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From a Penny to Self-Disgust: How Cashback Rewards for Favorable Comments and Relationship Norms Affect Consumers' Post-Purchase Behavioral Intentions

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Abstract: Sellers of platforms offering cashback rewards for favorable comments (hereinafter CRFC) to generate positive online reviews are ubiquitous. This research examines when and how a CRFC influences consumers' post-purchase behavioral intentions regarding repurchase and recommendation. Anchoring on the relationship norms theory and casting light on consumers' self-perceptions, the effect of a CRFC on consumers' post-purchase behavioral intentions is contingent on the relationship norms. The findings of a pilot study and two experimental studies show that after a CRFC offer, communal consumers experienced lower post-purchase behavioral intentions than exchange consumers, and that consumers' feeling of self-disgust is the mechanism underlying this interactive effect. Specifically, a CRFC is effective for exchange consumers but not for communal consumers because it triggers self-disgust in communal consumers. This paper thus reveals the mediating role of self-disgust in the interactive effect of CRFC and relationship norms on post-purchase behavioral intentions. The implications for sellers, platforms and consumers are discussed.

Keywords: cashback rewards for favorable comments; relationship norms; post-purchase behavioral intentions; self-disgust



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1. Introduction

Writing online reviews is an active way for consumers to participate in the marketing process. This interactivity becomes a critical part of marketing practices [1]. Positive online reviews can boost sales significantly [2–6]. Cashback rewards are the most prevalent incentive that sellers on platforms (e.g., Tmall, Buy Together and eBay) use to encourage consumers to write favorable comments [7,8]. CRFC incentives have become an effective tool in interactive marketing. Cashback rewards are only given if consumers give a five-star rating and write favorable comments. Extant research focuses on how and why monetary incentives promote review-writing in the interactive marketing area [9]. The offer of a cashback reward may instantly increase consumers' intention of giving a five-star rating and writing favorable comments. However, consumers' repurchase and recommendation intentions are indispensable indicators of loyalty and future profitability [10,11]. Given the significant role of CRFC incentives, this research aims to answer the following important question: how does a CRFC influence repurchase and recommendation intentions?

This research reveals that the effectiveness of a CRFC in interactive marketing practice is not always positive. Instead, the effect of a CRFC on the repurchase and recommendation intentions is contingent on relationship norms (exchange vs. communal) between the consumers and the platform. Specifically, for consumers in a communal relation with the platforms (hereafter communal consumers), they feel a sense of friendship with the platform and will react negatively to cashback [9]. After a CRFC offer, communal consumers have lower repurchase and recommendation intentions. In contrast, consumers in an exchange relation with the platforms (hereafter exchange consumers) may make inferences about a favorable comment written in exchange for cashback [12]. After a CRFC offer, exchange

consumers do not have lower intentions. Consumers with a higher level of moral identity are likely to participate in an interactive marketing program [13]. The present research supposes that the underlying mechanism is the strong feeling of self-disgust elicited by a CRFC for communal (vs. exchange) consumers.

Theoretically, this research contributes to the interactive marketing process and cash-back rewards literature. First, this research reveals that a CRFC, the interactive marketing incentive that has an effect on repurchase and recommendation intentions, is undesirable if lacking consideration. Second, from the perspective of relationship norms theory, this research uncovers the boundary condition of CRFC effectiveness. Third, this research explores the underlying mechanism of the interactive effect by highlighting how a CRFC affects self-perception rather than meta-perception. Meta-perceptions are social inferences [14] of how consumers are viewed/judged by others when accepting a CRFC [14–19]. Meta-perceptions do not include how consumers view or judge themselves when accepting a CRFC. This research explores the underlying mechanism of the interactive effect by highlighting self-perception, that is, how consumers view or judge themselves. The perspectives of self-reflection and self-awareness capture those consumers with a higher level of moral identity.

Practically, this study provides implications for sellers, consumers, and platforms to participate in the interactive marketing process. First, sellers should acknowledge that a CRFC may have a backfire effect for communal consumers. Therefore, sellers should design an appropriate interactive marketing strategy for these consumers. The philosophy of incentives (selfish vs. prosocial, [20,21]), reward schemes [18,22–24], and congruence/fit factors [25,26] should be considered in the design process. Second, consumers should have marketing knowledge to embrace this interactivity. That is, they should strategically establish relationship norms and regard platforms as business partners (vs. close friends). Third, platforms should monitor and assess incentive-making in interactive marketing. This is because CRFC incentives may hinder a platform's sustainable development and affect consumers' well-being.

2. Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

2.1. Incentives in Interactive Marketing: CRFC/RP/CRC

This research highlights the two critical components of the incentives in interactive marketing, cashback (presence vs. absence) and reviews (favorable vs. authentic vs. none). Offering consumers cashback and asking them to write favorable reviews belong to the CRFC incentive. Offering consumers cashback and asking them to write authentic reviews belong to the CRC incentive. In the PR incentive, consumers receive a return policy card. That is, consumers are offered no cashback and are not asked to write a review. The CRFC incentive differs from a referral reward program (RRP), which was introduced by Helm and Schlei [27]. In an RRP, companies or sellers offer rewards to encourage their current customers to refer prospective customers [23,28,29]. The incentive of CRFC is an adapted form of the RRP in the digital era. These two incentives have a shared essence, reflecting the evolution and adaptation of rewards from offline to online environments.

Research has mainly explored meta-perceptions, rather than self-perceptions, elicited by RRP. Meta-perceptions are social inferences [14]. Consumers make social inferences about cashback rewards by assessing whether they entail social risk, which can elicit doubt and trigger negative perceptions. Social inferences reflect consumers' concerns about how others view or judge them. An RRP arouses impression management concern [15], leading to a desire to avoid being viewed or judged negatively. That is, recommenders worry that the prospective consumers they refer may attribute their referrals to self-interest rather than to altruism [17–19]. Moreover, cashback rewards elicit doubt and skepticism in recommenders, thereby inducing negative perceptions in recipients [23,30].

Such meta-perceptions only consider how recommenders are viewed or judged by others. However, little is known about how consumers view or judge themselves when accepting a CRFC. This research supposes that a CRFC triggers recommenders to view or judge

themselves—that is, it affects their self-perception. This study highlights self-perception as the underlying psychological mechanism in the effect of a CRFC on post-purchase behavioral intentions. Guided by Fiske’s social-relation theory [31] and relationship norms theory [32], this research develops a conceptual model to examine why the effect of a CRFC on post-purchase behavioral intentions is contingent on relationship norms.

2.2. Interactive Effect between CRFC and Relationship Norms

The relationship norms between consumers and platforms are essential in examining the effectiveness of CRFC incentives. Consumers have one of two relationship norms (exchange or communal) with a platform [32]. Exchange consumers make decisions using a transactional philosophy, whereas communal consumers are guided by a philanthropic philosophy [33]. An exchange relationship is akin to a business partnership, reflecting a market relationship and activating a transactional mentality [32,34]. In contrast, a communal relationship is similar to a close relationship with family members or friends, reflecting a social relationship and arousing compassion and reciprocity [32,34]. Thus, when manipulating consumers to engage in an exchange relation with a platform, consumers’ proportional thinking is activated [35] and they tend to make utilitarian choices [36]. When manipulating consumers to engage in a communal relationship with a platform, a philanthropic mindset is triggered, inspiring mutually beneficial choices [37] and consideration of relationship norms [32,34].

This research proposes that the effect of a CRFC on repurchase and recommendation intentions is contingent on the relationship norms between the consumers and the platform. That is, consumers respond to sellers’ incentives according to their relationship norm with the platform [38]. For exchange consumers, the platform is a business partner that they are in a transactional relationship with, so a monetary reward offered by a seller triggers an effort-for-payment mindset [39]. Therefore, a CRFC elicits their transaction mentality or proportional thinking. For communal consumers, the platform is like a friend that they have a strong connection with and are faithful to [40], so a monetary reward disrupts their internal altruistic motivations [23,41]. A CRFC breaches the principles of compassion and reciprocity for communal consumers, generating a feeling that they are being bribed.

To conclude, after a CRFC offer, exchange consumers do not experience lower repurchase and recommendation intentions because the cashback reward is an extra economic benefit. However, after a CRFC offer, communal consumers have lower intentions of repurchase and recommendation because it spoils their altruism motive and violates the philanthropic mindset. Therefore, the effect of a CRFC on repurchase and recommendation intentions is contingent on relationship norms. Therefore, Hypothesis 1 was proposed as follows:

H1. *After a CRFC offer, communal consumers experience lower intentions of repurchase and recommendation than exchange consumers.*

2.3. The Mediation Role of Self-Disgust

Self-disgust is “an originally food-related emotion, expanded, both in biological and in cultural evolution, to become a guardian of the body, the social order, and the soul” [42]. This emotion functions not only as a defensive mechanism to protect against potential pathogens that threaten physical purity [43], but also arises in response to transgressions of moral and spiritual purity [44,45]. The underpinning of self-disgust is a purity violation [45–49], and the offer of a CRFC violates communal consumers’ mental purity. Consequently, this study elucidates the mediating role of self-disgust in the interactive effect between CRFC and relationship norms on post-purchase behavioral intentions. Specifically, a CRFC triggers self-disgust in communal consumers, thereby diminishing their intentions of repurchase and recommendation.

The interaction between a CRFC and relationship norms affects self-disgust. External stimuli can elicit feelings of purity violation [45,49], triggering internal conflict and arousing self-disgust [50]. As an external incentive, the influence of a CRFC on self-disgust is contingent on relationship norms. For communal consumers, a CRFC is a reminder of the pursuit of money, generating stimulated (vs. organic) word of mouth (WOM) composed of positive reviews and biased opinions [51]. Unlike organic WOM, which is generated by individuals' altruism and pure intentions [52], stimulated WOM reflects a purity violation in review writing. Thus, a CRFC evokes a purity violation and self-disgust in communal consumers. However, a CRFC is a bonus for exchange consumers, compensating them for their review-writing costs [53]. To conclude, a CRFC matches their exchange mentality and does not evoke a purity violation or elicit self-disgust.

The elicited self-disgust decreases communal consumers' repurchase and recommendation intentions. The literature has shown that the disgust induced by advertainments of food [54] and sexualized women [55] decreases purchase intention. Consumers are reluctant to touch or consume the stuff they feel disgusted by [56], leading to lower purchase intentions. Self-disgust triggers purity violation and predicts post-purchase behavioral intentions. Disgust in the consumption process affects post-purchase behaviors [57]. Thus, this research predicts that the self-disgust aroused by CRFC decreases communal consumers' repurchase intention. Self-disgust also decreases communal consumers' recommendation intention. Research has shown that disgust results in service failure [58], irresponsible corporate behavior [59] and non-green actions [60]. Similarly, the self-disgust elicited by a CRFC may also decrease communal consumers' recommendation intentions. In summary, the offer of a CRFC elicits self-disgust in communal consumers and further decreases their repurchase and recommendation intentions. The presence of a CRFC has no adverse effect on exchange consumers' mentality, and thus this underlying process does not occur for exchange consumers. Therefore, Hypothesis 2 was proposed as follows:

H2. *Self-disgust mediates the interaction between CRFC and relationship norms on post-purchase behavioral intentions.*

This research aims to examine how the incentives in interactive marketing influence repurchase and recommendation intentions by shedding light on CRFC. Specifically, the pilot study compares the effectiveness of the following three incentives: CRFC, RP, CRC. Subsequently, Study 1 and Study 2 compare CRFC to RP and CRC, respectively. Compared to RP in Study 1, after a CRFC offer, communal consumers have lower repurchase and recommendation intentions than exchange consumers. Compared to a CRC in Study 2, after a CRFC offer, communal consumers experience stronger self-disgust and have lower intentions than exchange consumers. To conclude, the conceptual model based on this analysis is illustrated in Figure 1.

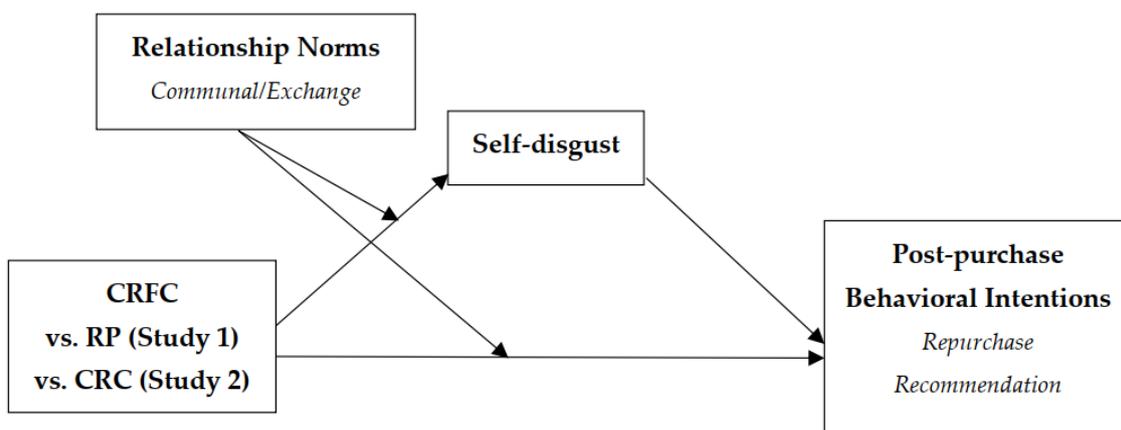


Figure 1. Conceptual model.

3. Pilot Study

Our pilot study was a preliminary exploration of how a CRFC influences post-purchase behavioral intentions, and it mimicked three actual incentives from the Tmall platform. This study had a between-subject design and the following three conditions: return policy (hereinafter RP), CRFC and cashback rewards for comments (hereinafter CRC; [61,62]; see Figure 2). This research anchors these conditions because the CRFC has the following two key components: offering a monetary reward or not and writing favorable or authentic comments. RP is included as a baseline because it does not involve a reward or reviews. The CRFC refers to cashback rewards only for favorable reviews, whereas CRC refers to cashback rewards for any authentic review, favorable or unfavorable. This study examined the effects of the three conditions (RP vs. CRFC vs. CRC) on post-purchase behavioral intentions.



Figure 2. Real existing stimuli of pilot study and study 1 (translated version). (A): RP card. (B): CRFC card. (C): CRC card.

3.1. Method

For the pilot study, 199 ($M_{age} = 30.41$, 77 males) participants were recruited to attend an online study (www.sojump.com; accessed on 18 April 2017). All participants were asked to imagine that they purchased an item on Tall and received a package containing the item and a gift card. To make the study reflect reality as much as possible, three existing stimuli (see Figure 2) from Tmall were used, corresponding to three cards that consumers received in reality [61,62]. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the three conditions. All participants reported which card they received with the package as the manipulation check. Subsequently, participants reported their repurchase and recommendation intentions (1 = very unlikely, 7 = very likely; [63,64]). Finally, participants completed some unrelated tasks to hide the true purpose of the study and provided demographic information.

3.2. Results

The manipulation was successful ($\chi^2 = 122.83, p < 0.001$), as participants accurately reported which card they received. The repurchase and recommendation intentions for participants in the CRFC and RP conditions were not significantly different (see Table 1). However, compared to participants in the RP or CRFC conditions, the post-purchase behavioral intentions of those under CRC conditions increased significantly. That is, participants had a higher repurchase intention in response to receiving a CRC rather than RP card ($M_{CRC} = 5.58, SD = 1.24; M_{RP} = 5.08, SD = 1.50; t(131) = 2.10, p = 0.038$), and the same was true for their recommendation intention ($M_{CRC} = 5.70, SD = 1.38; M_{RP} = 5.21, SD = 1.26; t(131) = 2.13, p = 0.035$). Similarly, participants had a higher repurchase intention in response to receiving a CRC rather than CRFC card ($M_{CRC} = 5.58, SD = 1.24; M_{CRFC} = 5.08, SD = 1.24; t(130) = 2.31, p = 0.022$), and the same was true for their recommendation intention ($M_{CRC} = 5.70, SD = 1.38; M_{CRFC} = 5.05, SD = 1.25; t(130) = 2.85, p = 0.005$). The underlying reason that the CRC (vs. PR vs. CRFC) had a positive effect on post-purchase behavioral intentions may have been that it sends a positive signal about product quality and reflect sellers' goodwill, encouraging consumers to write authentic comments (a form of organic WOM) [65].

Table 1. The results of the pilot study. (N = 199).

Stimuli and Cells	$M_{\text{Repurchase}}$	T-Value	$M_{\text{Recommendation}}$	T-Value
	$M_{\text{CRFC}} = 5.08$ vs. $M_{\text{RP}} = 5.08$	Non-sig.	$M_{\text{CRFC}} = 5.05$ vs. $M_{\text{RP}} = 5.21$	Non-sig.
Real practical gift cards: RP/CRFC/CRC ¹	$M_{\text{CRFC}} = 5.08$ vs. $M_{\text{CRC}} = 5.58$	$t(130) = -2.31,$ $p = 0.022$	$M_{\text{CRFC}} = 5.05$ vs. $M_{\text{CRC}} = 5.70$	$t(130) = -2.85,$ $p = 0.005$
	$M_{\text{RP}} = 5.08$ vs. $M_{\text{CRC}} = 5.58;$	$t(131) = -2.10,$ $p = 0.038$	$M_{\text{RP}} = 5.21$ vs. $M_{\text{CRC}} = 5.70;$	$t(131) = -2.13,$ $p = 0.035$

¹ CRFC: cashback rewards for favorable comments; RP: return policy; CRC: cashback rewards for comments.

3.3. Discussion

The pilot study provides initial evidence on how three real existing incentives (RP vs. CRFC vs. CRC) affect post-purchase behavioral intentions. Comprehending the inefficacy of the RP incentive is relatively straightforward. The effectiveness of CRC incentives can be explained. The interactivity of writing authentic reviews and receiving cashback is generally acceptable to all consumers. It is quite difficult to understand why the results of CRFC and RP have a similar pattern. Due to these counterintuitive results, this study particularly focuses on the effectiveness of CRFC. This study supposes that the influence of a CRFC on post-purchase behavioral intentions is contingent on relationship norms.

4. Study 1

4.1. Method

In total, 235 ($M_{\text{age}} = 28.89$, 97 males) participants were recruited to attend our online study. They were randomly assigned to one of four conditions: two relationship norms (communal vs. exchange) \times two actual incentive cards (RP vs. CRFC). First, following the literature [33], the participants' relationship norms were manipulated. Participants were randomly assigned to read one of two descriptions of relationship norms related to Tmall. The procedures of manipulation check for relationship norms were adapted from Aggarwal [33] (see Appendix A). Seven items were used to assess communal norms (e.g., "When I shop on Tmall, I have warm feelings"; 1 = extremely disagree, 7 = extremely agree) and four items to assess exchange norms (e.g., "Every penny I spent on Tmall is worthy"; 1 = extremely disagree, 7 = extremely agree). Then, the corresponding items were combined to form aggregated communal ($\alpha = 0.905$) and exchange ($\alpha = 0.817$) scores. The aggregated exchange score was reversed and combined with an aggregated communal score to form a net communality score ($\alpha = 0.834$; [33]).

Second, after the manipulation of the relationship norms, participants were randomly assigned to two imagery tasks similar to those in the pilot study. However, only two stimuli (RP and CRFC) were used in this study. Specifically, participants in the RP (vs. CRFC) condition were told that they received an RP (vs. a CRFC) card with the package (see Figure 2A,B). Participants were asked to recall which card (RP/CRFC) they received to check whether the manipulation was successful. Third, participants were asked "How likely are you to repurchase this item when you need it?" and "How likely are you to recommend this item to others when you know they seek this kind of item?" (1 = extremely unlikely, 7 = extremely likely; [63,64]). Finally, the participants' demographic information was collected and they were debriefed.

4.2. Results

4.2.1. Manipulation Check

Relationship-Type Manipulation Check

Communal participants had a higher net communality score ($M_{\text{communal}} = 4.31$, $SD = 0.69$) than exchange participants ($M_{\text{exchange}} = 3.71$, $SD = 0.74$; $F(1, 231) = 41.07$; $p < 0.001$). Moreover, communal participants had a higher aggregated communal score ($M_{\text{communal}} = 5.47$, $SD = 1.00$) than exchange participants ($M_{\text{exchange}} = 4.95$, $SD = 1.09$; $F(1, 231) = 14.54$; $p < 0.001$). Exchange participants had a higher aggregated exchange score ($M_{\text{exchange}} = 5.53$,

SD = 0.93) than communal participants ($M_{\text{communal}} = 4.85, SD = 1.35; F(1, 231) = 19.63; p < 0.001$).

Incentive Card Manipulation Check

The manipulation was successful ($\chi^2 = 21.23, p < 0.001$). Specifically, 82 of 123 (66.67%) participants assigned to the CRFC condition accurately reported that they received a CRFC card. In total, 71 of 112 (63.39%) participants assigned to the RP condition accurately reported that they received an RP card.

4.2.2. Hypothesis Testing
Interactive Effect Analysis

The results showed that the main effect of CRFC and relationship norms on the repurchase and recommendation intentions were not significant. However, the interactive effect between CRFC and relationship norms on the repurchase ($F(1, 231) = 13.26, p < 0.001$) and recommendation ($F(1, 231) = 12.07, p = 0.001$) intentions were significant, respectively (see Table 2).

Table 2. The results of Study 1 (N = 240).

Stimuli and Cells	$M_{\text{Repurchase}}$	T-Value	$M_{\text{Recommendation}}$	T-Value	Moderator Communal/Exchange
2 real practical gift cards (cashback rewards for favorable comments vs. return policy) × 2 relationship norm (exchange vs. communal) ²	$M_1 = 5.69$ vs. $M_2 = 4.93$	$F(1, 231) = 9.04, p = 0.003$	$M_1 = 5.45$ vs. $M_2 = 4.72$	$F(1, 231) = 6.28, p = 0.013$	Repurchase: $F(1, 231) = 13.259, p < 0.001$ Recommendation: $F(1, 231) = 12.073, p = 0.001$
	$M_3 = 4.94$ vs. $M_4 = 5.47$	$F(1, 231) = 4.57, p = 0.034$	$M_3 = 4.68$ vs. $M_4 = 5.37$	$F(1, 231) = 5.80, p = 0.017$	
	$M_1 = 5.69$ vs. $M_3 = 4.94$	$F(1, 231) = 9.46, p = 0.002$	$M_1 = 5.45$ vs. $M_3 = 4.68$	$F(1, 231) = 7.60, p = 0.006$	
	$M_2 = 4.93$ vs. $M_4 = 5.47$	$F(1, 231) = 4.42, p = 0.037$	$M_2 = 4.72$ vs. $M_4 = 5.37$	$F(1, 231) = 4.73, p = 0.031$	

² CRFC-E: 1; RP-E: 2; CRFC-C: 3; RP-C: 4.

Contrast analysis revealed that exchange participants had a higher repurchase intention in response to a CRFC (vs. RP) card ($M_{\text{CRFC-E}} = 5.69, SD = 1.41; M_{\text{RP-E}} = 4.93, SD = 1.76; F(1, 231) = 9.04, p = 0.003$). Communal participants reported a lower repurchase intention in response to a CRFC (vs. RP) card ($M_{\text{CRFC-C}} = 4.94, SD = 1.17; M_{\text{RP-C}} = 5.47, SD = 1.09; F(1, 231) = 4.57, p = 0.034$). Additionally, exchange participants reported a higher repurchase intention than communal participants in response to a CRFC card ($M_{\text{CRFC-E}} = 5.69, SD = 1.41, M_{\text{CRFC-C}} = 4.94, SD = 1.17; F(1, 231) = 9.46, p = 0.002$). However, exchange participants reported a lower repurchase intention than communal participants in response to an RP card ($M_{\text{RP-E}} = 4.93, SD = 1.76, M_{\text{RP-C}} = 5.47, SD = 1.09; F(1, 231) = 4.42, p = 0.037$; see Figure 3a).

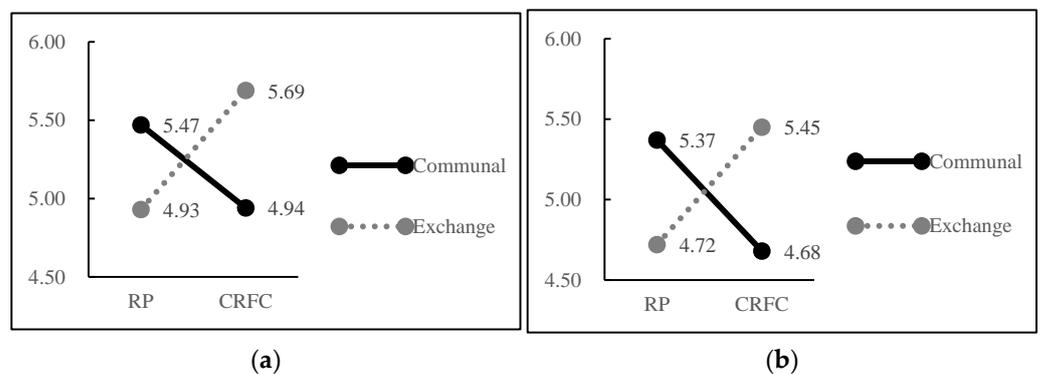


Figure 3. The interactive effect in Study 1. (a) The repurchase intention; (b) the recommendation intention.

Contrast analysis revealed a similar pattern in the results for recommendation intention. Specifically, exchange participants reported a higher recommendation intention in response to a CRFC card ($M_{\text{CRFC-E}} = 5.45$, $SD = 1.40$) than an RP card ($M_{\text{RP-E}} = 4.72$, $SD = 1.85$; $F(1, 231) = 6.28$, $p = 0.013$). Communal participants reported a lower recommendation intention in response to a CRFC card ($M_{\text{CRFC-C}} = 4.68$, $SD = 1.64$) than an RP card ($M_{\text{RP-C}} = 5.37$, $SD = 1.35$; $F(1, 231) = 5.80$, $p = 0.017$). Moreover, exchange participants reported a higher recommendation intention than communal participants in response to a CRFC card ($M_{\text{CRFC-E}} = 5.45$, $SD = 1.40$, $M_{\text{CRFC-C}} = 4.68$, $SD = 1.64$; $F(1, 236) = 7.60$, $p = 0.006$). However, exchange participants reported a lower recommendation intention than communal participants in response to an RP card ($M_{\text{RP-E}} = 4.72$, $SD = 1.85$, $M_{\text{RP-C}} = 5.37$, $SD = 1.35$; $F(1, 236) = 4.73$, $p = 0.031$; see Figure 3b).

4.3. Discussion

These results provide initial evidence for the interactive effect between a CRFC and relationship norms on post-purchase behavioral intentions. The findings suggest that after a CRFC offer, communal consumers experience lower intentions of repurchase and recommendation than exchange consumers. Despite limited understanding of the mechanisms involved, Study 2 specifically investigates the mediating role of self-disgust in this interactive effect.

5. Study 2

Study 2 explored the mechanism underlying the interactive effect. Specifically, it examined how a CRFC triggers self-disgust in communal (vs. exchange) consumers and decreases their repurchase and recommendation intentions. Self-disgust involves self-reflection and self-awareness [66,67]. Compared to exchange consumers, communal consumers have a higher inclination to self-reflection [68]. This research elucidates that self-disgust is activated because a CRFC triggers communal consumers to engage in a mental activity: how they view or judge themselves.

Study 1 used the RP and CRFC as stimuli to shed light on the influence of cashback rewards. Study 2 used CRC rather than RP to highlight the influence of the valence of comments (see Figure 4). That is, participants who received a CRC card were stimulated to write any comments, positive or negative. Participants who received a CRFC card were stimulated to write only positive comments.

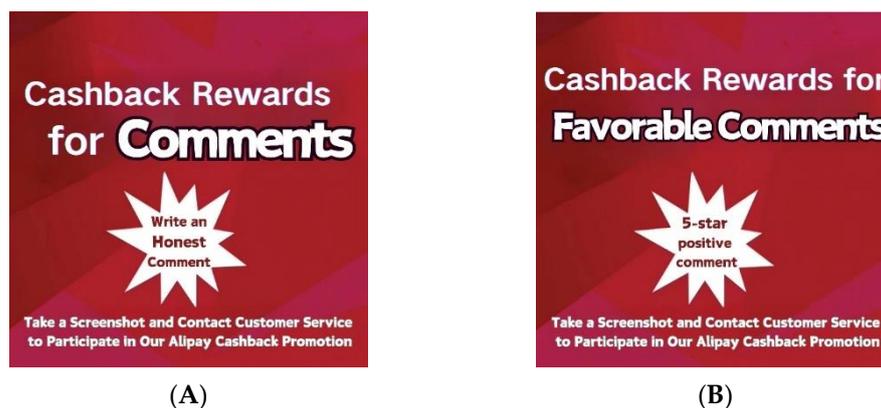


Figure 4. The fictitious stimuli of Study 2 (translated version). (A): CRC. (B): CRFC.

5.1. Method

In total, 293 ($M_{\text{age}} = 32.85$, 158 males) participants were recruited for this online study. They were randomly assigned to one of four conditions: two relationship norms (communal vs. exchange) \times two incentive cards (CRFC vs. CRC). The procedures were similar to those in Study 1, with three exceptions. First, two fictitious stimuli (CRC vs. CRFC) rather than real existing cards were used to eliminate any confounding effect. Second, this

study explored the mechanism of self-disgust to account for the interactive effect. The Self-Disgust Scale [69], which has been culturally adapted for Chinese participants [70], was employed to measure self-disgust. The adapted scale comprised 14 items ($\alpha = 0.971$), with 9 items tapping into disgust towards one’s emotions (e.g., “I find my-self repulsive”) and another 5 items addressing disgust towards one’s behaviors (e.g., “The way I behave makes me despise myself”).

Third, this study simplified the manipulation check of relationship norms [71]. Participants were asked to consider their relationship with the platform. This study used a single item for the manipulation check, which was as follows: “Consider the relationship between you and Tmall seriously for a few minutes. To what extent do you think the relationship is akin to an exchange relationship of equivalent services and products? (1 = extremely disagree, 7 = extremely agree)”. The score reflected the exchange aspect of the relationship; the higher the score, the more transactional the relationship is. Finally, participants completed some unrelated tasks and provided demographic information.

5.2. Results

5.2.1. Manipulation Checks

Relationship-Type Manipulation Check

Exchange participants reported a higher exchange score ($M_{\text{exchange}} = 5.68, SD = 0.93$) than communal participants ($M_{\text{communal}} = 5.38, SD = 1.16; F(1, 289) = 5.98, p = 0.015$).

Incentive Card Manipulation Check

The manipulation was successful ($\chi^2 = 201.51, p < 0.001$). Specifically, 131 of 143 (91.61%) participants assigned to the CRFC condition accurately reported that they received a CRFC card. In total, 137 of 150 (91.33%) participants assigned to the CRC condition accurately reported that they received a CRC card.

5.2.2. Hypothesis Testing

Interactive Effect Analysis

The results showed that the main effects of a CRFC and relationship norms on the repurchase and recommendation intentions were not significant. However, the effects of the interaction between relationship norms and CRFC on the repurchase ($F(1, 289) = 12.97, p < 0.001$) and recommendation ($F(1, 289) = 11.95, p = 0.001$) intentions were significant, respectively (see Table 3).

Table 3. The results of Study 2 (N = 295).

Stimuli and Cells	$M_{\text{Repurchase}}$	T-Value	$M_{\text{Recommendation}}$	T-Value	Moderator Communal/Exchange	Mediator Self-Disgust
2 fictitious gift cards (appeal for review vs. cashback rewards for favorable comments) × 2 relationship norms (exchange vs. communal) ³	$M_1 = 5.53$ vs. $M_2 = 5.11$	$F(1, 289) = 4.31,$ $p = 0.039$	$M_1 = 5.38$ vs. $M_2 = 4.89$	$F(1, 289) = 4.88, p = 0.028$	Repurchase: $F(1, 289) = 12.972,$ $p < 0.001$ Recommendation: $F(1, 289) = 11.949, p = 0.001$	Repurchase: $B = 0.1319, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.1066, 0.6317]$ Recommendation: $B = 0.1387, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.0991, 0.6415]$
	$M_3 = 4.96$ vs. $M_4 = 5.57$	$F(1, 289) = 9.11,$ $p = 0.003$	$M_3 = 4.92$ vs. $M_4 = 5.50$	$F(1, 289) = 7.18, p = 0.008$		
	$M_1 = 5.53$ vs. $M_3 = 4.96$	$F(1, 289) = 7.80,$ $p = 0.006$	$M_1 = 5.38$ vs. $M_3 = 4.92$	$F(1, 289) = 4.32, p = 0.038$		
	$M_2 = 5.11$ vs. $M_4 = 5.57$	$F(1, 289) = 5.27,$ $p = 0.022$	$M_2 = 4.89$ vs. $M_4 = 5.50$	$F(1, 289) = 7.94, p = 0.005$		

³ CRFC-E: 1; CRC-E: 2; CRFC-C: 3; CRC-C: 4.

Contrast analysis revealed that exchange participants reported a higher repurchase intention in response to a CRFC (vs. CRC) card ($M_{\text{CRFC-E}} = 5.53, SD = 1.09; M_{\text{CRC-E}} = 5.11, SD = 1.41; F(1, 289) = 4.31, p = 0.039$). Communal participants reported a lower repurchase intention in response to a CRFC (vs. CRC) card ($M_{\text{CRFC-C}} = 4.96, SD = 1.49; M_{\text{CRC-C}} = 5.57, SD = 1.14; F(1, 289) = 9.11, p = 0.003$). Additionally, exchange (vs. communal) participants reported a higher repurchase intention in response to a CRFC card ($M_{\text{CRFC-E}} = 5.53, SD = 1.09, M_{\text{CRFC-C}} = 4.96, SD = 1.49; F(1, 289) = 7.80, p = 0.006$). However, exchange (vs. communal) participants reported a lower repurchase intention than in response to a CRC card ($M_{\text{CRC-E}} = 5.11, SD = 1.41, M_{\text{CRC-C}} = 5.57, SD = 1.14; F(1, 289) = 5.27, p = 0.022$; see Figure 5a).

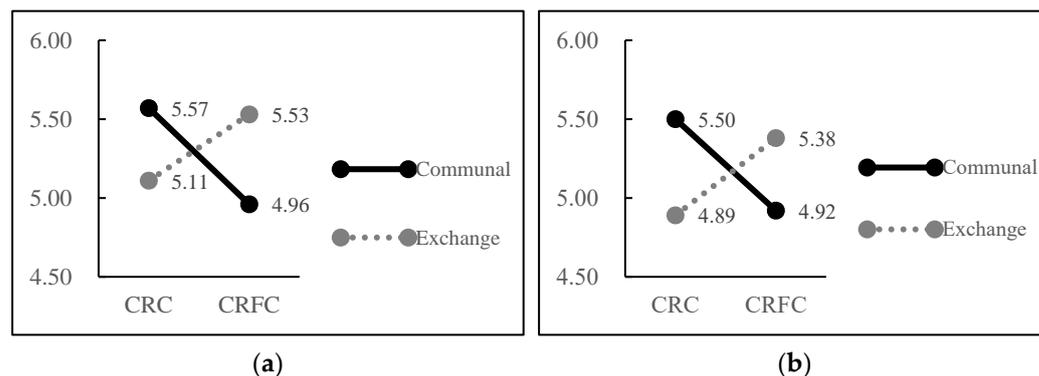


Figure 5. The interactive effect in Study 2. (a) The repurchase intention; (b) the recommendation intention.

Contrast analysis revealed a similar pattern for the participants' recommendation intention. Specifically, exchange participants reported a higher recommendation intention in response to a CRFC (vs. CRC) card ($M_{\text{CRFC-E}} = 5.38$, $SD = 1.37$; $M_{\text{CRC-E}} = 4.89$, $SD = 1.35$; $F(1, 289) = 4.88$, $p = 0.028$). Communal participants reported a lower recommendation intention in response to a CRFC (vs. CRC) card ($M_{\text{CRFC-C}} = 4.92$, $SD = 1.48$; $M_{\text{CRC-C}} = 5.50$, $SD = 1.07$; $F(1, 289) = 7.18$, $p = 0.008$). Similarly, exchange (vs. communal) participants reported a higher recommendation intention in response to a CRFC card ($M_{\text{CRFC-E}} = 5.38$, $SD = 1.37$, $M_{\text{CRFC-C}} = 4.92$, $SD = 1.48$; $F(1, 289) = 4.32$, $p = 0.038$). Exchange (vs. communal) participants reported a lower recommendation intention in response to a CRC card ($M_{\text{CRC-E}} = 4.89$, $SD = 1.35$, $M_{\text{CRC-C}} = 5.50$, $SD = 1.07$; $F(1, 289) = 7.94$, $p = 0.005$; see Figure 5b).

Mediation Analysis: Self-Disgust

Communal participants reported stronger self-disgust in response to a CRFC rather than a CRC card ($M_{\text{CRFC-C}} = 3.32$, $SD = 1.15$, $M_{\text{CRC-C}} = 2.68$, $SD = 1.29$; $F(1, 289) = 6.95$, $p = 0.009$). To explore whether the interactive effect was mediated by self-disgust, this study examined the indirect effect of the interaction between a CRFC and relationship norms on repurchase and recommendation intentions through self-disgust (PROCESS model 8, [72]). In 5000 bootstrapped samples with incentive cards as the independent variable, relationship norms as the moderator, repurchase intention as the dependent variable and self-disgust as the mediator, the analysis revealed that the interaction effect between a CRFC and relationship norms on the repurchase intention was mediated by self-disgust (indirect effect = 0.3278, boot SE = 0.1319; 95% CI [0.1066 to 0.6317]). Similarly, the result also revealed that the interactive effect between a CRFC and relationship norms on the recommendation intention was mediated by self-disgust (indirect effect = 0.3416, boot SE = 0.1387; 95% CI [0.0991 to 0.6415]).

Additionally, this study averaged repurchase and recommendation intentions into a single item, post-purchase behavioral intentions. This study ran the PROCESS Model 8, and the result still supported the mediating role of self-disgust (indirect effect = 0.3347, boot SE = 0.1298; 95% CI [0.1037 to 0.6080]; see Figure 6). Notably, the results supported the mediating role of self-disgust (95% CI [-0.4218, -0.0660]) for communal consumers. The results did not support the mediating role of self-disgust (95% CI [-0.0552, 0.2802]) for exchange consumers. Taken together, the mediating role of self-disgust in the interactive effect was verified.

5.3. Discussion

Study 2 and Study 1 provided converging evidence that the effect of a CRFC on post-purchase behavioral intentions is contingent on the relationship norms. Specifically, after a CRFC offer, communal consumers reported lower intentions of repurchase and recommendation than exchange consumers. Study 2 further revealed that the underlying mechanism

of the interactive effect was self-disgust. That is, communal (vs. exchange) consumers had stronger self-disgust than exchange participants when a CRFC was presented.

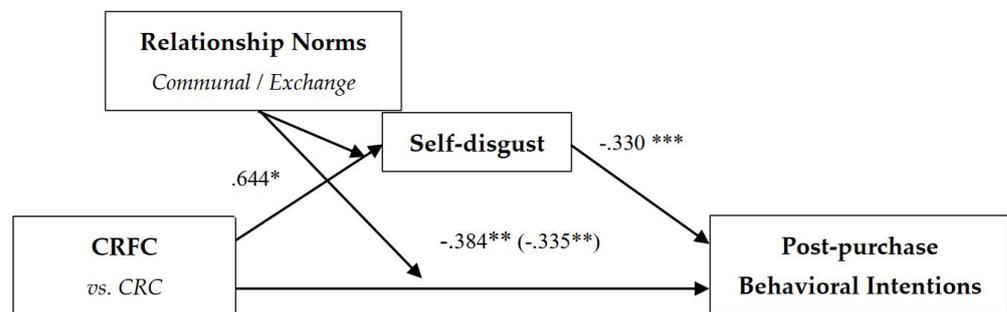


Figure 6. Path model of the mediation effect of self-disgust in Study 2. Note: The path coefficients are unstandardized betas. The value in parentheses indicates the effect of condition on the dependent variable after I control for the mediator. *** $p < 0.005$, ** $p < 0.05$.

6. Conclusions and Discussion

This current research examines (1) how three existing incentives (RP vs. CRFC vs. CRC) influence consumers’ post-purchase behavioral intentions (repurchase and recommendation), (2) the boundary condition of relationship norms in the effect of CRFC on the post-purchase behavioral intentions, and (3) the underlying mechanism of self-disgust in the interactive effect between a CRFC and relationship norms. Specifically, the results of the pilot study showed that after a CRFC and RP (vs. CRC) offer, consumers had lower post-purchase behavioral intentions. The results of Study 1 indicated that after a CRFC (vs. RP) offer, communal consumers experienced lower post-purchase behavioral intentions than exchange consumers. The results of Study 2 verified the mediating role of self-disgust in the interactive effect between a CRFC and relationship norms. That is, after a CRFC offer, communal consumers had stronger self-disgust than exchange consumers, which further led to lower post-purchase behavioral intentions.

6.1. Theoretical Contributions

This research makes theoretical contributions to the interactive marketing literature by attaching importance to the CRFC incentive and introducing the theory of relationship norms and highlighting the underlying mechanism of self-disgust.

First, it contributes to the interactive marketing literature by focusing on the sellers’ attempt to incentive consumers to write favorable rather than authentic reviews. Extant research focuses on the effect of monetary and non-monetary incentives on review-writing [9] or how to recognize and enhance review helpfulness [13,73,74]. This research revealed that offering cashback rewards for favorable comments rather than neutral or authentic comments can have a backfire effect on post-purchase behavioral intentions. Both a CRFC and CRC offer cashback rewards, but the former requires consumers to write favorable comments, whereas the latter just requires consumers to write comments. A CRC can stimulate consumers to write long reviews with rich information but fail to increase the ratio of favorable comments [65]. A CRFC is an adapted form of cashback rewards in the online context, and its effect on post-purchase behavioral intentions requires a more robust examination of its boundary conditions.

Second, this paper advances the interactive marketing research on relationship norms. This research found that the effectiveness of a CRFC is contingent on relationship norms. After a CRFC offer, communal consumers had lower post-purchase behavioral intentions than exchange consumers. Notably, the moderator, relationship norms, captures the relation between consumers and Tmall rather than the relation between consumers and the seller. Prior studies have highlighted the relationships between individuals (i.e., strong or weak ties; [22]) and their influence on meta-perceptions [16,19]. This research focused on the relation between consumers and the platform and demonstrated that in this relation, a

CRFC can elicit self-perceptions rather than social perceptions. That is, consumers are less dominant in the relation between themselves and platforms, and they are less inclined to make inferences about others or their surroundings [35]. This is especially true for communal consumers, who tend to make inferences about themselves rather than the platform when an unexpected CRFC is presented. This research enriches the interactive marketing literature by emphasizing the relationship norms theory. This work provides insight into how consumers react to a CRFC from the self-perception perspective.

Third, this study is the first attempt to link self-disgust and cashback rewards. This research explored how self-disgust mediates the interaction between a CRFC and relationship norms, expanding research on self-perceptions elicited by cashback rewards. The underlying process of how a cashback reward influences consumer behavior can be classified into the economic cost–benefit perspective [24,75], motivational perspective [51] and meta-perceptual perspective [18,19,23]. Notably, this research found that self-disgust, rather than meta-perceptions, affects consumers' post-purchase behavioral intentions. Self-disgust aroused by external stimuli generally affects consumers' inner world, inducing mental distress [76,77]. However, this study revealed that self-disgust can also influence behavioral intentions.

6.2. Managerial Implications

Sellers on platforms strive to maximize the impact of CRFC on consumers' repurchase and recommendation intentions, overlooking the detrimental effect of CRFC. Based on our findings, this research proposes three suggestions to minimize the negative consequences.

Consider relationship norms. As a common incentive in interactive marketing, CRFC fails to increase repurchase and recommendation intentions. Sellers should consider the relationship norms between consumers and the platform. Using advanced targeting technology, CRFC can be offered to consumers in an exchange, rather than a communal, relationship with the platform.

Understand self-disgust. Understanding self-disgust is imperative because it induces mental distress [76,77] and communal consumers have lower post-purchase behavioral intentions. Communal consumers experience stronger self-disgust after a CRFC offer. This also affects their well-being. Executing interactive marketing strategy should consider consumers' psychology.

Minimize leverage spillover. Designing incentives to enhance interactivity is vital for the stakeholders in the market. The unexpectedly detrimental effect of CRFC provides a novel perspective for sellers and platforms to consider in their policymaking. Notably, platforms, as the bridge between sellers and consumers, should manage relationship norms with consumers. Initiating a reward design from a congruence/fit perspective may be helpful for both sides [26].

6.3. Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

First, this study exclusively employs experimental studies to investigate behavioral intentions. The hypothetical scenario-based experimental method may not capture real behaviors. Real behaviors rather than intentions reflect the real world [16,23,24]. Thus, future research could use field studies to explore how a CRFC shapes real behaviors, especially when examining the long-term effects of cashback reward programs on consumer loyalty. Furthermore, it would be valuable to apply a new method (e.g., Python) to collect more powerful data or to explore traceable behaviors.

Second, this study has focused solely on the relationship norms between consumers and the platform. Expanding the scope, future research could explore additional boundary conditions, including moderating factors inherent to the CRFC itself, like the attractiveness of the reward [23,25], the structure of reward schemes [18,22–24], product type (utilitarian vs. hedonic; [26]) and the role of service innovation [75].

Third, further research could examine various mediator variables. For instance, a recent study has highlighted the influence of self-efficacy, which influences e-referrals [78].

Future studies could thus investigate the mediating role of self-efficacy in the relationship between CRFC and consumer behavior. To construct a robust understanding of the underlying mechanism of CRFC's effect on consumer behaviors, multiple perspectives could be integrated into the examination.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: This project has been approved by or on behalf of Swinburne's Human Research Ethics Committee (SUHREC) in line with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article.

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Appendix A. The Manipulation of Relationship Norms in Study 1

Exchange relationship norm scenario description:

You have shopped online on Tmall for the last five years. You have accessed Tmall extensively and been satisfied with its efficiency and the quality of the products. You access Tmall when you want to shop and really enjoy it. On Tmall, you had your first and most efficient online shopping experience. Tmall provides various products and timely services. You remember how great the items and efficiency are on Tmall. Specifically, each item is good value for money, and every penny spent on Tmall is worth it. Tmall provides what you need at the best price and recommends suitable items based on an algorithm. In the past, whenever you accessed Tmall, you bought what you wanted. Tmall respects your requests and provides ideal items. The quality of the products and services are guaranteed. Overall, your past shopping experiences with Tmall have always been excellent.

Communal relationship norm scenario description:

You have shopped online on Tmall for the last five years. You have accessed Tmall extensively and been satisfied with its benevolence and service quality. You access Tmall when you want to experience a sense of belonging and connection and really enjoy it. On Tmall, you had your first and most memorable online shopping experience. Tmall provides various products and warm services. You remember how great the items are and how marvelous Tmall is. Specifically, each interaction makes you feel special, and every moment spent on Tmall is relaxing. Tmall understands your needs and acts as an intimate friend to support your shopping decisions. In the past, whenever you accessed Tmall, you had warm and pleasant interactions. Tmall is always on your side to support you, bettering your consumption and life. Overall, your shopping experiences on Tmall have been memorable.

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