

The mediating role of consumer cynicism in the relationship between psychological contract breach and negative electronic word of mouth (eWOM)

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Abstract

The present study aims to investigate the mediating role of consumer cynicism's in the relationship between psychological contract breach and negative electronic word of mouth. A cross-sectional survey design with a standardised self-administered questionnaire used to collect data from 400 purposively selected consumers with online shopping experience. The Pearson r and the Process Macro regression analysis were used to analyse the data. The results showed that psychological contract breach was positively associated with both consumer cynicism and negative electronic word of mouth (eWOM), while consumer cynicism was positively associated with negative eWOM. The mediation analysis showed that consumer cynicism mediated the relationship between psychological contract breach's and negative eWOM. These findings have implications for organisations to put in measures to minimize errors in order to prevent customers from perceiving PCB during the online shopping process.

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Introduction

Online shopping, which provides the opportunity to shop from anywhere 24/7, may involve undesirable events for the consumer. Some of these negative experiences may include situations where a customer receives a wrong or faulty product, and sometimes not receiving the product at all. Consumers may perceive this as businesses not keeping their promises or not fulfilling their obligations. This perception may cause consumers to adopt negative attitudes towards the business. This phenomenon has been conceptualized as psychological contract breach (PCB) in the literature (Mehmood et al., 2018; Chang & Zhang, 2019). Psychological contract breach (PCB) has generally discussed in organizational behaviour literature (e.g. Robinson & Morrison, 2000; Guo, 2017), and has been examined in a limited number of studies in terms of consumer behaviour (Mehmood et al., 2018; Chang & Zhang, 2019; Liu et al., 2020).

Consumers are increasingly losing trust in brands and businesses, as businesses are only interested in increasing their profits while ignoring workers, consumers and the environment. Referred to as cynicism in the literature, may include the negative effects such as believing that businesses are dishonest and resenting the business or holding a grudge (Helm et al., 2015). Since cynicism is related to the concept of attitude as well as its cognitive, emotional and behavioural dimensions, it is an issue that should be addressed by companies and organizations. However, the concept of cynicism, which has been studied a lot in the field of organizational behaviour, has not been adequately addressed in the field of consumer behaviour (Güven, 2016).

Cynical consumers can boycott companies and brands that they dislike or get angry with or warn others not to buy the company's products (Chylinski & Chu, 2010). Studies have shown that negative information attracts more attention than positive information (Aydın, 2022) and negative comments prevent brand preference (East et al., 2008). Moreover, cynical consumers now share their negative opinions about companies on social media. Negative information shared about the company by dissatisfied customers to warn potential customers in various social networks or to take revenge on the company for not providing the expected service is referred to as negative electronic word of mouth (eWOM) (Tran et al., 2022). Since messages spread faster in the electronic environment and reach a wider audience, eWOM has a greater effect than traditional WOM (Amezcuca & Quintanilla, 2016). For this reason, it can be said that negative eWOM on social networks is more detrimental for companies. Therefore, the negative word of mouth that consumers convey to others about a company with a grudge (consumer cynicism) may form an existential threat for the company. For this reason, it is important to determine the factors that may lead consumers to negative discourse and ultimately cause them to exhibit hostile attitudes towards the company.

This study assumes that the perception of PCB affects negative eWOM behaviour, while consumer cynicism plays a mediating role in this effect. In other words, the study predicted that when consumers think that businesses do not fulfill their promises during

the shopping process (PCB), they adopt cynical attitudes and engage in negative eWOM behaviour. Within this context, the study aims to examine the relationship between PCB, consumer cynicism and negative eWOM. The study is expected to contribute to the literature on marketing and companies. As stated above, the study discusses the concepts of PCB and cynicism, frequently discussed within the context of employees in the field of organizational behaviour, within the context of the consumer. This study is the first to investigate how PCB affects consumer cynicism. The study is also the first to discuss consumer cynicism's mediating role in the relationship between PCB and negative eWOM. To avoid undesirable and negative customer behaviours, businesses must first identify the factors that trigger negative discourse and behaviours among customers. The study findings contribute to businesses by providing information on this subject.

Psychological contract breach (PCB)

Psychological contract was created by Argyris in 1960 when explaining the relationship between workers and employers (Özgen & Özgen, 2010). An employee's beliefs about the mutual obligations between them and their organization form the psychological contract for that employee (Morrison & Robinson, 1997). Although beliefs in mutual obligations create a contract, the two parties do not need to agree to believe that a contract exists. Therefore, a psychological contract is personal (Robinson & Rousseau, 1994). For most organisations, fulfilling the promises made to the employees ensures the organization's success in the competitive environment. Even if these promises are not written, they are a binding element between the employee and the organization and have an effect on the employees' attitudes towards the organization (Kobanoğlu, 2019). Conversely, negative attitudes emerge when employees feel that promises are not being fulfilled. This is explained by PCB, which refers to the feelings of anger and betrayal that the employee mostly feels when they think that the organization is not fulfilling its obligations (Morrison & Robinson, 1997). Within the literature, PCB has been examined in two different dimensions: breach and violation. While the breach dimension is a process of cognitive interpretation, the violation dimension includes emotional reactions (Türküzü & Sazkaya, 2020).

Just as employees may feel anger and dissatisfaction towards organizations that they perceive to be breaching their contracts, consumers may also react emotionally - such as feeling dissatisfaction and anger - when they perceive a breach of their psychological contracts with businesses. Studies show that businesses failing to fulfill their promises or to acting negligently in service provision hurts the consumers' trust (Mehmood et al., 2018) and leads to negative attitudes in consumers (Liu et al., 2020). Chang and Zhang (2019) found in their study that when consumers attribute their service failures to external factors rather than internal factors, they perceive PCB more severely and experience more intense emotions.

The relationship between PCB and consumer cynicism

Consumer cynicism has been defined as the stable and learned attitude of consumers towards the market with the perception that opportunism is widespread among businesses, creating a harmful consumer market (Helm et al., 2015). Consumer cynicism, which can be expressed as the consumers' reaction to the social order created by consumerism, consumers can develop a cynical attitude towards insincere or unfair behaviours of businesses (Aydın, 2022). Consumer cynicism emerges as a result of consumer suspicion and alienation (Chylinski & Chu, 2010). Cynical consumers do not believe that companies provide a fair exchange and believe that companies give more importance to maximizing their profits rather than compensating for service failures (Tran et al., 2022). They ultimately turn to negative attitudes and behaviours towards companies (Göktaş, 2019). Therefore, it is important to reduce cynical attitudes and behaviours in consumers. PCB is an important variable that affects consumer cynicism.

There are no studies that address the relationship between PCB and consumer cynicism in the literature. In the context of organizations, it is suggested that negative emotions and thoughts, such as anger, disappointment, hopelessness, frustration, anxiety, failure, and insecurity, contribute to organizational cynicism. Additionally, it is noted that one of the organizational factors that may influence organizational cynicism is PCB (Kosa, 2019). As a matter of fact, studies in the field of organizational behaviour have revealed that PCB has a positive effect on organizational cynicism (James, 2005; Koçak et al., 2018; Türközü & Sazkaya, 2020). Based on the findings indicating that employees who feel that the organization does not fulfill their promises will be more cynical towards it, the present study predicted that consumers would act more cynically towards businesses that they think do not fulfill their promises. This prediction is also in line with the perspective of social exchange theory.

The social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) involves the exchange of social and psychological resources, which may be abstract or tangible (Göktaş Kulualp & Sarı, 2019). According to social exchange theory, relationships are managed by individuals' perceptions of cost (related to negative exchanges such as those related to time, energy, money) and benefit (related to the positive outcomes of exchange such as satisfaction), and in this respect, social exchange theory helps explain the relationship between the consumer and the seller (Tran et al., 2022). According to the theory, when costs exceed the benefits in a relationship, individuals end the relationship. On the other hand, Blau (1964) argues that individuals will harm those who harm them within the scope of the theory (Gibney et al., 2009). Therefore, in consumer-seller relations, consumers may terminate their relationships with sellers (PCB) who do not fulfill their obligations or keep their promises, or they may turn to negative behaviours such as boycotting and damaging the reputation of the seller. On the basis of the above, it has been hypothesised that:

Hypothesis 1: Psychological contract breach will significantly and positively influence consumer cynicism.

Psychological contract breach and negative eWOM

Consumers sharing their opinions and recommendations about the products and services they use with those around them is considered as a form of word-of-mouth marketing. With the development of information technologies and the internet, these activities have moved to the electronic environment (Türk, 2020). Word-of-mouth communication can be positive or negative, as consumers may share their excitement and happiness, as well as their anger and sadness, with other consumers as a way to feel better psychologically (Karahan, 2020). Studies have revealed that consumers tell their dissatisfaction to 11 people if they tell their satisfaction to 1 person (Kaya, 2015). Moreover, it is suggested that negative eWOM has a stronger impact on purchasing decisions compared to positive eWOM (Chang & Wu, 2014). For this reason, in order to eliminate the negative eWOM that negatively affects companies, it is necessary to first determine the factors that lead consumers to negative eWOM. In this context, the present study predicted that PCB leads consumers to negative eWOM. Because the perception that companies do not fulfill their promises leads consumers to believe that companies are breaching an abstract, assumed contract (Amezcuca & Quintanilla, 2016), and this belief leads to the spread of negative word-of-mouth communication (Bavik et al., 2022). In their study on the subject, Mehmood et al. (2018). focused on consumers who shop online in Pakistan, revealing that PCB has a positive effect on negative eWOM. The following hypothesis was therefore developed:

Hypothesis 2: Psychological contract breach will significantly and positively influence negative eWOM.

Consumer cynicism and negative eWOM

Cynicism is a process in which consumers defend themselves in order to cope when they realize that they are being exploited. This process includes cognitive, emotional, and behavioural responses that are associated with consumers' initial suspicions, defensive attempts, and ultimately their alienation. Defensive consumers generally do not trust marketing claims and may resist marketing-oriented activities and act even more hostile (Chylinski & Chu, 2010). As a result of consumer cynicism, negative WOM emerges in addition to behaviours such as consumers being more careful during purchases, moving away from the brand or even abandoning it and joining consumer boycott groups or sites (Güven, 2016).

Some previous studies have revealed that cynical consumer attitudes negatively affect eWOM intention (Ayyıldız & Baykal, 2021). Similarly, it has also been observed

in the service sector that consumer cynicism has an effect on negative WOM in the service sector (Akçay, 2021). Tran et al. (2022) stated that consumer cynicism increases negative eWOM. Studies stating that negative WOM is an outcome of consumer cynicism indicates that consumers who hold cynical attitudes towards businesses are likely to share those negative attitudes with other consumers. In line with these findings, the following hypothesis was developed:

Hypothesis 3: Consumer cynicism significantly and positively influence negative eWOM.

The mediating role of consumer cynicism

A literature review revealed that there was no previous study examining consumer cynicism's mediating effect in the relationship between PCB and negative eWOM. In the literature on organizational behaviour, several studies have investigated the mediating effect of cynicism on the relationship between PCB and negative employee behaviours (Koçak et al., 2018; Kobanoğlu & Erdoğan, 2022). Similarly, other studies have examined consumer cynicism as a mediating variable, with negative eWOM as the dependent variable, resulting in the development of a mediating hypothesis. Within this scope, Tran et al. (2022) found that consumer cynicism mediates double deviation's effect (faulty service delivery and subsequent failure to compensate for the service failure) on negative eWOM. The study's findings revealed that double deviation increases consumer cynicism, which in turn increases negative eWOM. Based on these explanations and findings, the present study predicted that PCB increases cynicism, leading to negative eWOM. In other words, the study assumed consumer cynicism to have a mediating effect on the relationship between PCB and negative eWOM. The following hypothesis was developed accordingly. The hypothesised model for the study is shown in Figure 1.

Hypothesis 4: Consumer cynicism has a mediating role on PCB's effect on negative eWOM.

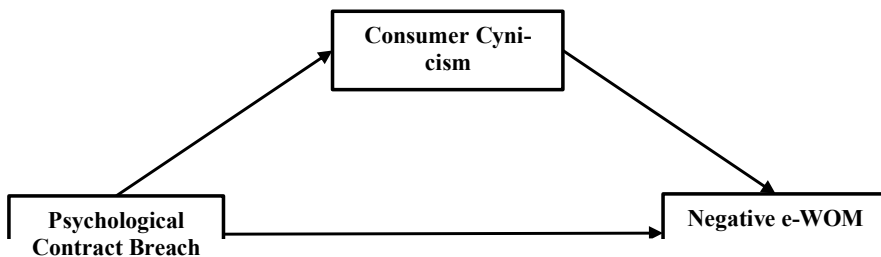


Figure 2: Hypothesised model for the study

Methods

Research design and procedure

We employed a quantitative research approach for this study as it allows the researchers to examine relationship among variable. We there used a correlational research design to examine relationships. This design allows us to provide explanation to our hypothesized relationships with no attempt at drawing cause-effect relationship. We sent an online link to participants who have experience with online shopping through social media. Those who accept the invitation, opened up the link that and accepted to participate in the study. It takes approximately seven minutes for participants to complete the online survey; and data was collected within three weeks.

Sample and sampling approach

The population consists of consumers over the age of 18 who have an online shopping experience. Participants were asked to answer the questions by thinking about “the last online retailer they shopped from”. Altunışık et al. (2007) stated that the minimum sample size should be 384 according to the calculation made when the number of the main mass is unknown (Aksu Armağan & Gürsoy, 2011). Therefore, in order to guarantee the minimum sample size, it was aimed to reach 500 people. Out of the 500 individuals who were approached using the convenience sampling method, 442 responded, and of those, 400 were deemed usable for the study. An analysis of the participants’ demographic data revealed that 59% were female, 49% were between the ages of 18-26, and 73% had completed associate or undergraduate degrees.

Measures

Psychological contract breach: The scale developed by Liu et al. (2020) was used to measure psychological contract breach. A sample item includes, “I feel betrayed by the brand”. Participants answered the questions using a 5-point Likert response style, with responses ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. A Cronbach alpha value of 0.899 was found in this study.

Consumer cynicism: We used an 8-item scale to measure consumer cynicism (Helm et al., 2015).

A sample item includes, “Most businesses are more interested in making profits than in serving consumers”. Participants answered the questions using a 5-point Likert response style, with responses ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. Results of reliability analysis showed that the scale was appropriate for statistical analysis ($\alpha = .941$).

Negative eWOM: We used a 3-item scale to measure negative eWOM (Chiosan & Anastasiei, 2017). A sample item includes, “I would write negative things online about ROM in social media”. Participants answered the questions using a 5-point Likert

response style, with responses ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. Results of reliability analysis showed that the scale was appropriate for statistical analysis ($\alpha = .899$).

Data analyses

The data was analyzed using the SPSS 25, Amos 18 and Process Macro programs. The data were first examined for normal distribution, and it was determined that there was normal distribution since the skewness-kurtosis values (PCB = 1.139 and .497; Consumer Cynicism = .280 and -.820; Negative eWOM = .482 and -1.033) were between -2 and +2 (George & Mallery, 2016). A confirmatory factor analysis was carried out. The analysis findings revealed that the factor loads of the scale items ranged from 0.756 to 0.931. The findings of the model fit index for the scales are presented in Table 1. It was noticed from these fit indices that the research model (measurement model) had better fit than the other models. Furthermore, The AVE values for the study scales were found to be higher than 0.50. Therefore, scale validity was ensured. To examine the mediating role of consumer cynicism’s in the relationship between perceived PCB’s and negative eWOM, a regression analysis was conducted utilizing the bootstrap method. The analysis was performed using Process Macro developed by Hayes (2018). The analysis included 5000 resampling and the bootstrap technique.

Table 1: Model fit values of scales used in the study

Indexes	Reference Value	Research Model	WOM+ PCV, CC	WOM, PCV+CC	PCV, CC+- WOM	One Factor PCV+CC+WOM
CMIN/DF	$0 < \chi^2/sd \leq 5$	3.124	9.109	7.763	8.395	12.588
RMR	$\leq .1$	.075	.113	.100	.123	.137
CFI	$> .90$	.968	.873	.894	.885	.817
GFI	$> .90$	.925	.773	.800	.797	.714
IFI	$> .90$	.968	.874	.895	.885	.817
TLI	$> .90$	.959	.842	.868	.856	.774
NFI	$> .90$	.953	.860	.881	.871	.805
RMSEA	≤ 0.8	.73	.143	.130	.136	.170

Results

Relationship among variables

The relationship among the variables (i.e. PCB, consumer cynicism, and negative eWOM) are presented in Table 2. The results showed that there is a positive relationship between PCB and consumer cynicism ($r = 0.682, p < 0.01$) as well as negative relationship between PCB and eWOM ($r = 0.586, p < 0.01$). On the other hand, there is a positive relationship between consumer cynicism and negative eWOM ($r = 0.671, p < 0.01$).

Table 2: Variable Correlation Analysis

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	AVE	CR
1- Psychological contract breach	2.02	1.088	1			0.750	0.900
2- Consumer cynicism	2.65	1.102	.682**	1		0.663	0.940
3- Negative e-WOM	2.49	1.295	.586**	.671**	1	0.759	0.904

Mediation analysis

Upon examining Figure 2, it is seen that PCB has a significant and positive effect on consumer cynicism ($b = .691, 95\% \text{ CI } [.6178, .7638]$) and negative eWOM ($b = .285, 95\% \text{ CI } [.1694, .4008]$). Also, consumer cynicism’s effect on negative eWOM ($b = .597, 95\% \text{ CI } [.4826, .7110]$) was also found to be significant and positive. These findings support hypotheses H1, H2 and H3. We further found that PCB has both a direct effect ($b = .285, 95\% \text{ CI } [.1694, .4008]$) and an indirect effect ($b = .412, 95\% \text{ CI } [.3193, .5020]$) on negative eWOM. It is for this reason why consumer cynicism mediates the effect, supporting hypothesis 4.

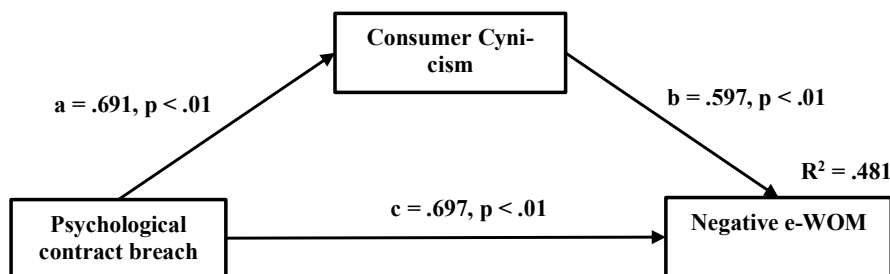


Figure 2: Consumer cynicism’s mediating the PCB and Negative eWOM relationship

Discussion

As a result of the analysis, it was found that PCB positively affects consumer cynicism. Therefore, H1 hypothesis is accepted. It is stated that when businesses do not keep their promises, negative attitudes are formed in consumers (Liu et al., 2020) and consumer trust is damaged (Mehmood et al., 2018). In this respect, it can be said that this finding supports the literature. The results of the research revealed that PCB also positively affects negative eWOM, and thus H2 hypothesis is supported. This finding is in line with the findings of Mehmood et al. (2018). Another finding of the research is that consumer cynicism positively affects negative eWOM. Therefore, the third hypothesis of the study is also accepted. This finding coincides with the findings in the literature

(Güven, 2016; Akçay, 2021; Tran et al., 2022). On the other hand, there were studies in the organizational behaviour literature (Koçak et al., 2018; Sezgin & Uçar, 2021; Kobanoğlu & Erdoğan, 2022) showing that cynicism has a mediating effect on the effect of PCB on negative employee behaviours. A similar result was obtained for the consumer behaviour literature. In other words, the research results have shown that consumer cynicism mediates the effect of PCB on negative eWOM. This shows that hypothesis H4 is supported.

Theoretical and practical implications

The research findings have important theoretical and practical implications for both the literature and the relevant sector. One of the main contributions of the study is that it examines PCB in the context of the consumer. Previous research on PCB has primarily focused on organizational behaviour (Robinson & Morrison, 2000; Guo, 2017), while its examination in the context of consumer behaviour has been limited (Mehmood et al., 2018; Chang & Zhang, 2019; Liu et al., 2020). However, PCB is a concept that is particularly relevant to the field of marketing because it can reduce customer trust and satisfaction with a company (Liu et al., 2020) and has been shown to play a destructive role in online shopping (Mehmood et al., 2018). Therefore, this study contributes to the existing literature by exploring the customer's perspective on PCB and examining this concept in the context of online shopping. First, this study findings showed PCB's positive effect on consumer cynicism; and that consumer cynicism acts as a mediator in the relationship between PCB and negative electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). These aspects are among this study's contributions to the literature. Secondly, the study also supports social exchange theory. According to social exchange theory, which involves the exchange of social and psychological resources between parties (Göktaş Kulualp & Sarı, 2019), individuals are likely to retaliate against those who have harmed them (Gibney et al., 2009). The present study found that consumers developed cynical attitudes towards online sellers who failed to fulfill their obligations and keep their promises (PCB). As a result, they tended to leave negative comments about the seller on social media sites. Therefore, the study supports social exchange theory. The findings of the study also offer several practical implications for online shopping sites operating on unstable ground. Although online shopping is comfortable for the consumer, it involves more risks than shopping in physical stores (Malhotra et al., 2017). For this reason, it can be said that online shopping is more open to the perception of contract breach. Studies have shown that when customers encounter service failures in online shopping, they perceive it as a psychological contract breach and may engage in negative behaviours as a result (Chang & Zhang, 2019). This study showed that cynicism and negative eWOM are among these negative behaviours. Therefore, companies will need to contend with cynical consumers on social media sites if they cannot prevent the perception of PCB. Furthermore, while cynical consumers pose a threat to businesses, it can be argued that cynical consumers

who band together in the virtual environment and post negative comments about companies may constitute an even bigger threat. Because messages spread much faster and reach wider audiences in the virtual environment (Amezcuca & Quintanilla, 2016). Therefore, companies should take measures to minimize errors in order to prevent customers from perceiving PCB during the online shopping process. Additionally, they should avoid making promises to customers that they cannot keep, especially in regard to delivery times. Product information and images should be truthful and not create a sense of inconsistency in consumers. If consumers perceive a difference between the product they ordered and the one they received, they may perceive a breach in the psychological contract that they established with the seller.

Notwithstanding these aforementioned contributions, the study also has certain limitations. One limitation is that the results cannot be generalized since the research data were collected only from consumers in Turkey with online shopping experience. Therefore, future studies may be recommended to encompass different cultures, involving consumers from various countries. It was noted in the study that PCB and cynicism have not been adequately explored in the field of marketing. Hence, future studies may investigate the precursors and outcomes of PCB and consumer cynicism to make valuable contributions to the literature. Another limitation is that the study only examines cynicism's mediating role in the relationship between PCB and negative electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). Future studies may expand the research model to include personality's mediating role.

Conclusion

This study represent an attempt to examine the mediating role of consumer cynicism's in the relationship between PCB'S and negative eWOM. Our findings showed that that PCB has a positive effect on both consumer cynicism and negative eWOM, while consumer cynicism has a positive effect on negative eWOM. Alongside its direct effects, the analyses also revealed that consumer cynicism has a mediating role (indirect effect) in PCB's effect on negative eWOM. These findings shows that cynicism and negative eWOM are among these negative behaviours that companies will need to contend with as cynical consumers on social media sites if they cannot prevent the perception of PCB. Thus, organisations to put in measures to minimize errors in order to prevent customers from perceiving PCB during the online shopping process.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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