



Japan Bilingual Publishing Co.

Journal of Behavioral Economics and Policy

<https://ojs.bilpub.com/index.php/jbep>

ARTICLE

Pragmatic Identity Construction of Cross-Border E-Commerce Retailers—A Move Analysis of Responses to Negative Reviews in AliExpress

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ABSTRACT

Negative customer online reviews significantly influence potential customers' purchasing behaviors and damage the reputation and profitability of online shops. The process of responding to such reviews involves the strategic construction of pragmatic identity to meet communicative needs in service recovery. However, research on pragmatic identity construction in cross-border e-commerce contexts remains relatively limited. Based on 325 responses to negative online reviews collected from AliExpress, this study employs move analysis and pragmatic identity theory to investigate how Chinese cross-border e-commerce retailers discursively construct their identities in responding to negative reviews. The findings reveal that: (1) Four main moves, Opening, Apology, Solicitation, and Closing—are identified in retailers' responses, with steps such as greeting, appreciation, dismissal, promise, and invitation facilitating the realization of each move; (2) Retailers construct both the default identity of the Seller and deviational identities including the Friend, the Defender, the Servant, the Apologist, and the Problem Solver; (3) The dynamic construction of various pragmatic identities serves to address customer complaints effectively and maintain positive customer relationships. This study contributes to the literature by providing empirical evidence of identity construction in computer-mediated business discourse, expanding the scope of online review response genre research, and offering practical implications for cross-border e-commerce retailers' service

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ARTICLE INFO

Received: 5 January 2026 | Revised: 8 March 2026 | Accepted: 22 March 2026 | Published Online: 28 June 2026
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55121/jbep.v2i1.1144>

CITATION

Peng, H., Zhao, C., Xiao, Y., et al., 2026. Pragmatic Identity Construction of Cross-Border E-Commerce Retailers—A Move Analysis of Responses to Negative Reviews in AliExpress. *Journal of Behavioral Economics and Policy*. 2(1): 99–116. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55121/jbep.v2i1.1144>

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recovery strategies.

Keywords: Pragmatic Identity Construction; Move Analysis; Responses to Negative Reviews; AliExpress; Online Review

1. Introduction

Web 2.0 allows consumers to share their purchase and usage experiences in the form of product reviews^[1], i.e., the electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), which is taken as free-of-charge pre-consumption consultancy^[2] by customers to reduce the risk or fear of purchasing an unsatisfactory product or service^[3]. Negative reviews would be written if there is an inconsistency between the real product and the picture or for delayed delivery. However, due to the open nature of the Internet, both complaints and responses will be weighed and scrutinized, not only by the immediate correspondent but also by a community of customers^[4], affecting the purchasing behaviors of potential customers^[5,6] and hurting the reputation and profit of online shops^[7]. In addition, research has shown that negative reviews usually receive more scrutiny and persist longer than positive reviews^[8-10], and the negative hurts business more than the positive can promote it^[11]. Furthermore, the great efficiency of the Internet promotes the expansion of such influence^[12], and, consequently, online sellers are constantly warned to be extremely cautious about how and to which reviews to respond^[2].

To better achieve the communicative purposes like apology or image restoration, the discourse and responding strategies are chosen carefully by online sellers in the course of responding to negative online reviews. Additionally, any discourse or utterance of online sellers involves the selection or construction of certain pragmatic identities^[13], which will affect the realization of communicative purposes. Consequently, appropriate pragmatic identity construction is essential for service recovery and trust repair. Moreover, “going out” is a new policy formulated by China since 1990. Since 2005, China has expanded its overseas investment to the developed world, and in recent years, such activities have accelerated^[14]. As a main new business model of Internet plus foreign trade, cross-border e-commerce has become an important way and breakthrough for China to create new foreign trade requirements in the Internet economy^[15]. It is a good channel for Chinese small and medium-sized enter-

prises to expand their overseas markets. Therefore, in order to better realize the communicative purpose, it is necessary to analyze cross-border e-commerce sellers’ pragmatic identity construction in their response to negative online reviews.

Preceding research on responses to online consumer reviews mainly concentrates on the hospitality industry such as accommodations or tourism, and linguistic studies in the domain of e-commerce, especially in cross-border e-commerce, are relatively few. Besides, the analysis of pragmatic identity construction in the review response genre is also rare.

Against this background, this study, using AliExpress as a case, attempts to analyze the pragmatic identity construction of cross-border e-commerce retailers. With the integration of move analysis and pragmatic identity construction, this investigation may not only expand the research domain and innovate in the traditional theoretical framework of review response genre, but also provide specific teaching and training recommendations on complaint handling and customer relationship management via responses.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Response to Online Consumer Reviews

Online consumer reviews are statements made by consumers about a specific product or service that are published online and therefore are considered as a typical kind of eWOM^[16]. Cross-disciplinary research on online reviews has been conducted in fields such as marketing, economics, tourism, and computing and information science, with a plethora of research examining online reviews in the tourism and hospitality industry^[17].

One aspect of the scholarship on online reviews focuses on examining their influence or role in consumers’ purchase behavior, and it is found that negative online reviews have greater influence than positive reviews, while the volume of positive reviews only marginally affects consumers’ purchasing decisions^[5,6,18]. In addition, scholars also explore the credibility of online reviews and how online review readers assess reviewers’ credibility^[19], offering important insights

for businesses on the influence of credible reviewers' product evaluations^[17].

Furthermore, the response to online reviews, especially negative reviews, is another research aspect, which is further divided into two categories: the effect of the response to online reviews^[18,20] and the organizational features or the move structure of responses to online reviews^[21–23]. For the first category, the effect of responses to online reviews, Kim^[24] analyzes the relationship between management responses and customer satisfaction in tourism service, which finds that the responses have a positive impact on customer satisfaction regardless of review valence. As for the move structure of online review responses, for example, Ho^[25] analyzes hotel responses to negative online reviews to explore how the hotel management attempts to achieve service recovery, and a total of three obligatory moves are identified, namely acknowledging problem, expressing feeling, and thanking reviewer, whereas the optional moves like counting relationship, denying problem, expressing feeling, greeting partially enhance the rapport with reviewers and attract potential reviewers. The analytical tool and structural framework of responses presented in Ho's research are great inspiration for present study.

Given the flourishing wave of online shopping and China's leading role in the global e-commerce, sellers engaged in online shopping sites are confronted with immense challenges in managing their responses in the public and traceable sphere of online reviews^[2]. Therefore, it is vital for e-commerce retailers to respond to negative online customer reviews appropriately. However, partially due to the dominant status of hotel booking websites such as TripAdvisor^[2], most of the current research on responding to negative online reviews mainly focuses on the hospitality industry such as accommodations or tourism^[12,26–29], whose move analysis may shed light on review response genre in other industries, and linguistic studies in the domain of e-commerce, especially in cross-border e-commerce, are relatively few. There are exceptions, though. For instance, Wang^[17] examines business responses to negative reviews on Amazon.com and compares the common genre moves for responding to negative online reviews with traditionally offline adjustment messages, revealing the genre stability and variation in different contexts. Nonetheless, there are cross-cultural differences in the genre in terms of the move structure and lexico-grammatical fea-

tures^[25], and the analysis of other countries' and regions' shopping websites is also significant.

Furthermore, although some generic structures or moves of the response to negative online comments are concluded on the basis of hotel service research, there is a difference between hospitality or tourism and products on e-commerce websites. To begin with, one is service, while the other is product. According to Qing et al.^[30], product-related negative customer reviews reduce consumer purchasing intentions more than service-related negative customer reviews. Consequently, the analysis of e-commerce retailers' responses to negative reviews is still meaningful.

Moreover, in the process of managing responses to negative online reviews, the selection of appropriate discourse is inevitable, and the discourse choice may construct certain pragmatic identity at the same time^[13], which also influences the realization of communicative purposes. However, the analysis of pragmatic identity construction in the review response genre is rare. Accordingly, in order to have a general comprehension of review responses genre and summarize effective responding strategies for online sellers, this study will first analyze the move structures of responses to negative online customer reviews on a cross-border e-commerce website. Subsequently, identity analysis will be conducted on the basis of move structure, hoping to help cross-border e-commerce sellers better achieve their communicative purposes.

2.2. Pragmatic Identity

To differentiate the preexisting social identity and highlight the dynamic communicative feature of identity^[13], Chen proposes the concept of "pragmatic identity" and defines it as "the identity people choose to construct discursively in the process of interaction to meet their communicative need or goal"^[13]. Unlike preexisting social identities, identity in pragmatics is discursively constructed in interaction with the identity attributes people already possess, or falsely invented ad hoc^[31].

According to Yuan^[32], pragmatic identity has been analyzed in areas from daily conversation^[33,34] to institutional discourse^[35,36], to business discourse^[37], validating the importance of appropriate pragmatic identity construction in the realization of communicative purposes. However, studies of pragmatic identity mainly concentrate on daily conversation,

or institutional discourse, and the proportion of business discourse, especially computer-mediated business discourse, is relatively small. Nonetheless, given the flourishing of Web 2.0, computer-mediated discourse is gaining importance as one of the hot topics in discourse analysis. Therefore, in order to help online interlocutors better achieve their purposes, it is necessary to investigate the pragmatic identity construction in computer-mediated business discourse.

Moreover, the identity construction in the real world and on the Internet is different. From the perspective of discursive practice, in the real world, the identity can be constructed not only through discourse, but also from gestures, clothing, or phonetic features. On the contrary, the identity is mainly constructed through discourse on the Internet^[38]. Owing to the absence of some real-world restriction, such as face-to-face communication, online sellers are able to construct, manage or even manipulate identities that are most beneficial to their needs. In such a virtual environment, where potential customers have no access to tangible merchandise, the way the owners construct their identities to present merchandise seems to be a determinant of successful sales^[39]. However, most studies mainly focus on the discourse that occurs in the real world, such as the discourse of counselors, postgraduates^[40], presenters^[41], or doctors^[42], etc. Even if online identity has been a focus of research in Web 2.0, including professional identity, personal identity, and concepts concerning identities, such as self-esteem, gender presentation and religious presentation^[43], the investigation of identity in e-commerce discourse is undervalued. One of the limited discourse studies that can be referred to is that of He and Chen^[39], which investigates the relational identities constructed by the shop owners and the motivations behind this construction by focusing on the address forms in Taobao merchandise descriptions, whose categorization of online sellers' pragmatic identities is taken as a reference in the present study.

In addition, as communicative purposes change according to the context, the construction of pragmatic identity is dynamic^[13], which plays a great role in explaining the reasons for different identity constructions. It is found that most studies of identity construction are based on qualitative analysis and lack dynamic analysis of linguistic realization and working mechanism of identity construction^[32]. However, more and more recent studies begin to take the dynamic

feature of pragmatic identity into consideration (i.e., Lv and Zhan^[37]), examining the dynamics of identity construction throughout the entire process of communication. The present study will also follow this trend, analyzing identity construction on the basis of move analysis. Since move analysis reveals the structure of responses to negative online reviews, it benefits the dynamic analysis of pragmatic identities constructed by online sellers. All in all, the present study will involve both linguistic structure and conversational structure to investigate the reasons for different identity construction in response to negative online reviews.

To sum up, due to the distinctions between hospital-ity industry and e-commerce, the discourse in real world and on the Internet, as well as the significance of computer-mediated business discourse and the lack of dynamic analysis of identity construction, this study endeavors to: 1) identify the move structure of cross-border e-commerce retailers' responses to negative online reviews on AliExpress; 2) explore pragmatic identities constructed in each move by cross-border e-commerce retailers in responses to negative online reviews; 3) interpret how identity construction contributes to the realization of communicative purposes.

3. Data and Methods

The corpus comprises 325 responses to negative online reviews that were posted on AliExpress (www.aliexpress.com), the third largest English online shopping website in the world. The choice of a small but representative number of replies enables the combination of quantitative and qualitative perspectives of analysis.

The data was downloaded using random scraping, following the criteria listed below. First, to increase the objectivity and validity of this research, the data covers all 13 product sections of AliExpress, and each section contains 25 responses. Secondly, according to Vásquez^[44], negative online reviews are those that assign only one or two stars out of a possible five stars. Thus, only 1-star and 2-star consumer reviews accompanied by online sellers' replies are collected. Fourthly, to avoid oversampling from one specific online shop and template-driven responses, no more than one response is collected from the same shop^[27]. Lastly, to conduct the move analysis, the length of the responses to negative customer reviews should include at least 50 words, which

follows a similar review response genre research conducted by Wang^[17] on Amazon.com.

Ultimately, the total number of collected responses amounts to 325 (296 1-star and 29 2-star) and the total number of words is 55,425, giving an average length of 88 words per response. The distribution of review ratings in the corpus was uneven, with one-star reviews ($n = 296$) substantially outnumbering two-star reviews ($n = 29$). This imbalance reflects the actual distribution of negative reviews that received seller responses on AliExpress during the sampling period. One-star reviews typically signal more severe customer dissatisfaction and pose greater reputational risks to sellers, making them more likely to attract managerial responses. Therefore, the dataset is considered representative of naturally occurring seller-customer interactions in this

context.

As presented in **Table 1**, factors accounting for negative reviews are mainly product related, logistics related, and seller related, such as not receiving parcels, wrong delivery, and poor performance and quality. However, 13 negative reviews are not clear to conclude reasons. A small number of reviews ($n = 13$) were classified as vague reviews because they contained highly limited textual information. Nevertheless, these reviews were retained because they received negative ratings and triggered seller responses. Given that the analytical focus of this study is on sellers' response practices and pragmatic identity construction rather than on the informational richness of customer reviews, the inclusion of such cases helps capture the full range of interactional contexts encountered in authentic e-commerce communication.

Table 1. Distribution of negative reviews.

Reasons	Example	Occurrence
Product related	Does not work, even on a single glazing window.	195
Logistic related	I never received the item.	104
Seller related	Bad service.	12
Vague	Arrived elephant.	13

The analytical procedure in this study is presented in **Figure 1**. According to Chen^[13], driven by communicative needs in responding to negative online customer reviews, cross-border e-commerce retailers would dynamically con-

struct their default identity and deviational identities through certain discursive practices. Subsequently, constructed identities will affect the realization of retailers' communicative needs.

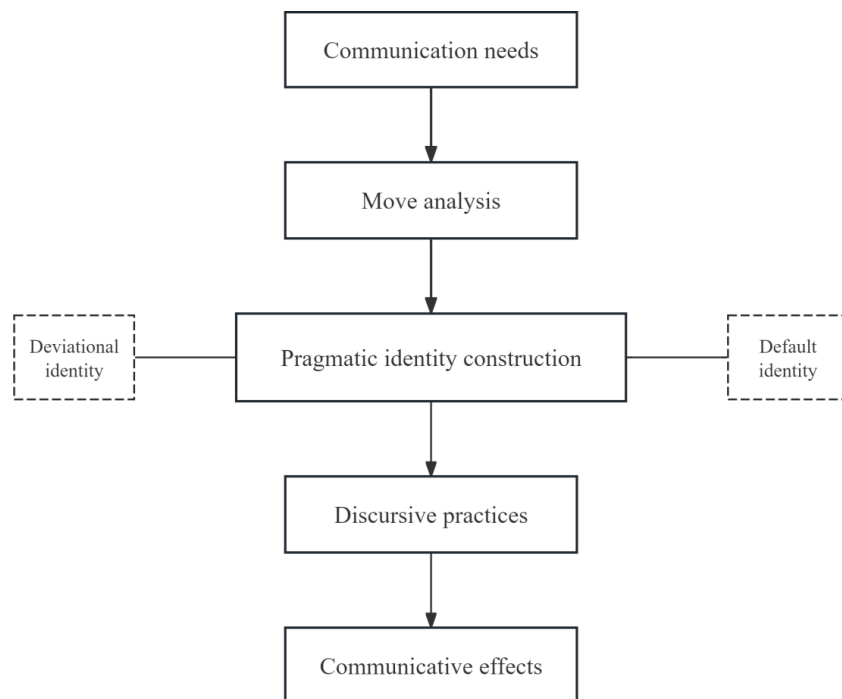


Figure 1. Analysis procedure of the present study.

Zhang and Vásquez^[4] claim that the genre of online review response is formulaic, and the ESP school's move analysis, which is needs-based and suitable for spoken and written language in academic and other professional settings, is therefore utilized to have a clear understanding of the discourse structure of responses to negative reviews, which benefits the analysis of dynamic identity construction. Specifically, move analysis follows steps of Biber Connor Upton (BCU) approach^[45,46], widely utilized by scholars working on online consumer reviews^[2,21,44], to have the generalizable descriptions of discourse structure. BCU approach includes the allocation of the primary communicative functions, the segmentation of the full texts into moves, the classification of moves by move step, the linguistic analysis of each move type, the description of discourse categories and move structure^[46]. Besides, apology is a vital part of the response to

negative online customer reviews, Blum-Kulka et al.'s^[47] apology strategies, including the illocutionary force indicating device, an acknowledgement of responsibility, an explanation of the situation, and an offer of repair and a promise of forbearance, are therefore taken as a reference in move annotation.

The coding of pragmatic identities is mainly conducted on the basis of discursive practices proposed by Chen^[13], with some additions and modifications of certain principles. For example, emoticons, text-based representations of faces in text-based computer-mediated communication, like :) (representing a happy, smiling face) could be observed in cross-border e-commerce sellers' responses, which display the intimacy between interlocutors. Thus, emoticon is added as another principle of identity identification. The detailed coding principles are shown in **Table 2**.

Table 2. Analytical framework of identity construction in present study.

Coding Principles	Description
Style choice	Formal style, informal style, etc.
Discourse feature	Discursive or conversational organization features
Propositional content	The contents concerning identities
Discourse method	(In)Directness of thought expression
Speech act	Speech acts concerning identities
Address form	Words used to address others and refer to self/others
Grammar choice	Personal pronouns, tag questions
Lexical feature	Word choices (e.g., discourse markers) concerning identities
Emoticon	text-based representations of faces (e.g., :))

The data were coded in several rounds of manual coding with NVivo 12 Plus, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS), which assists qualitative researchers in collecting, organizing, analyzing, visualizing, and reporting their data^[48]. It is noticed that some particular steps often occur twice or more within the same response but in a different position. The absolute number of move occurrences in the entire response sample is therefore counted, including the repeated moves, as well as the number of responses in which a certain move is present. Ultimately, a total of 2,252 node references, i.e., the occurrence of each step, are identified, and the node could be phrases, sentences,

or even short paragraphs.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Move Structure of Cross-Border E-Commerce Retailers' Response to Negative Online Reviews

Based on the principles of move analysis^[45,46] and analytical framework elaborated previously, the move structure of cross-border e-commerce retailers' responses to negative online reviews on AliExpress is analyzed. The results are shown in **Table 3**.

Table 3. The move structure of cross-border e-commerce sellers' review responses.

	Move/Step	Frequency	Percentage
1	Opening		
	a) Greeting	286	40.3%
	b) Appreciation	101	14.3%
	c) Dismissal	322	45.4%

Table 3. Cont.

	Move/Step	Frequency	Percentage
2	Apology		
	a) IFID	284	33.7%
	b) Solution	226	26.8%
	c) Promise	319	37.8%
	d) Acknowledgement of responsibility	14	1.7%
3	Solicitation		
	a) Five-star satisfaction	33	12.6%
	b) Contact	170	64.6%
	c) Understanding	60	22.8%
4	Closing		
	a) Sign-off	56	23%
	b) Next visit	187	77%

Although none of the collected responses employ all of the eight moves, at the same time, most responses adopt a combination of various moves.

4.1.1. Move 1: Opening

• Greeting

This step opens the response by greeting the customer, displaying a solidarity relationship between speakers, or signaling a level of familiarity^[49]. It is an essential element in customer service e-communication in general^[4].

In Greeting, cross-border e-commerce retailers usually address reviewers as “dear”, “friend(s)”, or customer(s)/buyer(s)”. “Dear” is seen most frequently in Greeting, accounting for 34%, followed by “friend(s)” (30%), and “customer(s)/buyer(s)” (10.3%). The high frequency of “dear” and “friend(s)” implies that, to some extent, online sellers prefer to shorten the social distance with reviewers at the beginning of the responses, leaving a good impression. In some cases, cross-border e-commerce sellers also address the reviewers by their name directly.

• Appreciation

Appreciation, which refers to thanking the customer, functions as a restoration of the imbalance between the two parties, as the seller is indebted to the customer. This step is usually found at the beginning of a response, expressing thanks to customers for various actions related to their purchasing experience. It represents basic and necessary communicative strategies in webcare^[4,25,50].

This step includes the gratitude for reviewers’ support or understanding (59.4%), and gratitude for providing feedback (39.6%), which shows that sellers value the comments

from their customers. As was observed in hospitality responses to negative reviews, the step of Appreciation is highly routinized and also very similar^[4,21]. The commonly adopted pattern is “thanks/thank you for”. Even if very standardized in its linguistic realizations, appreciating reviewers for the feedback and support functions as a typical face management, suggesting that the reviewer is appreciated and valued for his/her comments^[21,25], which makes responses more acceptable.

• Dismissal

In general, Dismissing implies that the seller disagrees with the received negative evaluation, comment, and tries to limit the shop’s responsibility as much as possible^[3,25]. To be specific, six subcategories are observed: a) shift responsibility to customers; b) shift responsibility to logistics companies; c) highlight the merits of the product/shop; d) mention past positive comments; e) deny the service failure; f) put the blame on force majeure.

The first two subcategories entail handing over (part of) the responsibility to customers and logistics companies. Instances consist of reminding the customer that (s)he should have contacted the customer service to solve the problem rather than giving negative comments directly, or should have checked the product description carefully before purchase. It is the logistics companies that should be blamed for the late delivery, loss and damage of products.

The emphasis on product/shop merits and past positive comments conveys that the products or services are of high quality, and sellers are reliable. By referring to the quality standards that sellers normally adhere to, the negative customer experiences are therefore framed as isolated incidents.

In addition, the utilization of promotional elements in this genre proves Bhatia's^[51] observation that the promotional genre is colonizing other non-promotional genres^[25].

In very limited cases, online sellers blame and even accuse customers in a very direct way. For example, in Extract 1, the seller implies that the buyer is lying, reporting the evidence, which strengthens the seller's argumentation.

Extract 1: We have evidence, so we will not meet the requirements because of your messages, and what you provided is still false.

Remarkably, in some instances, the delivery is prolonged as a result of the coronavirus pandemic and war, which are classified as force majeure. These factors are out of sellers' control, validating the dismissal of responsibilities and gaining the sympathy of reviewers and potential customers.

4.1.2. Move 2: Apology

In service recovery studies, Apology can be described as "a public expression of remorse through which the organization acknowledges the complainant's distress"^[52]. Being considered as an intangible and typical psychological com-

pensation, apology is a vital remedial strategy in the context of a recovery procedure^[53] since customers would expect it as a sign of courtesy and respect^[3].

• Illocutionary Force Indicating Device (IFID)

IFID (illocutionary force indicating device) in responses to negative reviews refers to the explicit performatives that convey apology. IFID is typically found at the beginning of the responses, following the step of Greeting or Appreciation. In some instances, to accentuate the effect of apology, sellers may employ this step more than once. Thus, this step also appears near the end of the response. As **Table 4** presents, IFID can be realized in an unmarked (47.9%) or in a more empathic (52.1%) way^[10].

Quite often, this step also includes an expression of regret or an empathetic statement to demonstrate the understanding and sympathy for reviewers' bad shopping experience and inconvenience caused by various factors. In addition, "sorry" has the highest use frequency among all apologetic IFIDs in response to negative consumer reviews, followed by "apologize". The high frequency of "sorry" coincides with the research result that "be sorry" is the most frequently adopted apologetic illocutionary force indicating devices^[54].

Table 4. Emphatic and unmarked linguistic realizations of IFID.

Realization Type	Linguistic Marker	Examples	Frequency
Empathic	High degree markers	We are very sorry that you got an unpleasant shopping experience this time.	52.1%
	Choice of specific words	We sincerely apologize to you for the delay in delivery...	
Unmarked	Customization of the apology	So sad that you give us bad feedback.	47.9%
	Unmarked	We are sorry for the trouble caused to you.	

• Solution

Solution refers to the remedial actions and suggestions offered by online sellers to solve the problems faced by reviewers, including return or refund, discounts or gifts, requests for details, and contact with local office, or operation instructions, etc.

Extract 2: As for the issue you have mentioned could you please contact us via message we really want to know more details and do want to help you.

Extract 3: Please use 5V 2A plug to connect this USB charger, then to setup the temperature to preheat, then the light will be changed from red to green, then it can work.

The return or refund of products and discount or gifts are considered as compensation, which accounts for 26.8% in Solution. However, some problems are of the reviewers' own making, such as ignoring detailed product descriptions, or are caused by logistic companies, and, thus, compensation does not display a clear-cut polarity of service failure acknowledgement. The offer of compensation implies that the seller is willing to provide compensation for the loss of customers in any circumstances, and, therefore, a trustworthy image is depicted. Moreover, operationalizing a full or partial compensation, as opposed to offering no redress, has a significant impact on customers' repurchase intentions and company image. However, negative reviews sometimes are not detailed enough for sellers to analyze problems as well as provide corresponding solutions. Thus, as extract

2 displayed, the provision of photos or videos are made, which enables online sellers to get more information and offer solutions accordingly.

Apart from compensation and further contact, online sellers also put forward proposals and instructions for reviewers to solve problems (extract 3), especially in cases of delayed delivery and defective products.

- **Acknowledgement of Responsibility**

In Acknowledgement of Responsibility, online sellers would clearly acknowledge that the problems were caused by them. However, this step is rare in review responses. Respondents are commonly reluctant to publicly take full responsibility for the service failures mentioned in the reviews^[21]. Although overt admissions of the service failure by online sellers might be perceived as very accommodating towards the reviewer's point of view, they come at a high communicative 'cost' for online sellers, and may damage the credibility of the shop. Therefore, the frequency of Acknowledgement of Responsibility is relatively low.

- **Promise**

In Promise, online retailers try to reassure that problems encountered by reviewers will be solved and will not recur in the future, which is usually observed after the step of Solution. On the one hand, to reestablish customer trust and confidence, online sellers may promise a further improvement in aspects such as logistics and product qualities. At the same time, online sellers also try to reassure reviewers that dissatisfactions will be solved ultimately, and all the losses will be compensated by sellers or AliExpress. By emphasizing every endeavor for customer satisfaction, online shops' credibility is rebuilt. Moreover, the degree of reassurance is strengthened by some routinized patterns like "please don't worry", or "we will try our best..."

Promise, accounting for 37.8%, plays an important role in responses to negative reviews. In addition, the response writers incline to opt for the personal plural pronoun "we" in the utterances of promise, emphasizing a preference for a corporate voice and collective identity. It shows that the online shop as a whole will take the negative reviews seriously and always be responsible to customers. Since Chinese sellers account for the majority on AliExpress, the employment of "we" also corresponds to the cultural dimensions of collectivism.

4.1.3. Move 3: Solicitation

- **Five-Star Satisfaction**

In this step, sellers may emphasize the importance of a 5-star rating for them, begging for reviewers' understanding. Besides, another kind of solicitation, contacting after-sales service before leaving negative comments, may also be made through expressions like "negative reviews will not solve the problem". The utilization of "hope", or "please/pls" enhances the tone of solicitation, depicting the humble aspect of online sellers. Moreover, it may ease the procedure of relationship reestablishment.

- **Contact**

In Contact, reviewers are always advised to contact customer service rather than directly leaving negative comments if they have questions or problems with products or services. It displays the wish to take the discussion of the service failure out of the public domain, preferring to move communication with the customer to a private environment. According to Cenni and Goethals^[21], Contact serves as a face-saving attempt for respondents, which will reduce possible additional criticism on a public platform. The realization of Contact occurs in a fairly routinized manner, which develops on a basic structure—"if you have any questions/problems, please (feel free to) contact us". The step of Contact is usually placed near the end of the responses, followed by Closing.

- **Understanding**

In general, Understanding is placed after Dismissal, or near the end of the response, followed by Sign-Off. It contains a solicitation of customers' understanding or empathy, and such pleading is reinforced by "please" and "hope".

4.1.4. Move 4: Closing

- **Sign-Off**

The Sign-Off announces the end of the response. E-commerce sellers would deliver their wishes to reviewers as a courtesy or a way of showing familiarity, which functions similarly to Greeting. Online sellers tend to use standard expressions in Sign-Off. Additionally, "have a nice day" is the most commonly adopted sentence pattern in Sign-Off. Apart from those routinized patterns, in some cases, respondents may replace the full stop with positive emoticons like "~", ";-)", "O (∩_∩) O ~", or state the name of the shop.

In computer-mediated communication, emoticons could display the service providers' emotions. They are significant in online communication, which increase the social presence of a brand, elicit a positive effect, strengthen the customer brand relationship, and influence the intention to adopt the advice provided^[55]. The employment of positive emoticons activates the mediocre sign-off. While the attachment of respondent's name shows the sincerity of online sellers. These personalized tokens not only differentiate themselves from other routinized replies, but also establish a personal connection with consumers, successfully shortening the social distance.

• Next Visit

In Next Visit, sellers convey an invitation to return to the shop. This step generally appears at the front Sign-Off, and, sometimes, could be observed in Solution, accompanied by the offer of discounts or gifts. The latter one implies an intrinsic awareness of the service failure and these realizations may function as an attempt to save the face of the reviewer, showing empathy and recognizing her/his right to be disappointed^[21].

4.2. Pragmatic Identities Constructed in Responses to Negative Online Customer Reviews

Generally speaking, selecting appropriate identities to communicate in a given context is regarded as rational. Moreover, by reference to Grice's Cooperative Principles, Chen^[13] also proposed Identity Principles—interlocutors would choose the pragmatic identity that is appropriate to the current communicative situation to communicate. Conse-

quently, the pragmatic identity constructed based on Identity Principle is called default identity. When Identity Principles are violated by interlocutors deliberately or purposefully, then such pragmatic identity is regarded as deviational. The construction of deviational identity is often accompanied by certain pragmatic functions, such as shortening or estranging social distance, which may have positive or negative impacts on social relationships between interlocutors.

Based on analytical framework of pragmatic identity construction (shown in **Table 1**), the thorough examination of cross-border e-commerce sellers' identity construction yields two broad findings: 1) deviational identities that do not accord with transactional settings, such as the Friend, the Defender, the Servant, the Apologist and the Problem Solver; and 2) default identity that characterizes cross-border e-commerce sellers' business activities, namely the Seller. **Table 5** depicts pragmatic identity's types, distribution in the move structure, and discursive practices utilized to construct the identity.

4.2.1. Identity as the Seller

The default identity of respondents is the Seller. According to He and Chen^[39], the social distance between sellers and buyers presented by default identity is neither intimate nor estranged. In online review response genre, negative reviews are left to display dissatisfactions of customers, and it is the Seller who is expected or responsible to tackle problems encountered by customers. This default identity is generally constructed in steps of Greeting, Appreciation, Dismissal, Next Visit and Sign-Off through the address form of "dear customer/buyer", vocabularies of "store", "order", and personalized tokens of respondents' names.

Table 5. The distribution of pragmatic identities in the move structure.

Pragmatic Identity		Steps	Adopted Discursive Practices
Default identity	Seller	Greeting, appreciation, dismissal, next visit, sign-off	Address form, lexical features
	Friend	Greeting, sign-offs with emoticons	Address form, emoticon
	Defender	Dismissal	Speech act, discourse method
	Servant	Five-star satisfaction, contact, understanding, promise	Speech act, discourse content, lexical features
	Problem Solver	Solution	Speech act, discourse method
Deviational identities		Apologist	IFID, acknowledgement of responsibility
			Speech act

To begin with, respondents may use the person-referencing word "customer(s)" or "buyer(s)" to address reviewers in Greeting. The counterpart of "customer(s)" or "buyer(s)" is seller, and, thus, respondents' default identity—Seller, is constructed indirectly. Secondly, the step of Ap-

preciation contains vocabulary like "feedback", "support", "order", or "purchase", which displays the transactional relationship between respondents and reviewers. Respondents' default identity, seller, is therefore constructed. While in Dismissal, respondents sometimes would emphasize the merits

of themselves to dismiss the problem proposed by reviewers and reassure other reviewers, such as “as an honest and responsible seller...”, or mention past positive reviews written by other reviewers. Address forms like “salesperson”, “seller” or “customer(s)/buyer(s)” explicitly construct the respondents’ seller identity. Moreover, some respondents may offer discount or gift to remedy reviewers in Solution, and business-related vocabularies, such as “discount”, implying that respondents employ their default identity, Seller, to provide preferential offers to reviewers. Furthermore, the invitation of Next Visit is usually made by salesperson after shopping. Words like “store” and “order” are utilized in this step, which displays the buying and selling relationship between respondents and reviewers. Therefore, through the invitation of next visit and utilization of some business words, respondents ultimately depict themselves as Seller in Next Visit. In addition, the names of the respondents or the shops would be enclosed in Sign-Off, such as “EAAE Official Store Customer Service Team”, which indirectly clarifies respondents’ identity as Seller.

4.2.2. Identity as the Friend

As one of the deviational identities constructed by respondents in negative customer review response genre, Friend is able to shorten the social distance between reviewers and respondents. Respondents mainly construct this identity in steps of Greeting and Sign-Off through addressing reviewers as “friend(s)” or using emoticons at the end of the response.

Apart from “customer(s)/buyer(s)”, respondents also utilize “friend(s)” to address reviewers in Greeting, such as “dear friend...”. The address form “friend” implies that the respondent chooses the identity of Friend to reply, regarding himself/herself as the reviewer’s friend. Compared with Seller, Friend is more intimate. In some cases, the address form “friend(s)” would sometimes be replaced by “hi dear” or “hello”. The omission of address form implies that respondents reply negative reviews in an informal style, which further shortens the social distance between reviewers and respondents. Even if there is no clear address form, the identity constructed under such circumstances is still annotated as Friend. In addition to the names, some respondents also close responses with emoticons or emojis. In other words, routinized expressions in Sign-Off are enriched with emoticons

and emojis. Generally, emoticons utilized in Sign-Off mainly express joy and happiness, such as “:)”, “(*□□*)”, and “O (∩_∩) O ~”, or function as moderation “~”. Emoticons are signals of informality, and the utilization of emoticons not only differentiates responses from those routinized ones, but also shows the familiarity between respondents and reviewers. Therefore, the pragmatic identity constructed in sign-offs with emoticons is regarded as Friend.

4.2.3. Identity as the Defender

As a deviational pragmatic identity, Defender is constructed by cross-border e-commerce sellers to protect their business interests and dismiss responsibilities. Some dissatisfactions are caused by reviewers’ negligence or by logistic companies, and hence online sellers shouldn’t be blamed. Through the speech act of criticizing, declaring, certain discourse content and direct discourse method, Defender is successfully constructed in the move of Dismissal.

Specifically, in Denial, respondents blame and even accuse reviewers in a very direct way. For example, in “Finally, since all your AliExpress feedback is 1- and 2-star negative reviews, we cannot judge your true identity and purpose”. Through the reference to certain content, questioning the credibility of this reviewer, the respondent chooses to behave as a Defender to protect the reputation of the shop and prevent similar matters from happening again.

Secondly, if respondents try to hand over (part of) the responsibility to reviewers or logistics companies, they also reply as Defenders. For instance, the content of “the size of the ball has been clearly marked in the picture, it is 3.5 cm. It is also clearly written on the details page...” implies that the wrong size of the product is attributed to the customer’s negligence rather than the seller, and the respondent therefore has reason to defend himself/herself from the reviewer’s criticism.

Furthermore, apart from Seller, respondents may also behave as Defenders in Dismissal when they mention past positive comments and force majeure, or highlight the merits of the product. Some responses contain clear person-referencing practices like “we are an old seller...”, which constructs respondents’ identity as Seller. However, other instances only include personal pronouns like “we” or “I”. Considering the communicative function of past positive comments and highlight of merits, the identity constructed

in cases without definite address forms is annotated as Defender. Furthermore, wars or pandemics are uncontrollable factors, and, thus, it is necessary for respondents to act as Defenders to protect their benefits and declare the validity. For instance, “Due to the impact of COVID-19, logistics has also been greatly affected. Now that the logistics are unstable...” infers that the delayed delivery is caused by the pandemic, and the respondent is not going to take the responsibility. The identity of Defender enables respondents to limit their responsibilities.

4.2.4. Identity as the Servant

Respondents sometimes would highlight their inferiority, portraying themselves as Servant, and the power of customers so as to better accomplish their communicative purposes. Furthermore, Servant is commonly constructed in the move of Solicitation and the step of Promise through discursive practices like speech act, discourse content and lexical features.

The communicative purpose of Solicitation is to ask for reviewers’ understanding and to plead that they not leave negative reviews. Solicitation includes three specific steps—Contact, Understanding, and Five-Star Satisfaction. In Contact and Understanding, reviewers are advised to contact customer service to solve the problem rather than directly leaving negative comments. “Please/pls” is the second most frequently used word in Contact, and other vocabulary items, such as “hope” or “feel free”, are also employed to accentuate the degree of solicitation. Although “please”, “hope” and “feel free” are courteous words and phrases, they also indirectly elevate reviewers’ status, portraying respondents’ Servant identity. For example, in “Please contact us first if you have any problem with the parcel or item”, “please”, instead of “can”, is utilized to show respect to the reviewer, making the request more acceptable. Since it is respondents who wish to take the discussion of the service failure out of the public domain, words and phrases adopted in Contact should be courteous, sincere and respectful. As for Five-Star Satisfaction, respondents will not only emphasize the importance of five-star rating, but also accentuate the detrimental effects brought by negative reviews. For example, “I hope you don’t give bad reviews at will, each of your reviews is very important to the store” implies that both positive and negative comments are essential to the shop, and the respon-

dent tries to get the reviewer’s sympathy by stressing the reviewer’s power.

In addition, the identity of Servant could be observed in the step of Promise, which is a constituent of the move—Apology. The identity of Servant implies that sellers will always endeavor to satisfy every customer and will not let customers bear any losses, spotlighting the high status of customers in business. For example, “We will keep working hard! Serve every customer well...” promises that the respondent will take every possible method to improve customer experience so long as the reviewer revises his/her comment, which portrays the inferior side of respondents.

4.2.5. Identity as the Problem Solver

In order to solve problems like defective merchandise and wrong delivery, or get compensation, some reviewers would leave negative reviews on the website to get the attention of sellers. The focal point of these negative reviews is gaining realistic and specific suggestions or instructions rather than general responses, and, consequently, respondents need to construct the identity of Problem Solver, whose social distance lies somewhere between Seller and Friend, to reply. Accordingly, respondents mainly construct their Problem Solver identity in the step of Solution through the speech act of suggesting and remedial discourse content.

If problems or difficulties are clearly elaborated in reviews, respondents are able to provide detailed instructions, compensations or suggestions to reviewers. For example, detailed instructions will be offered by respondents to help the reviewer successfully implement the product. The reviewer behaves as a Problem Solver to solve difficulties encountered by reviewers. In addition, respondents will also compensate reviewers for their unpleasant shopping experience, such as “Please don’t forget to initiate a dispute and request a refund. We will refund the money to your account...”, which meets reviewers’ demand for recovering losses. When negative reviews are not detailed enough for sellers to analyze problems and provide corresponding solutions, a further contact will be proposed as a solution. The identity constructed in these cases is also annotated as Problem Solver since the purpose of further contact is to confirm reviewers’ problems and provide solutions for them. Behaving as Problem Solver, respondents are able to provide possible suggestions or remedial measures for reviewers’ negative shopping experience.

4.2.6. Identity as the Apologist

The last deviational identity constructed by respondents is Apologist, which enables respondents to express their sympathy or apology for reviewers' unpleasant shopping experience. The priority of Apologist is to apologize, and apology, as expressive illocutionary act, maintains social contract and restores equilibrium between reviewers and respondents. Accordingly, Apologist is constructed in steps of IFID and Responsibility through the speech act of apology.

In IFID, empathic and unmarked apologies infer respondents' Apologist identity, conveying apology and showing empathy. The construction of Apologist demonstrates that the respondent attempts to manage the reviewer's personal face and sociality rights, which makes the response more acceptable. The discourse content in Responsibility implies that respondents will always take responsibility for reviewers' negative shopping experiences, which constructs the identity of Apologist. For example, "...my staff sent the wrong shirts without checking. I am willing to take all these mistakes..." shows that the respondent admits the mistake and is willing to take the responsibility. In other words, since taking responsibility is a sign of apology, the reviewer plays the role of Apologist.

4.3. Motivations for Different Pragmatic Identity Construction

After the discussion of various identities that cross-border e-commerce sellers fluidly constructed in responding to negative online customer reviews, another question naturally occurs: how do constructed identities affect the realization of communicative goals? Tracy and Robles^[56] point out that "the communicative actions that ensure that one is attending to the first part of the ideal are just the communicative actions that endanger the second part of the ideal", which is known as "identity dilemma". In other words, if interlocutors only consider one of the communicative needs in the interaction, they may fail to meet other needs. In accordance with Pragmatic Identity Theory, communicators construct various identities with a view to meeting their communicative needs in the ongoing conversation^[57].

Behaving as the Apologist, online sellers are able to express their sympathy or apology for reviewers' unpleasant shopping experiences and bear the responsibility for the

complaints. Compared with the default identity, the Seller, Apologist demonstrates the respect and attends to the reviewers' sociality right, trying to associate themselves with the reviewer^[25]. It has been proven in the hospitality industry that the expression of apology could raise reviewers' willingness to return and repurchase. Moreover, the explicit effort in taking the blame could actually signal to the potential customers that online sellers are willing to accept criticism, admit faults. Thus, the interpersonal communicative need, establishing and maintaining a good relationship with customers, is achieved.

The Defender would deny problems mentioned in the reviews through shifting the responsibility to customers, logistic companies and force majeure, or emphasizing the merits of their products and positive comments left by previous customers. The construction of Defender seems to be at odds with other deviational identities such as Problem Solver, Servant, which contribute to fulfilling the goal of service recovery and customer relationship management. However, with merits and quality promotion, both reviewers and potential customers would be led to focus on the strengths of the shop, the quality and service that have been recognized, praised and appreciated, the store operations that have been proven successful. Consequently, the goal of attracting potential customers or customer relationship management is achieved. Besides, responsibility deflecting, on the other hand, proves the quality of the products and, thus, protects the reputation of the shop.

Apart from handling the complaints, customer relationship management also concerns cross-border e-commerce retailers. For example, Friend is usually adopted at the beginning and the end of the responses through the address form "friend(s)" and the presence of emoticons, which contributes to shortening the social distance with reviewers and establishing a good rapport with them. A closer relationship would raise the possibility of successful problem solving since problems could be settled more easily between "friends". Moreover, the construction of Friend assists respondents to differentiate themselves from other normal competitors, impress reviewers and other viewers, achieving the purposes of customer relationship management.

As reviewers who leave negative feedback publicly seek to recover the loss that they have suffered while using the products or services^[50], or expect to be treated with re-

spect^[58]. Problem Solver literally fulfills respondents' transactional needs for complaints handling, assisting reviewers in solving problems they encountered in the course of product operation. Ho^[25] believes that reviewers expect to see some action taken to address the problems, and, thus, the construction of Problem Solvers caters to reviewers' expectations. Furthermore, Problem Solver depicts respondents' trustworthy and reliable image, which will reassure the quality of after-sales services for potential customers, realizing the purpose of customer relationship management.

The construction of Servant protrudes the inferiority of respondents, and indicates that respondents execute the rule—"The customer is always right." It correspondingly improves the status of reviewers, making them feel respected. Besides, the obligation of Servant is to serve the needs of customers, which relieves potential customers' concerns after viewing negative comments left by other customers. Consequently, on the one hand, it would be much easier for reviewers to accept the solicitation of five-star rating, further contact and understanding with the utilization of Servant, which benefits the complaints handling and reputation protection. On the other hand, in terms of interpersonal communicative needs, Servant impresses that respondents will definitely build pleasant consumption environment for customers.

5. Conclusions

This study, using AliExpress as a case, applies ESP school's move analysis and Chen's^[13] pragmatic identity theory as its primary analytical frameworks. To explore the dynamic construction of cross-border e-commerce retailers' pragmatic identities, a move analysis is first conducted with NVivo 12 Plus to identify the structure of responses to negative reviews. Results show that responses include four main moves, namely Opening, Apology, Solicitation and Closing, and each main move consists of several steps. Among the four main moves, Apology, composed by IFIDs, Promise, Solution and Acknowledgement, is the most frequently exploited moves in responses. Besides, it should be noted that pragmatic identities are not static but dynamically constructed. To better achieve the communicative purposes, respondents would utilize their default identity, the Seller, and construct deviational identities, including the Friend, the Defender, the Servant, the Problem Solver and

Apologist, in different moves and steps through discursive practices like speech act of apology or personalized tokens to respond to negative customer reviews. Moreover, no one-to-one mapping is found between discursive strategies the types of identity construction, which means that one type of identity is simultaneously constructed by more than one discursive practice. In the end, in review responses genre, various pragmatic identity constructions serve to meet the face needs and interactional goals of respondents so as to achieve the purposes of complaints handling and customer relationship management.

Endeavoring to analyze the pragmatic identity construction of cross-border e-commerce retailers, this study expands the research domains of reviews responses genre, which mainly focuses on the hospitality and tourism industry. Furthermore, the integration of move analysis and identity construction innovates in the traditional theoretical framework of pragmatic identity construction, the Adaptation Theory. Besides, this study may help in providing real business English cases for the reference of career training, formulating more specific teaching recommendations on complaint handling and customer relationship management. Moreover, the cross-border e-commerce website AliExpress is taken as the research subject, which may offer some implications for other small and medium-sized enterprises in expanding overseas market.

However, all the sample responses are collected from AliExpress to draw the conclusion, and cultural differences are beyond the scope of the present study. As a result, the findings are mostly applicable to AliExpress, and the generalization calls for larger data from various cross-border e-commerce shopping websites and a comparative study among different languages could be made in the future. Although the corpus contains substantially more one-star reviews than two-star reviews, this distribution reflects the naturally occurring review-response environment on AliExpress, where highly negative reviews are more likely to elicit seller responses. Future research may draw on a more balanced dataset or compare responses across different rating levels to further examine whether the severity of customer dissatisfaction influences sellers' move choices and pragmatic identity construction. In addition, automatic searching such as Python could be employed to expand the data size

and maximize the objectivity for future studies. Lastly, the present study takes retailers' responses as the research subject, ignoring the aspect of reviewers. Hence, future research, if possible, could collect reviewers' attitudes and reactions to respondents' replies, and analyze the effectiveness of constructed identities in problem handling and customer relationship management.

Author Contributions

Data curation, corpus annotation, move-step coding, initial draft writing, and full manuscript revision, H.P.; discourse analysis framework design, identity taxonomy development, data coding cross-check, and critical editing of the analysis sections, C.Z.; literature review compilation, example extraction and translation, and formatting of tables and figures, Y.X.; conceptualization, supervision, theoretical framing (pragmatic identity theory and move analysis), validation of analytical framework, and final approval of the submitted version, W.W. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding

This work received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement

Not applicable, as no human or animal subjects were involved in this study.

Informed Consent Statement

Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement

The data analyzed in this study were derived from publicly accessible user-generated content on the AliExpress platform. While the raw corpus cannot be directly shared due to platform terms of service and ethical restrictions regarding personally identifiable information, the coded dataset and analytical framework are available from the corresponding author upon request.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the School of English for International Business at Guangdong University of Foreign Studies for providing the necessary research facilities and administrative support during the data collection phase. Special thanks are extended to the participants who contributed to the corpus construction for their time and cooperation.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

AI Use Statement

During the preparation of this work, the authors used DeepSeek and Kimi for grammar check and expression. The authors subsequently reviewed and edited the content as necessary and take full responsibility for the final content of the published article.

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