Reviewer’s report

Title: Snus user identity and addiction - a Swedish focus group study on adolescents

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Reviewer: Brent Caldwell

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Snus user identity and addiction – a Swedish focus group study on adolescents.

This is a qualitative study of the experience of snus use by 27 adolescent students at technical colleges in Sweden. The students were interviewed in five focus groups, with four to six students per group. Four groups were composed of boys and one of girls. The aim of the study was stated as “to explore adolescents’ views on themselves as snus users, including attitudes and circumstances behind the process of stating to use snus”. The authors identified eight categories, and three themes. These themes and categories could be useful for the development of strategies to prevent the uptake of snus, and to help adolescents who have already taken up the habit. However, there are a number of limitations to the study design, and the way it is reported.

Major compulsory revisions

1. The manuscript does not describe the eight categories, but does give a detailed discussion of the themes.

2. The manuscript gives an interesting account of the thoughts of adolescent snus users about why they started using snus, and why they continue using snus. However, as far as I can tell, the manuscript does not cast any new light on the subject. The experiences of the participants in the study mirror those of nicotine dependent people all around the world: initiation is influenced by family and social influences, and the development of an ‘adult’ identity, which quickly turns into a nicotine addiction which prevents users from quitting. The literature already shows that snus is a rewarding and addictive method of nicotine administration, just like smoking, and therefore it is hardly surprising that the factors that facilitate the initiation of snus use and maintenance, are no different to those involved in the initiation and maintenance of smoking (which are well known, and have already been published). The description of the three themes is simply an illustration of the well-known processes involved in the development of a nicotine addiction: the initiation at a young age due to social influences; the maintenance of use despite initial aversive side-effects because of social pressure, the development of tolerance to those side-effects, and the onset of negative reinforcement through experience of withdrawal symptoms.

3. The external validity/transferability of the study may be seriously limited by the fact that the subjects were recruited by the school nurse, and that only technical
schools were enlisted. Although the manuscript describes the inclusion/exclusion criteria, it does not say what guidance was given to help the school nurses decide which students to ask to take part. How did school nurses know which students use snus? What guidance was given to the nurses to help them invite a broad range of snus users, to ensure that a wide variety of views would be raised in the focus groups? How many of the subjects knew each other, and were many of them were from the same circle of friends? How representative were their views? Are adolescents snus users in technical schools, representative of snus users in the general adolescent school population? I would imagine that technical school students would be very different from students at more academic schools?

4. In my opinion the organisation of the flow of ideas in the manuscript could be improved. Many aspects of the three themes overlapped, which gave rise to much repetition. Perhaps the paper could be organised around the eight categories, which should lead to less repetition? Graneheim and Lundman explain that qualitative content analysis should produce categories that are internally homogenous and externally heterogenous; and although themes can cross several categories, items in one category should be unique to that category, and not also be contained in a separate category. A focus on categories may help reduce the repetition in the manuscript.

5. Perhaps some of this repetition also derives from the fact that the aim of the study was not well described. The aim was very broad ‘to examine what students felt about their snus use, and why they started using snus’, but the focus groups examined an even wider topic – the factors that maintained and facilitated the use of snus.

6. The grammar of the manuscript made it hard for me to try to make sense of some of it. There were frequent changes of tense mid-sentence. Often it was unclear what the object of a verb was. An example of the lack of proof-reading is the sentence in the third paragraph under the heading “Circumstances pertaining to snus debut”: “You used snus to impress, be tough, cool och super, . . .”

7. The authors do not discuss the limitations of their study.

I would recommend that the authors consider whether they recruited a sufficiently representative sample of Swedish adolescent snus users. If the authors think they have, then I would recommend that they re-analyse the data, and identify themes and/or categories which can be described in a less repetitive manner.

The subsequent manuscript should be proof-read for grammar and spelling. Also, the authors should report what participants thought could help prevent the uptake of snus among adolescents.

**Level of interest:** An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests
Quality of written English: Not suitable for publication unless extensively edited

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:
I declare that I have no competing interests