



Article

“Cashback for Positive Reviews”: Boon or Bane? An Empirical Study on the Impact of Negative Emotions in Review Manipulation on Evaluation Behavior

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Abstract

“Cashback for positive reviews” is a common form of e-commerce manipulation that may undermine consumer trust and distort the market evaluation system. However, there is a lack of systematic research on how it influences consumers’ willingness to provide evaluations through psychological mechanisms. This study, based on the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) framework, integrates the theories of psychological contract and cognitive dissonance. An empirical analysis based on 460 valid questionnaire responses was performed using SPSS and AMOS, yielding the following findings. (1) Negative emotions, including disappointment, anger, and regret, significantly triggered psychological contract breach, both transactional and relational. (2) Psychological contract breach reduced consumers’ willingness to provide positive reviews and lowered their store evaluation behavior, fully mediating the relationship between negative emotions and evaluation behavior. (3) Cognitive dissonance partially moderated the pathway from negative emotions through psychological contract breach to review behavior. This study elucidated the influence mechanism of negative emotions in “cashback for positive review” scenarios on consumers’ evaluation behavior, established a “merchant-user” online review relationship model, and provided practical and managerial implications for fostering mutually beneficial outcomes among platforms, merchants, and consumers.

Keywords: cashback for positive reviews; review manipulation; negative emotions; psychological contract breach; evaluation behavior



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1. Introduction

The expansion of e-commerce has generated unprecedented opportunities for platform economies and their merchants while providing consumers with a broader and more convenient range of online choices. In online transactions, reviews have become a crucial channel for consumers to access product information and assess overall quality [1]. Online reviews play a vital role in alleviating information asymmetry and reducing quality uncertainties. As a result, they have become an indispensable reference for consumers’ online purchasing decisions [2]. Studies have indicated that more than 86% of consumers consult online reviews when shopping online, 80% of purchase decisions are influenced by them [3], and 93% of online shoppers spend over one minute reading reviews before making a decision (Local Consumer Review Survey, 2019). The specific functions of online reviews lie in consumers’ preliminary understanding of products and their initial assessment of merchants

and purchased goods. Research has demonstrated that consumers use reviews to acquire additional information, which directly shapes their purchase intentions [4]. Concurrently, positive cues embedded in online reviews can facilitate transactions and promote product sales [5]. Evidence suggests that each one-star increase in average ratings can enhance sellers' revenues by 5–9% [6], whereas negative reviews damage merchant reputation and suppress sales growth [7]. Therefore, online reviews serve not only as a channel for product information but also as a critical factor when formulating marketing strategies.

Online reviews are regarded as a resource, and platforms or merchants often pursue integrated management of favorable reviews to build their reputation and generate revenue [8]. Consequently, in pursuit of short-term gains, some merchants induce or manipulate consumers into engaging in unfair review practices through material incentives. Typical examples include “gift-for-praise” or “cashback for positive reviews” schemes (Figure 1). In such cases, merchants or platforms enclose cashback cards with purchased products to entice consumers to provide biased reviews. When purchases are driven by a merchant's high rating or favorable comments, the sudden discovery of a cashback card undermines trust in those reviews. Even consumers not directly influenced by prior ratings often hesitate to post reviews after encountering such tactics, fearing that their comments might mislead potential buyers.

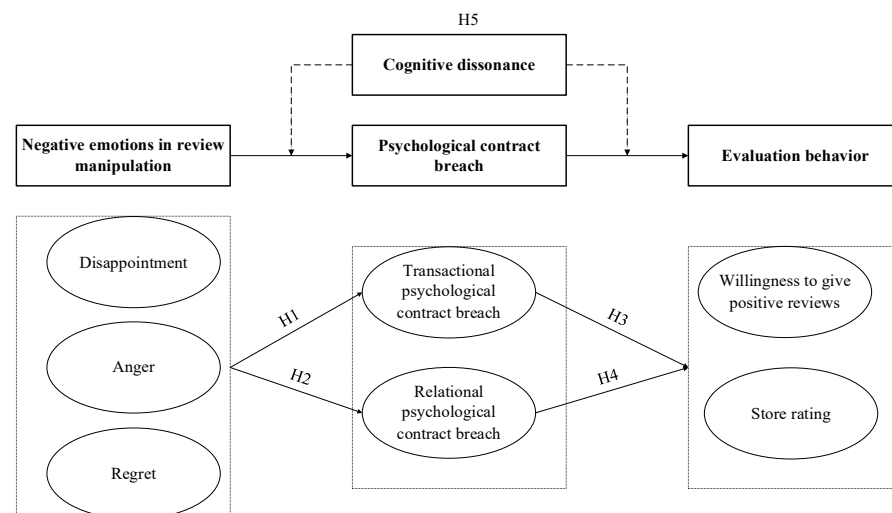


Figure 1. Research Model.

The manipulation of positive reviews by merchants or platforms has seriously compromised the fairness of the online review ecosystem, contributing to the proliferation of false reviews across all platforms. Existing studies on false reviews have explored issues such as publication causes [9], detection methods [10], and the influence of review content [11]. However, the negative consequences of review manipulation are significant. Practices such as hiring online trolls, fabricating transactions, and inflating credit ratings have distorted fair competition on e-commerce platforms. Moreover, consumers posting misleading or false reviews in exchange for rewards erodes the credibility of online evaluation [12]. When such manipulations are exposed, they elicit strong negative consumer sentiments. Although the existing literature has examined the antecedents, identification, and consequences of fake reviews, research has primarily focused on the effects of informational attributes of fake reviews on consumers. However, a notable gap remains in understanding how specific antecedent stimuli—such as proactive manipulative behaviors by merchants—systematically trigger consumers' negative emotions and subsequently influence their review willingness and behaviors.

The manipulation of positive reviews refers to the practice whereby merchants offer rebates, gifts, or other inducements in exchange for positive evaluations that are not grounded in genuine consumption experiences, leading to distorted platform reputation signals. Such conduct has been explicitly outlawed by China's E-commerce Law and the Interim Provisions on Anti-Unfair Competition on the Internet [12]. Although extant research has predominantly examined the antecedents of manipulation and its impact on purchase intentions [13,14], it has largely overlooked the negative affective responses and underlying psychological processes triggered when consumers perceive the manipulation as a breach of social exchange. Consequently, theoretical insights from psychological-contract breach and cognitive-dissonance theory remain under-integrated. Given the prevalence of positive-review manipulation and its corrosive impact on platform credibility, it is imperative to reveal its inhibitory effect on consumers' subsequent evaluation behaviors and the underlying mechanism. Accordingly, this study aims to address the following research questions: In the context of "cashback for positive reviews" incentives, how do consumers' negative emotions—via psychological contract breach—undermine their willingness to post positive reviews and to assign high store ratings, and what mediating role does cognitive dissonance play in this process?

Therefore, drawing on the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) theory, this study systematically examines how the practice of positive review manipulation violates the implicit psychological contract—based on fair exchange and trust—between consumers and merchants, and how such violation subsequently influences consumers' review behavior. Following the S–O–R paradigm, this study conceptualizes positive review manipulation serves as a significant external stimulus (S), negative emotions induced by exposure to review manipulation as the organismic state (O), psychological contract breach and consumers' review behavior as the organismic response (R). In this context, psychological contract breach is defined as an individual's perception that the other party has failed to honor the reciprocal promises associated with his or her contributions [15]. Based on this reasoning, we propose a path model linking negative emotions triggered by review manipulation to subsequent evaluation behavior. The findings offer important theoretical and practical implications for the sustainable development of e-commerce and the establishment of a trustworthy online review system.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Negative Emotions Elicited by Positive Review Manipulation

Online reviews play a critical role in online shopping platforms, serving as a primary reference for consumers' decision-making and purchasing behaviors [16]. Consequently, many merchants fabricate fake reviews to increase sales and rankings, thereby misleading consumers [17]. Such practices not only attract attention but also significantly elevate product clicks and purchase conversion rates [18]. Therefore, driven by profit motives, the widespread manipulation of reviews by platforms or merchants to fabricate favorable ratings has become a pervasive phenomenon [19]. Research has shown that false reviews can reduce the credibility of online comments [20], leading consumers to feel deceived and dissatisfied [21]. Because consumers typically rely on reviews to judge product or service quality, manipulated evaluations increase purchasing risks. When merchants conceal negative feedback through positive review manipulation, consumers who perceive exaggerated or inconsistent ratings experience heightened negative emotions [8].

Motivated by commercial gains, online merchants have strong incentives to manipulate positive reviews [13]. Despite existing research on review manipulation, studies focusing specifically on the negative emotions that can be elicited and their subsequent influence on consumer behavior remain limited. This study defines practices such as

“cashback for positive reviews”—where merchants intentionally manipulate consumers into posting positive reviews—as positive review manipulation. As a non-transparent commercial practice contrary to fairness principle, positive review manipulation serves as a significant external negative stimulus (S) in consumers’ shopping experience, potentially triggering a series of negative psychological and behavioral responses among consumers. The focus of this study on negative emotions triggered by positive review manipulation is justified by the fact that this practice directly undermines the credibility of online reviews and consumers’ right to truthful information, which also constitutes a pressing practical issue requiring resolution in the current e-commerce sector. Based on this difference, this study regards the negative emotions triggered by manipulative behavior as an organism (O) and divides them into three dimensions: disappointment, anger and remorse. It also examines the different intensities of their impact on consumer responses.

2.2. Psychological Contract Breakdown Caused by Manipulation of Positive Reviews

Consumers often interpret high ratings as a signal that merchants have fulfilled their promises, assuming that the products or services will match their evaluations. This perception prompts the formation of a psychological contract based on a “transactional-relationship”. Thus, online positive reviews play a pivotal role in purchase decisions [22], and products or services with high ratings not only attract greater attention but also significantly increase purchase intentions [23]. However, the emergence of manipulated reviews undermines the trust relationship built upon review valence between consumers and merchants or platforms, leading to the rupture of this psychological contract.

A psychological contract breach is defined as an individual’s perception that the other party has failed to honor the reciprocal promises associated with his or her contributions [15]. More specifically, it refers to consumers’ belief that the seller has reneged on its obligations or duties [24]. In e-commerce settings, high ratings and favorable comments are intrinsically tied to the formation of psychological contracts. Once consumers detect that these evaluations have been artificially engineered, the goodwill or trust established through online reviews collapses, resulting in a psychological contract breach. When consumers encounter situations in which merchants request reviews in exchange for cash back, they tend to question the credibility of the evaluation content, thereby developing dissatisfaction and resistance towards merchants or platforms. Therefore, negative emotions constitute the direct emotional experience preceding psychological contract breach and further motivate consumers’ subsequent behavioral tendencies. Psychological contract breach is integrated into the organismic response (R) process because it is the psychological reaction exhibited by consumers after being incentivized by cashback for positive reviews.

Consumers’ perceptions of manipulative practices, such as “cashback for positive reviews”, vary, and the negative emotions resulting from such practices differ in their impact on psychological contract breakdown. Different forms of breakdown consequently influence consumers’ evaluation behaviors in distinct ways. Accordingly, this study classified the psychological contract breakdown into transactional and relational dimensions and examined their respective effects on consumers’ evaluation behavior, as well as the mediating role of psychological contract breach between negative emotions and evaluation behavior.

2.3. Consumers’ Evaluation Behavior

Online reviews represent consumers’ public evaluations of a product or service’s attributes or quality after purchase [25]. Review-writing behavior can be affected by multiple factors, including cultural differences [26], perceived power and incentives [27], retaliatory motives [28], as well as utilitarian orientations and hedonic attitudes [29]. After extreme shopping experiences, consumers are more inclined to share their experiences

online [30]. Consequently, they are more willing to post authentic evaluations in a fair and transparent review environment.

The practice of “cashback for positive reviews” serves as an incentive but simultaneously raises suspicions of coercion, pushing consumers into passive praise. When shoppers encounter such manipulation, they question the authenticity of existing reviews, creating a discrepancy between pre-purchase expectations and actual shopping experiences. Therefore, tactics such as “cashback for positive reviews” often backfire. Even if consumers initially comply, persistent coercion erodes their trust in the overall review system. On this basis, the present study categorized consumers’ evaluation behavior (R) into willingness to provide positive reviews and overall store ratings and empirically tested how coercive “cash-for-praise” schemes could suppress both dimensions, offering managerial insights for merchants and platforms.

2.4. Cognitive Dissonance

Cognitive dissonance refers to a negative psychological state that arises when an individual’s behavior is inconsistent with their internal cognitions or beliefs. It is pervasive in the context of contradictions and conflicts [31]. To mitigate this discomfort, individuals adjust their cognitions by changing, adding, or reducing their beliefs [32]. In the domain of consumer behavior, cognitive dissonance can generate adverse emotional reactions, such as unease, confusion, anxiety, and regret [33], and further induce negative actions, including purchase cancellations or reduced willingness to repurchase [34]. When consumers make purchasing decisions based on online reviews but subsequently encounter manipulative practices such as “rewarding positive reviews”, the psychological contract previously established may be disrupted. This breach further influences the evaluation behavior. In summary, cognitive dissonance may act as a moderating variable that shapes the relationship between consumers’ negative emotions and their evaluation behavior.

2.5. SOR Model

The Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) model, introduced by Mehrabian and Russell in 1974, has been extensively utilized in consumer behavior research to analyze and explain the psychological processes underlying decision-making [35]. According to this framework, external stimuli exert a significant influence on an individual’s perceptions, attitudes, intentions, and subsequent behaviors. The model consists of three core elements: Stimulus, referring to the external environmental factors surrounding an individual; Organism, which represents the internal psychological and affective processes that mediate the interpretation of stimuli; and Response, denoting the behavioral outcomes resulting from such internal processing [36].

In the context of positive review manipulation, positive review manipulation serves as a critical external stimulus (S). This stimulus subsequently induces consumers’ negative emotions (O), thereby shaping their subsequent psychological contract and evaluation behaviors (R). Grounded in this theoretical perspective, this study adopts the SOR model to examine the impact and underlying mechanisms through which negative emotions—triggered by the manipulation of positive reviews—affect consumers’ evaluation behaviors.

3. Research Models and Hypotheses

3.1. Research Models

The S-O-R theoretical framework typically emphasizes that external stimuli influence behavior through internal psychological states [37]. In this study, it precisely captures the dynamic process of manipulation behavior through emotions. The digital consumption environment heavily relies on online network reviews, and the S-O-R theoretical framework

is conducive to explaining how such environmental stimuli are interpreted by consumers and transformed into behavioral decisions [38]. Moreover, this theoretical framework accommodates multiple levels of mediating and moderating mechanisms, providing a clear and structured path for integrating concepts such as emotions, psychological contracts, and cognitive dissonance. Therefore, the S-O-R theoretical framework has a high degree of compatibility with the study of favorable evaluation manipulation scenarios.

Based on the S-O-R framework, this study implemented a theoretical model in which negative emotions (disappointment, anger, and regret) generated during positive review manipulation served as the independent variable. Psychological contract breach (transactional breach and relational breach) is treated as the mediating variable, while consumers' evaluation behavior (willingness to provide positive reviews and store evaluation) constitutes the dependent variable. Additionally, consumer cognitive dissonance was incorporated as a moderating variable, and its moderating effect was examined. The research model is illustrated in Figure 1.

3.2. Research Hypotheses

3.2.1. Relationship Between Negative Emotions and Psychological Contract Breach

Social exchange theory suggests that individuals strive to maximize benefits in exchanges, and when the balance between inputs and outcomes is disrupted, a stress response is triggered [39]. A psychological contract breach occurs when individuals perceive the organization to have acted in bad faith, often accompanied by emotions such as betrayal, anger, and disappointment [40]. In online shopping contexts, where consumers cannot directly verify product quality, an implicit contractual relationship with the merchant is often established through online reviews [41]. However, the manipulation of positive reviews undermines the authenticity of these evaluations and prompts negative emotions such as disappointment, anger, and regret, which subsequently causes the breakdown of the psychological contract.

Research has reported that negative emotions, such as disappointment and regret, are closely linked to psychological contract violations [42]. When individuals perceive betrayal, the accumulation of negative emotions precipitates a contract breach [43]. Therefore, in online shopping, consumers' trust and emotional investment in merchants incline them to believe in the authenticity of reviews. Once manipulation triggers a crisis of trust, negative emotions become the primary driver of psychological contract breaches, thereby shaping consumers' evaluative attitudes and behaviors towards merchants or brands. Disappointment, anger, and regret, as varying degrees of negative emotions, may exert differential effects on different forms of psychological contract breach. Accordingly, the following hypotheses are proposed.

H1: *Negative emotions (H1a disappointment, H1b anger, and H1c regret) positively influence the transactional psychological contract breach.*

H2: *Negative emotions (H2a disappointment, H2b anger, and H2c regret) positively influence the relational psychological contract breach.*

3.2.2. Relationship Between Psychological Contract Breach and Evaluation Behavior

Social exchange theory indicates that the greater the mutual obligation between exchange partners, the more stable the relationship. A psychological contract breach represents a typical case of social exchange imbalance [44]. According to the psychological contract violation-behavioral response model, different types of psychological contracts exert distinct influences on individual behavior; once individuals perceive a breach, they are inclined to respond negatively [45]. After a psychological contract is broken, consumers

often display adverse coping behaviors such as complaints, silence, or even destructive actions [46]. Research has indicated that psychological contract breaches can diminish consumers' reuse intentions and recommendation behavior [47]. In particular, transactional psychological contracts based on short-term benefits, when breached, may reduce purchase and recommendation behaviors but exert limited influence on a merchant's long-term reputation [43]. Once the relational psychological contract is broken, consumers' trust, commitment, and loyalty to the merchant are adversely affected [48].

In online shopping, evaluation behavior is primarily reflected in consumers' willingness to provide positive reviews and store ratings. When positive review manipulation occurs, the psychological contract with the merchant and platform is breached, leading to a decline in consumers' willingness to leave positive reviews and their store evaluation behavior. In other words, the negative emotions triggered by manipulative practices can cause psychological contract breaches, and consumers also fear that their reviews may mislead potential buyers, further reducing their willingness to post. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3: *Transactional psychological contract breach negatively affects evaluation behavior (H3a: willingness to give positive reviews; H3b: store rating).*

H4: *Relational psychological contract breach negatively affects evaluation behavior (H4a: willingness to give positive reviews; H4b: store rating).*

3.2.3. Regulatory Role of Cognitive Dissonance

Because online purchasing does not provide direct experience of product quality, consumers rely heavily on online reviews when making decisions [22]. However, the manipulation of positive reviews can widen the gap between consumers' pre-purchase expectations and post-purchase outcomes, thereby triggering stronger negative feelings. Research has indicated that false information can induce cognitive dissonance, prompting impulsive decisions [49], while post-purchase dissonance often results in negative behaviors, such as product returns [50], as highly dissonant consumers attempt to restore their internal balance [51]. In response to inconsistent information, cognitive dissonance heightens consumers' sensitivity to merchant dishonesty and promotes divergent behavioral reactions. Specifically, the practice of "cashback for positive reviews" introduces heterogeneous information that can generate cognitive dissonance. Consumers may worry that positive review content will mislead future buyers, thereby reducing their own evaluation behavior. Therefore, this study suggests that consumers with higher levels of cognitive dissonance may experience stronger negative emotions, which may intensify their perception of a psychological contract breach and influence subsequent review behavior. Based on this reasoning, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H5: *Cognitive dissonance moderates the sequential path from negative emotions to psychological contract breach and subsequently to consumer review behavior.*

4. Research Methodology

4.1. Sample and Data Collection Procedure

This study focused on the shopping scenario of "cashback for positive reviews" in online purchasing, and respondents were limited to consumers who both understood and had personally experienced this practice, thereby enhancing ecological validity [48]. To strengthen the generalizability and applicability of the findings, purposive sampling was adopted. Its primary advantage was the precise alignment between research objectives

and participant selection [52], thereby enhancing methodological rigor and improving the credibility of data and results [53]. Because purposive sampling requires a certain level of organization and a clearly defined scope, a pre-test and screening questions were incorporated into the formal survey to ensure accuracy and relevance of participants. Example screening questions included “Have you ever encountered cashback for positive reviews?” “Have you participated in cashback for positive reviews?” “Do you consider cashback for positive reviews reasonable?” After completing the investigation, each participant received a reward of 6 CNY.

A formal survey was conducted from 1 March 2024 to 10 December 2024 using the Chinese professional online survey platform Wenjuanxing (<https://www.wjx.cn/>). A total of 530 questionnaires were collected. After excluding those who failed the screening criteria, 460 valid responses were retained, resulting in an effective response rate of 86.79%. Methodological guidelines suggest that the minimum ratio of sample size to questionnaire items should be 5:1. In this study, the ratio reached 13.9:1, meeting the requirement [54]. The descriptive statistics of the samples are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the samples.

Classification	Feature Indicators	Number/Person	Proportion/%
Gender	Man	240	52.2
	Woman	220	47.8
Age	Under 20 years old	104	22.6
	21–30 years old	136	29.6
	31–40 years old	106	23.0
	41–50 years old	53	11.5
	51–60 years old	34	7.4
	Above 61 years old	27	5.9
Education	Junior high school education	43	9.3
	Senior high school education	126	27.4
	College degree	133	28.9
	Bachelor’s degree	141	30.7
	Master’s degree or above	17	3.7
Occupation	Student	132	28.7
	Company employee	174	37.8
	Civil servant	36	7.8
	Freelancer	66	14.3
	Other	52	11.3
Monthly income (consumption for students)	Less than 2000 yuan	152	33.0
	2001–3000 yuan	89	19.3
	3001–5000 yuan	69	15.0
	5001–8000 yuan	58	12.6
	8001–10,000 yuan	70	15.2
	More than 10,001 yuan	22	4.8

4.2. Measure Operationalization

The questionnaire comprised four core constructs: negative emotions, psychological contract breach, review behavior, and cognitive dissonance. To ensure consistency with the research context, all scales were adapted from relevant studies in the Chinese context and subjected to minor revisions based on the specific research context. Response was measured on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree). Negative emotions, including disappointment, anger, and regret, were adapted from Guan et al. [8]. Example items included “I am deeply disappointed by the cashback-for-positive-review practice,” “I am angry about the brand’s cashback-for-positive-review behavior,” and “After encountering cashback for positive reviews, I regret choosing this merchant” [8]. Transactional and relational psychological contract breaches were measured using four items adapted from Hou et al. [44]. Example items include “I believe merchants have not

dealt with consumers honestly” and “Merchants do not respect and value consumers.” Review behavior includes willingness to provide positive reviews and store evaluation. Willingness to provide positive reviews was measured using two items, such as “Whether one is willing to provide a positive review”, which are adapted from Zeng et al. [1]. Store evaluation was assessed with three items, including “Whether one perceives the store as well managed”, which are adapted from Zeng et al. [1]. Cognitive dissonance was measured with three items, including “I am unsure whether posting positive review information is the right thing to do”, which are adapted from Song and Zhang [55].

5. Empirical Analysis

5.1. Data Reliability and Validity Tests

Validity and reliability were assessed using SPSS 26.0 and AMOS 24.0, based on Cronbach’s alpha coefficient, the combined reliability (CR) value, and the average variance extracted (AVE) [56]. The results indicated that Cronbach’s alpha coefficients exceeded 0.700, the AVE values were higher than 0.500, and the CR values surpassed 0.800, demonstrating the good reliability of the proposed model (Table 2).

Table 2. Reliability and convergent validity test results.

Variable	Factor	Factor Loading	Cronbach’s Alpha	AVE	C.R.
Disappointment	Disappointed by merchant’s ‘cashback for positive reviews’ behavior.	0.948	0.966	0.906	0.966
	Disappointed by brand’s ‘cashback for positive reviews’ behavior.	0.947			
	Disappointed by platform’s ‘cashback for positive reviews’ content.	0.961			
Anger	Angry about merchants’ ‘cashback for positive reviews’ behavior	0.932	0.959	0.885	0.958
	Indignant about brand’s ‘cashback for positive reviews’ practice	0.941			
	Annoyed by platform’s ‘cashback for positive reviews’	0.950			
Regret	Encountering the ‘cashback for positive reviews’, I regret choosing this merchant.	0.912	0.940	0.840	0.940
	Encountering ‘cashback for positive reviews’, I feel regret toward the merchant.	0.915			
	If I had known about ‘cashback for positive reviews’, I would have chosen differently.	0.923			

Table 2. Cont.

Variable	Factor	Factor Loading	Cronbach's Alpha	AVE	C.R.
Transactional psychological contract breach	I no longer believe this merchant deals with customers in good faith.	0.937	0.973	0.900	0.973
	I don't believe the merchant has earnestly delivered the product or service.	0.948			
	I believe the merchant simply ignored the rules of the transaction.	0.955			
	I believe the merchant failed to provide a fair and reasonable transaction service.	0.956			
Relational psychological contract breach	The merchant shows no respect or regard for consumers.	0.945	0.975	0.907	0.975
	The merchant simply doesn't deliver service that is reliable or of good quality.	0.942			
	When service failures occur, the merchant refuses to take any initiative to accept responsibility.	0.946			
	The merchant makes no effort to maintain a stable, ongoing relationship with its customers.	0.976			
Willingness to give positive reviews	Would you like to give a positive review	0.950	0.932	0.878	0.935
	Is it possible to give a positive review	0.924			
Store evaluation	Are you satisfied with this store	0.937	0.955	0.877	0.955
	Do you like this store	0.933			
	Do you think this store is well-run	0.940			
Cognitive dissonance	I'm not sure leaving a positive review is the right thing to do.	0.801	0.883	0.718	0.884
	I question whether it's right to post a positive review just to get a reward.	0.853			
	I felt uneasy after posting the positive review.	0.887			

The convergent validity of the measurement model was examined using confirmatory factor analysis. The fit indices of the measurement model indicated a good model fit, with the results indicating $\chi^2/df = 1.561$, $IFI = 0.990$, $TLI = 0.988$, and $CFI = 0.990$. The differential validity was confirmed, as the square roots of the AVE values for each construct were higher than the absolute values of the corresponding correlation coefficients, indicating an acceptable level of validity [57]. The detailed results are listed in Table 3.

Table 3. Validity analysis.

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	AVE	C.R.
Disappointment	1.000							0.906	0.966
Anger	0.521	1.000						0.885	0.958
Regret	0.495	0.477	1.000					0.840	0.940
Transactional psychological contract breach	0.552	0.451	0.589	1.000				0.900	0.973
Relational psychological contract breach	0.661	0.574	0.586	0.684	1.000			0.907	0.975
Willingness to give positive reviews	−0.678	−0.573	−0.491	−0.535	−0.627	1.000		0.878	0.935
Store evaluation	−0.491	−0.501	−0.442	−0.445	−0.514	0.566	1.000	0.877	0.955

5.2. Hypothesis Tests

Prior to hypothesis testing, a goodness-of-fit test was conducted on the structural equation model. The results showed $\chi^2/df = 2.779$, IFI = 0.974, TLI = 0.969, CFI = 0.974, AGFI = 0.868. These indices were close to the thresholds, indicating that the model was appropriate for validating hypothesized relationships [57]. The hypothesized pathways were estimated using standardized coefficients. This study adopts $p < 0.05$ as the threshold for statistical significance. All path coefficients and hypothesis tests are evaluated against this criterion to ensure transparency and rigor in the interpretation of results. The results are shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Hypothesis test results.

	Hypothetical Path	Estimate (β)	S.E.	C.R.	<i>p</i>
Disappointment	→ Transactional psychological contract breach	0.308	0.043	6.682	0.000
	→ Relational psychological contract breach	0.409	0.040	9.996	0.000
Anger	→ Transactional psychological contract breach	0.110	0.046	2.430	0.015
	→ Relational psychological contract breach	0.233	0.043	5.779	0.000
Regret	→ Transactional psychological contract breach	0.393	0.045	8.524	0.000
	→ Relational psychological contract breach	0.283	0.041	7.031	0.000
Relational psychological contract breach	→ Store evaluation	−0.408	0.042	−8.291	0.000
	→ Willingness to give positive reviews	−0.510	0.039	−11.062	0.000
Transactional psychological contract breach	→ Store evaluation	−0.182	0.043	−3.710	0.000
	→ Willingness to give positive reviews	−0.207	0.040	−4.562	0.000

Empirical analysis demonstrated that consumers' negative emotions significantly and positively influenced the transactional psychological contract breach, thereby supporting Hypothesis H1. Although transactional psychological contracts could be essentially based on mutually beneficial exchanges or one-time consumption, these relationships relied to some extent on trust in online reviews. When consumers encounter review manipulation by merchants or platforms, the resulting negative emotions intensify the breach of transactional psychological contracts. Thus, cashback for positive reviews could fuel negative emotions and accelerate the transactional-contract breakdown.

In addition, the results indicated that consumers' negative emotions significantly affected relational psychological contract breaches, supporting Hypothesis H2. These

findings confirm that positive review manipulation not only triggers transactional contract breaches but also directly precipitates the rupture of relational contracts. Negative emotions diminish goodwill and loyalty towards merchants, thereby weakening long-term buyer–seller relationships. Since online reviews can act as a critical bridge of communication, their authenticity and reliability may play a crucial role. However, merchants’ manipulation of reviews not only provoked negative consumer emotions but also undermined review credibility. This dual effect illustrates the destructive impact of manipulation on consumers’ psychological contracts and highlights the importance of improved review management by platforms and merchants.

Regarding the relationship between psychological contract breach and consumers’ evaluation behavior, transactional contract breach had a significant negative impact on both willingness to provide positive reviews and store ratings, thereby supporting H3. Relational contract breach exerted even stronger negative effects on willingness to post reviews and store ratings, thus supporting H4. Previous research has shown that different forms of psychological contracts can yield distinct behavioral responses. This study confirmed that in the context of positive review manipulation, breaches of both transactional and relational contracts reduced consumers’ willingness to leave favorable reviews and lowered their evaluation of stores. Moreover, the effect of relational contract breach is more profound than that of transactional breach, indicating that long-term trust and commitment are more deeply damaged by review manipulation.

5.3. Testing the Mediating Effect of Psychological Contract Breach

The mediating effect was examined using a bias-corrected bootstrap procedure (5000 resamples). Significance was determined by whether the 95% confidence interval excluded zero. The full results are reported in Table 5.

Table 5. Results of the Mediation Test for Psychological Contract Breach.

Path	Effect Size	S.E.	Bias-Corrected 95% CI		
			Lower	Upper	<i>p</i>
Disappointment → Transactional psychological contract breach → Willingness to give positive reviews	−0.064	0.024	−0.120	−0.025	0.001
Disappointment → Transactional psychological contract breach → Store rating	−0.056	0.022	−0.107	−0.021	0.002
Disappointment → Relational psychological contract breach → Willingness to give positive reviews	−0.209	0.000	−0.282	−0.141	0.001
Disappointment → Relational psychological contract breach → Store rating	−0.167	0.032	−0.230	−0.106	0.001
Anger → Transactional psychological contract breach → Willingness to give positive reviews	−0.023	0.012	−0.052	−0.005	0.011
Anger → Transactional psychological contract breach → Store rating	−0.020	0.012	−0.052	−0.004	0.011
Anger → Relational psychological contract breach → Willingness to give positive reviews	−0.119	0.000	−0.173	−0.072	0.001
Anger → Relational psychological contract breach → Store rating	−0.095	0.023	−0.145	−0.054	0.001
Regret → Transactional psychological contract breach → Willingness to give positive reviews	−0.081	0.025	−0.134	−0.035	0.001
Regret → Transactional psychological contract breach → Store rating	−0.071	0.024	−0.125	−0.029	0.002
Regret → Relational psychological contract breach → Willingness to give positive reviews	−0.145	0.000	−0.207	−0.098	0.000
Regret → Relational psychological contract breach → Store rating	−0.115	0.024	−0.168	−0.074	0.001

The 95% bias-corrected and percentile confidence intervals for each indirect path excluded zero, confirming that all mediating effects were statistically significant [58]. The findings demonstrated that both transactional and relational psychological contract breaches fully mediated the impact of positive review manipulation on consumers' negative emotions and subsequent evaluation behaviors. In other words, when consumers encountered manipulated positive reviews, the resulting negative emotions, including disappointment, anger, and regret, led to breaches of the psychological contract with the merchant or platform, which diminished their willingness to provide positive reviews and engage in evaluation behaviors.

5.4. Testing the Moderating Role of Consumer Cognitive Dissonance

The moderating role of consumer cognitive dissonance in the hypothesized path relationships was also investigated. Using the median score of the cognitive dissonance scale as the cutoff, respondents were divided into low ($N = 224$) and high dissonance ($N = 236$) groups. A structural equation model was then applied to compare the two groups [59], with the results reported in Table 6.

Table 6. Verification of the moderating role of cognitive dissonance.

Path			Cognitive Dissonance				C.R.
			Low Cognitive Dissonance (N = 224)		High Cognitive Dissonance (N = 236)		
			β	p	β	p	
Disappointment	→	Transactional psychological contract breach	0.498	0.000	0.150	0.018	−3.910
	→	Relational psychological contract breach	0.467	0.000	0.347	0.000	−1.481
Anger	→	Transactional psychological contract breach	−0.018	0.777	0.197	0.003	2.373
	→	Relational psychological contract breach	0.256	0.000	0.192	0.000	−0.661
Regret	→	Transactional psychological contract breach	0.305	0.000	0.470	0.000	2.066
	→	Relational psychological contract breach	0.196	0.000	0.387	0.000	2.657
Relational psychological contract breach	→	Store rating	−0.298	0.000	−0.524	0.000	−2.035
	→	Willingness to give positive reviews	−0.354	0.000	−0.654	0.000	−3.154
Transactional psychological contract breach	→	Store rating	−0.136	0.095	−0.194	0.012	−0.564
	→	Willingness to give positive reviews	−0.296	0.000	−0.100	0.178	1.655

In the relationship between negative emotions and consumer psychological contract breach, disappointment significantly increased the transactional psychological contract breach, with the effect being stronger among consumers with low cognitive dissonance. However, the effect of disappointment on the relational psychological contract breach did not reach the significance threshold, indicating that the group comparison lacked statistical validity. For anger, the effect on the transactional breach was stronger among high-cognitive-

dissonance consumers. In contrast, anger did not significantly affect relational breaches across groups. Furthermore, regret significantly intensified the psychological contract breach, with the effect being stronger among high-cognitive-dissonance consumers for both transactional and relational breaches.

Regarding the relationship between psychological contract breach and consumers' evaluation behaviors, relational psychological breach exerted a stronger negative effect on store rating and willingness to leave positive reviews among high-cognitive-dissonance consumers. For transactional breach, the critical ratios for both outcomes failed to reach significance, rendering the between-group comparison statistically invalid. Thus, H5 was partially supported.

In summary, for consumers with low cognitive dissonance, disappointment triggered by review manipulation was more likely to cause a transactional psychological contract breach, whereas for those with high cognitive dissonance, anger and regret induced by review manipulation were more likely to lead to a transactional psychological contract breach. Among high-dissonance consumers, regret was also more likely to precipitate a relational breach of the psychological contract. Furthermore, once the relational psychological contract was violated, high-cognitive-dissonance consumers exhibited an even stronger negative impact on both their willingness to provide positive reviews and store evaluations. Therefore, cognitive dissonance emerged as a critical construct in the context of review manipulation, underscoring its significant role in influencing psychological contract breaches and subsequent evaluative behaviors.

5.5. Discussion

This study empirically unpacks how consumers' negative emotions influence their evaluation behavior in the context of cashback for positive reviews. Firstly, disappointment, anger and regret significantly positively affect transactional and relational psychological contract breaches, and hypotheses H1 and H2 were supported. Yet, the impact of these three emotions on the two types of contracts varies. This finding goes beyond the conclusion that contract breaches are caused by negative emotions, and instead reversely demonstrates the positive impact of negative emotions on the psychological contract breaches, and for the first time distinguishes the sensitivity of different emotions in the dimensions of the contract [42]. This not only confirms that emotions are not merely reactive outcomes but also serve as indicators for identifying the nature of the contract. Moreover, it expands the applicable scope of the psychological contract theory in the context of e-commerce [60].

Secondly, H3 and H4 show that psychological contract breaches significantly inhibit consumers' evaluation intentions, and relational breaches have a stronger negative impact than transactional breaches. This result deepens the conclusion that contract breaches reduce user participation and further supports the effectiveness of the dual-dimensional structure of psychological contracts in the e-commerce environment [15,47]. Therefore, in the reputation economy, consumers not only focus on the gains and losses of a single transaction, but also interpret high ratings as an implicit guarantee from the merchant for continuous quality commitment. Once this commitment is disproved by the manipulation of positive reviews, the trust collapses more intensely, thereby more strongly inhibiting subsequent evaluation behavior.

Thirdly, this study provides partial but enlightening evidence for the moderating effect of cognitive dissonance (H5). High-dissonance consumers who feel anger or regret have a sharper sense of relational breach, which further significantly reduces evaluation behavior; low-dissonance consumers mainly experience transactional breach when disappointed. Integrating cognitive dissonance theory with the psychological contract framework, we echo the research on the impact of cognitive dissonance on loyalty [31,33]. Additionally,

the traditional psychological contract theory originates from organizational behavior and is mainly used to explain the employee-organization relationship [61]. However, this study demonstrates that it still has strong explanatory power in anonymous and fragmented e-commerce transactions. This highlights the implicit existence of relational contracts in the digital reputation mechanism, where there is no formal contract between the platform and consumers, but there is a long-term reciprocal expectation based on the rating signal. Therefore, platform governance should not only view ratings as an information tool, but also consider them as a key carrier for maintaining the social contract in the digital market, and it urgently needs to repair the eroded contractual foundation through algorithm transparency and punishment of manipulation behavior.

6. Conclusions and Management Implications

6.1. Conclusions

Based on the S-O-R theory, this study verified that negative emotions generated by positive review manipulation led to the breakdown of psychological contracts and further reduced consumers' evaluation behavior. Simultaneously, it confirmed the moderating role of consumer cognitive dissonance and revealed the mechanism underlying the interaction between consumers' negative emotions and evaluative behaviors. The main conclusions are as follows.

First, the results clarified that negative emotions induced by cashback for positive reviews triggered a breach of consumers' psychological contracts. This finding deepens our understanding of how review manipulation, as perceived by consumers, can influence purchase decisions [2]. This enriches the literature on the theoretical link between negative emotions and psychological contract breach, providing valuable theoretical insights for platforms and merchants to optimize online review management. Simultaneously, it offers a new perspective for interdisciplinary research integrating consumer behavior and psychological contract theories. The manipulation of positive reviews not only evoked negative emotions among consumers but also undermined the effectiveness of online reviews, eroding their original trust value and becoming a significant factor in review system failure. This finding highlights the dual destructive effect of positive review manipulation on consumers' psychological contracts.

Second, in the context of cashback for positive reviews, the breakdown of psychological contracts exerted a negative influence on consumers' evaluative behaviors. Specifically, the detrimental effect of a relational psychological contract breach on consumer review behavior was considerably stronger than that of a transactional psychological contract breach. This suggested that although transactional contract violations could undermine evaluative behavior, the long-term and far-reaching consequences of relational contract breakdown were more pronounced. This finding is consistent with prior evidence showing that cashback for positive reviews "erodes shopping experiences, undermines the perceived authenticity of reviews, and ultimately depresses purchase intention [62].

Finally, cognitive dissonance emerged as a critical factor that triggered psychological contract breaches and diminished consumers' willingness to review. Although "cash-for-positive-review" schemes fell into a legal gray area and were constrained by regulations and platform rules, competitive pressures could drive certain merchants and platforms to adopt these incentives. While such practices may temporarily stimulate purchasing decisions [11], they can create psychological imbalances for consumers endorsing the product, leading to heightened cognitive dissonance. As cognitive dissonance intensified, psychological contracts were more likely to collapse, and the willingness to provide evaluations declined. This conclusion further verified that cognitive dissonance as a manifestation of psychological imbalance significantly exacerbated the breakdown of psychological contracts and

magnified the reduction in evaluative behaviors in the context of “cash-for-positive-review.” Specifically, higher levels of cognitive dissonance were associated with more severe psychological contract breaches, thereby amplifying negative effects on evaluative behaviors.

6.2. Management Insights

This study delineates the pathway through which consumers’ negative emotions can influence psychological contract breach and review behavior in the context of cashback for positive reviews. It extends the theoretical boundary of research on online review valence and offers the following managerial implications for the sustainable development of e-commerce.

Firstly, for e-commerce platforms, governance can mitigate the psychological contract breach caused by merchants’ manipulative behaviors. When consumers detect cashback-for-reviews schemes, they may experience negative emotions and perceive a violation of integrity, which may reduce their willingness to provide genuine feedback—especially among those with high cognitive dissonance. Platforms can thus supplement technical detection with psychological interventions, such as adding neutral prompts before review submission to reduce moral conflict, and improving transparency by labeling incentivized reviews to lower deception and rebuild trust.

Secondly, for merchants, it is critical to recognize that cashback for positive reviews is not a neutral tactic but a form of manipulation that triggers psychological contract breach and negative emotions. This breach strongly suppresses consumers’ inclination to share authentic positive feedback, ultimately damaging long-term reputation. Therefore, merchants can shift from short-term manipulation to genuinely improving product and service quality. Such an approach not only aligns with the inherent logic of platform-based review systems but also avoids the adverse consequences triggered by psychological contract breach, thereby facilitating a sustainable shift from inducing positive reviews to genuinely earning them.

Finally, for regulatory authorities, governing can center on preventing the systematic erosion of the consumer–merchant psychological contract. Given that individuals with high cognitive dissonance feel particularly violated by such schemes, self-regulation is insufficient, market self-regulation is insufficient. Therefore, regulations require platforms to mandate clear disclosure of incentivized reviews, protecting informed consumer choice. Moreover, a governance framework oriented towards safeguarding psychological contracts can be established, embedding expectations of merchant integrity into digital market institutions to promote trust-driven engagement and authentic reviews.

6.3. Limitations

This study verifies the influence path of negative emotions triggered by positive review manipulation on consumers’ willingness to evaluate and expands the theoretical and practical scope of longitudinal research on online reviews. Nevertheless, several limitations remain that require further exploration in future studies. First, the survey respondents were restricted to individuals who had a certain understanding of “cash-for-praise” and had experienced it. However, some consumers may perceive cash-for-praise as “why not,” indicating a potential cognitive bias. Therefore, future studies should account for heterogeneous conclusions arising from consumers’ cognitive differences. Second, positive review manipulation is multifaceted, encompassing platforms or merchants hiring paid posters and engaging in fake-order brushing, as well as consumers issuing misleading or false reviews in exchange for rebates or gifts. This study focuses solely on the “cash-for-praise” scenario, thereby limiting its explanatory scope with respect to the full range of manipulation behaviors. Future research should differentiate between various forms of

positive review manipulation to provide a more comprehensive understanding. Finally, because consumers differ in how they perceive “cashback for positive reviews,” this study incorporated cognitive dissonance as a moderator of the hypothesized paths. Although significant moderating effects were observed for some relationships, other control variables and consumer cognitive differences require further investigation.

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