

Beyond Traffic Subsidies: Fair Organic Discoverability for Small Brands on Content-Commerce Platforms

Yilin Niu

*School of Communication, Hong Kong Baptist University, Hong Kong, China
nyl82271199@gmail.com*

Abstract. Content-commerce platforms have become critical infrastructures through which small brands gain visibility, build trust, and create customer value. Rather than asking whether platforms should unconditionally subsidize new brands with traffic, this paper examines whether eligible small brands can retain a meaningful opportunity for organic discovery before paid promotion or content templating becomes structurally necessary. When organic discoverability weakens, small brands may be pushed towards paid visibility dependence and content imitation, which can reduce brand differentiation and platform ecosystem health. Adopting a literature-based conceptual framework approach, this paper synthesizes research on multistakeholder recommendation, producer fairness, exposure fairness, algorithmic visibility, and platform rent. It proposes Fair Organic Discoverability as a producer-fairness concept for content-commerce platforms, defined as a quality-gated opportunity for eligible small brands to obtain meaningful non-paid exposure to relevant users based on content and product relevance rather than paid visibility. The framework introduces a Quality-Gated Discovery Logic, two diagnostic indicators (Eligible New Brand Discovery Rate and Organic-to-Paid Visibility Ratio), and Content Homogenization Risk as a downstream ecosystem outcome. Its key insight is that producer fairness should be assessed not by traffic subsidies, but by whether platforms preserve a quality-gated path for valuable small brands to be discovered and trusted.

Keywords: Content-commerce platforms, Producer fairness, Fair organic discoverability, Algorithmic visibility, Platform traffic rent

1. Introduction

In the digital era, content-commerce platforms increasingly mediate brand discovery, trust formation, and conversion through recommendation systems. For small brands, organic visibility is especially important because they usually lack established brand awareness, advertising budgets, and stable consumer bases. Their challenge is therefore not only to generate sales, but also to obtain opportunities to be discovered through content circulation and recommendation.

However, platforms cannot distribute visibility equally across all brands. They must balance consumer experience, product quality, conversion efficiency, revenue, and platform credibility. Abdollahpouri et al. argue that recommender systems serve multiple stakeholders and objectives [1]. When recommendation and commercialization mechanisms favor short-term engagement, proven

conversion, sponsored visibility, and replicable content, established brands may gain advantages over less-established brands. Eligible small brands may consequently lose organic discovery opportunities and become increasingly dependent on paid promotion or content imitation.

Existing research provides a basis for examining this problem. Abdollahpouri et al. state that end users are not the only stakeholders affected by recommendation outcomes, while Patro et al. show that customer-centric recommendation may create unfair exposure among producers [1, 2]. However, existing research does not fully explain producer fairness in small-brand organic discoverability on content-commerce platforms. This paper, therefore, asks: How do recommendation and commercialization mechanisms affect small brands' fair organic discoverability? How can platforms protect organic discovery opportunities without undermining consumer trust and commercialization goals? Using a literature-based conceptual framework, this study develops the concept of Fair Organic Discoverability and proposes a framework for examining quality-gated, non-paid discovery opportunities for eligible small brands.

2. Literature review

2.1. Multistakeholder and two-sided recommendation

Abdollahpouri et al. state that recommender systems are typically evaluated by their ability to satisfy end users' needs and interests. They also acknowledge that this user-centered focus is appropriate, because users would not use recommender systems if recommendations failed to match their interests. However, the same study argues that this focus becomes insufficient when the end user is treated as the only stakeholder in recommendation outcomes. Product providers and system-level objectives may also need to be considered when they differ from end-user perspectives. This is relevant to content-commerce platforms, where recommendation outcomes affect consumers, brands, merchants, creators, and the platform itself. Abdollahpouri et al. further identify fairness and balance as system-level objectives that may sometimes conflict with individual preferences [1]. In this sense, content-commerce recommendation should be understood as a multistakeholder allocation system rather than simply a neutral preference-matching tool.

Patro et al. frame two-sided platforms as systems that include customers on one side and producers on the other. Their work shows that customer-centric recommendations may generate unfair exposure distribution among producers, while a purely producer-centric design may also become unfair to customers [2]. The task is therefore not to maximize small-brand exposure, but to balance consumer trust, platform revenue, and producer fairness.

2.2. Producer fairness and exposure fairness

Exposure is not a neutral resource on content-commerce platforms. It determines whether brands can gain attention, interaction, orders, reviews, and the behavioral data required for further recommendation. Ye et al. investigate seller-side fairness in online marketplaces where many sellers and items are not sufficiently exposed to customers. They suggest that insufficient exposure raises concerns about revenue loss and reduced marketplace diversity [3]. Producer fairness is therefore not only a seller-protection issue, it is also related to the long-term diversity of platform supply. Yang et al. argue that ranking items only by relevance can lead to unfair exposure and opportunities for item producers or providers. Persistent exposure unfairness may force providers to leave and eventually reduce consumers' purchase options [4]. These studies show that supply-side fairness can feed back into consumer value and platform health.

Yet Deldjoo et al. highlight that fairness research in recommender systems often relies on abstract operationalizations and does not always specify what fairness should mean in particular application contexts [5]. This paper therefore specifies producer fairness in the context of content-commerce branding as Fair Organic Discoverability rather than as equal exposure or unconditional traffic allocation.

2.3. Platform traffic rent and algorithmic visibility

In content-commerce environments, brand visibility is mediated by recommendation systems, and platform control over attention shapes brand opportunity. O'Reilly et al. conceptualize algorithmic attention rents as a form of platform market power created through algorithmically mediated attention allocation [6]. This implies that platform visibility is not only a technical ranking outcome but also a commercializable attention resource. Dash et al. examine organic and sponsored related-item recommendations on Amazon and find that sponsored recommendations are more biased toward Amazon private-label products than organic recommendations [7]. Although their study focuses on Amazon, it demonstrates that the distinction between organic and paid recommendations can have important fairness implications.

Building on this logic, this paper uses platform traffic rent as a conceptual extension to describe the value extracted from brands' dependence on algorithmically controlled visibility. When organic discovery becomes insufficient, brands may increasingly rely on paid promotion to obtain visibility, creating a potential dependence on platform-controlled traffic. Such visibility scarcity can also reshape content strategies. Huang and Ye find that Chinese short-video platforms cultivate creators through staged mechanisms organized around traffic rewards, algorithmic visibility, and advertiser satisfaction [8]. This supports the concern that platform visibility rules may encourage brands and creators to adapt their content formats to algorithmic and commercial incentives.

3. Conceptual framework: Fair Organic Discoverability

3.1. Defining Fair Organic Discoverability

Building on multistakeholder recommendation, two-sided fairness, and seller-side exposure fairness research, this paper conceptualizes Fair Organic Discoverability as a producer fairness concept for content-commerce platforms [1-3]. Fair Organic Discoverability refers to the extent to which eligible small or new brands can obtain meaningful non-paid exposure to relevant users before becoming structurally dependent on paid promotion or template-driven algorithmic adaptation. The concept is not a call for unconditional traffic support or equal exposure distribution. Instead, it emphasizes a quality-gated, low-risk, verifiable, and withdrawable path of organic discovery. This path responds to three stakeholder concerns at the same time: consumers need trustworthy recommendations, platforms need sustainable commercialization, and small brands need opportunities to be discovered and evaluated. Fair Organic Discoverability therefore translates producer fairness from an abstract exposure concern into a diagnosable brand management problem.

3.2. Quality-Gated Discovery Logic

Fair Organic Discoverability must be built on quality gates, otherwise, it may be misunderstood as a visibility benefit for low-quality brands. This paper therefore proposes a Quality-Gated Discovery Logic composed of three stages: ex-ante eligibility gate, controlled organic testing, and post-

exposure trust signal. The ex-ante eligibility gate determines whether a brand qualifies for a small-scale organic discovery test. Eligibility does not mean that a brand has already proven superior quality. It means that the brand has passed minimum trust and compliance requirements, such as verified identity, product compliance, basic fulfillment and after-sales capacity, non-exaggerated content claims, and the absence of obvious manipulation risks. Controlled organic testing then provides eligible brands with a small, targeted, and withdrawable window of organic exposure. Post-exposure trust signals determine whether exposure should be expanded, based on evidence such as return or refund rate, complaint rate, review quality, repurchase or retention, and consistency between content claims and product experience. Ge et al. warn that recommender systems may generate undesired effects on users, items, producers, platforms, and society, including compromised trust and unfair treatment [9]. They further frame trustworthy recommendation as involving fairness, privacy-aware recommendation, robustness, and user control [9]. Fair Organic Discoverability should therefore be embedded in a trustworthy recommendation logic: the eligibility gate determines entry, while post-exposure trust signals determine continuation.

3.3. Core indicator 1: Eligible New Brand Discovery Rate

The first core diagnostic indicator is Eligible New Brand Discovery Rate, which evaluates whether eligible new or historically under-exposed brands still receive organic discovery opportunities. It measures the share of effective organic exposure allocated to such brands within a specific product category and time window. The indicator should be category-specific because competition intensity, quality risk, and consumer decision costs vary across categories. It should also be time-bounded within a predefined entry period (such as 30, 60, or 90 days, as illustrative examples rather than empirically validated optimal windows).

The purpose is not to determine whether a single post becomes viral but whether the platform provides a continuing small-scale test of organic discovery. The indicator must also be eligibility-gated, observing only brands that have passed the basic qualification threshold. This prevents producer fairness from becoming open-ended traffic redistribution. Ye et al. identify insufficient seller and item exposure as a key fairness concern in online marketplaces [3]. Eligible New Brand Discovery Rate adapts this concern to the specific question of whether eligible small brands can still access an organic market entry pathway. Yang et al. warn that persistent exposure unfairness may reduce provider participation and eventually leave consumers with fewer purchase options [4]. The indicator is therefore designed not to maximize new-brand exposure but to diagnose whether the platform still preserves a natural entry point for qualified small brands.

3.4. Core indicator 2: Organic-to-Paid Visibility Ratio

The second core indicator is Organic-to-Paid Visibility Ratio. It evaluates whether small brands can still obtain meaningful visibility through organic recommendation rather than becoming structurally dependent on paid promotion. The indicator compares the relative share of a small brand's visibility derived from organic recommendation and paid promotion. It is not anti-advertising and does not reject platform commercialization. Paid promotion can be a legitimate commercial tool. The problem emerges when visibility becomes nearly impossible without payment, because visibility then shifts from brand-value validation to purchased market access. This problem can be understood through the concept of platform traffic rent. O'Reilly et al. conceptualize algorithmic attention rents as a mechanism through which platforms exercise market power by controlling attention allocation [6]. Dash et al. show that sponsored recommendations on Amazon are more biased towards Amazon

private-label products than organic recommendations [7]. Together, these studies suggest that paid visibility may alter fairness structures rather than simply supplement organic recommendations. Organic-to-Paid Visibility Ratio therefore helps diagnose whether small brands are shifting from being discovered through value to surviving by purchasing visibility.

3.5. Downstream risk: Content Homogenization Risk

When Fair Organic Discoverability weakens, the consequence is not only slower small-brand growth but also Content Homogenization Risk. This risk refers to the tendency of brands to imitate similar titles, tags, covers, narrative structures, and promotional formulas in order to gain algorithmic visibility. Platform use of tags and titles for content recognition is not inherently problematic. The problem arises when specific titles, tags, or campaign templates become perceived gateways to traffic competition. In that situation, brands may copy similar expressions in order to be recommended, even when such copying weakens differentiation. Huang and Ye find that Chinese short-video platforms cultivate creators through staged mechanisms that combine traffic rewards, algorithmic visibility, and advertiser satisfaction. They further suggest that such platform mechanisms can direct creators into a platform-advertiser-creator transaction chain [8]. Yao et al. demonstrate that purely relevance-driven recommendation with low exploration strength may improve short-term user satisfaction while undermining the long-term richness of the content pool [10]. Content Homogenization Risk should therefore be understood as a downstream ecosystem consequence of weakened organic discoverability, not as the core mechanism of this paper.

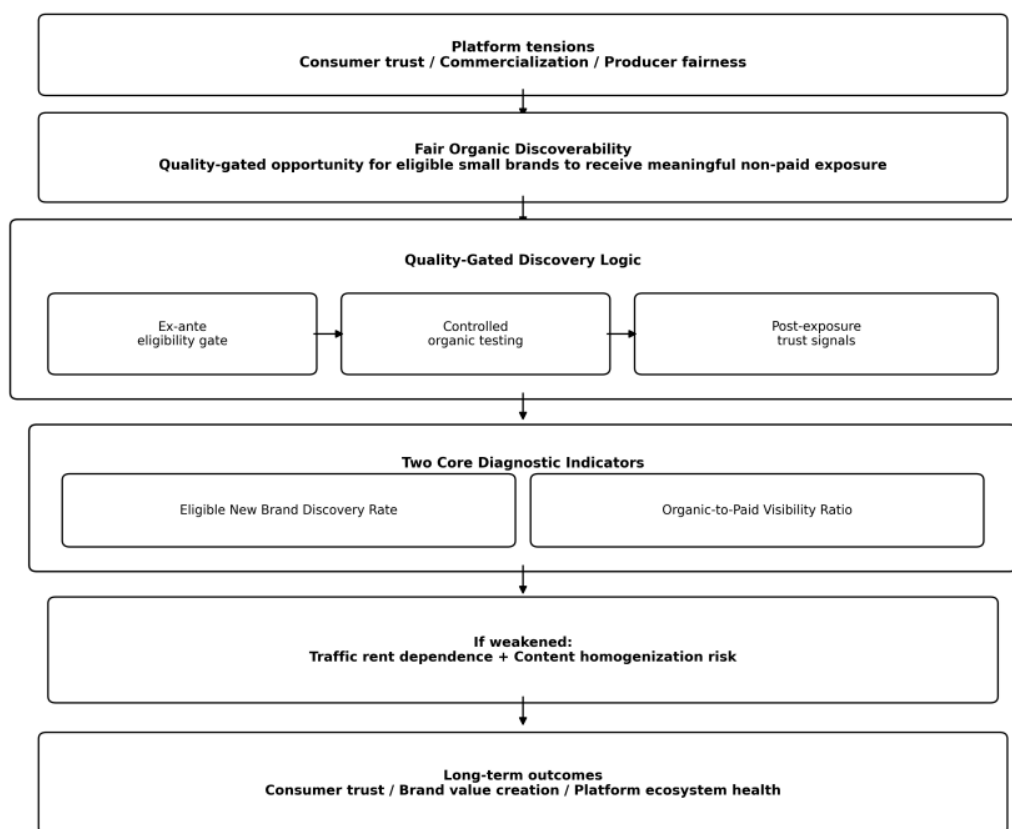


Figure 1. Conceptual model of Fair Organic Discoverability

Figure 1 summarizes how the proposed framework links multistakeholder tensions to Fair Organic Discoverability and then operationalizes the concept through the Quality-Gated Discovery Logic and two core diagnostic indicators. The model also positions Content Homogenization Risk as a downstream consequence when organic discoverability is weakened and connects the framework to longer-term outcomes in consumer trust, brand-value creation, and platform ecosystem health. Table 1 complements the model by specifying the role of each construct and the diagnostic question it is intended to answer, clarifying that Fair Organic Discoverability is the core concept, the Quality-Gated Discovery Logic is the safeguard mechanism, the two indicators are diagnostic tools, and Content Homogenization Risk is an ecosystem-level risk rather than a fairness metric itself.

Table 1. Constructs and roles in the Fair Organic Discoverability framework

Component	Role in the Framework	Main Question Answered
Fair Organic Discoverability	Core concept	Can eligible small brands still be organically discovered before relying on paid promotion or template-driven algorithmic adaptation?
Quality-Gated Discovery Logic	Safeguard logic	Which brands are eligible for testing, and should exposure continue after user feedback?
Eligible New Brand Discovery Rate	Core diagnostic indicator	Do eligible new or under-exposed brands receive meaningful organic discovery opportunities?
Organic-to-Paid Visibility Ratio	Core diagnostic indicator	Are small brands becoming structurally dependent on paid visibility?
Content Homogenization Risk	Downstream ecosystem risk	Does visibility scarcity push brands toward template-driven content imitation?

4. Discussion and implications

This paper responds to the lack of context-specific operationalization of fairness identified in recommender-systems research by conceptualizing Fair Organic Discoverability as a producer-fairness perspective for content-commerce platforms [5]. The concept connects multistakeholder recommendation, exposure fairness, and platform traffic rent, while linking these debates to customer value creation in integrated marketing and brand management. In this context, fairness should not be reduced to the amount of traffic a platform gives to small brands. The more precise question is whether eligible small brands still have a quality-gated path through which their value can be discovered and validated.

For platforms, the framework suggests that the goal is not to maximize small-brand exposure. Rather, platforms should balance consumer trust, commercialization, and producer fairness. Quality-Gated Discovery Logic can reduce the risk that organic discovery becomes an unconditional privilege for low-trust products or strategic manipulators. Eligible New Brand Discovery Rate helps platforms monitor whether qualified new brands still have an organic entry point. Organic-to-Paid Visibility Ratio helps diagnose whether small brands are becoming overly dependent on paid

visibility. Content Homogenization Risk further reminds platforms that unified tags, titles, and campaign templates may improve content recognition but can also weaken diversity and brand differentiation.

For small brands, the framework implies that the strategic response should not be limited to gaming algorithms. Brands should build value signals that can be verified by both platforms and consumers, including product quality, consistency between content claims and actual experience, after-sales capacity, review quality, repurchase, search intention, and differentiated expression. Digital customer value creation therefore depends not only on how brands communicate, but also on whether platforms can identify, verify, and amplify trustworthy brand value.

5. Conclusion

Traffic subsidies alone cannot solve the structural visibility problem faced by small brands on content-commerce platforms. The central issue is whether eligible small brands still have a fair chance to be organically discovered before they become dependent on paid promotion or template-driven algorithmic adaptation. By proposing Fair Organic Discoverability, this paper reframes producer fairness as a brand management and platform governance issue rather than a simple demand for more traffic. More broadly, it argues that producer fairness should be assessed not by equal exposure, but by whether platforms preserve a credible, quality-gated path through which qualified brands can be discovered and evaluated on the basis of value. The framework contains one quality-gated discovery logic, two core diagnostic indicators, and one downstream ecosystem risk. Quality-Gated Discovery Logic explains how platforms can use an ex-ante eligibility gate, controlled organic testing, and post-exposure trust signals to avoid exposing users to low-trust products indiscriminately. Eligible New Brand Discovery Rate diagnoses whether eligible new or under-exposed brands still receive meaningful organic discovery opportunities. Organic-to-Paid Visibility Ratio diagnoses whether small brands are becoming structurally dependent on paid visibility. Content Homogenization Risk explains how visibility scarcity may push brands toward repeated titles, tags, covers, and promotional narratives, weakening brand differentiation and long-term platform attractiveness. The limitation of this paper is that its indicators remain conceptual. Future research should operationalize them using platform data, category-level sampling, or longitudinal observation and examine their relationships with consumer trust, brand growth, content diversity, and platform ecosystem health over the longer term.

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