



From left: A “gas gum,” a “milk tea cup” and an illegal blueberry-flavored e-cigarette are among the e-cigarettes being sold online mainly targeting the underage. — Ti Gong

THE SMOKESCREEN OF VAPING:

How young e-cigarette users fall into a trap

Yang Jian

It's hard to quit smoking cigarettes, but turning to vaping on the belief that it is a safer alternative can also be a trap.

Mai Jiawei, a senior high school student in the southern city of Zhuhai, spent a year quitting electronic cigarettes. Now he is urging other young people to give up vaping.

“Quitting tobacco feels like 100 people working in your brain who suddenly lose their daily bonus from the boss,” Mai said on his livestream account on Bilibili. “They will definitely go on strike.”

Known as “Fantastic Mike” on his livestreaming program, Mai shares his thoughts with 10,000 online followers.

“To me, there are two kinds of addictions: one from the nicotine and, more importantly, one from the feeling of relaxation,” a female classmate of Mike’s said in an interview on his program.

She said she and most of her classmates never realized they were actually “smoking” when they turned to e-products that claimed to be “atomized sugar.”

Indeed, e-cigarette retailers are clever at marketing and disguising the true ingredients of their products. They aim their pitches at the young and promote their products as harmless, trendy and non-addictive.



Most products at an e-cigarette store in Shenyang, capital of Liaoning Province, have been removed from shelves to abide by the new national standards. — Imaginechina

China has joined a handful of countries in banning flavored vapes. Starting from October 1, e-cigarette companies are allowed only to sell tobacco-flavored vapes. But that doesn’t appear to have thwarted manufacturers who keep coming up with ingenious subterfuges and advertising enticements.

One of the more recent products

— quite illegal — is a flavored e-cigarette that claims to be “gas gum” or a “milk tea cup.” It has become popular with teenagers.

These disposable e-cigarettes are being sold at between 60 yuan (US\$8.6) and 150 yuan on e-commerce platforms and social media, cloaked as “milk

tea cups” or “coke cups” to dodge regulations.

The gadget, about 10 centimeters long, looks like a USB storage unit with a nozzle. The products feature flavors such as strawberry, mint, ice cream and coffee — all banned by China’s State Tobacco Monopoly Administration.

No information about the manufacturer or production date is printed on the packaging, except for an English warning reminding users that there is “nicotine involved and it can be addictive.” The sellers claim the products are for export only.

Health data shows that juveniles with vaping experience are twice more likely to become addicted to mainstream tobacco in the future.

According to a 2021 survey from China’s Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 86 percent of junior high students had heard of e-cigarettes, and 16 percent were using them. Both figures were up from 2019.

About 64 percent of students who use e-cigarettes said they prefer fruit flavors, according to the survey.

Illegal products are accessible on most mainstream social media and livestream platforms, including Weibo, WeChat and Douyin, China’s version of TikTok. A discussion group related to “milk tea cups” on Weibo has over 2,500 followers.