



An Analysis of Consumer Reviews on Douyin Mall from the Perspective of Appraisal Theory

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Abstract

Consumer reviews are regarded as an important channel for consumers to obtain precise information about commodities and for sellers to improve the quality of their products and services. Previous linguistic research has primarily focused on the descriptive study of online consumer reviews. This study, therefore, seeks to deepen the analysis of such reviews by examining negative customer reviews on Douyin Mall. Through qualitative content analysis, this study investigates the discourse features of different appraisal resources based on appraisal theory and explores the underlying reasons behind them. The findings suggest that the selected reviews predominantly express consumers' negative attitudes. Consumers frequently employ monoglossic assertions and demonstrate a high degree of gradability to emphasize their subjectivity and strengthen their claims. Moreover, the discourse features observed in these reviews can be attributed to both individual and environmental factors. This study may contribute to future research on online reviews from the perspective of appraisal theory.

Subject Areas

Linguistics

Keywords

Online Consumer Reviews, Appraisal Theory, Douyin Mall

1. Introduction

The rapid development of the economy and the increase in personal income have provided a solid foundation for the growth of online shopping. For many consumers, browsing online reviews is an effective way to obtain accurate information about products. For sellers, these reviews serve as valuable feedback, helping them

identify the strengths and weaknesses of their products and improve their services accordingly. Therefore, online consumer reviews play a crucial role in e-commerce.

Scholars from various fields, including economics, marketing, information technology, and social psychology, have conducted extensive studies on online consumer reviews. However, relatively few studies have examined the linguistic aspects of these reviews. As a form of consumer feedback, online reviews not only contain emotions but also directly reflect consumers' shopping experiences. This makes them a valuable subject for analysis based on appraisal theory.

Previous linguistic studies on appraisal theory have primarily focused on the descriptive analysis of online consumer reviews, such as the frequency and distribution of appraisal resources across different platforms. However, there remains a need for a more in-depth examination of the discourse features of reviews in varying contexts. This study, therefore, aims to analyze the discourse characteristics of reviews across different appraisal resources using appraisal theory and to explore the factors contributing to these features.

2. Literature Review

Since the birth of appraisal theory, it has received extensive attention of scholars in the field of linguistics. Throughout the present researches based on appraisal theory in recent years, the previous studies at home can be divided into the following four aspects.

The first category includes theoretical analyses, summaries, and reviews of the theory itself, such as Li Zhanzi [1] and Liu Shizhu [2]. In particular, Wang Zhenhua [3], provided a more thorough overview of this theory and formally introduced it to China. Secondly, several researchers have carried out interdisciplinary studies between appraisal theory and other linguistic theories. Liu Xiaolin [4], for example, analyzed two English versions of *A Dream of Red Mansion* in comparison with the original. In addition, there are studies on the appraisal theory application in teaching foreign languages. For example, Sun Jin [5] study on the use of appraisal theory for teaching foreign language reading. Finally, the study of discourse analysis has the greatest number of articles among those based on appraisal theory [6]. Specifically, in discourse analysis, the analysis of journalistic discourse, literary discourse, book reviews, advertising discourse, interrogation discourse in court, and other types of discourse fall under the purview of this theory. In short, the research on the application level is still the research focus of appraisal theory.

Throughout the previous studies, the research scope of appraisal theory is expanding, but there are still many areas that have not yet been covered. Additionally, it is demonstrated that most domestic scholars prefer to concentrate on the hot-button issues in politics and the economy because they have higher influence power and practicability. As a result, it is necessary to further examine the question of how to explore the research of other niche fields and cold topics so that

expand this theory application ability [7].

Along with the vigorous development of the Internet, online consumer reviews has also drawn a great deal of attention from scholars. Some scholars have studied these reviews from different fields such as economics, marketing, information technology, social psychology, etc. The previous study has proved that online consumer reviews may affect marketing strategies [8], product sales [9], as well as consumers' purchasing decisions [10]. Few academics both domestically and internationally have looked at online reviews from the standpoint of linguistics. Wang Jin [11], for instance, studied the reviews in Meituan Takeout, and Xu Qingqing [12] analyzed the English online customer reviews on Amazon. However, these studies at home focus on the frequency, distribution, and interpersonal meaning of these reviews.

Hence, in this study, discourse features and influencing factors of these reviews in Douyin will be discussed in order to expand the research scope of appraisal theory.

3. Theoretical Framework

In this study, appraisal theory is employed as our theoretical framework. As we all know, this theory is proposed by Martin and White. The publication of the book *Beyond Exchange: Appraisal Systems in English* marks the birth of appraisal theory [13]. It aims at systematizing a varied set of linguistic resources that speakers and writers use to negotiate evaluations with their addressees and to construct solidarity around shared values [14]. Three main regions of meaning are identified. Here is an overview of appraisal theory in **Figure 1**.

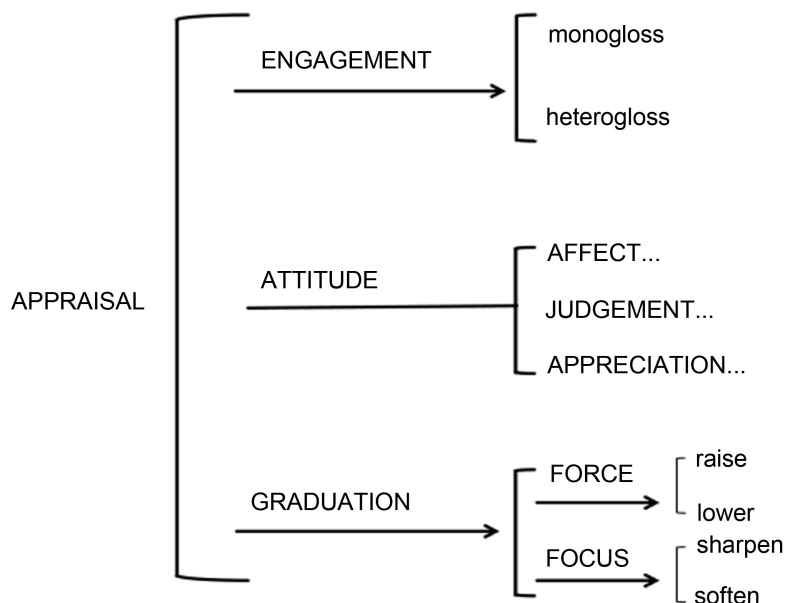


Figure 1. An overview of appraisal resources [15].

From the above chart, we can observe that appraisal theory consists of three

systems. The first system is engagement. This system deals with sourcing attitudes and play of voices around opinions in discourse [15]. Thompson claimed that engagement focuses on how resources like modality and projection are deployed in negotiating solidarity [14].

There are various engagement meanings. All verbal communication, whether written or spoken, is “dialogic” in that to speak or write is always to reveal the influence of, refer to, or to take up in some way, what has been said or written before, and simultaneously to anticipate the responses of actual, potential or imagined readers or listeners [15]. Engagement system, hence, can be classified into two subcategories: monogloss and heterogloss. When utterances make no reference to other voices and opinions, we can classify them as monoglossic. On the contrary, when utterances can invoke or allow for dialogistic alternatives, we can regard them as heteroglossic.

The second system of meanings is Attitude. It is the central area in the appraisal model. It can be simply defined as the indication of whether the speaker thinks that something (a person, thing, action, event, situation, idea, etc.) is good or bad [14]. Then Martin and White divide the attitudinal system into three subcategories, that is, affect, judgement and appreciation.

As for affect, it is concerned with registering positive and negative feelings: whether we feel happy or sad, confident or anxious, interested or bored [15].

To be specific, affect focuses on the feeling of the appraiser, while judgement and appreciation pay attention to the qualities of the appraised entity. Furthermore, judgement deals with attitudes towards behaviour, which we admire or criticize, praise or condemn [15].

The final one is appreciation. It is similar to judgement to some extent. Appreciation involves evaluations of semiotic and natural phenomena, according to the ways in which they are valued or not in a given field [15]. So, the difference between these two depends on whether we are appraising a person or something else. To put it simply, when we are appraising a person, it involves judgement. And it relates to appreciation while we are appraising something such as a thing, an action, an event, etc. In addition, this system can be taken further delicacy. That is to say, affect, judgement and appreciation all can be sub-categorized.

The third one is the graduation system. Graduation is related to gradability, and it is distributed throughout the evaluation system to provide a grading component. Thompson believes that graduation deals with the ways speakers and writers can intensify or weaken their evaluations [14]. It operates across two axes of scalability [15].

As shown in **Figure 1**, graduation has two major subcategories, that is, force and focus. Specifically speaking, graduation which operates in intensity or amount is termed force. In detail, assessments of the degree of intensity can operate over qualities, processes, etc. As for focus, it is related to prototypicality and preciseness through which classification boundaries are made [15]. Sharpen and soften are included in it.

4. Research Design

4.1. Data Collection

This study collected data from Douyin Mall, an e-commerce applet embedded within ByteDance's short-video platform Douyin, for empirical analysis.

The selection rationale derives from the platform's substantial commercial influence, as evidenced by ByteDance's 2022 report indicating annual gross merchandise volume exceeding 1.4 trillion yuan, reflecting massive consumer transactions. Given the inherent limitations of positive reviews potentially influenced by seller guidance, this research specifically focuses on negative consumer reviews to ensure data authenticity.

To be specific, this study first takes a well-known Chinese sports brand's official flagship store in Douyin as our study object. This brand selection criterion was determined by its notable social responsibility initiative a 50 million yuan charitable donation for disaster relief in early 2023, which earned it the "National Pride Brand" designation among Chinese citizens. Within this context, the study concentrates on negative reviews of the store's best-selling product, a men's athletic shoe model, collected between February 15 and June 15, 2023.

The corpus construction followed rigorous protocols: 1) Exclusion of multi-modal elements (emoticons, images) to focus exclusively on textual content; 2) Implementation of manual screening procedures to ensure data relevance and quality control. This process yielded 95 valid negative reviews meeting the established research criteria by the collection cutoff date of June 15, 2023. The methodological approach prioritizes ecological validity through real-world consumer feedback analysis while maintaining scientific rigor in data selection and processing.

4.2. Research Questions

The present study aims to investigate the discourse features of negative consumer reviews in the Douyin Mall based on appraisal theory and explore the reasons for their different resources. Hence, an attempt will be made to answer the following questions:

- 1) What are the discourse features of negative consumer reviews in different resources?
- 2) How can the discourse features of negative consumer reviews in different sources be explained?

4.3. Research Method

In this study, we employ qualitative analysis to examine the discourse features of different appraisal resources based on appraisal theory.

Specifically, we analyze three types of appraisal resources in negative consumer reviews on Douyin Mall. Furthermore, we explore the underlying reasons behind these discourse features.

5. Results

5.1. Engagement Resources in Negative Consumer Reviews

As we mentioned before, the engagement system pays attention to sourcing attitudes and play of voices around opinions in discourse. In detail, two sub-types monogloss and heterogloss are included.

Firstly, in monoglossic assertion, disclaim is used many times. It means the textual voice positions itself as at odds with, or rejecting, some contrary [15]. Examples of these are shown in the following.

Example 1

鞋子胶水还未干，绝不在购此品牌，眼见为真，该大品牌消费了一腔国货情怀(The glue in the shoes is still wet. I will never [disclaim: deny] purchase products of this brand. Seeing is believing. This mega brand makes me lose feelings for domestic products.)

Example 2

在也不相信鸿星尔克这个品牌！服务态度极差！（I no longer [disclaim: deny] trust the brand ERKE again! The service is extremely poor!)

Example 3

鞋子虽然是高仿的，但还算可以，不过太贵了，如果是一百快左右就物有所值了。（Although [disclaim: counter] the shoes are highly imitation, they are okay. However, they are too expensive. If they were around 100 yuan, they would be good value for money.)

Monoglossic assertions narrow the space for other voices and reduce the possibility of dialogue. The frequent usage of deny in disclaim is one of discourse features. Negative discourse resources are used to construe the experience, whereby the speaker expresses opposition or rejection of other points of view. Here, obviously, the consumers indicate a disalignment with the views of some citizens who regard the products of this store as the “branded domestic products”. Then, the proposition that the shoes are okay is in a countering relationship with the proposition that they are too expensive. Such counters make the readers surprised by this exceptional case so as to highlight the consumer’s subjectivity and emphasize their positions and claims.

As for monoglossic assertion, its frequency is lower than monoglossic assertions. In these negative reviews, we find that heteroglossic assertion appears two times. Examples are shown in the following.

Example 4

第一次买这双鞋子左高右低，联系客服又换了一双结果还是左高右低，我老公就说不换了穿着干活，磨烂了就不要啦，低的那一只又多垫了一只鞋垫才可以。（I bought this pair of shoes for the first time, and the heel of shoes were high on the left and low on the right. I contacted customer service and got another pair, but the result was still the same. My husband said [attribute: acknowledge] he wouldn’t change again, so he wore them to work, and when they got worn out, he didn’t want them. I had to put an extra insole in the low one to make it work.)

Example 5

儿子说鞋底硬不舒服。(My son said [attribute: acknowledge] the shoe's soles were hard and uncomfortable.)

We notice that the way the consumers in these examples frame their expressions is different from that in monoglossic assertion. They adopt a locution that diminishes and downplays the weight of what they have said to this shoe. Certainly, they do not show themselves as under external compulsion.

The poor quality of the shoes is emphasized by a third party. In the first example, the writer begins by describing the shoes, and then indirectly shows her opinion by the use of "my husband said". Similarly, the writer in the second example also conveys his views by using others' words.

5.2. Attitude Resources in Negative Consumer Reviews

Attitude system involves three semantic regions, that is affect, judgement, and appreciation. We make analysis of them step by step in this section.

To start, the source of these evaluations is consumers who bought this shoe. That is to say, consumers are the appraisers. Hence, for affect, all of the selected reviews express the feelings of these consumers. As for the appraised, it can be the people, thing, or activity that is being reacted to. To be more explicit, affect can be grouped into four subcategories. They are dis/inclination, un/happiness, in/security and dis/satisfaction.

The first subcategory dis/inclination means feelings that involve intention. The positive one relates to aspiration for something, whereas the negative meaning involves fear of something. The un/happiness has to do with the moods of feeling happy or sad, and the possibility of directing these feelings by liking or disliking it [15]. Here is an example from which we can feel consumers' aversion to this shoe in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Illustrative realizations for affect.

Affect	Examples
Disinclination	和期待的差很多。(It's not what I expected.)
Unhappiness	真是失望透顶! (What a disappointment!)
Insecurity	唉, 本来看评价说磨脚中间的位置还不相信, 万万没想到, 还真是! (Ugh, I didn't believe the reviews that this shoe would rub the middle of an individual's feet previously. To my surprise, it's true about this!)
Dissatisfaction	不是很满意, 鞋底脏了不好洗, 洗也洗不干净。 (Not very satisfied, the soles are not easy to wash when they are dirty, and you can't get them clean even if you wash them.)

As for in/security, it involves our feelings of peace and anxiety in relation to our environs. Meanwhile, dis/satisfaction is concerned with our feelings of achievement and disappointment regarding the activities in which we take part in, in-

cluding our roles as both participants and observers [15].

From examples shown in **Table 1**, the speaker's attitude is revealed clearly. Here, all of the selected reviews express the negative emotions of consumers, such as unhappiness, disappointment, etc. These consumers set themselves up as the equal of the sellers so that show their feelings straightforwardly.

In addition, as we have already indicated, the behaviour of participants is the target of judgement. The participants in these negative reviews include consumers, sellers, customer service and deliverymen. For judgement, social esteem and social sanction are two major subcategories as shown in the table. The illustrative realizations for judgement are presented in **Table 2**.

Table 2. Illustrative realizations for judgement.

Judgement	Subcategories	Examples
Social esteem	Normality	万万没想到，一天，一次，几天
	Capacity	不防滑，不标准，不耐脏，没弹力
	Tenacity	不负责
Social sanction	Veracity	高仿的，天花乱坠，山寨，夸大，虚假
	Propriety	不建议买，不要买，次品中的战斗机

Similarly, these reviews are characterized by negative judgement because these expressions all have negative connotations. For example, these words show that the seller is dishonest, deceitful because the shoe was inconsistent with that of the seller advertised in their direct broadcasting room. By using the negative judgement, the consumers are capable of showing their authorities. More importantly, we need to notice that the meanings beyond these words. Interpersonal meaning of these expressions, for instance, is to remind others to place orders carefully.

With appreciation, we are concerned with meanings that construe consumer evaluations of things. The appraised in these negative reviews involves two entities. Both of them are concrete and material in the real world. The first one is the shoe. Another is the express. Here are two examples below.

Example 6

这鞋子容易发黄。(Shoes are easy to turn yellow [reaction: quality].)

Example 7

快递好垃圾,箱子都烂了。(The express is rubbish because the box is broken [composition: balance].)

Both the phrase “turn yellow” and the word “broken” are negative impact resources. The first one shows that the product could be easy to be dirty so that it may be worn out quickly. In addition, the second word “broken” presents that the express selected by this store is irresponsible for their package. By evaluating the shoes and the express, consumers share their experience with potential consumers. The functions of this appreciation may warn potential consumers to think twice while ordering this shoe.

5.3. Graduation Resources in Negative Consumer Reviews

Graduation is the third major sub-system of meanings as we have mentioned above. In this system, we are concerned with up-scaling and down-scaling. Gradability is a defining property of all attitudinal meanings. As indicated in **Figure 1**, graduation has two major subcategories, force and focus.

Firstly, both intensification and quantification are covered in the category of graduation – that of force. Intensification refers to the assessment of degree of intensity of qualities and processes. In our collected corpus, consumers use the way of sharpening many times to adjust their degree of evaluation frequently. The relevant expressions include “很” “非常” “挺” “超级” “真的” and so on. Here are a few examples.

Example 8

不怎么好，很硬，脚宽的不建议买。(Not great, very [intensification: quality] hard, not recommended for wide feet.)

Example 9

很差劲，周边都是黄色胶水。(It is extremely [intensification: quality] terrible, there is yellow glue all around it.)

Example 10

这鞋是真的不耐脏啊，日常上下班，又不去泥地穿了半个月就脏的穿不下去了，唉，另一双也是，真滴是超级不耐脏。(This shoe is stained easily. I commute to work every day and didn't go into the mud, but after half a month of wearing them, they are too dirty to wear, ugh, and so is the other pair. They are super [intensification: quality] easy to mucky.)

Example 11

穿着挺舒服，洗着是真难。(It's quite [intensification: process] comfortable to wear, but it is really [intensification: quality] hard to wash.)

As shown in these examples, we can notice that the intensification applies to either qualities or verbal processes. These lexicalized relations of degree of intensity convey two kinds of meanings, that is, experiential meaning and interpersonal meaning. On the one hand, they highlight the fact that this shoe has a poor quality and rough design. On the other hand, they implicate the consumers' attitudes and point-of-view, trying to establish a connection with others. They may, in particular, convey the feelings such as unhappiness, dissatisfaction, disappointment, etc. of these consumers, so as to arouse the imagination and strong resonance of other readers.

On the another hand, quantification involves scaling with respect to amount (e.g. size, weight, strength, number), and with respect to extent, with extent covering scope in time and space (*i.e.* how widely distributed, how long lasting) and proximity in time and space (*i.e.* how near, how recent) [15]. Here are two examples in the data.

Example 12

这是我买过的最不舒适的跑步鞋，首先它厚的只是脚跟部分，脚掌处和脚跟处的厚度比例绝对是不对的，跑了一次，脚面疼了几天，两年在宝子买

过一双便宜的鸿星尔克，特别好穿，谁知道这双就踩了雷，这双鞋子的设计绝对不符合人体工学，销售吹的天花乱坠的背后绝对没有穿着跑过一次。另外这双鞋子极其不适合跑步机，不防滑。(This is the most uncomfortable running shoe I have ever bought. Firstly, it's thick only in the heel portions, so the ratio of thickness at the forepaws of this shoe to the heel portions is definitely wrong. I ran in this shoe one time [quantification: number], ending up with a painful instep for a few days [quantification: extent]. I bought a cheap pair of ERKE's shoes from another shop two years ago, and they were exceptionally good. Who knew that it is such a wrong choice this time. The design of this pair of shoes is absolutely not ergonomic. Despite the hype, the salesmen definitely have not run with wearing them once [quantification: number]. And the pair of shoes are extremely unsuitable for treadmills because they are not slip-resistant.)

Example 13

他家的鞋子号大，其他的品牌穿 38 的正好，他们的 38 的大很多，换 37 的才合适，问了他们还说码数很准！已经买了两次了都是码数大，而且大很多！（The size of this shoe in the store is larger. The size of my shoes is 38 [quantification: mass] when I am wearing the shoes in other stores. But size 38 [quantification: mass] in this store is much larger. It is fitting that I change the shoe with size 37 [quantification: mass]. I asked them about it, and they told me that the size was standard! I've bought them two times [quantification: number]. The shoe has a much, much larger size!)

As the example 12 demonstrates, the consumer felt that there was something wrong with the shoes after wearing them once. The design of this sports shoe is not reasonable, because running in these shoes will make people's feet hurt. The example 13 points out that the shoe size is not standard. The customer pointed out that the shoe size was not standard. This precise information is displayed to allow other readers can clearly know the shoe and think carefully before purchasing.

Under focus it is possible to up-scale and down-scale. Up-scale is sharpen, while down-scale is soften. The former means the specification so that prototypicality is indicated. In consumers' comments about this store in the Douyin Mall, the sharpen appears only once. Here is an example of this type.

Example 14

本就支持国货的态度第一次买鸿星尔克的东西，但这个鞋看起来真的很廉价，感觉很山寨。(It is my first time buying ERKE's product in support of Chinese products. But this pair of shoes looks really [focus: sharpen] cheap, and it feels fake.)

Apart from sharpen in the graduation system, soften also appears only once. It means the specification in order to characterize an instance as having only marginal membership in the category [15]. It can be exemplified in the negative reviews below.

Example 15

鞋带有点紧，穿进去的时候有点难穿。(The laces are kind of [focus: soften])

tight and it's sort of [focus: soften] hard to put them on.)

According to whether the value is sharpening or softening, the rhetorical effect varies. Under sharpening, the effect is to indicate maximal investment by the consumers' voice in the value position being advanced and hence to strongly align the potential consumers into the value position being advanced.

To be specific, consumers think that the shoes look cheap. The word cheap here has two connotations. One is that when a person wears this shoe, it makes him rustic, vulgar and low-class. Another is that this shoe makes others feel that its price seems to be very low. This idea is held by a person who left this comment, as well as tried the shoes, and this person aims at persuading other readers and buyers to agree with his view. The softening occurs as the consumer, via the word “有点” two times. This consumer is politely expressing his dissatisfaction with the quality of this shoe. Probably considering the principle of saving face, the consumer did not explicitly accuse the merchant.

5.4. Factors of Different Resources in Negative Consumer Reviews

Viewed from consumers' standpoint, the features in this discourse are closely related to their purposes. On the one hand, these consumers want to vent their emotions through these expressions. They can't see the real goods vividly in online shopping, so what they do is look through pictures and words provided by the sellers to further have a general understanding of the product. Normally, when consumers are shopping, they pay more attention to the quality of goods. However, when they receive the shoes, many consumers find that the quality of the shoes is not as good as imagined, or that there is a gap between the shoes they received and the shoes advertised in the live broadcast. It will make consumers have the psychology of being cheated. At this time, consumers tend to perceive themselves as victims, and show their unhappiness and innocence through negative reviews, which is helpful to win the sympathy of others and jointly condemn the sellers. Therefore, evaluative expressions have negative connotations in the attitudinal system.

On the other hand, these consumers try to warn other potential consumers to achieve the purpose of reducing the profit of sellers. When consumers feel dissatisfied, they are prone to make the sellers be penalized as well. Hence, the most simple way they can adopt is to reduce the sales of this shoe, so they produce a lot of negative words.

From the point of view of the sellers, this is closely related to their services and products. In terms of products, the shoes in this store are of poor quality. The quality of the shoes is the main appraised in consumer comments. Consumers evaluate this shoe by using a range of words such as “hard” “inelasticity” and “stuffy”. The shoes are hard so that they make individuals uncomfortable while running in this shoe. The shoes are easy to become dirty, thus making consumers wash them frequently, so it is time-consuming and laborious.

In addition, the service provided by the sellers is another important factor. For

affect, consumers make mention of after-sale customer service. Usually, once there is a problem with a product, consumers will first negotiate with the after-sales service, trying to find a method that is acceptable to both buyers and sellers. However, if the attitude of the after-sales service is not good, such as perfunctory, ignore, etc., which will easily cause consumer resentment. In addition to after-sale customer service, the logistics company chosen by the sellers also belongs to one of the services it provides. When shopping online, people want to receive the goods as quickly as possible and prefer to receive the goods in good condition. However, from the above analysis, we can see that some consumers feel dissatisfied because the shoes are damaged during transportation.

From a macroscopic perspective, the status of consumers has fundamentally changed as a result of China's economic reforms. Consumers were treated with neglect or even abuse before 1978 because the planned economy made consumers in a subordinate position in the service [16]. The status of consumers then is steadily improving with the reform and development of the market economic system, and they are even seen as the patrons of the merchants. With the rapid advancement of globalization and the Internet economy, consumers' position has a direct impact on the power relationship and interaction between them and merchants. As a result, customers are able to criticize the sellers, protect their rights, and meet their need for emotional release.

6. Conclusions

For a start, these attitudinal evaluations all reveal the consumers' negative feelings and values triggered by the shoes or services in this store. It is shown that the promotion of consumer's status at present from these expressions.

Furthermore, consumers tend to use monoglossic assertions frequently and adopt a high degree of gradability to highlight their subjectivity and emphasize their claims. In detail, force appeared in the negative reviews more compared with focus, indicating that consumers are likely to increase the force of their assertions while expressing negative reviews.

Finally, the discourse features in these reviews can be ascribed to individual and environmental factors. The former involves two parties, the buyers and the sellers. The latter is related to the economic and policy environment.

Admittedly, there are limitations in this study. The quantity and variety of the data we selected are limited. Besides, more subcategories of each system resource have not been fully discussed. Hence, future research can focus on enlarging the quantity of data and exploring all subcategories of appraisal theory.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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