

ANALYSIS OF YOUTH SELF-HARM PROFILES AND NARRATIVES ON TWITTER AND TIKTOK

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Abstract—The analysis of self-harm-related content on social media provides insight into risk dynamics and dissemination patterns within digital environments. This study investigates the presence and characteristics of users on Twitter and TikTok who post content associated with self-harming behaviors, covering the period from November 2022 to June 2023. A total of 250,000 tweets from 66,732 unique users were collected using the hashtags #shtwt, #ouchietwt, #sefharm, and #goretwt, with the analysis focusing on the first 1,000 tweets of the sample. A TikTok profile was created to retrieve information and verify post recommended by the platform 875 posts containing specific hashtags (#Catscratchtw, #Scars, #Cuttwt, #Beanstwt, #X_sh, #Sh, #Babycuts, #Shscars, #Styrofoam) from January to April 2024. Of these, 102 posts (11.65%) were directly related to self-harm, and 400 posts were subjected to manual analysis. User profiles were classified based on account status, inferred gender, and predominant language. Significant differences were observed across nearly all profile variables. The findings reveal platform-specific user profiles and behavioral dynamics, highlighting distinct risks for prevention, monitoring, and intervention strategies.

Keywords— Narratives, Non-Suicidal Self-Injury [NSSI], Social media, TikTok, Twitter, Young people's.

I. INTRODUCTION

Nonsuicidal self-injury (NSSI) is conceptualized as a deliberate behavior that involves the infliction of physical harm in the absence of suicidal intent, primarily serving as a strategy for emotional regulation in the face of intense psychological distress (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2022). Such behaviors provide temporary relief from emotional pain (Nock, 2010), offering a momentary sense of control over psychological discomfort (APA, 2022). NSSI may manifest through a variety of methods, including cutting, burning, or other forms of self-inflicted injury. The etiology of this behavior is multifactorial, encompassing interpersonal difficulties, depressive and anxiety symptoms, trauma exposure, experiences of victimization, substance misuse, and different personality disorders, among other contributing factors (Valencia-Agudo et al., 2018).

Over the past decade, a significant increase in the prevalence of NSSI has been documented, particularly among adolescents and young adults. Several international organizations have expressed concern regarding the rising incidence of self-injurious behaviors among minors. UNICEF (2024, 2025) has underscored the gravity of the situation and, in collaboration with the World Health Organization (WHO), has issued a set of guidelines aimed at promoting adolescent mental health and mitigating self-harm (World Health Organization & UNICEF, 2021). Furthermore, the Lancet Commission on Self-Harm Report (2024) estimates that approximately 14 million episodes of self-injury occur annually on a global scale, a figure that highlights the urgency and public health relevance of this phenomenon.

In addition to these epidemiological trends, young people increasingly turn to social media platforms such as TikTok and X (formerly Twitter) as spaces for interaction and sources of support. However, these interactions may also contribute to the normalization and reinforcement of self-injurious behaviors (Martínez-Pastor, Atauri-Mezquida, Nicolás-Ojeda, & Blanco-Ruiz, 2023; Alhassan, Inuwa-Dutse, Bello, & Pennington, 2021). While such platforms may foster isolation, they simultaneously offer meaningful channels of peer support (Martínez-Pastor et al., 2023; Hilton, 2017). Digital communities, in this sense, provide spaces where individuals who engage in self-injury may feel understood and develop a sense of belonging. Nonetheless, these same dynamics may also lead to significant risks.

Abi-Jaoude et al. (2020) documented a 15% increase in posts related to stressful situations between 2013 and 2017, noting that approximately 70% of adolescents aged 13 to 17 own a smartphone and are active on one or more social media platforms, dedicating on average more than five hours per day to their use. The validation of self-destructive behaviors, the romanticization of suffering, and constant exposure to explicit content may reinforce self-injurious practices and increase the likelihood of their repetition among young people (Atauri, Nogales, & Martínez, 2025; Khasawneh et al., 2021). This normalization not only discourages the pursuit of professional help (Susi et al., 2023), but also promotes the imitation of self-injurious behaviors, amplifying their frequency and severity (Chen et al., 2021; Memon et al., 2018). Zdanow and Wright (2012) further warn of the potential role of social media as gateways to self-injury or even suicide, due to the promotion and dissemination of related content. Additionally, the digital environment is giving rise to a new form of metalinguistic expression, characterized by a reduction in communicative depth that fosters the creation of unique codes among young people (Sabando & Rodríguez, 2019; Martínez-Pastor & Gaete Salgado, 2023; Moraleda & Martínez, 2024). This transformation in communicative practices may hinder interaction in offline contexts, fostering isolation and reducing the ability to establish meaningful connections in face-to-face settings (Nasibova, 2018).

In light of these issues, the present study seeks to identify users on Twitter (X) and TikTok who generate and consume self-injury-related content, in order to determine whether specific behavioral and interactional patterns can be observed among them. The overarching aim of this work is to analyze the digital manifestations of self-injury on Twitter (X) and TikTok, considering both the profile of users producing such content and the distinctive language employed in these posts. To achieve this, the study sets forth to identify the profile of users who generate and disseminate content related to self-injury on Twitter (X) and TikTok.

This paper is structured as follows: Section 2 presents a review of the literature; Section 3 describes the case study; Section 4 reports the findings; and Section 5 offers conclusions and directions for future research.

II. LITERATURE OVERVIEW

The proliferation of self-injury content on social media, particularly TikTok and Twitter/X, has become a serious public health concern affecting young people worldwide. Rates of self-injurious behavior among adolescents have increased exponentially over the past two decades (Martín Muñoz & Atauri-Mezquida, 2024). Social media platforms facilitate the sharing of self-injury experiences through text, images, and videos (Atauri, Nogales, & Martínez, 2025).

Empirical research demonstrates a considerable volume of self-injury content circulating on major social networking sites. On Twitter/X, a comprehensive analysis collected 32,231 tweets containing self-harm-related keywords (“selfharm,” “shtwt,” “goretwt,” and

“ouchietwt”) over a two-month period, revealing an average of 725 tweets per day published by 11,749 distinct users (Atauri-Mezquida, Nogales-González, & Martínez-Pastor, 2025). These findings highlight the limited regulation of self-injury content on X, despite the existence of policies ostensibly designed to control it. Moreover, self-injury-related content on these platforms frequently includes graphic images, detailed descriptions of methods, and the formation of communities centered on self-injurious practices. Such content ranges from explicit depictions of self-harm to more subtle references using coded language and hashtags. Research indicates a progressive increase in the prevalence of graphic self-harm imagery over time, with potentially harmful material being concentrated on platforms that provide minimal moderation, anonymity features, and simple search functions (Marchant, 2021). Young users also employ coded language to avoid detection by platforms (Brown et al., 2018; Moreno et al., 2016), including text, photographs, and videos labeled with hashtags such as “#blithe” (NSSI), “#Deb” (depression), “#ouchetwt,” or “#secretsociety123.”

This practice, referred to as *algospeak* (i.e., coded language to evade censorship), allows communities to bypass restrictions through the strategic use of hashtags and other symbolic codes, making their posts visible to peers familiar with these terms (Lorenz, 2022). Such terminology evolves continuously to avoid detection, enabling persistent communication within these online communities.

In this context, Sharma (2023) highlights concerns regarding the contagion effect of self-injury and suicide on TikTok. After analyzing 100 TikTok videos, the content was categorized as helpful advice (24%), misleading information (12%), and personal experiences (64%). The latter, being the most popular in terms of views and “likes,” underscores the contagion potential of suicide-related content on this platform. Similarly, studies by Romann et al. (2025) and Logrieco et al. (2021) raise concerns regarding TikTok’s recommendation algorithm, which records user data and generates a personalized “For You” (FYP) page. This feature suggests videos not only from followed accounts but from across the platform. Consequently, if a user accidentally views a self-injury video and subsequently searches for similar material, the algorithm will continue to recommend such content. This raises serious concerns about the algorithm’s inability to differentiate between harmless and harmful content.

Milton et al. (2023) argue that these algorithmic strategies overexpose users to emotionally harmful material, with detrimental consequences for mental health. In the same vein, Udam et al. (2024) found that young people who consume TikTok content report higher rates of self-injury compared to those primarily using other platforms. This evidence suggests that the type and manner of social media use significantly influence self-injurious behavior. Ramanan et al. (2025), however, argue that any social networking site frequented by young people poses increased risks of self-harm due to the repetitive exposure to negative content.

The Molly Rose Foundation (2025a) further asserts that social media platforms are largely incapable of detecting and removing self-injury content. Between September 2023 and April 2024, the foundation documented more than 12 million self-harm reports across Pinterest, TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, and X (12,194,588 moderation decisions). Alarming, only 2% of these decisions were related to self-injury and suicide. Pinterest and TikTok were the only platforms that removed the vast majority of content violating their

guidelines (98%), compared to others that acted in only 1% of cases. Additionally, TikTok moderation decisions were found to occur on the same day in 94.4% of cases.

However, a subsequent report by the same foundation, Suicide and self-harm content still recommended “at industrial scale” by TikTok and Instagram eight years after Molly’s death (Molly Rose Foundation, 2025b), used a simulated account of a 15-year-old girl to investigate recommended content. The findings revealed that 97% of videos on Instagram Reels and 96% on TikTok’s FYP recommended to this simulated account were categorized as harmful, including references to suicidal ideation, self-injury, and detailed methods.

III. CASE STUDY DATA

The platform X, formerly known as Twitter, is a social media network that allows users to share short messages, known as tweets, of up to 280 characters. X is widely used for breaking news, public debates, and viral trends, providing a platform for rapid communication and real-time information exchange Arimetrics (2024). The tweets were collected from November 24, 2022, to June 10, 2023. To ensure high-quality data, a regular expression was used in X’s (formerly Twitter) advanced search, specifying the keywords #: shtwt, ouchietwt, sefharm y goretwt related to self harm. This approach allowed for accurate filtering, ensuring that only the relevant tweets were retrieved for subsequent analyses. Ultimately, approximately 250,000 records were collected from 66,732 different users with a total amount of 1,798,711 likes and 196,112 retweets. Data was obtained through a personalized API. This report comprises the first 1000 tweets from the sample.

In addition, data were retrieved from TikTok through a systematic download process, through an API from January to April 2024. Data was obtained with reference to user profile created ad hoc for this project (@aiko3135) specifying the keywords #Catscratchtw, #Scars, #Cuttwt, #Beanstwt, #X_sh, #Sh, #Babycuts, #Shscars, #Styrofoam. The sample comprised a total of 875 results, of which 102 items (11.65%) were identified as being related to self-harm. Additionally, a subset of 400 TikTok posts was subjected to manual content analysis in order to examine qualitative aspects of the discourse.

The data were collected and systematically coded into a database (.sav) and an additional file (.xlsx).

IV. METHODOLOGY

A systematic review for the case of platform X, was conducted on a sample of tweets to identify patterns relevant for coding, including image content, message intent, and the presence of descriptions of injuries or implements. The data collection involved selecting tweets with the highest number of likes over a 25-week period, beginning on November 24, 2022, to ensure the inclusion of the most engaging content and facilitate a structured analysis of trends. On the other hand, a systematic review was conducted on a subset of TikTok posts to identify patterns relevant for coding, including image content, message intent, and the presence of descriptions of injuries or implements from January to April 2024. The data collection was carried out using a Python-based application, which facilitated the periodic extraction of TikTok posts tagged with hashtags associated with self-harm, ensuring consistent and structured data acquisition for subsequent analysis.

After performing a comprehensive exploratory data analysis, duplicate records were identified and removed. Necessary data transformations were applied, including the standardization of date variables and other relevant adjustments, to prepare the dataset for subsequent statistical processing (Pramanik, Samal, Sahoo& Pani, 2019).

To test the proposed hypotheses, qualitative variables were described using absolute frequencies and percentages. These measures provided a comprehensive overview of the data distribution and variability.

For inferential statistical, Chi-square test was applied to assess whether statistically significant differences exist between two proportions derived from independent populations. This test is appropriate for categorical variables with sufficiently large sample sizes. For the case where more than two proportions from independent populations, Fisher's exact test was applied to evaluate significant differences. This test is particularly suitable when sample sizes are small or expected frequencies are low.

For data interpretation, statistically significant results were denoted with an asterisk (*) for $p < 0.05$ and with two asterisks (**) for $p < 0.01$, ensuring clarity in reporting the strength of the evidence. For the statistical analysis, SPSS version 19 (<http://www-01.ibm.com/software/es/analytics/spss/>) and the R software environment (<http://cran.r-project.org/>) were employed. SPSS was primarily used for descriptive and inferential statistical procedures, while R facilitated advanced data manipulation and visualization, ensuring a comprehensive and robust analysis of the dataset.

The following objectives are:

1. *Identification of the profile of users who generate and disseminate content related to self-injury on Twitter (X) and TikTok*
2. *Differences of the profile of users who generate and disseminate content related to self-injury on Twitter (X) and TikTok*

V. RESULTS

A review study of a selected group of X's and TikTok posts was conducted to identify relevant trends for coding, including aspects related to imagery, message intent, and the presence of descriptions of wounds or instruments, among others.

A. *Identification of the profile of users who generate and disseminate content related to self-injury on Twitter (X) and TikTok*

On Twitter/X, 130 users were identified out of a total of 656 distinct accounts that had posted at least two pieces of content across different time periods. It is noteworthy that 80% of users posted only a single message during the study period, whereas 11% posted two messages. Among those who posted more than one message, 131 users (20% of the total sample analyzed) published multiple tweets during the analyzed timeframe. Within this group, 12.9% (17 users) subsequently suspended their accounts, 74.8% (98 users) did not disclose their gender, while 22.1% (29 users) self-identified as female and 8.4% (11 users) as male (see Figure 1). On the other hand, 102 accounts in TikTok were detected through the API, and an additional 298 were identified as fake accounts, resulting in a total of 400 accounts analyzed. Among these, 10 users (2.5% of the total) had been suspended, and their information was no longer accessible. In 53% of cases (212 users), the profile image depicted a real person,

whereas 44.8% (179 users) used images with an Asian-inspired aesthetic (e.g., anime or kawaii style). Regarding gender identification, 44.5% (178 users) self-identified as female, 11.5% (46 users) as male, while 41.5% (166 users) did not disclose their gender (see Fig.1).

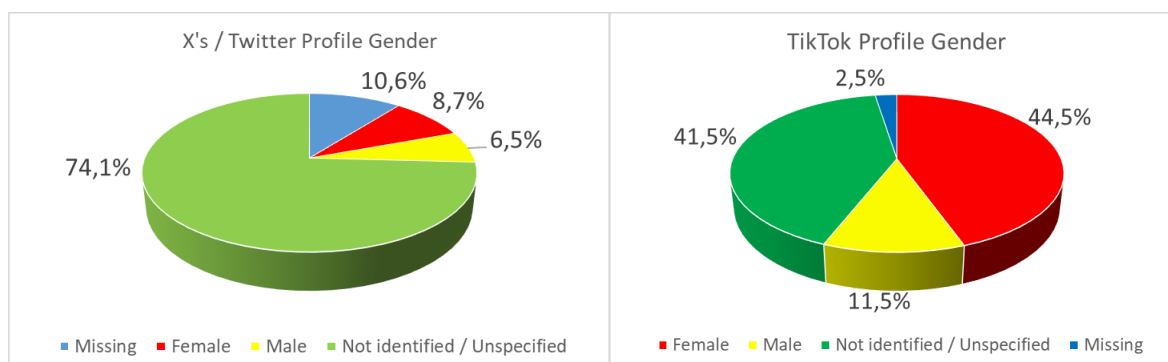


Fig. 1X's / Twitter and TikTok profile gender

Fig. 2 presents the general language of the profile description and Fig. 3 the language used in the tweets. Of all tweets coded, 69% (327 messages) were flagged as sensitive content according to the platform's API. Nearly half of the posts (47.9%, n = 227) were autobiographical in nature, written in the first person rather than in generic terms. In addition, 11.2% (53 tweets) contained references to illness, and only 4% (19 tweets) mentioned instruments used for self-injury. For TikTok users, the predominant profile language was English (52%, 208 out of 400 accounts), followed by Spanish (42.8%, 171 out of 400 accounts).

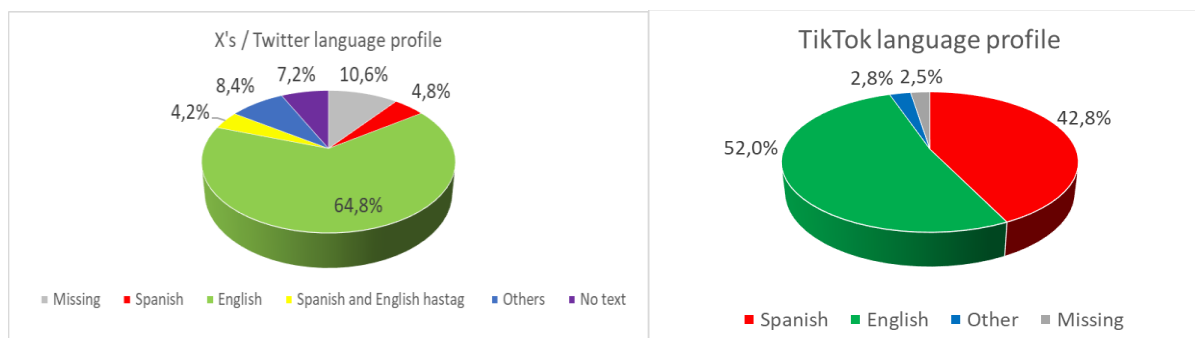


Fig. 2X's / Twitter and TikTok profile language

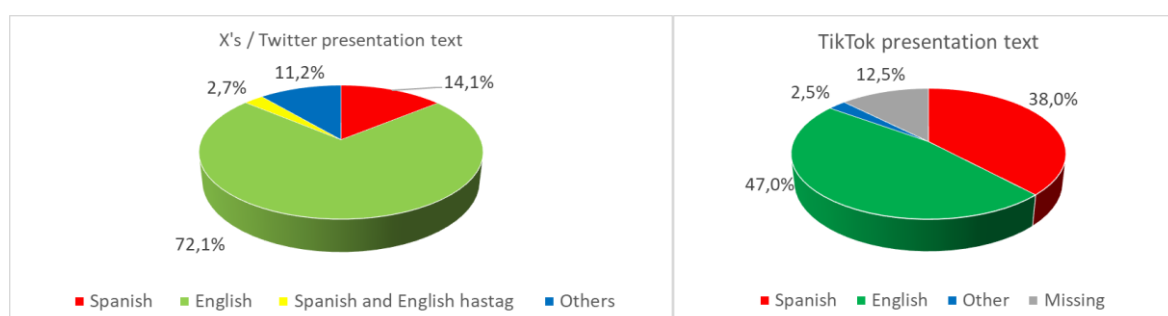


Fig. 3X's / Twitter and TikTok language in text

For X's/Twitter users, it is worth noting that 51.5% (146 tweets) described specific characteristics of wounds, and 6.1% (29 tweets) included references to infections. In contrast, only 1.9% (9 users) explicitly mentioned discontinuing the practice or being in some stage of recovery. For Tiktok profiles, 53% of users (212 accounts) explicitly referenced self-injury and *comorbidity* in their profile descriptions. These included the use of keywords such as *shtwt* and *edtw*, references to autism or other pathological conditions, as well as terms such as *mentalhealth*, *red text*, or *shscars*, among others.

Finally, the most frequently used hashtags included #edtw (eating disorder Twitter) and #yellowspongetwt (a reference to cutting deep enough to reach fat tissue). These findings illustrate the presence of highly specific terminology within self-injury-related communities on Twitter, highlighting the complexity of their discursive and behavioral patterns. Besides, for TikTok users, the most frequently used hashtags included recovery, mental health and bar-code.

This evidence highlights that self-harm content is a tangible reality on social media platforms, where young people share their experiences through text, images, and videos (Atauri, Nogales, & Martínez, 2025; Martín Muñoz & Atauri-Mezquida, 2024). Increasingly, coded language and hashtags are used to avoid detection by platform algorithms (Lorenz, 2022; Brown et al., 2018; Moreno et al., 2016), while remaining recognizable to peers who are familiar with such codes (Lorenz, 2022). Scholars have raised concerns that platforms must adopt more rigorous measures and improve detection systems to identify and mitigate content that may pose risks to the mental health of young people (Mezquida, Nogales-González, & Martínez Pastor, 2025).

With regard to gender, it is noteworthy that research findings remain inconclusive about which gender is more likely to engage in non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI). Some studies suggest no significant differences between males and females in NSSI prevalence (Yang & Feldman, 2018; Taylor et al., 2018; Claes et al., 2007), whereas others report a higher prevalence among adolescent girls (Fonseca-Pedrero et al., 2020). Our findings indicate a greater proportion of female participants; however, this may be partially explained by the fact that young women are generally more willing to openly express their emotions compared to young men. However, users often prefer not to disclose their gender in order to preserve their anonymity. This is understandable, as they turn to social networks seeking a space where they can feel 'safe' and communicate freely about self-harm—something that in other settings might provoke shame or fear of being judged and stigmatized for this behavior.

Regarding language use, English emerges as the most dominant, which implies that young people across the globe can easily access such content, given that English is one of the most widely spoken and understood languages worldwide. This universality facilitates unrestricted exposure to self-harm content beyond national or linguistic boundaries, thereby amplifying the potential risks to adolescent mental health (World Health Organization, 2021; Cheng et al., 2022). Research has consistently emphasized that the global accessibility of harmful online material can contribute to the normalization of maladaptive behaviors and exacerbate psychological distress among vulnerable youth populations (Moreno et al., 2016).

B. Differences of the profile of users who generate and disseminate content related to self-injury on Twitter (X) and TikTok

Table 1 summarizes the main user profile characteristics by platform. Significant differences were observed across most profile items, except for the evaluation of the negative aspects of self-injurious behavior and the positive aspects of wounds, where percentages were similar. TikTok did not flag any posts as sensitive, while Twitter flagged 31% of posts.

Twitter users generally exhibited more impersonal profiles, with predominantly single posts that were autobiographical, referenced illness more frequently, emphasized perceived positive aspects of self-injury and wounds, and included more requests for opinions and endorsements of the behavior. Conversely, TikTok users were more likely to disclose their gender, reference wound characteristics, acknowledge cessation or recovery from self-injury, and characterize their posts as “real,” with more frequent requests for follow-up. Although a small proportion, TikTok users more often advised against self-injury compared to Twitter users.

Repeated exposure of Young people to self-harm content—particularly autobiographical accounts and depictions of wounds—may contribute to the normalization of such behavior and increase the risk of reproducing harmful patterns (Ramanan et al., 2025; Milton et al., 2023). In line with this, thereportpublishedbyThe Molly Rose Foundation (2025b), Suicide and self-harm content still recommended ‘at industrial scale’ by TikTok and Instagram eightyears after Molly’s death, highlights that both directaccess and algorithmic recommendations of self-harm materials on social media exposeuserstoharmfulcontent, including references to suicidalideation, self-injury, and specific methods. Furthermore, the foundation emphasizes important differences in content moderation practices: while TikTok removes 94.4% of posts violating its policies onthesame day they are uploaded, other platforms demonstrate considerably slower response times in enforcing content moderation (The Molly Rose Foundation, 2025a).

TABLE I
PERCENTAGE OF USER PROFILE CHARACTERISTICS BY PLATFORM.

	Twitter	TikTok	P-value
1 message	80,2% (526 usuarios)	100% (400 users)	
Gender	Undefined 74.1% (390 users)	44.5% (178 users) female, 11.5% (46 users) male	$\chi^2=163.8$; P-value ≈ 0
Accountsuspension	10,6% (56 users)	2,5% (10 users)	$\chi^2=23.28$; P-value <0.001
Language	English64.8% (341 users), Spanish 4.8% (25 users)	English 52% (208 users), Spanish42.8% (171 users)	$\chi^2=221.1$; P-value ≈ 0
Sensitive	31,6% (166 users)	0%	$\chi^2=153.8$; P-value ≈ 0
Autobiographical	51,9% (273 users)	22.5% (90 users)	$\chi^2=58.9$; P-value <0.001
Mentionsillness	32% (169 users)	17.8% (71 users)	$\chi^2=24.26$; P-value <0.001
Mentionutensils	4,2% (22 users)	0.3% (1 users)	$\chi^2=14.57$ P-value <0.001
Woundcharacteristi	27,8% (146 users)	37.8% (151 users)	$\chi^2=10.29$; P-

CS			value=0.001
Mentionsinfections	3,2% (17 users)	1.3% (5 users)	$\chi^2=3.84$; P-value=0.05
Endofpractice	1% (5 users)	12.5% (50 users)	$\chi^2=54.25$; P-value<0.001
N	1000 tweets (656 differentusers)	400 contents	

VI. CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Regarding the platform-specific user profiles, our analysis encountered X's/ Twitter users generally maintain impersonal profiles, post primarily single messages, and focus on autobiographical narratives with frequent illness references, whereas TikTok users were more likely to disclose gender, depict wound characteristics, and reference recovery or cessation of self-injury. Respect to content moderation discrepancies, Twitter flagged 31% of posts as sensitive, whereas TikTok did not flag any, highlighting significant differences in platform moderation and potential exposure to harmful content. Both platforms showed extensive use of self-injury-related hashtags and terminology, indicating the presence of specialized online communities that facilitate peer recognition and sharing of experiences. Finally, TikTok showed a slightly higher tendency for content promoting recovery or advising against self-injury, while Twitter posts more often normalize or endorse self-injurious behavior. English was found to be the primary language for X's/Twitter users, whereas TikTok users preferred both English and Spanish.

These findings emphasize the need for platform-specific strategies to reduce exposure to harmful content while leveraging online communities for support and recovery interventions. The use of undefined profiles across both platforms may be indicative of adolescents' and young adults' need for anonymity in the context of self-injurious behaviors, which may hinder the early detection and prevention of NSSI. Future research includes a deeper text analysis on both platforms, focused in messages, text mining, and structural relationships among TikTok and Twitter platforms. Furthermore, improving content moderation policies on social networks poses a challenge, as it is essential to make these platforms safe spaces for communication among Young people and to prevent content that could be harmful to their health.

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