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Impact of Workplace Mobbing on Knowledge Sabotage among Academicians in the Higher Education Sector: The Mediation Role of Emotional Exhaustion

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Abstract

This study highlights one of the triggering factors of counterproductive work behavior i.e. knowledge sabotage. Using social exchange theory as a guiding lens, this study aims to understand how these behaviors transit and coexist. A quantitative research design was used by collecting data of 200 academicians working in universities accredited by higher education commission of Pakistan. The data was analyzed using smart PLS and the results indicated that emotional exhaustion does mediate the relationship between workplace mobbing and knowledge sabotage. The aim of this study is to provide a guiding lens to companies asserting that a regular mobbing among their employees could reach to a catastrophic workplace behavior i.e. knowledge sabotage. It will guide companies to identify mobbers and try to mitigate this act as much as possible so that the effective and efficient flow of knowledge could be established. Last but not the least it will provide a seamless environment to flourish and grow.

Keywords: emotional exhaustion, knowledge sabotage, workplace mobbing

Introduction

Continuously changing dynamic organizational landscapes, has made knowledge a critical intangible resource that enables firms to anticipate upcoming market shifts, agile response, and helps them in attaining long term competitive advantage (Thomas, [2025](#)). Rapid growth of industries has increased the demand for their internal growth so that they may conquer disruptions along with making themselves internally strong and innovative. Additionally, empirical studies suggests knowledge as the most strategic valuable asset (Kearns & Sabherwal, [2006](#)). Efficient flow and sharing of knowledge are emphasized as the core of organizational practice that enhances decision quality, promotes innovation and strengthens collective performance (Cabrera & Cabrera, [2005](#); Thomas, [2025](#)). Contrarily, in

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knowledge driven firms when employees face unforeseen negative surrounding behaviors they tend to exhaust their negative emotions through counterproductive knowledge behaviors (Al Hassan et al., [2025](#); Serenko & Abubakar, [2023](#)).

Similarly, workplace mobbing is practiced among academicians in order to have a negative competition with them, that is excluding them from everything (Ince-Yenilmez, [2024](#); Thomas, [2025](#)). Workplace mobbing is the cause of consistent burnout for employees. It works as a chronic stressor by depleting the energy of employees and alter their process of taking things (Ilieva et al., [2024](#); Zapf et al., [2003](#)). Empirical studies highlight that workplace mobbing is a cause of relational aggression and creates psychological drain (Yadav & Tiwari, [2026](#)) that ultimately pools into intention of sabotaging knowledge (Ly & Duy, [2024](#)). Prolonged stress makes employees emotionally drained and lessens their motivation to work efficiently. Stresses like mobbing or negative behaviors triggers frustration, detachment and increases the likelihood of rule breaking or intentional withholding of information (Islam & Chaudhary, [2024](#); Soliman et al., [2025](#)). Burnout studies explain that emotionally exhausted employees often disengage from their role and may exhibit harmful behaviors towards colleagues (Maslach & Leiter, [2016](#)).

People sometime start sabotaging knowledge at once and are unwilling to change this behavior. It is an alarm that there must be some cognitive relational attributes triggering this act. The perpetrator deliberately starts to engage in counterproductive knowledge behavior which ultimately harms the target's mental wellbeing, performance, and even entire organizational operation (Serenko, [2020](#)). Over 50% of employees have faced knowledge sabotage at least one time in their working carrier and it is mostly because of jealousy, anger, personality, or harassment (Serenko, [2020](#)). While the relationships between workplace bullying, whether mobbing or abusive supervision and various negative psychological outcomes are well established through emotional exhaustion, knowledge hiding, etc. But the assumption that such bullying will trigger extreme hostile behaviors like sabotage has not yet been strongly established in the literature. There is a thin line difference between hiding and sabotaging knowledge, although hiding knowledge is passive and defensive while knowledge sabotage is intentional and oozes out of aggression. In other words, the nature is more or less similar but the intention and intensity is quite different. A significant

body of research shows that bullying and other forms of mistreatment drain employees' emotional resources as well as increase counterproductive responses, like the decision to withhold or conceal knowledge when one is asked for it; emotional exhaustion is often noted to be a mediator in such settings. For example, studies in diverse work settings such as IT and health sector explain that negative workplace behaviors increase knowledge hiding, mediated by negative emotions or emotional exhaustion that is consistent with previous studies (Islam & Chaudhary, [2024](#)).

However, knowledge sabotage that is a deliberate provision of incorrect information or concealing knowledge is conceptualized as an extreme form of counterproductive work behavior that goes beyond ordinary withdrawal or avoidance. In fact research by Serenko and colleagues situates knowledge sabotage as the most counterproductive knowledge behavior category driven by factors such as interpersonal conflict and malicious traits rather than directly being a consequence of exhaustion (Serenko, [2019](#)). To date the empirical evidence directly tying bullying or emotional exhaustion to sabotage remains limitedly compared to negative responses such as knowledge hiding or withdrawal. At this point of time there is a need to investigate the causal factors/antecedents that may cause hurdle in knowledge sharing and shape exhaustion into a knowledge sabotage trap (Serenko & Choo, [2020](#)). It could be due to any reason, personality trait, external factor, personal grudges, highly competitive environment (Perotti et al., [2022](#); Serenko & Choo, [2020](#)).

Research Objectives

- To explore the direct effect of workplace mobbing on knowledge sabotage.
- To investigate the positive influence of workplace mobbing on emotional exhaustion.
- To investigate the mediating role of emotional exhaustion between workplace mobbing and knowledge sabotage.

Problem Statement

Modern organizations increasingly rely on knowledge sharing, collaboration, and employee well-being to sustain performance and innovation. However, negative interpersonal dynamics at work, particularly workplace mobbing i.e. systematic, repeated psychological harassment, are emerging as serious threats to both employee health and organizational

effectiveness. Previous researches have elaborated that workplace mobbing harms are related to job satisfaction, mental health and turnover, while behavioral and psychological knowledge-based consequences remain unleashed. A very critical yet unleashed outcome, emotional exhaustion, that is a core outcome in burn-out resulting from prolonged exposure to stressors, needs to be explored. Employees experiences mobbing are often emotionally depleted and have reduced psychological resources. Lately these things shape their behavioral outcome.

Particularly concerning response is knowledge sabotage, the intentional act of concealing information or changing it for one's own sake. In, knowledge centered organizations, where knowledge is a crucial part, seamless flow of knowledge is very much needed and failing to do so might create catastrophic risks. Despite its potential impact, knowledge sabotage has received limited empirical attention, and little is known about its psychological antecedents. Current literature has examined the workplace mobbing and counterproductive work behaviors alone but the mechanism through which mobbing is translated to harmful behavior is yet to be discovered. Specifically, the role of emotional exhaustion as a mediating psychological pathway has not been adequately theorized or tested. Without this understanding, organizations may fail to recognize how toxic social climates indirectly erode knowledge integrity and long-term performance.

Therefore, there is a pressing need to investigate whether and how workplace mobbing contributes to knowledge sabotage through the experience of emotional exhaustion. Addressing this gap will extend the literature on workplace mistreatment, burnout, and counterproductive knowledge behaviors, while also offering practical insight into preventing hidden forms of organizational damage rooted in psychosocial stress.

Literature Review

Knowledge Sabotage

It is an emerging construct in organizational behavior studies and deliberately harmful form of counterproductive knowledge behavior. Unlike knowledge hiding or withholding that are passive or defensive behaviors, knowledge sabotage is aggressive and malicious, it involves intentions to provide incorrect, misleading or damaging knowledge to colleagues or organization (Serenko, [2019](#)). Earlier studies focused on dysfunctional knowledge behaviors like knowledge hoarding and hiding as

barriers to organizational learning (Ness & Connelly, [2017](#)). However, scholars identified that employees go beyond hiding and they either conceal the information completely or alter it to their interest. This led to the conceptualization of knowledge sabotage as a more severe and malicious form of knowledge misbehavior (Serenko, [2020](#)). The strongest motivators for knowledge sabotage are external factors and personal gain. Furthermore, knowledge sabotage consists of two matrix dimensions. One is provoked, target directly approaches saboteur and unprovoked where target doesn't approach saboteur directly. Similarly, active in which saboteur provides wrong knowledge while passive within which saboteur completely conceals the knowledge (Serenko, [2019](#)). The consequences of knowledge sabotage are substantial such as increased error rates, reduced productivity, compromised innovation capacity and decision-making failures. At individual levels it creates revengeful cognitions and produces cycles of interpersonal conflicts (Alaydi et al., [2021](#)). This harmful nature of knowledge sabotage makes it one of the most destructive knowledge behaviors in modern work space.

Several studies have drawn social exchange theory in order to explain knowledge sabotage. Studies explain that mistreatment, mobbing, unfair supervision, or lack of reciprocity can make employees retaliate through knowledge sabotage (Serenko & Abubakar, [2023](#)). A study on mitigation of immoral knowledge activities explained that one organization should create an interactive working environment by reducing chain of command, and should implement and introduce incentive policies that can cover different levels of organizational performances (Butt, [2020](#)). Making the long story, short specifically in knowledge driven firms, knowledge is the key driving force and a hurdle less flow of knowledge is very crucial. Knowledge and skills work hand in hand to flourish such organizations (Jantunen et al., [2020](#)).

Workplace Mobbing

The term "mobbing" was first introduced into occupational health psychology by Heinz Leymann in the 1980s, based on his observations in Swedish workplaces. (Leymann, [1990](#))_ defined it as "psychosocial terror," involving hostile communication and unethical actions occurring repeatedly over a prolonged period i.e. at least once a week for six months. He identified 45 specific mobbing behaviors, categorized into: 1) attacks on communication, 2) attacks on social relations, 3) attacks on reputation, 4)

attacks on occupational situation, and 5) attacks on health. Victims frequently underreport incidents, with around 70% of them staying silent due to trivialization of toxic dynamics. It manifests as attacks on personality, isolation, or professional status, escalating over time (Balsak et al., [2025](#)).

Workplace mobbing has become a central topic in organizational study behaviors and occupational psychology due to its pervasive and damaging nature towards individuals and organization. It refers to a persistent, systematic hostile behaviors towards an employee by one or more colleagues or supervisors. While the motto is to make the victim powerless, give him/her distress or making an environment that forces him/her to finally leave the organization. Mobbing triggers state and trait anxiety, mediating links to reduced job performance and counterproductive behaviors like passive resistance. It causes moral, psychological, and physical harm, including mental health disorders, absenteeism, and permanent disability in severe cases. Recent studies highlight its role in lowering emotional well-being, though resilience can buffer effects (Rincon-Hoyos et al., [2025](#)). Workplace mobbing is a complex phenomenon that is deeply rooted in culture and environment of organization.

Emotional Exhaustion

Emotional exhaustion refers to burnout, emotional drainage and overextends due to work stressors (Zhou & Chen, [2021](#)). Low psychological safety along with poor organizational embeddedness can lead to contributing psychosocial factors that enhance emotional exhaustion (Jia et al., [2022](#)). The primary reasons for emotional exhaustion are overwhelming situations combined with work environment (Swider & Zimmerman, [2010](#)). Emotional exhaustion is being discovered in the context of digital work environments, where constant connectivity and "technostress" create novel forms of depletion (Tarafdar et al., [2019](#)). Precisely, emotional exhaustion is a well-defined and validated marker of a dysfunctional person-job fit.

Past studies consistently depict the positive relationship between workplace mobbing and emotional exhaustion. Employees experiencing persistent mobbing report emotional exhaustion as burnout symptom (Biswakarma et al., [2024](#); García et al., [2022](#); Khan et al., [2021](#)).

Hostile social environments make employees exhibit less cooperative

knowledge behaviors creating a fertile ground for counterproductive behaviors like knowledge sabotage (Islam et al., [2025](#)). For example, research surveying R&D employees in Chinese technology firms found a significant positive relationship between workplace bullying and knowledge hiding. It indicates that the strain from bullying reduces the willingness to share knowledge and may escalate negative behaviors around knowledge exchange (Yao et al., [2018](#)). Moreover, employees facing mobbing are triggered with imbalanced social relationship and start experiencing intentions of knowledge sabotage (Ly & Duy, [2024](#))

H1: workplace mobbing is positively related to knowledge sabotage.

Another study involving nurses in Pakistan reported that psychological contract breach mediated the adverse effect of workplace bullying on knowledge hiding, suggesting that perceived violations of mutual obligations contribute to knowledge hoarding as employees respond to social mistreatment by retracting knowledge resources (Perotti et al., [2024](#)). Direct empirical work specifically linking workplace mobbing with knowledge sabotage, the most extreme form of counterproductive knowledge behavior where employees intentionally provide incorrect information or conceal critical information to harm others is still emerging, counterproductive knowledge behavior research conceptualizes knowledge sabotage as an outgrowth of hostile interpersonal dynamics, including exploitation and retaliation for perceived mistreatment (Chaudhary & Islam, [2025](#)). Although indirect impact through emotional exhaustion is also evident in empirical studies. Emotional exhaustion creates a sphere of frustration and emotional disengagement thus making employees move towards hostile behaviors (Islam & Chaudhary, [2024](#)). These behaviors could be reduced motivation at work or harmful behaviors towards colleagues (Maslach & Leiter, [2016](#)). In knowledge centered organizations it could be knowledge sabotage (Soliman et al., [2025](#))

H2: Workplace mobbing is positively related to emotional exhaustion.

Research involving R&D employees in Chinese technological firms demonstrated that workplace bullying was significantly associated with increased knowledge hiding and that emotional exhaustion, along with organizational identification, mediated the effect of bullying on knowledge hiding, highlighting emotional exhaustion as an internal pathway through which negative workplace treatment leads to detrimental knowledge

behaviors (Yao et al., [2018](#)). Similarly, a study of nurses in Pakistan found that workplace bullying increased emotional exhaustion and knowledge hiding, with emotional exhaustion explaining part of this effect, suggesting that the strain and resource depletion induced by sustained negative acts motivates employees to retract or conceal knowledge as a coping response (Islam et al., [2025](#)). In light of these discussion, it could be hypothesized that workplace mobbing is a chronic stressor that ends up making employees' emotional exhausted and they pore their exhaustion into the revenge pool of knowledge sabotage.

H3: Emotional exhaustion mediates the relationship between workplace mobbing and knowledge sabotage.

Theoretical framework

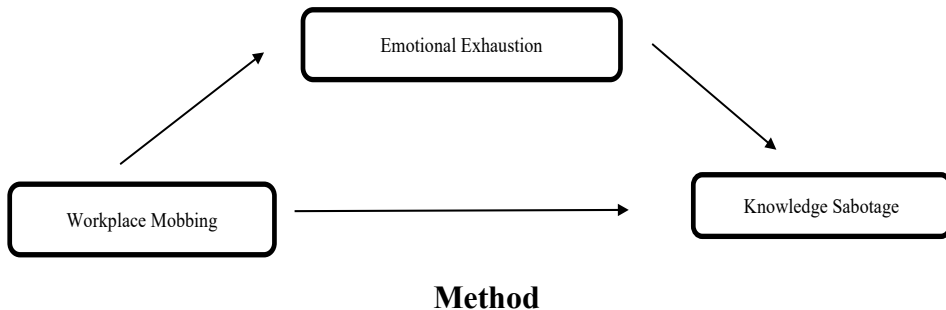
Workplace relations work on the norm of reciprocity in which employees and organizations continuously exchange resources, respect, trust, integrity, cooperation, support and ethical conduct that lately changes into valuable resource of constructive outcomes. Failing in this causes breakage of reciprocity norm and they are likely to reciprocate with withdrawal or counterproductive behaviors (Blau et al., [1964](#)). When employees are subjected to workplace mobbing or bullying ongoing negative acts that breach expectations of fair and supportive social exchange targets perceive a violation of the implicit “give-and-take” norms, undermining trust and psychological connection with colleagues and the organization. In response to such breaches, employees experience psychological strain, particularly emotional exhaustion, as they expend emotional resources attempting to cope with persistent social mistreatment, which has been consistently linked with deteriorating attitudes and behaviors in organizational settings where reciprocity expectations are violated and emotional resources are depleted (Ilieva et al., [2024](#)).

Empirical research on workplace bullying significantly predicts knowledge hiding behaviors and antecedents that are more counterproductive in nature like knowledge sabotage (Tan et al., [2024](#)). While emotional exhaustion plays a mediating role in this relationship, it suggests that the depletion of emotional resources partially explains why employees who experience mistreatment are more likely to withhold knowledge rather than share it. For example, Cao ([2022](#)) found that emotional exhaustion and reduced organizational identification mediated

the effect of workplace bullying on knowledge hiding among employees in an R&D setting. Under social exchange theory perspective this pattern reflects a norm of negative reciprocity where employees start feeling unfair in treatment and emotionally drained. It creates reduced willingness to invest in cooperate exchanges and they potentially start moving towards knowledge sabotage in order to exhaust their negative feelings or burnout (Shao et al., [2025](#)). Such dynamics demonstrate that when social norms of reciprocity are violated through mobbing, emotional exhaustion not only depletes employee well-being but also undermines constructive organizational exchange processes, fostering behaviors that harm knowledge flows and organizational effectiveness (Kong et al., [2024](#)).

Figure 1

Proposed Theoretical Model



Scale and Items

Workplace Mobbing is measured by a five pointer Likert scale used in past studies. Reliability index of the scale is more than 0.7 for each statement in previous studies (Steffgen et al., [2016](#)). Knowledge sabotage scale of four items has shown reliability index at 0.8 and above in previous studies (Serenko, [2020](#)). These statements are measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging between strongly disagree to strongly agree. Emotional exhaustion is measured using nine item scale to measure emotional exhaustion at 5 pointer Likert scale ranging from A few times to everyday. The reliability index was 0.8 in the previous studies (Ditzel, [2008](#)).

Table 1*Respondent Profile*

Profile	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	112	56.0
	Female	88	44.0
Age Group	20–29 years	54	27.0
	30–39 years	78	39.0
	40–49 years	46	23.0
	50 years and above	22	11.0
Education Level	Bachelor's Degree	82	41.0
	Master's Degree	94	47.0
	MPhil/MS	18	9.0
	PhD	6	3.0
Position Level	Instructor (Visiting faculty)	78	39.0
	Lecturer	30	15.0
	Associate Professor	50	25.0
Employee Status	Professor	42	21.0
	Permanent	118	59.0
	Contract-Based	64	32.0
Tenure in Current Organization	Volunteer / Intern	18	9.0
	Less than 1 year	28	14.0
	1–3 years	72	36.0
	4–6 years	54	27.0
	7 years and above	46	23.0

Results**Table 2***Descriptive Statistics of the Items*

	Mean	Standard deviation	Cramér-von Mises statistic	Cramér-von Mises p value
Advice	2.621	1.180	1.315	0.000
Burned	2.280	0.940	2.935	0.000
Conflicts	2.521	0.965	3.799	0.000
Critical	2.464	1.094	1.494	0.000
Drained	2.346	0.958	2.700	0.000
Duties	2.583	0.986	1.848	0.000

	Mean	Standard deviation	Cramér-von Mises statistic	Cramér-von Mises p value
Fatigued	2.327	0.925	3.354	0.000
Ignored	2.540	0.975	2.523	0.000
Performance	2.422	1.043	1.933	0.000
Professional	2.673	1.153	1.380	0.000
Rope	2.441	0.959	2.502	0.000
Stress	2.109	0.888	2.453	0.000
Teased	2.464	0.945	3.861	0.000
Work	2.555	0.908	3.046	0.000

The descriptive statistics indicate that the mean scores of the measured items range from 2.109 to 2.673, suggesting that, on average, respondents reported moderate levels of the experiences reflected in these variables. The highest mean score was observed for *Professional* $M = 2.673$, $SD = 1.153$, followed by *Advice* $M = 2.621$, $SD = 1.180$ and *Duties* $M = 2.583$, $SD = 0.986$, indicating relatively higher agreement or frequency for these experiences compared to other items. The lowest mean was reported for *Stress* $M = 2.109$, $SD = 0.888$, followed by *Burned* $M = 2.280$, $SD = 0.940$ and *Fatigued* $M = 2.327$, $SD = 0.925$, suggesting comparatively lower but still noticeable levels of emotional strain among respondents. The standard deviation values range between 0.888 and 1.180, showing a moderate spread of responses around the mean.

The Cramér–von Mises test statistics and associated $p = 0.000$ depicts that all items significantly deviate from a normal distribution. As the p values are below 0.05, null hypothesis of normality is rejected for each variable. The overall results show moderate mean level significance.

Table 3

Reflective Measurement Model

Constructs	α	Composite reliability rho _a	Composite reliability rho _c	AVE
Emotional Exhaustion	0.872	0.878	0.907	0.663
Knowledge Sabotage	0.833	0.877	0.883	0.657
Workplace Mobbing	0.897	0.918	0.924	0.710

The reliability and convergent validity of the study is assessed using Cronbach's alpha composite reliability. The results indicate that all three constructs Emotional Exhaustion, Knowledge Sabotage, and Workplace Mobbing demonstrate strong internal consistency and satisfactory convergent validity.

Cronbach's alpha values range from 0.833 to 0.897, exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70, which confirms that the items within each construct consistently measure the same underlying concept. Workplace Mobbing shows the highest internal consistency at 0.897, followed by Emotional Exhaustion at 0.872 and Knowledge Sabotage at 0.833. Composite reliability values further support construct reliability. The rho-a values range from 0.877 to 0.918, while rho-c values range from 0.883 to 0.924, all well above the acceptable cutoff of 0.70. These findings indicate that the latent constructs have high reliability and that the indicators share a substantial proportion of variance.

Convergent validity was assessed using the Average Variance Extracted (AVE). The AVE values for Emotional Exhaustion 0.663, Knowledge Sabotage 0.657, and Workplace Mobbing 0.710 all exceed the recommended minimum of 0.50. This indicates that each construct explains more than half of the variance of its indicators, confirming that the items converge well in representing their respective latent variables.

Table 4

Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio

	HTMT
Knowledge Sabotage <-> Emotional Exhaustion	0.544
Workplace Mobbing <-> Emotional Exhaustion	0.481
Workplace Mobbing <-> Knowledge Sabotage	0.316

The discriminant validity of the constructs was assessed using the Heterotrait–Monotrait ratio of correlations. The HTMT values for all construct pairs are well below the conservative threshold of 0.85, indicating that each construct is empirically distinct from the others. Specifically, the HTMT value between Knowledge Sabotage and Emotional Exhaustion is 0.544, between Workplace Mobbing and Emotional Exhaustion is 0.481, and between Workplace Mobbing and Knowledge Sabotage is 0.316. These results confirm that while the constructs are related, they are sufficiently

discriminant and measure distinct theoretical concepts, supporting the validity of the measurement model for further structural analysis.

Table 5

Fornell–Larcker Criterion

	Emotional Exhaustion	Knowledge Sabotage	Workplace Mobbing
Emotional Exhaustion	0.814		
Knowledge Sabotage	0.521	0.811	
Workplace Mobbing	0.441	0.296	0.843

The discriminant validity of the constructs was further assessed using the Fornell–Larcker criterion, where the square root of the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for each construct should be higher than its correlations with other constructs. As shown in the results, the square roots of AVE are 0.814 for Emotional Exhaustion, 0.811 for Knowledge Sabotage, and 0.843 for Workplace Mobbing. Each of these values exceeds the correlations with the other constructs: Emotional Exhaustion correlates 0.521 with Knowledge Sabotage and 0.441 with Workplace Mobbing; Knowledge Sabotage correlates 0.296 with Workplace Mobbing. This supports the assertion that Emotional Exhaustion, Knowledge Sabotage, and Workplace Mobbing are empirically distinct constructs, justifying their use in subsequent structural model analysis.

Table 6

Collinearity Assessment

	VIF
Emotional Exhaustion -> Knowledge Sabotage	1.241
Workplace Mobbing -> Emotional Exhaustion	1.000
Workplace Mobbing -> Knowledge Sabotage	1.241

Multicollinearity among the predictor constructs was assessed using the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF). The VIF values range from 1.000 to 1.241, which are well below the commonly accepted threshold of 5 (or the more conservative 3.3), indicating that multicollinearity is not a concern in the structural model.

Figure 2
Path Coefficients' Model

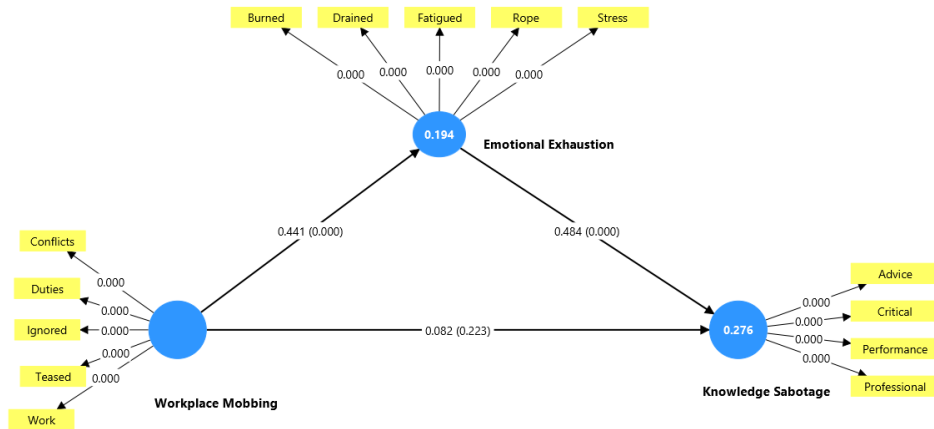
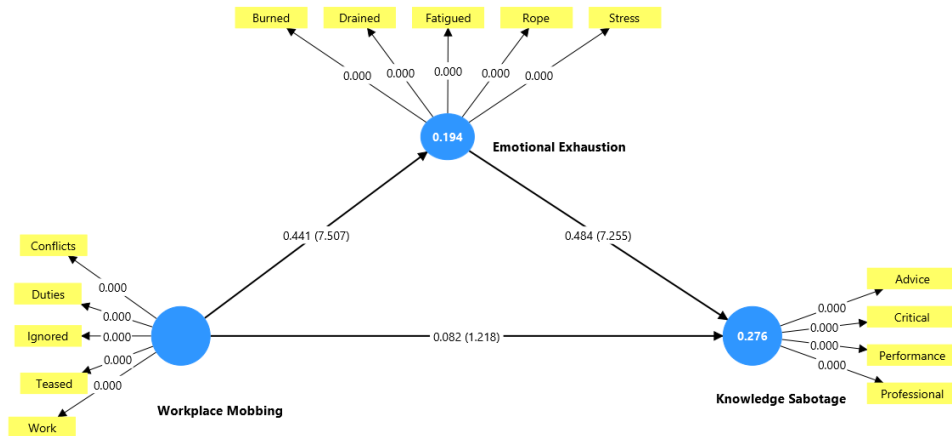


Figure 3
Bootstrapping' Model



The structural model represents the hypothesized results among variables. Workplace mobbing has a significant positive relation with emotional exhaustion at $\beta = 0.441$, $t = 7.507$, $p < 0.001$, suggesting that employees who experience higher levels of mobbing report greater emotional exhaustion. It is aligned with previous studies that suggest mobbing as a continuous stressor that influence employees' emotional exhaustion.

Moreover, Emotional Exhaustion, in turn, has a significant positive

effect on Knowledge Sabotage at $\beta = 0.484$, $t = 7.255$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that emotionally drained employees are more likely to engage in knowledge sabotage behaviors. It indicates the bridging effect of emotional exhaustion by indicating the full mediation in this case. It explains that employees' emotional being victimized through mobbing are emotionally exhausted and make themselves at peace by moving towards knowledge sabotage as a malicious act.

The direct path from Workplace Mobbing to Knowledge Sabotage is not statistically significant ($\beta = 0.082$, $t = 1.218$, $p = 0.223$), suggesting that the effect of workplace mobbing on knowledge sabotage occurs primarily through emotional exhaustion, supporting a full mediation effect. This implies that the negative impact of mobbing on employees' counterproductive knowledge behaviors is largely explained by the emotional strain induced by mobbing, consistent with the theoretical framework of Social Exchange Theory (SET), which posit that resource depletion and violated social expectations drive retaliatory or protective behaviors.

Discussion

Empirical support for the hypothesized relationship is seen evidently in the study findings. It is also aligned by the prior researches that workplace mobbing makes employees' emotionally exhausted (Hancock et al., [2020](#)). Employees who experience mobbing are likely to feel mentally and emotionally drained, which reduces their capacity to engage constructively in their work. Moreover, emotional exhaustion is an evident predictor of knowledge sabotage explain that employees who are emotionally drained may respond to stress via counterproductive knowledge behavior such as withholding information or altering it according to own revenge interest (Ly & Duy, [2024](#)). This finding is also consistent with social exchange theory that employees balance their relationships according to what happens to them (Blau et al., [1964](#)).

Academic organizations reveal that people in knowledge-based organizations use some illegal ways to take revenge exhausting out their feelings with others or by showing counterproductive verbal behaviors (Koç et al., [2020](#)). Pakistan is a collectivist society and very emotional as well. The concept of respect or "Ezzat" is very prominent in Pakistan and dignity is questioned upon being dishonored which ultimately flushes out in the

form of aggression. Pakistanis find it rude to say straight no or when someone neglects them as they have collectivism in roots and blood (Cultural Atlas, [2021](#)).

Above mentioned empirical studies highlight the setting of Pakistani culture and the study is proof of that. The theoretical framework of the study highlights that mobbing is a constant stressor for the employees' which makes them emotionally exhausted, demotivated, frustrated and aggressive which ultimately settles down after doing the malicious aggressive act of knowledge sabotage. According to these results, workplace mobbing faced by academicians can be regarded as a source triggering the emergence of emotional exhaustion which acts as an intervening factor for knowledge sabotage. Employees facing hostility, ostracism or being constantly criticized in the workplace are depleted of their emotional and mental energy, and, hence, may experience feelings of burnout or fatigue as well as being negatively involved in institutional norms. While emotionally exhausted employees will be negatively engaged toward helping their colleagues or refraining from undesirable behavior; they might also be involved in distorting, hiding or not sharing the required or important information in order not to expose themselves or to avenge of the people they do not have good relations with.

Similar to the fact that emotional exhaustion that emerges because of unfavorable conditions of working environment increases the tendency towards deviant behaviors (Duffy et al., [2012](#)), knowledge sabotage may also arise as a result of hostile working environment and strained relationships, which can be a result of workplace mobbing (Serenko, [2019](#)). Therefore, these results show that in addition to deteriorating the employee health in workplace, workplace mobbing faced by academicians in the university increases the probability of occurrence of the unintended negative behavior of knowledge sabotage due to feeling of emotional exhaustion. Interestingly, the direct path of workplace mobbing towards knowledge sabotage isn't proven while the indirect path via emotional exhaustion is significant proves full mediation. It indicates that the relation of workplace mobbing and knowledge sabotage has to go through an emotional strain. In other words, emotional exhaustion serves as a critical psychological mechanism linking toxic social environments to counterproductive knowledge behaviors.

Conclusion

The study provides captivating results that workplace mobbing indirectly drives knowledge sabotage through emotional exhaustion. Employees' who repeatedly experience negative social behaviors or conflicts emotionally exhaust their feelings by practicing knowledge sabotage. Obstruction in work related matters, lack of recognition at work and discouragement of professional competence are the common workplace bullying practices among university faculty members (Ahmad, [2017](#)). These results highlight that addressing workplace mobbing is not only essential for employee well-being but also for maintaining effective knowledge-sharing practices critical to organizational performance.

Future Implications

The findings support the theoretical perspective of SET, which explains reciprocal behaviors in response to perceived violations of fairness and reciprocity. Overall, this study underscores the importance of managing workplace social dynamics to prevent both psychological strain and counterproductive knowledge behaviors. Organizations should implement policies and procedures that enable tight scrutiny of mobbers so that employees may not get emotionally exhausted. Counseling and mentoring free sessions should also be introduced in order to rectify any legitimate problem regarding social incivility. Additionally, knowledge sharing behaviors should be appreciated and welcomed. Additional mediators or moderators such as personality type, leadership styles, revenge seeking behaviors should also be explored. Longitudinal study design will unleash other possible predictors of knowledge sabotage, as cross-sectional design and common biasness could be mitigated through longitudinal studies. Expanding research across industries and cultural contexts can enhance the generalizability of the findings and provide insights into context-specific interventions. In sum, the study highlights that reducing workplace mobbing and managing emotional exhaustion are critical for preserving organizational knowledge integrity and fostering a healthy, productive work environment.

Author Contribution

Khizra Tanveer: conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, methodology, software, writing – original draft, writing – review & editing. **Noor Azman Ali:** supervision, writing – review & editing.

Conflict of Interest

The authors of the manuscript have no financial or non-financial conflict of interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

Data Availability Statement

The data associated with this study is not available due to ethical, legal, or commercial restrictions.

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Generative AI Disclosure Statement

The authors did not use any type of generative artificial intelligence software for this research.

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