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Social media reshaping research on substance use



Reddit and TikTok – with help of AI – offer unprecedented insights

Layla Bouzoubaa Drexel University | THE CONVERSATION

When you think of tools for studying substance use and addiction, a social media site like Reddit, TikTok or YouTube probably isn't the first thing that comes to mind. Yet the stories shared on social media platforms are offering unprecedented insights into the world of substance use. • In the past, researchers studying peoples' experiences with addiction relied mostly on clinical observations and self-reported surveys. But only about 5% of people diagnosed with a substance use disorder seek formal treatment. They are only a small sliver of the population who have a substance use disorder – and until recently, there has been no straightforward way to capture the experiences of the other 95%.

Today, millions of people openly discuss their experiences with drugs online, creating a vast collection of raw narratives about drug use. As a doctoral student in information science with a background in public health, I use this material to better understand how people who use drugs describe their lives and make sense of their experiences, especially when it comes to stigma.

These online conversations are reshaping how researchers think about substance use, addiction and recovery. Advances in artificial intelligence are helping make sense of these conversations at a scale that wasn't possible before.

The hidden population

The vast majority of people diagnosed with a substance use disorder address the issue infor-

mally – seeking support from their community, friends or family, self-medicating or doing nothing at all. But some choose to post about their drug use in dedicated online communities, such as group forums, often with a level of candor that would be difficult to capture in clinical interviews.

Their social media posts offer a window into real-time, unscripted conversations about substance use. For example, Reddit, which is comprised of topical communities called subreddits, contains over 150 interconnected communities dedicated to various aspects of substance use.

In 2024, my colleagues and I analyzed how participants in drug-related forums on Reddit connect and interact. We found that they focused on the chemistry and pharmacology of substances,

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GETTY IMAGES

King salmon rebound in Great Lakes

Keith Matheny

Detroit Free Press
USA TODAY NETWORK

There's a reason why Chinook salmon are also known as king salmon.

"They put up an incredible fight," said Dennis Eade, a tournament fisher for decades up and down Lake Michigan from his home in Holland.

"It's so intense that even the last 20 yards behind the boat is the most precarious time to land them. They are notorious for jumping and spitting that lure right behind the boat. It's extremely exciting, and you are totally worn out. It takes typically 20 minutes to fight a salmon of over 15 pounds and get it into the boat. They provide a phenomenal experience."

Eade is the executive director of the nonprofit Michigan Steelhead and Salmon Fishermen's Association, an anglers group that works with the Michigan Department of Natural Resources and the state Legislature on issues protecting and promoting a thriving Great Lakes fishery.

A recent study commissioned by the Great Lakes Fishery Commission found sportfishing contributes \$5.1 billion in economic impact to the Great Lakes region. Eade estimated that "at least a third to a half" of that amount is driven by salmon and steelhead fishing.

It's a fishery that's seen hard times in the not-too-distant past. In 2015, at a time of record-low Great Lakes water levels, Chinook salmon populations fell off a cliff – down 75% from their highs of just three years earlier. A drop in populations of the Chinook's primary prey fish, alewives, was a big contributor. Low water levels and high water temperatures in the streams the salmon use to spawn were factors as

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Ukraine to export arms, cashing in on war tech

Max Hunder
REUTERS

KYIV – Ukraine is opening up exports of its domestically produced weapons, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said, a way for Kyiv to cash in on a wartime technological arms race against Russia to generate badly needed funds.

The four-year war has fueled a boom in the defense sector, with industry associations estimating Ukraine has more than a thousand arms and military equipment manufacturers, most of them small, privately owned companies founded after Russia's 2022 invasion.

As companies scrambled to produce new weapons systems and ways to counter them, the defense sector has grown quicker than the government's



A Ukrainian service member operates a drone Oct. 5, 2025, during a drone racing competition, which simulates combat conditions, in Kamianets-Podilskyi, Ukraine.

YURIY DYACHYSHYN/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

ability to buy its products, leading Kyiv to seek money from its allies to help fund domestic purchases.

Zelenskyy said 10 "export centers" for Ukrainian weapons would be opened in 2026 across Europe, adding that combat drones, also known as unmanned aerial vehicles, would be among the exports.

"Today, Europe's security is built on technology and drones," Zelenskyy said Feb. 8. "All of this will be based largely on Ukrainian technology and Ukrainian specialists."

Ukraine's allies have expressed interest in learning from its wartime experience and technological innovation to bolster their own forces, many of them weakened by decades of low defense spending.

Since the start of the war, Ukrainian

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