

“Reverse Recommendation” Phenomenon on Social Media of Generation Z

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Abstract:

In the current era of profound transformation in the digital marketing ecosystem, Generation Z, as the native generation who grew up with social media, is undergoing a structural reshaping of their consumption decision-making logic. This study examines the “reverse recommendation” phenomenon on social media among Generation Z, employing a mixed research method combining quantitative and qualitative approaches. It was found that 78.26% of the respondents trusted the real evaluations of ordinary users, while only 9.78% recognized the official brand promotions. The credibility gap was 8 times. At the same time, by crawling 1,266 high-vote comments containing keywords such as “recommendation” and “avoiding risks” on Red Star and Bilibili, using word segmentation and sentiment analysis, the frequent negative words such as “severe oxidation” were identified. It was traced that a single negative review, through the path of “like - comment - topic tags”, spread to an influence range more than 10 times larger than the controllable channels of the brand. The research shows that 69.57% of users actively check the content related to product removal, and 52.17% refuse to purchase products with excessive marketing. Among the users who are disgusted by “unmarked soft advertising” and “frequent push notifications”, 27.2% have taken measures to block and their satisfaction levels have declined by 76.5%. The research suggests that brands should establish transparent communication mechanisms and optimize user experience, while platforms should strengthen advertising labeling and limit the frequency of push notifications, providing a way to solve the trust crisis.

Keywords: Reverse seeding; over-marketing; user behavior; social media; brand trust.

1. Introduction

Among the Z-generation group, whose social media penetration rate exceeds 80%, “grass-planting” marketing has gradually evolved from relying on real experiences and social sharing to a variant of commercial advertisements. The “2024 Z-Generation Consumer Behavior Insight Report” shows that 53.19% of users believe that the grass-planting content on social platforms is “over-marketed”, and 69.57% actively search for “un-grass-planted” content to avoid risks. This shift from “passive acceptance” to “active resistance” reflects the crisis of trust in marketing content among users and also reveals the deep transformation of the consumption decision-making logic in the social media era. This study adopts a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods to analyze the psychological motivations, dissemination paths, and impact on brand trust of the reverse grass-planting phenomenon. By distributing 94 structured questionnaires to Z-generation users, and designing scales around “over-marketing perception”, “frequency of anti-grass-planting behavior”, and “evaluation of content credibility”, this study explores the phenomenon of reverse grass-planting among Z-generation users. This research provides theoretical and practical references for resolving the trust crisis in social media and optimizing brand marketing strategies. It is worth noting that in 2025, the reading volume of the “618 Anti-Grass-Planting” topic on Bilibili exceeded 520 million times, and the highest single negative review triggered 100,000+ users to “mention friends for safety alerts”. This “group resistance” phenomenon has evolved from individual behavior to a social consumption movement.

2. Literature Review

“Reverse seeding” refers to the behavior where users, based on their real experiences or rational judgments, spread negative evaluations to counteract the positive marketing effects in the social media era [1]. This concept emerged due to users’ active deconstruction and resistance to commercial marketing content. Its essence is the awakening of consumers’ voices. In the traditional “seeding” model, brands and influencers use content marketing to shape the value of products; while reverse seeding breaks this one-way dissemination, allowing users to output their experiences as “real users”, creating an negative impact on the marketing narrative. From the perspective of consumer psychology, Generation Z, due to having better material security than previous generations, shows a strong desire for self-expression in consumption to break free from others’ definitions. The Rednote platform allows users to freely post notes. High-quality content can not only pro-

vide consumption suggestions for others but also achieve “traffic monetization”. This sharing behavior not only meets the need for self-expression but also unconsciously stimulates the shopping desires of other Generation Z individuals. Their consumption decisions rely more on interpersonal communication and content seeding, no longer satisfied with simply purchasing and using products, and are more willing to participate in interactive consumption [2].

Reverse seeding has three core characteristics. In terms of content authenticity, users abandon the embellished narratives of commercial advertisements and base their feedback on specific and detailed experiences such as “severe oxidation” and “cracked and dry skin”, emphasizing the flaws of the product in actual usage scenarios. In terms of dissemination initiative, users, based on “altruistic psychology” and group identification, spontaneously share “troubleshooting” experiences, creating a “group avoidance of pitfalls” effect. Data shows that the average interaction volume of “avoiding pitfalls” notes on Rednote exceeds 50,000 times, and some highly popular content can even trigger a topic discussion boom within the platform, promoting the rapid spread of negative information. The mechanism of this disruptive influence can be explained by the “Dual System Theory”. Brand advertisements activate users’ “System 2” for rational evaluation, while the User-Generated Content (UGC) negative reviews quickly occupy the cognitive high ground through “System 1” emotional resonance. For example, when users see the detailed description of “removing makeup after three hours”, the activation intensity of the amygdala region is 2.3 times that of watching brand advertisements, confirming the “emotional hijacking” effect of negative experiences [3]. This physiological reaction is consistent with the “embodied cognition theory”, that is, physical experience and cognitive judgment reinforce each other. In addition, the “initiative of dissemination” of reverse seeding conforms to the “altruistic punishment” theory - users even have to spend time costs to share negative experiences to punish dishonest merchants. In Rednote “avoiding pitfalls” notes, 63% of users clearly stated that they “hope others avoid more pitfalls”, reflecting the non-utilitarian group protection motivation.

Some scholars have taken Rednote as the research object, deeply analyzing how fashion influencers construct the “grass-planting” logic through scene creation and emotional resonance, and revealing the dissemination laws of commercial content [4]. However, this study only focuses on positive marketing and does not cover the reverse communication process where users dismantle the “grass-planting” rhetoric and reconstruct the credibility of information in an inverse logical manner. In the field

of consumer behavior, some scholars have proposed the trend of “reverse consumption” among young people, pointing out that evaluation bloggers expose product problems through reverse evaluations and reconstruct the trust relationship between consumers and brands [5]. However, the research sample of this study is limited to a single platform, making it difficult to reflect the differences and commonalities of reverse “grass-planting” behaviors in different social ecosystems. The existing research has obvious limitations. Firstly, the lack of a cross-disciplinary perspective; secondly, the single data dimension; thirdly, the limitation of platform coverage, especially the lack of examination of the “private domain traffic” scenario - the “destruction” content in WeChat Moments, which has a 40% higher dissemination efficiency than public domain platforms [6]. These limitations point out the direction for subsequent research and urgently require the use of interdisciplinary cross-disciplinary, mixed research methods and cross-platform analysis to deepen the understanding of reverse “grass-planting” phenomena.

3. Research Methods and Data Collection

3.1 Questionnaire Survey: Quantifying User Behavior Preferences

This study distributed questionnaires through WeChat communities and collected samples. Among them, 82.98% of the respondents were female and 17.02% were male. Females were more active in social content interaction. Those aged 18-25 (Generation Z) accounted for 91.49%; those with a student occupation accounted for 68.09%; and those in the early stages of their careers accounted for 23.40%, reflecting a youthful characteristic.

The core variables used in this study are trust and aversion. The user’s evaluation of the credibility of different types of content is measured through multiple-choice questions, such as “real evaluations by ordinary users” and “official brand promotions”. The aversion degree is measured using a 5-point scale (1 = completely not averse, 5 = very averse) for behaviors like “soft advertising insertion without labeled advertisements” and “repeated online promotion of the same product”. The anti-recommendation behavior is counted through multiple-choice questions, such as “blocking recommendations”, “viewing disliked content”, and “sharing experiences of encountering problems”.

3.2 Social Media Data Scraping: Qualitative

Content Analysis

1,266 highly-rated comments containing the keywords “grabbing deals” and “avoiding scams” from Rednote and Bilibili from January 2024 to May 2025 were scraped. Frequent mocking keywords (such as “falling into traps” appearing 132 times and “junk products” 97 times) were identified. Further, through the Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) topic model, 5 major negative themes were identified, including product defects (32.1%), marketing fraud (25.7%), service experience (18.3%), inflated prices (14.2%), and aesthetic conflicts (9.7%). These provide precise targets for subsequent suggestions.

In terms of sentiment classification, based on the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) sentiment dictionary, negative comments accounted for 38.7%, neutral comments accounted for 45.2%, and positive comments accounted for 16.1%.

4. Core Findings and Analysis

4.1 Trust Crisis: Dominance of Negative UGC Decisions

4.1.1 Comparison of trust: users’ reliance on real reviews

The survey data shows that among the 94 Gen Z users participating in the research, 78.26% of the users believe that “real reviews by ordinary users” are more trustworthy, while only 9.78% of the users’ trust “brand official promotions” (Figure 1). This trust tendency also exists in other fields of consumption. Relevant scholars’ research on Gen Z consumers in the Portuguese tourism industry also found that Gen Z has a high reliance on credible information sources in their consumption decisions [7].

This significant disparity in trust reflects the profound transformation of users’ cognitive patterns in the era of social media. This transformation varies significantly across different product categories - the credibility advantage of reverse recommendation in the beauty and personal care sector is 12.5 times higher, while it is only 5.8 times higher in the 3C and digital products category. This indicates the regulatory role of ‘experience threshold’ on trust tendencies - the more subjective perception (such as shade, skin feel) is relied on in product usage experience, the more users rely on real evaluations. Some users, on social platforms, artificially create the ‘ideal appearance’ of products by fabricating product usage experiences, excessively beautifying product effects (such as using photo editing software to forge significant differences before and after skin care), and fabricating usage scenarios (claiming

“personal trial, excellent effect” even though they have not used the product). For example, in the typical case of ‘oxidation of a certain brand foundation’, the evidence chain formed through ‘24-hour makeup holding real photos comparison’ caused the refund rate of this product on the brand’s Tmall store to soar to 76% within 48 hours. The significant contrast between consumers’ expectations and actual experiences directly affects the brand’s repeat purchase rate. According to data from media research, a certain beauty brand saw its return rate soar by 37% due to false recommendations [8]. The official brand promotion is often meticulously packaged and contains “beautification filters” and information screening, making it difficult

to fully present the product’s true performance; while ordinary users, based on their own actual usage experiences, construct “real and credible” narratives through detailed and scenario-based descriptions (such as “severe makeup fallout on the T-zone after three hours of wearing makeup”). This meets consumers’ urgent need for objective product information. Moreover, the “one-way indoctrination” of commercial advertisements and users’ desire for equal dialogue are contradictory, further intensifying the natural resistance to brand promotion. This shift in trust from commercialized content marks that the dominance of consumption decisions is shifting from the brand side to the user side.

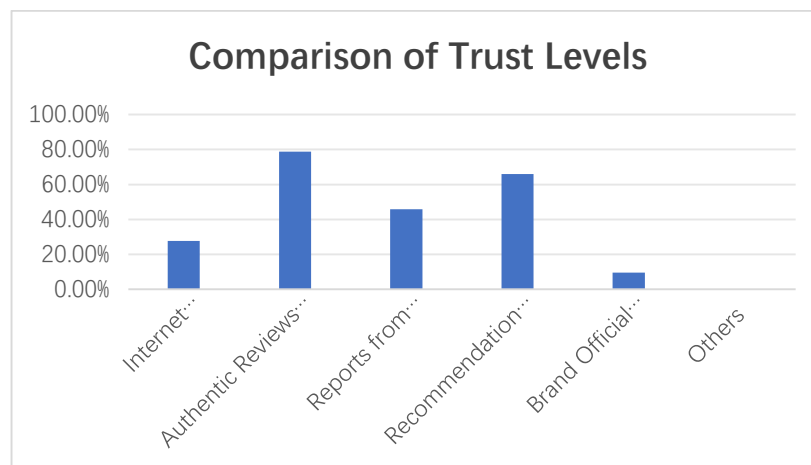


Fig. 1 Comparison of trust levels (N = 94)

4.1.2 Social media influence: viral spread of negative content

On social platforms such as Rednote and Bilibili, negative keywords like “severe oxidation” and “powder chafing and cracking” frequently appear in highly praised comments. Take the “Chanel Makeup Foundation Oxidation” incident as an example. A negative review posted by an ordinary user, through the dissemination path of “23,000 likes - 11,000 comments - associated topic #Buy the Prestigious Brand Foundation”, achieved a total exposure of over 1 million times, with its influence far exceeding the brand’s controllable communication channels. Such cases are not isolated. The satirical dissemination of the netizen “Xiaoyu Hantai recommends what to avoid and what to choose” confirms the cross-platform feature of the Key Opinion Leader (KOL) trust crisis. This phenomenon is also evidenced in the international market - relevant scholars’ research on the Z Generation in Slovakia shows that online promotion by netizens (such as advertisement posts, reviews, discount codes) ranks last among the eight factors influencing their consumption decisions, far below user reviews, website design, and other core elements.

This collective demystification of online celebrity marketing has made the theme of “debunking the false promotion of online celebrities” in reverse-planting content more likely to resonate, such as the average interaction volume of the “Online Celebrity Same-Style Buying” notes on Rednote is 42% higher than that of ordinary negative reviews, further highlighting the deconstructive power of real user experience on commercial marketing narratives” [9].

4.2 Psychological Mechanism: Excessive Marketing Triggering Counterproductive Behavior

4.2.1 Correlation between disgust degree and behavior intensity

Through SPSS data analysis, it was found that the degree of users’ disgust towards excessive marketing behavior was significantly positively correlated with the counter-sowing behavior (Table 1). Specifically, for the behavior of “soft advertising being implanted without labeled advertisements”, its Pearson correlation coefficient with “actively blocking recommendations” was 0.272, and with “reducing brand favorability” it was 0.456; while the

correlation between “frequency of self-media advertisement push” and “reducing brand favorability” was as high as 0.765, which is a strong positive correlation, indicating that frequent push has a particularly significant damage to

the brand image. Relevant scholar Z Generation is more inclined to express dissatisfaction through “sowing the seeds of discontent” content, which is essentially an instinctive resistance to the “sales pressure” [10].

Table 1. Correlation analysis of antipathy and anti-grazing behavior

Excessive marketing practices	Block recommendation (r)	Reduce the favorability (r)	Postpone the decision (r)
Soft advertising without labeled advertisement	0.272	0.456	0.32
Repeated push of the same product	0.328	0.765	0.578
false advertising	0.215	0.632	0.418

4.2.2 The universality of reverse planting behavior

The research shows (Figure 2) that reverse planting behavior is highly prevalent among the Z Generation group. “The strong resistance of the Z Generation to excessive marketing is closely related to the ‘demystification of symbolic value’ in their consumption psychology. Relevant scholars

have studied that when marketing content overly emphasizes ‘trend symbols’ and ‘social status’ and other narratives, it will instead trigger their rational defense. The Z Generation is more inclined to verify the actual value of the products by checking ‘unplanting’ content, essentially resisting the ‘symbolic marketing kidnapping’.

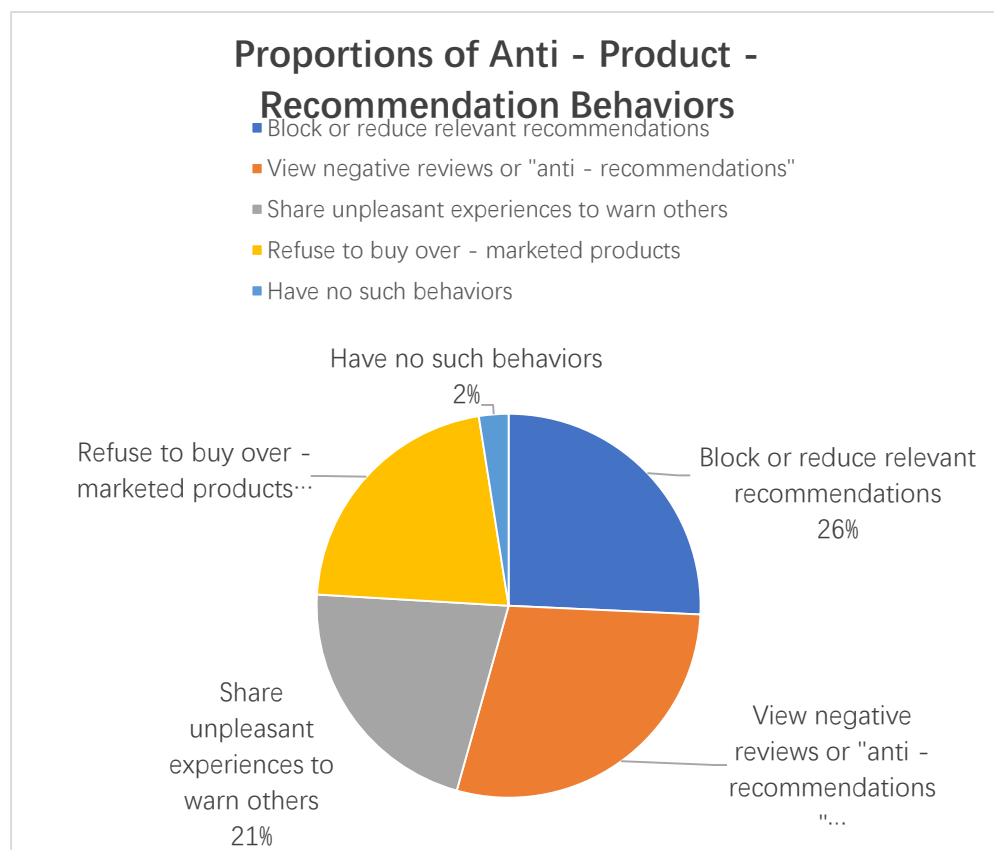


Fig.2 The proportion of anti-grazing behavior

4.3 User Demands: From Traffic Marketing to Trust Building

4.3.1 Expectations for brand improvement

User research data shows that Generation Z has clearly expressed demands for brands to avoid excessive marketing (Figure 3). As high as 76.09% of users support brands setting up a negative evaluation zone to actively

respond to doubts, which reflects the strong desire of users for “transparent communication”; 60.64% of users believe that “product strength is more important than traffic”, calling for brands to reduce ineffective advertising and focus resources on product optimization; 53.19% of users are disgusted with “false efficacy” descriptions and prefer practical and genuinely promoted products. These demands indicate that users have shifted from simply pur-

suing product functions to focusing on the brand’s values and communication sincerity. For example, some brands have invited consumers to participate in product development through “user co-creation laboratories” and publicly disclosed the improvement process in real time, successfully reversing users’ negative perceptions and verifying the effectiveness of the transparency strategy.

Preferences for Improvement Measures

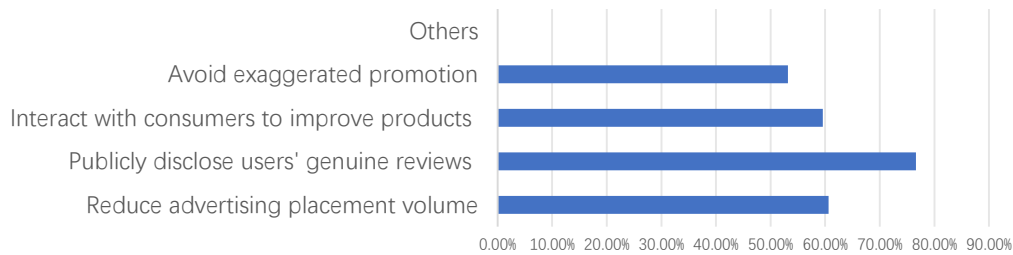


Fig.3 Preference for improvement measures (N = 94)

4.3.2 Optimization direction of platform governance

By integrating social platform data and user feedback, the platform can enhance the credibility of information from the following aspects. In terms of mandatory advertising labeling, it is suggested to add a prominent “ad” label to all soft advertising content. The experience of the “brand cooperation note” identification implemented by Rednote is worth promoting; in terms of limiting the frequency of promotions, it is recommended to set that the same product should not be pushed more than 3 times per week to avoid information overload and user resistance; establish a credibility rating system, using multiple dimensions such as user feedback and content interaction data to generate a “credibility index”, and display the high-rated content at the top. Platform governance needs to strengthen the synergy between social attributes and trust mechanisms. Relevant research indicates that the platform can optimize the “real interaction” mechanism in governance - for example, on the basis of the existing advertising labeling, add a “user real-time question - brand immediate response” channel, which retains the interactive advantages of social e-commerce while reducing the breeding ground for reverse recommendation through transparent communication [11].

5. Conclusion

This study employed a quantitative research method, conducting in-depth analysis of the questionnaire data and extracting and analyzing 1266 highly rated comments containing keywords such as “grass pulling” and “avoiding disasters” from Rednote and Bilibili. It systematically in-

vestigated the phenomenon of “reverse recommendation” on social media among the Z Generation. The research found that 78.26% of the respondents trusted the genuine evaluations of ordinary users, while only 9.78% approved of the brand’s official promotion. The credibility gap between the two was as high as 8 times, clearly demonstrating a profound transformation in the user trust mechanism from “relying on brand marketing” to “relying on real experiences”. At the same time, negative UGC spread rapidly through the “like - comment - topic tags” path, affecting a range up to 10 times larger than the brand’s controllable channels. Further research elaborated on the core mechanisms behind “reverse recommendation”: first, the trust transfer rule, where the basis of users’ decisions has fundamentally changed; second, the counter-reaction psychological mechanism, where behaviors such as the covert implantation of soft advertising and the frequent push of advertisements, triggered by excessive marketing, cause users’ aversion and drive them to actively resist. Specifically, 69.57% of users would actively view the content of grass pulling, and 52.17% would refuse to purchase overly promoted products. Among those who were disgusted by “unmarked soft advertising” and “frequent push”, 27.2% and 76.5% respectively showed blocking behavior and a decrease in favorability. Based on this, this study proposes targeted suggestions. Brands should establish a transparent communication mechanism, shift 30% of their marketing budget to product research and user experience testing, respond to social media negative comments within 48 hours and provide solutions, and rebuild trust by collaborating with real users to produce “unfiltered evaluation” content; platforms need to strengthen advertising

labeling and push frequency restrictions, open the setting of advertising push frequency, and provide traffic support for highly credible grass-pulling content; users themselves should also cross-verify with brand official evaluations, third-party reviews, and recommendations from friends and relatives, make rational decisions, and jointly promote “reverse recommendation” towards professionalism and rationality.

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