01/30/24; Living in Zyn

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

SCORING IN <KPM\_KPM\_2216\_01001\_Unsettled\_\_a\_\_APM-08>

SEAN RAMESWARAM (host): There’s a new threat to American children.

LAURA BULLARD (fact checker): Uh, Sean …

HAUNTING SCORING OUT

LAURA : … It’s not that new.

SEAN: Oh, uhh … okay.

SCORING IN <KPM\_KPM\_2216\_01001\_Unsettled\_\_a\_\_APM-08>

SEAN: There is a threat to American children. It’s a new tobacco product.

HAUNTING SCORING OUT

LAURA: Well, the product has nicotine, which comes from tobacco leaf, but there's no tobacco leaf in this product.

SEAN RAMESWARAM (host): Oh. <exhales> Okay.

SCORING IN <KPM\_KPM\_2216\_01001\_Unsettled\_\_a\_\_APM-08>

SEAN: There is a threat to American children. It’s a new *nicotine* product.

LAURA: Not new!

SEAN: Maybe you’ve heard of it or even seen it behind the counter at your local gas station. It’s called Zine!

LAURA: It’s, it’s called Zyn. Z-Y-N, Zyn!

SEAN: And it’s got politicians on edge.

LAURA: Definitely *some* politicians.

SEAN: We’re gonna *Zynvestiage* the culture war over these nicotine pouches on *Today, Explained.*

SCORING OUT

LAURA: Shame on you, Sean.

[THEME]

SEAN: Rameswaram. Here with David Weigel who does not write about nicotine products for *Semafor*. He writes about national politics in the United States. But he recently wrote about the intersection of the two, so we started with the essentials: What is Zyn?   
DAVID WEIGEL (POLITICAL REPORTER, SEMAFOR): Zyn has been around for ten years, the brand itself. You have seen in your local gas station or wherever you pick up tobacco products or nicotine products. You see cigarettes, you see stuff in chew, you see gum, and you see these pouches, which are little containers of nicotine, two grams, three gram, six grams, that you put above your upper lip or below your lower lip that you put it in your mouth and they dissolve. This has been around for a while. there's lots of nicknames for people who've discovered this product and see it as just a incredible way to enhance your mind to to connect with your nervous system, to get energized, middle of the day without the calories of coffee or the cancer risk of cigarettes. It's got both of those. It had a pretty good reputation in the nicotine enjoyer community. And then Chuck Schumer came in.

SEAN: And why is it that Chuck Schumer came in? Why is this something that he's taking on?

DAVID: Schumer has done this many times. Maybe before he was Senate majority leader. He was a congressman from New York with a very good sense of what would get attention and what people might think was a threat to their children.

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*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZoS66qJMy9o)*> CBS NEW YORK ANCHOR: Senator Chuck Schumer is taking one an energy drink backed by popular youtube stars…*

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.cbsnews.com/miami/live/#x)*> SENATOR CHUCK SCHUMER (D-NY): And the problem here is that the product has so much caffeine in it that it puts red bull to shame.*

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t99GmgBN6mw)*> LINEWSTONIGHT, NYIT LI NEWS TONIGHT ANCHOR: A US senator is calling for the ban of a synthetic drug used by young people for a cocaine like high.*

*SEN. SCHUMER: these are very dangerous drugs and they call them bath salts but they’re not. It’s sort of everyone winking at each other. They oughta be abolished.*

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.cbsnews.com/newyork/news/schumer-ban-dangerous-yoga-mat-chemical-from-foods/)*> CBSNEWYORK ANCHOR: Senator Schumer says somehow this industrial chemical safely used in shoes and yoga mats found its way into food products.*

*SEN. SCHUMER: We want it banned in all foods, they want to keep putting it in yoga mats and shoes, not too many people eat those so it’s ok.*

SCORING OUT

DAVID: Schumer has been here before, warning about the risk of flavored cigarets, of clove cigarets, flavored vapes, just ways in which nicotine might be marketed to minors. And that's what he thought might be happening with zyn,

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qYeXxqOgx_Y)*> SEN. SCHUMER: kids know what ZYN is. Their parents don’t. There are also ZYNfluencers who’ve made nicotine pouches a part of their online personalities.*

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.tiktok.com/@wholldpdrkn/video/7306567466900213038?q=zyn&t=1706593427599)*> TIKTOK, WHOLLDPDRKN: These things get you laser focused, right. You’re buzzing off your mind. To freaking buttery smooth Zynbabwe. The potential’s limitless. You need to cut, maybe you’re just trying to lose weight or something, pop a Zynbabwe. Or you know if you just wanna enjoy one. Let’s go baby!*

DAVID: The company is not is not paying them to do this. They can't control exactly how enthusiastic people are about their products. But that was Schumer's idea here is that, hey, there's a new product. You might not even be aware of it, but your kid certainly is.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xO1MLMHKqqc)*> SEN. SCHUMER: So today I'm delivering a warning to parents, because these nicotine pouches seem to lock their sites on young kids, teenagers and even lower. And then use the social media to hook’em.*

DAVID: Schumer didn't come out of the gate and say, there's this product. I'm going to ban it. He said that you should be worried about this. And just by saying that people, parents especially should be worried. He woke up a lot of angry people.

SEAN: Who's angry?

DAVID: The members of the nation of Zynbabwe.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/shorts/rMlSGV0UNYo)*> @fullsendpodcastclips: Little Zynbabwe? <laughs>*

DAVID: which is one term I discovered as I reached out to people who either use it or just believe that it should be available as a product.

*<CLIP> TIK TOK, feelerangui: Sup boyz? You can call me king of Zynbabwe or Tucker Carlzyn’s cousin.*

DAVID: Hundreds of millions of these are sold across the country according to their stats. it's it's a large group of people who take this nicotine product, a couple times a day. And I met some, the ones that I met who were more enthusiastic for the product, were angry generally were in the conservative movement. But they'll point to people who do not care about politics, people who just are your contractor. You've got a job where you need a pep of energy in the middle of the day, or you used to smoke and you miss. You missed the kick. You're just going to take this, no harm nicotine pouch. You're not even spitting it into a spittoon or something gross. But let's call it, like a blue collar nicotine habit. I could, I could say, and that's how a lot of the fans of Zyn who love it for not just the the products and the nicotine for a cultural reason. That's one thing they'll say about it, is that, hey, all we're trying to do here is enjoy a drug. Yes, a controlled substance, sure, but one that just gives you some energy. And it's been around for hundreds of years Nicotine. Why are we having our rights restricted while the government, Chuck Schumer in particular, are trying to make it easier to buy marijuana? And when it comes to flavors, okay, no, it's not advertised to to minors, but you can go into a dispensary and buy flavored marijuana edible products. Why can't you buy a flavored nicotine product? That's kind of why it became a burgeoning culture war issue.

SEAN: And as Schumer being met with opposition in Washington itself? Is Marjorie Taylor Greene, um, like, you know, is she Zyning?

DAVID: She's not talked a lot about her own Zyn habits, and she talks about her CrossFit- less about what a role she might take.

SEAN: My apologies.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U0Atpt8B3sY)*> REP. MARJORIE TAYLOR GREENE: Looks like the average troll in my Twitter feed, so I don’t really care.*

DAVID: But you bring up a good point that the first reaction to Schumer came from some of the more media savvy members of the Republican conference in the House, a little bit in the Senate, most of the House, Marjorie Taylor Greene saying that this is leading to Zyninsurrection. But also, I thought more significantly, Richard Hudson, who chairs the National Republican Congressional Campaign Committee and this is the group that is tasked with, keeping a Republican majority in place, he immediately posed with a pack of in in hunting gear, talking about how he was going to protect this stuff. And Republicans like Hudson said, okay, Democrats just stumbled into a very stupid cultural war issue for them.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sukzhSpvYos)*> REP MICHAEL WALTZ (R- FL): If Schumer’s so worried about teenagers, why don’t you close the border? 110,000 per year of americans, and our fellow citizens, and many of them teenagers are dying of fentanyl overdoses.*

DAVID: That was sort of the Republicans response to Schumer.

SEAN: Hmm, and Democrats are they uniformly behind this?

DAVID: No, they are not uniformly at all. The first Democrat to comment on it was John Fetterman from Pennsylvania, who was stopped in the hallway and said:

*<*[*CLIP*](https://x.com/townhallcom/status/1750622486675267949?s=20)*> SENATOR JOHN FETTERMAN (D-PA): I’m going to air on the side of more freedom and personal choices on those sorts of things. And I made that same argument when I wanted to legalize marijuana. And I think there’s, there’s bigger issues to address than that product.*

DAVID: And other Democrats didn't really jump on board. And that itself is significant when there have been crackdowns on nicotine and advertising of nicotine in the past, the recent past, really starting in the 80s, in the 90s, it was popular. You didn't have that many Republicans saying, we're on board with wanting the Philip Morris to make more money selling tobacco products. This was more unpopular. And I think there are cross-currents I don't think Democrats were even aware of.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zP0Cc94Nw8g)*> Mike's Tom MacDonald Reviews, Libs Want to Take Your Zyn!*

*marijuana is left coded. Broadly speaking, it’s a left wing thing. And broadly speaking nicotine is a right wing thing. And chuck schumer supports the left wing substance. And the left wing substance makes you kind of dumb and lazy and passive. And the right wing substance makes you more alert.   
  
<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r7t_GYRp-_4)*> TUCKER CARLSON: Nicotine frees your mind, marijuana makes you compliant*

*Carlson: They hate nicotine. They love THC. They’re promoting weed to your children, but they’re not letting you use tobacco or even non-tobacco nicotine delivery devices which don’t cause cancer. Why do they hate nicotine?*

DAVID: I mean, they don't really connect it to the Panera Lemonade thing. <laughs>. But there's there's a lot of outrage about that right now about the idea of people having too much of a energizing drug coursing through their veins. And the people I talked to said, ‘Yeah, we're we we're for this. And Democrats are against it because they hate the idea of people being independent, energized, and breaking free of their cultural programming.’ That was their take one that I really think surprised Schumer.

SEAN: Mmm. I mean, does Chuck Schumer have a case here that kids are out there committing, you know, venial Zyns?

DAVID: He didn't make that strong of a case. Not that I'm judging every Chuck Schumer press conferences. His theory is that, yes, if you advertise a product with flavors, it's going to appeal to kids. It's going to look cool to kids, they're going to use it. I don't think that's crazy. I think that that's true of many products. That's true of a lot of sugary things that are bad for you. Even though you can't walk into a dispensary without an ID, you can drive through LA and see billboards advertising what sounds like really good tasting edibles, right? So this is this is an issue that the government does have the power to regulate, because, one of the first things Barack Obama did as president was signed legislation giving the FDA more power to regulate, the nicotine industry, to investigate how it advertises, that has led to different waves of crackdowns and different waves of popular nicotine products. And this has gone in two directions, right? This is gone in the Mike Bloomberg direction to … ten years ago. If you were at CPAC, a conservative conference, you could see Sarah Palin hold a giant Big Gulp full of soda as a protest against Mike Bloomberg trying to regulate, caffeine products and sugary drinks in New York. Today you can see people saying, you're not going to take my Zyn away from me as a different kind of protest. One is a more libertarian the government should not be telling anyone what they should consume. And the other is a little more, I'd say, a little more traditionally conservative. The government, if it if there's any role whatsoever, it's in making society a little bit better collectively through police power, so why is it focused on nicotine and not weed?

SEAN: Mm. Is there a chance that this Schumer request that the FDA do something about this goes anywhere? Or is this going to be DOA at the FDA?

DAVID: So the FDA might act on what Schumer did. Certainly there's not going to be legislation about this. I do think there was enough of a public backlash, enough of a sense that you were irritating not just conservatives, but maybe some independent voters who don't care about politics but want to be left alone when it comes to nicotine products. I think that might put some fear in Democrats before they issue legislation.

SCORING IN <Stone Sober (hip hop instrumental, melodic, steady)-01>

DAVID: And certainly that, that was the tone I got when I talked to conservatives who were working in the space that Democrats should have learned in 2016, when the Obama administration was cracking down on flavored vapes. They should have learned from 2020, when Trump almost did, his Trump's FDA was thinking about it is actually a reason why Scott Gottlieb Gottlieb, who's now a very well known sort of Covid expert, why he left the FDA, They, think, look, we've proven if you mess with nicotine users that guys are blowing smoke everywhere and getting a room full of it, but people who just want to be left alone with your nicotine, you're going to pay a political price. That was a response, from the last couple attempts, to regulate any of these products.

SCORING BUMP

SEAN: You can read David Weigel at Semafor dot com.

When we’re back on *Today*, *Explained* there will be a doctor in the house.

[BREAK]

*<CLIP> VINTAGE CIGARETTE AD:   
 VOICE ACTOR: Come to where the flavor is. Come to …*

*ROBOT: ZYN*  
 *VOICE ACTOR:* … *County.*

SEAN: *Today, Explained* is back. And we’re joined by Dr. Keren Landman, health writer at Vox. Keren, you’re writing about Zyn. We’re talking about Zyn. What would you call that? That’s like?

KEREN LANDMAN, MD (SENIOR REPORTER, VOX): Zynergy, I think. Zynergy. Definitely Zynergy or Zymbiosis?

SEAN: <chortles> Very nice. We spoke to David Weigel about the politics of Zyn, the nation of Zynbabwe; but we wanted to come to you for some of the science. How do these nicotine pouches work when you wedge one in the upper or lower decky of your mouthpiece?

KEREN: The way this works is basically there's this little pouch made of this permeable membrane, and that can be like an organic cellulose compounds, and it might be made of something else, but basically it's just something through which the nicotine can leach out and get absorbed into the tissue of your gum or the tissue of your lip when you hold it sort of tucked up in there for minutes to an hour or so. From there, it causes all the effects that nicotine causes. It, often makes people feel a little bit of a buzz, a little bit more energetic, a little bit more focused, and like, kind of like a really big cup of coffee will do it also raise your blood pressure a little bit, raise your heart rate a little bit, and, just kind of make you feel a little bit high. And, so people like it for that reason.

SEAN: Obviously, this is a sort of modern cigarette alternative. How does it compare to a cigarette? How much nicotine is in a cigarette versus a Zyn pouch, or a similar product from another leading supplier?

KEREN: A cigarette delivers about a milligram of nicotine, even though it contains a lot more of it, the amount that you actually end up taking in when you're smoking a cigarette is about a milligram of nicotine. These pouches, depending on the brand and the formulation, contain anywhere between one milligram per pouch to like 12mg per pouch.

SEAN: Holy smokes. But of course, we should point out here that unlike smoking half a pack of cigarettes, when you drop a Zyn pouch or some other pouch into your mouth, into your upper or lower deck, whatever it might be, you're not getting all those chemicals and all that smoke and all that tobacco?

KEREN: Yeah, that's, that's kind of the point. I will say a lot of what we know about nicotine, we know from studies of tobacco, and it's really sometimes hard for people to disentangle the concept of nicotine without tobacco in their minds. But that's really what we are talking about when we're talking about a nicotine pouch. We're talking about one of the most active, most addictive ingredients, the most addictive ingredient in tobacco without the rest of tobacco. And that's really, really important for talking about its health effects and for talking about its addictive potential.

SEAN: I think we've kind of touched on how a nicotine pouch compares to ye old cigarette Keren, but, but how do these pouches compare to a vape?

KEREN: Not to overstate the obvious, but these go in between your lip and gum, and so the nicotine that you absorb from them, you absorb slowly over time into your bloodstream. Whereas when you inhale, the smoke from a vape, that smoke delivers the nicotine much more quickly and sort of a large dose to the tiny little capillaries in your lungs. And so it gets absorbed into your bloodstream a lot more quickly. So your bloodstream level of nicotine goes from 0 to 60 when you take a hit off a vape, where it increases much more slowly when you are using a nicotine pouch.

SEAN: Okay.

KEREN: And when it comes to creating addiction, that actually makes pouches have a relatively lower addictive potential than vapes do.

SEAN: Huh?

KEREN: Theoretically.

SEAN: Okay, so what I'm getting from you is not as addictive as vapes, not as unhealthy as cigarettes, but they're going to make you feel energized and a little awake. And, maybe you'll have some sort of zesty, fruity, who knows what sensation in your mouth there.   
  
KEREN: <laughs>   
  
SEAN: Um, what's the downside Keren?

KEREN: Yeah. What could be bad, right? It actually sounds great. I feel really weird saying this because so much public health communication around this starts by saying no tobacco product is safe, especially for youth. I want to make a caveat here. Nicotine pouches have really only been used by large numbers of people for a few years, right? They only came on the market in Europe in, like, around 2009. Slow rollout, narrow markets in the United States in 2014. And then like more expanded roll out in 2019. Right? So it's really only been a few years that we've seen these used in the U.S. broadly before that in Europe. The point is, we don't have tons and tons of long term data about nicotine pouches.

SEAN: Mmm.

KEREN: Either about their effects on health or about how easy it is to get addicted to them. So that's a really important caveat here, because, you know, we have a lot of examples of things that we thought were fine early on because we didn't have long term data on them. And then later we learned through these things that we didn't really predict. So I think that's really important to keep in mind. But that said, you know, the main health effects that cigarettes seem to have, namely cancer causing, direct damage to the lung tissue from the smoke, and, brain effects, these things do not seem to happen when it comes to nicotine pouches.

SEAN: Hm! It seems like there is a fair concern out there that this is going to be a very attractive product to young people. There are untold reasons why you might not want your teenager addicted to Zyn or any other nicotine pouches. Do we have any idea how many young people are using this product Karen?

KEREN: So the latest data we have suggests about 1.5% of youth have used a nicotine pouch sometime in the last month.  
  
SEAN: Hm!

KEREN: And that's really a relatively small number compared to the number that vape, the number that smoke cigarettes, although those have also been on the downturn lately. So, I mean, it's a relatively recent product in the United States. And I think it's reasonable to expect that, especially after all of this media coverage, we're gonna see more kids trying us more and that percentage go up.

SEAN: Are you saying, Keren, that there's a chance that by, by alerting the media to the, the Zyn danger out there, Chuck Schumer maybe just got more people to try this product?

KEREN: You said that, not me. Why are you saying that?   
  
SEAN: <laughs>   
  
KEREN: Um, no, I mean, I think there is something to media coverage of a moral panic perhaps contributing to, awareness and youth. But I also think that this is something that's already happening on the TikToks, and that's where the youth are really paying attention.

SEAN: Is this starting to feel cyclical to you, Karen, that every, I don't know, other leap year or so there's some moral panic over the tobacco product du jour? It feels like seven, six years ago, maybe eight. We were scared about JUUL and now we're scared about Zyn. And surely there'll be some new, you know, technological development in a few years. And then maybe a few years after that, Chuck Schumer will be scared about that if he's still around, which he'll probably will be.

KEREN: It is a very familiar pattern here, right? Like the …

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q3D8670smTI)*> Springfield, USA, The Simpsons: Won't somebody please think of the children?*

KEREN: … kind of tone to all of this? And I, I get it like there is some reason to be concerned that getting people hooked on something while their brain is not done developing is bad for their brains. It's bad for, you know, their likelihood of getting addicted to things, period. It's bad for brain development. I mean, I want to be clear, the data on that is not rock solid. You know, these are hard things to prove because so many other things affect the way people's brains developed. And sometimes the thing that makes a kid able or likely to cram their mouth full of nicotine pouches is itself the thing that's going to make them likely to do other risky things, right? But anyway, I guess there's there's enough other data out there from animals and from laboratory science to suggest that we shouldn't, like, kids should not be getting addicted to stuff. It's not great for them to get addicted to stuff. It teaches them something that they then go on to apply in other negative ways in their lives. But at the same time, the way we talk about these things affects what kids do and don't want to do, right? And if we talk about them like they are, agents of destruction and like they're bad, that, that makes it a rebellion to use it. And, and it just has a really different impact on, on the way these things figure into youth culture and into culture as a whole. SCORING IN <KPM\_KPMS\_0060\_00801\_Escapism\_\_b\_\_APM>

KEREN: I also do want to say when we're talking about harms, what are we comparing the agent of those harms to? A lot of times we're thinking about the kids, but we should also be thinking about adults and the people who are really having a tough time coming off of cigarette addiction and are, you know, are having trouble getting a prescription for the drugs that help them do that or using the lozenges or the gums that are FDA approved for helping them do that and Zyn hasn't been studied the way nicotine gum and nicotine lozenges have been studied, but they could help people do some of the same stuff those products help people do, namely quit cigarettes. And that is, ultimately a good thing. That is harm reduction, baby! So, there is some people that these products will really help. You know, creating a moral panic around them. And as much as it might reduce access to these things for the people who could actually really have true health benefits from them, I think we need to think about how we're communicating and talking about these things.

SCORING BUMP  
  
SEAN: Dr. Keren Landman. Vox dot com. Our show today was produced by Hady Mawajdeh. We were edited by Amina Al-Sadi, fact checked by Laura Bullard and Kim Eggleston. Thanks, Kim! We were mixed by Patrick Boyd this time around at *Today, Explained*.

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]