

39 SHARE Fears of underage drinking as Starbucks opens Hong Kong flagship in Causeway Bay

Youth groups fear high foot traffic in Causeway Bay could make the 5,500 sq ft store – the city's largest – a place teens go for alcohol but the company says it is taking measures to ensure safety

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Alice Shen

Starbucks will serve an expanded alcoholic drinks menu when it opens its new flagship store in Hong Kong's teeming Causeway Bay on Friday, raising fears among some youth groups that the shop could be a haven for underage drinking.

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The 5,500 sq ft store, located at Lee Garden Three, is the largest in the city and the first to serve a complete menu of coffee-infused craft beers and cocktails. The company is

looking to offer its expanded drinks menu to other locations if the bar in Lee Garden is well-received, the company said.

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While the chain offers a limited alcohol menu at one of its locations in Central, some are worried that the shop's location in Causeway Bay – a popular district for teens younger than the city's legal drinking age of 18 – will attract underage drinkers.



Sky Siu, executive director at the youth charity KELY Support Group, said the shop should be proactive in helping stop underage drinking by alerting customers that some of the drinks contain alcohol, especially parents.

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"Coffee shops are a popular choice among young people for hanging out, reading or even studying. We recommend the shops being vigilant in checking IDs for those who may be younger than 18," Siu said.

Norbert Tan, executive director of Starbucks Hong Kong, said the company was taking measures to ensure that underage drinking would not be an issue, including displaying the city's drinking laws in the store.



"If needed, our [employees] will request identification to verify the age of the customers," Tan said.

Businesses caught selling alcohol to minors are subject to a HK\$50,000 (US\$6,371) fine, according to the law passed in February. The law will take effect on August 1.

Starbucks opened its biggest shop in Hong Kong at a time when it is closing about 150 cafes in the US. The world's largest coffee chain is facing competition both from high-end niche cafes such as Blue Bottle and fast-food stores such as McDonald's.

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There are about 250 independent coffee shops in Hong Kong, according to the Hong Kong Professional Coffee Association, while the city's biggest chain Starbucks owns 174 stores.

A Hong Kong-born mini-chain, The Coffee Academics, started from one store in 2012 and now has nine in some of the city's trendiest locations, including Taikoo Shing, Lan Kwai Fong, Causeway Bay and Repulse Bay. The speciality cafe which places an emphasis on "coffee culture" is expanding on to mainland China and Singapore.



"Retailers and restaurants – whether mass market or niche – need to constantly change winds as consumer trends shift," said Tom Birtwhistle, digital consulting director at consultancy PwC Hong Kong. "Niche brands that cater to specific customer segments or lifestyle are now really emerging."

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Starbucks' Hong Kong chief said the company had been looking for the location of its first flagship store in the city for about four years, given the city's limited shop space and high rents.

"We focus on Causeway Bay because it's got a great blend of residential, commercial, shoppers and tourists," Tan said. "There are not that many opportunities for a large store. We really waited for Lee Garden Three to be open."