

ORIGINAL ARTICLES

The violation of the bans on tobacco advertising and promotion at points of sale in Vietnam, 2024

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: This study aims to describe the violations of tobacco advertising and promotion (TAP) bans at points of sale (POS) in Vietnam in 2024, addressing the lack of nationwide data since 2017.

Methods: A cross-sectional observational study was conducted at 2,414 tobacco POS across eight provinces in Vietnam in 2024. The data was collected by using an observational checklist.

Results: The study showed that violations of tobacco advertising bans were observed at 23.1% of POS, with the highest rate in Hanoi (41.7%). Tobacco promotion violations occurred at 4.9% of POS, with the highest rate in Dak Lak (13%). Additionally, 40.9% of POS violated display regulations, with the highest rate in Binh Duong (53.5%).

Conclusions: Violations of tobacco advertising and promotion bans and display regulations remain common at POS in Vietnam, likely due to low awareness and weak enforcement. To address these issues, comprehensive communication strategies are needed to educate POS owners and sellers on TAP bans, along with enhanced monitoring and stricter enforcement mechanisms to ensure compliance.

Keywords: Tobacco, advertising, promotion, point of sale, TAPS, POS, Vietnam.

INTRODUCTION

As efforts of Tobacco Industry targeted Tobacco advertising, promotion (TAP) as the primary marketing strategy to boost sales and expand markets, restricting TAP remains an effective tobacco control strategy and policy measure – one of only two WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control provisions with a mandatory timeframe for implementation (1, 2). According to the Guidelines for Implementation Article 13 (1) comprehensive TAP bans cover all direct and indirect forms of marketing, for example, display and visibility of tobacco products at point of sale (POS), advertising via domestic and global internet,

product placement as means of advertisement or promotion and depiction of tobacco or tobacco use in entertainment media products (3).

Exposure to TAPS is strongly related to increased smoking initiation, cigarette cravings, and impulse purchases, eventually raising the number of smokers (2-5). Besides, TAP are proven for undermining the quit attempts among current smokers trying to quit. Implementation of TAP bans was associated with a reduction of 20% (6) in the odds of current smoking and 37% in smoking initiation.

Vietnam Law on Tobacco Harm Prevention has been effective since May 2013, prohibiting all



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types of advertising, sales promotion, and direct marketing to consumers, and allowing the display of only one cigarette pack or carton per brand at POS. However, the violations of TAP still exists in Vietnam, especially at POS as tobacco companies consider POS as a key channel for advertising and promoting their products (7, 8). The data from the Global Adult Tobacco Survey 2015 in Vietnam indicated that the most common type of adult exposure to tobacco advertising and promotion was POS, with a typical violation being the display of more than one pack or one carton of a cigarette brand (7). Additionally, tobacco companies maintain sustainable cooperation with retailers in tobacco advertising and promotion programs. A study in 2018 showed that 65% of retail stores joined the partnership based on selection by sales representatives, with requirements including banner installation (86.3%), product placement on display racks (92.5%), and pack display arrangement (72.5%), while only 8.8% enroll voluntarily (9).

This study was conducted to describe violations of tobacco advertising and promotion bans at POS in Vietnam in 2024. The results from this study will provide scientific evidence to support advocacy for stronger enforcement of TAP bans in Vietnam.

METHODS

Study design: This was a cross-sectional study.

Study site and time: The study was conducted in eight provinces: Lao Cai, Quang Ninh, Dak Lak, Thua Thien Hue, Binh Duong, An Giang, Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh city. Data collection was implemented from October – November, 2024.

Research subject: POS at selected provinces. POS refer to stores with clear addresses that sell tobacco, includes conventional stores, café shop, restaurant, supermarkets, push-carts with fixed addresses.

The sample size and sampling method: The sample size was calculated using the following formular:

$$n = Z_{(1-\alpha/2)}^2 \frac{(1-p)}{\varepsilon^2 p}$$

In which: $\alpha = 0.05$, $p = 0.4$ (proportion of tobacco advertising violations in period 2009 – 2015 to obtain the largest require sample) (7); $\varepsilon = 0.15$. The required sample size was 256 POS; To accommodate up to 15% potentially invalid observation forms, the sample size was increased to 300 POS per province.

Study variables and qualitative research topics

General information: Socio-demographic characteristics of POS included the type of POS (categorized as convenience store, café, pushcart, restaurant, and others) and location (urban and rural areas).

The primary outcome variables were violations of bans on tobacco advertising, promotion, and display at POS.

Violation of tobacco advertising at POS: A POS was identified as violating tobacco advertising ban if investigators observed any of 14 methods used to showcase tobacco products to public. This included, but was not limited to: using counters/poster/billboards (with logo, symbol, brand names, colors of tobacco products); Umbrellas, ribbons carrying tobacco branding; Tobacco display shelf/shelves with logo, symbol, brand name, color of tobacco products; branded display in other objects such as lighters, ash-trays etc.;

Violation of tobacco promotion at POS: any of 7 promotional activities such as offering promotion prices, buying in bulk and getting discount, free gifts, free coupons, were recorded.

Violation of tobacco display at POS: display more than one pack/carton per brand.

Tools and methods of data collection: An observational checklist was used to record violations of tobacco advertising, promotion, and display at POS. The checklist was adapted from a survey used in 2015 (10). It was piloted at selected POS in Hanoi and adjusted before the data collection. After obtaining permission from the POS owner, investigators observed from outside to inside of the POS and recorded any violations using the checklist form. For promotional violations, investigators combined direct observation with asking the POS’s owner or staff about promotion activities.

Processing and analyzing data: Quantitative data were entered using EpiData 3.1 software and analyzed using Stata version 16.0. Descriptive statistics, including frequency (n) and proportion (%) were used to summarize the data. The Chi-squared test with 95% confidence intervals was used to determine differences in proportions and to examine associations between violations and factors

such as province, location, and POS type.

Research ethics: The study was reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee of the Hanoi University of Public Health under Decision No. 354/2024/YTCC-HD3, dated August 19, 2024.

RESULTS

General characteristics of points of sale

In total, 2,414 POS were observed. The most common POS type was convenience stores, accounting for 57.4%, followed by cafés at 26.1%. The distribution of POS between urban and rural areas was nearly equal (50.5% vs. 49.5%). The number of POS observed across provinces was similar, ranging from 300 to 311. There were significant differences in the distribution of POS types across provinces ($\chi^2 = 668.52, p < 0.001$). However, no significant difference in the distribution of POS between urban and rural areas was found ($\chi^2 = 1.41, p = 0.985$). (Table 1).

Table 1. General characteristics of observed POS

POS type	Total 8 provinces	An Giang	Binh Duong	Hue	Hanoi	Lao Cai	Quang Ninh	Hochiminh	Dak Lak
Convenience store	1385 (57.4%)	146 (48.7%)	214 (71.1%)	230 (74%)	131 (43.7%)	191 (63.5%)	211 (70.1%)	114 (38.0%)	148 (49.3%)
Café	629 (26.1%)	126 (42%)	55 (18.3%)	60 (19.3%)	89 (29.7%)	71 (23.6%)	42 (14%)	56 (18.7%)	130 (43.3%)
Pushcarts	153 (6.3%)	6 (2%)	3 (1%)	2 (0.6%)	15 (5%)	23 (7.6%)	5 (1.7%)	97 (32.3%)	2 (0.7%)
Restaurant	130 (5.4%)	17 (5.7%)	15 (5%)	16 (5.1%)	35 (11.7%)	9 (3%)	14 (4.7%)	5 (1.7%)	19 (6.3%)
Others	117 (4.9%)	5 (1.7%)	14 (4.7%)	3 (1%)	30 (10%)	7 (2.3%)	28 (9.3%)	28 (9.3%)	1 (0.3%)
Location									
Urban	1220 (50.5%)	150 (50%)	151 (50.2%)	166 (53.4%)	148 (49.3%)	154 (51.2%)	149 (49.5%)	151 (50.3%)	151 (50.3%)
Rural	1194 (49.5%)	150 (50%)	150 (49.8%)	145 (46.6%)	152 (50.7%)	147 (48.8%)	152 (50.5%)	149 (49.7%)	149 (49.7%)
Total	2414	300	301	311	300	301	301	300	300

Violation of tobacco advertising, promotion, and display bans

Table 2. Violations of tobacco advertising, promotion, and display bans

	Number of POS (%)	Number of POS with tobacco advertising violation (%)	Number of POS with tobacco promotion violation (%)	Number of POS with tobacco display violation (%)
POS type				
Convenience store	1385 (57.4%)	360 (26.0%)	85 (6.1%)	617 (44.6%)
Café	629 (26.1%)	99 (15.7%)	17 (2.7%)	203 (32.3%)
Pushcarts	153 (6.3%)	43 (28.1%)	5 (3.3%)	70 (45.8%)
Restaurant	130 (5.4%)	25 (19.3%)	6 (4.6)	32 (24.6%)
Others	117 (4.9%)	30 (25.6%)	6 (5.1%)	66 (56.4%)
Location				
Urban	1220 (50.5%)	298 (24.4%)	49 (4.0%)	503 (41.2%)
Rural	1194 (49.5%)	259 (21.7%)	70 (5.9%)	485 (40.6%)
Total	2414 (100%)	557 (23.1%)	119 (4.9%)	988 (40.9)

Table 3. Violation of tobacco advertising, promotion, and display bans by store types between urban and rural areas

Store type	Advertising (%)		Promotion (%)		Display (%)	
	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural
Convenient store	172 (57.7%)	188 (72.6%)	32 (65.3%)	53 (75.7%)	277 (55.1%)	340 (70.1%)
Café	56 (18.8%)	43 (16.6%)	8 (16.3%)	9 (12.9%)	123 (24.5%)	80 (16.5%)
Push-carts	35 (11.7%)	8 (3.1%)	4 (8.2%)	1 (1.4%)	46 (9.2%)	24 (5.0%)
Restaurant	10 (3.4%)	15 (5.8%)	1 (2.0%)	5 (7.1%)	18 (3.6%)	14 (2.9%)
Other	25 (8.4%)	5 (1.9%)	4 (8.2%)	2 (2.9%)	39 (7.8%)	27 (5.6%)
	$\chi^2 = 31.13, p < 0.001$		$\chi^2 = 6.89, p = 0.142$		$\chi^2 = 24.82, p < 0.001$	

Violations of advertising

Overall, the violation rate of tobacco advertising bans at POS across the 8 provinces was 23.1% (Table 2). There were significant differences in the violation rates among different types of POS ($\chi^2 = 29.41, p < 0.001$). Pushcarts had the highest rate of tobacco advertising violations (28.1%), followed by convenience stores (26.0%), while cafés had the lowest rate (15.7%). The difference in violation rates between urban (24.4%) and rural (21.7%) areas was not statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 2.54, p = 0.111$).

Among POS with advertising violations, there were significant differences in the distribution of violation rates by POS type between urban and rural areas ($\chi^2 = 31.13, p < 0.001$). In particular, rural areas had a much higher rate of advertising violations in convenience stores (72.6%) compared to urban areas (57.7%). Conversely, pushcarts in urban areas accounted for a higher rate of advertising violations (11.7%) than in rural areas (3.1%) (Table 2).

The violation rate of tobacco advertising bans across the eight provinces is shown in Figure 1.

There were statistically significant differences in violation rates by province ($\chi^2 = 154.82$, $p < 0.001$). The highest rates of violations were

recorded in Hanoi (41.7%), Ho Chi Minh City (29%) and Quang Ninh (28.9%), while Lao Cai had the lowest rate at 3.7%.

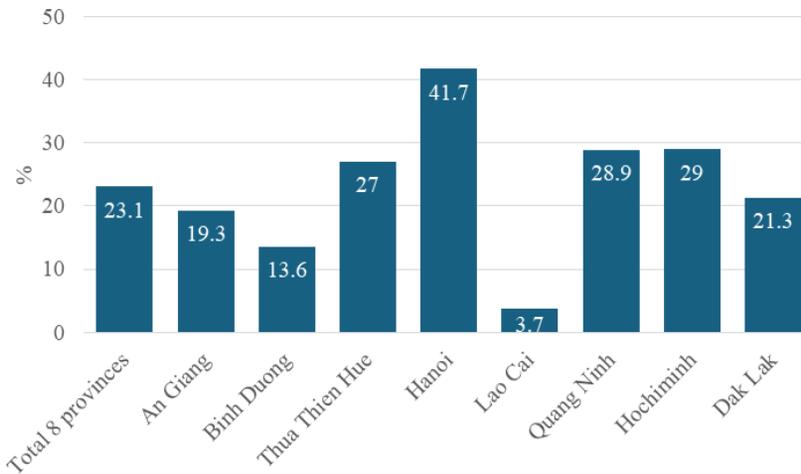


Figure 1. Violation rate of tobacco advertising bans in 8 provinces (n=2414)

The most common methods of tobacco advertising were posters (9.6%), display cabinets (7.8%), cigarette box models (3.3%), wall boxes (1.9%), pushcarts (1.1%). The highest rates of these advertising methods were

recorded in the following provinces: posters in Hanoi (33%), display cabinets in Thua Thien Hue (16.4%), cigarette box models in Dak Lak (13%), wall boxes and pushcarts in Hochiminh city (4.3% and 4.7%, respectively) (Table 4).

Table 4. The violation rate of the most common tobacco advertising methods at POS by provinces

Methods of tobacco advertising	Province N (%)								
	Total 8 provinces (n = 2414)	An Giang (n=300)	Binh Duong (n=301)	Hue (n=311)	Hanoi (n=300)	Lao Cai (n=301)	Quang Ninh (n=301)	HCM (n=300)	Dak Lak (n=300)
Poster	232 (9.6)	3 (1.0)	12 (4.0)	7 (2.3)	99 (33.0)	4 (1.3)	59 (19.6)	27 (9.0)	21 (7.0)
Display cabinet	189 (7.8)	27 (9.0)	12 (4.0)	51 (16.4)	41 (13.7)	1 (0.3)	24 (8.0)	24 (8.0)	9 (3.0)
Cigarette box model	80 (3.3)	4 (1.3)	0 (0.0)	2 (0.6)	5 (1.7)	2 (0.7)	13 (4.3)	15 (5.0)	39 (13.0)
Wall box	46 (1.9)	4 (1.3)	2 (0.7)	2 (0.6)	5 (1.7)	0 (0.0)	8 (2.7)	13 (4.3)	12 (4.0)
Pushcart	30 (1.2)	3 (1.0)	3 (1.0)	2 (0.6)	1 (0.3)	0 (0.0)	5 (1.7)	14 (4.7)	2 (0.7)

Violations of promotion

The overall rate of tobacco promotion violations at POS was 4.9% (Table 2). There

were significant differences in violation rates among POS types ($\chi^2 = 11.90$, $p = 0.018$). Convenience store had the highest violation

rate (6.1%), while cafés had the lowest (2.7%). Violation rates were significantly higher in rural areas (5.9%) compared to urban areas (4.0%) ($\chi^2 = 4.39, p=0.036$) (Table 2). Among POS with promotion violations, the distribution of violation rates by POS type did not differ significantly between urban and rural areas ($\chi^2 = 6.89, p=0.142$), (Table 3).

The rate of tobacco promotion violations across the eight provinces is shown in Figure 2. There were statistically significant differences between provinces ($\chi^2 = 78.78, p<0.001$). The highest violation rate was found in Dak Lak (13%), while Thua Thien Hue had the lowest (0.3%). No violations were recorded in the Lao Cai province.

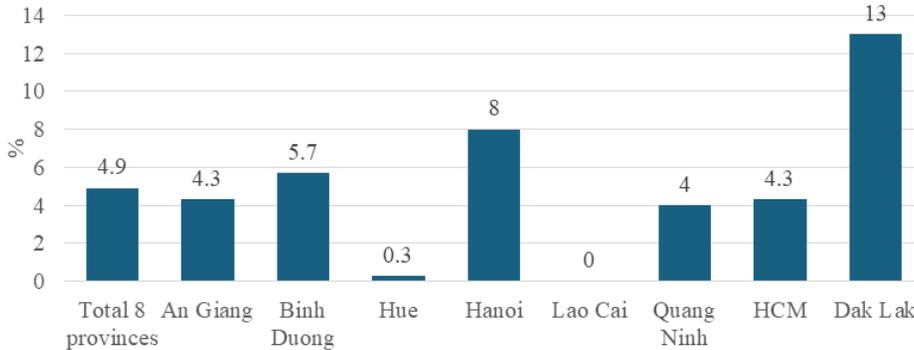


Figure 2. Violation rate of tobacco promotion bans in 8 provinces (n=2414)

Among the different methods of tobacco promotion, the two most common were “bulk purchase and discount offers” (1.8%) and “exchanging used tobacco packs for new packs or money” (1.8%). The rate of these promotion methods varied across provinces.

Specifically, Dak Lak recorded the highest rate of exchanging used tobacco packs for new packs or for money (9%), Hanoi had the highest rate of promotional price violation (6%), Quang Ninh had the highest rate of bulk purchase and discount offers (3.7%) (Table 5).

Table 5. The violation rate of the most common promotion methods at POS by provinces, n (%)

Methods of tobacco promotion	Province N (%)								
	Total 8 provinces (n = 2414)	An Giang (n=300)	Binh Duong (n=301)	Hue (n=311)	Hanoi (n=300)	Lao Cai (n=301)	Quang Ninh (n=301)	HCM (n=300)	Dak Lak (n=300)
Promotional price	34 (1.4)	1 (0.3)	4 (1.3)	1 (0.3)	18 (6.0)	0 (0.0)	3 (1.0)	2 (0.7)	5 (1.7)
Bulk purchase and discount offer	44 (1.8)	3 (1.0)	5 (1.7)	1 (0.3)	10 (3.3)	0 (0.0)	11 (3.7)	5 (1.7)	9 (3.0)
Free cigarette	21 (0.9)	2 (0.7)	3 (1.0)	1 (0.3)	7 (2.3)	0 (0.0)	3 (1.0)	3 (1.0)	2 (0.7)
Free gifts	39 (1.6)	4 (1.3)	8 (2.7)	0 (0.0)	3 (1.0)	0 (0.0)	3 (1.0)	5 (1.7)	16 (5.4)
Prizes in cigarette packs	17 (0.7)	3 (1.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	2 (0.7)	0 (0.0)	2 (0.7)	4 (1.3)	6 (2.0)

Methods of tobacco promotion	Province N (%)								
	Total 8 provinces (n = 2414)	An Giang (n=300)	Binh Duong (n=301)	Hue (n=311)	Hanoi (n=300)	Lao Cai (n=301)	Quang Ninh (n=301)	HCM (n=300)	Dak Lak (n=300)
Exchanging used tobacco packs for new packs or money	43 (1.8)	8 (2.7)	2 (0.7)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	3 (1.0)	3 (1.0)	27 (9.0)
Other	3 (0.1)	0 (0.0)	1 (0.3)	1 (0.3)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	1 (0.3)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)

Violations of display

The overall rate of violation related to the display of tobacco packages at POS was 40.9% (Table 2). There were significant differences in display violation rates among POS types ($\chi^2 = 54.38, p < 0.001$). However, there was no significant difference in violation rates between urban (41.2%) and rural (40.6%) areas ($\chi^2 = 0.09, p = 0.761$). Among POS with display violations, there were significant differences in the distribution of violation rates by POS type between urban and rural

areas ($\chi^2 = 24.82, p < 0.001$). Specifically, rural areas had a much higher rate of display violations in convenience stores (70.1%) compared to urban areas (55.1%). Conversely, all other POS types in urban areas accounted for higher rates of display violations than their rural counterparts (Table 3).

Tobacco display violation rates also differed significantly across provinces ($\chi^2 = 161.82, p < 0.001$) (Figure 3). The highest rate was recorded in Binh Duong (53.5%), while the lowest was in An Giang (13.0%).

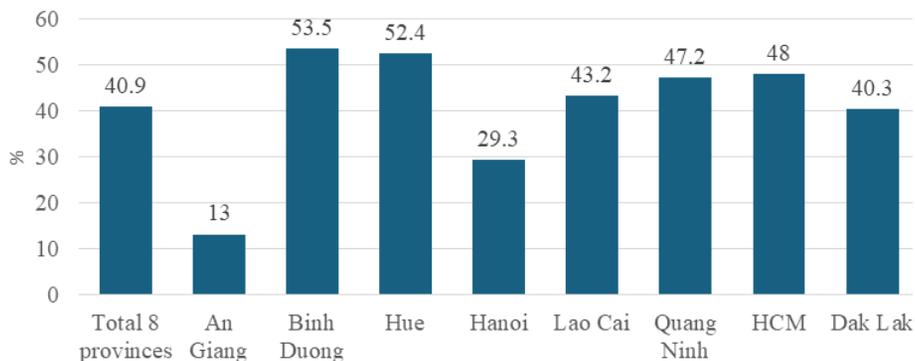


Figure 3. Violation rate of tobacco display ban in 8 provinces (n=2414)

DISCUSSION

Since the period 2015-2016, this study was conducted in eight provinces, representing the six socio-economic regions and the two largest cities in Vietnam, providing the most updated evidence on violations of tobacco advertising, promotion, and display bans at the POS.

Violations of tobacco advertising bans

The overall violation rate of tobacco advertising at POS was 23.1%, which is lower than the rate reported in five largest cities of Vietnam in 2017 (69.9%) (11). However, this rate in our study is slightly higher than those reported in earlier studies conducted in six provinces in 2015

(19.2%) (10) and in three southern provinces in 2018 (18.5%) (12). This rate has not decreased compared to the previous period of 2015, which may be partly due to inconsistent or ineffective monitoring, enforcement and communication efforts regarding the advertising ban across all regions (7, 10). Notably, the highest violation rates of tobacco advertising were observed in large cities and province such as Hanoi, Hochiminh and Quang Ninh, where the high density of business stores may pose challenges for local authorities to conduct regular monitoring and enforcement, especially given limited human resources. In contrast, the low violation rate in Lao Cai (3.7%) may reflect better local compliance, fewer retail outlets, or more effective local enforcement mechanisms. These findings are consistent with previous studies that also mentioned higher advertising violations in largest cities compared to other provinces (7, 11).

Posters remained the most common method of tobacco advertising, consistent with findings from earlier studies in Vietnam (7, 11). Similar to previous studies (7), pushcarts and convenience stores were more likely to feature such advertisements, emphasizing the need for targeted enforcement in these retail formats.

Violations of tobacco promotion bans

Although the rate of tobacco promotion violations at POS (4.9%) was much lower than that of advertising violations, it remains similar to the rate reported in 2015 (10) and is even higher than the rate reported in 2017 (1.6%) (11) and 2018 (1.7%) (12). This indicates that promotion violations are still concerning, particularly due to their potential to influence price-sensitive populations such as youth and low-income smokers.

The most common promotional strategies included “bulk purchase and discount offers” and “exchanging used tobacco packs for new packs or for money”, both of which were

recorded at a rate of 1.8%. These practices were especially prevalent in Dak Lak (9% for used-pack exchange) and Hanoi (3.3% bulk purchase and discount offers, and 6% for promotional price), suggesting targeted marketing efforts by the tobacco industry in these areas. Notably, no promotion violations were recorded in Lao Cai, which is consistent with its low advertising violation rate.

Interestingly, rural areas recorded a higher rate of promotion violations (5.9%) than urban areas (4.0%), which contrasts with the previous findings (7). This may indicate a shift in industry focus toward rural populations, possibly due to reduced oversight or growing markets.

Violations of tobacco display bans

Violations of tobacco display ban remain high, with an overall rate of 40.9%. However, this represents a great decrease compared to previous reports from 2017 (11), 2015 (10) and the earlier study period (7), indicating some good progress.

Despite this improvement, substantial differences between provinces remain. Binh Duong reported the highest display violation rate (53.5%), while An Giang reported the lowest (13.0%). These discrepancies may be due to varying enforcement capacities, awareness levels among store owners, or differences in retail practices. For example, in provinces like An Giang, many cafés did not display tobacco products visibly but still sold them upon request. In contrast, provinces with a high density of convenience stores may unintentionally encourage visible displays due to store layout and commercial practices. Store owners’ limited awareness of the law specifically, the restriction on displaying more than one pack or one carton may also contribute to non-compliance (13). This highlights the importance of education and outreach to retail businesses.

Limitation: Although this study provides important updated evidence on violations of

tobacco advertising and promotion bans at POS in Vietnam, some limitations should be considered. While data collection was supported by a team of supervisors to help minimize inconsistencies, the use of observational checklists may still have introduced some observer bias. Additionally, the field-based observation method may not capture all forms of tobacco promotion, particularly those that are temporary, indirect, or deliberately designed to avoid detection, such as concealed displays or verbal promotions.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the current situation of enforcing tobacco control laws at the POS in Vietnam. Although there has been some progress in improving compliance with display regulations, violations related to advertising and promotion remain common, especially in large cities and province with high densities of retail outlets. The differences across regions and POS types suggest a need for context specific enforcement strategies. To reduce tobacco exposure and protect public health, particularly among vulnerable groups, coordinated efforts from government authorities and increased responsibility from POS owners are urgently needed.

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