

Youth and Nicotine Pouches: The concerning new trend examined through TikTok

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Youth and Nicotine Pouches: The concerning new trend examined through TikTok

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Abstract

Background: This study highlights TikTok's influence in shaping youth perceptions of nicotine pouches as trendy and relatively harmless. This underlines the need for more restrictions to be applied on the content that is so readily available for youth.

Objective: This study employs a qualitative descriptive design to explore how nicotine pouches (specifically Zyns) are represented on TikTok.

Methods: A total of 200 TikTok posts were screened under the #zyn, #zyns, and #nicotinepouch hashtags, with 132 being analyzed. Posts were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis approach. Collaborative coding ensured reliability and identified key themes in the content.

Results: Five themes emerged: (1) The Zyn Movement; (2) "Boy Heaven"; (3) "Unintended Negative Consequences"; (4) Product Design: "Life doesn't need to stop"; (5) Physical Benefits: "It's like IcyHot for your mouth." Overall, the content heavily condoned nicotine pouch use and normalized it, with males disproportionately represented as the primary users of nicotine pouches.

Conclusions: This study highlights TikTok's influence in shaping youth perceptions of nicotine pouches as trendy and relatively harmless. This underlines the need for more restrictions on the content that is so readily available to youth.

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Original Manuscript

Original Paper

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Conclusion: This study highlights TikTok's influence in shaping youth perceptions of nicotine pouches as trendy and relatively harmless. This underlines the need for more restrictions on the content that is so readily available to youth.

Keywords: quantitative research; nicotine pouches; TikTok; Zyn; youth; social media

Introduction

Nicotine use among youth is an epidemic that began in the mid to late 2010s through the introduction of e-cigarettes (also known as vapes), and has remained prevalent through the evolution of non-combustible nicotine products, such as nicotine pouches (East et al., 2021; Sparrock et al., 2023). Nicotine pouches are small, pre-portioned pouches containing white powder that lacks tobacco, but instead typically consists of nicotine salts, which deliver a substantially higher concentration of nicotine to the user during consumption compared to products containing free-based nicotine (e.g., Nicotine Replacement Therapy) (Sparrock et al., 2023; Robichaud et al., 2020). These products are used by placing the pouch between the lip and gum and are absorbed through the oral mucosa into the user's bloodstream (Ye & Rahman, 2023; Robichaud et al., 2020). From there, it takes the nicotine only 10-20 seconds to cross the blood-brain barrier and can have serious implications on the developing brain of an adolescent consumer, such as but not limited to a significantly higher risk for psychiatric disorders, attention-deficit disorders, and a plethora of cognitive deficits (Goriounova & Mansvelder, 2012). In addition, due to the location of where the nicotine pouches are placed, there is a significant risk of users developing irreversible periodontal diseases and deterioration (Ye & Rahman, 2023).

Despite the negative health implications, several studies have found that users of nicotine pouches perceive them to be less harmful compared to other available nicotine products (Morean et al., 2023; Long et al., 2023). There has also been heavy discussion regarding the discreteness and convenience of using nicotine pouches compared to other nicotine products, and how these characteristics are a driving factor for individuals to begin using them or make the switch from an alternative nicotine product (Vogel et al., 2023; Robichaud et al., 2020). Companies marketing nicotine pouches have pushed the idea that these products are 'cleaner, healthier, simpler,' and present less of a risk to the user by using terms such as "tobacco-free" and emphasizing the fact

that there is no inhalation into the lungs to use these products (Vogel et al., 2024; Sparrock et al., 2023). The successful marketing of these products is reflected in market trends. For example, in the United States, overall sales increasing from 126.06 million units from August to December 2019 to 808.14 million units from January to March 2022 (Majmundar et al., 2022). Zyn (Philip Morris International) is the most popular nicotine pouch product and continues to lead the overall unit share at 58.8% (Majmundar et al.).

Tobacco companies have capitalized on the reach power of social media to market the increasingly popular nicotine pouches, particularly targeting the youth demographic through sensory appeals, like enticing flavors (Ling et al., 2023; Robichaud et al., 2020), and through reward programs (Dobbs et al., 2024). Research has shown that social media plays a significant role in influencing trends among youth, including use of nicotine products by increasing their social acceptability and desirability (Smith & Hilton, 2023). Nicotine pouches have become particularly popular on social media (e.g., TikTok) in recent years, with studies reporting a significant increase in nicotine-pouch related posts between 2019-2022 (Ling et al., 2023, Shao et al., 2022).

One of the most popular social media platforms used among youth where nicotine pouches are being promoted is Tik Tok (Dobbs et al., 2024). TikTok was first introduced in 2017, and has become one of the fast growing social media platforms (Pew Internet, 2023; Oberlo, 2024). As of 2024, there are an estimated 2.14 billion TikTok users, and the majority of them are children and teenagers. According to Pew Internet Research, 63% of teens in the United States use TikTok and over half of these users report using it daily (Pew Internet, 2024). The hallmark feature of TikTok is the ability to create short videos with different effects (e.g., overlaid music or text, filters) that can then be posted and shared via hashtags.

Monitoring engagement with content promoting nicotine pouches on TikTok is imperative because engagement with social media content that promotes nicotine products has been associated with greater odds of nicotine product use (Smith and Hilton, 2023). To date, an in-depth understanding of user-generated nicotine pouch content and user engagement on TikTok is lacking. Therefore, the purpose of this study is understand how users are engaging with and expressing their experiences and perspectives on nicotine pouches through content posted on TikTok.

Methods

Study Design

This study is underpinned by constructivist realism, which asserts that an understanding of phenomena external to us (realism) can be understood through engaging in interpretive inquiry (constructivist) of that phenomena (Cupchik, 2001; Wilig, 2016), like how nicotine pouches are being represented on TikTok. Given the lack of research in this emerging area, we employed qualitative description, which is an ideal study approach for exploring and describing phenomena where research is lacking (Sandelowski, 2010). In this vein, we aimed to generate a rich thematic description of user experiences and perceptions of nicotine pouches through content posted on TikTok.

Ethical Consideration

TikTok has multiple options for users to restrict their content through their privacy settings. For example, users can choose between a public and private account, additionally, users can also select "who can view" for each video. Public accounts can set each TikTok to only be viewed by their friends, everyone, or just themselves. Therefore, ethical clearance was deemed not necessary since TikTok's posted with a public account and no restriction on viewers indicates that the creators

wanted their content to be available for as many people as possible. Additionally, only posts that were publicly accessible and downloadable were used for thematic analysis, as it was assumed that creators had no expectation of privacy and that their videos were a part of the public domain. Lastly, to protect the identity of the users, no identifying information has been used in this paper (e.g. username).

Data Collection

TikTok posts that used the following hashtags: #zyn, #zyns, #nicotinepouch were analyzed. As of May 13, 2024, there were 45,000 posts ranging from individuals talking about their personal experiences or significant others talking about their partner's usage. To gather the data for this study, a new TikTok account was made, and the age of the user was set to 15 years old for this study. The first 250 TikTok's under those hashtags were screened for this analysis. However, after taking out any TikToks that were not in English, that were not downloadable, and that had no mention of nicotine pouches or Zyns, there was a total of 132 TikToks left for the analysis. Additionally, only TikToks posted after January 2023 were used. The number of likes, comments, and shares were all recorded on an Excel sheet.

Data Analysis

We analyzed the videos using Braun and Clark's guidelines for thematic analysis (reference). This approach entails six steps. For the first step (familiarization), we viewed the collected TikTok videos and talked about what we were seeing and how to approach the coding process. For the second step (initial code generation), the analysis of these videos began with us individually coding the first 20 TikToks. Each TikTok was watched a minimum of 3 times. Then we met and discussed our findings to ensure there was consistency within the analysis. This process was repeated again with the first 50 TikToks to ensure consistency in the coding process. The first author then completed coding the remaining TikToks. This process helped the us develop a codebook that was accurately representative of the content and increased interrater reliability. During step three (development of themes), after all of the videos were coded, we engaged in several collaborative meetings to discuss how these codes naturally group together to form themes. For example, while we had codes relating to the ability to conceal use due to their nature, ability to use them anywhere, and the ability to engage in sports or military training while using, it became evident that primary theme was that, with nicotine pouches, life doesn't have to stop, which became one of our themes. During step four (theme refinement), we collaboratively reviewed our themes and ensured that our themes and associated sub-themes were capturing the video content appropriately. For phase five, (theme naming), we built a diagram to showcase how each theme and sub-theme related to each other (see Figure 1).

Results

The authors interpreted the data to form five themes (two of which have subthemes), as shown in Figure 1. The authors understood that each TikTok varied greatly despite being under the same hashtag. Therefore, the TikToks were analyzed according to the theme message the creator was trying to deliver. These TikToks generated 16 488 662 likes, 114 125 comments, and 1 930 115 shares. From the most common theme to the least, the themes are a) the Zyn movement, b) #boyheaven, c)product design: life does not need to stop, d) "unintended negative consequences," and e) physical design: "its like icy hot for your mouth."

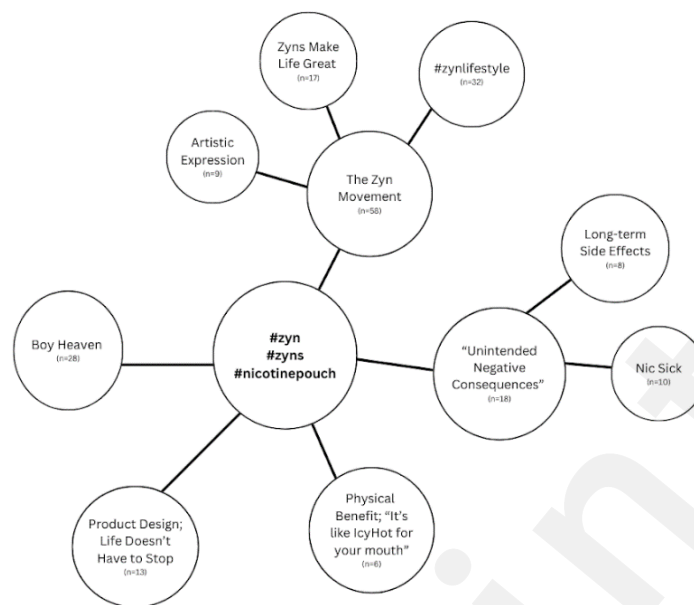


Figure 1 Themes identified across content posted under #zyn, #zyns, #nicotinepouch on TikTok. The five themes are shown in the large circles and include: (1) The Zyn Movement, (2)#boyheaven, (3)Product Design: Life Doesn't Have to Stop, (4) "Unintended Negative Consequences," and (5)Physical Benefit: "It's like IcyHot for your mouth." Within the theme (1) The Zyn Movement, the subthemes identified are: (a)#zynlifestyle, (b)Zyns Make Life Great, and (c) Artistic Expression. The theme (4)"Unintended Negative Consequences," was broken down into two subthemes: (a) Nic Sick and (b) Long-Term Side Effects.

The Zyn Movement

Creators (47.50%, n=58 posts) showcased their alliance with using Zyns by posting content in favour of Zyns and nicotine pouches. The Zyn movement was a common hashtag found under videos where Zyns were mentioned. The Zyn movement is a brilliant way to capture how Zyn users feel about their choices, they have almost made it feel empowering and normalized. This phrase also adds exclusivity to individuals who are using Zyns as they are a part of this movement where others who are not using Zyns are not a part of this group. This theme was further separated into three subthemes, (a) #Zynlifestyle, (b) Zyns makes life great, and (c) artistic expression.

(a) #Zynlifestyle

This subtheme chooses to showcase how Zyns can become a part of someone's lifestyle. A lifestyle describes a way in which a person chooses to live their life. Creators (n=32) posted videos showcasing their Zyn lifestyle by showing how they could do their day-to-day living with Zyns. Creators were seen using Zyns while at work, watching sports games, playing sports, and on vacations. A creator even called Zyns the "perfect ball marker" while playing golf. Creators also chose to show how Zyns can be used as tools like a car jack and a line marker. These TikToks show how normalized Zyns are and how easy it is to incorporate into your day.

(b) Zyns make life great

This subtheme promotes the use of Zyns as it makes life great. Creators (n=17) made TikToks expressing how great Zyns are and how they have made their lives better. A creator even made a two minute long video just simply expressing his love for Zyns. A creator posted a tiktok with a caption “Just copped the ‘Why do I feel so good all the time? starter pack” where he showcased drinking a soda while using Zyns. Another creator made a video with the caption “How tf you sad in a generation where wintergreen zyns, coors banquets, and girls in 7s exist.” These TikToks describe Zyns as something that is great and if you use Zyns it will make your life so great that you couldn’t even be sad.

(c) Artistic Expression

This subtheme shows the creativity of these creators, who chose to include Zyns in their TikToks to demonstrate their versatility of Zyns. Not only can you use them to give you a high, but you could also use them to express your artistic side. Creators (n=9) made TikToks using these Zyn cans for decorations, music, toys, and TikTok trends. The hashtag #zynmas was used under videos that displayed Zyn cans used as ornaments on the Christmas tree. A creator made her boyfriend a cake identical to a Zyn can. Also, creators used Zyn cans to create videos for the most recent TikTok trend. Tiktok trends are usually a short, limited time when a particular song or dance becomes wildly popular. Therefore, creators will also make videos of that trend to remain relevant and gain engagement. Under this subtheme, people incorporated Zyns in TikTok trends which normalizes Zyns as just being a creativity tool.

#Boy-Heaven

Creators (22.76%, =28 posts) displayed how using Zyns was like heaven on Earth. These videos were usually made by men or their significant others. “Boy Heaven” is a phrase that was used on one of the videos underneath this category, this video showcased how cheap and accessible Zyns were at a festival. Other videos underneath this category showcased significant others who mentioned how they felt like they “just couldn’t get mad” at their partners because the Zyn rewards were so good. One creator even made a “care package” for her military boyfriend and included multiple cans of Zyns, further validating the use of Zyns. Creators used captions like “perfect boy’s night” and “just a guy lunch,” where they showed Zyns paired with an energy drink or alcohol. These tiktoks showcased how these creators truly believed that Zyns was equivalent to their heaven on Earth.

Unintended Negative Consequences

Creators (14.63%, n = 18 posts) often reached out to social media to share their experiences with using nicotine pouches. Whether that was their first day of use or consistent use, there were a lot of interesting stories. A really interesting point was when this user who presented their content through a podcast on TikTok labelled all the side effects of nicotine and, specifically, nicotine pouches as “unintended negative consequences” and presented the research-proven facts about side effects as mere coincidences. This phrase was a really good representation of the videos because all creators don’t acknowledge the side effects but instead choose to dismiss them. This theme was split into two subthemes: (a) Nic Sick and (b) Long-term Side Effects.

A.Nic Sick

This subtheme highlights the aftermath of individuals using Zyns or other variations of nicotine pouches for the first time. The term nic sick describes the sickness(ex. nausea, sweats, and vomiting) individuals may experience after their encounter with nicotine. Creators (n = 10) share storytimes about their horrific first-day experiences. One creator discussed how they felt confident in trying a Zyn since they had already been used to nicotine through vaping. However, after only one encounter with a Zyn, they “felt like they won’t make it till tomorrow” and “sle[pt] in the fetal position.” This creator felt the sickness that comes with nicotine to such a great extent that they feared for their life.

b.Long-Term Side Effects

This subtheme highlights the effects on individuals who have been using nicotine pouches for an extended period. Creators (n = 8) talk about how products like Zyns and Zonnics have caused some irreversible side effects. Multiple videos were about how nicotine pouches negatively impact oral health, for example, causing gum recession, tooth decay, and, in severe cases, oral cancer. Another creator talks about how nicotine can impact cardiac health.

Product Design: Life Does Not Need to Stop

Creators (10.57%, n=13) made videos using nicotine pouches while doing other activities. The videos under this theme highlight the product’s convenience, discreteness, ability to be easily sharable, and the option to use multiple at once. Creators made videos of them using Zyns while working out, at work, and participating in our day-to-day activities. Athletes like golfers, hockey players, and baseball players were seen using Zyns while playing their games or engaging with their fans. A few of these videos showed fans offering Zyns to athletes and athletes taking them up on the offer, showcasing how easily this product can be distributed. Other creators chose to make videos about how discrete Zyns were and how easily they could have them on their person while continuing to work (ex. soldiers). Lastly, two creators made videos of them using multiple pouches simultaneously, showing how easy it is to increase the nicotine intake by adding more pouches.

Physical Benefit; “It’s like IcyHot for your mouth”

Creators (4.9%, n=6) chose to make videos regarding the benefits of nicotine and nicotine pouches. Creators mentioned benefits like nicotine being a neurotropic, work enhancer, and a substance that increases mental acuity. For males, nicotine was linked with being a testosterone booster and also called a “male enhancer.” Multiple creators chose to make claims like, “I don’t think nicotine hurts anything,” and that “Zyn is not a sin.” A creator even suggested that nicotine be used for severe weight problems. Lastly, a creator chose to compare nicotine pouches to the popular muscle relief topical medication called IcyHot (drug class: menthol and methyl salicylate). The medication is known to provide significant relief, and comparing Zyns to this medication further solidifies how these creators believe nicotine pouches to be very beneficial.

Discussion

Principal Findings

This is the first study to examine how TikTok users are posting and engaging with nicotine pouch content. This study reveals themes around how nicotine pouches are experienced, perceived, and promoted among TikTok users. The implications of these findings are critical for advancing health promotion efforts such that they resonate with individuals who use these platforms, particularly youth.

A primary finding from this study is the resoundingly positive way in which Zyns were portrayed in TikTok videos (e.g., “boy heaven”; “unintended negative consequences”; life doesn't have to stop). This is similar to studies examining how other nicotine products popular among youth are engaged with on TikTok, like vaping. For example, in a study by Sun and colleagues (2023), they found that, out of a sample of 808 videos that were collectively viewed over 1.5 billion times, the majority (63%) of them portrayed e-cigarette use in a positive way, and these positive videos represented over 1.1 billion views. These findings reveal how novel nicotine products are not only being represented on popular youth-led social media platforms, but also explains why these products have proliferated youth cultures.

Another key finding is the way in which nicotine pouches are not promoted as a cessation product, but rather, a lifestyle product through direct posts that refer to use of pouches as a movement (e.g., #zynlifestyle, #zynbabwe, #zyngang), as well as indirect posts that associate use of pouches as something that improves everyday life (e.g., pouches make life great; life doesn't have to stop). This is similar to how vaping became a lifestyle product through similar social media posts and hashtags (e.g., #Juulgang), normalizing the use of e-cigarettes as part of everyday life (Kostygina et al., 2021). According to a study that used computational and qualitative thematic analysis to characterize vaping-related TikTok posts, the findings underscored how promotional content, influencers, and everyday conversations on TikTok subtly normalized vaping as something that goes with popular culture (e.g., gaming, tattooing) and social practices (e.g., shopping, driving) (Jung et al., 2024). In this regard, social media serves as a powerful tool for the tobacco industry in normalizing use of their products among youth, a prime demographic to secure profits from due to the developmental propensity of youth to become addicted to their products for the long-term (TheTruthInitiative, 2022).

Another key finding from this study is that the majority of TikToks were created by males or showed nicotine pouches being used by males. This is reflected in our theme, “Boy Heaven”. This reveals that use of nicotine pouches encompasses gender-based dynamics whereby use of these products is showcased as a primarily male endeavor. In addition, male role models, including athletes, military personnel, and influencers were represented in these TikToks, which not only reinforces and promotes use of pouches among males, but also shows that perceived “healthy males” are using these products. Furthermore, while males presented as the primary users of pouches on TikTok, females presented as supporters of their male counterpart's use, which foregrounds stereotypical gender roles playing out. For example, in many of the videos, the female partners, while may not agree with the behavior, still show support of the behavior by creating art with the tins (e.g., a Zyn birthday cake for her boyfriend), stating that they can't get mad at their partner because they get free stuff through the rewards, and showing silence when their partners announce that they are running out to get pouches. Not only do these findings align with studies indicating that more males use pouches compared to females to date (Patel et al., 2023), but they also provide a glimpse into how gender is influencing and reinforcing these trends.

Implications

A major implication of this study's findings is that we need to treat nicotine pouches as lifestyle product given their widespread normalization among youth as represented in the analyzed TikTok videos. Once a trend, like nicotine pouch use, becomes embedded in youth contexts and accelerated via social media, it becomes normalized (Jung et al., 2024), which inherently makes such trends difficult to counter. This brings forward the need to shift our focus on presenting nicotine pouches as solely a health issue to acknowledging that it's also lifestyle trend embedded into youth cultures. Efforts to tell youth about the harms of these products will fall flat if we try to combat a lifestyle issue by presenting it as a cultural issue. This was evident in the way that the negative health impacts of pouch use were downplayed or presented as a fluke, or as an "unintended" side effect of using them. This brings forward the urgent need to design prevention messaging that resonates with youth cultures and to empower youth to believe that they don't need pouches to fit in or to feel good.

There currently appears to be a gender-gap when it comes to pouch use whereby males are overwhelmingly represented as pouch users on Tik Tok. This is similar to how smoking and vaping began, with but through clever marketing, the gender gap began to close. One can expect that the same gender gap will close shortly without due attention to how females may be particularly targeted.

Additionally, the media regarding Zyns capitalizes on the fundamental need of humans, a sense of belonging (Allen, 2022). Users create little communities named #zyngang, #zymbabwe, and #zynlifestyle on social media platforms, which represents a safe space for users to express their love for nicotine pouches (Zyns). This means that when someone posted a TikTok about Zyns they would use one of the hashtags above to show that they belonged to that group. This community can become really appealing to the youth brain as they are desperate to fit in. They want to feel like they belong, which is why Zyn communities on social media can further increase the uptake of these products in youth. As per Erikson's theory of psychosocial development, youth ages 12-18 belong in "Identity vs. Role Confusion" stage. This stage is where the children are figuring out their identity, and what their values are. Ultimately deciding where they belong (McLeod, 2024). Which is why groups like #zyngang can be so appealing to youth. Therefore stricter policies are needed for hashtags and content. TikTok has community guidelines for products like cannabis, which basically blocks the content to be viewed by anyone underage, however there is no policy in place for nicotine pouches and Zyns.

Additionally, education needs to be provided to individuals who interact with youth on a daily basis, like parents, teachers and coaches. They need to be taught how to detect teen use and how to handle the slickness of nicotine pouches. Since the product design is so slick, schools will need support to combat the use in classrooms. Additionally, health care professionals, like pharmacists, need to be educated on the actual consequences of these products. There needs to be an increase in awareness of the negative consequences of this product, so they can not continue to be dismissed as "unintended". Then only will this nicotine pouch epidemic be able to be controlled.

Strengths and Limitations

A major strength of this study is that it is the first of its kind to date, identifying the ways in which nicotine pouches are communicated on the most popular social media platform used among youth – TikTok. Another strength of this study is that it was led by a youth co-researcher. This is a major

strength because the lead author was familiar with the platform, and with the lingo and the ways in which youth cultures are represented on this platform, which facilitated rigorous theme development. Another strength is that this study followed similar methods in analyzing TikTok content as previous studies (reference). Finally, this study is strengthened by the collaborative coding and theme development process that hallmarked data analysis. In relation to limitations, it is important to note that this study was conducted in 2024 and that rapid shifts in social media policies (e.g., US temporary ban on TikTok), as well as nicotine pouch policies (e.g., FDA approval of Zyn marketing) may alter the ways in which nicotine pouches are communicated. Additionally, it is important to recognize that the majority of TikTok users are from US, limiting Canadian representation in this study. This study only included English content, excluded content on Snus (tobacco-based product), and excluded content from European creators, limiting our findings to primarily to English-speaking people in the US. Finally, this content is primarily representative of Zyn and does not include content shared in relation to other nicotine pouch brands (e.g., Rogue, Zonnic), which is likely due to the proliferation of Zyn in the US above other brands to date. Additionally, TikTok is a constantly growing platform, with millions of videos posted daily from all over the world. TikTok is algorithm-focused, meaning it tracks the type of videos users watch to curate their experience. However, to make our findings as unbiased as possible, we created a brand-new account on a brand-new device, with no previous data to be tracked and used. Therefore, all the content analyzed in this research project could be available to anyone.

Conclusions

In this study, we analyzed content on TikTok regarding nicotine pouches, which revealed how this trend has already infiltrated youth cultures in a resoundingly positive way, especially among young males. We outlined various themes identified in the content analysis, all highlighting different benefits of using Zyn. Policy and prevention efforts to better educate and support youth against the harms of this trend are urgently needed and should be driven by the youth themselves.

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Supplementary Files

Figures

Themes Identified.

