

The Power of Reciprocity Cycles: The Impact of Reciprocal Relationships on Consumer Behavior

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Abstract

Reciprocity embodies the resource circulation between “giving” and “returning,” exerting widespread influence across the consumption domain in various forms. However, the impact of reciprocity relationships with enterprises as the focal actor on consumer behavior has not yet been systematically reviewed. Through a review of marketing literature, it is found that reciprocity relationships can influence the consumer actor, the nature of behavior, and the level of behavior from three aspects: mutual exchange, the norm of reciprocity, and moral norms. Consumers’ responses to reciprocity relationships are driven by internal mechanisms of conscious and unconscious decision-making, outcome and morality orientation, and fair exchange, with social and personal factors playing a moderating role. Future research should expand in four areas: research perspectives on reciprocity relationships, integration of consumer behavior, exploration of boundary elements, and mechanistic differences among reciprocity actors.

Full Text

Preamble

The Power of Circulation: The Impact of Reciprocal Relationships on Consumer Behavior

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Abstract: Reciprocity reflects the resource circulation between “giving” and “reciprocating,” exerting widespread influence across consumption domains in various forms. However, the impact of reciprocal relationships—where firms serve as the focal actors—on consumer behavior has not been systematically reviewed. By examining marketing literature, this study constructs a conceptual framework demonstrating that reciprocal relationships affect consumer behavior

through three dimensions: the behavioral subject, nature, and level. Specifically, reciprocity influences participants and observers in relationships, shapes both positive and negative behaviors, and determines behavioral quality and quantity. Consumer responses to reciprocal relationships are driven by mechanisms of conscious and unconscious decision-making, outcome and deontology orientation, and equitable exchange, while social and individual factors moderate these effects. Future research should expand along four dimensions: research perspectives on reciprocal relationships, integration of consumer behaviors, exploration of boundary conditions, and mechanism differences across reciprocal actors.

Keywords: circulation, reciprocal relationship, consumer behavior, equivalence principle, cultural learning theory

1 Introduction

An ancient Chinese business maxim states: “A great merchant benefits both self and others.” As marketing initiatives focused on social welfare—such as “consumer-driven poverty alleviation,” “green consumption,” and “cause-related co-branding”—continue to emerge, how firms build mutually beneficial relationships with consumers, nature, and other societal members has become a critical reference point in consumer decision-making. Reciprocity, defined as the tendency to respond similarly after receiving benefits or harm from others (Gouldner, 1960; Zhang Hui et al., 2018), facilitates resource exchange and circulation, serving as a vital mechanism for establishing and maintaining cyclical relationships (André et al., 2017). Scholars across anthropology (Hamilton, 1964), sociology (Gouldner, 1960), economics (Kranton, 1996; Wang Chongjin & Nie Zuoling, 2015), and organizational behavior (Zou Wenchi et al., 2012) have extensively examined reciprocal relationships. Recent marketing research reveals that reciprocal relationships with firms as focal actors directly and significantly influence ethical consumption (He et al., 2022), resource exchange (André et al., 2017), spillover effects (Swoboda & Winters, 2021), and consumer attitudes (Romani et al., 2013; Stäbler, 2021). Nevertheless, both the research objects related to reciprocity and consumer behavioral responses remain fragmented across multiple themes, lacking a systematic analytical framework that focuses on the diverse contexts and internal mechanisms of reciprocity. This fragmentation prevents the development of integrated policy recommendations for governments and firms regarding resource circulation at the consumption end. Therefore, a comprehensive review is necessary to help researchers deepen their understanding of existing findings in this domain.

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Accordingly, this paper conducts a literature review centered on reciprocal relationships in marketing, constructing a conceptual framework illustrating how reciprocity influences consumer behavior [Figure 1: see original paper]. The framework identifies and categorizes antecedents affecting consumer behavior in interdependent situations from three perspectives: mutual exchange, equivalence principle, and moral norms. It then synthesizes consumer behaviors across three dimensions: behavioral subject (participants vs. observers), behavioral nature (positive vs. negative actions), and behavioral level (quality and quantity outcomes). The analysis reveals three distinctive influences of reciprocal relationships on consumer behavior. First, as a dyadic relationship, reciprocity not only creates differences between exchange partners in attribute preferences (Baskin et al., 2014) and mental imagery (Briley et al., 2017) but also predicts attitudes among third-party observers outside the relationship (Romani et al., 2013; Evanschitzky et al., 2011), demonstrating the **transmissibility** of reciprocity's influence. Second, as a one-to-one equivalent exchange, the valence of reciprocal relationships does not consistently match consumer behavioral outcomes. Research shows that positively valenced reciprocity may trigger negative consumer behaviors (Ioannou et al., 2022; Stäbler, 2021), while negatively valenced reciprocity can produce positive consequences (Henkel et al., 2017; Pugh et al., 2018), reflecting the **duality** of reciprocity's impact. Third, even when valence and behavioral nature align, reciprocal relationships generate **asymmetry** in behavioral levels (Narwal et al., 2022; Su et al., 2022). The framework explains these three characteristics—transmissibility, duality, and asymmetry—through mechanisms of conscious vs. unconscious decision-making, outcome vs. deontology orientation, and social exchange. Building on this foundation, the study incorporates social and individual moderators to further enrich the conceptual framework.

This study makes three primary contributions. First, given the multidimensional nature of reciprocal relationships, the framework systematically and comprehensively organizes antecedents influencing consumer behavior, offering new insights into reciprocity-driven behavioral factors. Second, it synthesizes and distills consumer behavioral responses within reciprocal relationships, facilitating a systematic understanding of behavioral patterns in social exchange. Third, by examining how reciprocity interacts with both personal and social factors to shape individual behavior, the framework extends traditional models of decision-making in interdependent contexts.

Figure 1 Framework of Reciprocal Relationships Influencing Consumer Behavior

Source: Compiled from relevant literature

2.1 Definition and Evolution of Reciprocal Relationships

Human relationships typically assume three forms: independent relationships where outcomes depend entirely on individual effort, dependent relationships where outcomes rely solely on the other party, and interdependent relationships

where outcomes reflect joint efforts (Blau, 1964). By dictionary definition, reciprocity denotes both “a situation where two groups agree to help each other in the same way or give each other similar benefits” and “mutual dependence, interaction, or influence,” characterizing relationships where individuals mutually control each other’s outcomes (Columbus & Molho, 2022). This represents a crucial component of interdependent situations (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). To distinguish reciprocal interdependence from other contexts, Gouldner (1960) articulated three defining characteristics. First, at the manifestation level, reciprocity involves contingent exchanges between parties, where one party’s action elicits a response from the other even without explicit transactional agreements (Gouldner, 1960). Second, at the psychological expectation level, reciprocity embodies a folk belief that “people get what they deserve,” with the equivalence principle at its core—if one party fails to provide adequate returns or meet the other’s equivalence expectations, the reciprocal relationship cannot be established or sustained (Gouldner, 1960). Third, at the cultural mandate level, reciprocity functions as a moral norm and personal orientation, obligating individuals to give and return, with non-compliance resulting in punishment (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005).

Within reciprocal relationships, exchanges between individuals primarily take three forms: generalized reciprocity, balanced reciprocity, and negative reciprocity (Sparrowe & Liden, 1997). Generalized reciprocity involves giving without expecting equivalent returns, exemplified by corporate donations and public welfare activities. Balanced reciprocity occurs when one party’s effort elicits corresponding returns from the other, such as reward-based crowdfunding or promotional tactics designed to stimulate purchases (Evanschitzky et al., 2011). Negative reciprocity requires explicit specification of return timing and emphasizes resource equivalence (Zou Wenchi et al., 2012), characterized by high immediacy and equality, as seen in tit-for-tat strategies where neither party necessarily benefits. Within social norms, these three forms constitute a continuum of reciprocal norms (Liden et al., 1997). Subsequently, Uhl-Bien and Maslyn (2003) condensed this continuum into two types: positive norms and negative norms. In summary, reciprocal relationships extend beyond mutual giving between cooperating parties to encompass exchanges with negative content and processes, including mutual taking. Moreover, individual responses in reciprocal relationships operate at both economic levels (e.g., returning favors) and socio-emotional levels (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). For instance, beneficiaries often cannot provide material returns to donors but must express gratitude and confer moral credit to demonstrate adherence to reciprocal norms.

Hamilton (1964) first explained human reciprocity through kin selection theory in evolutionary biology, arguing that cooperative behavior at the organism level could confer genetic advantages. However, this fails to explain motivations for building reciprocal relationships with non-kin groups. Trivers (1971) subsequently proposed reciprocal altruism theory, suggesting that reciprocity functions as an insurance policy against crises and resource scarcity (“I share my food with you now; you must reciprocate when I lack food later”). Trivers

(1971) and Alexander (1987) further developed indirect reciprocity, wherein individuals do not expect returns from those they helped but from others. Indirect reciprocity involves reputation and status, leading to continuous evaluation and re-evaluation of everyone in the group, forming the foundation of human moral systems (Alexander, 1987). From a modern market perspective, reciprocal relationships help accurately predict and influence others' behaviors, select partners, communicate social motives, and detect situational changes. They also help resolve conflicts of interest and avoid outcomes where everyone's best individual result proves worse for all (Balliet et al., 2017). For example, when each firm focuses on creating transactional barriers for its own development, the ultimate payoff proves far lower than that generated through mutual cooperation. However, at the moral level, reciprocal norms provide moral justification for negative exchanges like retaliation, even when such behaviors are costly and yield no future material benefits (Falk & Fischbacher, 2006). At the social resource circulation level, exchange parties may resort to theft, plunder, robbery, fraud, or "legal" property deprivation to achieve giving objectives; cooperating parties may also accumulate wealth by exploiting others' labor through inequitable reciprocal relationships (Narotzky & Moreno, 2002). These considerations constitute the primary scholarly critiques of reciprocity's evolution.

2.2 Manipulation and Measurement of Reciprocal Relationships

Most studies employing scenario simulation methods investigate reciprocal relationships through games, textual materials, and videos. Given that reciprocity reflects Party A's response to Party B's prior behavior, researchers frequently utilize classic economic games such as repeated prisoner's dilemmas and trust games to examine direct reciprocity based on differing return structures.

In the prisoner's dilemma, two individuals choose between cooperation or defection each round. In trust games, Phase 1 involves Trustor A deciding how much money to give Trustee B, which is multiplied before Phase 2, where B decides how much to return to A (Thielmann et al., 2020). These methods also extend to indirect reciprocity strategies: individuals first observe others' cooperation in previous rounds before deciding whether to cooperate themselves (Flynn & Yu, 2021). Economic games can simulate basic market environments; for instance, Kanagaretnam et al. (2010) designed a simple two-partner business alliance where one partner determined profit-sharing rules while the other provided resources, illustrating the reciprocity process.

Reading materials represent another primary method for describing reciprocal relationships to participants. Chen and Huang (2016) activated reciprocal norms by having participants read an article explaining reciprocity's importance to human evolution and then write a personal story involving reciprocity. Xiong et al. (2018) had participants read and imagine themselves in reciprocal scenarios—such as merchants offering discount coupons or extra services to incentivize purchases—achieving expected results. Fan et al. (2020) designed crowdfunding

project webpages combining text and images where participants could provide funding and receive products as rewards upon reaching funding goals. Video clips depicting interactions between customers and salespeople in ethical product purchases also serve as experimental stimuli (Flynn & Yu, 2021; Shang & Pelozo, 2016).

Reciprocity measurement primarily employs four approaches. First, behavioral observation in economic games tracks participants' cooperation/defection choices, allocation amounts, and role judgments. Second, validated scales directly measure subjective perceptions. Based on Gouldner's (1960) conceptualization, Hoppner and Griffith (2011) developed 7-point Likert scale items measuring equivalence and immediacy in reciprocity. Pervan et al. (2009) created a reciprocity scale encompassing strategic behaviors stabilizing relationship exchanges, providing evidence for dimensionality, reliability, and validity. Yoshikawa et al. (2020) developed and validated a scale assessing individual orientations toward generalized exchange, reciprocity, and negotiated exchange, offering a comprehensive social exchange orientation measurement. Third, secondary data analysis examines real-time service data to analyze direct and indirect reciprocity in donation, lending, and skill-sharing contexts. For example, Harvey et al. (2020) calculated direct and indirect reciprocity using the ratio of total connections between nodes to all edges in a topological network. Fourth, interviews enable content coding based on reciprocity concepts, as Lou (2022) demonstrated by identifying reciprocity types between social media influencers and followers.

3 The Impact of Reciprocal Relationships on Consumer Behavior

As previously discussed, reciprocal relationships require consumers to respond to others in interdependent situations (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Drawing on Gouldner's (1960) three perspectives—mutual exchange, equivalence principle, and moral norms—we identify and organize antecedents triggering consumer behavioral responses in reciprocal interdependence contexts. Three dimensions of individual responses critically affect reciprocity's sustainability. First, **behavioral subject**: reciprocity becomes more feasible and effective when more people participate (Kranton, 1996). Second, **behavioral nature**: whether respondents reciprocate previous actions determines whether new exchanges and resource cycles can be realized (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Third, **behavioral level**: high-level individual responses strengthen trust and emotional bonds among social groups, enhancing social network solidarity (Molm et al., 2007). Therefore, we synthesize consumer behaviors across these three dimensions to illustrate reciprocity's evolution in interdependent contexts. Specifically, behavioral subjects include participants in existing reciprocal relationships and external observers; behavioral nature encompasses positive actions like cooperation and negative actions like refusal; behavioral level includes quality outcomes (e.g., satisfaction, purchase intention) and quantity outcomes (e.g., response fre-

quency).

Reviewing major literature on reciprocity's impact on consumer behavior reveals three key patterns. From the **behavioral subject** perspective, as a one-to-one dyadic relationship, reciprocity affects both initial participants and external individuals, meaning consumers as third-party observers can evaluate and respond to others' reciprocal relationships, demonstrating **transmissibility** across subjects. From the **behavioral nature** perspective, reciprocity's valence does not consistently determine behavioral outcomes. Consumers may exhibit either congruent or opposite behaviors in response to a given valence, showing the **duality** of reciprocity's influence. From the **behavioral level** perspective, equivalent exchanges produce **asymmetrical** consumer responses in both quality and quantity. The following sections elaborate on these patterns through the lenses of mutual exchange, equivalence principle, and moral norms.

3.1 Mutual Exchange Perspective

To differentiate from general commercial transactions, the mutual exchange perspective in consumption contexts draws on Molm's (2003) conceptualization. In reciprocal relationships, contributions from firms and other participants are made independently and without negotiation—such as offering discounts and gifts to stimulate purchases—without knowing whether, when, or to what extent the other party will reciprocate. This occurs because participants complete their exchange by performing beneficial acts for others, thereby initiating the other party's decision-making for a subsequent exchange (Molm, 2003).

Research on giver-receiver decision-making shows that givers do not consider their own preferences, while receivers imagine experiencing the exchanged item, leading them to evaluate gifts based on feasibility rather than desirability, especially at shorter social distances (Baskin et al., 2014). When gift options include inferior versions of products they own, givers are less likely to give than receivers are to accept, as givers adopt a more prevention-focused orientation (Givi & Das, 2022). Under a responder frame (“How will I handle this problem?”), individuals think more concretely, generating mental imagery highlighting impending problems and solutions; under an initiator frame (“How will I act?”), they adopt abstract thinking focused on person-oriented general solutions (Briley et al., 2017). Exchange roles also vary contextually: in service failure recovery, personal gestures (e.g., handwritten notes from service staff) generate stronger return obligations and satisfaction restoration than impersonal ones (e.g., company-printed notes) (Roschk & Gelbrich, 2017). Corporate agency strategies (where firms act on consumers' behalf to support environmental causes) prove more effective than traditional reciprocity strategies (persuading consumers) or incentive agency strategies (supporting causes after consumer action) in motivating consumer cooperation (Goldstein et al., 2011).

Even outside reciprocal relationships, consumers analyze observed contingent exchanges, attributing motivations to actors and triggering cognitive and behav-

ioral differences. When firms initiate green cooperation initiatives, consumers perceive environmental commitment and increase support for other green products (Romani et al., 2013). Flynn and Yu (2021) find that observers grant lower social status to reciprocators than initiators, potentially interpreting reciprocators' helping behavior as self-serving attempts to reduce indebtedness and discomfort rather than spontaneous altruism. In small service settings, even when service outlet owners have no direct customer contact, frontline employees' positive performance enhances customer satisfaction and purchase intentions (Evanschitzky et al., 2011).

3.2 Equivalence Principle Perspective

During reciprocal relationship execution, the equivalence principle leads consumers to evaluate relationship valence when determining response strategies. A typical manifestation involves seeking retaliation when facing negative reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960). When service providers violate moral norms like reciprocity, consumers perceive betrayal and engage in boycotts (Su et al., 2022). Witnessing unfair corporate behavior toward third parties, even without direct personal impact, triggers consumer boycotts driven by negative reciprocity norms (Hahn & Albert, 2017). Tourists receiving high service quality engage in environmentally responsible behaviors driven by positive reciprocity norms (He et al., 2022). Swoboda and Winters (2021) demonstrate reciprocal effects between online and offline channel images, where positive offline images enhance online channel perceptions and vice versa. These findings confirm that equivalence in reciprocal relationships primarily determines whether consumers respond positively or negatively.

However, valence and behavioral nature sometimes diverge. Positively valenced reciprocity may yield negative outcomes—for example, low-quality giveaways generate negative attitudes toward sponsors (Stähler, 2021), and excessive corporate environmental commitments are perceived as hypocrisy, reducing satisfaction (Ioannou et al., 2022). Conversely, negatively valenced reciprocity can trigger positive responses: observing another customer's uncivil behavior toward employees leads observers to prioritize social concerns and provide greater emotional support to employees (Henkel et al., 2017), and corporate condemnation of service failure employees increases customer transaction satisfaction (Pugh et al., 2018).

Notably, even when exchange content is equivalent, equivalence **form** elicits different evaluations. Hoppner and Griffith (2011) argue that homogeneous equivalence reciprocity (where exchanged items must be specifically similar or identical) may negatively affect relationship quality compared to heterogeneous equivalence reciprocity (where items need not be similar). The higher capability requirements and restricted return scope of homogeneous equivalence prevent relationships from benefiting from multiple diverse exchanges, reducing efficiency and increasing adaptation costs. However, other research identifies cognitive and cooperative advantages: homogeneous equivalence exhibits greater similar-

ity, reducing cognitive difficulty and resource demands (Sun et al., 2012; Sun et al., 2019; Sun Jin & Wang Yonggui, 2016), while clarifying relationship benefits, demonstrating shared values, and increasing partner communication (Hoppner et al., 2015). Regarding **timing**, long-term reciprocity allows customized relationship behaviors for specific needs, enhancing performance and cooperation, whereas short-term reciprocity implies high uncertainty, misaligned goals, increased costs, and unstable relationships (Hoppner & Griffith, 2011; Hoppner et al., 2015). Thus, equivalence research extends beyond achieving “equal value” to comparing forms and timing that enhance reciprocal relationship efficiency in social exchange.

3.3 Personal Moral Norms Perspective

Reciprocity constitutes not merely a simple conditional behavior pattern but a moral norm governing informal social exchange in human cultures (Gouldner, 1960). As a personal moral norm, reciprocity requires decision-makers to ensure their actions align with ethical standards and exercise self-control based on perceived behavioral norms (Bandura, 1991). For instance, returning benefits represents a moral obligation for beneficiaries, while punishment expresses moral disapproval of norm violations. In participative pricing (where consumers influence product pricing), moral disengagement from reciprocity reduces consumers’ return responsibility and willingness to offer higher prices (Narwal et al., 2022). Eco-friendly products embody firm-nature reciprocal relationships, leading consumers to associate high product morality with gentleness and low morality with strength (Luchs et al., 2010). Reciprocal relationships also exert sustained, long-term effects: consumers morally re-evaluate past reciprocal experiences to inform future decisions. For example, when consumers share social connections with salespeople and believe they can control purchase outcomes to achieve reciprocity, non-purchase may induce guilt, prompting planned remedial actions in future interactions to honor the initial relationship (Dahl et al., 2005). These findings demonstrate that reciprocity’ s moral dimensions continuously affect behavioral quality and quantity, with diverse consumer behaviors essentially representing reinforced reciprocal actions.

4 Explanatory Mechanisms of Reciprocity’s Impact on Consumer Behavior

Why do one-to-one reciprocal relationships produce transmissible, dualistic, and asymmetrical effects on behavioral subjects, nature, and levels? Through literature review, we identify three internal mechanisms—conscious/unconscious decision-making, outcome/deontology orientation, and equitable exchange—that explain these complex effects, forming the theoretical foundation for reciprocity’ s influence on consumer behavior.

4.1.1 Conscious Decision-Making: Cultural Learning Theory

Cultural learning theory posits that individuals possess cultural learning accounts that accumulate shared behavioral practices and strategies to enhance overall adaptability in specific environments (Richerson & Boyd, 2005). Since survival-relevant information is too extensive for any individual to master, people psychologically rely on others for most behavioral skills, learning through observation, demonstration, and imitation (Bandura, 1986). Reciprocity thus represents one of many cultural transmission and social learning contents (Jung et al., 2020). Specifically, individuals observe and learn from existing reciprocal relationships, subsequently participating in broader social exchanges and creating new reciprocal relationships to enable exchange, altruistic, and prosocial behaviors.

4.1.2 Unconscious Decision-Making: Goal Contagion

Goals represent mental representations of ideal states (Gollwitzer & Moskowitz, 1996). When individuals assign positive valence to expected behavioral states and outcomes, they engage in goal-directed activities. Research shows goals can be automatically activated by contextual cues, guiding behavior without conscious awareness (Aarts & Dijksterhuis, 2000; Bargh, 1990). Two conditions enable unconscious goal contagion (Aarts et al., 2004): (1) repeated and consistent pursuit of specific goals strengthens environment-goal associations, and (2) repeated goal-achieving actions reinforce goal-action associations. The presence of social relationships in the environment triggers unconscious goal activation, influencing cooperation and norm compliance (Liao Dongsheng et al., 2014). For example, observing others' generous donations increases unrelated social helping (Aarts et al., 2004). Goal contagion thus implies that people extend helping or retaliation to new targets beyond existing relationship participants (Jung et al., 2020).

In summary, reciprocal dyads extend through conscious and unconscious decision-making, achieving transmissibility across behavioral subjects. Once initiated, reciprocal relationships trigger additional exchanges (Jung et al., 2020), including: (1) **target-match reciprocity** (observers help the same target after witnessing reciprocity), (2) **target-overlap reciprocity** (observers help different targets), (3) **downstream reciprocity** (observers help the original giver), and (4) **upstream reciprocity** (beneficiaries create new relationships with non-givers).

4.2.1 Outcome Orientation: Intertemporal Decision-Making Theory

Intertemporal decision-making theory explains consumer acceptance/rejection of reciprocity, as the time lag between giving and returning inevitably requires trade-offs between immediate and future gains (Frederick et al., 2002). Individuals discount values across time points, forming temporal discounting in cognitive processing. When evaluating reciprocity as givers, consumers compare current

costs against future returns; if discounted utility falls below initial utility, they reject cooperation. For instance, in positive reciprocity requiring a ¥100 payment now for a ¥110 future return, consumers refusing cooperation perceive the future ¥110 as less valuable than the current ¥100, while those accepting cooperation perceive the opposite. This theory similarly applies to negative reciprocity, explaining why identical reciprocal relationships can elicit both cooperation and refusal, demonstrating behavioral **duality**.

4.2.2 Deontology Orientation: Moral Consistency and Moral Balance

Behavioral researchers have long examined how prior moral behavior influences subsequent actions. Do individuals repeatedly engage in reciprocal relationships to reinforce moral norms after fulfilling reciprocal obligations? Moral consistency theory and moral balance theory offer divergent perspectives. Moral consistency theory posits that individuals maintain positive, long-term reputational outlooks, aligning self-concept with past behavior (Joosten et al., 2014). To achieve consistency, individuals act as moral persons, confirming and building their reputations accordingly. Conversely, moral balance theory suggests individuals conduct psychological accounting of past moral behavior: compliance with norms activates self-representations that influence pursuit or rejection of subsequent moral actions (Nisan & Horenczyk, 1990; Zhong et al., 2010). Positive self-images temporarily liberate individuals from moral self-cultivation needs, permitting norm violations—**moral licensing**. Conversely, diminished moral self-images activate restoration motives, guiding more moral behavior—**moral cleansing** (Zhu Yijie et al., 2013). Thus, after positive reciprocity, accumulated moral credit becomes a psychological resource licensing future immoral behavior; after violating reciprocal norms, consumers compensate through subsequent reciprocity for self-“cleansing” (Newman & Brucks, 2018). Both theories explain why identical valence reciprocity produces dualistic behavioral outcomes and account for long-term quality and quantity differences in consumer behavior.

4.3 Mechanism Explaining Reciprocal Asymmetry

Equity theory focuses on individuals’ perceptions and demands for equality or fairness in relationships. During social exchange, consumers evaluate their own and their partner’s inputs and outcomes. Equity exists when relative outcomes match inputs (Adams, 1965). Fair exchange can be restored through two mechanisms: (1) changing one’s own outputs or inputs to achieve “actual equity,” or (2) altering self-perceptions to restore psychological equity, such as subjectively adjusting resource importance in fair transactions (Shaddy & Shah, 2018).

Thus, equity theory predicts consumer cooperation and refusal in reciprocal relationships. The pursuit of fairness motivates consumers to maintain balance when exchanging valuable resources, preventing either party from gaining at the other’s expense (Adams, 1965; Blanchard et al., 2018). When consumers perceive their contributions exceeding returns, they reduce concern for others’ in-

terests and cooperation likelihood, potentially punishing partners; when returns exceed contributions, they increase concern and cooperation willingness. For example, sellers can enhance transaction fairness perceptions to reduce consumer risk and increase sales (Blanchard et al., 2018). Equity theory thus explains why consumers respond positively or negatively to different reciprocity forms (“good deeds beget good returns; evil begets punishment”). Since fairness cognition is subjective, identical reciprocal valences can produce behavioral deviations based on individual value assessments. If Person A takes Person B’ s pen, negative reciprocity norms dictate retaliation, but A might downgrade or forgo retaliation if the pen seems low-value, or escalate retaliation if it seems high-value. This further explains reciprocity’ s asymmetrical effects.

4.4 Summary

The aforementioned theories collectively demonstrate that consumers are motivated to process reciprocal relationships, thereby affecting consumption behavior. Further analysis reveals distinct explanatory emphases: intertemporal decision-making and equity theories interpret behavioral responses as driven by economic rewards or punishments, while cultural learning, goal contagion, and moral consistency/balance theories show that even when exchange content is equivalent, reciprocity’ s transmitted signals and moral dimensions provide additional behavioral motivation. These theories thus explain how reciprocal relationships broadly affect consumer behavior across multiple dimensions. However, inconsistencies remain: equity theory predicts both escalation and de-escalation in negative reciprocity, while moral theories suggest positive reciprocity may either reinforce moral norms or license future immorality. Consequently, scholars advocate contextualizing reciprocal relationships to explore their effects in specific situations (Flynn & Yu, 2021). Comprehensive analysis of how reciprocity interacts with other consumer cognition factors is necessary to systematically explain psychological mechanisms and boundary conditions, improving behavioral prediction accuracy.

5 Moderating Factors in the Reciprocity-Consumer Behavior Relationship

Regardless of which reciprocity dimension triggers consumer behavior, a given reciprocal relationship must be transformed into an effective situation. However, limited cognitive resources often constrain consumers’ ability to identify reciprocal relationships, analyze their feasibility, resist temptations of deception or non-cooperation, and pursue mutual benefits. Moreover, during subjective transformation, individual differences emerge: some focus on collective cooperation and common welfare, while others emphasize competition and self-interest (Thielmann et al., 2020). Therefore, examining factors that moderate reciprocity’ s impact on consumer behavior is crucial. Literature review reveals that social and individual factors moderate this relationship.

5.1.1 Cultural Factors

Culture moderates the reciprocity-behavior relationship because social norms imply passive information acceptance, with culture serving as external permission to follow norms. Culture affects norm content, roles, and expectations in social relationships (Samaha et al., 2014), creating intensity differences in reciprocity's effects. According to Hofstede's (1984) cultural dimensions, collectivist cultures emphasize long-term social connections more than individualistic cultures. Research shows that interdependence-focused Asians tend to invoke reciprocal norms in gift exchanges, refusing gifts from casual acquaintances to avoid indebtedness (Shen et al., 2011), and adopting responder frames when facing health challenges to promote optimistic recovery (Briley et al., 2017). Conversely, independence-focused North Americans consider return obligations less, basing gift acceptance on attractiveness (Shen et al., 2011), and respond more optimistically to initiator frames (Briley et al., 2017). Feminine cultures emphasize relationships and collaboration more than masculine cultures (Hofstede, 1984; Samaha et al., 2014), while tight cultures enforce social norms more strictly with lower deviation tolerance (Gelfand et al., 2011)—all strengthening reciprocity's effects. Culture also influences reciprocity type preferences: collectivist cultures, sensitive to psychological distance and in-group/out-group differences, show lower downstream reciprocity ($A \rightarrow B \rightarrow C$) 倾向 than direct reciprocity ($A \rightarrow B \rightarrow A$), a difference absent in individualistic cultures (Yang et al., 2020). High power-distance and uncertainty-avoidance cultures emphasize hierarchical relationships and risk aversion, leading individuals to selectively prefer reciprocity with high-status and professional groups (Samaha et al., 2014). North American culture (vs. Southeast Asian) emphasizes promotion (vs. prevention) focus, causing Americans to escalate reciprocity over time when framed as positive giving, while Singaporeans maintain stable reciprocity; conversely, when framed as negative taking, Singaporeans escalate while Americans maintain stable patterns (Deng et al., 2021).

5.1.2 Communication Context

How information providers present reciprocal relationships and describe reciprocal norms within information environments significantly affects attitudes. Research shows reciprocity's effectiveness depends on website characteristics: higher site utility and informational advertising strengthen reciprocity's positive effect on ad acceptance, while high user-generated content reverses this relationship (Schumann et al., 2014). Reciprocity motivates consumers to comment and tip after receiving resources, but this effect weakens when facing numerous expert reviews (Xu et al., 2020) or high audience crowding (Lu et al., 2021). When firms use price discounts to persuade consumers to support reciprocal relationships, consumers prefer non-assertive ads (e.g., “suggested”) without discounts or assertive ads (e.g., “must”) combined with discounts (Bang et al., 2021). Compared to incomplete information, enhanced transparency significantly increases trust behaviors in one-shot and repeated

interactions (Kanagaretnam et al., 2010).

5.1.3 Other Exchange Forms

Given social exchange' s breadth, marketers often combine reciprocal relationships with other exchange forms to enhance evaluations. Regarding exchange timing, some reciprocity outcomes manifest only long-term. Individuals high in direct reciprocity focus on self-interest and immediate rewards, showing low participation in delayed-giving activities; those high in downstream reciprocity emphasize fairness maintenance, making them insensitive to outcome delays (Yang et al., 2020). Exchange form research shows that low-level price promotions reduce checkout donation likelihood, but this effect weakens when discounts are expressed in monetary (vs. percentage) terms (Xia & Bechwati, 2017). Firm-consumer reciprocal relationships around shared social responsibility positively affect channel performance, strengthened by intense market competition like price wars but weakened by weaker competition (Luo & Zheng, 2013).

5.2.1 Demographic Factors

Demographics of both cooperation partners create behavioral differences. As beneficiaries, characteristics like being female or rural entrepreneurs increase crowdfunding success likelihood (Figueroa-Armijos & Berns, 2022). As givers, reciprocity motivates voting behaviors, with males showing more “empathy” than females and being more likely to vote for firms on WeChat (Zhou et al., 2020).

5.2.2 Personality Traits

In reciprocal relationships, independent self-construal individuals (who value uniqueness and differentiation) adjust their behavior less based on others' actions compared to interdependent self-construal individuals (who value relationships) (Shen et al., 2011). Consequently, cause-related marketing based on reciprocal norms proves less effective for independents in enhancing brand image, self-brand connections, and purchase intentions (Chen & Huang, 2016). Consumers high in reciprocity anxiety avoid receiving benefits from retailers and remain more vigilant about reciprocity opportunities (Xiong et al., 2018). When help recipients perceive high (vs. low) ability in assistance activities, they experience higher (vs. lower) threat states (Tai et al., 2022). Observer personality traits also matter: high self-brand overlap consumers show lower generosity in economic games after witnessing brand donations (positive behavior) due to vicarious moral licensing, but higher generosity after negative brand behavior due to moral cleansing; low overlap consumers show no such effects (Newman & Brucks, 2018). Consumers with strong just-world beliefs exhibit higher satisfaction when firms reprimand service failure employees (Pugh et al., 2018). These findings support the interaction paradigm between reciprocal contexts and personal traits, affecting both participants and observers.

5.2.3 Cognitive States

Consumers select moral behaviors based on cognitive states: ego-depleted individuals (vs. non-depleted) show higher compliance with reciprocal norms (Fennis et al., 2008). In participative pricing, perceived control weakens the negative relationship between moral disengagement and willingness to pay higher prices (Narwal et al., 2022). When individuals recall past giving behavior using abstract (vs. concrete) thinking, they exhibit moral consistency (vs. compensation) tendencies (Conway & Peetz, 2012). Self-efficacy (belief in balancing non-reciprocal outcomes) and response efficacy (belief that reciprocity produces expected results) strengthen reciprocity's effect on relationship commitment when both are high (Davlembayeva et al., 2021).

5.3 Summary

These studies demonstrate that reciprocity-consumer behavior relationships are moderated by social and individual factors encompassing dynamic, diverse contextual elements and stable traits. Treating these as moderators explains both impulsive, less-deliberative behaviors triggered by reciprocity and reciprocity as routine activity requiring no calculated reasoning. This further proves that reciprocity exerts broad, deep influence on consumer behavior within contexts shaped by social and personal factors.

6.1 Exploring Antecedent Variables from Multiple Perspectives

This study constructs a research framework for consumer behavioral decision-making in interdependent contexts centered on reciprocal relationships. The framework moves beyond the assumption that self-interest maximization represents market actors' sole objective (Kranton, 1996), uncovering internal and external drivers from marketing's domain to explain psychological and behavioral variations in consumer decision-making. Economics and sociology traditionally view reciprocity's development as driven by internal forces like exchange quantity/scale (Kranton, 1996) and economic rewards/punishments (Balliet et al., 2017). Increasing marketing research reveals that reciprocal relationships provide external drivers for interpersonal and social exchange development and maintenance (Pervan et al., 2009). This review reorganizes antecedents affecting consumer behavior in reciprocal relationships, finding that internal and external drivers from mutual exchange, equivalence principle, and moral norms all influence consumers, supporting Pervan et al.'s (2009) perspective. Future research could categorize reciprocity-related factors into internal and external driver systems, exploring their independent and joint effects on consumer behavior.

As markets evolve, reciprocal exchanges continuously extend and expand in consumption domains. Indirect reciprocity, as a widespread social exchange outcome, extensively exists in marketing practice as a social solidarity mechanism (Takahashi, 2000). However, previous research typically analyzes reci-

prociprocity's behavioral antecedents based on direct exchange, lacking discussion of triadic and higher-order relationships. Goldstein et al. (2011) and Romano et al. (2022) show that indirect reciprocity varies in exchange sequence, agency form, and group composition. Future research should explore antecedents causing behavioral differences in indirect reciprocity. Additionally, when consumers face different social exchange types, signals generated by cooperation partners (e.g., reputation, bilateral communication, relationship observation) fluctuate (Kozlenkova et al., 2017). Whether consumers assign different weights to antecedents as reciprocity types change during cognitive decision-making remains an open question.

6.2 Adopting an Integrated Approach to Consumer Behavior Research

Although reciprocity's impact on individual behavior has long been studied, Gouldner's (1960) proposition about reciprocity's key role in social institutional formation and development remains under-supported. This study elaborates consumer behavior across subjects, nature, and levels, systematically synthesizing reciprocity's transmissible, dualistic, and asymmetrical effects, providing theoretical direction for future individual behavior research. However, existing studies focus on either participants or observers, not examining macro-level behavioral patterns—for instance, whether a reciprocal relationship's positive effect on participant behavioral quality simultaneously produces negative quantity responses among observers. Future research could supplement longitudinal designs and employ large-scale individual-level data analysis, combining laboratory experiments with real consumption contexts to systematically and macroscopically summarize behavioral patterns. Such efforts should aim to make reciprocity's three-dimensional effects on individual behavior synergistic, positive, and sustainable to promote social development.

6.3 Expanding Boundary Conditions of Reciprocity's Influence

Although reciprocity can predict consumer behavior, explaining behavioral deviations remains challenging. Based on mechanisms and moderators of reciprocity's individual effects, this study further explains outcome variations from social and individual perspectives, supplementing individual decision-making frameworks in interdependent contexts (Thielmann et al., 2020). Future research should continue exploring frameworks where social and individual factors simultaneously operate as boundary conditions between reciprocity and consumer behavior, improving predictive accuracy for consumer groups and explaining behavioral deviations to develop culturally appropriate marketing strategies and interventions.

6.4 Exploring Mechanisms Across Different Reciprocal Actors

This study focuses on reciprocal relationships with firms as focal actors, reviewing literature on firm-society, firm-consumer, and firm-nature relationships, and finds inconsistent views on whether exchange actors create mechanism differences. Some research suggests no intrinsic mechanism differences exist across firm-different actor relationships (e.g., Evanschitzky et al., 2011), explaining that economic actors' values guide broad reciprocal exchanges with consumers, society, and environment to achieve sustainable value creation (Williams & Aitken, 2011). Other research provides contrary evidence (e.g., Kupfer et al., 2018), showing firms select partners based on groups and exhibit mechanism differences. These differences stem from static factors like group size (Parks & Komorita, 1997)—nature's representative group vastly exceeds society and consumer groups, hindering clear identification of reciprocity strategies and actors—and dynamic factors like degree of interdependence, correspondence, interdependence basis, and asymmetric dependence (Balliet et al., 2016). Future research should examine static and dynamic factors, expanding focal actors to consumers and social organizations to explore whether and why mechanism differences exist across actors, enhancing understanding of reciprocity's essence and its potential psychological and behavioral mechanisms.

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