

Social Media Marketing by E-cigarette Brands in China

Background

In China, e-cigarette policies set the minimum age of purchase at 18 years, ban online sales, and ban all flavors except tobacco (fully implemented October 2022). A ban on online advertising and sales of e-cigarettes originated in 2019, was clarified and strengthened in 2022, and has been more strictly enforced since May 2023.

This study, conducted between August 1, 2022, and January 31, 2023, examined marketing strategies used and product characteristics advertised by e-cigarette brands on social media.

Methods

A list of e-cigarette brands available in China was generated through a review of the literature, local store visits, and searches conducted on search engine (including Baidu), social media, and e-commerce platforms by China-based market analysts at the digital analytics firm Radarr.

Four popular social media platforms in China—Douyin (TikTok), Weibo, Weixin (WeChat), and Xiaohongshu—were identified and searched for active brand accounts. Publicly visible posts from 19 identified brand accounts were found on only two of the platforms searched—Weibo (347) and Weixin (232). Of these posts, a randomly selected sample of 300, stratified by platform, was coded:



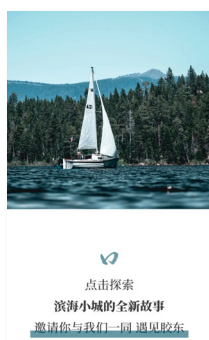
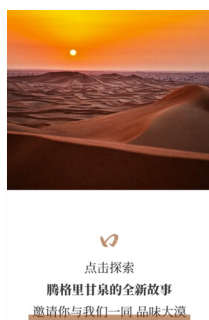
Key Findings

Of the 300 social media posts assessed, indirect or implicit references to e-cigarette products were often included. Examples include naming product lines after popular tourist destinations and posting content related to those destinations without explicitly mentioning the products (pictured, right).

Being subtle and difficult to detect, these tactics were not quantified in this study.

Some e-cigarette brands featured health-related messaging and/or images of people doing physical activities, a marketing tactic that has also been used for cigarettes. The conflation of e-cigarettes with health and wellness can be misleading to consumers.

It is possible that e-cigarette brands in China anticipated the stricter enforcement of the online advertising ban of e-cigarettes and developed these strategies to circumvent the ban.



▲ Excerpts from Heyday/盛世 brand posts associating e-cigarette variants **Grand Desert/大漠** and **Jiaodong/胶东** with the Tengger desert and Jiaodong seashore.

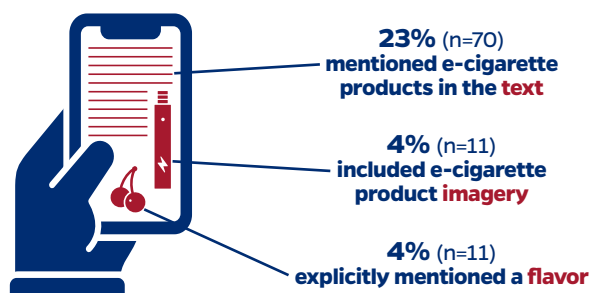
Implications

While the majority of the e-cigarette brand social media posts we examined did not explicitly show or mention e-cigarette products—thereby technically complying with the ban on online e-cigarette advertising—e-cigarette brands in China can still engage in online marketing under current guidelines through posts that aim to build brand recognition and foster positive brand associations among consumers, rather than promote specific products or characteristics.

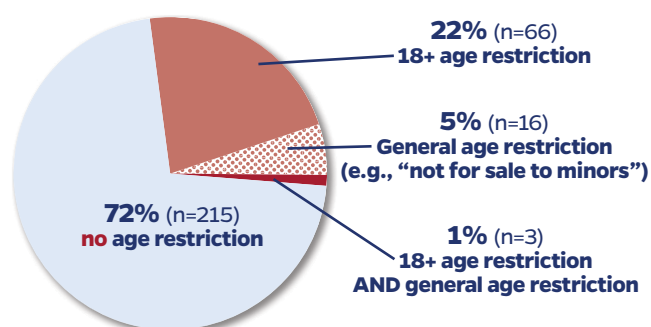
Prohibiting e-cigarette brands from having online content—or taking regulatory action against any e-cigarette products promoted or referenced on social media (including the use of images of the product and people using or promoting the product)—can help prevent people who do not use cigarettes from developing positive associations with e-cigarette products and brands.

Additional Findings (300 total posts)

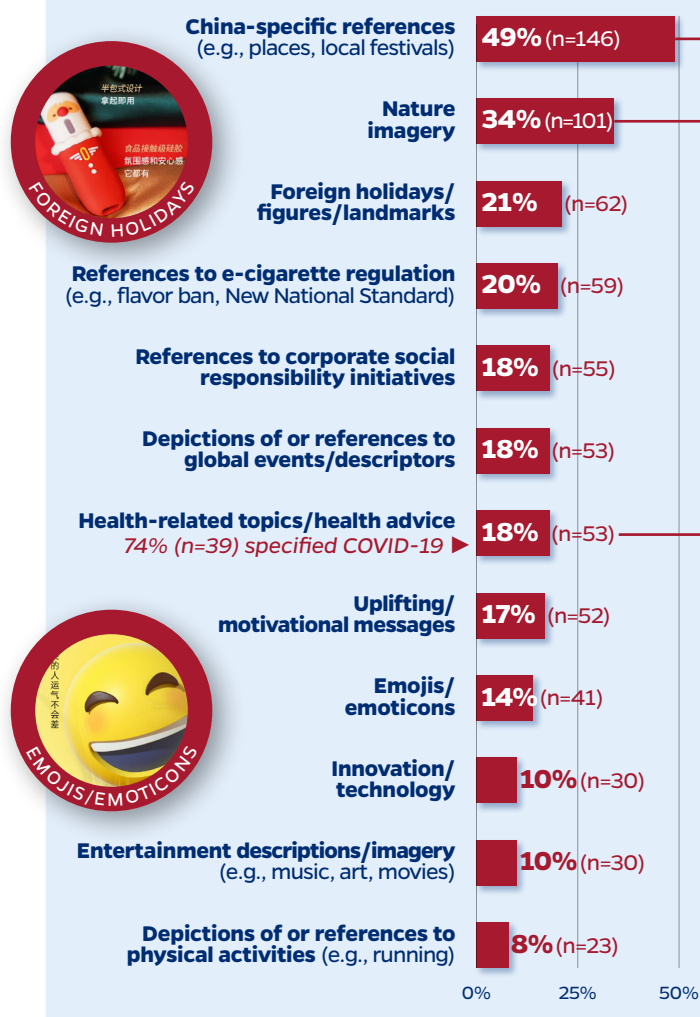
Products & Flavors



Inclusion of Age Restriction Text



Common Marketing Appeals



Health-related topic/health advice
Book cover reads “Health Tips” in this illustration for a post on World Health Day.

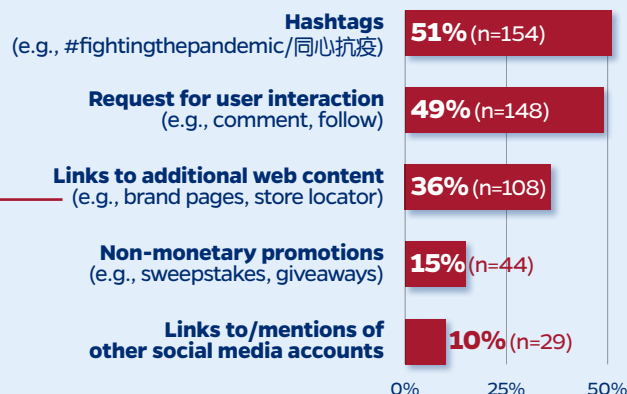


Nature imagery
Accompanying text reads “Let’s go into the mountains to get some fresh oxygen!”



China-specific reference
“Nice 兔 meet u Start of the Lunar New Year all things new.” Text can be read as a rhyming pun, referring to both the Year of the Rabbit and the Chinese word for rabbit/兔, pronounced as “to.”

Common Promotion & Engagement Strategies



Link to additional content ▶
QR code caption reads “Scan to see nearby stores.”

Corporate social responsibility initiative
Brand’s e-cigarette prevention program, “Youth Shield Project,” is referenced in the footer.

