Marketing Claims and Featured Appeals on E-cigarette and HTP Brand Websites in China

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Background

Effective October 2022, e-cigarettes with flavors (other than tobacco) are banned in China. China also prohibits the sale of e-cigarettes to minors under the age of 18, as well as online retail sales of e-cigarettes to the general public (authorized business-to-business transactions can occur via a national platform).

To date, China has not approved any heated tobacco products (HTPs) for sale.

This study explores marketing strategies used and product characteristics advertised on e-cigarette and HTP brand websites in China following implementation of these policies.

Methods

We identified e-cigarette and HTP brands available in China through searches on the popular search engine Baidu. Brand websites specifically targeting people in China, determined by web domain or country selection option, were included in the sample.

We coded and analyzed 687 webpages (within two clicks from the homepage) across 29 e-cigarette and three HTP websites captured between June and November 2023.

Findings

E-cigarette devices, cartridges/pods, and liquids were marketed on e-cigarette brand websites, and HTP devices and inserts on HTP brand websites.

- During our analysis, one observed website (HTP) **offered online sales**
- 53% of websites (16 e-cigarette; 1 HTP) **restricted site access based on viewers' age**
- 44% (13 e-cigarette; 1 HTP) **mentioned that products are intended only for adults**
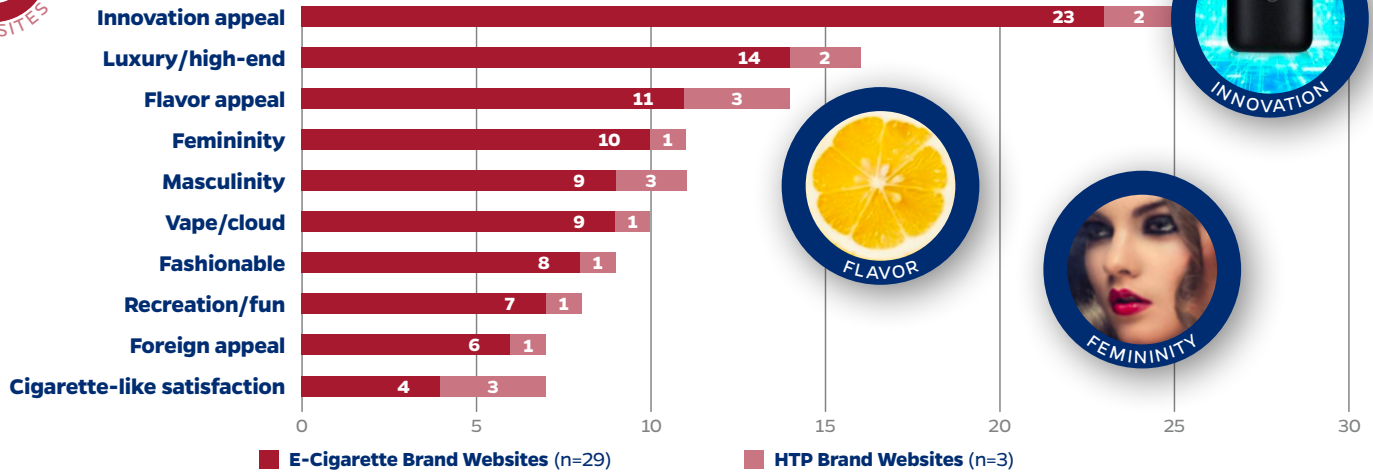- 31% (8 e-cigarette; 1 HTP) **included health warnings**

Conclusions

Findings reveal a significant focus on brands portraying themselves as responsible and capable of self-regulation, with limited emphasis on age restrictions and health warnings on their websites—noteworthy given the availability and marketing of flavored products, which can be particularly appealing to youth.

The presence of flavored products and online sales—despite regulatory restrictions prohibiting them—suggests the need for enhanced monitoring and enforcement to mitigate potential health risks associated with e-cigarette and HTP online marketing in China.

Advertising Appeals

29 OF 32 SITES

The top advertising appeals on brand websites were **innovation appeals**, **luxury/high-end**, **flavor appeal**, **femininity**, **masculinity**, and **vape/cloud**.

Appeal	E-Cigarette Brand Websites (n=29)	HTP Brand Websites (n=3)
Innovation appeal	23	2
Luxury/high-end	14	2
Flavor appeal	11	3
Femininity	10	1
Masculinity	9	3
Vape/cloud	9	1
Fashionable	8	1
Recreation/fun	7	1
Foreign appeal	6	1
Cigarette-like satisfaction	4	3

INNOVATION

FLAVOR

FEMININITY

■ **E-Cigarette Brand Websites** (n=29)   ■ **HTP Brand Websites** (n=3)

Messages

28 OF 32 SITES

The top three messages on brand websites were claims of **responsible marketing** or **self-regulation** (81%: 19 e-cigarette; 3 HTP), **claims of reduced health risks** (47%: 12 e-cigarette; 3 HTP), and **claims of product safety** (41%: 11 e-cigarette; 2 HTP) including the following examples:

> [Brand] has **always** been **strictly abiding**…
>
> SELF-REGULATION CLAIM ON E-CIGARETTE BRAND SITE

> The **groundbreaking** independent oil tank and independent battery compartment design **ensures the safety of use**.
>
> PRODUCT SAFETY CLAIM ON E-CIGARETTE BRAND SITE

> **Effectively controls** the **health risks** of smoking.
>
> REDUCED HEALTH RISK CLAIM ON HTP BRAND SITE

Promotion and Engagement Strategies

25 OF 32 SITES

The most common promotion and engagement strategies observed on brand websites were extensions of the brand's web presence via **social media accounts** (59%: 16 e-cigarette; 3 HTP), **events** (19%: 16 e-cigarette; 0 HTP), or **product authentication** (16%: 4 e-cigarette; 1 HTP), the option to enter a product's serial number or scan its barcode to verify its authenticity or counterfeitness.

Flavor descriptors

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The most prevalent flavor descriptors were **fruit** (22%: 6 e-cigarette; 1 HTP), **mint/menthol** (19%: 5 e-cigarette; 1 HTP), **concept descriptors*** (19%: 5 e-cigarette, 1 HTP), **coffee/tea** (13%: 3 e-cigarette; 1 HTP), and **other non-alcoholic beverages** (13%: 4 e-cigarette; 0 HTP).

*Terms that imply some type of flavor/sensation/taste/aroma that awaits the consumer, such as "Ice Spring" (mint).