

[Open Peer Review on Qeios](#)

Sports, Gigs, and TikToks: Multi-Channel Advertising of Oral Nicotine Pouches

Tianze Sun¹, Harry Tattan-Birch²

¹ The University of Queensland

² University College London, University of London

Funding: HTB's salary is funded by Cancer Research UK (PRCRPG-Nov21\100002). The authors have no links, financial or otherwise, to manufacturers of tobacco or nicotine products.

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

Abstract

Oral nicotine pouches, which contain fewer harmful constituents than traditional tobacco products, are being increasingly marketed and sold. In this paper, we use images we collected in Great Britain between 2021 and 2023, along with a social media scan of Instagram and TikTok in 2023 to analyse the marketing strategies of these pouches on three key marketing channels — online media, sports sponsorships, and out-of-home advertising. Findings reveal the extensive use of visually appealing content, influencer partnerships, and event sponsorships that are potentially targeting young and naive audiences. Despite this, survey data indicates that nicotine pouch use in Great Britain remains minimal. However, a notable shift in public health impact could arise if these marketing efforts start to bear more fruit. The study underscores the need for balanced policy measures that increase access to reduced harm alternatives for existing tobacco and nicotine users while minimising exposure to youth and non-users. Continuous monitoring and regulatory adjustments are essential to address the evolving landscape of nicotine pouch marketing.

Tianze Sun^{1,2} (BPsyc Hons), and **Harry Tattan-Birch**^{3,4} (PhD, MSc)

¹ *The National Centre for Youth Substance Use Research (NCYSUR), The University of Queensland, Australia*

² *School of Psychology, The University of Queensland, Australia*

³ *Department of Behavioural Science and Health, University College London, UK*

⁴ *SPECTRUM Consortium, UK*

Keywords: nicotine pouches, marketing strategies, youth, social media, snus.

Oral nicotine pouches are increasingly marketed and sold^[1]. 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^[2]. While not risk-free, nicotine pouches likely have similar or lower health impacts compared to

snus — a smokeless tobacco product which is substantially less harmful than combustible cigarettes^[3]. Nonetheless, they deliver high levels of nicotine, which can lead to dependence^[2]. As such, their use should be discouraged among youth and individuals who would otherwise avoid nicotine entirely^[4].

Positive public health outcomes may occur if these products primarily serve as complete substitutes for people using cigarettes, e-cigarettes, or heated tobacco products. 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. To determine the overall public health impact of nicotine pouches, one must balance the number of existing tobacco and nicotine users who completely switch to nicotine pouches against the number of young and otherwise nicotine-naïve users being attracted to nicotine use. Understanding the net effect on public health requires a comprehensive analysis of these concurrent trends and the relative scale of each.

In the UK and many European Union (EU) countries, nicotine pouches fall outside tobacco or e-cigarette regulation and so are only regulated under general consumer product safety regulations^[5]. This gap allows manufacturers to market their products on various channels, mirroring those historically used by the tobacco industry^[6].

This raises the question: *How are manufacturers of nicotine pouches advertising their products under the current regulatory framework?* To address this, we explore three key marketing channels — online media, sports sponsorships, and out-of-home advertising. We used images collected 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^[7] (data is available on an online repository: <https://osf.io/27cen/>).

Online Marketing

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^{[8][9]}. Our scan revealed that VELO operates 17 official accounts across countries both within and outside the EU. The most popular among these are *@velo.pakistan* and *@velo.global* with 50,500 and 40,500 followers, respectively. These accounts predominately display visually appealing images of nicotine pouches and young adults, often integrated with lifestyle appeals such as travel, sports, and music (Figure 1).

In addition to visual advertising, these accounts host competitions that offer Instagram users the chance to win holidays, tech gadgets, and event vouchers, in exchange for engagement activities like liking or sharing posts, following the account, and tagging friends. While these accounts do implement age verification and nicotine addiction warnings, they also engage in paid partnerships with influencers with thousands to millions of followers who are not age restricted^[4]. These approaches are similar to the Juul phenomenon, which increased the product's appeal among youth and individuals who would have otherwise avoided nicotine entirely^[10].

TikTok, with its substantial young user base, serves as another social media platform for nicotine pouches. As of October

11, 2023, the hashtag #zyn had 459.4 million views, followed by #nicotinepouches at 83.8 million views^[5]. Videos under these hashtags feature themes of nicotine addiction, celebrity sightings (e.g., videos of famous sports players spotted with nicotine pouches), reviews and comedy. As with vaping-related content on TikTok^[11], most videos are available without age verification and lack content warnings and so may attract young viewers who would otherwise be nicotine naive.

Nicotine pouch advertisements also extends to web-based online platforms, including newspaper websites, platforms serving FIFA video game communities, and crossword puzzle websites, as illustrated in Figure 2.

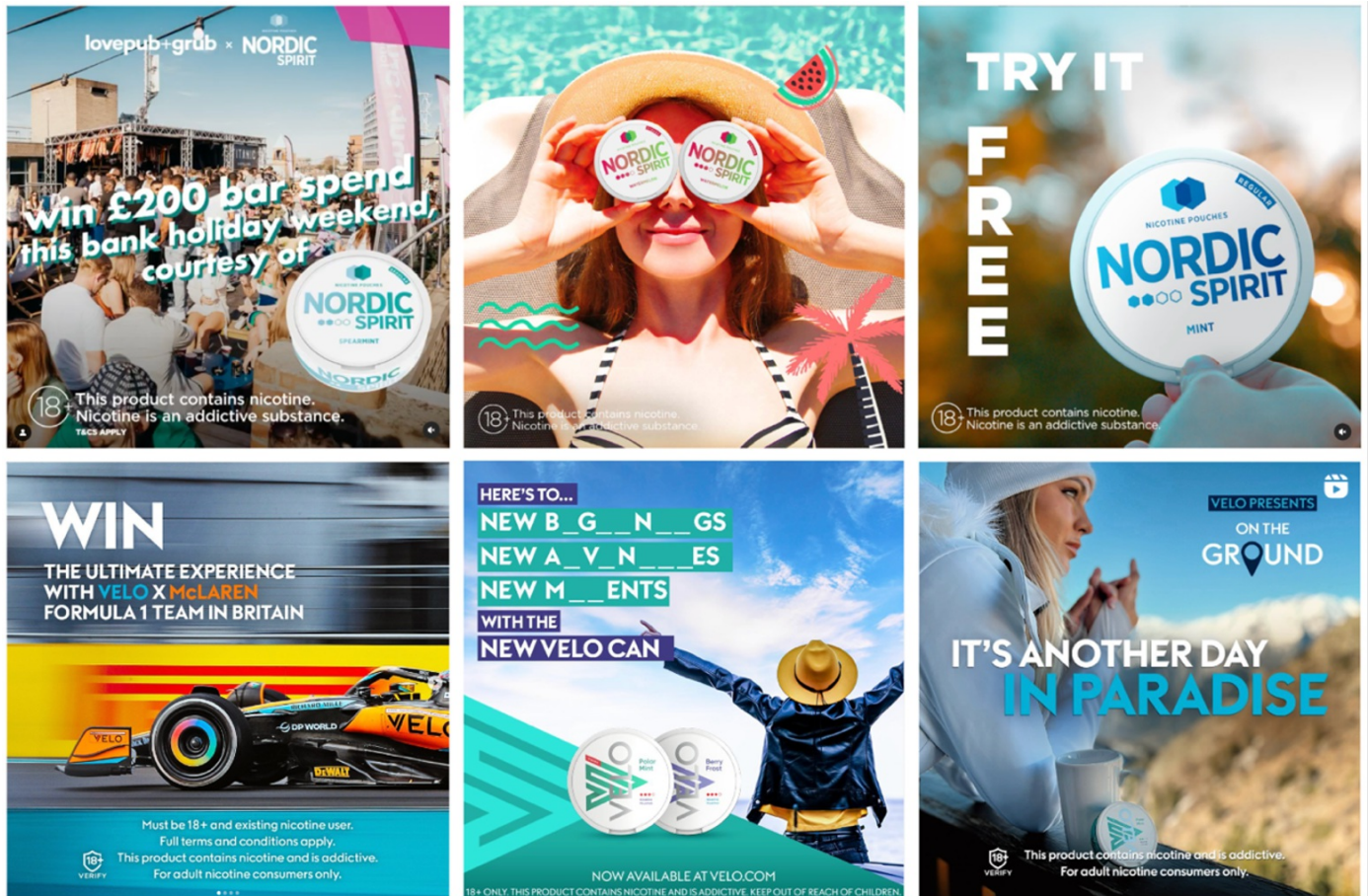


Figure 1. Screenshots from Instagram accounts @nordicspirit_uk (top row) and @velo.unitedkingdom (bottom row) in 2023 featuring (1) a contest offering £200 bar spend for post engagements, (2) a promotion for the limited-edition Nordic Spirit watermelon flavour in strong strength, (3) an invitation to sample Nordic Spirit for free, (4) a McLaren Formula 1 experience giveaway for user interaction, (5) a crossword reinforcing brand association with new beginnings, new adventures, and new moments, and (6) a promotional video for Tomorrowland Winter 2023 festival in collaboration with VELO.

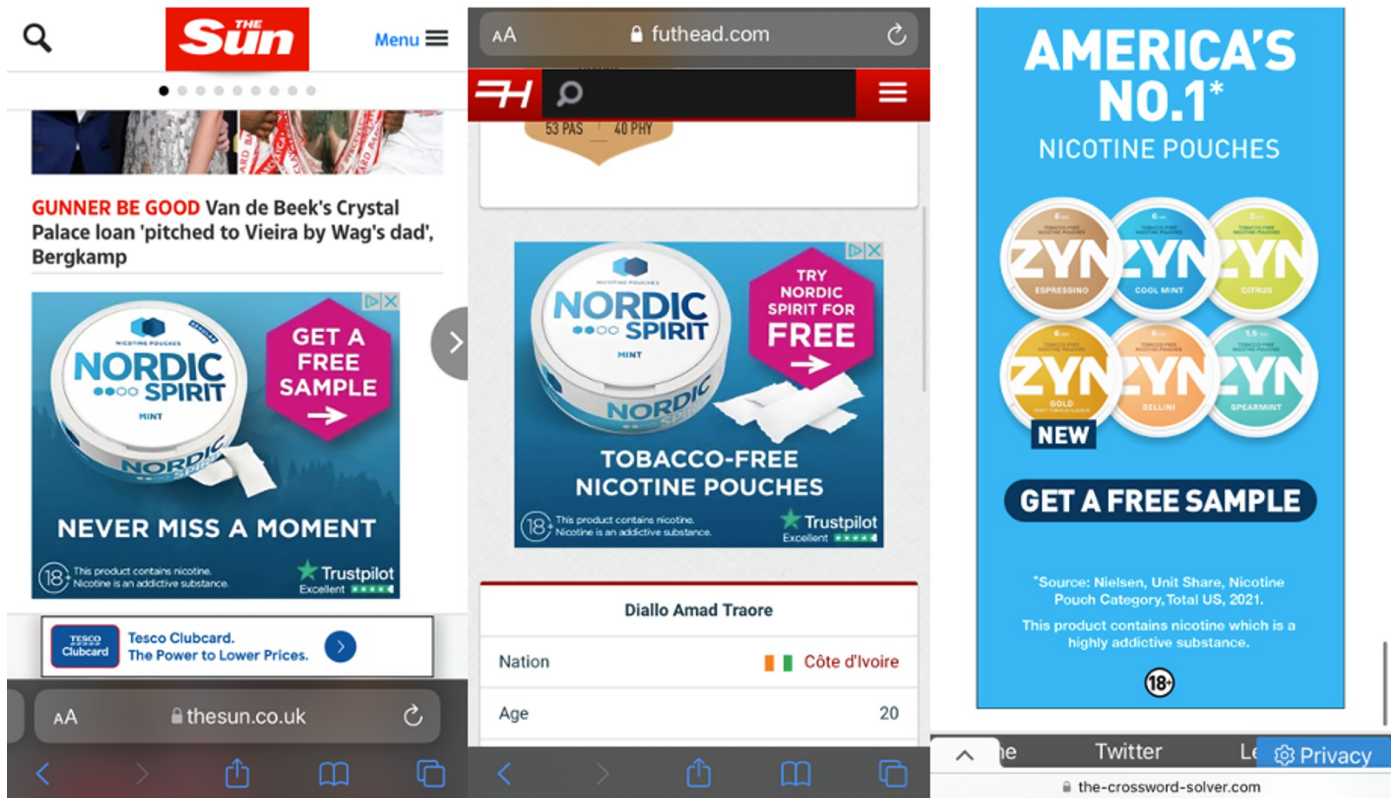


Figure 2. Web-based advertisements of nicotine pouches across news, gaming, and puzzle websites.

Sport Sponsorship

Tobacco industry sponsorship of sports, most notably Philip Morris's Marlboro sponsorship of Formula One racing (F1), began in 1968^[12]. Although the 2005 EU Tobacco Advertising Directive^[13] and the 2006 Federation International Automobile's banned tobacco advertising in F1, Phillip Morris adapted its marketing strategies, transitioning from explicit branding to more subtle, suggestive designs (Figure 3). These designs mimicked the appearance of the distinctive red and white Marlboro logo, serving as a form of 'alibi' marketing^[12]. Though the barcode design was phased out in May 2010, the practice of alibi marketing continues in the industry.

Presently, BAT's VELO adopts a similar strategy by sponsoring the McLaren F1 team and featuring their trademark on team apparel and cars^{[14][15]}. In the Netherlands, where the sale of nicotine pouches is prohibited and health organisations are advocating for the removal of such branding, "VELO" is reworded to "LOVE" on the McLaren cars (Figure 3)^[15]. This form of advertising gains extensive reach as races are aired globally, often in digital and online spaces^[6]. These spaces often blur international borders and regulatory jurisdictions, making it challenging to enforce domestic marketing laws, even in countries with strict advertising policies.

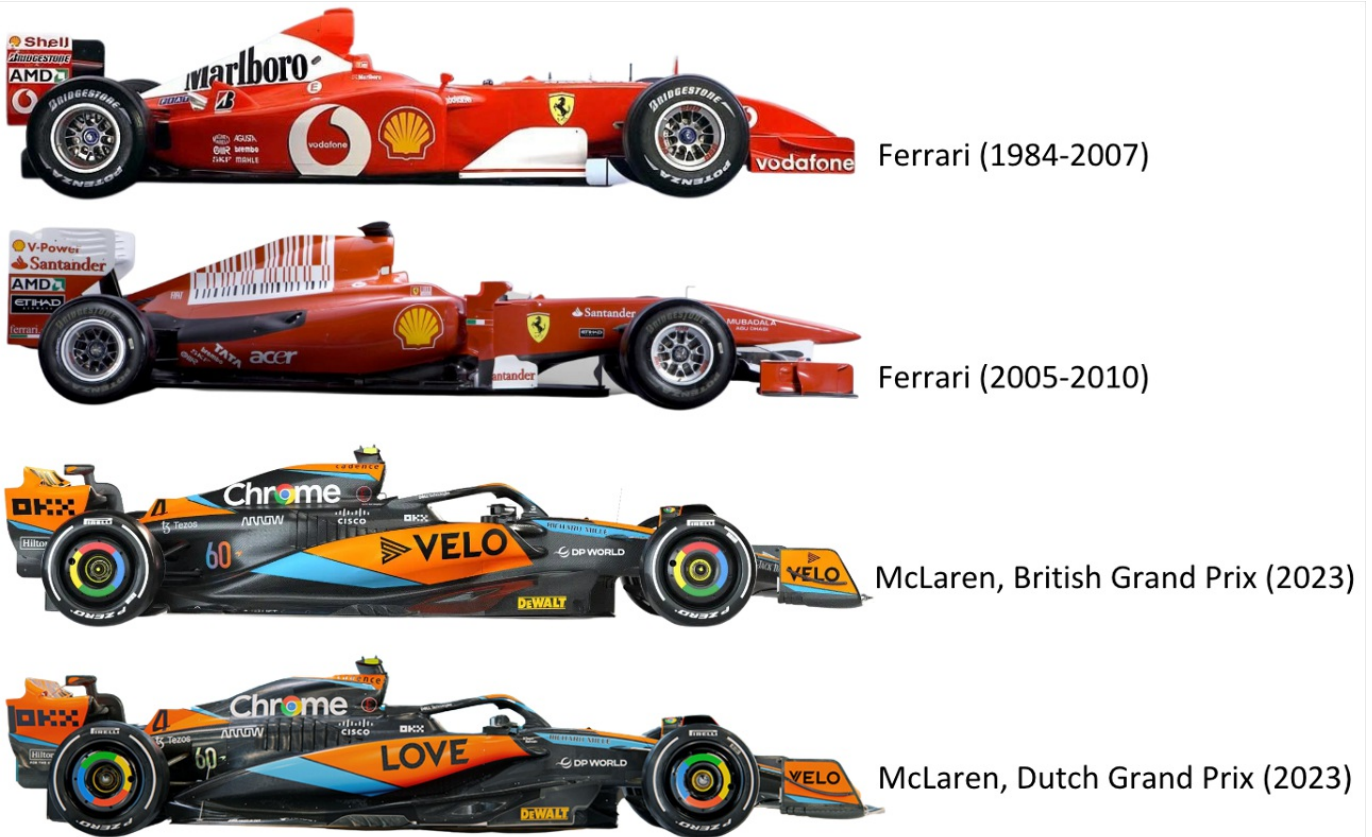


Figure 3. Comparative visuals of F1 cars showcasing the evolution of industry branding strategies. Featuring overt Marlboro trademark vs subliminal red and white barcode design, which would blur into a semblance of the Marlboro logo at high speeds, alongside trademark “VELO” branding vs reworded “LOVE” branding during the Dutch Grand Prix.

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^{[16][17]}. In the U.S., similar patterns are observed with smokeless tobacco products having long been entrenched within baseball culture^[18].

Out-of-home Marketing

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 in busy train stations (Figure 4). 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^[19]. At the point of sale, nicotine pouches are often displayed alongside candies and snacks, clearly visible to youth.



Figure 4. 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.

How effective has this advertising been?

Despite this widespread advertising, data from a large British survey shows that nicotine pouch use is rare in Great Britain, with only one in every 400 adults reporting their use in October 2020^[20]. By August 2023, the prevalence only modestly increased to an estimated one in every 300 adults (Supplementary Figure 1). Most users are either people who were current or former smokers (86%). Around two-thirds (68%) are men.

Conclusions and considerations

To date, nicotine pouch marketing has not significantly impacted public health, either positively or negatively. However, should the multichannel marketing efforts described above start to bear more fruit, there could be a noticeable shift in their

impact. To mitigate potential negative impacts, policy measures should focus on increasing access to reduced harm alternatives for existing users of risky tobacco and nicotine products, while minimising any marketing that targets youth and non-users^[2]. Continuous monitoring of marketing strategies and consumer impacts are essential to inform regulatory efforts.

Supplementary Files

Supplementary Figure 1. *Trends in Current Nicotine Pouch Use Among Adults in Great Britain from October 2020 to March 2023.*

Statements and Declarations

Contributors: **Tianze Sun:** writing original draft (lead); visualisation (equal); review and editing (equal); data curation (equal). **Harry Tattan-Birch:** conceptualisation (lead); supervision (lead); writing – original draft (supporting); data curation (equal); visualisation (equal)

Acknowledgements: The authors would like to thank Emeritus Professor Wayne Hall and members of UCL Tobacco and Alcohol Group for providing comments on an earlier draft.

Funding: HTB's salary is funded by Cancer Research UK (PRCRPG-Nov21\100002). The authors have no links, financial or otherwise, to manufacturers of tobacco or nicotine products.

Competing interests: None.

References

- ^a Robichaud MO, Seidenberg AB, Byron MJ. Tobacco companies introduce 'tobacco-free' nicotine pouches. *Tobacco Control*. Dec 2020;29(e1):e145-e146. doi:10.1136/tobaccocontrol-2019-055321
- ^{a, b, c} Patwardhan S, Fagerström K. Nicotine pouches- a research and regulatory policy agenda to maximise public health benefits and minimise harms. *Qeios*. 04/20 2021;doi:10.32388/L4TIAF.3
- ^a Foulds J, Ramstrom L, Burke M, Fagerström K. Effect of smokeless tobacco (snus) on smoking and public health in Sweden. *Tobacco control*. 2003;12(4):349-359.
- ^{a, b} WHO study group on tobacco product regulation. Report on the scientific basis of tobacco product regulation: ninth report of a WHO study group Vol. WHO Technical Report Series, No. 1047. 2023.
- ^{a, b} Tobacco Tactics. Nicotine Pouches. Updated 30 August 2023. Accessed 12 October, 2023. <https://tobaccotactics.org/article/nicotine-pouches/>
- ^{a, b} Freeman B, Watts C, Astuti PAS. Global tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship regulation: what's old, what's new and where to next? *Tobacco Control*. 2022;31(2):216-221. doi:10.1136/tobaccocontrol-2021-056551

7. [^] Sun T, Tattan-Birch H. Multi-channel advertising of oral nicotine pouches in Great Britain. October 23. doi: <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/27CEN> <https://osf.io/27cen/>
8. [^] Kong G, Laestadius L, Vassey J, Majmundar A, et al. Tobacco promotion restriction policies on social media. *Tobacco Control*. Nov 3 2022;doi:10.1136/tc-2022-057348
9. [^] Das S. Influencers and freebies: Big Tobacco's push to sell nicotine pouches in UK. Accessed 13 October, 2023. <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2023/jul/30/influencers-and-freebies-big-tobaccos-push-to-sell-nicotine-pouches-in-uk>
10. [^] Huang J, Duan Z, Kwok J, Binns S, et al. Vaping versus JUULing: how the extraordinary growth and marketing of JUUL transformed the US retail e-cigarette market. *Tobacco Control*. 2019;28(2):146-151.
11. [^] Sun T, Lim CC, Chung J, Cheng B, et al. Vaping on TikTok: a systematic thematic analysis. *Tobacco Control*. 2023;32(2):251-254.
12. ^{a, b} Grant-Braham B, Britton J. Motor racing, tobacco company sponsorship, barcodes and alibi marketing. *Tobacco control*. 2012;21(6):529-535.
13. [^] Tobacco advertising ban takes effect 31 July. European Commission; 2005.
14. [^] Chapman M, Okoth E, Törnkvist A, Margottini L, Irfan A, Cheema U. New products, old tricks? Concerns big tobacco is targeting youngsters. *The Bureau of Investigative Journalism*. <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/stories/2021-02-21/newproducts-old-tricks-concerns-big-tobacco-is-targeting-youngsters>
15. ^{a, b} Mee L. F1 News: McLaren Receives Official Complaints Over Nicotine Sponsors. *Sports Illustrated*. Accessed 10 October 2023. <https://www.si.com/fannation/racing/f1briefings/news/f1-news-mclaren-receives-official-complaints-over-nicotine-sponsors-lm22>
16. [^] Taylor D. How English football got hooked on snus: 'Players don't understand the threat of it'. *The Athletic*. Accessed 24 Oct 2023. <https://theathletic.com/4347316/2023/03/30/premier-league-snus-players-addiction/>
17. [^] Read D, Carter S, Hopley P, Chamari K, Taylor L. Snus use in football: the threat of a new addiction? *Biology of Sport*. 2023;41(1):201-205.
18. [^] Severson HH, Klein K, Lichtensein E, Kaufman N, Orleans CT. Smokeless tobacco use among professional baseball players: survey results, 1998 to 2003. *Tobacco Control*. 2005;14(1):31-36. doi:10.1136/tc.2004.007781
19. [^] Saunders T. Nicotine pouches get top billing at festivals as disposable vapes banned. *The Times*. Accessed 13 Oct 2023. <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/nicotine-pouches-get-top-billing-at-festivals-as-disposable-vapes-banned-bzwtc9frk>
20. [^] Tattan-Birch H, Jackson SE, Dockrell M, Brown J. Tobacco-free Nicotine Pouch Use in Great Britain: A Representative Population Survey 2020-2021. *Nicotine Tobacco Research*. Aug 6 2022;24(9):1509-1512. doi:10.1093/ntr/ntac099