

E-CIGARETTE BRAND SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING IN CHINA

SIGNIFICANCE

This study examined marketing strategies used and product characteristics advertised by e-cigarette brands on social media in China before the May 2023 enforcement of a ban on online sale and advertising of e-cigarettes.

This ban originated in 2019, was clarified and strengthened in 2022, and more strictly enforced in 2023.

METHODS

- Weixin (WeChat, on left) and Weibo social media channels



- 579 publicly available posts by 19 e-cigarette brand accounts, found between Aug. 2022–Jan. 2023
- 300 randomly sampled posts, stratified by platform, were coded for:
 - product characteristic advertised
 - marketing tactics used

EXPLICIT AND IMPLICIT MARKETING APPEALS ON SOCIAL MEDIA UNDERSCORE THE NEED FOR ROBUST ENFORCEMENT



EXPLICIT

This brand post explicitly promotes e-cigarettes by including imagery of an e-cigarette device and associating the product with the Christmas holiday—a foreign reference.

TRANSLATED TEXT:

“Catch this red-nosed lucky charm! / Joyful Universe Santa Claus Costume Protective Case / A Santa Claus hidden in your pocket, with a bright red nose, bringing you festive good fortune and abundant blessings.”



IMPLICIT

While this post does not include explicit text or imagery promoting e-cigarettes and appears to focus on China’s Tengger Desert, implied marketing appeals include references to “Heyday” (盛世), an e-cigarette brand variant, and “Grand Desert” (大漠), a subvariant. These product names are presented alongside desert-themed imagery and an invitation for user interaction.

TRANSLATED TEXT:

“Click to explore / Whole new story of streams in the Tengger Desert / Inviting you to taste the grand desert with us / What does the desert feel like to you? Post your thoughts in the comments section / 10 lucky commenters will receive surprise gifts. / Meet Heyday • Menu”

RESULTS

- Posts that **explicitly** referenced e-cigarette products/actions (center left) occurred in posts via both text (23%, n=70) and imagery (4%, n=11)
- Posts that **implicitly** referenced e-cigarettes through subtle associations (center right) were also commonly observed
- Some posts included descriptors alluding to a sensation or taste (e.g., “mellow fragrance”) and/or concept flavor (e.g., “infinite black hole... a unique and refreshing taste”)

CONCLUSIONS

The explicit and implicit marketing appeals observed can create positive e-cigarette brand associations among consumers. Findings suggest that stronger enforcement is needed in China and highlight challenges other jurisdictions should consider when banning online tobacco advertising.

- Implicit marketing examples may have occurred in anticipation of imminent ban on online e-cigarette marketing and in response to non-tobacco flavored e-cigarette ban
- On Weibo, as of July 2025, 19 brands appeared to have removed their pages or discontinued posting
- On Weixin, as of July 2025, some brands continued to post content like that observed, including RELX (which has China’s largest e-cigarette market share)



Access the fact sheet for additional findings

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AUTHORS

Jennifer L. Brown, Tuo-Yen Tseng, Meagan O. Robichaud, Maryam Ibrahim, Chunlin Ren, Joanna Cohen