

Perceptions of Ambivalence in Cause-Related Marketing: Exploring the Impact of Mixed Motivational Signals on Consumer Evaluations

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ABSTRACT

Despite CRM's popularity for social contributions and profits, sellers struggle with consumers' mixed views on their motivations. This study gathered 268 survey data to reflect consumers' understanding of sellers' motivations for CRM. The current paper uses a polynomial regression model and response surface analysis to reveal that the incongruence between perceived egoistic and altruistic motivation can positively influence consumer evaluations. Meanwhile, the congruence between these two motivational perceptions also enhances consumer evaluation. Moreover, sellers' function usage behavior can further amplify the positive incongruence effect, but there is no salient moderating role in the congruence effect.

Keywords: Cause-related marketing, platform function usage, polynomial regression model, response surface analysis, stereotype content model.

INTRODUCTION

Intertwining the aspirations of profit with the pursuit of social benefits, an increasing number of sellers aim to utilize CRM to enhance their brand image and drive sales while simultaneously contributing to social causes. Cause-related marketing (CRM) refers to sellers contributing part of their revenues from business transactions to charitable organizations (Andrews *et al.*, 2014). However, a profound dilemma for sellers lies beneath this seemingly benevolent pro-social behavior. On the one hand, CRM fulfills corporate social responsibility objectives; thereby, it should enhance brand reputation and improve brand image from consumers' perspectives (Demetriou *et al.*, 2010). On the other hand, it may risk breeding consumers' skepticism, diluting the sincerity of philanthropic efforts, and potentially triggering consumer aversion if perceived as mere corporate opportunism or stunt (Connors *et al.*, 2017; Skarmeas & Leonidou, 2013). Confronted with the multifaceted viewpoints of CRM, sellers are eager to explore whether and how they can utilize CRM to generate positive consumer evaluations.

Existing literature has argued that evaluative inconsistency occurs often, meaning that individuals may simultaneously positively and negatively evaluate one object (Jonas *et al.*, 2000). Extending the theoretical logic to CRM, two perspectives exist for understanding sellers' motivation of CRM: perceived egoistic and altruistic motivation. Perceived egoistic motivation stands for consumers believing that sellers' provision of CRM aims for their image and profits (Zlatev & Miller, 2016), while perceived altruistic motivation refers to consumers' understanding that sellers conduct CRM for social benefits instead of their benefits (Bar-Tal, 1986; Elster, 2006). Although prior studies have widely investigated the outcomes of CRM (Lii & Lee, 2012; Matarazzo *et al.*, 2020; Seo & Song, 2021), they mainly focused on the positive pro-social perspective, ignoring the potential negative understanding and the concurrence between them. Based on attitudinal ambivalence, this study tends to disentangle consumers' ambivalent understandings of CRM, providing advantages for sellers to understand how CRM works and detailed implications for practices. Particularly, incongruence refers to the discrepancy between two motivational perceptions, meaning that consumers may have a high perception regarding perceived egoistic motivation while a low perception of perceived altruistic motivation or vice versa (Shanock *et al.*, 2010). Differently, congruence refers to the impact of simultaneously increasing both perceived egoistic motivation and perceived altruistic motivation (Shanock *et al.*, 2010). As congruence and incongruence can comprehensively reveal how people view CRM, this study investigates the congruence and incongruence between perceived egoistic motivation and altruistic motivation on consumers' evaluations of the seller.

Research question 1: How do congruence and incongruence between perceived egoistic and altruistic motivations impact consumers' evaluations?

The Stereotype Content Model (SCM) has identified that warmth and competence are the crucial dimensions in social judgment, guiding individuals in forming their perceptions and determining evaluations (Motsi and Park, In the current study, perceived altruistic motivation can be interpreted as a manifestation of warmth, illustrating a seller's dedication to societal causes (Coleman et al., 2020; Ferraris et al., 2020); while perceived egoistic motivation aligns with the competence aspect of a seller's CRM strategy, underscoring a seller's emphasis on enhancing its performance. The SCM further posits a common belief that warmth and competence are seldom found together in the same entity (Ferraris et al., 2020). As a result, sellers categorized as high warmth and high competence contradict consumers' normal cognitive scheme, resulting in confusion and suspicion (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2019). Therefore, we propose that incongruence between perceived egoistic and altruistic motivation can enhance consumer evaluations. Moreover, the SCM assumes that although individuals with high warmth and high competence may violate people's cognitive schemas, they would receive more favorable evaluations than those with low warmth and low competence (Cuddy et al., 2011). Thus, the SCM provides a theoretical basis for us to believe that congruence between perceived egoistic and altruistic motivation can positively enhance consumer evaluations.

Literature on SCM further argues that individuals rely on environmental cues to inform their interpretation of warmth and competence (Jha et al., 2020). This view is corroborated by Rousselet et al. (2020), who noted that besides voluntary out-role behavior, sellers' in-role behavior, like platform function usage, can be recognized by consumers and further regulates consumers' interpretations of CRM. Platform function usage refers to sellers using a set of IT-enabled storefront functions to customize their offerings, reflecting consumers' shopping benefits, like low prices, service guarantees, or convenient payment options (Li et al., 2019). Therefore, the increased degree of sellers' function usage stands for more benefits consumers can enjoy, thereby changing the role of their reflections of CRM. Thus, this study further explores how sellers' function usage behavior moderates the congruence and incongruence between consumers' perceived egoistic and altruistic motivation on their evaluations of the seller.

Research question 2: How does sellers' function usage behavior moderate the congruence and incongruence between perceived egoistic and altruistic motivation?

This study gathered 268 survey data to examine the research model to reflect consumers' understanding of sellers' motivations for CRM. The current paper uses a polynomial regression model and response surface analysis to reveal that the incongruence between perceived egoistic and altruistic motivation can positively influence consumer evaluations. Meanwhile, the congruence between these two motivational perceptions also enhances consumer evaluation. Moreover, sellers' function usage behavior can further amplify the positive incongruence effect, but there is no salient moderating role in the congruence effect. Our study makes several important contributions. First, it helps to disentangle CRM's mixed impacts on consumers' evaluations of sellers by scrutinizing the congruence and incongruence between two motivational perspectives of CRM, namely perceived egoistic motivation and perceived altruistic motivation. Second, the current study examines sellers' function usage behavior as the boundary conditions, thereby extending prior studies by revealing how in-role behaviors influence consumers' understanding of sellers' extra-role behaviors.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature of Cause-Related Marketing

CRM refers to firms' contribution activity to a designated cause that is activated by consumers' purchase behavior (Andrews et al., 2014). Specifically, for each successful transaction, firms will donate a certain amount of revenue to the charity (Chang & Chu, 2020). Although CRM has been widely adopted in real marketing scenarios, scholars have conflicting understandings. For instance, existing literature has demonstrated that CRM can improve not only firms' sales performance (Andrews et al., 2014) but also firms' image and reputation (Demetriou et al., 2010). Nevertheless, another stream of literature has revealed that consumers may have a negative understanding of CRM because they tend to be skeptical of firms' public social responsibility behavior, thereby further influencing their attitudes toward the firm. Consequently, confronted with the mixed understanding of how consumers perceive CRM, this study tends to distinguish two types of theoretical attributions of firms' CRM.

Previous literature has concluded that individuals may simultaneously use positive and negative perspectives to evaluate one object (Jonas et al., 2000). Therefore, consumers might understand that firms' motivation for conducting CRM is perceived as altruistic motivation because this kind of pro-social activity provides monetary benefits to charity organizations. Nevertheless, it can be understood as perceived egoistic motivation because consumers may suspect sellers' motivation for CRM is for their benefit instead of social one. Due to the possibility of the concurrence of these two understandings, this study tends to disentangle the complex relationships between them.

Stereotype Content Model

Drawing from the Stereotype Content Model (SCM), warmth and competence are crucial dimensions in social judgment, guiding individuals in forming their perceptions on various issues (Motsi & Park, 2020). Warmth assesses perceptions of others' benevolent or malevolent intentions, whereas competence evaluates their ability to enact those intentions (Fiske et al., 2018). Within the realm of CRM, perceived altruistic motivation is interpreted as a manifestation of warmth, illustrating a seller's dedication to societal causes (Coleman et al., 2020; Ferraris et al., 2020). On the other hand, perceived egoistic motivation aligns with the competence aspect of a seller's CRM strategy, underscoring a seller's emphasis on enhancing its performance.

In online e-commerce, sellers leverage the dimensions of warmth and competence, as outlined in the SCM, to mold consumers' impressions of them (Cuddy et al., 2009). Upon encountering sellers, consumers instinctively assess their intentions (warmth) — whether they aim to help or harm — and their ability (competence) to follow through. Perceived egoistic motivation is perceived when consumers believe that a seller's engagement in CRM is driven by a desire to enhance its image and profits, whereas perceived altruistic motivation arises from the belief that CRM efforts are genuinely aimed at societal benefits rather than self-gain. The SCM posits that there is a common belief that warmth and competence are seldom found together in the same entity (Ferraris et al., 2020). As a result, sellers are often categorized as either high in warmth but low in competence or vice versa, aligning with people's cognitive frameworks for evaluating them (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2019). Despite this, entities perceived as high in warmth and competence can defy these cognitive schemas and are typically met with more favorable evaluations than those seen as lacking in both dimensions (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2019). Thus, the SCM offers a theoretical framework for understanding how customers evaluate sellers based on perceived levels of warmth and competence, highlighting the intricate ways these perceptions influence consumer behavior in the digital marketplace.

As social interaction evolves alongside human development, individuals increasingly rely on environmental cues to inform their judgments of warmth and competence in interpersonal interactions (Jha et al., 2020). For example, the functionalities of e-commerce platforms are theorized to reflect online sellers' warmth and competence, influencing product sales predictions. In omnichannel retailing, sellers' integration of online and offline channels demonstrates their commitment to enhancing customer interactions and showcasing their care and capability (Timoumi et al., 2022). Consumers interpret perceived egoistic motivation as indicating that sellers' CRM efforts primarily enhance their image and profits, thus influencing customers' cognitive assessments of the sellers' competence (Twyman et al., 2023). Conversely, consumers perceive altruistic motivation as sellers engaging in CRM for societal benefits rather than self-gain, leading to affective evaluations of the sellers' warmth (Fan et al., 2020). In this context, perceived egoistic motivation signals the sellers' capabilities, affecting customers' perceptions of competence, while perceived altruistic motivation highlights the sellers' efforts, enhancing perceptions of warmth.

The SCM has been extensively applied to explore how customers evaluate and form relationships with retail sellers (Fiske et al., 2018). Research has delved into customer perceptions of congruence and incongruence between warmth and competence, viewing sellers as intentional agents (Klysing et al., 2021). Congruence, characterized by high warmth and competence, bolsters the seller's reputation and elicits customer admiration. In contrast, incongruence, marked by disparities between warmth and competence, influenced the dynamics of perceived egoistic and altruistic motivations in customer relationships, leading to varied outcomes. Thus, perceived egoistic and altruistic motivations represent diverse facets through which customers assess sellers, considering both the congruence and incongruence of warmth and competence. This study explores how these motivations' congruence and incongruence impact the seller's evaluation from the consumer's perspective, offering insights into how customers perceive and interact with sellers in the retail landscape.

HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

Impact of Congruence between Motivational Perceptions of CRM

According to the literature on the SCM, entities perceived as high in warmth and competence are more favorably received than those perceived as low in these dimensions (Motsi & Park, 2020). This favorable perception aids in positive evaluations by convincing individuals that the entity can act on its good intentions (Kervyn et al., 2012). In our research, when consumers understand that sellers' CRM initiatives are based on equal egoistic and altruistic motivation, they perceive them as warm-competent sellers. This perception arises from the sellers' apparent intention to kindly assist consumers throughout their shopping experience, along with their ability to provide professional services. This balance of motivations ensures that consumers view the seller as genuinely caring and professionally capable, fostering positive evaluation. Specifically, a high level of perceived egoistic motivation suggests that the seller can employ strategies to enhance their capabilities, offering customers professional fulfillment options during the post-purchase stages (Lee et al., 2019). Meanwhile, a high level of perceived altruistic motivation conveys to consumers that the seller is genuinely helpful and exudes warmth, making customers feel at ease and enhancing their enjoyment of the online shopping experience (Birch et al., 2018). This skepticism typically arises from the expectation that an authentic CRM effort should be driven by either self-interest (egoistic motivation) or a genuine desire to support the cause (altruistic motivation). Consumers may perceive the initiative as lacking sincerity or depth when these motivations are not apparent. Consequently, consumers are likely to view such sellers unfavorably, reflecting their negative evaluations due to the perceived lack of egoistic and altruistic motivations. Consequently, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1: When consumers perceive congruence between the seller's perceived egoistic motivation and perceived altruistic motivation, it can lead to an improvement in consumers' evaluations.

Impact of Incongruence between Motivational Perception of CRM

The SCM suggests that individuals typically categorize groups based on a dichotomy of high warmth and low or low warmth and high competence (Kervyn et al., 2012; Yzerbyt et al., 2005). This model implies that entities characterized by either high warmth and low competence or low warmth and high competence are more likely to align with consumers' pre-existing cognitive schemas, which hold that warmth and competence rarely coexist in the same entity. Consequently, these distinct

categorizations can lead to more reliable impressions among consumers as they conform to the expected patterns of group characteristics (Holoien & Fiske, 2013). In line with the SCM, we propose that the perceived incongruence between warmth and competence in sellers reinforces customers' inherent beliefs, thereby positively influencing customer evaluations. While a high degree of perceived egoistic and altruistic motivation suggests enhanced benefits for customers during the shopping process, this combination may conflict with customers' inherent beliefs, leading them to question the authenticity of the sellers' intentions. Consequently, customers might perceive a seller's high levels of egoistic and altruistic motivation as a form of CRM aimed at improving their image rather than genuine concern for customer welfare. Due to these suspicions, a brand characterized by high perceived egoistic motivation and altruistic motivation could be perceived as more deceitful than brands where these motivations are not aligned. In contrast, the incongruence between perceived egoistic motivation and perceived altruistic motivation reflects a more flawed portrayal of the seller, aligning with customers' inherent expectations about the authenticity of entities engaged in social causes. This perceived imperfection may enhance the brand's credibility in the eyes of consumers by fitting their preconceived notions of how genuine social engagement should appear. Hence, in line with customers' cognitive schemas, the incongruence between perceived egoistic and altruistic motivation can enhance customer evaluations, thereby improving the consumers' evaluations. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

H2: When consumers perceive incongruence between the seller's perceived egoistic motivation and perceived altruistic motivation, it can lead to an improvement in consumers' evaluations.

Moderating Role of Platform Function Usage

Literature on the SCM indicates that the environmental context significantly affects individuals' perceptions of others' warmth and competence, leading to specific social responses (Cuddy et al., 2009). In the context of e-commerce, the way customers perceive sellers influences their evaluations. Increased use of platform functions, which may introduce uncertainties in the shopping experience due to disruptions, can affect the positive impact of a high congruence between perceived egoistic motivation and altruistic motivation on the consumers' evaluations. When platform function usage is high, customers may feel uncertain and distrustful about their transactions with the seller on the e-commerce platform (Islam et al., 2020). As a result, they may view a high degree of both perceived egoistic and altruistic motivation as critical factors in their evaluation process.

Literature on the SCM suggests that environmental conditions influence the impact of perceived warmth and competence on customer reactions (Fiske et al., 2018). High usage of platform functions reflects a complex transaction environment, complicating the assurance of consumers' online shopping benefits (Kretschmer et al., 2022). As previously discussed, the incongruence between perceived egoistic and altruistic motivation can positively influence customer ratings, aligning with customers' cognitive schemas. In an uncertain shopping environment, customers are more inclined to depend on their inherent beliefs to evaluate sellers' ratings, such as the incongruence between perceived egoistic and altruistic motivation. Specifically, consumers can focus more on transactions under conditions with low platform function usage. They rely less on their cognitive schemas to assess the seller, meaning that incongruence between perceived egoistic and altruistic motivation negatively impacts customer ratings. However, in high platform function usage scenarios, customers face a greater potential risk of disruption during purchase. Consequently, the significance of incongruence between perceived egoistic motivation and altruistic motivation in determining sellers' ratings is amplified, as customers use it as a key criterion to navigate the increased uncertainty and potential risks.

H3: Platform function usage can strengthen the positive impact of congruence between perceived egoistic motivation and perceived altruistic motivation at high levels.

H4: Platform function usage can strengthen the positive impact of incongruence between perceived egoistic motivation and perceived altruistic motivation at high levels.

METHODOLOGY

Sample and Data Collection

We conducted an online survey on the Sojump platform (www.wjx.cn), a leading survey platform in China, to collect study data. China provides a well-suited context for testing our hypotheses because there are many CRMs, such as "Suning Yipin" of Suning.com and "GongYiBaoBei" of Taobao.com.

We employed a random sampling technique to recruit participants. All participants were required to recall their online shopping experience recently. Particularly since our focal participants paid attention to the CRM, and only these participants were permitted to continue the survey. The survey took approximately 5 minutes to complete. Participants who effectively completed our survey would be rewarded 10 RMB. After three weeks, we gathered 268 responses, 50 of which were excluded because some participants made wrong answers in the test question (i.e., they chose the wrong number for the question "Please choose '5' from the following options"). The remaining 218 responses were used for data analysis. Table 1 shows the sample's demographic information.

To check the potential nonresponse bias, we followed the procedure outlined by Armstrong and Overton (1977) to compare responses from the early (e.g., first 25%) and late (e.g., final 25%) respondents. The results showed no significant differences existed between early and late respondents against the constructs of perceived altruistic motivation ($t = -0.833$, $p = 0.406$), perceived egoistic motivation ($t = -0.135$, $p = 0.893$), consumer evaluation ($t = -0.084$, $p = 0.934$).

Table 1: Sample's demographic information

Items	N (%)	Items	N (%)
Age		Monthly Income (RMB)	
<18	2 (0.917%)	<2000	57 (26.147%)
18-30	105 (48.165%)	2000-6000	62 (28.440%)
30-40	91 (41.743%)	6000-10000	48 (22.018%)
≥40	20 (9.174%)	10000-14000	35 (16.055%)
Education		≥14000	16 (7.339%)
High school or below	6 (2.752%)	Occupation	
Undergraduate	132 (60.550%)	Student	94 (43.119%)
Post-graduate or above	80 (36.697%)	State-owned enterprises and institutions	40 (18.349%)
Daily Shopping Time		Civil servant	4 (1.835%)
<30 minutes	84 (38.532%)	Private and foreign companies	74 (33.945%)
30-60 minutes	85 (38.991%)	Self-employment	4 (1.835%)
1-3 hours	33 (15.138%)	Wait for employment	2 (0.917%)
3-6 hours	9 (4.128%)	Gender	
≥ 6 hours	7 (3.211%)	Male	112 (51.376%)
		Female	106 (48.624%)

Measurements

We adapted measurement scales from previously validated instruments. The initial questionnaire was constructed in English, and to ensure linguistic accuracy, it underwent a back-translation process into Chinese (Brislin, 1980). To further authenticate the validity of the translated questionnaire, it was rigorously reviewed by four academic experts specializing in consumer behavior. Moreover, we recruited nearly 30 participants to conduct pre-tests to ensure the questionnaire's accuracy and feasibility. Based on their suggestions, we made minor modifications to address the concerns. The response choices for the questionnaire items were designed on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to agree (7) strongly.

Independent variable. Perceived altruistic motivation was measured by four items adapted from Skarmeas and Leonidou (2013). Perceived egoistic motivation was measured by three items adapted from Bae (2018) and Rifon et al. (2004).

Dependent variable. We measure seller evaluation by calculating the average of consumers' ratings of products, logistics, and services.

Moderator. The number of price-related function usage numbers and service-related function sellers used measured the function usage. Specifically, we measured price-related and service-related function usage numbers in two steps. First, we asked respondents to choose which price-related function and service-related function were used in the shopping process among the options we provided. Second, we counted the number of used functions as the value of these variables. Then, we calculate the sum of these two functions as the total functions the product uses. For the control variables, we measured the sample's demographic information (i.e., age, gender, education, monthly income, occupation, and daily shopping time).

Control variables. To mitigate the possible endogeneity resulting from unobserved or omitted variables, we controlled for a set of control variables that influence seller evaluation. Specifically, we controlled for consumers' age, gender, educational level, and income. We also controlled for consumers' shopping experience, including daily shopping time and whether they had purchased the product before. In addition, we controlled the product price.

Reliability and Validity

We employed confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) as a mean to verify the reliability and validity of our measurement instruments. The results from the CFA, encompassing all survey constructs, indicated satisfactory fit indices ($\chi^2/df = 53.880/32 = 1.684$, root mean squared error of approximation [RMSEA] = 0.056, standardized root mean squared residual [SRMR] = 0.051, Tucker–Lewis index [TLI] = 0.965, and comparative fit index [CFI] = 0.975). We evaluated all constructs' reliability, discriminant, and convergent validity. Table 3 shows that values of Cronbach's alpha of key constructs ranged from 0.766 to 0.877, above the benchmark value of 0.70. The composite reliability values ranged from 0.858 to 0.916, which were also above the benchmark value of 0.70. These results indicate good reliability (Hair et al., 2010). We further evaluated the convergent and discriminant validity of our measurements. The results suggest that the average variance extracted (AVE) scores ranged from 0.671 to 0.731, higher than the benchmark value of 0.50. The factor loading ranged from 0.681 to 0.933, well above the benchmark value of 0.500. These results reveal good convergent validity. As presented in Table 2, the square roots of the AVE values for each construct exceeded the inter-construct correlations, thereby demonstrating a robust discriminant validity.

Table 2: Correlation matrix among key variables

Variables	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
1. Consumer evaluation	0.825			
2. Perceived egoistic motivation	0.244***	0.819		
3. Perceived altruistic motivation	0.473***	0.162**	0.855	
4. Function usage	-0.042	0.043	0.007	N.A.
Notes: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. The diagonal elements are the square roots of AVEs. N.A. refers to not applicable.				

Table 3: Measurements

Items	Factor loading
Perceived altruistic motivation (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.877$; CR = 0.916; AVE= 0.731)	
-The seller has a long-term interest in society.	0.814
-The seller is trying to give back something to society.	0.853
-The seller has an ethical responsibility to help society.	0.879
-The seller feels morally obligated to help society.	0.873
Perceived egoistic motivation (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.776$; CR = 0.858; AVE = 0.671)	
-The seller wants to persuade consumers to buy its product.	0.681
-The seller wants to create a positive corporate image.	0.933
-The seller wants to help its own business.	0.824
Consumer evaluation (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.766$; CR = 0.865; AVE = 0.681)	
Product evaluation	0.840
Logistics evaluation	0.803
Service evaluation	0.833

Common Method Bias

We implemented procedural measures and statistical tests to mitigate and assess the potential of common method bias. Specifically, we assured participants that their responses would be used exclusively for academic research. To minimize confusion in question interpretation, we crafted the survey questions to be clear and succinct (Podsakoff et al., 2003). We also executed statistical tests to assess the presence of common method bias. First, we compared the goodness-of-fit between the measurement and single-factor models. The fit indices for the one-factor model demonstrated significantly inferior results ($\chi^2/df = 329.701/35 = 9.420$, RMSEA = 0.197, SRMR = 0.146, TLI = 0.572, CFI = 0.667). Second, we conducted Harman's one-factor test. The outcome reveals three distinct constructs with eigenvalues exceeding 1.0, cumulatively explaining 71.070% of the total variance in the data. Among these, the first construct alone contributes 29.700% to the explained variance. Thus, common method bias was not a serious problem in this study.

Results

Hypotheses Testing

To test our hypotheses, we opted for a polynomial regression approach accompanied by a response surface analysis. This method is chosen because it can examine the impact of (in)congruence between two predictor variables on the outcome we are interested in (Edwards & Parry, 1993). The inclusion of response surface analysis enabled us to interpret the polynomial regression results using a three-dimensional graphical representation, which facilitates the visualization and evaluation of the effects of (in)congruence between two predictor variables (Edwards, 2002).

We initially assessed the individual effects of perceived egoistic motivation and altruistic motivation on consumer evaluation on sellers. Subsequently, in order to validate Hypothesis 1 and 2, we constructed a model where consumer evaluation on sellers (CES) was estimated as a function of perceived egoistic motivation (EGOM), perceived altruistic motivation (ALTM), and their interaction terms (i.e., EGOM², EGOM \times ALTM, and ALTM²). To mitigate potential multicollinearity issues within these interaction terms, we mean-centered the variables EGOM and ALTM before calculating the high-order interactions. The entire polynomial equation can be expressed as follows:

$$CES = \beta_0 + \beta_1 EGOM + \beta_2 ALTM + \beta_3 EGOM^2 + \beta_4 EGOM \times ALTM + \beta_5 ALTM^2 + \text{Controls} + \varepsilon \quad (1)$$

When any of the high-order terms within Equation 1 demonstrated statistical significance, we employed the response surface method to illustrate the impact of the incongruence between EGOM and ALTM (Edwards & Parry, 1993). We constructed response surface graphs using the results obtained from a polynomial regression analysis. The horizontal axes in the plots denoted EGOM and ALTM, while the vertical axis signified CES (Edwards, 2002). Table 3 show the polynomial regression results.

For characterizing the surface along the congruence line (i.e., where EGOM equals ALTM) and the incongruence line (i.e., where EGOM equals the negative of ALTM), we calculated slope and curvature based on the estimated coefficients from the polynomial terms. Specifically, we computed the slope along the congruence line as the $\beta_1 + \beta_2$; the curvature along the

congruence line was quantified as the $\beta_3 + \beta_4 + \beta_5$. The slope along the incongruence line was calculated as $\beta_1 - \beta_2$, which indicated the directional difference between EGOM and ALTM. The curvature along the incongruence line was expressed as $\beta_3 - \beta_4 + \beta_5$, thereby revealing the extent of the discrepancy between EGOM and ALTM. Table 4 presents the results of slope and curvature along congruence and incongruence lines.

Hypothesis 1 suggests that when congruence between EGOM and ALTM occurs, the level of both EGOM and ALTM is positively related to consumer evaluation of sellers. This hypothesis will be supported if the surface slope along the congruence line reveals a statistically significant and positive value. (Edwards and Parry 1993). As evidenced in Table 4 and Figure 1, the results demonstrated a positive and significant slope (slope = 0.524, $p < 0.001$) of the surface along the congruence line. Thus, Hypothesis 1 is supported. Hypothesis 2 suggests that the incongruence between EGOM and ALTM is positively related to consumer evaluation on sellers. The results show that the curvature of the surface along the incongruence line is positive and significant (curvature = 0.216, $p < 0.05$). This finding suggested that when the divergence between EGOM and ALTM increased, consumers' evaluations of sellers increased. Thus, Hypothesis 2 is supported. Figure 1 shows the response surface for the main effects.

In our study, to test the moderating effects of function usage (FS), we adhered to Vogel et al. (2016) approach by introducing five interaction terms into the model that collectively represented the joint impact of (in)congruence between EGOM and ALTM and FS (Equation 2). When computing the higher-order terms, we utilized a mean-centered function usage value to mitigate multicollinearity issues. Further, we assessed the slope and curvature of the relationship at high and low levels of function usage by substituting values one standard deviation above and below the average score of function usage. Table 5 presents the polynomial regression results detailing the main and moderating effects.

$$CES = \beta_0 + \beta_1 EGOM + \beta_2 ALTM + \beta_3 EGOM^2 + \beta_4 EGOM \times ALTM + \beta_5 ALTM^2 + \beta_6 FS + \beta_7 EGOM \times FS + \beta_8 ALTM \times FS + \beta_9 EGOM^2 \times FS + \beta_{10} CCTX \times ALTM \times FS + \beta_{11} ALTM^2 \times FS + \text{Controls} + \varepsilon \quad (2)$$

In Hypothesis 3, we suggest that function usage also strengthens the influence of influence of EGOM and ALTM on consumer evaluation when they are congruent. As shown in Table 5, there is no significant difference between the slope of the surface along the congruence line when function usage increases from low to high, rejecting Hypothesis 3. Hypothesis 4 proposes that function usage enhances the influence of incongruence between EGOM and ALTM on consumer evaluation. Table 5 shows that when function usage is low, the curvature of the surface along the incongruence line does not significantly differ from 0 (curvature = 0.136, $p > 0.05$), indicating incongruence between EGOM and ALTM is not significantly related to consumer evaluation. In contrast, when function usage is high, the curvature along the incongruence line is significant and positive (curvature = 0.346, $p < 0.05$), indicating that consumer evaluation increases as EGOM and ALTM diverge. As such, Hypothesis 4 is supported.

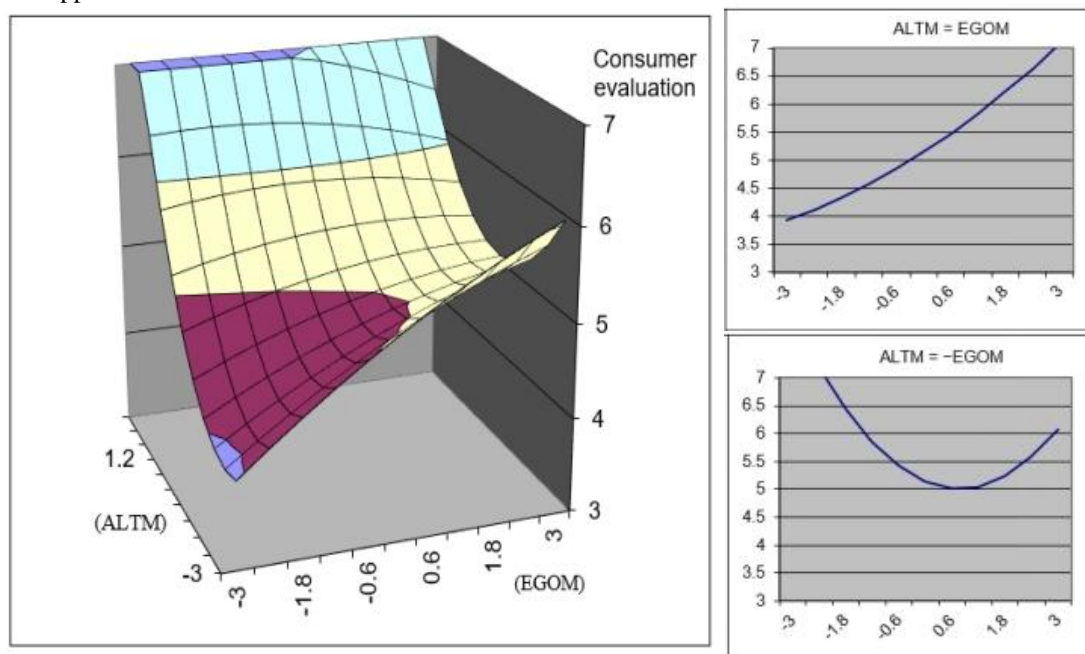


Figure 1: Response surface for main effects

Table 4: Polynomial regression results

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Egoistic motivation (EGOM)	0.121 [*]	0.094 ⁺	0.079
Altruistic motivation (ALTM)	0.338 ^{***}	0.431 ^{***}	0.447 ^{***}
EGOM ²		-0.018	-0.017
EGOM×ALTM		-0.088 ⁺	-0.096 ⁺
ALTM ²		0.146 ^{***}	0.162 ^{***}
Function usage (FS)			-0.017
FS ×EGOM			-0.008
FS ×ALTM			-0.003
FS ×EGOM ²			0.004
FS × EGOM×ALTM			-0.022 ⁺
FS ×ALTM ²			0.005
Consumer age	0.091	0.147	0.143
Consumer education	0.017	0.017	-0.010
Consumer income	-0.010	-0.005	0.002
Consumer gender	0.077	0.046	0.045
Occupation included	-0.365	-0.461	-0.535
Consumer shopping time	0.057	0.021	0.032
Product price	0.063	0.073	0.077
Shopping experience	0.116	0.096	0.092
Constant	5.279 ^{***}	5.142 ^{***}	5.197 ^{***}
N	218	218	218
R ²	0.285	0.338	0.353
Adj R ²	0.235	0.282	0.276
F value	5.542	7.603	7.238

Notes: ⁺ $p < 0.10$, ^{*} $p < 0.05$, ^{**} $p < 0.01$, ^{***} $p < 0.001$.

Table 5: Response surfaces analysis for main and moderation effects

	Main effect	Function usage	
		Low	High
Congruence line			
Slope ($\beta_1 + \beta_2$)	0.524 ^{***}	0.564 ^{***}	0.489 ^{***}
Curvature ($\beta_3 + \beta_4 + \beta_5$)	0.040	0.094	-0.002
Incongruence line			
Slope ($\beta_1 - \beta_2$)	-0.337 ^{***}	-0.350 ^{**}	-0.386 ^{**}
Curvature ($\beta_3 - \beta_4 + \beta_5$)	0.216 [*]	0.136	0.346 [*]

Discussion

In this study, we explore the (in)congruence between consumers' perceived egoistic and altruistic motivation on consumer evaluation of sellers. Our empirical analyses provide significant findings that enrich the existing literature. First, consistent with our hypothesis, the results indicate that the incongruence between consumers' perceived egoistic and altruistic motivation has a significantly positive influence on consumer evaluation of sellers. Second, the findings show that when a consumer perceives sellers' egoistic and altruistic motivations to be congruent, the stronger the presence of both motivations, the more favorable their assessment of the seller becomes. Third, as we expected, the findings indicate that function usage enhances the positive effect of incongruence between perceived egoistic and altruistic motivation on consumer evaluation on sellers. However, function usage does not moderate the relationship between the level of perceived egoistic and altruistic motivations on consumer evaluation of sellers when these two motivations achieve congruence. One possible reason is that in cases where both motivations are congruent, consumers might simplify their decision-making process, focusing mainly on aligning these core values instead of scrutinizing functional aspects.

Theoretical Implication

First, differs from previous studies that only focused on the positive perspectives of understanding CRM, this study helps to disentangle the mixed impacts of CRM on consumers' evaluations of the seller by scrutinizing the congruence and incongruence between two motivational perspectives of CRM, namely perceived egoistic motivation and perceived altruistic motivation. The current study's findings emphasized the necessity of exploring ambivalent attitudes toward CRM. Second, the current study examines sellers' function usage behavior as the boundary conditions, thereby extending prior studies by revealing how in-role behaviors influence consumers' understanding of sellers' extra-role behaviors. Future studies can build on our work to further explore how in-role behavior and extra-role behaviors are intertwined to influence the consumer shopping process.

Managerial Implication

This study also has three managerial implications. First, based on the findings, sellers should tactically reinforce the divergence between consumers' perceived egoistic and altruistic motivations instead of striving for an artificial equilibrium. By intentionally cultivating a sense of emphasizing either egoistic or altruism in the minds of consumers, sellers can craft a more authentic image that resonates with consumers and thus improve consumers' evaluation. Second, when sellers wish to project a harmonious blend of both egoistic and altruistic intentions, they must meticulously curate a narrative that maximizes the visibility and impact of both sets of motivations. In such a situation, sellers should diligently intertwine profitability stories with evidence of social responsibility and customer-centric initiatives to demonstrate that these motivations are complementary and reinforcing rather than contradictory. Third, sellers should intensify their focus on applying platform functionalities to increase consumer evaluations through the divergence between perceived egoistic and altruistic motivations. This entails providing a suite of platform functions and meticulously orchestrating how these functions resonate with and effectively reconciling the seemingly disparate pulls of self-benefit and communal welfare.

Limitations and Future Research

Beyond its valuable insights, this study acknowledges certain constraints that leave opportunities for future studies. First, the current investigation's reliance on a cross-sectional research framework restricts establishing definitive causal relationships. As a result, prospective researchers could build upon these findings by adopting a longitudinal study design to delve deeper into the influence of (in)congruence between egoistic and altruistic motivations on consumer evaluation of sellers over time. Second, this study asks respondents to recall their online shopping experience to answer key constructs questions. Although this method has been widely used in empirical studies, future studies can consider incorporating experimental designs to collect data. Researchers can manipulate variables in a controlled environment by conducting experiments to isolate cause-and-effect relationships.

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