THE ASIAN BULLETIN OF GREEN MANAGEMENT AND CIRCULAR ECONOMY
Vol 5, Issue 2(2025)
THE ASIAN BULLETIN OF GREEN MANAGEMENT AND CIRCULAR ECONOMY
ISSN (online): 2959-0035
http://abgmce.com/ 10.62019/abgmce.v5i2.159
ISSN (Print): 2959-0027

The Role Of Consumer Distress In Driving Brand Sabotage: An Empirical Study Of Brand Experience, Reputation, And Relationship Quality In Pakistan

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Chronicle

Article history

Received: July 23, 2025
Received in the revised format: Aug 13, 2025
Accepted: sept 21, 2025
Available online: Oct 29, 2025

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Abstract

In recent years, brands have increasingly encountered a novel and detrimental form of consumer behavior characterized by deliberate hostility aimed at damaging brand equity. The present research aims to explore the interrelationships among brand experience, brand reputation, and brand relationship quality in relation to consumer brand sabotage, with a particular focus on the mediating role of consumer distresss. Drawing on the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework, the research investigates how these brand-related constructs influence consumer behavior within the context of Pakistan's railway sector. Data were collected using a systematic intercept survey at major railway stations and analyzed through Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). Findings reveal that both brand experience and brand reputation significantly contribute to the formation of consumer distresss, which in turn, are significantly associated with consumer brand sabotage. Conversely, brand relationship quality demonstrated no significant impact on either consumer distresss or sabotage behavior. The study concludes by outlining theoretical insights, practical implications for brand management, and methodological contributions, while also acknowledging research limitations and proposing directions for future inquiry.

Keywords: Consumer Distress, Brand Sabotage Brand Experience, Reputation.
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INTRODUCTION

Consumer Brand Sabotage (CBS) emerges as a retaliatory response to ongoing service shortcomings, unfair treatment, and unfriendly service environments (Daskin & Kasim, 2016; Zhang & Zhang, 2021). Under such adverse conditions, consumers may deliberately violate organizational norms, policies, and social expectations as a form of protest against unsatisfactory service encounters. Tronvoll (2010) emphasizes that disgruntled customers may engage in sabotage behaviors capable of undermining a firm's reputation through negative word-of-mouth or, in more extreme cases, through legal action. CBS is conceptually related to constructs such as brand hatred (Japutra et al., 2021; Kucuk, 2019), consumer revenge (Grégoire et al., 2018), and negative word-of-mouth (Garcia et al., 2019). However, CBS is distinct in its overtly antagonistic and often premeditated nature. Unlike general consumer dissatisfaction or acts of revenge—which are often reactive—CBS entails proactive hostility with the explicit goal of harming the brand. As such, its potential consequences are more damaging. For instance, the widely publicized "United Breaks Guitars" video reportedly cost United Airlines over $180 million in brand damage (Nyffenegger et al., 2018). Similarly, the viral #FitchTheHomeless campaign contributed to the dismissal of Abercrombie & Fitch's CEO and a significant drop in the company's stock value (Peterson, 2014; Trefis Team, 2014). Despite its potential to inflict significant harm, CBS remains relatively underexplored in marketing scholarship. Most prior studies have concentrated on employee-driven sabotage (Harris & Ogbonna, 2006, 2009; Hwang et al., 2021; Wallace & Chernatony, 2009; Yeh, 2015), even though such behaviors arguably exert a more limited impact on brand equity compared to consumer-initiated sabotage. Gursoy et al. (2017) emphasize the need for further investigation into CBS, particularly within service sectors where consumer dissatisfaction is more pronounced. This research addresses the manifestation of CBS within Pakistan's railway system—a context where consumer hostility has been documented in the form of protests and disruptions ("Protests cause suspension, delays in rail services," 2018). According to Khan (2018), the Pakistani railway system has consistently failed to meet consumer expectations, triggering widespread negative reactions. These behaviors not only disrupt current services but also deter prospective passengers, compounding the sector's challenges.

Although prior research has identified various antecedents of CBS—such as failed service recovery, revenge motives, emotional exhaustion, verbal aggression, and dysfunctional behavior (Daskin & Kasim, 2016; Harris & Reynold, 2004; Yeh, 2016)—there remains little consensus on the specific drivers of consumer sabotage. Recent studies suggest that brand experience, brand reputation, and brand relationship quality may influence consumer emotions and behavioral intentions (Brakus et al., 2009; Khatoon & Rhema, 2021; Ma, 2020), yet these constructs have received limited empirical attention, particularly within the railway transport sector in developing economies such as Pakistan.

Consequently, this study seeks to address these gaps by investigating the role of brand experience, brand reputation, and brand relationship quality in influencing consumer distresss and consumer brand sabotage. It does so through the theoretical lens of the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model, integrating these variables into a framework that reflects the psychological processes underlying consumer retaliatory behavior. The primary aim of this study is to investigate the influence of brand-related factors on consumer sabotage behavior within the context of Pakistan's railway sector. Specifically, the study examines how brand experience, brand reputation, and brand relationship quality contribute to the development of consumer distresss, and how these emotions subsequently influence consumer brand sabotage. Accordingly, the research objectives are as follows:

- To analyze the relationship between brand experience and consumers' consumer distresss.
- To investigate the influence of brand reputation on consumer distressal responses among consumers.
- To assess the effect of brand relationship quality on the emergence of consumer distresss.
- To determine the relationship between consumer distresss and consumer brand sabotage behavior.
- To examine the mediating role of consumer distresss in the relationship between brand experience, brand reputation, brand relationship quality, and consumer brand sabotage.

SCOPE OF THE STUDY

This study focuses on examining consumer brand sabotage behavior within Pakistan's railway transportation sector. As a significant contributor to national GDP, the railway sector is currently facing operational inefficiencies, declining consumer satisfaction, and loss of market share. Notably, reports indicate a high prevalence of consumer sabotage behavior within this sector (Kang & Gong, 2019). Service disruptions—such as train delays and cancellations—have triggered consumer dissatisfaction, often resulting in protests and retaliatory behaviors that damage the brand image of Pakistan Railways ("Passengers protest non-restoration of rail traffic," 2018).

The research specifically targets inter-city passengers utilizing Pakistan Railways services. The behaviors of these consumers are crucial, as they not only affect the brand directly but also influence the perceptions and experiences of other passengers. Escalating dissatisfaction has led to a substantial shift of consumers toward alternative transportation modes, contributing to reduced customer retention and a decline in potential market expansion.

This study aims to explore the psychological and behavioral processes underpinning such sabotage behavior, with a particular emphasis on how branding practices influence consumer emotions. By integrating the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model, the research conceptualizes branding elements (brand experience, reputation, and relationship quality) as external stimuli, consumer distresss as the organismic state, and sabotage behavior as the consumer's behavioral response.

The study underscores the emotional, rather than purely cognitive, processes that drive consumer responses to branding stimuli. It emphasizes that consumers may not always act rationally; rather, their behaviors are often shaped by emotive evaluations that stem from environmental triggers. Consequently, this investigation positions consumer distresss as a key mediating factor linking brand-related stimuli to consumer brand sabotage. The study is therefore situated within the behavioral branding literature, with a specific focus on consumer aggression and retaliation in the Pakistani railway context.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study offers both theoretical and practical contributions, particularly in the domains of branding and consumer behavior within service sectors. The investigation is underpinned by the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) theoretical framework (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974; Jang & Namkung, 2009), which enables a structured understanding of how branding stimuli influence consumer emotional responses and subsequent behavioral outcomes. By integrating this model, the study provides new theoretical insights into the mediating role of consumer distresss in the relationship between brand experience, brand reputation, brand relationship quality, and consumer brand sabotage (CBS).

From a theoretical standpoint, this research fills notable gaps in the literature by highlighting the underexplored connection between branding practices and consumer retaliation behavior in the context of railway transportation—a sector largely overlooked in prior studies, particularly in developing countries such as Pakistan. Most existing studies have emphasized positive consumer emotions and responses, whereas this research extends the discourse by incorporating the influence of consumer distresss on consumer sabotage behavior. Practically, the study provides actionable insights for service managers and policymakers, especially those operating within the railway sector. It identifies key antecedents of negative consumer emotions and their behavioral consequences, enabling service providers to develop more effective branding and customer relationship strategies. The findings suggest that enhancing brand experience and brand reputation can mitigate consumer sabotage behavior by reducing consumer distressal responses. In contrast, the limited role of brand relationship quality in this context suggests the need for a re-evaluation of current relational marketing practices within Pakistan Railways.

Moreover, the study has significant implications for customer retention, market share preservation, and service improvement. Sabotage behaviors not only harm brand reputation but also deter prospective consumers and exacerbate operational challenges. By understanding and addressing the emotional triggers of such behavior, railway authorities can reduce customer attrition, improve public perception,

LITERATURE REVIEW

Consumer Brand Sabotage

The term "sabotage" originates from the French practice during labor unrest, where workers disrupted operations by throwing wooden shoes (sabots) into machinery (Analoui, 1995). In a marketing context, consumer brand sabotage (CBS) refers to intentional, hostile acts by consumers aimed at damaging a brand's image, equity, or operational integrity (Kähr et al., 2016). It is a deliberate form of consumer misbehavior driven by consumer distresss and dissatisfaction with brand-related experiences.

CBS involves well-thought-out actions where consumers expend effort to alter public perception of a brand, often by sharing adverse experiences with others (Nyyffenegger et al., 2018). Unlike general dissatisfaction, CBS is marked by its aggressive intent and strategic execution—ranging from negative word-of-mouth to public campaigns aimed at discrediting the brand. While much of the extant literature has focused on employee sabotage (Wallace & De Chernatony, 2007), consumer-driven sabotage remains underexplored. In contemporary marketing, CBS is increasingly recognized as a potent threat, wherein consumers intentionally harm a brand by influencing the attitudes and beliefs of others through digital and offline platforms (Kähr et al., 2016).

Sabotage behaviors may be enacted both online (e.g., negative reviews, viral videos) and offline (e.g., in-store protests, boycotts), and their impact is amplified in the digital age. For instance, viral campaigns such as "United Breaks Guitars" or #FitchTheHomeless highlight how individual consumers can inflict substantial damage on brand reputation and financial performance (Nyffenegger et al., 2018; Peterson, 2014). What distinguishes CBS from other negative consumer behaviors—such as complaints or brand aversion—is its proactive and often emotionally charged nature. Rather than seeking resolution or restitution, saboteurs aim to retaliate and influence others' perceptions. As Kucuk (2019) notes, negative brand associations may be more influential than positive ones in shaping consumer decisions and brand loyalty.

Digital technologies have further empowered consumers to engage in sabotage, making it essential for marketers and brand managers to understand the underlying emotional and experiential drivers of such behavior. Thus, CBS represents a critical area of inquiry within consumer behavior and brand management research. The marketing literature emphasizes the importance of preventing recurrent consumer brand sabotage (CBS) to safeguard brands' financial viability. One effective strategy is to motivate employees to adhere to established brand management systems and codes of conduct (Harris & Ogbonna, 2009). Despite this, a significant research gap remains, particularly in understanding the underlying motivations driving consumers to engage in sabotage. Limited empirical investigations have explored consumer sabotage behavior and the role of customer satisfaction and loyalty in mitigating such actions (Gremler & Gwinner, 2000). The problem becomes more pronounced when service saboteurs—consumers who channel their aggression and frustration toward service employees—are identified as a key threat (Harris & Ogbonna, 2009). Within the service sector, CBS has been linked to substantial financial losses (Chen, Lei, & Hao, 2015). Given this context, reducing consumer sabotage behavior should be a strategic priority for service organizations. Harris and Ogbonna (2009) reported that service negligence in the 1990s resulted in financial losses exceeding USD 800,000. Their earlier research (Harris & Ogbonna, 2002) established a clear association between consumer sabotage, service productivity, profitability, and organizational growth. They found that such sabotage reduces operational efficiency and diminishes brand performance. Giacalone and Rosenfeld (1987) conceptualized sabotage as any detrimental behavior that disrupts production or causes harm to an organization or its brand. These findings underscore the importance of consumer care as a critical component of brand profitability.

Extant literature in the field of management indicates that when service providers fail to meet customer expectations, not only does this negatively impact customer loyalty—often rooted in mismatched expectations and perceptions—but it also erodes trust between the brand and its consumers, ultimately leading to financial and operational disruptions (Harris & Ogbonna, 2006; 2009). Scholars have also identified several antecedents of consumer sabotage, including mistreatment by service personnel (Wang et al., 2011), consumer-induced stressors (Kao et al., 2014), and consumer distressal states among employees (Chi et al., 2015).

To counteract these effects, researchers have recommended enhancing service brand behavior and improving employee-customer interactions to elevate service quality and fulfill customer expectations (Wallace et al., 2009). Evidence suggests that customers are willing to incur higher costs when they receive satisfactory treatment and high service quality. However, brand failures, including poor service and mistreatment of customers, can provoke consumer anger, potentially triggering sabotage behavior (Chernatony et al., 2003).

Consumer sabotage has far-reaching implications, including damage to the company's reputation and brand image, particularly among prospective customers (Daunt & Harris, 2014). Chowdhury and Gurtler (2015) define consumer sabotage as any costly behavior by a consumer that negatively affects another consumer's experience. Given the accelerated pace of information dissemination, once a brand's image is tarnished in the eyes of one consumer, it can quickly influence a broader audience (Douglas et al., 2015). Social media platforms have become prevalent venues for such sabotage (Hailat, 2016), where dissatisfied consumers post negative reviews, thereby damaging the brand's image. These actions often manifest through critical comments or discussions in online forums (Hagel & Armstrong, 1997).

The behavior of frontline employees remains a critical factor influencing customer perceptions. Negative service experiences are often the catalyst for consumer sabotage (Sergeant & Frenkel, 2000). Harris and Ogbonna (2002) define sabotage as any deviant act by consumers or employees intended to disrupt functional service encounters. Typical manifestations include delaying service, expressing hostility, embarrassing or mocking customers, arguing, or overcharging. Notably, Harris and Ogbonna (2002, 2009) found service sabotage to be pervasive in the hospitality industry—over 85% of customer-facing employees admitted to engaging in sabotage during the week preceding the survey, with daily incidents being commonplace.

These actions detrimentally influence customer evaluations, undermine satisfaction and loyalty, and can significantly harm a firm's profitability, growth, and even survival (Anderson & Fornell, 2000; Harris & Ogbonna, 2006; Analoui & Kakabadse, 1992). Unlike industrial sabotage, which generally targets an organization or coworkers, service sabotage is customer-directed and deliberately intended to degrade the service experience (Lee & Ok, 2014). These actions are distinguishable from unintentional service errors, which often result from carelessness, inexperience, or excessive workload (Harris & Ogbonna, 2009). Examples include intentional mistreatment, unjustified delays, emotional hostility, intentional neglect, public embarrassment, retaliation, and fraudulent pricing (Anderson & Fornell, 2000; Harris & Ogbonna, 2006; Lee & Ok, 2014). Such behaviors undermine not only individual service encounters but also overall customer satisfaction, loyalty, and the brand's long-term financial health.

The term "sabotage" originates from the French word sabots, wooden clogs that workers allegedly threw into machinery during the industrial revolution to halt production. While employee sabotage has been widely examined in management research (Analoui, 1995), marketing scholarship has traditionally framed brand saboteurs as internal actors—employees who actively undermine the brand (Wallace & de Chernatony, 2007). However, this narrow conceptualization overlooks the potential for external actors, particularly consumers, to inflict comparable harm. This study adopts an external perspective on CBS, defining it as a deliberate act by customers or non-customers aimed at damaging a brand by negatively influencing brand-related associations held by others.

CBS consists of five key characteristics. First, it is a conscious and intentional act, distinct from impulsive or automatic reactions (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Anderson & Bushman, 2002). Second, CBS requires an overt behavior—mere intentions or preparatory acts without execution (e.g., creating a sabotage video without publishing it) do not constitute CBS (Warner, 1941). CBS behaviors vary in scale and format, occurring both locally and globally, either sporadically or systematically, and may involve online, offline, or hybrid modalities (van Doorn et al., 2010). Crucially, the dominant motive must be to inflict harm on the brand.

Third, CBS can be perpetrated by both consumers and non-consumers. For instance, the backlash against Abercrombie & Fitch followed controversial comments by the CEO, prompting non-customers to engage in viral sabotage campaigns (Denizet-Lewis, 2006; Karber, 2013). Such efforts can be initiated by individuals or collectives, as seen in anti-brand graffiti campaigns targeting BP following its oil spill disaster (Flickr, 2010). Fourth, the principal aim of CBS is to damage the brand. This aligns with the concept of hostile aggression in social psychology, where the primary goal is to cause harm (Anderson & Bushman, 2002; Baron & Richardson, 1994).

Brands, being valuable and vulnerable corporate assets, become prime targets for consumer hostility (Lefevre, 2001). Finally, CBS seeks to undermine a brand by distorting brand-related associations in the minds of other consumers. Since the core value of a brand lies in these consumer associations (Keller, 1993), targeting them is an effective method of brand sabotage.

Evolution and Application of the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) Theory

The Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) theory, initially conceptualized by Mehrabian and Russell (1974), provides a foundational framework for understanding how external stimuli influence individuals' internal states and subsequent behavioral responses. This theoretical model posits that environmental stimuli (S) affect the cognitive and emotional states of individuals (O), which in turn elicit specific behavioral responses (R). The model has been extensively applied across various disciplines, including psychology, retail, marketing, and consumer behavior, to explain the mechanisms through which stimuli evoke emotional and behavioral outcomes. In consumer research, the S-O-R model facilitates a nuanced understanding of how branding elements—such as product features, service quality, or environmental cues—serve as stimuli that shape consumers' internal evaluations. These internal evaluations, encompassing emotional reactions, cognitive processing, and psychological states, ultimately influence consumers' behavioral intentions and actions (Bagozzi, 1986).

Arora (1982) further categorizes stimuli into two distinct types: objective stimuli (e.g., product characteristics, service quality, pricing) and social-psychological stimuli (e.g., brand image, interpersonal interactions, or contextual influences). The organism, as the mediating component, includes affective and cognitive processes such as feelings, perceptions, or evaluations. This internal processing determines the nature of the behavioral response, which may manifest as purchase decisions, brand loyalty, avoidance, or, in adverse scenarios, brand sabotage.

In the current study, the S-O-R model is employed to conceptualize the relationship between branding practices and consumer sabotage behavior. Specifically, brand experience, brand reputation, and brand relationship quality are positioned as the external stimuli. Consumer distress function as the organismic response, mediating the impact of these stimuli on the final behavioral outcome—consumer brand sabotage. Jang and Namkung (2009) emphasize that emotional states significantly mediate the influence of environmental stimuli on consumer behavior, supporting the application of the S-O-R model in contexts where emotions play a pivotal role. The current study builds upon this foundation by focusing on consumer distressal responses, which are often underexplored in consumer research compared to their positive counterparts.

Graa and Dani-Elkebir (2012) and Sherman et al. (1997) argue that emotional reactions—whether aroused by dissatisfaction, frustration, or betrayal—can significantly affect consumer behavior. These emotions are often subconscious yet powerful enough to drive adverse actions such as brand switching, negative word-of-mouth, or sabotage. Therefore, the present study adopts the S-O-R model to elucidate how negative consumer emotions, triggered by perceived deficiencies in brand experience, reputation, or relational quality, result in brand-directed sabotage behavior. By integrating emotional processes into the analysis, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of consumer decision-making, particularly in high-involvement service sectors like railway transportation. The emphasis on emotional mediation allows for the recognition that consumers are not purely rational actors; rather, their behaviors are often shaped by affective evaluations, especially when service expectations are unmet.

Brand Experience

Brand experience encompasses the internal, subjective responses that consumers have when interacting with brand-related stimuli. These responses include emotional, cognitive, sensory, and behavioral reactions that occur during direct or indirect brand encounters (Brakus et al., 2009). In marketing literature, brand experience has been widely acknowledged as a critical determinant of consumer engagement, satisfaction, and loyalty. It serves not only as a differentiating factor in competitive markets but also as a foundational element in establishing long-term consumer-brand relationships (Keller & Lehmann, 2006; Khan & Rahman, 2016).

According to Murphy (1988), brand experience is shaped through a combination of promotional efforts, packaging, advertising, and overall brand presentation. Brakus et al. (2009) further conceptualize it as a multidimensional construct comprising sensory, affective, intellectual, and behavioral components. These components interact dynamically to influence how consumers perceive and relate to a brand. Positive brand experiences often lead to emotional attachment, repeat purchases, and brand advocacy, whereas negative experiences may provoke dissatisfaction, brand avoidance, or retaliatory behaviors.

Brand experience also plays a vital role in eliciting emotional responses. Aaker (2015) notes that emotionally resonant experiences foster deeper psychological engagement and are more likely to influence consumer attitudes and actions. As such, experiential branding strategies aim to go beyond functional benefits to stimulate emotional and symbolic value. In service industries, particularly those characterized by frequent and prolonged consumer contact, such as transportation, brand experience assumes heightened importance. The quality of interactions at various service touchpoints—from ticket purchasing to onboard services—significantly shapes the overall brand perception. Iglesias et al. (2011) argue that brand experience is pivotal for cultivating strong consumer-brand relationships in the service sector, where intangible elements heavily influence consumer evaluations.

In the context of the current study, brand experience is treated as a stimulus that has the potential to evoke both positive and consumer distresss. The literature suggests that while favorable brand experiences promote trust and loyalty (Murwatiningsih & Apriliani, 2013), unfavorable experiences can trigger adverse emotional responses such as anger, frustration, or resentment (Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2007; Zarantonello et al., 2016). These consumer distressal reactions may, in turn, lead to harmful consumer behaviors, including brand sabotage. Given the deteriorating quality of services in Pakistan's railway sector, consumers' experiences are often negative, resulting in emotional discontent and behavioral backlash. Therefore, analyzing brand experience as a key antecedent of consumer distress is essential for understanding its influence on consumer brand sabotage in this context.

Brand Reputation

Brand reputation refers to the collective perception and evaluation of a brand's credibility, reliability, and performance over time as held by consumers and other stakeholders. It reflects a brand's ability to meet or exceed expectations and is shaped by cumulative brand interactions, marketing communications, and product or service performance (Fombrun, 1996). In marketing literature, brand reputation is recognized as a strategic intangible asset that significantly influences consumer attitudes, trust, and loyalty (Lau & Lee, 1999). A favorable reputation enhances consumer confidence, reduces perceived risk, and increases brand attractiveness, often translating into higher sales and market competitiveness (Keller, 1993). Strong brand reputations reduce consumers' price sensitivity, foster resilience against negative publicity, and contribute to long-term brand equity (Supriyatno & Handyani, 2019).

Conversely, reputational damage may evoke distrust, consumer distresss, and adverse behavioral outcomes, such as switching behavior or consumer sabotage (Ma, 2018). Brand reputation is not built overnight; it is a long-term outcome of consistent performance and value delivery. Herbig and Milewicz (1993) assert that consumers associate reputable brands with quality and safety, especially in serviceoriented sectors. When expectations are consistently met, consumers are more likely to maintain long-term relationships with the brand (Morgan, Thomas, & Veloutsou, 2013). From a consumer perspective, brand reputation influences emotional responses. Positive brand reputations are linked with feelings of assurance and satisfaction, while negative reputations can trigger emotions such as anger, disappointment, or betrayal (Su et al., 2014). These emotional responses can, in turn, motivate consumers to engage in behaviors that either support or harm the brand (Ma, 2018).

In the context of Pakistan Railways, repeated service failures—including accidents, substandard food, and lack of punctuality—have eroded consumer trust and damaged the brand's reputation (Ali, 2016; Siddiqui, 2015). As a result, consumers often experience heightened consumer distresss and become disinclined to continue their association with the service. The degradation of brand reputation in this context not only impacts current user sentiment but also discourages prospective passengers from choosing the railway as a viable mode of transport.

Despite its critical role, the literature presents mixed findings on the specific effects of brand reputation. Some studies highlight its positive influence on consumer attitudes (González-Rodríguez et al., 2019; Nguyen et al., 2021), while others emphasize that negative reputation disproportionately impacts consumer evaluations compared to positive perceptions (Jung & Seock, 2016). Furthermore, limited research has investigated brand reputation within the railway sector, particularly in developing economies such as Pakistan—underscoring the need for deeper inquiry into its role as a precursor to negative consumer emotions and sabotage behavior.

Brand Relationship Quality

Brand relationship quality (BRQ) refers to the overall strength and depth of the relationship between a brand and its consumers, typically reflected through dimensions such as trust, satisfaction, commitment, and emotional attachment (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). It encapsulates the consumer's evaluation of how well the brand fulfills relational expectations over time, contributing to relational stability, brand loyalty, and repeated patronage (Jarvelin & Lehtinen, 1996).

Within marketing scholarship, BRQ has emerged as a critical construct in understanding long-term brand success, especially in service sectors where repeated consumer-brand interactions shape perceptions and loyalty. High-quality brand relationships are typically characterized by consumer trust in the brand's promises, satisfaction with previous engagements, and a sense of emotional or symbolic attachment (Jain et al., 2018; Lishan, Wenxuan, & Yinmei, 2014).

When consumers perceive the relationship as fulfilling and consistent with their personal and functional needs, they are more likely to continue engaging with the brand and resist switching, even in competitive environments (Aaker, 1991; Bowden, 2009). Conversely, when the perceived quality of the relationship declines—due to service failure, broken promises, or neglect—consumers may experience consumer distresss, including frustration and resentment, which can escalate into retaliatory behaviors such as brand sabotage (Romani et al., 2012; Kahr et al., 2016). Relationship quality is typically evaluated through constructs such as trust, satisfaction, and commitment (Crosby, Evans, & Cowles, 1990; Dorsch et al., 1998). These elements jointly influence consumer perceptions of relationship value, which in turn affects repurchase intentions, advocacy, and resistance to negative influences. Yang, Wu, and Wang (2010) further argue that trust and commitment function as the foundational pillars of relational strength. Despite its theoretical importance, the application of BRQ in the context of public sector services, such as railway transportation, remains limited. In the case of Pakistan Railways, several factors have negatively impacted brand-consumer relationships. These include delayed services, poor value delivery, inadequate management, and overcharging—leading to declining passenger loyalty and a shift toward alternative transportation options (Effendi, 2011; Yearbook, 2017). Official acknowledgments from railway authorities have highlighted the pressing need to rebuild consumer trust and engagement (Mehmood, 2019).

Although BRQ has been widely studied in sectors such as hospitality and retail, findings are often inconsistent regarding its direct impact on consumer behavior (Ahn & Back, 2017; Jain et al., 2018). Additionally, its influence within the specific context of railway transportation in developing economies like Pakistan remains largely underexplored. Given this research gap, a more nuanced understanding of how BRQ interacts with consumer emotions and sabotage tendencies is warranted.

Consumer Distresss as a Mediator

Consumer distress are affective states such as anger, frustration, disappointment, and resentment that arise when individuals perceive an experience as unjust, dissatisfying, or harmful. In consumer behavior literature, these emotions are recognized as powerful drivers of negative actions, including brand avoidance, complaints, and sabotage behavior (Romani, Grappi, & Dalli, 2012; Lis & Fischer, 2020). Although prior research has extensively addressed the influence of positive emotions on consumer attitudes, the role of consumer distresss—particularly as mediators—has received comparatively less empirical attention (Sampedro, 2017).

As a mediating variable, consumer distresss help explain how independent variables (such as brand experience, reputation, and relationship quality) influence behavioral outcomes like consumer brand sabotage (CBS). The theoretical basis for mediation lies in the proposition by Baron and Kenny (1986), which suggests that inconsistent or weak direct relationships between predictors and outcomes can often be clarified by incorporating a mediating construct. Within this framework, consumer distresss serve as the psychological mechanism that links branding stimuli to retaliatory consumer responses. Several studies have empirically validated the mediating role of consumer distresss in various contexts. For instance, research has demonstrated that feelings of betrayal or anger mediate the relationship between service failure and consumer revenge (Kahr et al., 2016; Eren, 2014). Other studies have explored its mediating influence in educational (Ahmed et al., 2010), ethical consumption (Walsh et al., 2011), and marketing communication contexts (Thengso et al., 2013), confirming its central role in shaping behavioral outcomes.

Zeelenberg et al. (2007) and Bagozzi et al. (1999) further emphasize that emotions—particularly negative ones—are not only reactions to events but also antecedents of behavior. They influence cognition, motivation, and decision-making, thereby acting as catalysts for consumer responses ranging from mild dissatisfaction to overt hostility. In the context of Pakistan Railways, frequent service disruptions, lack of responsiveness, and poor customer engagement have generated widespread negative sentiment among passengers. These emotional responses—when left unaddressed—can evolve into sabotage behaviors, including public complaints, social media attacks, or physical protests. Thus, understanding the mediating role of consumer distresss is crucial to comprehending the mechanisms through which branding failures result in damaging consumer actions. This study positions consumer distress as the organismic element in the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model, mediating the relationship between branding constructs (stimuli) and sabotage behavior (response). By integrating consumer distress into the framework, the study aims to uncover deeper psychological dynamics that drive CBS in the railway sector and offer insights for both academic theory and managerial practice.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) theoretical model, which serves as the conceptual foundation for examining the antecedents and consequences of consumer brand sabotage (CBS) within the railway sector of Pakistan. The S-O-R framework posits that environmental stimuli (S), such as brand-related factors, affect internal psychological states or organisms (O), which in turn produce observable responses (R) (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974; Jang & Namkung, 2009).

In the present context, brand experience, brand reputation, and brand relationship quality are conceptualized as stimuli—external brand-related inputs that influence consumer perceptions and emotional states. Consumer distress function as the organism, representing the internal affective responses triggered by these stimuli. Finally, consumer brand sabotage is positioned as the response—an overt behavioral outcome that reflects the consumer's negative evaluations and emotional reactions toward the brand.

The research framework is designed to examine both direct and indirect pathways through which branding constructs impact CBS. Specifically, the study explores the mediating role of consumer distresss in the relationship between the brand variables and sabotage behavior. This mediating mechanism is consistent with previous literature emphasizing that emotional states serve as pivotal psychological intermediaries between external stimuli and consumer actions (Bagozzi, 1986; Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2007).

The model is also informed by empirical findings suggesting that negative consumer experiences with a brand can induce strong emotional reactions, which may escalate into active resistance or harmful behavior (Kähr et al., 2016; Kucuk, 2018). In the context of Pakistan Railways, where service failures and reputational issues are prevalent, such consumer distressal responses are particularly salient and likely to manifest in destructive consumer actions.

Thus, the theoretical model proposed in this study consists of three main components:

- Stimuli (S): Brand Experience, Brand Reputation, Brand Relationship Quality
- Organism (O): Consumer Distress
- Response (R): Consumer Brand Sabotage

This framework not only addresses the gaps identified in the literature but also offers a structured approach to understanding the psychological processes through which branding failures lead to consumer retaliation. By employing the S-O-R model, this study contributes a comprehensive lens through which consumer behavior in public sector services—especially under emotionally charged conditions—can be analyzed and addressed.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Theoretical Framework

This research focused on the major determinants of consumer brand sabotage. The research model shows the association between the independent variables (brand experience, brand reputation, brand relationship quality), the intervening variable (consumer distresss), and the dependent variable (consumer brand sabotage).

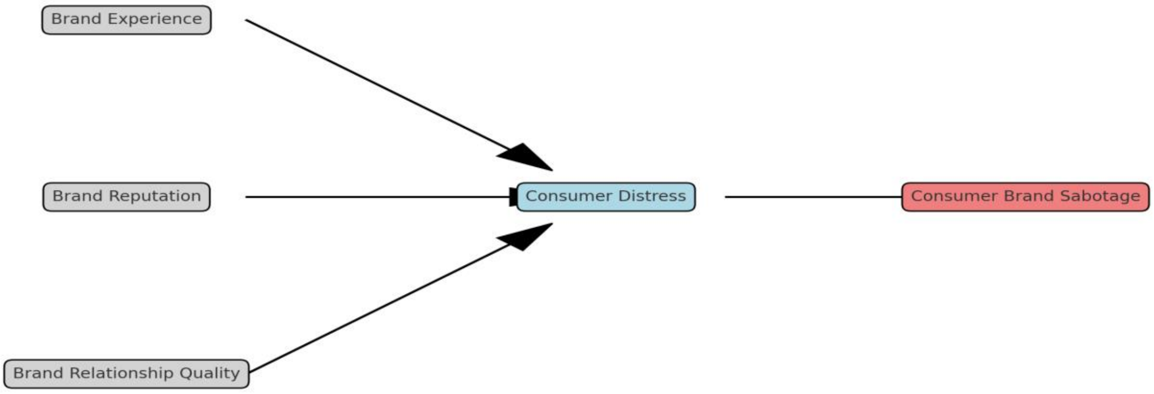

Figure 1.
Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) Model (with Consumer Distress)

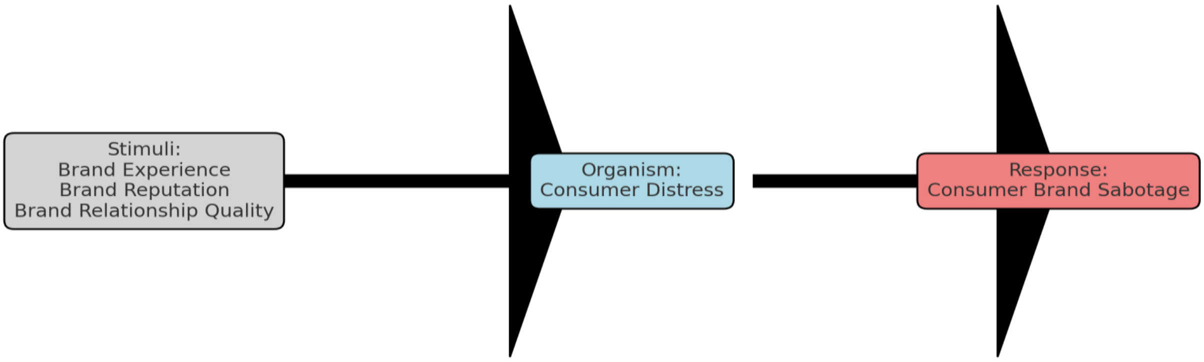

Figure 2.

Hypothesis

H1: There is a significant relationship between brand experience and consumer distress.

H2: There is a significant relationship between brand reputation and consumer distress.

H3: There is a significant relationship between brand relationship quality and consumer distress.

H4: There is a significant relationship between consumer distress and consumer brand sabotage

H5: Consumer distress mediates the relationship between brand experience and consumer brand sabotage.

H6: Consumer distress mediates the relationship between brand reputation and consumer brand sabotage

H7: Consumer distress mediates the relationship between brand relationship quality and consumer brand sabotage.

Research Design

Research design refers to the overarching strategy used to integrate the various components of the study in a coherent and logical manner, thereby ensuring the research problem is effectively addressed (Creswell, 2012). This study adopts a quantitative research design, characterized by the collection and analysis of numerical data to identify patterns, relationships, and statistical significance among variables. Given the study's focus on the consumer perspective within a large and geographically dispersed population, a cross-sectional survey design was deemed most appropriate. Cross-sectional studies capture data at a single point in time, enabling researchers to examine relationships among variables without manipulating the research environment (Bryman et al., 2011). Although longitudinal designs may provide richer insights over time, their practical limitations—particularly in terms of cost and duration—render them less feasible for this context. A structured questionnaire was employed as the primary data collection instrument, administered to consumers at major railway stations in Pakistan. This approach facilitated the systematic gathering of standardized data from a diverse sample of railway users.

To statistically analyze the hypothesized relationships, the study utilized Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). This technique is especially suited for exploratory models involving complex relationships among latent constructs and is robust even with relatively small sample sizes (Hair et al., 2017). PLS-SEM allows for the simultaneous evaluation of both the measurement model (reliability and validity of constructs) and the structural model (hypothesized relationships among constructs), making it an ideal choice for this study.

Population

The target population for this study comprised consumers who use inter-city passenger services offered by Pakistan Railways. These individuals represent a relevant population for examining brand-related perceptions and behaviors, particularly given their direct and ongoing interactions with the service provider.

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection for this study was conducted over a six-week period across several major railway stations in Pakistan, including Lahore, Karachi, Rawalpindi, Multan, and Peshawar. These stations were selected based on their high volume of inter-city passenger traffic and their strategic significance within the national railway network. The purpose of selecting multiple urban locations was to ensure a diverse and representative sample of railway passengers with varying travel experiences. Trained research assistants were deployed at designated data collection points within these stations, such as waiting areas, ticket counters, and platforms. Respondents were approached systematically, following the interval-based intercept sampling method described in the previous section. Participation was entirely voluntary, and respondents were first provided with an explanation of the study's objectives, as well as assurances regarding the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses.

Only passengers who confirmed having used Pakistan Railways for inter-city travel at least once in the past six months were invited to participate. After obtaining verbal consent, participants were asked to complete a self-administered questionnaire, which was available in both English and Urdu to accommodate language preferences and enhance comprehension. Research assistants were present to clarify any queries related to the questionnaire items, but they did not influence responses in any way. In total, 450 questionnaires were distributed. Of these, 396 were returned, and 375 were deemed usable after screening for completeness and consistency. Questionnaires with substantial missing responses or patterned answers (e.g., selecting the same scale point throughout) were excluded from the final analysis. This systematic approach ensured the collection of high-quality, relevant data that accurately reflected passengers' brand-related experiences, emotional responses, and behavioral tendencies. The sample size obtained was adequate for the application of Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), which was used to test the proposed hypotheses and validate the conceptual model.

Sample Size

Determining an appropriate sample size is a critical component of research design, particularly in studies employing multivariate analysis techniques such as Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). The adequacy of the sample directly influences the robustness, reliability, and generalizability of the statistical findings.

According to Hair et al. (2017), the minimum sample size for PLS-SEM is typically based on the "10-times rule," which recommends that the sample should be at least 10 times the maximum number of structural paths directed at any construct in the model. In the present study, the most complex construct received three structural paths, suggesting a minimum sample size of 30 under this rule. However, to ensure higher statistical power and enhance the generalizability of results, a substantially larger sample was targeted.

Based on guidelines from Kline (2011) and G*Power analysis for medium effect sizes ($f^2 = 0.15$), a minimum sample size of approximately 150 respondents was required to achieve statistical power of 0.80 at a 5% significance level. To further strengthen the empirical reliability, the study aimed to collect data from a larger pool of respondents. A total of 450 questionnaires were distributed at selected railway stations. Of these, 396 were returned, yielding an initial response rate of approximately 88%. Following data screening, 375 completed and valid questionnaires were retained for analysis. This final sample size exceeds the minimum thresholds recommended for both exploratory and confirmatory modeling using PLS-SEM, thereby ensuring the analytical validity of the results.

Sampling Frame

After identifying the population and selecting the sampling method, the next step is to establish the sampling frame. According to Sekaran (2003), a sampling frame refers to the complete list of the population from which a sample is drawn. In this study, an ideal sampling frame would be a list of consumers who have traveled via Pakistan Railways. However, obtaining such a comprehensive list is nearly impossible. Therefore, cluster sampling was adopted due to the heterogeneity of consumers arising from different travel classes. Homogeneity also exists, as the selected respondents are all consumers of Pakistan Railways. The heterogeneity is based on the fact that passengers travel to various destinations, while homogeneity lies in their shared use of the same railway system.

Additionally, the main stations and headquarters of Pakistan Railways are located in Lahore (Yearbook, 2017). For this research, a complete list of consumer names is unavailable because of the large population size. As stated by Cooper and Schindler (2014), when a list of consumers or individual elements cannot be obtained, cluster sampling is a suitable choice because it reduces cost and improves efficiency. The major advantage of using cluster sampling is its minimal bias and the assurance that each cluster has an equal chance of selection, thereby enhancing the validity of statistical outcomes (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016).

Sampling procedure

Cluster sampling was selected for this study. It is a type of probability sampling that divides the population into subgroups, with each subgroup representing the overall population. This method is particularly useful when the population is heterogeneous as a whole but homogeneous within each cluster (Burns & Bush, 2014). In the context of Pakistan Railways, consumers are categorized into four distinct classes: first class, business class, second class, and economy class, with each class representing a separate cluster. The first-class cluster comprises 1,229,959 consumers, the business-class cluster includes 1,117,034 consumers, while the economy-class and second-class clusters consist of 4,993,740 and 101,988 consumers, respectively.

Data Collection Method

After identifying the population and sample, the next step was determining the data collection method. In this study, self-administered survey questionnaires were distributed among respondents at various railway stations across Pakistan. Since the list of Pakistan Railways' consumers was confidential, the intercept survey method was employed. This approach typically results in a higher response rate compared to other techniques. Additionally, it is a cost-effective method that allows easy access to respondents. According to Bush and Hair (1985), intercept participants tend to be more knowledgeable about brands and therefore provide more accurate responses. Hence, the intercept survey method was considered suitable for this study, aligning with previous marketing research that has identified it as a widely used and effective approach (Hornik & Ellis, 1998).

A systematic intercept survey was adopted to ensure that every consumer had an equal opportunity to be selected. To minimize bias, every 5th consumer was approached, giving respondents adequate time to complete the questionnaire. Data collection was conducted at various times throughout the day to ensure a sufficient number of available participants within the survey period. Data for this study were gathered from Pakistan Railways' consumers. To further reduce sampling error and bias, data were collected on different days of the week, including weekends, as recommended by Sudman (1980). The main railway station in Lahore, Pakistan, served as the central location for data collection, where the researcher spent significant time distributing questionnaires to passengers waiting to purchase tickets. Questionnaires were distributed according to the proportion of each consumer class. The economy class, comprising 4,993,740 consumers (95.33% of the total population), received 576 questionnaires. The first-class cluster, consisting of 1,229,959 consumers (2.34% of the total), was given 13 questionnaires. The business class, with 1,117,034 consumers (2.13% of the population), received 12 questionnaires. Lastly, the second-class cluster, comprising 101,988 consumers (0.19% of the population), was assigned 2 questionnaires.

DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Response Rate

Data for this study were collected from consumers of Pakistan Railways. A total of 576 respondents were approached using the systematic intercept survey method, and self-administered questionnaires were distributed to them. Out of these, 412 questionnaires were returned, resulting in a 71.5% response rate. According to Latour and Rotfeld (1997) and Miller et al. (1997), a response rate between 50% and 80% is considered adequate for survey research. However, some questionnaires were either incomplete or contained errors. As noted by Tabachnick and Fidell (2007), questionnaires with missing data are unsuitable for analysis. Therefore, after a thorough review, only 382 valid questionnaires were retained for further analysis. as shown in the table below.

Table 1.

Questionnaires	No
Distributed Questionnaire	576
Returned Questionnaire	412
Response Rate	71.5%

Description of the Demographic Profile of the Respondents

The demographic factors of this study include gender, age, qualification, profession, railways, class-wise, purpose, frequent travel in the railways. Table 4.5 presents the demographic profile of the participant.

Demographics

Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	298	78.00%
Female	84	22.00%
Age		
18-25 years	369	96.60%
26-35years	9	2.40%
36-45 years	1	0.30%
More than 45 years	3	0.80%
Qualification		
Matric	8	2.10%
Intermediate	124	32.50%
Bachelor	245	64.10%
Master	3	0.80%
PhD	2	0.50%
Profession		
Student	370	96.90%
Employee	8	2.10%
Business	4	1.00%
Use of railway in province		
Punjab	361	94.50%
Sindh	5	1.30%
KPK	10	2.60%
Baluchistan	6	1.60%
Class		
first class	9	2.34%
business class	8	2.1%
economy class	364	94.8%
second class	1	0.52%
Purpose of travel		
business tour	29	7.60%
travel with friends	135	35.30%
travel with family	182	47.60%
study tour	36	9.40%
Frequent of travel		
Daily	13	3.40%
Once a week	18	4.70%
Once a month	52	13.60%
Once a year	299	78.30%

Data Normality

According to Hair et al. (2014), in PLS-SEM, non-normal data can still be analyzed; however, it is recommended to assess data normality using skewness and kurtosis. This is important because highly skewed or kurtotic data may lead to inflated bootstrapped standard error estimates (Chernick, 2011). Gravetter and Wallnau (2007) define normality as a symmetrical bell-shaped curve characterized by higher frequencies near the center and lower frequencies toward the extremes. Many statistical tests assume that data should follow a normal distribution (Hair et al., 2007), making it essential to examine data distribution before conducting any analysis. In this study, normality was assessed following the guidelines provided by Pallant (2011). As suggested by Tabachnick and Fidell (2007), normality can be evaluated through various methods such as scatterplots, boxplots, skewness, kurtosis, and the Shapiro–Wilk and Kolmogorov–Smirnov tests. Accordingly, this study employed two main approaches to assess data distribution: skewness and kurtosis, along with the Shapiro–Wilk and Kolmogorov–Smirnov tests. The results of are listed in the table below.

Table 2.
Skewness Kurtosis

	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error
BE	382	-.001	.125	.342	.249
BR	382	-.082	.125	-.766	.249
BRQ	382	-.042	.125	.124	.249
CD_M	382	.024	.125	-.043	.249
CBS	382	.371	.125	-.596	.249

Note: BE (Brand Experience), BR (Brand Reputation), BRQ (Brand Quality Relationship) NE (Consumer Distresss), CBS (consumer brand sabotage)

The table shows that all the values have skewness and kurtosis between 1 to -1. It therefore shows that data are normally distributed (quasi normality).

Descriptive Statistics

The study utilized the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20 and Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) version 3 for data analysis and hypothesis testing. Descriptive analysis was conducted to categorize the respondent sample. Additionally, the data were filtered and cleaned, outliers were removed, and checks for data normality were performed. The descriptive statistics is stated in Table 4.6.1. below.

Table 3
Descriptive Statistics

	Mean	Std. Deviation
	Statistic	Statistic
Brand experience	3.90	1.215
Brand reputation	4.01	1.660
Brand quality relationship	3.79	1.264
Consumer distress	3.87	1.400
Customer brand sabotage	3.36	1.576

In table mean values are ranging between 3.36 to 4.0 which indicate that respondents generally somewhat neutral or agreed to the statements.

Common Method Bias

Common method bias arises when data for all variables are collected from a single source (Simonin, 1999). Previous studies have proposed several statistical techniques to address this issue, including Harman's single-factor test, the common latent factor test, and the marker variable technique (Podsakoff, 2003). In the present study, Harman's single-factor test was employed to assess common method bias. Although multiple approaches exist, Harman's method is widely preferred by researchers (Fuller, Simmering, Atinc, Atinc, & Babin, 2015).Using SPSS version 20, all measurement items were entered into an unrotated principal component factor analysis with all indicators loaded onto a single factor. According to Podsakoff and Organ (1986), common method bias is present if a single factor accounts for the majority of the variance. As shown in Table 4.4, all factors had Eigenvalues greater than 1, and the total variance explained was 31%. Based on Harman's (1960) guideline that variance should be below 50%, it was concluded that common method variance was not an issue in this study's data.

Table 4.
Common Method Bias

Component	Initial Eigen values			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	15.013	31.942	31.942	15.013	31.942	31.942
2	6.043	12.857	44.799			
3	3.806	8.097	52.896			
4	2.055	4.372	57.268			
5	1.421	3.024	60.292			
6	1.291	2.747	63.039			
7	1.145	2.437	65.475			
8	1.076	2.289	67.764			

Structural Model

After assessing the measurement model, the next step was to evaluate the structural model. In this phase, the study examined the predictive relevance (Q^2), coefficient of determination (R^2), path significance, and effect sizes. In reflective models, collinearity is generally not a concern since the indicators are interchangeable; however, in formative models, collinearity must always be assessed. Nonetheless, collinearity was checked prior to conducting the bootstrapping procedure, and the results confirmed that no collinearity issues were present in the data (Hair et al., 2017).

In this study, seven hypotheses were tested using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). Bootstrapping with 5,000 samples was performed in PLS to generate t-values for evaluating path coefficients. At the 5% significance level, a t-value greater than 1.96 indicates a significant relationship when using a two-tailed test (Hair et al., 2011). The p-value was also used to determine the level of significance, where relationships are considered significant if the p-value is less than 0.05.The analysis began by examining the direct relationships between the independent variable and the mediator, as well as between the mediator and the dependent variable. Mediation tests were then conducted to assess all indirect effects. Path coefficients were used to determine the significance of these relationships, and the PLS algorithm was executed to estimate β-values. Bootstrapping was applied in SmartPLS with 500 sub-samples.

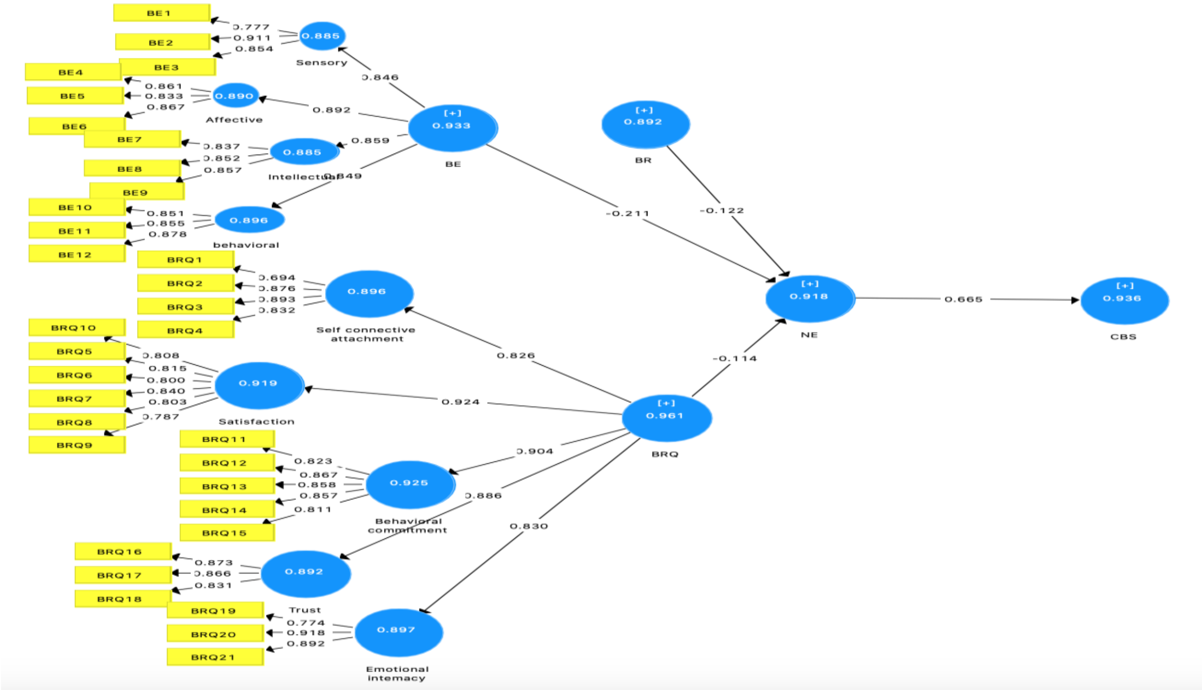

Figure 3.
Path coefficients

The results indicated that five out of the seven proposed hypotheses were statistically significant.

Table 5.

Hypothesis	Statement	Findings
H1	There is a significant relationship between brand experience and consumer distress.	Supported
H2	There is a significant relationship between brand reputation and consumer distress.	Supported
H3	There is a significant relationship between brand relationship quality and consumer distress.	Not Supported
H4	There is significant relationship between consumer distress and consumer brand sabotage	Supported
H5	Consumer distress mediates the relationship between brand experience and consumer brand sabotage.	Supported
H6	Consumer distress mediates the relationship between brand reputation and consumer brand sabotage.	Supported
H7	Consumer distress mediates the relationship between brand relationship quality and consumer brand sabotage.	Not Supported

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

The primary objective of this study was to examine the antecedents and outcomes of consumer brand sabotage (CBS) in the context of Pakistan's railway sector, using the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework. Specifically, the study investigated how brand experience, brand reputation, and brand relationship quality influence consumer distresss, and how these emotions, in turn, lead to sabotage behavior. The mediating role of consumer distresss was also tested.

The findings revealed the following:

- Brand experience significantly influenced consumer distresss, indicating that poor or dissatisfying service encounters evoke strong emotional reactions among consumers.

- Brand reputation was also a significant predictor of consumer distresss, suggesting that a tarnished brand image contributes to adverse emotional responses.

- Contrary to expectations, brand relationship quality did not exhibit a significant effect on consumer distresss, implying that long-term relational bonds may not mitigate consumer distressal outcomes in this service context.

- Consumer distress were found to have a strong and significant impact on consumer brand sabotage, confirming the hypothesis that emotionally charged dissatisfaction drives consumers to retaliate against the brand.

- Furthermore, consumer distresss mediated the relationships between both brand experience and brand reputation with CBS, reinforcing their critical role in shaping consumer behavior in emotionally adverse conditions.

These findings underscore the importance of managing brand experience and reputation to prevent emotionally driven sabotage behaviors, especially in high-contact, public service sectors such as railway transportation.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

Brands must actively work to minimize consumer sabotage behavior, as doing so offers multiple benefits. These include improving brand reputation, managing customer attrition, attracting new consumers, and enhancing overall brand performance. Consumer sabotage not only damages the brand directly but also influences how other consumers perceive it. When potential customers observe aggressive or negative behavior toward a brand, they may develop unfavorable opinions and choose to avoid it altogether. Therefore, reducing or preventing consumer sabotage is essential. By minimizing such behavior, brands can strengthen the trust of both existing and potential consumers while improving their services and customer relationships. Consumer sabotage behavior can be understood in four main ways. First, it acts as a barrier to attracting potential customers. Reducing sabotage behavior will help Pakistan Railways draw more future passengers to its services. Second, dissatisfied or unhappy consumers who engage in sabotage often spread negative word of mouth, discouraging others from trusting or remaining loyal to the brand. Controlling such behavior can therefore reduce negative publicity and build consumer trust. Third, consumers who sabotage the brand are less likely to provide constructive feedback, which is vital for service improvement. When customers disengage or act destructively, they often withhold valuable suggestions that could help enhance service quality or operational efficiency. Lastly, consumer sabotage frequently reflects frustration over service disruptions. Minimizing such behavior can help the brand identify and address underlying issues that cause consumer dissatisfaction and impatience.Given these insights, it is imperative that Pakistan Railways management take consumer sabotage seriously. The significant findings of this study highlight several managerial implications, which are discussed below.

THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

The present research provides an empirical evidence of the influence of several antecedents on the sabotage behavior of consumers. In particular, the result pointed out the significant role of brand experience and brand reputation in reducing sabotage behavior through the mediation of consumer distresss. Unexpectedly, brand relationship quality did not receive empirical support. It highlighted that Pakistan railway sector should focus more on brand experience and brand reputation to minimize the sabotage behavior of consumers through minimization of consumer distresss. The study didn't find the role of brand relationship quality in Pakistan railway sector. Overall, the results of the study are consistent with previous studies and the SOR model in the context of the Pakistan railway. Also, this study adds to the body of knowledge in studying the antecedents of consumer brand sabotage in the railway sector of Pakistan. Such a study in this context is rare and scant, and this is the major contribution of the present study.

PRACTICAL ACADEMIC AND MANAGERIAL CONTRIBUTIONS

This study offers both managerial and practical implications by providing valuable insights for managers in Pakistan's railway sector on how to strengthen their brand. The findings revealed that brand experience and brand reputation have a significant impact on consumer distress. Based on these results, railway management should focus on enhancing the overall brand experience and reputation of Pakistan Railways. By doing so, existing customers are more likely to remain loyal and refrain from engaging in harmful behaviors toward the brand, while new customers will be drawn to a brand they perceive as trustworthy and reliable. When consumers enjoy positive experiences with a brand, they are less inclined to sabotage it and more likely to support and promote it. Improving brand experience and reputation ultimately contributes to higher consumer satisfaction, stronger loyalty, and increased profitability for the organization. Several strategies can be adopted to improve brand experience. The management of Pakistan Railways should aim to create a welcoming, pleasant, and comfortable environment for passengers. This includes offering a relaxing travel atmosphere and sensory comfort that ensures a memorable journey. Brand experience can also be strengthened through engaging brand-related activities and promotional initiatives designed to evoke positive emotions. Examples include organizing events for families and friends, offering travel packages to new destinations, and implementing loyalty or mileage reward programs. Additionally, management should focus on providing smooth check-in and check-out procedures, onboard entertainment, and high-quality food services. Such efforts can encourage consumers to feel more positively toward the brand and reduce sabotage behavior.To further enhance the brand's reputation and minimize consumer distress, Pakistan Railways' brand managers should actively promote positive word of mouth. The brand should be known for excellent service quality, high customer satisfaction, responsiveness to feedback, and swift resolution of complaints. A strong and credible reputation helps attract new consumers who are more likely to choose Pakistan Railways over competitors. When services meet or exceed customer expectations, consumers are more satisfied, develop favorable perceptions of the brand, and are less likely to engage in negative behaviors.

METHODOLOGICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

In addition to its theoretical and practical contributions, this study also makes significant methodological contributions. Many previous studies relied on traditional validation techniques such as Cronbach's alpha and other basic statistical tests, which are often insufficient for addressing the complexities of modern data analysis. A review of the literature revealed that earlier research on consumer brand sabotage and its antecedents primarily employed the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) and Analysis of Moment Structures (AMOS) (Curth et al., 2014; Dang & Arndt, 2017; Hansong et al., 2012; He et al., 2013; Luo et al., 2016; Revilla-Camacho et al., 2015; Shamim et al., 2017). Only a few studies have utilized Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) (Ho et al., 2017; Yi & Gong, 2008; Yi et al., 2011, 2013; Zhu et al., 2016). However, research combining both SPSS and PLS-SEM approaches remains limited (Tan et al., 2017). To address this gap, the present study employed both SPSS and PLS-SEM. SPSS was used for data screening and cleaning, while PLS-SEM was applied to assess model robustness and predictive validity in exploring the relationships between variables.

The simultaneous use of these two statistical tools is relatively uncommon and represents a valuable methodological contribution to marketing research. Furthermore, the systematic evaluation of the measurement instruments in this study provides guidance for future researchers in developing more reliable and valid measures.Since the measures of consumer brand sabotage were adapted from prior studies, their reliability and validity had already been established. In this study, discriminant validity, composite reliability, and convergent validity were also found to be satisfactory. Thus, this research makes an important methodological contribution by validating and confirming the reliability of these measures in the context of Pakistan. Additionally, another methodological advancement of this study lies in testing the mediating effect of consumer distress using Preacher and Hayes's (2004) method. The results showed that consumer distress mediated the relationship between brand experience and consumer brand sabotage, as well as between brand reputation and consumer brand sabotage.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE STUDIES

While this study makes valuable contributions to the literature on Pakistan Railways, several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting its findings. The research focused primarily on passengers traveling through major cities in Pakistan. Future studies should broaden the sample to include consumers from smaller cities to gain deeper insights into the factors driving sabotage behavior and to enhance the generalizability of the results. This study employed a quantitative approach using surveys for data collection; however, future research could utilize interviews to allow consumers to express their opinions in greater detail. A mixed-method approach combining qualitative and quantitative techniques could also be adopted to explore consumer brand sabotage more comprehensively. Furthermore, this study was conducted specifically within the railway sector of Pakistan. The theoretical model developed here could be tested in other sectors such as banking, agriculture, and transportation, which also contribute significantly to the country's GDP.

The research relied on cross-sectional data due to time and cost constraints, meaning that consumer behavior was captured at a single point in time. Future studies could employ a longitudinal design, collecting data over multiple periods to observe changes in consumer behavior and better understand the dynamic relationships among variables. Such an approach would provide stronger evidence of causality and a deeper understanding of behavioral patterns over time. In this study, reflective measurements were used. Future research could consider using formative measurements or a combination of formative and reflective indicators. Additionally, unidimensional scales were applied to measure the key constructs; future work could use multidimensional scales to examine sub-hypotheses and extend the framework by analyzing relationships among dimensions.Lastly, this study employed consumer distress as a mediating variable. Future researchers could explore other emotional constructs as potential mediators or incorporate moderators and control variables to better understand their effects on the dependent variable.

CONCLUSION

This study sought to emphasize the significance of consumer sabotage behavior (CBS) and to identify the factors influencing it among Pakistan Railways passengers through the lens of the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model. The S-O-R theory connects consumer rationality by explaining how external and internal stimuli lead to specific behavioral responses. In this framework, stimuli are categorized into two key components: brand-induced external stimuli and internal variables driven by individual factors. The findings of this research can assist Pakistan Railways in reducing CBS, regaining market share, attracting new customers, increasing profitability, and strengthening its brand image. Overall, the study successfully achieved its research objectives and addressed the proposed research questions. Although several studies have investigated consumer brand sabotage and its antecedents, this research is among the few that examined CBS from a branding perspective. It provides valuable insights for Pakistan Railways brand managers, helping them develop effective strategies to enhance customer satisfaction and minimize sabotage behavior.

The results suggest that the organization should focus on improving its brand reputation and enhancing the overall consumer experience to mitigate negative emotions and discourage consumers from engaging in destructive behavior toward the brand. The study tested seven hypotheses, of which five were supported and two were rejected. Findings revealed that brand experience and brand reputation significantly influenced consumer brand sabotage through the mediating role of consumer distress. Consumer distress was also found to have a direct and significant relationship with CBS. However, brand relationship quality did not show a significant effect on consumer distress or consumer brand sabotage, and mediation was not established in this relationship. The mediation effects were tested using Preacher and Hayes's (2008) method.In addition, the study contributed theoretical, methodological, and practical insights to the literature. It also acknowledged several limitations and provided recommendations for future research directions.

DECLARATIONS

Acknowledgement: We appreciate the generous support from all the contributor of research and their different affiliations.

Funding: No funding body in the public, private, or nonprofit sectors provided a particular grant for this research.

Availability of data and material: In the approach, the data sources for the variables are stated.

Authors' contributions: Each author participated equally to the creation of this work.

Conflicts of Interests: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Consent to Participate: Yes

Consent for publication and Ethical approval: Because this study does not include human or animal data, ethical approval is not required for publication. All authors have given their consent.

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