# Do inconsistent online reviews reduce sales for merchants on the platform? Evidence from China

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***Abstract:*** *Inconsistent online reviews are the norm in online shopping. However, platform merchants often believe that inconsistent online reviews have a negative impact on sales. They delete or hide negative reviews in pursuit of consistent praise. So, do inconsistent online reviews really reduce sales? In view of this, this study explores the impact of inconsistent online reviews on the sales of platform merchants based on the stimuli-organism-response (S-O-R) theory and service remediation theory, as well as its mechanism and boundary conditions. And using 5,487 crawler data and 447 questionnaire data, employing both ordinary least squares (OLS) model for empirical analysis. Moreover, in order to verify the robustness of the empirical results comprehensively and rigorously, four methods of changing the measurement model, adjusting the sample size, changing the data source and transforming the assignment were used to carry out the robustness test. The results show that the inconsistent online reviews have a significant inverted U-shaped effect on the sales of platform merchants. Brand image plays a significant mediating role in the influence of inconsistent online reviews on consumers' purchase intention. And peer response conflict has a significant moderating effect on the impact of online review inconsistency on consumers' purchase intention. Therefore, platform merchants should take a rational and open attitude towards inconsistent online reviews. In addition, platform merchants can adopt intelligent management methods for online reviews, pay attention to the shaping and strengthening of brand image, and pay attention to peer effect through social marketing, so as to maximize the benefits brought by the inconsistency of online reviews and minimize the potential negative impact of the inconsistency.*

***Keywords:*** *Online reviews, platform merchants, brand, response conflict.*

***JEL Classification:*** *M31, L81, M37.*

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## Introduction

According to the "Statistical report on China's internet development" released by the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) in 2023, as of December 2022, the scale of online shopping users in China has reached 1.067 billion (CNNIC, 2023), and online shopping has become an important form

of consumption. However, in online shopping, consumers and merchants are physically separated, and consumers cannot touch and feel the goods before the transaction, which leads to the problem of information asymmetry (Liao & Cheung, 2001). This increases consumers' concerns about the quality of goods and distrust of platform merchants, which in turn reduces online spending. Therefore, major e-commerce platforms have launched credit mechanisms that include consumer online reviews and merchant information disclosure to reduce information asymmetry. However, the information disclosed by the merchants may not be true (Jin & Kato, 2006). Online reviews are more driven by consumers' spontaneous sharing, and commercial communication has a lower purpose, which has a stronger influence and persuasiveness on other consumers (Aghakhani et al., 2020). As a result, online reviews can affect the sales of merchants on the platform. Review valence has always been the focus of scholars in the field of online review. Purnawirawan et al. (2015) pointed out that the review valence is the positive and negative affective polarity of online reviews, which can be divided into positive online reviews and negative online reviews. However, whether it is using star ratings to measure the valence of reviews, or using the sentimental tendency of online review texts to measure the valence of reviews, scholars usually focus only on positive online reviews or negative online reviews in the review valence. In the real environment, it is common for the same online review to contain both positive and negative content, the text and rating titer of the same online review are contradictory, and different consumers make inconsistent evaluations or ratings for the same product. Inconsistent online reviews became the norm (He & Bond, 2015). Scholars have also begun to pay attention to the negative impact of inconsistent online reviews on the sales of platform merchants. However, under the influence of Chinese traditional culture, consumers often have the psychology of "extreme things must be reversed." So, do inconsistent online reviews actually reduce sales?

Thinking about the mechanism and boundary conditions of online review inconsistency affecting the sales of platform merchants. In the era of e-commerce, if businesses want to gain more market share, they must focus on brand management. Consumers' brand cognition is a direct factor to stimulate consumers' purchasing behavior (Yang & Liu, 2010). From the perspective of psychological cognition, the brand image reflects consumers' cognition and evaluation of a brand (Hu & Yao, 2021). User-generated content is an important factor affecting the formation of consumer brand cognition (Feng, 2012), and online reviews are an important form of user-generated content. So, will the brand image mediate the impact of inconsistent online reviews on the sales of platform merchants? And in online shopping, consumers are faced with a huge amount of information. Peer response can pre-process redundant information for consumers and become an effective means to reduce consumers' information overload and disadvantage (Wang, 2019). Some studies have pointed out that merchants' response strategies play a moderating role in the impact of inconsistent online reviews on sales (Shan et al., 2022), while compared with ordinary consumers, peers have a more profound impact on individual behaviors (DeLay et al., 2016). So, does peer response conflict moderate the effect of inconsistent online reviews on platform merchant sales?

Current scholars pay more attention to the one-way linear impact of inconsistent online reviews on the sales volume of platform merchants, but do not pay attention to the non-linear impact of inconsistent online reviews on the sales volume of platform merchants. In addition, the researches on the mechanism of the impact of inconsistent online reviews on the sales of platform merchants pay more attention to the mediating role of consumer perception (Huang et al., 2017) and consumer attitude (Shi et al., 2018), but do not pay attention to the mediating role of brand image. As for the moderating effect of inconsistent online reviews on the sales volume of merchant platforms, current scholars pay more attention to the moderating effect of the titer of reviews (Langan et al., 2017) and product types (Huang et al., 2017), but do not consider the importance of peers. To solve the above questions, that is, whether inconsistent online evaluation really reduces sales, whether brand image plays an intermediary role in the impact of inconsistent online evaluation on sales, and whether peer response conflict moderates the impact of inconsistent online evaluation on sales. This study explores the impact of inconsistent online reviews on sales of platform merchants, and

the mediating and moderating role of brand image and peer response conflict. Compared with previous studies, the marginal contribution of this study has the following three points: i) from the perspective of research content, it points out that the inconsistency of online reviews has a significant inverse U-shaped impact on the sales volume of platform merchants; ii) from the perspective of research, based on S-O-R theory and service recovery theory, this paper explores the mediating and moderating effects of brand image and peer response conflict; and iii) from the perspective of research data, empirical analysis is carried out based on crawler data and questionnaire data.

The rest of this study is organized as follows. The first part discusses the theoretical background. The second part introduces variable setting, data source and measurement model setting. The third part reports the empirical results and analyzes them. Finally, the fourth part discusses the research conclusions, management implications, limitations and future research agenda.

## 1 Theoretical background

In 1913, Watson (1913) proposed S-R (stimulus-response) theoretical model for the first time, pointing out that individual behavior is a response to stimulation. Later, Mehrabian and Russell (1974) added organism to the S-R theoretical model, suggesting that stimuli to an individual can cause an individual to make behavioral responses by influencing internal emotional changes. At present, many scholars have explored consumers' online shopping intention based on S-O-R theory. For example, Zhu et al. (2020) based on S-O-R theory found that perceived information quality and social presence of online comments, as external stimuli, will have an impact on consumer trust and satisfaction, and then affect consumers' purchase intention. Based on the S-O-R theory, Xiong et al. (2024) pointed out that the use of ant forest as an external stimulus would affect consumers' cognitive value (such as knowledge acquisition and utility perception), emotional value (such as satisfaction and pleasure) and social value (such as social interaction and social responsibility), thus affecting consumers' low-carbon consumption behavior. There is a significant positive correlation between consumers' purchase intention and their purchase behavior (Cui et al., 2024), and the sales volume of merchants on the platform is closely related to consumers' purchase behavior. Therefore, based on the S-O-R theory, this study will explore the impact mechanism of inconsistent online reviews on the sales of platform merchants.

According to the S-O-R theory, individual stimuli will affect individual internal emotions and cognition, thus leading to individual behavioral responses. Before opening the "black box" of individual complex behaviors, scholars believe that individual behaviors are stimulated responses. Initially, Baker (1986) divided the external factors of the store environment into three categories based on the offline shopping scene: social factors, design factors and environmental factors. With the rise of online shopping, the traditional ability to appeal to consumers' senses through an infinitely complex combination of various external factors has been limited to the main visual appeal of the screen (Eroglu et al., 2001). Therefore, the external environmental stimulus has expanded from the traditional store environment to network information and network community interaction (Jacoby, 2002). As an important part of network information, online comments will stimulate consumers. Real online shopping is often filled with a large number of positive online reviews, negative online reviews and irrelevant content, and consumers' evaluation of products is formed by the synthesis of multiple online reviews (Du et al., 2021). It can be seen that inconsistent online reviews (S) will have an impact on consumer purchasing behavior (R).

Sun (2012) found that inconsistent online reviews can promote product sales based on real data on Amazon. Tang et al. (2014) found that in the process of online shopping, inconsistent online reviews will convey to consumers the information that product quality is highly likely to be unstable, which will have a negative impact on product sales. However, since culture has an important impact on individual psychology and behavior, consumers who have been in the background of Chinese traditional culture for a long time cannot ignore the influence of Chinese native culture on their psychology and behavior. The culture of the mean is the most representative philosophy in traditional Chinese culture to deal with contradictions, emphasizing a state of just right and too much, and requiring individuals to seek moderation in the continuum of "less than" and "too" (Ma & Cai, 2018). On the one

hand, Tong et al. (2020) pointed out that excessive positive exposure (such as the high-profile publicity of entrepreneurial public welfare) may lead to consumer aversion, especially for those consumer groups with high requirements for moderation, and they may therefore have a negative evaluation of relevant enterprises. Similarly, when online reviews from merchants on the platform are uniformly positive, this highly unified positive feedback may make consumers feel that the merchant is too "loud" and thus influence their purchasing decisions. Research by Zhang et al. (2021) further supported this, pointing out that unanimous praise does not always boost sales growth. On the other hand, according to the "defect effect" theory (Ein-Gar et al., 2012), reviews with negative information are considered more natural and in line with people's general understanding compared to uniformly positive information. Eisend (2006) highlighted the unique role of negative information in enhancing consumers' trust. A small but genuine negative review can act as an "unexpected stimulus," breaking the monotony of pure praise, increasing the richness and credibility of information, thereby stimulating consumers' purchase willingness and promoting sales. However, this positive effect has a boundary condition, that is, the "too much of a good thing" effect (Pierce & Aguinis, 2013). When the ratio of positive and negative reviews is unbalanced, especially when negative reviews increase significantly, the cognitive burden of consumers in processing information increases, leading to decision-making difficulties, and ultimately inhibit purchase behavior and reduce sales. Therefore, in online reviews, moderate negative information can be used as a supplement to positive reviews, which can enhance the authenticity and credibility of reviews, promote consumers' trust and purchase behavior, and thus increase the sales volume of platform merchants. However, when the number of negative reviews is too high, leading to an increase in the overall inconsistency of reviews, this positive effect will gradually diminish or even reverse. Because consumers are dealing with complex, contradictory information, their purchase decision process will be disrupted, and ultimately lead to lower sales. In summary, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

*H1: Inconsistent online reviews have an inverted U-shaped impact on the sales volume of platform merchants.*

According to the S-O-R theory, the stimuli received by individuals will affect their internal emotions and cognition, and thus lead to their behavioral responses. Therefore, the inconsistency of online comments (S) may affect consumers' purchasing behavior (R) by affecting brand image (O).

First of all, consumers will form the overall cognition of the brand after contact with the brand information, and the brand touch point, as the context for consumers to understand the brand information, will have an important impact on the brand image. With the development of e-commerce, online brand touch points can be divided into three categories: the brand information of the enterprise itself, the brand comments of social media and the experience of consumers' participation in brand image construction. Compared with the brand information of enterprises themselves, consumers trust brand comments on social media more (Zhang, 2013). Therefore, online reviews become an important touchpoint for consumers to obtain brand information. Some scholars have shown that negative online comments can significantly negatively affect brand image (Bambauer-Sachse & Mangold, 2011). However, for consumers in the context of Chinese traditional culture, due to excessive emphasis on mediocrity, individual behavior traits such as compromise and fear have evolved over thousands of years (Xie, 2024). Consumers have a certain tolerance for merchant mistakes. If consumers believe that the errors described in negative online reviews are insignificant, it will not affect their purchase behavior of the platform merchants' products, but will enhance the authenticity of the merchants' online reviews. Therefore, when a small number of negative online reviews appear in the favorable reviews, it will increase consumers' trust in the brand, and thus improve consumers' overall perception of the brand. However, once the degree of inconsistency of online reviews exceeds the tolerance range of consumers, the higher the degree of inconsistency of online reviews, the more consumers can perceive the uncertainty of product quality, thus forming a negative perception of the brand. In summary, inconsistent online reviews have a significant inverted U-shaped impact on brand image.

Secondly, consumers' brand cognition is a direct factor that stimulates consumers' purchasing behavior (Yang & Liu, 2010).

Brand image, as consumers' overall cognition of the brand, will affect consumers' purchasing behavior. For example, Li and Liu (2018) pointed out that brand image has a significant positive effect on enhancing consumer purchasing behavior. Tariq et al. (2017) pointed out that brand image plays a significant mediating role in the influence of e-word-of-mouth on consumer purchasing behavior, and online reviews are a new form of e-word-of-mouth. Rao et al. (2021) pointed out that both functional brand image and hedonic brand image will mediate the influence of online reviews on consumers' purchase intention to some extent. There is a significant positive correlation between consumers' purchase intention and their purchase behavior (Cui et al., 2024), and the sales volume of merchants on the platform is closely related to consumers' purchase behavior. In summary, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

*H2: Brand image plays an intermediary role in the process of inconsistent online reviews affecting the sales of platform merchants.*

*H2a: Inconsistent online reviews have an inverted U-shaped impact on brand image.*

*H2b: Brand image has a significant positive impact on the sales of platform merchants.*

In the field of marketing research, Chou (2018) pointed out that service recovery refers to the measures taken by merchants to improve consumers' willingness and satisfaction when the products or services provided by merchants cause losses to consumers or fail to achieve the expected purpose of consumers. Bai et al. (2024) believed that service recovery is the follow-up action taken by merchants to solve service failure events and consumers' complaints when the products or services provided by merchants do not meet consumers' expectations. It can be seen that service recovery can summarize a series of positive remedial measures taken by merchants after service mistakes to improve consumers' satisfaction and willingness.

At present, scholars have conducted extensive research on the service recovery behavior taken by merchants after service mistakes. For example, Xu et al. (2022) pointed out that in the process (outcome) type service failure scenario, compared with "material remedy before spiritual remedy," the remedial strategy order of "spiritual remedy before material remedy" respectively has a higher (lower) impact on customers' intention to participate in service remedy and customers' perception of enterprise support. However, the change in consumers' satisfaction and willingness depends not only on the remedy strategy, but also on the remedy agent. For example, Jiang et al. (2024) found that consumers' satisfaction will be higher because humans can provide more sincere services than service robots. Han et al. (2022) found that responder identity had no significant effect on the perception of distributive justice and interpersonal justice. Therefore, this study will explore the moderating effect of peer response conflict based on service recovery theory.

Based on the theory of service recovery, after service failure, merchants will take a series of measures to improve the satisfaction and willingness of consumers. In online shopping, consumers often talk about their unpleasant experience of a merchant's products or services through negative online reviews. However, merchants cannot explain to consumers in person, so responding to negative online reviews has become an effective means of service recovery for merchants. Liang's (2016) research showed that consumers' doubts about the authenticity of corporate information will change with different communication situations. Therefore, consumers' perception of inconsistent online reviews will vary depending on the context in which merchants and consumers communicate. As peer responses are often closer to the language and way of thinking of consumers and are more easily accepted and understood by consumers, peer responses will have a more profound impact on individual behaviors (Delay et al., 2016). Then, in the context of peer response conflict, consumers' perception of inconsistent online reviews will change.

First, conflicting responses from merchants to negative online reviews are essentially positive messages. When high-quality negative online reviews and merchant responses exist at the same time, consumers tend to take the merchant's high-quality responses as the dominant information in the information processing process (Shan et al., 2022). As a result, when peers make high-quality responses to negative online reviews, consumers pay more attention to the content of the peer responses. Although negative online reviews convey negative information about the lack of integrity and other aspects of the business,

timely responses from peers can attract consumers' attention to the positive content of peer responses. The peers' responses mitigate the negative impact of negative online reviews and enhance the persuasive power of positive online reviews. Therefore, peer response conflict has a moderating effect on the inverse U-shaped relationship between online review inconsistency and platform merchant sales.

Secondly, peers are an important influencing force and reference group in the process of consumer socialization. Once consumers believe that the group recognizes a brand, they will be less skeptical of the brand (Liang, 2016). Therefore, peers' positive responses to negative online reviews in the context of inconsistent online reviews can gain consumers' trust through their peer status, thus enhancing consumers' overall perception of the brand. In addition, peer response conflict means that peers respond positively to the content of negative online comments, and the response content is more detailed, which can reduce the uncertainty risk of inconsistent online comments. Therefore, peer response conflict has a moderating effect on the inverse U-shaped relationship between online comment inconsistency and brand image. In summary, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

*H3: Peer response conflict plays a moderating role in the impact of inconsistent online reviews on the sales of platform merchants.*

*H3a: Peer response conflict has a moderating effect on the inverse U-shaped relationship between online review inconsistency and platform merchant sales.*

*H3b: Peer response conflict has a moderating effect on the inverse U-shaped relationship between online review inconsistency and brand image.*

Based on the above assumptions, this study draws the conceptual model diagram shown in Fig. 1.

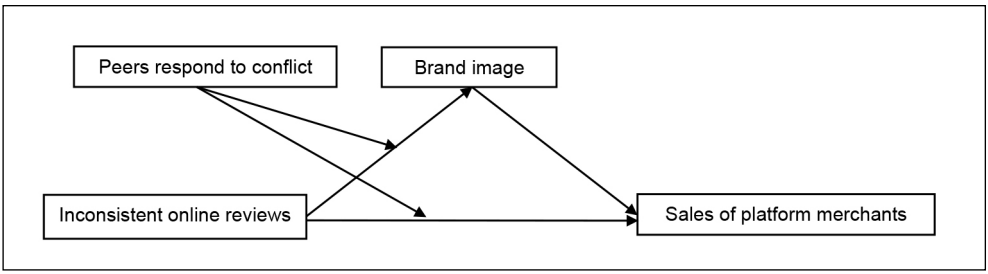


**Fig. 1: Conceptual model**

Source: own

## 2 Research methodology

### 2.1 Measures

In this study, the study variables are measured based on crawler data and questionnaire data. After the reliability and validity test of the scale of each variable, SPSS 26.0 is used for factor analysis, dimensionality reduction of the study variable was processed, and the factor score obtained by regression method is used as its final measurement value.

Dependent variable: sales of platform merchants. Commodity sales data are confidential data of online shopping platforms and cannot be directly obtained. Scholars usually use the number and sales of online comments rank two surrogate variables to measure product sales. In addition, since the sales ranking is opposite to the sales volume, the first ranked product has the highest sales volume, so this study uses the inverse of the sales ranking to measure the sales volume of the platform merchants. Consumers' purchase intention has a positive impact on purchasing behavior (Cui et al., 2024), and the sales volume of merchants on the platform is closely related to consumers' purchase behavior. Therefore, this study uses consumers' purchase intention to measure the sales volume of merchants on

the platform. Based on the questionnaire data, consumers' purchase intention is measured by referring to the five-item scale developed by Dodds et al. (1991).

Independent variable: inconsistent online reviews. Based on crawler data, the probability value of online comments belonging to the positive category calculated by python language tools and Baidu intelligent cloud natural language processing API is used as the text sentiment value of online comments, and the variance of text sentiment value within a single month is used to measure the inconsistency of online comments (because the JD platform does not display consumers' ratings on products). Moreover, the text analysis of the same online review containing both positive and negative information is complicated, so the inconsistency of online reviews in this part only focuses on the differences between the text of reviews of different consumers for the same product. Based on the questionnaire data, the measurement of inconsistent online comments is mainly based on the scale developed by Shi et al. (2018), and appropriately modified in combination with the research of Baek (2012) and Schlosser (2011).

Intermediate variable: brand image. Based on the questionnaire data, the brand image is measured using the nine-item scale developed by Aaker (1991). The six-item scale with two dimensions of product image and user image is selected.

Moderating variable: peer response conflict. Based on the questionnaire data, peer response conflict is measured mainly by referring to the relevant research of Wang's (2019) zagging theory, and the peer response conflict scale is designed.

Control variables. The control variables of this study include three aspects: individual characteristics, commodity characteristics and store characteristics. The controlling variables of individual characteristics include sex, age, edu and monthly disposable income. The controlling variables of store characteristics include price, price satisfaction, praise rate, and number of reviews. The control variables of store characteristics include JD self management.

## 2.2 Data collection and processing

Crawling data. This study uses octopus harvester to capture the top 100 pages of laptop data of JD by sales rank on October 1, 2023, and finally captured 5,846 items and 2,972,918 online reviews, and screened 517,903 online reviews from September 1, 2023 to September 30, 2023. The data are processed as follows: i) delete the default online review data of the system; ii) delete the online review data with repeated content in the same product; and iii) delete online comment data with comments of 3 words or less. After processing, the final sample size was 5,487.

Questionnaire data. After the preliminary design of the questionnaire scale is completed, 42 questionnaires are first issued for a small range of pre-research, and 33 valid questionnaires are obtained. The results of reliability test show that the scale of research variables has good reliability, and the results of validity test show that the aggregate validity of brand image is poor. Scholar Gorsuch (1983) pointed out that if factor analysis is carried out, the total sample size should not be less than 100. Therefore, a total of 628 questionnaires are sent out in the formal investigation of this study. After deleting the sample data with answer time less than 90 seconds and obvious logic errors, 447 valid questionnaires are obtained, with an effective recovery rate of 71.18%.

Reliability test. According to previous studies, 0.60 ≤ Cronbach's α < 0.80 indicates that the scale is reliable, 0.80 ≤ Cronbach's α < 1.00 indicates that the scale is highly reliable (Kurhan et al., 2018; Raharjanti et al., 2022).

**Tab. 1: Reliability test results of the scale**

| Variable | Item quantity | Cronbach's α |
|---|---|---|
| ***Inconsistent online reviews*** | 4 | 0.613 |
| ***Brand image*** | 6 | 0.786 |
| ***Peers respond to conflict*** | 7 | 0.831 |
| ***Purchase intention*** | 5 | 0.796 |

Source: own

The results of the reliability test for this study are presented in Tab. 1, demonstrating that the scale has reliability.

Distinguishing validity. The discriminative validity test results of this study are shown in Tab. 2. The results show that the four-factor model has the best fit, and meets the empirical criteria of 1 < 2/df < 2, RMSEA < 0.05, CFI > 0.9 and TLI > 0.9, so the variables have good discriminative validity.

**Tab. 2: Results of discriminative validity test of the scale**

| Model | $\chi^2$ | df | $\chi^2$/df | RMSEA | CFI | TLI |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Four-factor model (*RI*, *BI*, *PC*, *SL*)** | 333.499 | 203 | 1.643 | 0.038 | 0.951 | 0.944 |
| **Three-factor model (*RI*, *BI* + *PC*, *SL*)** | 898.667 | 207 | 4.341 | 0.087 | 0.738 | 0.707 |
| **Two-factor model (*RI* + *BI* + *PC*, *SL*)** | 935.007 | 208 | 4.495 | 0.089 | 0.724 | 0.694 |
| **Single factor model (*RI* + *BI* + *PC* + *SL*)** | 1,250.612 | 209 | 5.984 | 0.106 | 0.605 | 0.564 |

Note: *RI* – inconsistent online reviews; *BI* – brand image; *PC* – peers respond to conflict; *SL* – the sales of platform merchants.

Source: own

## 2.3 Model setting

Reference regression. The explained variable is the consumer's purchase intention, which is a continuous variable. Therefore, the OLS model is used for baseline regression in this study. The model settings are as follows:

$$SL = \alpha_1 + \beta_1 RI_i + \beta_2 RI_i^2 + \gamma_1 Z_i + \delta_i \quad (1)$$

where: *SL* – sales by merchants on the platform, $RI_i$ – online reviews are inconsistent; $RI_i^2$ – the square term of *RI*; $\beta_1$ – the influence coefficient of $RI_i$ on online review inconsistency on the sales volume of platform merchants; $\beta_2$ – the influence coefficient of $RI_i^2$ on the sales volume of platform merchants. According to the one variable quadratic function, if $\beta_2 > 0$, the inconsistency of online reviews has a significant U-shaped effect on the sales volume of platform merchants. If $\beta_2 < 0$, the inconsistency of online reviews has a significant inverted U-shaped effect on the sales volume of platform merchants. $Z_i$ represents the control variables. Specifically, according to the availability of data, when the data source is a crawler, the control variables include price, favorable rate, number of reviews and JD self-support. When the data source was a questionnaire, the controlling variables included sex, age, edu, monthly disposable income, and price satisfaction. $\delta_i$ is the random disturbance term.

Mediation effect test. According to the test method proposed by Baron and Kenny (1986), the mediating role of brand image in the impact of inconsistent online reviews on the sales of platform merchants is verified, and the following model is constructed:

$$SL = \alpha_3 + \beta_5 RI_i + \beta_6 RI_i^2 + \gamma_3 Z_i + \delta_i \quad (2)$$

$$BI = \alpha_4 + \beta_7 RI_i + \beta_8 RI_i^2 + \gamma_4 Z_i + \delta_i \quad (3)$$

$$SL = \alpha_5 + \beta_9 RI_i + \beta_{10} RI_i^2 + b_1 BI_i + \gamma_5 Z_i + \delta_i \quad (4)$$

where: *BI* – brand image; $\beta_7$, $\beta_8$, $\beta_9$ and $\beta_{10}$ – the impact coefficient of online comment inconsistency and its square term on brand image, and the impact coefficient of online comment inconsistency and its square term on sales of platform merchants after adding brand image variables, respectively; $b_1$ – the influence coefficient of brand image on the sales volume of platform merchants.

Adjustment effect test. According to the test method of Edwards and Lambert (2007), the moderating effect of peer response conflict is significant by judging whether the interaction term between the moderating variable and the square term of the independent variable is significant, and the following model is constructed:

$$SL = \alpha_6 + \beta_{11}RI_i + \beta_{12}RI_i^2 + \theta_1 PC_i + \\ + k_1 RI_i * PC_i + k_2 RI_i^2 * PC_i + \gamma_6 Z_i + \delta_i \quad (5)$$

$$BI = \alpha_7 + \beta_{13}RI_i + \beta_{14}RI_i^2 + \theta_2 PC_i + \\ + k_3 RI_i * PC_i + k_4 RI_i^2 * PC_i + \gamma_7 Z_i + \delta_i \quad (6)$$

where: *PC* – peers respond to conflict; $k_1$, $k_2$, $k_3$ and $k_4$ – the influence coefficients of online comment inconsistency, square term and peer response conflict interaction term on the sales volume and brand image of platform merchants, respectively; $\theta_1$ and $\theta_2$ – the influence coefficient of peer response conflict on sales and brand image of platform merchants.

## 3 Results and discussion

### 3.1 Baseline regression

Tab. 3 shows the results of baseline regression. When the data source is crawler data, columns 1–3 are the benchmark regression results with only core explanatory variables and control for commodity characteristics (price, favorable rate, number of reviews) and store characteristics (JD self-support). When the data source is questionnaire data, columns 1–3 are the benchmark regression results with only core explanatory variables, controlling for individual characteristics (sex, age, edu, monthly disposable income) and controlling for commodity characteristics (price satisfaction), respectively. The results show that regardless of whether the individual characteristics, product characteristics and store characteristics are controlled, the influence coefficient of inconsistent online reviews on the sales volume of platform merchants is significantly positive, and the influence coefficient of the square term of inconsistent online reviews on the sales volume of platform merchants is significantly negative. According

**Tab. 3: Baseline regression results**

| Data source | Variable | (1) | | (2) | | (3) | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | *SL* | | *SL* | | *SL* | |
| Crawling data | *RI* | 0.049*** | (0.012) | 0.038*** | (0.012) | 0.031*** | (0.012) |
| | *RI²* | −0.209*** | (0.068) | −0.174** | (0.067) | −0.141** | (0.068) |
| | *Price* | – | | 0.001 | (0.001) | 0.000 | (0.001) |
| | *Favorable rate* | – | | −0.008 | (0.000) | 0.003 | (0.008) |
| | *Number of reviews* | – | | 0.001*** | | 0.001*** | (0.000) |
| | *JD self-support* | – | | – | | 0.003*** | (0.001) |
| | Cons_ | 0.001 | (0.000) | 0.007 | (0.008) | −0.003 | (0.008) |
| Questionnaire data | *RI* | 0.129** | (0.050) | 0.127** | (0.050) | 0.116** | (0.048) |
| | *RI * RI* | −0.140*** | (0.020) | −0.135*** | (0.020) | −0.109*** | (0.020) |
| | *Sex* | – | | −0.142 | (0.087) | −0.120 | (0.084) |
| | *Age* | – | | 0.135 | (0.085) | 0.108 | (0.082) |
| | *Edu* | – | | −0.006 | (0.064) | 0.021 | (0.062) |
| | *Monthly disposable income* | – | | 0.072* | (0.038) | 0.051 | (0.037) |
| | *Price satisfaction* | – | | – | | 0.314*** | (0.054) |
| | Cons_ | 0.139*** | (0.047) | −0.160 | (0.283) | −1.417*** | (0.348) |

Note: *RI* – inconsistent online reviews; *SL* – the sales of platform merchants; ***, **, and * represent significant at 1, 5, and 10% confidence levels, respectively (two-tail test); the standard error of regression results in parentheses.

Source: own

to the basic properties of the one-variable quadratic function, if the coefficient of the square term is less than 0, the parabola opens downward, which means that with the increase of x, the y value will first increase (before reaching the vertex) and then decrease (after passing the vertex), that is, the inverted U-shaped curve. Therefore, inconsistent online reviews have a significant inverted U-shaped effect on the sales of platform merchants. *H1* is verified.

### 3.2 Robustness test

In this study, four methods are used to verify the robustness of the model: changing the measurement model, changing the sample size, changing the data source and changing the assignment method. One is to replace the measurement model. For crawler data, Tobit regression model is used. Breakpoint regression model was used for questionnaire data. The second is to change the sample size. For crawler data, the sample data whose online comments are inconsistent with 0 is deleted. For the questionnaire data, the sample data whose answer time is less than 120 seconds is deleted. The third is to change the data source. For crawler data, octopus harvester is used to capture the data of JD's top 100 suitcases (experiential goods) according to the sales ranking on October 1, 2023, and 4,925 goods and 244,849 online comments are obtained, with a final sample size of 1,042. The fourth is to change the method of assignment. For the questionnaire data, each variable is re-measured by calculating the average value of each variable scale item. It can be seen from the results in Tab. 4 that the robustness of the estimated results in this study is strong, and the inconsistency of online reviews has a significant inverted U-shaped impact on the sales volume of platform merchants.

**Tab. 4: Robustness test results**

| Data source | Variable | Change the measurement model | Change the sample size | Change the data source | Change the assignment mode |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Tobit model/ breakpoint regression model | *SL* | *SL* | *SL* |
| Crawling data | *RI* | 0.031*** (0.012) | 0.032* (0.013) | 0.084 (0.052) | – |
| | $RI^2$ | −0.141** (0.068) | −0.143* (0.070) | −0.632* (0.260) | – |
| | Control variable | Yes | Yes | Yes | – |
| Questionnaire data | $RI_{low}$ | 0.396*** (0.059) | – | – | – |
| | $RI_{high}$ | −0.421** (0.191) | – | – | – |
| | *RI* | – | 0.113** (0.054) | – | 1.660*** (0.252) |
| | $RI^2$ | – | −0.129*** (0.021) | – | −0.201*** (0.035) |
| | Control variable | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |

Source: own

### 3.3 Intermediate effect test

As can be seen from Tab. 5, the influence coefficient of inconsistent online comments on brand image is significantly positive, and the influence coefficient of the square term of inconsistent online comments on brand image is significantly negative, indicating that inconsistent online comments have a significant inverted U-shaped influence on brand image. Moreover, after adding the variable of brand image, the impact of inconsistent online reviews on the sales of merchants on the platform still presents an inverted U shape, and brand image has a significant positive impact on the sales of platform merchants. So, brand image plays a significant intermediary role. In summary, *H2* is verified.

**Tab. 5: Results of mediation effect test**

| Variable | *SL* | | *BI* | | *SL* | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ***RI*** | 0.116** | (0.048) | 0.122** | (0.050) | 0.080* | (0.046) |
| ***RI²*** | −0.109*** | (0.020) | −0.116*** | (0.020) | −0.075*** | (0.019) |
| ***BI*** | – | | – | | 0.297*** | (0.044) |
| **Control variable** | Yes | | Yes | | Yes | |
| **Cons_** | −1.417*** | (0.348) | −0.687* | (0.362) | −1.212*** | (0.333) |

Note: *RI* – inconsistent online reviews; *BI* – brand image; *SL* – the sales of platform merchants; ***, **, and * represent significant at 1, 5, and 10% confidence levels, respectively (two-tail test); the standard error of regression results in parentheses.

Source: own

### 3.4 Adjustment effect test

According to the study of Edwards and Lambert (2007), if the interaction between the square term of the explanatory variable and the regulating variable has a significant influence on the explained variable, it indicates that the regulating effect is significant. It can be seen from Tab. 6 that the square term of online comment inconsistency and the interaction term of peer response conflict have a significant positive impact on brand image. Therefore, under the moderating effect of peer response conflict, the inverted U-shaped effect of online comment inconsistency on brand image becomes smooth, that is, the increase of peer response conflict strengthens the inhibiting effect before the curve inflection point and the promoting effect after the inflection point. This may be because when there are inconsistent opinions in online reviews, peer response conflicts may help consumers form a more comprehensive and objective brand perception by providing interpretation or refutation from different perspectives, thus balancing the conflicts between different opinions to some extent. *H3b* is verified. The square term of inconsistent online reviews and the interaction term of conflicting peer responses have no significant impact on the sales of platform merchants, so *H3a* is not verified. In summary, *H3* is partially verified.

## Conclusions

Based on S-O-R theory and service recovery theory, this study constructs a conceptual

**Tab. 6: Test results of adjustment effect**

| Variable | *BI* | | *SL* | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| ***RI*** | 0.081 | (0.051) | 0.092* | (0.050) |
| ***RI²*** | −0.043 | (0.033) | −0.057 | (0.032) |
| ***PC*** | 0.090* | (0.051) | 0.056 | (0.050) |
| ***RI * PC*** | −0.005 | (0.052) | −0.037 | (0.050) |
| ***RI² * PC*** | 0.024* | (0.013) | −0.101 | (0.012) |
| **Control variable** | Yes | | Yes | |
| **Cons_** | −0.562 | (0.361) | −1.335*** | (0.350) |

Note: *RI* – inconsistent online reviews; *BI* – brand image; *PC* – peers respond to conflict; *SL* – the sales of platform merchants; ***, **, and * represent significant at 1, 5, and 10% confidence levels, respectively (two-tail test); the standard error of regression results in parentheses.

Source: own

model, and conducts empirical analysis based on 5,487 crawler data and 447 questionnaire data, and draws the following conclusions: first, this research reveals the subtle but significant inverted U-shaped influence of online review inconsistency on the sales of platform merchants. This finding challenges the conventional wisdom that a market environment dominated by positive reviews inevitably leads to sales growth. In fact, when online reviews are highly consistent and positive, this "flawless" appearance may trigger consumers' vigilance. They believe that these reviews may not be true enough or there are suspicions of manipulation, and thus reduce the willingness to buy, leading to a decline in sales. On the contrary, when a few negative reviews are interspersed with many positive reviews. They are like "flavoring agents," adding a sense of reality to the evaluation system, stimulating consumers' curiosity and desire to explore, and promoting sales. However, once the number or content of negative reviews exceeds the psychological tolerance threshold of consumers, forming a strong evaluation inconsistency, consumers will be trapped in decision-making difficulties, resulting in cognitive conflicts, and finally choose to avoid buying, and sales will decline. Secondly, this study deeply analyzes the key mediating role of brand image in this complex influence mechanism. Brand image is deeply affected by the inconsistency of online comments. When the evaluation inconsistency is at a moderate level, the existence of a small number of negative comments enhances the credibility and attractiveness of the brand image, and thus promotes the growth of sales. However, as the evaluation inconsistency intensifies, the accumulation of negative comments gradually erodes the positive image of the brand image, and ultimately adversely affecting sales. This process fully demonstrates the important role of brand image in regulating the relationship between online reviews and sales. Finally, this study explores the unique role of peer response conflict in mitigating the U-shaped impact of online review inconsistencies on brand image and sales. Peer response conflict does not directly change the impact of online comment inconsistency on the sales of platform merchants. But it adjusts and smoothen the inverted U-shaped relationship between online comment inconsistency and brand image. Specifically, when peers respond positively to negative online reviews, their positive attitudes can effectively reduce consumers' fear of negative reviews and improve the persuasiveness. This peer effect not only enhances consumers' positive cognition and trust in the brand. But it also reduces the uncertainty risk and decision conflict caused by evaluation inconsistency, thus alleviating the negative impact of negative reviews on sales to a certain extent.

The conclusions of this study provide valuable management implications for platform merchants on how to improve their sales by managing online reviews. First of all, platform merchants should conduct intelligent management of online reviews. Platform merchants should establish a systematic customer feedback mechanism, not only limited to immediate contact after purchase, but also collect opinions regularly during the product life cycle. Encourage consumers to share truthful, multi-dimensional feedback, including feedback that may seem negative, by designing diverse incentives, such as points redemption, membership privileges, etc. This open and inclusive attitude can enhance the integrity of the brand and attract more potential customers. And using big data, intelligent analysis of massive reviews can identify valuable negative reviews and repetitive, meaningless positive reviews. Reasonable control of the display ratio, both to show the real face, but also to avoid excessive negative caused by consumer panic. Secondly, platform merchants should carry out brand building and strengthening. Combine online reviews to build brand stories that demonstrate brand values, corporate culture and social responsibility. Through the brand image, enhance consumer loyalty to the brand, even in the face of a small number of negative reviews, but also maintain a stable sales situation. Moreover, for the negative comments beyond the tolerance range, businesses should respond quickly and take positive measures. Through timely remedial measures and follow-up services, demonstrate brand responsibility and problem-solving ability to effectively repair brand image. Finally, platform merchants should pay attention to peer effect and conduct social marketing. Hire opinion leaders or industry experts to engage as "peers" in responding to and interacting with online reviews. Their professional insights and positive attitude can significantly enhance the credibility of reviews and reduce consumer doubts. At the same time, these experts can guide the conversation and promote the spread

of positive word of mouth. Moreover, brand communities can be built to encourage communication and sharing between consumers and between consumers and brands. Enhance user stickiness through community activities, exclusive benefits and other ways. In the community, responses to negative comments can be timelier, thus effectively mitigating their negative impact.

Despite the implications, our study has some limitations. Firstly, there may be cultural differences between the Chinese market and other markets, which may affect the interpretation of data and the universality of the conclusions. Therefore, it is necessary to conduct heterogeneity research on related issues. Secondly, although different types of online review inconsistencies are considered in the scale measurement, there is no comparative study on the impact of different types of online review inconsistencies on the sales of platform merchants. Moreover, this study did not consider the difference in the impact of inconsistent online reviews on the sales of platform merchants under different backgrounds. Therefore, in the future research, scholars can discuss and study from the above two aspects.

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# Appendix

**Tab. A1: Variable measurement scale**

| Variable | Item | Completely disagree → completely agree | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Inconsistent online reviews | Sometimes both positive and negative content can be included in the same comment | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| | Reviews from different consumers sometimes contradict each other | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| | There are sometimes large differences in the rating of the product in the reviews of different consumers | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| | Sometimes the content and the rating in the same comment do not match | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Brand image | The quality of this brand is good | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| | The brand is excellent value for money | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| | There are reasons to buy products from that brand over similar products from other brands | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| | The brand has a distinct personality | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| | The brand can provide me with symbolic or emotional value | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| | I know exactly what kind of people are the consumers of this brand | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Peers respond to conflict | Responses sometimes point out that negative reviews are of low informational value in terms of, e.g., product features, and parameters | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| | Responses sometimes point out that negative reviews misjudge the authenticity of the product | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| | Responses sometimes point out that negative reviews are inaccurate about product design and workmanship | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| | Responses sometimes point out that the negative review publisher misstated the price of the product | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| | Responses sometimes point out that negative review publishers are unaware of price increases and price reductions | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| | Responses sometimes point out that negative comments are “waterlogged” or “waterlogged” posts that are untrue | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| | Responses sometimes point to negative reviews as malicious insults or fabrications by the review publisher | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Consumer purchase intention | I have a good chance of buying this product | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| | At the same price, I would consider buying this product | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| | There is a good chance that I will consider buying this product | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| | I would like to buy this product | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| | If I need to buy similar products, I will choose this product as my first choice | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

Source: own