

Branding Recognition Pathways and Marketing Adaptation in Teen Social Interactions

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Abstract. This study, using Yuanqi Forest as a case study, examines the relationship between "likes" and brand awareness and early loyalty, and explores whether this path shifts with age groups. The study tracked three campaign cycles: the first, back-to-school KOL promotion; the second, the release of limited-edition winter flavors; and the third, a regular mix during the spring exam preparation period. The results indicate that "likes" do not equal loyalty. In teenagers' information flows, "likes" are often fleeting signals of peer visibility. They are only remembered when emotional spurts are combined with clear brand anchors and reinforced repeatedly over a short period of time. This pattern is largely consistent across different activities and platforms, so a more reliable interpretation is that "likes" don't automatically translate into loyalty. Age can alter the path from "like" to "true identification." In short, age matters—the path from emotional resonance to memory, and from memory to early loyalty, is shaped by the daily needs of different groups. Practical advice is to create content based on age: For younger groups, place the brand name within the image, use easy-to-read and easy-to-say labels, and include short reminders to "catch" likes. For older groups, anchor emotions around relevant interests, contextual prompts, and lightweight community tasks to encourage referrals. Subsequent research should validate these pathways through experiments and longer observation periods, test whether algorithm exposure is a common moderator, and examine whether these age effects extend beyond beverage categories.

Keywords: Adolescent consumers; social media engagement; brand recognition; loyalty formation.

1. Introduction

This study examines the place of social media in the lives of contemporary adolescents and the role of "likes" as visible signals of peer affiliation [1,2]. A large number of likes can quickly capture attention, but unless the emotional response is coupled with clear brand cues and repeatedly reinforced in the short term, it may not translate into brand recognition or loyalty [3–5]. Because adolescents are particularly sensitive to emotional cues, understanding when and how these signals become memories is crucial for understanding the adolescent market.

This research has both practical and academic value. For practitioners, it clarifies the gap between superficial engagement metrics and enduring brand equity, preventing the misinterpretation of short-term buzz as long-term value, and provides age-specific creative pacing recommendations. For academics, it provides empirical evidence in the context of Chinese adolescents on the role of emotional cues in brand memory and early loyalty and proposes a replicable analytical framework.

The research unfolded along three main lines. First, examining the relationship between "like" behavior and brand recognition or short-term recall. Second, comparing differences in this pathway across age groups (middle school and high school) and third, which identify practically feasible combinations of emotional cues, brand anchors and reinforcement timing for designing creative sequences. The study began with a literature review of relevant research on adolescent media use, the emotional processing and brand memory to solidify conceptual definitions and contextualize causal pathways within established theory, which enhance interpretability and methodological focus.

Based on this foundation, the empirical component employed the case study of Genki Forest, a single brand in China, which employ process tracing and platform triangulation. Three campaigns were analyzed, back-to-school KOL promotion (September–October 2024), the release of limited-edition winter flavors (December 2024–January 2025) and the spring exam preparation season collaboration (April–May 2025). Public posts and comments on Douyin, TikTok and Xiaohongshu

were collected, which use a structured codebook to capture peer signals, sensory narratives, narrative anchors and value statements. Two trained coders reviewed labels for consistency; descriptive statistics were used to summarize clue and response distributions; and groups were formed by grade level to enable systematic comparisons. This design preserved the temporal sequence between creative input and observable outcomes, which reduce cross-brand noise by working within a single brand context and mitigated platform-specific bias through multi-platform comparisons. A coding manual and two-person review enhanced reliability. Compared to questionnaires or experimental approaches alone, this approach is more suitable for the rapidly evolving nature of youth content. The ultimate goal of the study was to map an age-specific path from "likes" to brand recognition and ultimately to early loyalty, and to refine actionable sequential principles. The research steps included a literature review, data collection and coding across three campaign rounds, a stratified descriptive and comparative analysis, and the synthesis of the evidence into practical guidance for managers.

The enquiries for the research are Research Question 1. To what extent do likes serve as predictors of brand loyalty among adolescents through short-term encoding of brand signals? Research Question 2. In what ways do these ties vary between middle school and high school groups? Research Question 3. In what manner should brands adjust their strategies according to age demographics?

2. Literature Review

Existing research generally focuses on the impact of social media interactions on brand cognition. The study by Pentina et al. provides direct evidence in this area. They systematically analyzed the relationship between user reactions and brand attitudes by tracking brand page posts across platforms and combining a short survey of users who were exposed to the posts [6]. The core finding of the study is that when social media posts can combine emotional appeals with clear brand cues, the number of "likes" they receive will increase significantly, and it can also effectively improve consumers' brand attitudes and brand top-of-mind recognition. However, when brand cues are vague, this positive effect will be weakened. The value of this study lies in its methodological innovation. It directly links user behavior data on the platform with consumer attitude data, avoiding treating "likes" as just an isolated number. However, its limitation is that the tracking window of the study is relatively short. Therefore, whether this attitude improvement driven by likes can last for a long time after the end of the marketing campaign remains to be further verified. Although "likes" can reflect immediate brand favorability, the academic community is more cautious about whether this positive attitude can be transformed into deeper brand loyalty. Moorman et al. used a combination of company-level panel data and consumer-level research to explore this more challenging issue. Their conclusions were very cautious. After controlling for variables such as consumer basic preferences, product distribution channels, and promotional activities, the surge in the number of "likes" on social media is often only a short-term timing effect or a peer-visibility effect driven by social visibility, and cannot directly prove that brand assets have achieved substantial growth [7]. The field experiment in Moorman et al.'s research further showed that the attitude improvement brought about by highly interactive posts is fragile and short-lived [8]. Unless the brand can provide diagnostic information clues in time and repeat them quickly, this positive effect will quickly fade. Therefore, Moorman et al.'s study believes that although "likes" may change synchronously with brand attitudes, the transformation from brand attitudes to brand loyalty is conditional and unstable [7]. This view is partially different from the optimistic conclusion implied by Pentina et al. The reason is not that the former is wrong, but because the two studies focus on different links in the process of consumer-brand relationship building [6]. Recent studies have begun to take user heterogeneity into account, especially the moderating role of age differences in social media information processing. You et al. introduced the perspective of developmental psychology and used a mixed design method to combine platform data with recall tests in a laboratory environment to compare the differences in social media interactions between junior high school and high school age adolescents [9]. The study found that younger adolescents (junior high school students) responded more quickly to social signals visible to their peers and

sensory novelty. They tended to like and post short comments more frequently; however, unless the content closely combined emotions with easy-to-understand brand anchors, their information encoding depth was shallow. In contrast, older adolescents (high school students) spent more time on information related to their own values, and they showed stronger recall effects when brand narratives were associated with their daily activities such as campus or sports. This study provides an important explanation for the aforementioned disagreement. It reveals that the conversion from “likes” to “brand awareness” is uneven among different age groups, and also explains why the brand loyalty conversion effect for young audiences appears relatively weak in the study of Moorman et al. [7].

Overall, the studies of Pentina et al. and You et al. both confirm that when brand cues are clearly visible, “like” behavior on social media can be used as an effective indicator to predict brand attitude and brand awareness [6,9]. At the same time, Moorman et al. also indirectly acknowledged the association between “likes” and attitudes, but emphasized its transience. The main inconsistency of the arguments is reflected in the main tension between the studies in the expectation of the long-term effects of “like” behavior. The study of Pentina et al. focused on the direct link of “like-attitude”, and its conclusions were relatively optimistic [6]. The study by Moorman et al. extended the analysis chain to the transformation from “attitude to loyalty”. By introducing more stringent dependent variables such as repeat purchases and wallet share, they came to a more cautious conclusion, believing that the transformation from attitude to loyalty is not inevitable. The study by You et al. played a reconciling and complementary role. It did not directly refute the previous two studies, but revealed the possible regulatory mechanism behind them. The study showed that the depth of cognitive processing varies among different age groups, which explains why the positive attitude represented by “likes” can sometimes be consolidated into brand memory (such as in older teenagers), while sometimes it is fleeting. This provides micro-level evidence for understanding how “fragile” and “conditional” the transformation from attitude to loyalty is [9]. This article starts with the conversion path from likes to loyalty, examines age differences and the role of emotional cues, brand anchors, and reinforcement timing, and fills the evidence gap on the age-based conversion mechanism.

3. Case Overview: Genki Forest

3.1. Brand Identity and Audience Targeting

Genki Forest targets Generation Z and uses “zero sugar plus trend” as its core identity. The highlighted background, white space and clear bottle shape shown in Figure 1 are recognizable visual assets that help form retrievable brand knowledge and shelf recall in attention-constrained situations [8]. The bottle body acts as a portable social badge in photos and short videos, connecting self and group identity [10]; “zero sugar” and light taste reduce the burden of understanding and support repeat purchases with easy-to-read labels and simple claims [11]. Figure 1 shows a brand identity board that includes core assets, a high-key background, plenty of white space and a clear bottle silhouette. This gives a sense of freshness and control, which aligns with the idea that a unique visual system helps people remember and identify a brand [12]. The messaging makes the drink sound like it fits in with an active and healthy lifestyle while ensuring it is fun and enjoyable. The drink sits somewhere between a sugary soda and a functional health drink. It has an aspirational tone without being too chill. The primary target audience is young people in urban areas, especially students, who need a drink that can be easily transported from class to events to casual gatherings [13]. The brand addresses two key needs of this group: social signaling, with the bottle acting as a portable badge in images and short videos; and personal control. Whereby zero sugar and a lighter taste reduce guilt and support everyday repetition. The communication tone emphasises optimism, mobility, and peer belonging. Pricing and pack formats keep repeat purchase accessible for students and young office workers. Copy favours short, memorable claims over expert jargon to aid quick recall. Taken together, these choices build a coherent identity that is easy to spot on screen and to recall at the shelf, a requirement for audiences with attention windows [14].



Fig. 1 Genki Forest Sparkling Water (White Peach) product shot

3.2. Social Media Strategies

In the observed campaigns, two strategies stood out in the use of social media. First, the brand worked with KOLs and campus-level influencers to boost peer exposure. This matches findings from communication and diffusion research, which suggest that peer signals, such as visible likes or comments can increase surface engagement among similar users [15]. Second, interaction-based incentives like “like and win” were used to drive participation. While these tactics often succeed in creating visible activity, prior research reminds us that this kind of symbolic support doesn’t always lead to real behavior change [16]. These approaches helped the brand gain visibility in fast-moving, peer-driven environments, especially during periods when emotions run high, like the start of a school term or the exam season. However, the rise in engagement metrics alone doesn’t confirm whether the brand message was truly remembered or valued. This gap led the study to look more closely at how visible reactions relate to recognition and early preference

4. Key Findings and Analysis

4.1. Likes and Brand Loyalty

In brand-produced videos, subtitles, and creator posts, likes are lightweight public signals used to manage peer relationships and maintain conversations. Likes peak in scenes such as friendship, daily school activities, and leisure entertainment, where collective laughter, coordinated movements, visual novelty, and musical rhythms are particularly prominent. This pattern is consistent with the social proof and peer visibility effects in adolescent media use: visible counts and clues about what classmates have done can shorten decision-making time and encourage rapid imitation [17]. Because the act of liking requires little effort, it is more like mutual recognition within the network of classmates and campus creators rather than a deliberate endorsement, which is consistent with the conclusion of low-elaborate responses in persuasion research [18]. Therefore, as an indicator of brand loyalty, the power of likes itself is limited. Loyalty requires the co-occurrence of emotional micro-moments with brand knowledge, at least a readable name or label, to be encoded in memory so that subsequent choices can retrieve it. Consistent with customer-based brand equity theory, brands benefit when the package or brand name is prominent at the moment of impulse and is repeated in the short term; otherwise, this behavior primarily supports social maintenance and rarely generates subsequent recognition [19]. Comments surrounding such posts are dominated by short exclamations and emoticons, with few mentions of product attributes; however, when posts contain classroom buzzwords such as challenges or inside jokes, the number of shares increases. Taken together, these observations suggest that a path from likes to emotion or peer visibility is common, but the transition

from recognition to early loyalty only occurs when there is a clear brand anchor and it is reinforced shortly after the like [20].

Core audience is middle-school and high-school students. Observation of public interactions indicates two participation styles consistent with adolescent media research. Middle-school audiences are emotion-driven, they echo peer cues, visual novelty and music beats, often tapping like within seconds, a pattern aligned with peer-influence and social-visibility effects [21]. Conversation depth is limited, and brand memory remains weak unless sensory storytelling is paired with a readable label and immediate name repetition, followed by near-term reinforcement [22]. High-school audiences are more evaluative, they still enjoy peer scenes and sensory cues but dwell on value propositions such as health, self-discipline and productivity; their comments more often reference flavour, price and usage occasions, matching evidence that older teens use identity and routine to guide judgments [23]. Resharing is more likely when posts provide an identity statement or a practical tip, reflecting mechanisms of social proof and shareability under arousal [24]. Across both groups, the most reliable route from reaction to recognition occurs when three elements align, a relevant social scene, an emotional sensory cue, and an explicit brand anchor visible at the emotional moment and reinforced shortly after, which increases the probability of encoding and later retrieval [25].

4.2. Creative Sequencing Adaptation in Branding

Large reaction counts do not guarantee memory for the brand name or variant. Across the campaigns we reconstructed, users frequently recalled a color, a sound effect or the face of a creator but where unsure which brand had been featured. Several recurring design choices weaken encoding, labels not oriented to camera or shown only at the opening or closing second; playful captions without name repetition or a short verbal hook; music and edits that pull attention away from text or logos; lighting or filters that reduce label-background contrast. These choices make clips lively yet separate the emotional peak from the brand cue, inviting generic memory. Branding improves when three conditions coincide, the label is visible during an emotional beat, the copy provides a brief pronounceable name cue, and a prompt invite recall with quick follow-up exposure through a second post or creator reply within a short window. Concrete formats include a 7–9 s second post that freezes on the pack at the same beat with on-screen text “Genki Forest · Winter Peach” and a voiced hook “say the name,” or a creator reply pinned under the original with a 3–5 s close-up labeling the variant and a line such as “brand is Genki Forest; see 0:02, save for your study break.” Under this sequence, short-run recall rises; without it, consolidation fails and the like remains a mood trace rather than a step toward equity.

5. Integrated Theoretical Model and Contribution

This study develops a like–emotion–cognition model that treats visible engagement as social currency rather than immediate brand equity [26]. In typical campaigns, liking serves as a public cue that elicits affect and peer visibility; only when attention is simultaneously directed to an explicit brand anchor, such as a readable name or package, can that arousal consolidate into brand knowledge and later behavior [27]. Evidence indicates that conversion commonly fails at the juncture between emotion and cognitive anchoring when the cue is absent or ambiguous at the emotional peak, and it fails again between recognition and behavior when reinforcement does not arrive quickly enough to stabilize memory [28]. Age differences moderate these processes: middle-school audiences are guided by classroom social context and sensory novelty, producing rapid likes and short comments but weak recall unless the name or label is shown and repeated immediately; high-school audiences allocate attention by value fit with study, health, or self-discipline routines, which increases brand mentions and occasional advocacy when narratives are framed to those routines [29]. The model thus clarifies when memory is likely to form, identifies typical breakpoints on the path from liking to loyalty, and motivates age-fit interaction strategies that pair emotional cues with explicit anchors and timely reinforcement [30].

6. Conclusion

This study shows that a visible “like” functions mainly as social currency rather than durable brand equity, and that it contributes to recognition only when the moment of affect coincides with a salient brand anchor, such as a readable name or pack and is reinforced soon after. By specifying a like–emotion–cognition pathway, this research locates two common breakpoints in conversion, the shift from feeling to naming, and the subsequent move from recognition to early behavior; both links are systematically moderated by age. Middle-school audiences, propelled by peer context and sensory novelty, require anchor-first creative and rapid reminders to prevent shallow encoding, whereas high-school audiences convert more reliably when the same emotional cues are embedded in value-consistent routines around study, health, or sport and paired with light participatory tasks. The practical implication is to tailor interaction by age. Future research should employ eye-tracking and controlled experiments to verify micro-attention mechanisms and test whether media type raises anchor salience or merely amplifies social currency.

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