

Eye on China's youth

Beijing has been on a drive to clean up the Internet to make sure that under-18s in China are better protected. It has ordered the country's technology giants, such as Tencent and Alibaba, to purge their platforms of soft pornography involving children and to increase efforts to prevent minors from becoming addicted to online gaming. State media outlets have also called out vendors that peddle electronic cigarettes to students. Earlier this month, Tencent, which runs the wildly popular game Honour Of Kings, promised regulators that it will further restrict how much time minors spend on video games. Tencent also runs WeChat, China's most popular social messaging app, which can be used to access Honour Of Kings. Prosecutors in Beijing had filed charges against Tencent for flouting child protection laws because WeChat's youth mode does not protect those aged under 18 well enough. China Correspondent Aw Cheng Wei looks at the three industries - online gaming, e-cigarettes and pornography - that Beijing has in its cross hairs.

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Gaming companies step up measures to protect underage users

BEIJING • Fears of a regulatory crackdown have prompted Tencent, which runs the wildly popular mobile game Honour Of Kings, to beef up its measures to protect underage gamers.

The Internet giant has limited playing time and spending for those under 18 in a move to appease Beijing, after state media decried online gaming as "spiritual opium" earlier this month.

Prosecutors followed up with a lawsuit, claiming that Tencent's "youth mode" on WeChat, China's most popular social messaging app, runs afoul of child protection laws. Users can access Honour Of Kings via WeChat.

Beijing had beefed up its child protection laws on June 1, International's Children Day, including forbidding Internet companies from providing underage users with products and services that are known to be addictive.

Restrictions on access to Internet services, duration of use and consumption must be installed for minors using services such as gaming, live streaming, social media, and audio and video, according to the revision.

Under new rules that kicked in on Aug 4, minors are banned from playing Honour Of Kings for more than an hour on regular days and two hours on public holidays. They also cannot play between 10pm and 8am.

Limits have also been placed on how much they can spend each month on the world's most popular game, which averages more than 100 million users.

It is not known how much minors spend on online gaming but they accounted for 6 per cent of Tencent's Chinese online gaming gross receipts between October and December last year.

Beijing has been worried about underage gamers in China, after reports on how some had stolen their parents' credit cards and borrowed money to buy in-game items such as upgraded abilities, rare weapons and better designs.

Minors also bought fake adult credentials online to bypass restrictions, such as a government video game curfew imposed on the young in 2019.

Beijing has cracked down on online gaming in recent years to try and ensure children are not addicted to it.

Tencent, which runs the world's biggest video gaming business by revenue, has started using facial recognition technology in its games to make sure that players are above 18 years old.

Last year, Tencent made 156.1 billion yuan (\$32.7 billion) from its online games - more than half of the gaming industry's real income. NetEase, its closest competitor in the world's second-largest economy, made 54.6 billion yuan last year.

Education expert Xiong Bingqi told The Sunday Times that gaming companies like Tencent are stepping up their child protection measures in anticipation of a wider crackdown by Beijing.

"It is a matter of time that online games will go the way of off-campus tutoring services," said Professor Xiong, who is director of 21st Century Education Research Institute, an independent think-tank.

Prof Xiong was referring to a separate clampdown last month when Beijing banned after-school tutoring companies from making profits in a move to reduce the costs of raising children.

Medical doctor Wang Fang, 39, whose son is 13, welcomes Tencent's tougher restrictions.

Her son often exceeds the one hour that she allows him to play, so having a mechanism built into the game will help him keep to the stipulated amount, she said.

Dr Wang added: "He is an obedient boy in all areas, except when it comes to games. He isn't addicted but he will constantly want to go beyond the hour-long limit I set."

Chinese President Xi Jinping brought up the perils of online gaming addiction at China's annual parliamentary meetings in March, and called for the "social problem" to be solved.

Platforms fined, warned over soft child porn

BEIJING • A search for children's underwear on online retail platforms shows ads of young, doe-eyed girls wearing tight tops and panties while kneeling on a bed.

An animated sticker of a toddler resting her head on a table accompanied with the words "xiang lao gong", or "missing my husband" in Chinese, are among the "expressions" that netizens can send to their friends over messaging apps.

Suggestive online content involving children came under scrutiny last month when China's top Internet watchdog slapped fines on tech giants, including Tencent and Alibaba, for allowing users to upload or share "soft child porn".

The Cyberspace Administration of China also ordered companies, such as microblogging platform Weibo and the Instagram-like Xiaohongshu, to clean up their content depicting minors.

The platforms or their users had used children to make indecent suggestions to attract more traffic, the regulator said in a Weibo post.

It did not state the amount of fines or provide a deadline for the firms to comply with the rule.

Beijing has been ordering clean-ups in a variety of sectors that have harmed minors, including tech companies and retailers of electronic cigarettes.

Parents told The Sunday Times that they support the clampdown on the offensive online content.

Housewife Meng Xun, 37, wanted to buy clothes for her one-year-old niece in March when she saw the suggestive photos promoting girls' underwear.

"I reported the ad to the platform because it was disgusting," she said. "Why are these sellers sexualising children to boost their sales?"

Civil servant Zhou Jianhua, 33, was disturbed by an "expression" that his colleague sent him in May, showing a young girl putting a finger in her mouth with the caption "I am very hungry" in Chinese.

"My colleague was trying to rush me to go for lunch, but I found the sticker quite offensive," he said.

He wants the authorities to do more to uphold society's morals and to create a better environment for children to grow up in.

"Minors can access these popular platforms easily," he said. "I don't want my daughter to think it is okay to behave in a suggestive manner."

Stickers on China's social media platforms typically feature text layered over images, usually of cute animals, celebrities or familiar faces such as friends or family members. They are used the way that emojis and emoticons are on WhatsApp.

Police have arrested more than 700 suspects in over 600 cases involving pornography since the start of the year.

The Public Security Ministry vowed in May to intensify its crackdown on pornographic content online, especially child pornography.

Calls to reinforce rules over sales of e-cigarettes

BELJING • E-cigarette vendors in China have breached the law by selling to underage customers, and hawking their wares on social media platforms despite a ban on the online sale of tobacco products.

Shops around schools are also peddling e-cigarettes to students.

These were among the allegations made in an Aug 4 news report by state media Xinhua that ended with a call to tighten regulations.

The report stoked fears of a clampdown in the controversial industry, with the share prices of Chinese e-cigarette companies falling the next day.

Shares of Huabao Flavours and Fragrances, which develops tobacco flavours, tumbled 11.4 per cent, and Relx Technology stocks fell about 5 per cent.

As part of Beijing's campaign to protect under-18s, it has been warning companies and industries that have directly or indirectly targeted minors of penalties or stricter regulations.

The central government had once considered e-cigarettes, which can cost less than 40 yuan (S\$8.40) each and come in an assortment of designs and flavours, as a way to wean hardcore smokers off regular cigarettes.

But policymakers are changing their minds as more minors have taken to e-cigarettes.

Office administrator Wang Ling, 38, told The Sunday Times that she is worried her 15-year-old son will pick up smoking.

Making it harder for students to buy e-cigarettes will go some way towards assuaging her concerns, she said, adding that "it was legally wrong for these vendors to sell to students to begin with".

She hopes that the authorities can step up their checks to make sure that e-cigarette vendors comply with the laws, especially after the news report.

According to the Xinhua report, brick-and-mortar shops selling e-cigarettes did not check the age of buyers unless the person "looks very young". Customers can also buy e-cigarettes through the messaging app WeChat, although the sale is illegal.

In May, the central government for the first time warned of the health risks that come from smoking e-cigarettes, based on a report by the National Health Commission and the World Health Organisation.

A national survey released last year showed that 2.7 per cent of students aged between 13 and 15 smoked e-cigarettes in 2019, up 1.5 percentage points compared with 2014. About 3 per cent of students aged between 16 and 18 smoked e-cigarettes in 2019. The survey did not release earlier figures.

China is the world's largest producer and consumer of tobacco, with nearly one-third of the world's smokers. About 27 per cent of those aged 15 and above are smokers.