

## On Strategies and Pragmatic Motivations of Online Negative Book Reviews

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**Abstract:** Based on Spencer-Oatey's rapport management theory, using 240 negative online book reviews on Amazon.com, this paper explores the main strategies used to challenge harmonious interpersonal relationships and elucidates pragmatic motivations of negative online reviews with the aid of the software Nvivo 12. The results show that, according to the degree of directness, negative book reviews mainly include direct negative review strategies, indirect negative review strategies, and positive review strategies. Consumers' pragmatic motivations for posting negative online reviews are to threaten or disrupt the harmonious relationship and to achieve specific interaction goals. This paper provides a new research perspective on negative online reviews by associating negative reviews with computer-mediated communication.

### 1. Introduction

Online user reviews, also known as "online consumer reviews", refer to reviews made by consumers by online platforms, which includes products, services, books, movies, etc. (Lü Donglian, 2019). Online consumer reviews, as a new type of computer-mediated communication, have unique language characteristics compared with face-to-face communication. For different communication purposes, online consumer reviews can be divided into positive reviews and negative reviews respectively. The pursuit of interpersonal harmony is the essence of human rationality, but disharmonious discourse can still occur in interpersonal communication. The success of interpersonal communication depends on the behavioral expectations, interactive needs and face sensitivity of both parties (Ran, 2012; Chen, 2018). Both positive and negative reviews have a great impact on consumers in the shopping planning stage, but negative reviews somehow more influential on consumers than positive ones to some extent. (Kusumasondjaja et al, 2012; Papathanassis & Knolle, 2011). Olshtain & Weinbach (1993) defined negative comments as expressions of dissatisfaction or irritation with some unacceptable behaviours. an expression of dissatisfaction or annoyance with some unacceptable behavior. Reviewers are expressing not only the literal meaning, but also their negative emotions or other illocutionary acts.

Online negative reviews are regarded as an impolite behavior, in other words, a disharmony-oriented speech act. Based on face theory and politeness principles, Spencer-Oatley (2002, 2008) put forward Rapport Management Theory (RMT) with face, social rights and obligations, and interactional goals as the core concepts. Face includes quality face and social identity face. Quality face is closely related to personal self-esteem and image, which reflects communicators' basic desire and expectation to get a positive evaluation from others; social identity face is related to their social identity and role. In the process of communication, the communicator hopes that his identity and role can be recognized and maintained by others. Social rights and obligations include the right to equality and interaction, which reflect people's concerns about whether they are fairly treated, sufficiently valued and socially recognized or excluded (Yang Hong, 2013). The right to equality is that the communicator needs to be considerate of others to ensure that both parties are treated fairly. The right to interaction means that the communicator needs to have social contact with others to maintain the social relationship between the two parties (Ran Yongping, 2012). Interactional goals refer to the specific communicative purposes in mutual communication, including conveying information or expressing relationships (Yuan, 2016).

As a politeness theory, RMT incorporates politeness into the framework of interpersonal relationship management, incorporates individuals' social identities and rights into the (im)politeness theory framework, which is more socially realistic. This paper aims to explore the main online negative review strategies and the pragmatic motivation behind them.

## **2. Literature Review**

In recent years, online consumer reviews have attracted more and more scholars' attention. They have studied positive and negative online consumer reviews from the perspectives of appraisal theory (Liu Juan, 2020), politeness principles (Ren, 2018), speech act theory (Jin & Yuan, 2020), discourse analysis (González & Taboada, 2021), and genre analysis (Ho, 2017, 2020, 2021).

Most studies on online negative reviews based on RMT is from the perspective of sellers rather than consumers. In other words, these studies focus on sellers' responses to consumers' negative online reviews in order to promote and maintain the harmonious relationship between the two parties.

This type of research has two focuses: one is responses to comment movers, which points out that there are multiple types of steps in negative comment responses, such as apology, appreciation, explanation, confirmation etc. (Sparks & Fredline, 2007). The other is the communication purpose of responses to reviews: service remediation. Results indicated that moves such as apology, explanation and appreciation can achieve the communicative purpose of service recovery (Levy, 2013; Yavas, 2003).

All the previous studies show that researchers have conducted research on online consumers' positive reviews, negative reviews, and review responses from different perspectives. However, in terms of research topics are concerned, most studies focus on responses to negative reviews to help sellers repair the relationship with dissatisfied consumers and reestablished a harmonious interpersonal relationship. The research on the negative reviews themselves is scarce. As far as the analysis framework is concerned, most studies adopt others' analysis framework, and fail to construct their own analysis based on corpus. In terms of analysis methods, few researchers analyze negative reviews through the qualitative analysis software of Nvivo. By using 240 negative online book reviews on Amazon.com, this paper, from the perspective of RMT, explores the main strategies used to challenge harmonious interpersonal relationships and elucidates pragmatic motivations of negative online reviews with the aid of the software Nvivo 12.

## **3. Research Methodology**

### **3.1 Research Questions**

This study aims to answer the following two research questions:

- (1) What are the main types of online negative book review strategies in online communication?
- (2) From the perspective of RMT, what are the pragmatic motivations of negative online book reviews?

### **3.2 Data Collection**

This paper examines negative book reviews of online consumers in English as an example of negative book reviews in Amazon.com. One-star bad reviews were chosen as the primary data source, and data in 2019 and 2020 were collected. Negative book reviews written by explicitly non-English speaking buyers were excluded. Although these original data contain many linguistic errors, including spelling, grammar and punctuation errors etc., no artificial modifications were made in order to preserve the linguistic characteristics of the reviews as well as the objectivity of the study. Based on the above principles, 240 one-star negative consumer book reviews from Amazon.com in the United States were selected as the research data, containing a total of 11,154 words, with an average word length of 56 words. The shortest review has only 2 words, and the longest is 346 words.

### 3.3 Data Analysis

This paper uses Nvivo 12 to create projects, import data, establish nodes, node codes and analyze data to discuss the strategy types of negative book reviews. The theoretical basis of Nvivo, a qualitative analysis tool, is grounded theory (Liu & Li, 2017: 6), which is a bottom-up approach to construct theories. Researchers generally do not have theoretical assumptions before starting the research, and start from direct observation, summarize from raw data, find the core concepts that reflect the essence based on the systematic data collection, and finally construct relevant social theories through the connections between these concepts. In accordance with the principles of grounded theory, Nvivo adopts a bottom-up three-level coding process, which specifically includes three core coding functions including open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Sun & Wang, 2021), as shown in Figure 1. After reading the reviews repeatedly, the researcher coded the data word by word, and marked and named all the strategies found. By looking for the internal logical relationship between the initial strategies, the above strategies are classified, integrated, and named, so that the relationship between the strategies is more specific and clear, thus forming the main strategy types.

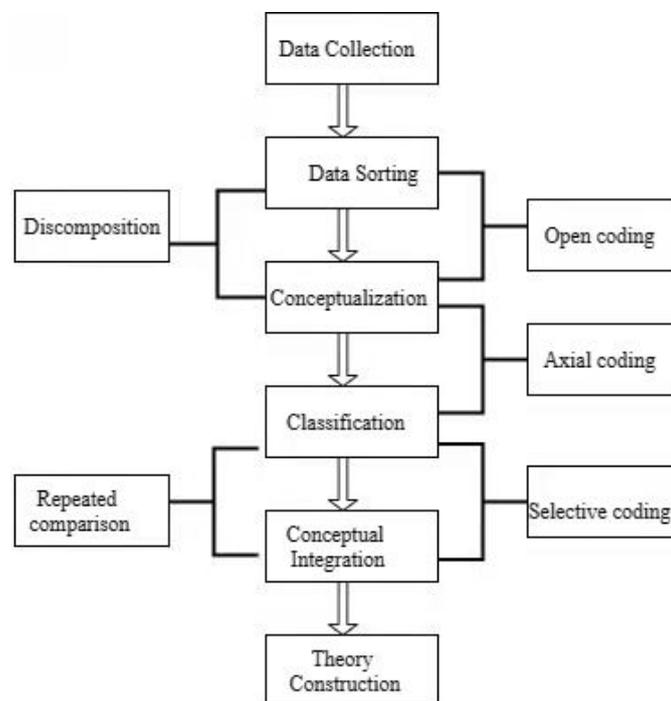


Fig.1 Steps of Nvivo Analysis Based on Grounded Theory

(Sun & Wang, 2021)

In addition, the pragmatic motivations of negative online book reviews are explained from the three core concepts of RMT: face, social rights and obligations, and interactional goals.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1 Types of Online Negative Review Strategies

With the aid of Nvivo 12, 122 free nodes were found through open coding. By classifying the 122 free nodes, i.e., axial coding, 10 sub-nodes were formed, and by category analysis, i.e., selective coding, 3 main types of negative book review strategies were finally formed: explicit negative review strategy, implicit negative review strategy, and positive review strategy, as shown in Figure 2.

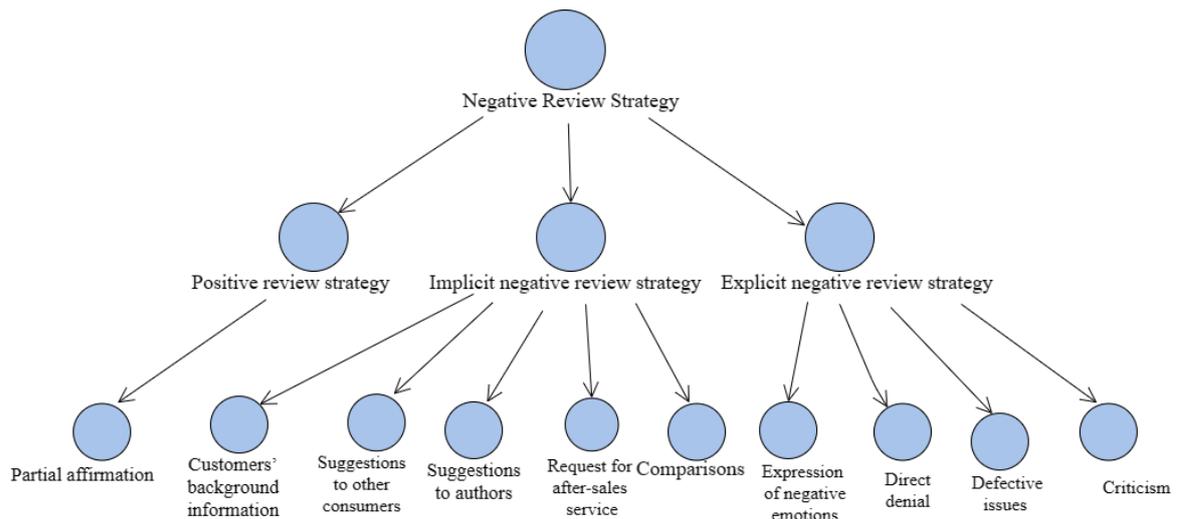


Fig.2 Types of Online Negative Review Strategies

As shown in Figure 2, the explicit negative review strategies are divided into 4 sub-strategies, the implicit negative book review strategy includes 5 sub-strategies and the positive review strategy only includes 1 sub-strategy. The frequency distribution of online negative comment strategies is shown in Table 1:

Table 1 Frequency of The Major Negative Review Strategies

| Types of Strategies                 | Percentage (%) | Reference points |
|-------------------------------------|----------------|------------------|
| explicit negative review strategies | 69.75%         | 376              |
| direct denial                       | 24.30%         | 131              |
| expression of negative emotions     | 20.59%         | 111              |
| defective issues                    | 16.70%         | 90               |
| criticism                           | 8.16%          | 44               |
| implicit negative review strategies | 24.68%         | 133              |
| suggestions to other consumers      | 9.65%          | 52               |
| suggestions to authors              | 0.74%          | 4                |
| customers' background information   | 9.46%          | 51               |
| comparisons                         | 2.23%          | 12               |
| request for after-sales service     | 2.60%          | 14               |
| positive review strategies          | 5.57%          | 30               |
| partial affirmation                 | 5.57%          | 30               |
| Total                               | 100%           | 539              |

Table 1 clearly shows the results of the frequency distribution. The explicit negative book review strategy had the highest percentage (69.75%); the implicit negative book review strategy was the next highest (24.68%), and the positive book review strategy had the lowest percentage (5.57%).

Direct denial (24.30%), expression of negative emotions (20.59%), and pointing out faulty problems (18.57%) are the three most popular negative review sub-strategies employed by consumers. The three sub-strategies of partial affirmation (5.57%), comparisons (2.23%) and request for after-sales service (2.60%) account for relatively smaller percentages.

#### 4.1.1 Explicit Online Negative Review Strategies

The direct negative book review strategy includes four sub-strategies: direct denial, expression of negative emotions, pointing out specific problems and criticisms.

##### Sub-strategy 1: Direct denial

Direct denial is usually used to deny some facts or existence. The strategy of direct denial in this article means that consumers use some explicit words to convey their negative reviews, including negative nouns, adjectives, verbs and other expressions involving negation, such as rubbish, worst, terrible, awful, horrible, boring, etc.

(1) *This however was by far the worst!*

(2) *Absolutely horrible. Poor character development, boring unrealistic plot.*

The buyer in example (1) used *the worst* to make a direct negative review about the book concerned, thinking that this book was the worst book he has read so far. In example (2), the buyer used adjectives such as *horrible*, *poor*, *boring*, and *unrealistic* to make a direct negative review on the characterization and plotting of the book.

Sub-strategy 2: Expression of negative emotion

In computer-mediated communication, customers will use various negative emotions to express their dissatisfaction with book, sellers, or services. The most important negative sentiment in negative online book reviews is disappointment. In example (3), consumers directly expressed their disappointment with the book by using *disappointing* in their reviews. In addition, negative book reviews also contain a variety of emotions such as dislike, unhappiness, regret, etc. For example, the buyers directly expressed unhappiness in example (4), and dislike in example (5).

(3) *This book was very poorly written and quite disappointing.*

(4) *Not Happy.*

(5) *I hated this book.*

Sub-strategy 3: Pointing out faulty problems

A very important reason for consumers to post negative reviews is that there are a variety of problems in the process of book purchase or in the book they have received, such as missing pages or chapters, binding errors, poor packaging, etc. Pointing out the flaws can help consumers to directly express their negative attitude toward this buying experience.

(6) *...but when I got to page 89 it skipped about 40 pages and went back to page 39 before skipping to 140?*

(7) *Book damaged upon arrival.*

In example (6), the buyer pointed out that e-books have skipped pages in reading, and the reading experience is extremely poor. In example (7), the buyer directly pointed out that the book was damaged when it was delivered. By pointing out the specific faulty problems, s/he clearly stated the reason for his or her negative review.

Sub-strategy 4: Criticisms

In negative book reviews, customers sometimes will directly attributed the book flaws or their dissatisfaction with the book purchase process to someone or the online shopping platform. In other words, the seller or a specific person should take full responsibility for the unsuccessful shopping experience.

(8) *The producer/publisher of this book should be ashamed.*

(9) *Baldacci used to be such a powerful story teller but he isn't anymore.*

The buyer in example (8) accused the author or publisher of being ashamed and embarrassed for the book. The consumer in example (9) evaluated the author of the book, thinking that he was very good in the past, but his current performance is not satisfactory, indicating that the buyer blamed the author for his dissatisfaction with the book.

#### 4.1.2 Implicit Online Negative Review Strategies

Implicit online negative review strategy includes 5 sub-strategies: suggestions to other customers, suggestions to authors, presenting customers' background information, making comparisons, and request for after-sales service.

Sub-strategy 5: Suggestions to other customers

Based on consumers' current unsuccessful shopping experience or book reading experience, they often make suggestions to other consumers in their reviews or directly remind them of not buying this book.

(10) *Don't waste your time reading it!*

(11) *Spend your time reading something else by a good writer.*

In example (10), the buyer reminded other consumers that it was not necessary to spend time reading this book. In example (11), the buyer suggested that other buyers could choose the works of other authors, which reflected their negative comments on the books they bought and the authors.

All these suggestions or warnings to other readers could indicate their negative attitudes towards the books they had bought.

#### Sub-strategy 6: Suggestions to authors

Some customers are not satisfied with the book, but they are still the fans of the author, so they give suggestions to the author for further improvement or in their future writing.

(12)*I wish you continued success as a person and actor. Just please, don't write another self-serving book like this again.*

(13)*Hope that Balducci does a better job with the next one.*

In example (12), although the buyer expressed a negative attitude toward the purchase of the book, he hoped that the author would no longer write such books aiming at fame and wealth in the future. In example (13), although the buyer blamed the author, he still suggested that the author could change his writing ideas in the future and write better books.

#### Sub-strategy 7: Presenting customers' background information

When writing negative book reviews, consumers can provide background information about their purchases, including personal age, occupation, reading habits, previous reading experience, reasons for buying books, and initial expectations. These buyer-related background information usually appear at the beginning of the entire review, paving the way for negative book reviews later. This strategy is usually used in combination with other strategies to indicate that the book or the seller fails to meet the consumer's initial expectations, and the buyer has to give a negative review.

(14)*I've heard about this book for the longest time and I finally decided to read it. Big mistake! This is the most boring book I've ever laid eyes on. 5% of the book is readable the rest is just out and out drivel. I couldn't get through it and had to stop midway. Too bad I can't get my money back.*

(15)*I have read 35 of Baldacci's books. This was the worst. I almost couldn't finish it. The double plot was confusing. Amos's character is weakening. His relationship with his partner is stale. I can't believe readers are giving this above 2 stars. Come back down to earth Dave! Totally unbelievable.*

The buyer in example (14) claimed in his review that he bought the book because he had heard about it for a long time, so he decided to buy it, which indirectly indicated that the buyer was expecting a lot from the book, but after reading it, he found it to be the most boring book he had read, with only 5% of the content being readable and the rest being gibberish. In example (15), the buyer stated his reading experience that he has read 35 books by the same author, indicating that the buyer is a fan of the author. These statements of previous reading experiences and reasons for purchasing the book can reflect the huge gap between the buyer's dissatisfaction and his previous expectations, thus indirectly indicating the buyer's negative attitude toward the book.

#### Sub-strategy 8: Comparisons

Comparisons are also an indirect negative book review strategy adopted by buyers to express negative attitude, which usually includes two comparisons. One is to compare the currently purchased book with other books previously written by the same author, and the other is to compare the currently purchased book with the ones on similar topics written by other authors. The purpose of making comparisons is to show the buyer's dissatisfaction with the books by explaining the preference for the latter. When making comparisons, some buyers will use obvious comparison words or comparison structures, such as *worst*, *better*, *as...as* and so on.

(16)*I should have known. I have a few Baldacci titles left on my shelf to read. I just grateful that they're some of his early stuff. They have to be better than this one.*

(17)*There are dozens of latinx authors that have written this story, have written it better.*

The customer in example (16) had read many books previously written by the author, and by comparing his recent purchase with his previous purchase, he indicated that the current book is not as good as the previous ones, thus indirectly showing his negative attitude towards the book. In example (17), the buyer compared the book with books on the same topic by other authors and indicated his preference for the latter.

#### Sub-strategy 9: Request for after-sales service

Customers also request after-sales service from sellers in negative book reviews. This is also an indirect negative book review strategy, indicating that the books may not meet their normal reading

needs due to the quality and other issues. Mostly, buyers usually ask the seller to exchange or refund directly in their negative consumer reviews.

(18) *I thought this was an Amazon free read. I would like to return the digital copy. I've already deleted it.*

(19) *Want a REPLACEMENT IMMEDIATELY.*

The buyer in example (18) asked for the return of the e-book, which has been deleted on Kindle. The customer in example (19) asked for a new copy, which could indirectly reflect the buyer's dissatisfaction with the book purchased.

#### 4.1.3 Positive Review Strategies

Sub-strategy 10: Partial affirmation

Some buyers, despite giving a one-star review for this book purchase, will make partial affirmations. For example, the parts of the book are good, but the flaws outweigh the advantages. After expressing a partial affirmation, the buyer will usually continue to express their negative review using words such as *but*, *however* or *except*.

(20) *The book would be great except that every other page is missing on my Kindle!*

(21) *The overall plot was intriguing but the writing felt clumsy at times and forced.*

Partial affirmation usually appears at the beginning of the review. For example, in (20) and (21), the buyer made a positive evaluation of the book as a whole or the plot, which followed the principles of empathy and respect in the interaction right, intended to reduce the distance of interaction and protect the harmonious relationship with each other. However, the second half of the reviews used transitional conjunctions *except* and *but* to express their dissatisfaction with the book, which was also what the reviewer really wanted to express, intending to alienate emotions, a kind of relationship-challenging orientation.

#### 4.2 Pragmatic Motivations of Online Negative Review Strategies

Spencer-Oatey (2000) believes that harmonious interpersonal relationship plays a vital role in communication. Relationship orientation refers to the speaker's subjective willingness to maintain or challenge the interpersonal relationships. In most cases, the speaker usually shows politeness in the interaction. However, if one feels that his interests are impaired, he may no longer consider maintaining or improving interpersonal harmony as his main communication task. On the contrary, it is easy for him to use impolite words to challenge the harmonious relationship with the other party.

Therefore, when consumers are dissatisfied with the book they have bought, they will post negative reviews on shopping websites, deliberately challenging or destroying the harmonious interpersonal relationship with the seller. Specifically, the pragmatic motivations of online negative reviews are to help consumers protect their self-image, achieve specific interactional goals, and maintain social rights and obligations.

##### 4.2.1 To Protect Face in Interaction

Spencer-Oatey (2008) proposed that face management includes quality face and identity face. In the interaction, once the communicator feels that his face is threatened, they will be accustomed to attacking others with impolite expressions to protect their face. In the same way, if the buyers' face is damaged by the sellers, they will adopt certain language strategies to maintain their own face. However, online review communication is not a face-to-face communication. Book reviews have nothing to do with the maintenance of personal self-esteem and personal image, and have nothing to do with the communicator's basic desire and expectation to receive positive reviews from others. Therefore, in negative book reviews, the protection of identity face is mostly involved.

Identity refers to the speakers' social roles, such as professors, doctors, managers, engineers, etc. On book shopping websites, buyers play the social role of readers and consumers. If sellers sell pirated, defective, or poor-quality books to buyers, the buyers' identity face as readers and consumers is threatened. In this case, buyers have the right to maintain their identity face. The buyer in example (22) was both a reader and a fan of the author, but the book was not satisfactory,

which greatly disappointed the reader. Therefore, the buyer's identity face was threatened and destroyed. Therefore, the consumer asked the author of this book to explain and apologize in order to maintain his identity.

(22)... and either Baldacci explains/apologizes, or he loses countless loyal buyers. Business shouldn't be THIS corrupting.

#### 4.2.2 To Achieve Specific Interactional Face

The purposes of interpersonal communication include conveying information and maintaining relationships (Ran, 2012; Yuan, 2016). The word distribution in negative book reviews (see Figure 3) visually reflects the interactional goals of online negative consumer reviews, i.e., expressing dissatisfaction and venting negative emotions. In the word cloud distribution, *disappointed* appears most frequently, 24 times out of 240 negative book reviews. In addition, words such as *disappointing*, *never*, *worst*, *boring*, *waste*, *terrible*, and *poorly* also appear frequently. Apparently, these evaluative words help buyers easily convey negative emotions, thus reinforcing disharmonious relationship orientation and deliberately challenging interpersonal harmony.

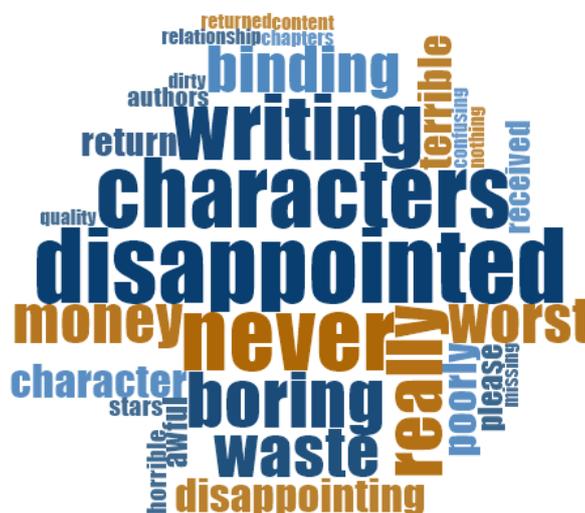


Fig.3 Word Distribution of Online Negative Reviews

Kasper (1990) suggested that the inability to control one's feelings and excessive public expression of emotions, such as anger, disappointment, and frustration, could be considered rude and disrespectful. However, if such negative emotions are expressed as a result of previous rude behavior or assault from others, they cannot be considered rude and impolite. Thus, when buyers receive defective books or when sellers are rude to them in the first place, the negative emotions they express are intended to respond to the seller's rude behavior and to give vent to their frustration with the defective books.

(23) *This book was very poorly written and quite disappointing. The plot is very vague and throwing more characters in doesn't solve the problem.*

(24) *Don't have this product.*

As seen in example (23), because they did not get the perfect book they expected, the buyers were not polite enough and they did not hesitate to use words such as *poorly written* and *disappointing* to show that the book was poorly written and the plot and characters were very disappointing. Secondly, in reviews buyers also wanted to suggest or advise other buyers on their purchases, which was one of the communicative purposes they intend to achieve through negative book reviews, as in example (24).

#### 4.2.3 To Maintain Social Rights and Obligations

Social rights and obligations are related to people's social expectations and express the communicators' concerns about fairness, consideration, and appropriateness of behavior. (Yuan Zhoumin, 2016). People's expectations of social rights and obligations are based on verbal norms in

different contexts, such as communication under the framework of legal agreements, statutory behavioral activities, or business meetings, and so on. The communication rules under these different values are called sociopragmatic rules. The communicators can judge the roles and positions of the communicators according to different sociopragmatic rules. Two of the fundamental rules are the right to fairness and the right to interaction. The appropriateness of the right to fairness and interaction will vary depending on the relationship between the interlocutors, social and cultural norms, and the individual preferences of the interlocutors. If the contexts are different, the purposes of communication are different, and the communicators' consideration of the two aspects is also different.

Social rights and obligations are implicitly related to certain roles (Spencer-Oatey, 2008). On the one hand, when consumers buy products, they have the right to obtain high-quality products and services. On the other hand, sellers or shopping platforms as providers of products and services should provide good products and quality services, because this is their obligation. Failure to provide satisfactory services and unfair treatment to consumers amounts to the negligence of the service provider's obligations, which may constitute a violation of consumers' rights and undermine the harmonious relationship with them. Therefore, consumers post negative book reviews, especially one-star negative reviews, to protect their rights to equality in shopping.

*(25) Advertised as a multi book collection but sent only an old paperback copy of one book. Total false advertising!*

*(26) I want a refund.*

After paying for the purchased books, customers should have the right to receive high quality books. However, sellers failed to fulfill its obligation to provide consumers with satisfactory services and books. Therefore, in example (25), after receiving a book that did not match the description of the shopping platform, the customer's right to fairness was seriously undermined by specifying that the book was sold with false advertisement. In example (26), the consumer asked Amazon to provide a refund service in order to preserve their social rights, and deliberately destroyed the harmonious relationship in order to attract the attention of the sellers.

## **5. Conclusions**

Based on RMT, this paper investigates online consumers' negative review strategies and pragmatic motivations in book purchase in Amazon.com. The results of the study show that in computer-mediate communication, consumers adopt a number of negative book review strategies in order to express their dissatisfaction with the books or services. Based on the degree of directness, three main negative review strategies were included: direct negative book review strategies, indirect negative book review strategies, and positive book review strategies. Since negative online consumer reviews are not face-to-face and asynchronous online interactions, consumers are more likely to use the direct negative book review strategy. Second, from the perspective of RMT, consumers' pragmatic motivations for posting negative book reviews after receiving inferior services or products are, at the macro level, to threaten or destroy harmonious relationships; at the micro level, to maintain their identity face, social status and equal rights, and to achieve specific interactional goals, such as giving vent to emotions and providing advice or warnings to other consumers.

There are still some limitations of this study. First, only 240 negative book reviews from Amazon.com were collected, and consumer reviews from other platforms and non-CMC ones were not collected, so the data sample is small and not comprehensive. In addition, negative reviews include not only language but also pictures and videos. This paper only analyzes online negative book reviews from the perspective of RMT at the linguistic level, and the pictures or videos used in reviews are excluded. Therefore, future research can be based on more theoretical perspectives, multimodal perspectives, more platforms, and larger sample sizes to conduct consumer review research, including positive and negative reviews, online and offline reviews, etc. More types of consumer reviews, such as food, movie, and cosmetic reviews, can also be selected for study.

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