

‘I’d rather have worse gums than worse lungs’: Young people’s views of nicotine pouches in the UK

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Abstract

Background and aims: Nicotine pouches entered the UK market in 2019. Although research has shown that young people’s prevalence of use has been low, it has been reported to be increasing and a cause for concern. This paper reports the findings of the first qualitative study in the UK to explore the views of 14–16 year olds’ knowledge, awareness of, access to and use of nicotine pouches, augmented by the views of school staff, as part of a wider study investigating the marketing and use of new nicotine products (NNPs) in Scotland (NIPS Study).

Design: Qualitative study using 16 focus groups conducted February–March 2025, and in-person and telephone interviews (nine individual and two paired) with school staff.

Setting: Four schools in Scotland based in areas of differing socio-economic status and two levels of urbanity.

Participants: Seventy-seven third-year (S3; 14–15 years) and fourth-year (S4; 15–16 years) pupils who vaped or were at-risk of vaping. School staff ($n = 13$) with a senior teaching or pastoral care/guidance role.

Measurements: Focus groups with pupils and interviews with staff explored perceptions and use of nicotine pouches and other NNPs. The qualitative data underwent thematic analysis.

Findings: Pupils were knowledgeable about nicotine pouches and thought that they were easy to access. Experimental use was commonplace and regular use was reported, particularly among boys. This was in stark contrast to the views of the staff, who were largely unaware of pouches and perceived that pupils were not using them. Young people liked that nicotine pouches could be used discreetly as well as experiencing a ‘nicotine rush’; however, pupils reported adverse effects from the use of pouches, from pain in the gums to more serious episodes of sickness and fainting.

Conclusions: Young people in Scotland appear to have high awareness and knowledge of nicotine pouches, and experimental use and adverse effects are common. More established use is reported among older boys than other students, who are able to use these products discreetly in schools. School staff appear to be aware of pupils vaping but largely unaware of pouch use.

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KEYWORDS

adolescents, nicotine pouches, public health, qualitative, tobacco, vapes

INTRODUCTION

Nicotine pouches are tobacco-free products placed by the user between the lip and the gum that allow nicotine to be absorbed into the bloodstream [1]. They are unregulated products and there is currently no age restriction on their sale within the UK [2–4]. Little is known about their use within the UK since they entered the market in 2019 [3, 5]. Most of the research is survey-based and suggests that the prevalence of current use is relatively low, in the order of 1%–2% among adults, children and young people, although higher use is reported in groups such as younger males or in those who use other forms of nicotine or cannabis [3, 4, 6]. In the UK it has been reported that pouches are heavily marketed, particularly through social media messaging targeted at young people, and use of pouches appears to be increasing [3, 5, 7]. Therefore, research is needed to monitor their adoption more generally, and in young people in particular [4].

International evidence, particularly from the USA, suggests a similar picture, with survey-based research dominating and showing a relatively low use of these tobacco-free products, although knowledge and awareness of pouches is higher and increasing [4, 8–12]. A review article demonstrated that between 35% and 42% of US adolescents and young adults had heard of oral nicotine products (ONPs), and 9%–21% of ‘tobacco-naïve youth’ (young people who have not used tobacco or other nicotine products) were susceptible to trying them [4]. It also stressed, though, that 17 of the studies in the review were funded by the tobacco industry [4].

There has been a lot of recent media interest in the UK about the marketing, availability and use of nicotine pouches, with concern raised as to their appeal to young people, as well as their use, their perceived nicotine dosage/strength and reported adverse effects [2, 3, 13, 14]. This indicates a rapidly evolving area, and one of potential public health concern given the availability of high-strength products and the potential for nicotine addiction and other negative health outcomes for young people [15]. In addition, even though the adoption of nicotine pouches is relatively recent, longer-term adverse health outcomes have been reported, such as gingival recession, changes to oral mucosa, Type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular issues and decreased sperm count [1, 16]. There have also been concerns expressed as to the effect of nicotine on the developing brain during adolescence [17]. As a consequence, qualitative research with young people to explore their views of nicotine pouches in detail should be a priority, although as yet there has been a dearth of qualitative research conducted. A small number of studies have examined the marketing of these products, their depiction in social media or their discussion among young people in online forums [7, 18–20]. Early insights from the Generation Vape study in Australia demonstrated that there was an increase in the use and popularity of ONPs among young people, as they perceived that they enhanced sporting performance, aided vaping cessation, and were becoming a part of partying and clubbing culture [21].

They were also thought to be a ‘healthier’ alternative to smoking or vaping [21]. This lack of research into the use of pouches among young people reflects their relatively new introduction to the market and their low reported prevalence. The current article is part of a wider study exploring the retail availability, display and marketing of new nicotine products (NNPs) in four communities in Scotland (NIPS study). This study is closely modelled on the DISPLAY study, which evaluated the impact of the tobacco point-of-sale promotions ban in Scotland and conducted qualitative research with pupils aged 13–16 years in four schools in Scotland between 2013 and 2017, inclusive [22–29]. During the earlier study, e-cigarettes and vapes barely featured during the first two waves of fieldwork, but became increasingly part of the young people’s narratives from 2015 onwards as awareness and use became a lot more widespread [23, 25, 28, 29]. Given the rapid growth in the NNPs market since 2017, it is vital to understand the perceptions of the pupils in relation to pouches, as well as tobacco and other NNPs, to ascertain their knowledge, awareness, use and impacts of such products.

METHODS

Study design and sample

Sixteen single-sex focus groups (77 participants) were conducted with pupils from four secondary schools in the central belt of Scotland (where 70% of the Scottish population reside). In addition, in each school, three or four school staff members ($n = 13$ in total), including senior teaching staff (headteachers and deputy head teachers) and guidance and pastoral staff, took part in in-depth one-to-one ($n = 9$) or paired ($n = 4$) interviews. Schools were purposively selected to represent different levels of socio-economic deprivation (high vs medium/low) and urbanisation (large urban vs semi-urban/small town). The social deprivation level for each school and its surrounding catchment was estimated using the uptake of free school meals and the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD), based on the home postcode of all pupils in the school. Four focus groups were undertaken in each school, segmented by sex and age (S3, 14–15 years; S4, 15–16 years), with between three and seven participants recruited per group (Table 1). Recruitment was facilitated by teaching staff members who identified students thought to already vape or who were at increased risk of vaping (i.e. students who either vaped

TABLE 1 School location and level of deprivation.

	High deprivation	Medium/low deprivation
Large urban	C1	C2
Small town/rural	C3	C4

themselves or had vapers in their immediate social networks). The research team has successfully used this approach before to recruit young people at risk of smoking [26, 27, 30]. Parental and pupil opt-out consent procedures were used, with participants assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Results are presented using a group identifier comprised of the school (C1–C4), age group (S3–S4), sex (M/F) and staff respondent number. Ethical approval was obtained from the NatCen Research Ethics Committee.

Focus group and interview format

Focus groups and interviews were conducted in person by two lead facilitators from the research team (J.S. and S.M.), with support provided by other researchers (A.H. and E.H.), although one teaching staff interview took place online via Teams (Microsoft, Redmond, WA, USA). Fieldwork was conducted between the 3rd and the 26th of March 2025. Each group lasted about 35 minutes, designed to take place within a school teaching period. Staff interviews were 45 minutes long on average. Discussions and interviews were digitally recorded and fully transcribed with consent from both pupils and staff. The topic guides addressed a range of issues, including views on the awareness and use of vapes and other nicotine products (including pouches and tobacco), accessibility of vapes and NNPs, marketing and promotion of vapes and NNPs, and potential policy measures and legislative approaches aimed at reducing the use of vapes among young people. Visual aids, showing examples of vapes, pouches and heated tobacco, as well as their marketing, were also used as prompts to aid discussion.

Data analysis

Focus group discussion and interview transcripts were entered into the qualitative computer package NVivo 12 (Lumivero, Denver, CO, USA). The data were coded and an inductive thematic analysis was undertaken, drawing on Braun and Clarke's iterative approach to thematic analysis [31]. The initial analysis involved data familiarisation; transcripts were read and re-read by three authors (A.M., J.S., A.H.) and emergent themes discussed, and a coding frame developed. Codes were systematically compared to identify cross-cutting themes and common experiences, as well as differing and alternative views. The coding framework was further refined into key themes. This article reports primarily on the themes relating to nicotine pouches. The source of each quotation (school, year, sex), school teaching staff respondent code and facilitator (F) or participant (P) are provided (Table 1).

RESULTS

The following sections report on the main themes identified in relation to pouches, under the broad themes of awareness, access/appeal,

use, impact and future developments. School staff views are outlined in the 'awareness' section only, as staff expressed very limited knowledge of pouches and their use by young people.

Awareness of nicotine pouches

As pupils were recruited on the basis of their use of vapes or contact with other vapers, the pupils reported very high levels of awareness of vapes, including different brands and generations of vape. However, they also showed high awareness of nicotine pouches. They referred to them at times as pouches but were much more likely to use other terms such as 'snus' (even if they did not contain tobacco), 'upper deckies' (as they were placed by the upper gum inside the lip) or the names of brands (e.g. 'Zyns', 'Pablos' or 'Velos'). Both male and female participants reported a high awareness of pouches, although this was higher among male pupils, as was the reported personal use of pouches (see the section on nicotine pouch use below).

- P: 'Upper decky' snus!
 P: That's what it's called, yeah.
 F: Okay, and is that specific brands or is it just more generally?
 P: It's just a name for them. (C3, S4 boys)
 P: You see them [pouches] all the time in every shop you go into.
 P: Everywhere!
 P: Every shop has them.
 P: Every shop you go into they are always at the counter ...
 P: Aye, you put them in your gums.
 P: It's nicotine pouches but your gums get ... it kills all your gums. (C1, S4 girls)

The level of pupil awareness of pouches was in stark contrast to that of the members of staff interviewed in the four schools. While school staff demonstrated very high awareness and knowledge of vapes and their use in and outside of school by young people, only a minority of the staff had a limited awareness of the product, usually associated with use among family members or friends, as opposed to events involving pupils within school. The staff consensus was that they had little knowledge of pouches and indeed they frequently asked the researcher questions about the nature of the products and how they were used. They suspected that they were not being used widely by pupils, but they admitted that because of the size of the pouches and their ability to be used discreetly that this might not be the case.

- P: See I do not know much about them to be honest; I'll be honest, I have a really limited knowledge ... (C1, staff interview 3)
 F: I think you already mentioned there that the nicotine pouches ...
 P: Not something I've been aware of. Not something I've heard the kids talk about. I think within pupil support, we are quite good at keeping our ear to the ground and we are pretty good at having conversations with young people and picking up on what they are talking about, but it's not something I've ever heard anyone

... speak about in school. That's not to say that it's not happening but, as I said, it's not something I'm necessarily aware of. (C2, staff interview 3)

F: Do you see anyone using nicotine pouches?

P: We did have an incident last year, I think, in the dinner hall where a boy chewed one of those and then fell over. I do not think they are common.

P: I've never seen any.

P: That was quite an isolated incident. So as far as we are aware ...

P: Do they just chew them? (C3, staff paired interview 1)

F: I asked you a little bit about the nicotine pouches ... are you aware of young people using those at all?

P: Only through them telling, them talking about it. During personal and social education classes they have been talking about it, and young people knew all about it. I'm not aware of anybody actually using them. (C4, staff interview 3)

The pupils were aware of the pouches via a number of sources, including marketing, use among others within and outside of school, personal use and experimentation, and adverse effects, all of which are addressed below.

Access and availability

The young people tended to get access to all NNPs, including pouches, in a variety of ways. These included obtaining them from older pupils or peers, with promotion of what was on offer, including the price, being made via social media sites such as Snapchat and Instagram. Family members including older siblings were also said to provide NNPs, both knowingly and unwittingly. Nicotine pouches were not age-restricted products at the time of the fieldwork, but it was clear that most retailers were not willing to sell them directly to young people if they were clearly under the age of 18 years. The pupils did note being able to buy these products from shops directly, and examples were given of specific retail outlets that would sell pouches, vapes and tobacco directly to young people, not necessarily within the local communities around the schools (both in locations nearby and in different local authority areas). It was also stressed that supermarkets and specialist shops tended to have more rigorous retail practices and would not sell NNPs to young people. In terms of pouches specifically, promotional stalls set up in train stations or other venues, with individuals wearing branding and handing out samples, were also cited.

P: Parents, like some people's parents give their children them.

P: But like only a few.

P: ... everybody knows someone that's older, that like is over 18 who will get them. I think everybody has fake IDs and stuff now so ...

P: I buy them myself.

F: You do?

P: Obviously, yeah—some corner shops are like 'oh you just look over the age'.

P: Yeah.

P: So they do not check. (C4, S4 girls)

P: It's quite easy.

P: Yeah.

P: Because people at school sell them. (C4, S3 boys)

Nicotine pouch use

The reported use of pouches was high among the focus group participants, although regular and repeated use appeared to be less common, and was predominantly the preserve of older male pupils. Experimentation was commonly reported by the 15 and 16 year olds, again more frequently by male respondents, although females shared examples too, often having been given a pouch by a school friend or peer.

Those who were using pouches on a more regular basis stated that they did so because they experienced a 'niccy rush' (a nicotine hit), and they also liked the fact they could be used more discreetly and easily than tobacco or vaping products. This meant that pouches could be used within school, on buses and in other places in which vaping was banned. In a few cases the pupils were using pouches to try to reduce vaping, although dual use was also reported. Other reasons for attempting to stop or reduce vaping while using pouches were related to participation in more active sports, in which vapes were viewed as compromising respiratory function. It is important to emphasise, though, that there was little evidence among the majority of pupils that pouches were being used to aid tobacco or vaping cessation. The use of pouches at weekends was also reported, although it was unclear if this was related to socialising, participating in sporting events or both.

P: It gives you a 'nic rush' as well.

P: You explain.

P: I'll take it from here, so basically it's not like a vape, it does not destroy your lungs like ... a vape would.

P: It destroys your gums though.

P: Yeah, it destroys your gums though so it's like hit for hit but still ...

P: It hits you more. (C2, S3 boys)

F: And when you do see [pouch use] is that in school, outside of school?

P: Normally outside of school.

P: Sometimes on the bus. (C3, S3 girls)

First reactions to pouch use were often negative, with the pupils commenting on the strength of the pouch, a burning pain in the gum and feelings of sickness (see below for more severe reactions). As a result, it was evident that some individuals had been put off using pouches owing to this initial reaction. However, those who were more

established users said that this initial reaction wore off, and that repeated use became more pleasurable over time, enhanced by flavours, although it was also acknowledged that the pouches could be powerful and they were concerned that they might be becoming addicted to nicotine. In one group the participants admitted that they would be curious to try caffeine pouches as a way of weaning themselves off nicotine pouches. Even if there were concerns expressed as to the strength of pouches (those who used them were knowledgeable about strengths/dosages) and potential nicotine addiction, pouches were perceived as being less damaging to health than tobacco or vapes over the longer term.

- P: So I do not really vape as much but I did see people talking about the snus or whatever you want to call them. I tried them, I did not like them at first though, but then I kind of like them now a bit more.
- P: I started in like S2. Just started buying more and more. I said I'd never buy one and then I just started to buy more and more.
- F: What do you like about them?
- P: The flavour usually.
- P: Yeah.
- P: Like 'nic rushes' as well ...
- P: ... yeah, but it's more the fact like your lungs for like the sport obviously, it still does have side effects like your gums, gum cancer and stuff like. I would not want gum cancer but I'd rather have like worse gums than like worse lungs. (C4, S4 Boys)
- P: I'd say probably the nicotine pouches are a lot better than the vapes because obviously the vapes affect your lungs but the snus is obviously like ... its only damaging the gums and it's not actually the lungs because that can have like worse effects. I would say they are both still not the best though but if you had to pick what was ... if you had to do one of them whatever one would be better, I would say probably the snus. (C3, S4 Boys)
- P: I've tried it three times but then I just did not like it ... it was really spicy at the back of my throat, so I was like, 'I do not like this; I'm not going to do it'. (C3, S3 Girls)
- P: Like the caffeine snus ... it's like a nicotine pouch except it's got caffeine inside.
- P: I would say the vapes obviously I've tried them and it's a complete scam but I am quite curious about the caffeine pouches. I think that could maybe be a way to like stop doing snus maybe.
- F: Do you want to stop?
- P: I would like to yeah ...
- P: Yeah, I would like to too.

Adverse effects of pouches

As has been noted, pupils reported a number of adverse outcomes from using pouches, often after first use. However, more serious adverse health effects were also cited, both on a personal basis and involving other pupils within the school. These episodes included

pupils experiencing a fast heart rate, feeling nauseated and/or being violently sick, experiencing sweat attacks, and feeling faint and/or passing out ('a whitey'). Some of these events were described as occurring because the young person involved was unaware or had been misled as to the nicotine strength of the pouch that they had used. Individuals who had this type of experience tended to say that they would not use pouches again.

- P: I'm never ever doing snus again ... I took one and I got told that it was the wrong milligrams and I just threw up everywhere basically in the school ... I got quite a while off school so it was alright!
- P: I had to run to the bathroom and spew there...
- P: Was that the cherry one?
- P: It was that one, it was the bloody mango one. (C4, S4 boys)
- P: Too strong. Burns your mouth. They're boggin' [disgusting] man.
- P: I've no touched them in ages mate.
- P: You were on them for ages!
- P: They taste alright, some of them taste alright and then there's ones that are just too strong that taste rubbish.
- F: What happens if it's too strong, how can you tell it's too strong?
- P: You'll be sick ...
- P: When you put them in it burns your gums and then you'll be able to tell. If it goes away, then they are alright.
- P: If you start sweating ...
- P: If you start sweating and that then you are gonnae whitey, so ... my advice to you if get yourself to the nearest toilet! [Laughter] (C1, S3 boys)

Marketing of pouches

On the whole, pupils were much more aware of the marketing of vapes and vaping products than they were of the advertising of pouches. However, they were aware of promotions within shops, often placed by vape displays, and of advertising on social media, particularly content posted by other pupils attempting to sell these and other nicotine products. Males were more likely to cite links between the marketing of pouches and sports. These included Velo pouches being promoted on McLaren Formula 1 cars, as well as footballers and football managers using pouches [32]. Furthermore, there was a view that the marketing of pouches was aimed more at males than at females: for example, in terms of the colouring of packaging and marketing materials and the association with specific sports. Media stories were also raised that addressed the issue of the use of pouches by professional footballers. Special stalls with individuals promoting and handing out samples of a particular brand at train stations and events were also mentioned by the young people.

- P: Footballers do them, to give them energy.
- P: Aye who was it, Neymar?
- F: And how do you know that footballers are [using pouches]?

- P: Because we see them on videos, they are like walking 'oot the tunnels and that and putting one in.
- P: Are they allowed to do that?
- P: Aye.
- P: It gives you energy. (C1, S3 boys)
- P: It's a fairly masculine product that one ...
- P: Because of the sports thing that [name of participant] mentioned.
- P: I do not know I just think it's more boys that look at it and find it more like ...
- P: Appealing ...
- P: It's not even that it's got bright colours like the vapes, but it still attracts people so ...
- F: So does it feel more like its aimed at boys or girls?
- P: It's more for like men, yeah. (C2, S4 boys)
- P: It's mainly targeted to boys.
- P: Yeah more boys do it.
- F: Are these people your age or older? Younger?
- P: Oor age ...
- P: I do not like them. (C1, S4 girls)
- P: The ones I get about snus on my Instagram is crazy.
- P: That's just the stuff you see, yeah.
- P: When you like one thing on Instagram it comes up with 10 other videos about it ...
- P: Oh the nicotine pouches, aye I seen some guy in town with like a whole ... you know when you see the guys at like American football games and they have got like the tubs of hotdogs, I seen some guy and he just had loads of Velos... (C2, S3 boys)

Future developments

The pupils were asked about their potential use of nicotine products in the future, particularly given the ban on the sale of disposable vapes, which was due to come into effect in the UK on 1 June 2025, 2–3 months after the fieldwork was completed. It should also be noted that pupils were unaware of aspects of the Tobacco and Vapes Bill, also progressing through parliament at the time of the fieldwork [33]. The pupils were sceptical that the ban would come in, or that there would not be ways to circumvent it if young people still wanted to access disposable vapes, at least in the short term. There was also no clear consensus as to what the outcome of a ban on the sale of disposable vapes might be. There was a mixed response to the proposed ban, with pupils expressing support in that it might reduce vaping among young people and others arguing that it was unnecessary and might result in negative impacts. Some pupils thought that use of other types of vapes would become more common, whereas others thought that pouch and tobacco use might also increase. However, others disagreed that there would be any major impact on pouch, tobacco or even vape use, given that the pupils argued that the ban could be flouted.

- P: I think folk would start buying more like cigarettes or nicotine pouches if disposables were to go. (C3, S4 Boys)
- F: What do you think you'll all do if [disposable vapes] are banned?
- P: Get a reuseable.
- P: I would just quit.
- P: Resort to snus.
- P: No, they made my gum bleed.
- P: Yeah, they literally rip your gums apart.
- P: They disintegrate your gums so much faster than vaping. (C4, S4 Girls)
- P: If all the vapes were gone I feel like everyone would be on snus.
- P: Nah. (C2, S3 Boys)

DISCUSSION

To the authors' knowledge there is no published qualitative research in the UK that explores the use of nicotine pouches by young people. Most published literature regarding this age group is survey-based and has demonstrated that the prevalence of use among youths is relatively low, although this needs to be monitored as there is evidence that youth awareness, knowledge and use of pouches is increasing. Qualitative research has tended to look at the marketing of pouches or their promotion or discussion on social media, not always with a focus on young people. However, early insights from the Generation Vape study in Australia demonstrated that young people were using pouches for a variety of reasons, including sport performance enhancement, when clubbing and partying, as well as to aid vaping cessation [21]. This current study, part of the wider NIPS study that aims to explore the retail availability, display and marketing of NNPs in four communities in Scotland, conducted focus groups with pupils aged 14–16 years ($n = 77$), and indicated that awareness and use, at least in terms of experimentation, was high among young people. Schools in the UK have been developing with measures to address vaping among pupils. It is possible that pouch use may become a similar concern, and potentially more difficult to deal with given the lack of awareness and knowledge among school staff in tandem with the relative discretion with which they can be used and acute initial adverse effects.

Awareness of nicotine pouches was high among the pupils, and the ability to access these products was relatively straightforward. There was also evidence of youth subcultures developing around these products, with the pupils referring to them most frequently as 'snus' or 'upper deckies', as well as by specific brand names. This study was modelled closely on the DISPLAY study [22, 23] that examined the impact of the point-of-sale tobacco promotions ban, although other issues such as e-cigarette and vape use featured more prominently as the fieldwork progressed, particularly between 2015 and 2017, inclusive. The pupils' awareness of and access to NNPs, including pouches, were strongly reminiscent of the views expressed in the earlier study in relation to vapes and tobacco. Now, however, the advertising of NNPs by other pupils on social media, such as Snapchat

and Instagram, appeared to be more common. Being offered pouches directly by peers and friends was also reported, particularly before the first use of the product. However, all of the modes of access described in DISPLAY (such as via older family members, buying from shops directly and indirectly, using other adults for 'proxy purchase' as well as online purchases, and on occasion using the accounts of family members above the age of 18 years) were all reported for NNPs. Currently pouches are unregulated and there is no age restriction on their sale in the UK, although our participants' accounts suggest that most retailers are unwilling to sell to young people directly. Pupils, even if they acknowledged that most shops had adopted robust retail practices, emphasised that there were always other ways to access NNPs, and therefore the ban on, and any impact of, the sale of disposable vapes in the UK needs to be closely monitored. Already local reports have shown that disposable vapes were still being sold in shops after the ban on 1 June 2025 was implemented.

The use of pouches, especially early experimentation, was reported as being fairly widespread among school pupils. Some of the reasons cited for use in the early insights from the Generation Vape study [21] were reflected in our study, with those trying to reduce or stop vaping (in some cases to enhance sporting prowess) trying pouches, although dual use was also reported in some cases. There was not such an association noted with pouch use and 'partying' or 'clubbing', which might reflect the age of the school pupils in our study being towards the younger end of the age spectrum. Instead, the ease and discreet nature of pouch use was emphasised, perhaps related to the school environment and bus travel experienced by pupils, where vaping was banned. It should also be noted that in our study the reported use of pouches as smoking and vaping cessation aids was uncommon.

The consensus was that more regular pouch use was more prevalent among male pupils and increased in later school years. Survey research has shown this increased prevalence in young males, and in this qualitative study the male pupils seemed more knowledgeable about all aspects of pouches, including branding and marketing, strengths of dosage and association with sports. Those who spoke most positively about pouch use were male and stated that they enjoyed or appreciated the swift delivery of nicotine into the bloodstream—described as the 'niccy rush' or 'nicotine hit'. Flavoured pouches were also viewed as enhancing the experience of using these products. There was also a view expressed that nicotine pouch marketing was aimed more at males, which seemed to be based on the association with Formula 1 sponsorship (Velo), media articles on male footballers' use of pouches and the colours used in promotions, which were perceived as appealing more to males. However, in our study it is important to note that use, especially in terms of experimentation, was reported by female respondents, and females were very aware of pouches as a result.

Negative health impacts of using pouches were commonly reported, both from personal use as well as from episodes involving other pupils. Of particular concern were the reports of young people being violently sick, passing out and requiring medical attention. Even though the majority of cases reported in this study were related to a

burning or painful sensation in the gum or mouth, especially during first use, some young people persevered until they were able to tolerate these effects. Similarly, the fatalistic and nihilistic perception that local damage to the gum or mouth was unimportant, and was preferable to lung damage or compromised lung function, even if an individual is still addicted to nicotine and may also be using other NNP products, needs to be addressed in future public health messaging, as longer-term adverse health outcomes are being reported [1, 16, 17].

The research was conducted at the same time as the introduction of the Tobacco and Vapes Bill in the UK parliament. At the time of writing this article, this bill is at the committee stage in the House of Lords [31]. This bill includes potential legislation aimed at the supply of tobacco, vapes and other nicotine products, including provision to: prohibit the sale of tobacco products to people born on or after 1 January 2009; specify product and information requirements in relation to tobacco, vapes and other nicotine products; control the advertising and promotion of tobacco, vapes and other products; and extend smoke-free places, vape-free places and heated tobacco-free places. The ban on the sale of disposable vapes came into effect on 1 June 2025. The pupils had limited awareness of the forthcoming legislation, but although there was no consensus, the view was expressed that the use of nicotine pouches may increase among young people as a result of these measures. Certainly, at present it is difficult to see how the use of pouches, currently unregulated, would decrease among young people if smoking and vaping are subject to further regulation, given that the pupils in school spoke positively about the ease and discretion with which they can be used. As other research has identified, close monitoring on the prevalence and use of these products among young people is becoming increasingly important. Future public health messaging may have to consider the negative health impacts on youths of using pouches and indeed nicotine, although the Tobacco and Vapes Bill, which aims to restrict the sale of nicotine pouches to individuals under the age of 18 years, and restrict their marketing, display and packaging, should address some of these issues if and when it is enacted.

As far as the authors are aware, this is the first qualitative study to explore the views of those aged 14–16 years with regards to awareness, access and use of nicotine pouches in the UK. Study strengths include basing the design on the DISPLAY study, the involvement of young people from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, residing in areas of differing levels or urbanity (and therefore varying retail environments), and facilitating separate groups of males and females, to allow the detailed exploration of responses by gender. However, the study has several limitations.

As it is a qualitative study, participants were not recruited to be representative of young people in the UK and so our findings may not be generalisable. Fully briefed members of teaching staff within the schools helped recruit participants based on their vaping status (known vapers or ex-vapers or those with vaping friends), and so it is likely that the participants would be more knowledgeable about other NNPs, including pouches. Also, most of the discussion in the focus groups centred on vapes and vaping products, given that the reported use of vapes was higher among pupils and the high awareness of use

within school reported by teaching staff. Despite this, young people were able to discuss nicotine pouches in terms of knowledge and awareness, access, marketing and use in a way that they could not in relation to, for example, heated tobacco, which was dismissed as something of interest to older people only.

CONCLUSION

The findings from this qualitative study with school pupils aged 14–16 years demonstrate that young people possess knowledge and high awareness of nicotine pouches, and experimental use is also common. More regular, sustained use was also reported, particularly among older male pupils, who liked the convenience and discreet nature of the product. Adverse health reactions were reported, which are of some concern if the appeal and use of pouches become more widespread among young people. School staff may require additional training to ensure awareness of the use and potential negative health impacts of these products. The Tobacco and Vapes Bill aims to restrict the sale of nicotine pouches to individuals under the age of 18 years in the UK and restrict the way they are marketed, displayed and packaged. However, it is still not known if and when the regulations specified in the bill will come into force. Strict enforcement of sales to young people in tandem with further regulation on price, flavours and strength of the products is necessary to protect young people in the future. Measures may also have to be considered to protect young people if there is a delay to the introduction of the legislation. Further research is needed to monitor and evaluate the availability, price, marketing and use of pouches and other NNPs in young people in what is a continually evolving environment.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Andy MacGregor: Conceptualization; Methodology; Supervision; Writing—original draft; Writing—review & editing; Investigation; Formal analysis; Project administration; Funding acquisition. **Jessica Shields:** Investigation; Formal analysis; Writing—original draft. **Asiya Hamid:** Investigation; Writing—original draft; Formal analysis; Supervision. **Eleanor Holman:** Investigation; Writing—review & editing. **Hannah Biggs:** Writing—review & editing. **Sarah Minty:** Investigation; Writing—review & editing. **Jamie Pearce:** Conceptualization; Writing—review & editing; Funding acquisition; Writing—original draft. **Allison Ford:** Conceptualization; Supervision; Funding acquisition; Writing—original draft; Writing—review & editing.

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DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

None.

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