

# Youth Exposure to and Perceptions of Tobacco Marketing in China: Evidence from Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

## Fact Sheet

Adolescents are uniquely vulnerable to nicotine addiction, and rates of youth tobacco use in China remain high.<sup>1</sup> Although China implemented a ban on tobacco advertising in public places, Chinese youth remain exposed to tobacco marketing. Exposure to tobacco marketing is associated with increased susceptibility to use, and use of, cigarettes among Chinese adolescents.<sup>2,3,4,5</sup>

The study was conducted in 10 Chinese cities, including Baiyin, Beijing, Chongqing, Guangzhou, Guilin, Jinan, Kaifeng, Kunming, Shanghai, and Shenyang. The findings from the study may support regulatory efforts to strengthen the implementation of national restrictions on tobacco marketing.

### Study Design

Data were collected from 20 online focus group discussions (FGDs) with 119 adolescents aged 15-16 in Grade 10. In each city, FGDs were conducted by gender and each group included 5-6 girls or boys. Participants were asked 1) to describe sources of tobacco advertising and promotion; 2) describe the attractiveness of tobacco advertising and displays; and 3) who they believed was the target audience for the marketing they were exposed to.

### Discussion

The evidence from this study indicates that tobacco ads and displays remain common in public places and online in China. Many tobacco ads/displays were placed in youth-friendly locations (e.g., near schools, in shopping malls) and contained youth-appealing features. Chinese youth in this study believe e-cigarette ads/displays are intended for teens like them and exposure to e-cigarette marketing could lead to future product use. Increased regulatory efforts are needed to reduce youth exposure to attractive tobacco product marketing in China, especially e-cigarette marketing.



Image of cigarette display inside a convenience store (Beijing).

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### References

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# Key Findings

Chinese youth are regularly exposed to tobacco ads and displays in public places and online in **youth-friendly locations**.

- Tobacco ads/displays are commonly shown in public places, including retail stores or kiosks in their neighborhoods or near their schools, subway stations, and shopping malls
- Exposure to tobacco ads on traditional media (i.e., television, radio, and newspaper) was rare
- Youth exposure to online tobacco ads was common, particularly exposure to e-cigarette ads through branded accounts and posts made by classmates or friends selling e-cigarettes

*“Sometimes I have seen them on Tik Tok. For example, when browsing on the video app, sometimes an ad may pop out, with some ads about tobacco.” - Baiyin, girls focus group*

*“I see the ads of e-cigarette posted by a WeChat merchant on WeChat Moments. He is an e-cigarette seller.” - Beijing, girls focus group*

Multiple features were described as attractive and many tobacco ads and displays contained youth-appealing features.

- Neat, organized cigarette displays in convenience stores were perceived as aesthetically pleasing and noticeable, and use of color and unique flavors made cigarettes in ads/displays more appealing
- Youth-appealing features, including eye-catching colors, youthful imagery (e.g., fashionable models, skateboarding culture), product packaging, and price promotions (e.g., discounts, free trial offers) featured in e-cigarette ads/displays attracted participants' attention

*“They want to attract teenagers, because they are curious and they want to try it out.” - Baiyin, girls focus group*

*“For example, [the youthful] images in the pictures, the bright red and bright purple color tones, and the very young and chic dressing. And like what they have just said, skateboarding. When they are skateboarding, they get a cigarette in their hands, and this look trend[y] or a styl[ish].” - Beijing, boys focus group*

Participants felt they were the target of e-cigarette ads/displays and flavor capsule cigarettes.

- Cigarette ads/displays were targeted toward older adults, with the exception flavor capsule cigarettes which some groups felt were more modern and intended for use by teens and college students
- While e-cigarette marketing could be intended for adults in their 30s-40s who might be trying to quit smoking, e-cigarette ads/displays were perceived as largely intended for middle- and high-school youth who would be attracted to the stylish, trendy product design, the bright colors and fashion used in ads/displays, and the available flavors

*“Those ads about e-cigarette(s) tell us that it has fruit flavor, such as apple flavor, so we want to buy it.” - Chongqing, boys focus group*

*“It feels like they make the packages so different and so good-looking and appealing. People may think it looks very nice, and everyone wants to try what it's like.” - Baiyin, girls focus group*

Exposure to e-cigarette ads/displays could directly increase youths' interest in trying an e-cigarette, particularly exposure to e-cigarette displays in points-of-sale and e-cigarette social media ads posted by peers and online sellers.