younger individuals, potentially leading to new nicotine dependencies. This highlights the ongoing challenge in regulating marketing tactics that evolve to exploit legal and regulatory loopholes, particularly in online spaces.

While these marketing efforts are widespread, the impact of nicotine pouch marketing on public health in Great Britain has been neither significantly positive nor negative thus far given how few people use them. Data from a large nationally representative survey of adults (aged 18 years and over) in Great Britain (England, Scotland, and Wales), shows that nicotine pouch use remains rare, with only one in every 400 adults reporting their use in October 2020 (24). By August 2023, the prevalence only modestly increased to an estimated one in every 300 adults (Supplementary Figure 1). Most users are either current or former smokers (86%) and around two-thirds (68%) are men. However, should the multichannel marketing efforts described above start to bear more fruit, a noticeable shift in their impact could occur.

Continuous monitoring of marketing strategies and its impact on use, particularly among young people, is needed to ensure that nicotine pouches do not promote nicotine addiction. Given the reduced harm potential of nicotine pouches compared to other tobacco

products, the uncertainty around their net impact on public health, and the widespread marketing practices, a balanced regulatory approach should be implemented. This approach should prioritise the protection of young people while still increasing access to reduced harm alternatives for existing users of risky tobacco and nicotine products (3).

This could include bans on youth-oriented advertising, sponsorships, mandatory age verification systems both online and in retail settings (11), and mass media education campaigns aimed at preventing nicotine pouch use among youth. Furthermore, there is growing global consensus that social media companies should be held accountable for the content shared on their platforms and the potential harm it may cause to vulnerable populations (5). As such, global efforts should be made to ensure that these companies implement measures such as robust age verification systems, content warning labels, and algorithms that limit the exposure of nicotine pouch-related content to underage users. Governments could impose penalties on social media companies failing to safeguard youth. Clear information about the absolute and relative risks of nicotine pouches should be communicated and further research into the long-term health effects of nicotine pouch use is also necessary to fully understand their public health implications.



Figure 1. Out-of-home marketing of nicotine pouches in the UK from 2021-2023, showcasing (1) nicotine pouches displayed alongside vaping products and everyday consumer goods such as candies and snacks; (2) a billboard near a pharmacy promoting the traveller-friendly appeal of nicotine pouches; (3) VELO's branding on escalator handrails at the Oxford Circus transport hub, asking onlookers to search their product, explaining how to use their product and handing out free samples to people who self-identified as being a nicotine user; (4) Nordic Spirit's interactive Rock Hero setup designed to attract festival-goers, and (5) Nordic Spirit's music festival van.

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