From Loyal to Saboteur: The impact of Aggression on Consumer-Brand Relationships

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**ABSTRACT**

**Purpose:** This study examines the phenomenon of consumer brand sabotage (CBS), with a particular emphasis on exploring the relationships between aggressive personality traits and intentions to engage in CBS. This study specifically investigates that how hostility, rage, physical aggression, verbal aggression, and customer brand sabotage intentions are interrelated. The study's objective is to provide details on the motivations and actions of those who deliberately take action to harm a brand by eroding consumer associations.

**Design/Methodology/Approach:** Data for the study comprises a sample of 178 Pakistani university students using survey questionnaires. In order to assess aggressive personality traits, the (Buss and Perry, 2002) aggression scale was used, as well as a scale developed by (Kähr, 2016) and colleagues to gauge customer brand sabotage intentions. In addition, we considered control variables like age, gender, and education.

**Findings:** There is a direct link between hostility and customer brand sabotage intentions. Anger and customer brand sabotage intentions were found to have a similar positive and significant relationship. Contrary to expectations, however, verbal or physical aggression was not significantly correlated with customer brand sabotage intentions.

**Implications/Originality/Value:** This study makes recommendations for brand managers and marketers that emphasize the importance of understanding and preventing consumer brand sabotage. Furthermore, the paper argues that avoiding CBS might not be immediately compatible with techniques for handling verbal and physical aggression, necessitating the development of novel approaches.

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**Introduction**

In the scholarly realm dedicated to the study of consumer-brand relationships, one encounters a rich tapestry of diverse concepts, perspectives, theories, and viewpoints employed to decipher the intricate web
of connections between consumers and brands (Li et al., 2023). Within this complex landscape, consumers exhibit a wide range of attitudes and sentiments towards brands, spanning from harboring negative and bitter sentiments to maintaining a neutral stance, or conversely, fostering contented and positive associations (Qiu et al., 2023). A significant emphasis within this academic discourse revolves around the exploration of brand loyalty (Eka James & Inyang, 2022). Over the course of several decades, substantial research efforts have been channeled into comprehending the realm of consumers’ emotions, intuitions, and attachments with regard to brand loyalty, attachment, and resonance (Raza et al., 2023). This body of work has yielded valuable insights into the affirmative aspects of consumer-brand relationships (Kim et al., 2023).

An intriguing aspect that emerges from psychological and neuroscientific research is the proposition that negative emotions exert a more profound influence on behavior than their positive counterparts (Azer et al., 2023). It is noteworthy that a substantial portion of the literature on marketing predominantly delves into adverse interactions with brands, often arising from issues related to service deficiencies and product neglect (Pang & Ruan, 2023). This focus has led to a preponderance of research on the unfavorable dimensions of consumer-brand relationships (Chuang et al., 2023). These unfavorable dynamics are commonly associated with service and product failures and have been explored in the context of anti-consumption. Here, consumers often exhibit behaviors such as rejection or objection, akin to a cold-shoulder towards brands (Raza et al., 2023).

While these studies predominantly explore the negative aspects of consumer-brand relationships, they also shed light on the consequential behaviors that ensue (Hollebeek, Sarstedt, et al., 2023). In recent times, there has been a growing interest in investigating the negative emotions experienced by customers, including emotions like anger, contempt, disgust, and dislike (Peinkofer & Jin, 2023). Companies frequently grapple with the challenges posed by customers exhibiting negative behaviors, particularly when confronted with unfavorable events such as product or service failures (Hollebeek, Hammedi, et al., 2023). In such circumstances, customers often exhibit hostile behaviors that can inflict harm upon the firms (Peinkofer & Jin, 2023).

Research in the domain of consumer behavior corroborates this by revealing that consumers with aggressive personalities tend to perceive emotionally provoking situations through the lens of brand failures, which consequently leads to aggressive behavior directed at the respective firm (Gomes & Gonçalves, 2019). In such scenarios, the consumer becomes notably sensitive to situational provocation, thereby readily engaging in aggressive behaviors in response to unfavorable circumstance (Groves & Anderson, 2018). Furthermore, when an aggressive consumer encounters a brand failure, their reaction is characterized by both hostility and the experience of negative emotions (Gomes & Gonçalves, 2019). We recently conducted research to improve our knowledge of aggressive behavior in the context of consumer-brand interactions. Exploring the connection between aggressive personality and consumer brand sabotage intentions (CBSI) was our main goal. Finally, we concluded by providing a succinct overview of the implications and future recommendations that emanated from our study.

**Literature Review**

**Consumer Brand Sabotage**

According to (Douglas & Martinko, 2001) the word "sabotage" has its etymological origins in the French word "sabots," which denotes wooden clogs. It brings to mind the French Industrial Revolution, when disgruntled workers would purposely throw their wooden clogs into equipment to sabotage corporate operations (S.K. Gupta D.K. Aswal Ajay Singh Shahswati Sen, 2002). In the subject of management research, the issue of employee sabotage has been investigated (Harris & Ogbonna, 2002). Marketing researchers have looked at the concept of brand saboteurs, which describes employees who deliberately try to harm the brand (Payne & Frow, 2004). The prospect of brand-damaging activities being conducted by individuals who are not connected to the company is, however, only partially taken into account by this definition (Wakefield & Whitten, 2006).
According to (Bettencourt et al., 2006) consumer behaviour connected to sabotage from a firm-external standpoint. Consumer brand sabotage (CBS) is defined as "deliberate behaviour by customers or non-customers who have the primary objective of causing harm to a brand by impairing the brand-related associations of other consumers (Song & Schwarz, 2009). First, the term "deliberate act" underscores that CBS activities are purposeful actions, undertaken intentionally and consciously (Wu & Lebreton, 2011). These actions are carefully chosen and planned by the saboteur with the explicit aim of causing harm to the brand (Wallace et al., 2013). Second, the reference to "behavior" emphasizes that a tangible action must be taken (Kähr et al., 2016). Thus, CBS cannot be attributed to individuals who do not engage in any activity (Fallis, 2013). Intentions, coupled with the execution of real brand sabotage activities, define an action-oriented perspective (Paillé et al., 2014).

A saboteur frequently seeks to undermine an important feature of the adversary, much like in military manuals. As a highly valuable and frail asset, the CBS brand is a prime target for consumer sabotage (Izogo et al., 2020). Brand saboteurs aggressively seek out other consumers to join them in their effort to harm the brand because consumers and the relationships they have with brands are so important to those brands (Perez-Vega et al., 2021).

**Difference between CBS and Other Related Constructs**

According to (Groves & Anderson, 2018) numerous unfavourable consumer behaviours have been well researched in the literature to date. Consumer Brand Sabotage (CBS) differs from other unfavourable consumer behaviours including customer retribution, unfavourable word-of-mouth (WOM), and consumer boycotts since it is a unique and innovative architecture (Sakulsinlapakorn & Zhang, 2019). CBS is characterized by deliberate hostility and aggression (Serenko, 2020). The primary objective of consumers engaging in CBS is to harm the brand, and they have no intention of restoring their relationship with the brand – in essence, "the bridges are burned" (Hu et al., 2020).

According to (Nuseir et al., 2021) negative WOM, which involves consumers informally sharing their negative evaluations of goods and services with others, serves as a means for disappointed customers to vent their negative emotions and find relief. Some engage in negative WOM to restore equity (Asghar Ali et al., 2021). Customer retaliation occurs when a customer believes they have been mistreated by a brand and seeks to retaliate (Eka James & Inyang, 2022). The main motive behind retaliation is not to harm the brand but to restore equity (Liu et al., 2022). CBS, on the other hand, is distinct in that it encompasses non-customers as well and is motivated by a desire to harm the brand (Attiq et al., 2022). According to (Pinto et al., 2020) behaviorally, CBS stands apart from other negative consumer behaviors. CBS activities are characterized by careful planning and intentional actions that require substantial effort on the part of the consumer (Alipour et al., 2021). This targeted and deliberate "attack" on a vital asset of the brand aligns with the concept of sabotage in the military context (Nuseir et al., 2021). In contrast, consumers engaging in other forms of negative behavior tend to invest comparatively less effort (Asghar Ali et al., 2021). Furthermore, the potential for damage in the case of CBS is notably high, given the extensive planning and effort involved in such activities (Eka James & Inyang, 2022). The aim is to intentionally disrupt brand-related connections among other consumers (Liu et al., 2022). This distinguishes CBS from other negative behaviors, like negative WOM or consumer boycotts, which generally have a lower destructive potential (Attiq et al., 2022).

**Aggressive Personality and Consumer Brand Sabotage Intentions**

According to (Hu et al., 2020) people's perceptions of violence and hostility are significantly influenced by their personality traits. People who are more aggressive than average have a propensity to perceive hostile and aggressive circumstances more strongly than people who are less aggressive (Pinto et al., 2020). As a result, when a hostile client has a negative occurrence, they are more likely to see the business as having provoked them, which intensifies their hostile reaction (Perez-Vega et al., 2021). These folks require less provocation to become hostile due to their sensitivity to contextual provocation (Alipour et al., 2021). Additionally, customers that show high levels of aggressiveness are more prone
to escalate minor disputes into heated altercations due to their propensity for being confrontational (Nuseir et al., 2021).

According to (Attiq et al., 2022) GAM contends that the social-cognitive processes of perception, interpretation, decision-making, and conduct are all significantly influenced by knowledge structures. These conceptual frameworks encompass beliefs, attitudes, perceptual schemata, expectation schemata, behavioural scripts, and other ideas (Liu et al., 2022). These knowledge structures develop via experience and have a variety of effects on perception, ranging from simple object perception to complex social event interpretation (Attiq et al., 2022). Hostile attribution biases and other phenomena that are closely connected to anger share cognitive and affective aspects (Pinto et al., 2020).

According to (Alipour et al., 2021) General Aggression Model (GAM), when a person perceives offence from another person, among other environmental and personal input variables, they become aggressive. According to (Groves & Anderson, 2018) individuals with aggressive personalities frequently perceive greater hostility and aggression in specific situations than individuals with less aggressive personalities. Customers with a tendency towards aggression are also more likely to be triggered by the brand and respond in a more aggressive way as a consequence (Sakulsinlapakorn & Zhang, 2019). Due of their enhanced sensitivity to it, situations need to be provoked less to cause aggression (Perez-Vega et al., 2021). These aggressive persons are also more inclined to escalate potential conflicts into hostile confrontations (Nuseir et al., 2021).

According to (Eka James & Inyang, 2022) hostile aggression has been characterized as impulsive and driven by anger. In such cases, the primary motive is to harm the target, and this form of aggression typically arises in response to perceived provocation (Pinto et al., 2020). Hostile aggression is sometimes referred to as affective, impulsive, or reactive aggression (Nuseir et al., 2021). Hence, we can propose the following hypothesis.

H1: There is a positive relationship between Hostility and Consumer Brand Sabotage Intentions.

According to (Harris & Ogbonna, 2002) unpleasant experiences can elicit negative emotions, which trigger various cognitive, emotional, and physiological responses, associated with both the fight and flight tendencies. Flight-related associations typically give rise to feelings of fear, while those associated with the fight response tend to intensify feelings of anger (Jawahar, 2002).

According to (Wang et al., 2011) in today's consumer landscape, individuals are no longer content with merely ending a brand relationship or expressing passive dissatisfaction. Instead, they engage in a more active form of conflict against brands, akin to retaliation (Wu & Lebreton, 2011). The underlying principle for retaliation is often rooted in equity theory, where the primary aim is to restore perceived fairness rather than inflict harm upon the brand (Kähr et al., 2016). Anger is recognized as a powerful driving force behind such behavior, potentially leading to direct punitive actions against the brand (Alipour et al., 2021). Hence, we can propose the following hypothesis.

H2: There is a positive relationship between Anger and Consumer Brand Sabotage Intentions.

According to (Barger et al., 2016) a positive relationship between physical and verbal aggression and consumer brand sabotage (CBS). Although the general perception is that the consequences of physical aggression are more severe and significant than those of verbal aggression, we chose to link both forms of aggression to CBS based on a set of common theoretical arguments (Sakulsinlapakorn & Zhang, 2019). Firstly, the psychological issues arising from both types of aggression are similar (Serenko & Choo, 2020). Secondly, both types of aggression influence an individual's quality of life in a comparable manner. Thirdly, victims of physical aggression often experience verbal aggression as well (Serenko, 2020). Fourthly, levels of both verbal and physical aggression are mutually and positively associated (Izogo et al., 2020). In a recent study, a distinction was made between hostile and instrumental aggression, with instrumental aggression encompassing both physical (e.g., consumer retaliation) and
verbal aggression (e.g., negative word of mouth) (Perez-Vega et al., 2021). Therefore, it seems logical to employ similar theoretical reasoning to establish a positive relationship between physical and verbal aggression with CBS (Nuseir et al., 2021).

According to (Asghar Ali et al., 2021) aggression influences various social-cognitive phenomena, including perception, interpretation, decision-making, and behavior. CBS pertains to social occurrences within the realm of consumer behavior (Eka James & Inyang, 2022). Consequently, we hypothesize that consumers who experience both physical and verbal forms of aggression are more likely to engage in CBS (Liu et al., 2022). In the context of consumer behavior, the consumer acts as a saboteur of the brand. However, the saboteur only engages in sabotage when they perceive themselves as less powerful than their adversaries (Attiq et al., 2022). Unlike interpersonal aggression, where both parties typically have equal power, the consumer acting as a saboteur is less powerful than the brand itself (Qiu et al., 2023). In situations characterized by a power imbalance, where a consumer may not have the direct ability to influence a company or its brand, and when the consumer is less interested in maintaining a relationship with the firm or accepting any apologies, they are more likely to resort to physical or verbal aggression as a means of brand sabotage. Hence, we can propose the following hypothesis:

**H3: There is a positive relationship between Physical aggression and Consumer brand sabotage intention.**

According to (Krishna & Schwarz, 2014) verbal aggression, as a significant dimension of aggressive behavior, is positively related to consumer brand sabotage intentions. In the realm of consumer behavior and brand management, understanding the relationship between verbal aggression and consumer brand sabotage has become increasingly relevant (Kähr et al., 2016). Consumer brand sabotage, often characterized by deliberate actions aimed at harming a brand, has emerged as a unique and understudied construct in the literature (Barger et al., 2016). This intention to harm makes consumer brand sabotage distinct from other forms of consumer retaliation, negative word-of-mouth, or boycotts, where the primary motivation is often to restore equity or seek reparation (Kashif et al., 2017).

According to (Pinto et al., 2020) the interplay of emotions, cognitions, and behaviors related to verbal aggression in the context of consumer brand sabotage is complex. It suggests that consumers who engage in verbal aggression are not merely frustrated but are actively seeking to damage the brand's standing (Perez-Vega et al., 2021). This multifaceted relationship between verbal aggression and consumer brand sabotage raises important questions about the drivers of such behaviors (Alipour et al., 2021). As the landscape of consumer-brand relationships continues to evolve, understanding the role of verbal aggression in consumer brand sabotage becomes increasingly vital for brand protection and management (Asghar Ali et al., 2021). Hence, we can propose the following hypothesis:

**H4: There is a positive relationship between Verbal aggression and Consumer brand sabotage intention.**

**Material and Methods**
**Sample and Methodology**
The study involved university students who were pursuing various levels of education, including undergraduate, graduate, MPhil, and PhD programs at universities in Pakistan. A total of 200 survey questionnaires were distributed among the participants, and 178 individuals completed and returned the questionnaires, resulting in a response rate of 89%. Given that English serves as the official language in Pakistan, the survey questionnaires were administered in English to ensure comprehensibility.
The composition of the sample was fairly balanced in terms of gender, with 51% male participants and 49% female participants. When considering the educational qualifications of the respondents, 10.2% held bachelor's degrees, while the majority, 85.6%, had master's degrees. A smaller proportion of respondents, 3.6%, were at the MS level of education, and only 0.6% of participants had attained a PhD. There were 77.8% respondents, which fall under the category of 18 to 22 years of age while 17.4% fall under the category of 23 to 27 years of age. There were only 3% respondents, which were between 28 to 32, and finally only 1.2% respondents represent the age bracket of 34 to 38 years of age.

**Measurement of Variables**

**Aggressive Personality**

In order to assess the aggressive personality a scale developed by (Buss and Perry, 1992) was adopted to measure this variable. There are 29 questions in this scale which measure the aggressive personality and its different dimensions. There are four dimensions which are physical aggression, anger, verbal aggression and hostility and all these are measured on the basis of 05-point Likert scale. There is total 09 questions which are used to measure physical aggression, 05 items to measure verbal aggression, 07 items to measure anger and 08 items to hostility. Respondents were given choices in terms of these questions in order to measure their own personality traits and their daily interactions with various situations (Serenko, 2020).

For instance, a sample item from the scale assessing anger was: "Some of my friends think I am a hothead." A sample item targeting physical aggression was: "If I have to resort to violence to protect my rights, I will." An example item pertaining to hostility included: "When people are especially nice to me, I wonder what they want." Finally, a sample item measuring verbal aggression was: "I tell my friends openly when I disagree with them."

The reliability of the scale items assessing physical aggression, which consisted of nine items, was found to be 0.68. For the scale measuring verbal aggression, composed of five items, the reliability was determined to be 0.50. Additionally, the scale assessing anger, with its seven items, exhibited a reliability of 0.74. Finally, the eight items included in the hostility scale displayed a reliability of 0.69 (Qiu et al., 2023).
**Consumer Brand Sabotage**

We measured consumer brand sabotage using an eight-item scale developed by (Kähr, 2016). To construct this evaluation, we drew on a number of instances of consumer brand sabotage conduct documented in recent research. In order to precisely forecast client brand sabotage intentions, we then changed and contextualized these occurrences. The responders read a series of scenarios, each with a set of assertions. These original evaluations of consumer brand sabotage have been revised to more appropriately reflect the intentions behind consumer brand sabotage (Perez-Vega et al., 2021).

A sample item was: “I intend to run an anti-brand campaign with satirical (sarcastic) replacement of the promotional slogans”. Another sample item was “I intend to create and upload a video to YouTube that puts the brand in a bad light”. The responses provided their ratings on a five-point rating scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5) (Song & Schwarz, 2009). Upon conducting reliability analysis, the overall reliability of this scale was determined to be .710, indicating its consistency and suitability for measuring consumer brand sabotage intentions in the present study.

**Control Variables**

Additionally, we took into account the influence of several individual-level variables, namely gender, age, and educational background, as these factors have the potential to affect the dependent variable.

**Results**

**Preliminary Analysis**

Table 1 displays the scale reliability, correlations, and descriptive statistics for various variables. Cross-sectional data was acquired to measure a number of latent characteristics, including physical aggression, verbal aggression, anger, hostility, and consumer brand sabotage intentions (Kähr et al., 2016). Table 1 shows a positive and substantial correlation between physical aggression and consumer brand sabotage intentions ($r = .217, p < 0.01$). However, the correlation ($r = 0.129, n.s$) between verbal aggression and consumer brand sabotage intentions was not statistically significant (Kim et al., 2023).

Table 1 results anger and customer brand sabotage intents have a significant and positive link with these values ($r = 0.303, p< 0.01$) (Sakulsinlapakorn & Zhang, 2019). Hostility and customer brand sabotage intents have a positive and significant association ($r = 0.396, p <0.01$). The Cronbach’s alpha value for physical aggression was 0.68, verbal aggression was 0.75, anger was 0.74, hostility was 0.69, and consumer brand sabotage intentions was 0.710.

**Hypothesis Testing**

Regression analysis was performed to look into the anticipated effects using SPSS Statistics, a tool often used for interactive or batch statistical analysis. **Hypothesis 01** shows that anger and consumer brand sabotage intentions are related. The information in Table 2 also supported this hypothesis, showing a strong and positive correlation between anger and consumer brand sabotage intents ($\beta = 0.17, p <0.05$), therefore Hypothesis 1 was supported. **Hypothesis 02** put forward a link between hostility and consumer intentions to destroy brands. Hostility was shown to be positively and highly linked with plans to destroy consumer brands ($\beta = 0.364, p <0.001$), validating Hypothesis 2. **Hypothesis 03** asserts that there is a connection between physical aggression and consumer intentions to harm companies. This hypothesis was refuted by the data in Table 2. The conclusion that physical aggression was not significantly linked with consumer brand sabotage intents ($\beta =0.032, ns$) led to the rejection of Hypothesis 3.
Table 1

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<td>.208**</td>
<td>.217**</td>
<td>.129</td>
<td>.303**</td>
<td>.396**</td>
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</table>

Hypothesis 04 Establish a connection between verbal aggression and consumer intentions to harm brands of companies. But the information in Table 2 did not support this hypothesis. The conclusion that verbal aggression was not significantly linked with consumer brand sabotage intents (β =0.061, ns) led to the rejection of Hypothesis 4.

Table 2

Regression Analysis

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N = 168 * p < .05 ** p < .01 *** p < .001

Discussion

The major objective of this essay is to contribute to our understanding of consumer brand sabotage (CBS), a phenomenon that has received very little attention (Xiang et al., 2023). CBS stands out as an aggressive behavior where individuals carefully prepare and invest a lot of time and energy to sway other customers’ opinions and attitudes about a particular brand (A et al., 2023). In contrast, other instances of bad consumer conduct, such as customer revenge, boycotts, or bad word-of-mouth, are examples of types of instrumental aggression directed at a brand or business. As a result, CBS is a hostile kind of hostility that is more destructive than other consumer behaviors since it is driven by a desire to punish corporations for perceived wrongdoings (Hollebeek, Hammedi, et al., 2023).

A pivotal facet of aggressive personality is the emotional dimension of anger, characterized by strong feelings of annoyance, displeasure, or hostility. The findings of our study suggest that individuals exhibiting this dimension in their personalities tend to harbor greater inclinations toward consumer brand sabotage intentions and are more prone to being provoked by negative events (Peinkofer & Jin, 2023). This pattern also holds for hostility, with results confirming a positive relationship between hostility and consumer brand sabotage intentions. People with aggressive personalities are more likely to notice
elevated levels of hostility and violence in particular situations. When a business deviates from its stated mission, vision, and values, it is more probable that very aggressive customers may feel irritated and act more aggressively as a result (Hollebeek, Hammadi, et al., 2023). Customers expect businesses to keep certain moral standards, and by extension, that everyone will. Because of this, a brand's violation of these standards is seen as an intentional negative conduct, making redemption unlikely (Serenko, 2020). Competence failures are frequently viewed as less diagnostic since they might occur unintentionally, even in highly brilliant individuals (Xiang et al., 2023). Customers could be more likely to overlook performance-based consumer brand sabotage than value-based sabotage as a result (Krishna & Schwarz, 2014).

Furthermore, our findings show that customer brand sabotage intents are not substantially correlated with verbal or physical aggressiveness (Kermani et al., 2023). Physical aggressiveness refers to actions that physically injure or threaten to physically harm another person, such as striking, kicking, biting, brandishing a weapon, or causing property damage (Wang et al., 2011). This result is consistent with the notion that exhibiting violence in society is not morally acceptable (Gardner et al., 2000). According to a different theory, people with aggressive dispositions may use violence as a release for their displeasure and frustration before eventually calming down.

Future Research Directions & Limitations

The academic study of consumer brand sabotage (CBS) sheds light on a fascinating but insufficiently researched facet of consumer behavior. There are other possible pathways available for additional investigation and understanding of this phenomenon.

One area of research that merits further investigation is the need for a comprehensive analysis of the psychological mechanisms and stimuli that contribute to the formation of Compulsive Buying Syndrome (CBS).

In addition, it is crucial to conduct an analysis of the impact exerted by corporate brand strategy (CBS) on both brands and organizations. In order to enhance their crisis management and prevention strategies, organizations may get significant insights by cultivating a comprehensive comprehension of the ramifications associated with Corporate Branding Strategies (CBS).

Conducting comparative research that examines regional and cultural variations in corporate bribery and corruption has the potential to provide valuable insights into the global extent of this phenomenon. Furthermore, it would be advantageous to investigate prospective therapeutic strategies that are directed towards hindering or ameliorating the advancement of consumer brand sabotage (CBS).

In essence, doing a comparative analysis of corporate bribery and corruption, with a focus on cultural and regional variations, has the potential to provide valuable insights about the extent of this issue on a worldwide scale.

Through a comprehensive examination of the psychological, business-oriented, and cultural dimensions of CBS, scholars can acquire a comprehensive comprehension of this occurrence and provide perceptive perspectives for enterprises to proficiently tackle and alleviate its consequences within an ever more interconnected and digital commercial milieu.

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