BRAND HATE IN EMERGING MARKETS: THE ROLE OF INCOME IN ESCALATING EMBARRASSMENT TOWARD DETACHMENT

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Abstract
The importance of negative consumer-brand relationship has been getting growing academic interest as it has been found to undermine brand equity and long-term firm performance. Among those, there is such an adverse relationship as brand embarrassment that has become a natural emotional reaction in case of discomfort or social embarrassment caused by the fact that a consumer is associated with a brand, especially in the context of socially visible consumption (Khan and Rahman, 2023; Kumar and Singh, 2021; Patel, Singh, and Verma, 2023). According to preceding research, these emotive experiences usually culminate into more severe negative feelings, such as brand hate, which can eventually result in consumers becoming psychologically detached to brands (Ali, Rehman, and Sarfraz, 2023; Rehman, Ali, and Sarfraz, 2022). Based on the attribution theory and psychology of hate, this research focuses on the process by which brand embarrassment can result in brand detachment by integrating the mediating attitude of brand hate and the moderating attitude of the income level (Sternberg, 2003; Ahmad, Khan, and Ali, 2021). The quantitative research design was applied to collect the data on the consumers and analyze the information with the help of Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). The results are added to the literature on negative branding by describing the process of emotional escalation in emerging markets and how income level influences the emotional and behavioral reaction of consumers towards brands.

Introduction

In emerging markets, where symbolic consumption is deeply linked to the socio-economic positioning, brands are important in forming the identity of consumers, social status, and self-expression (Iqbal, Khan, and Sarfraz, 2022; Zafar, Rehman and Sarfraz, 2022). Although previous branding research has mostly focused on positive consumer-brand relationships, including loyalty and attachment, recent articles have also mentioned the significance of negative emotions and disengagement behaviors of consumers in their interactions with the brand (Kucuk and Krishnamurthy, 2021; Singh and Verma, 2021). Such negative emotional reactions tend to be more powerful and long-lasting than positive ones, which are especially harmful to brands (Stenstrom and Curtis, 2020).

Brand embarrassment is a psychological condition experienced by the consumer when they feel

humiliated, uncomfortable, or socially anxious because of using, or being linked with, a brand, particularly when in a social or publicly critical context (Kumar and Singh, 2021; Khan and Rahman, 2023). Such experiences are magnified by collectivist and income stratified cultures since consumers rely on brands as a social signifier to convey status and membership (Zafar et al., 2022; Patel et al., 2023). When a brand does not fulfill such symbolic expectations, consumers can shift the blame on the brand, which can cause negative emotional reactions to anger, resentment, and hate (Chen and Li, 2023; Sarfraz, Zafar and Ali, 2023).

Brand hate is a negative emotional attachment of the highest level, when a person is angry, disgusted, and contemptuously oriented against a brand (Kucuk, 2021; Kumar and Gupta, 2022). There is empirical evidence that brand hate commonly leads to brand avoidance, negative word-of-mouth, and psychological detachment of the brand (Ali et al., 2023; Nguyen, Patel, and Sharma, 2023). These emotional responses can eventually lead to a brand detachment, in which consumers deliberately dissociate with the brand to defend their self-concept and feelings of well-being (Ali, Rehman, and Zafar, 2022; Chaudhry, Farooq, and Iqbal, 2022). Although there is an increasing interest in such phenomena, few studies have explored the synergistic impacts of brand embarrassment, brand hate and income level in a holistic context in the environment of emerging markets.

Theoretical Background and Hypotheses Development

Brand Embarrassment

Brand embarrassment is a self-consciousness emotional response that appears when consumers believe that their connection with a given brand can negatively impact their social image or self-identification. This feeling indicates a perceived gap between the ways consumers would like to be perceived and the ways they are afraid they will be perceived by others in regards to their brand preferences (Park and Kim, 2022). The embarrassment is also particularly high in those cultures where social evaluation and group norms are at the forefront of behavior determination. Consumers in collectivist cultures such as Pakistan are also very concerned with how their peers view their consumption, and brand-related embarrassment is a strong predictor of behavior (Santos and de Oliveira, 2023).

The causes of brand embarrassment have many causes, including the quality of the product, the older brand status, scandals, controversial advertisement, or even the culpability with stigmatized consumer segments. Whenever consumers feel that a brand indicates a low social status or is dissonant with their self-image, they strive to dissociate themselves with them both publicly and privately (Islam and Rahman, 2023). Notably, embarrassment is not a slight, short-lived emotion. Upon chronic development, it may further lead to more violent emotional responses, including anger, resentment, or hate of the brand. Studies indicate that negative emotions at an initial stage are usually triggers that are fueled into other negative relationships with the brands when unaddressed (Zhao and Wang, 2022). This is why brand embarrassment must be regarded as an urgent pre-emptive indicator that a negative trend in consumer-brand relationship is taking place.

Many consumers in emerging markets where social class and symbolic consumption are highly determinant in the expression of identity tend to use brands to express belonging, prestige and aspiration. Because of this, brands should be careful in how they present themselves to the public, in terms of quality consistency, and symbolism so as not to evoke embarrassment, which eventually results in brand hate or disidentification.

Brand Hate

One of the most negative emotional reactions to a brand is brand hate. It is a combination of anger, disgust, contempt, hostility, and even retaliation (Lee and Kim, 2023). In contrast to dissatisfaction, which is an eventual condition, and usually temporary, brand hate is deep-seated, long-lasting, and unquestionably based on more profound psychological or moral infraction. This renders it to be among the most detrimental feelings that a consumer can develop towards a brand.

Studies define a number of brand hate triggers:

1. Identity Threats: Hate may arise when a brand conflicts or subverts any personal or social identity of a consumer.
2. Moral Violations: Unethical business conduct, scandals, and offensive messages tend to cause anger and moral outrage (Chen and Li, 2023).
3. Unfulfilled Expectations are: When a buyer or end user gets scammed or deceived by a defective product
4. Symbolic Misalignment: The brand has lost its ability to represent the values, lifestyle and aspirational identity of the consumer.

There are high behavioral outcomes of brand hate. The consumers, who despise a brand, might share a negative word-of-mouth, criticize the brand online, boycott it, or persuade other people to avoid it (Nguyen et al., 2023). These measures may greatly harm brand equity, influence market performance and cause long-term reputational risks.

Due to the multidimensionality and the intensity of emotions that are involved in hate, the brands need to be aware of the psychological causes of hatred to be able to prevent or reduce the occurrence or progression of hatred. The literature emphasizes that brand hate can manifest itself in the emotional escalation process which starts with the feeling of discomfort or embarrassment and becomes more hostile after the negative experiences are higher.

Brand Detachment

Brand detachment is the emotional, psychological, end of a tie by a consumer to a brand. It is characterized by a diminishing emotional engagement, a tendency to be less interested in brand messages and finally withdrawal behavior through diminished purchases or avoidance altogether. In comparison to dissatisfaction in the short term, brand detachment is an indicator of a more serious and calculated choice to eliminate the brand in a list of consideration (Rehman et al., 2022).

This disconnection is usually based on emotional discomfort particularly when the consumer is embarrassed, betrayed, or ignored by the actions or communications of a brand. It appears as a safeguarding measure to the recurrent disillusionment that assists consumers sustain their identity and emotional state of equilibrium (Ali et al., 2023). These emotions may intensify in circumstances when the brand serves as a signal of social standing or group affiliation, influenced by social standards, cultural stigma, or peer criticism (Khan and Rahman, 2023).

Brand detachment can be behaviorally observed with ignoring the advertisement, unfolding brand page, quitting using the product, or discouraging others to purchase the brand. The lack of engagement undermines the brand equity and customer lifetime value in the long term (Sarfraz et al., 2023). As the brand detachment usually comes after the intense negative response, such as brand hate, it is the last stage of the process of the waning consumer-brand relationship (Zafar et al., 2022).

Emotional Disengagement

Emotional disengagement is a process whereby a consumer progressively loses his or her emotional connection with a brand which more often than not is a process of defense against the continuous psychological pain. The process is likely to start when the brand does not match the personal expectations, does not conform to the values of the consumer or is the source of embarrassment, disappointment, and frustration again and again. To counteract this emotional tension, consumers in turn psychologically distance themselves with the brand and fail to have the emotional closeness with it. In contrast to the temporary dissatisfaction, the emotional disengagement is a more permanent, profound change of the emotional attitude, with the loss of interest and concern with new changes in the brand or marketing communication and the absence of or minimal emotional response.

Such disidentification is especially prevalent in situations where a brand used to play an important part in the self-image, or social identity of a consumer. Emotional disengagement is one such self-protective mechanism when a perceived identity-enhancing value is broken, such as in the case of scandal, product failure or conflicting

brand communications. It may not directly lead to apparent behavioral consequences as, say, the rejection of at least some purchases, yet it is often a precursor of observable evidence of brand rejection: avoidance, a shift to different brands, or a negative word of mouth. Emotional lackluster therefore becomes an early indicator that a consumer-brand relationship is on the verge of decline, a message that marketers cannot overlook in case they desire to maintain long term loyalty and brand recommendation.

Cognitive Disassociation

There is a deeper level of mental detachment called "cognitive disassociation", where customers mentally distinguish themselves from the identity, symbolism, and core values of a brand. This occurs when people no longer believe that the brand aligns with their moral codes, lifestyle, or personal views. Cognitive disassociation is an active process in which one distances their self-concept from the brand, whereas emotional disengagement reflects a decline in emotional attachment. At this stage, the customer no longer considers the brand to be part of their identity and actively denies the meanings and associations previously connected to it.

Events that run counter to the consumer's expectations of the brand, perceived hypocrisy, unethical behavior, unclear or inconsistent messaging, or actions that damage the brand's credibility are common occurrences leading to this type of detachment. Customers start to reinterpret the brand as untrustworthy, irrelevant, or even detrimental to their personal values when they notice such contradictions. In an effort to preserve their integrity and self-consistency, they consequently mentally disassociate themselves from everything the brand stands for.

Cognitive disassociation is also especially high among the brands that position themselves as lifestyle-based, value-based, or purpose-based. In a case where these brands do not speak their own values that they say to represent such as ethics, social responsibility, cultural sensitivity, and transparency the betrayal can be more pronounced. When this happens, consumers tend to review the role played by the brand in their life

more critically and whether the brand continues to suit them or it helps them to project the image they desire.

In contrast to passive disinterest, cognitive disassociation is not accidental, but it frequently causes overt changes in attitudes and behaviors. The consumers are not only likely to cut down on their interaction with the brand, but they are also likely to dishearten other people to identify with the brand, which strengthens their psychological distancing. This is particularly hard to reverse in terms of cognitive disassociation by brands. After this psychological distance has been created, it is hard to re-engage the consumer, since regaining trust is laborious in terms of effort, predictability and time.

Cognitive disassociation is a crucial aspect to be understood by a marketer as it is a point of turning point in the relationship between the consumer and the brand. Although it is sometimes possible to restore emotional disengagement by reassurance or by offering better experiences, cognitive disassociation is a stronger indication of a deeper and more intentional rejection one that has frequently led to long-term detachment or total abandonment. In the case of brands, it is important to identify the first signs of this process to avoid losing the loyalty of consumers and identity-based relationships irreversibly.

Behavioral Avoidance

Behavioral avoidance is a deliberate practice by the consumers to avoid a brand once they have been emotionally/cognitively disengaged. These behaviors can be: canceling the buying, disregarding promotional messages, refusing to attend brand-sponsored events, unfolding the brand on social media, or simply going around the brand in shops. Notably, this type of avoidance is not passive, it is a decision taken by the consumer consciously and intentionally in order to eliminate the brand out of his/her lifestyle and everyday routine. This is usually caused by negative emotional responses like embarrassment, betrayal, disappointment or feeling that the brand does not share the same values as them. The effect is that, by being distanced, consumers are able to gain control of their brand environment, and minimize

the emotional discomfort they experience with the brand.

On more extreme levels, the behavior avoidance may turn into an active resistance in which the consumers will not just disengage themselves, but will also make an effort to make others change their behavior. This can involve deterring friends or family to buy the brand, posting negative remarks on the internet and even organizing boycotts. Such acts reveal that brand detachment is a process that does not only work at a psychological level but also as a group of observable behaviors with some far-reaching implications on a brand. When news of negative feeling regarding behavior spreads very quickly through social networks or digital media, sales, brand reputation, and long-term loyalty can suffer directly due to behavioral avoidance.

The severity of avoidance behavior usually relates to the severity of the consumer-brand relationship initially. Previously well-emotional brands can be even more severely backlashed when the trust is violated as the disappointment in the brand is more likely to be high. Marketers and brand managers must understand these trends because it would be possible to recognize the initial signs of behavior avoidance and avert further negative relationship decline. Proactive behavior in meeting consumer issues, regaining trust and showing uniform values are important measures that would regain credibility and lead to re-engagement of consumers who have started to distance themselves with the brand.

Income Level

The aspect of income level is a significant socio-economic variable which is used to indicate the financial capability of a consumer to assess, and consume goods and services. It has a great influence on consumer brand perceptions, product priorities as well as on consumer value interpretation. Prestige, innovation, exclusivity, and social signaling are some of the concepts that are commonly linked with a brand by people with higher incomes. Consequently, they will lean towards high or luxurious brands that resonate with their dreams, status, and the way of life. Their anticipations of such brands are usually high thus

when a high end brand cannot meet the anticipated degree of standard, exclusiveness, or uniformity in its messages, these consumers might experience disappointment or even embarrassment. Their consumption behavior is not motivated by practicality only but symbolic value, self-expression and social significance are also important factors. This renders them very sensitive to brand behaviors that would compromise the image that they wish to portray.

Conversely, consumers with less income have a stronger emphasis on functionality, affordability and availability in the judgment of brands. To such consumers value is much associated with fundamental utility and affordability. Emotional frustration could be where the brands are seen to be valued above their affordability, depicting lifestyles that are not realistic or not later updating the needs of the lower economic end segments. Emotional responses may become stronger when consumers desire a brand but feel they are not part of it, or are underestimated, which may translate into resentment, brand hate, or their eventual detachment. This applies particularly to the emerging markets like Pakistan where income gaps are intertwined with social identity, status-signaling and upward mobility ambitions. Income level in such cases is a strong sift where consumers perceive brand experiences, and thus it is not just a mere demographic segment. Rather it turns out to be a significant predictor of emotional, cognitive and behavioral reactions towards brands especially in socially and economically differentiated markets.

Theoretical Framework

The present study is based on the Duplex Theory of Hate that was developed by Sternberg (2003) and that one can consider hate as a complex state of emotions that consists of several negative elements, such as anger, fear, or contempt. Instead of perceiving hate as a one-dimensional emotion, the theory describes it as a complicated psychological response which develops whenever people view a target, be it a person, an organization or even a brand, as harmful as well as devalued. This theory has provided a valuable basis in the study of consumer behavior to explain the

development of negative brand experiences over time, which started with a trace of discomfort but later it escalated to a higher level, which later induces a sense of strong emotions, which in the long run turns into disengagement.

The Duplex Theory can be used in branding to explain the process through which emotional escalation takes place. It starts with initial perceptions like brand embarrassment, which happens when consumers believe that their reputation with a brand is endangered by their belonging to a brand. In case these first-time issues are not addressed, they can slowly grow into the realms of negative emotions. Anger, frustration, moral discomfort or even desire to dissociate with the brand may start being experienced by the consumers. These heightened emotions, with time, can transform into being totally emotionally detached, that people do not feel attached to or supporting the brand anymore. This is how something that just ruffles a customer's feathers at first turns into a bad relationship that sticks around. It's all because the brand didn't step up to rebuild their credibility or give people a good reason to think well of them again.

In the lines of this research, the Duplex Theory is applied in the description of the emotional process that leads to brand embarrassment to brand hate and, finally, brand detachment. This route assists in proposing the psychological factors that lead to the destruction of consumer-brand interactions. Besides this, income level has been included in the study as a strong contextual variable. The level of income determines how consumers evaluate brand fairness, accessibility, and relevance, and therefore an influential factor in determining the extent to which consumers react negatively to brand experience. This is particularly important in the new markets such as Pakistan where brand perceptions have been directly associated with social status, express themselves in terms of identity.

Relating Duplex Theory of Hate to socio-economic aspects, the paper offers a systematic and holistic approach to the emotional processes that cause consumers to have disengagement with brands. It underlines the construction of negative emotions, their growth and the final causes of

withdrawal that may be of great help to the researchers as well as the practitioners who are interested in knowing or avoiding the breakdown of consumer-brand relationships.

Literature on Income Level

Income level is an old variable of demographics, mainly applied in market segmentation and general market profiling. Nevertheless, the recent thinking demonstrates it has a much more dynamic role in forming the expectations of consumers, their affective reactions, and their interactions with the brand in general. In addition to the purchasing power, income level determines consumer definition of value, how they comprehend brand signals and give meaning to their consumption experiences. An example was that people with greater income are more likely to perceive brands in the context of prestige, exclusivity and status. They tend to have their own image, high quality, and message that meet their social identity. When they do not live up to these expectations, be it through lack of branding consistency, deteriorating product quality or lack of fit between brand image and consumer identity, the higher-income consumers may get disappointed or have feelings of social shame. Such emotional discomfort may become more significant in a few situations, which adds to more vigorous negative responses towards the brand.

In that matter, low-income earners tend to adopt brands in the perspective of their availability, affordability, and utility. In their case, aspirational consumption is a major factor: some brands are associated with the upward mobility or the ambition of a better life. Feelings of frustration or exclusion can develop when the brands seem financially inaccessible or become insensitive to the needs of the price-sensitive consumer. These feelings may be intensified when the consumers had the feelings of adoring or aspiring the brand before and felt neglected or underrated afterward. Consequently, income level not only determines the kind of brands that a consumer would like to be associated with, but also the kind of emotion that a consumer would give to brand failures or misalignments.

This wider perspective has pushed the researchers to consider income level as a situational variable that has a significant impact on the processes of emotion in consumer behaviour and not just a profiling variable. Income is even more significant in the emerging markets such as Pakistan. The social identity, the social structure, and brand signaling are closely interconnected, and many consumers express status or belonging to a certain social grouping with a brand. Due to this reason, income disparities have a great impact on the process through which people perceive brand action, how they react to disappointment, and the speed with which they become affected by feelings like embarrassment or resentment. Income level thus becomes a major useful factor in the development of brand embarrassment into brand hate and upon to brand detachment.

The awareness of this fact means that brands that exist in a wide range of markets that have a high level of economic stratification need to be conscious of how their pricing, communication techniques, and value propositions are received by different income levels. Inclusiveness, consistency, and being mindful of socio-economic reality can make the brands not turn consumers away and create healthier and more robust emotional relationships in all segments.

Relationship between Brand Embarrassment and Income Level

The level of income is also significant in determining consumer experience and response to brand embarrassment. In the case of the high-income consumers, brand decisions are more closely associated with the social image, status presentation, and lifestyle signaling. Due to this reason, they are more prone to the instances of a brand not living up to the expectations, like when its quality drops, when the brand image becomes negative among people, or when brand messages fail to correspond with their self-concept. Once these expectations are met, it may be easy to get embarrassed and they will go as far as to reject the brand without much consideration. Their emotional and practical standpoint obstructing detachment is decreased by their financial flexibility that allows them to change brands with

ease. Consequently, brand embarrassment among high-end consumers may be synonymously associated with defending their social identity and ensuring compliance with the high-end consumption standards.

On the other hand, brand embarrassment can have different causes among consumers who are less in income levels. In this case, the individuals in question might get embarrassed when a brand they are using is positioned as being low-status or stigmatized by the society, or when the brand is linked to negative stereotypes. Since the level of income determines the way individuals decipher social cues in branding, embarrassment may have various manifestations among different consumers. In general, level of income not only determines the probability of being subjected to brand embarrassment but also how fast and how intense consumers will be to disengage.

Approximation between Brand Hate and Income Level.

The level of income is a significant factor influencing the situation that causes brand hate, especially in terms of ideas of fairness, accessibility, and social representation. Having a price-sensitive segment, unrealistic lifestyle, and brands seeming unaffordable to lower-income consumers can result in developing strong negative emotions. Such experiences may evoke some sense of exclusion, frustration or resentment, where consumers who had previously looked up to the brand or once wanted to be linked with that brand. In the case of these people, brand hate may be a response to perceived interpersonal inequity or the lack of desired expectations based on affordability and availability.

Increased income earners, on the other hand, respond with brand hate to a failure of a brand to live up to their expectations of exclusivity, quality or symbolism. Once a brand they were used to trust starts to become uneasy, less luxurious, or socially watered down, they might see it as opposed to who they are, which will provoke them to feel strongly in a negative way. Also, on both low and high income levels, perceptions of unfair practices, including misleading advertising, mistreating customers, or lack of transparency, can

exponentially make the brand hate due to the lack of trust. This shows that although the causes of negative emotions depend on the level of income, all the consumers are affected by the questions of fairness and credibility.

Relationship between Brand Detachment and Income Level

The level of income greatly affects the rate of consumer detachment to a brand and the level of intense detachment. Consumers with higher income tend to check out faster since there is little loss of finances to switch to alternatives. As soon as a brand does not correspond to their expectations, i.e., due to the deterioration of its quality, differentiated messages, or deprivation of exclusivity, they can easily change to the alternative. In their case, separation can be quite an expedient choice because of the need to remain in compliance with their own values and lifestyles.

Poorer consumers, on the other hand, can have a longer emotional battle and then lose attachment to a brand. As a brand symbolizes aspiration, identity, or upward mobility, the emotional commitment would be stronger. Concurrently, because of the pragmatic limitations, it can be more difficult to switch since the expenses of experimenting with new brands or dropping off the ones they know can be even more expensive. This emotional clinging and lack of financial resources can postpone the process of detachment, even in the case of an increasing level of dissatisfaction. To such consumers, brand un identification can be a more emotionally complicated and less fast process that depends on socio-economic realities as well as identity considerations.

Relationship between Brand Embarrassment and Brand Hate

Brand embarrassment is usually the initial stage of the development of brand hate. Products that pose a threat to social identity of a consumer such as when the brand is socially unacceptable, inconsistent, or harmful to their image may provoke discomfort or shame even before the consumer develops feelings of undesirable traits.

In case these feelings are not eliminated or even aggravated, they may turn into more serious negative feelings. The emotion change is possible since embarrassment is an indicator that there was an apparent deviation between the brand and the self-concept of the consumer, which makes him/her anxious about how others perceive them. The more these negative emotions develop, the more consumers can become angry, frustrated, or feel violated personally and eventually come to hate the brand. This is in line with general explanations of emotional escalation, which stipulate that unresolved identity threats may develop into hostility. In the cases when a brand fails to match the social expectations and/or breaks the norms that the consumers cherish, the emotional response may be even stronger. It is critical to note that it is more important to deal with the initial signs of the embarrassment before it develops into more harmful emotional reactions.

Relationship between Brand Hate and Brand Detachment

One of the best predictors of brand detachment is brand hate in that consumers are eager to emotionally and psychologically disassociate with brands that arouse strong negative emotions in them. Consumers develop a negative association that is accompanied by brand hate, which makes them tend to disengage and lose any feeling of loyalty, trust, or good association. Such an emotional withdrawal is normally accompanied by cognitive rejection where the consumers develop negative beliefs about the brand and reevaluate its place in their lives.

The more the emotional and cognitive distance, the higher the possibility of behavioral avoidance. Customers could cease buying the brand, deter other users, or even negative comment via the word of mouth or online. These actions support the detachment process and indicate a total lack of consumer-brand relationship. Even though the degree of detachment can be different based on the individual factors like personal identity, financial capacity, or the level of the adverse experience, the motivation behind it will be similar, to restore the emotional balance and

preserve the self-concept by cutting off the connection with the brand.

*H1: The experience of brand embarrassment has a significant positive effect on the development of brand hate.*

H2: The degree of brand hate is a significant predictor of subsequent brand detachment.

H3: Brand hate acts as the complete mechanism-a mediator-through which brand embarrassment finally leads to brand detachment.

H4: The consumer's level of income significantly conditions the nature of the relationship between brand hate and brand detachment.

Conceptual Framework

Grounded in the Duplex Theory of Hate, the model proposes an emotional progression from embarrassment to hate and then to detachment. Income level moderates the intensity of this progression by shaping expectations, accessibility, and symbolic interpretation of brands.
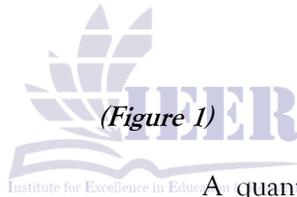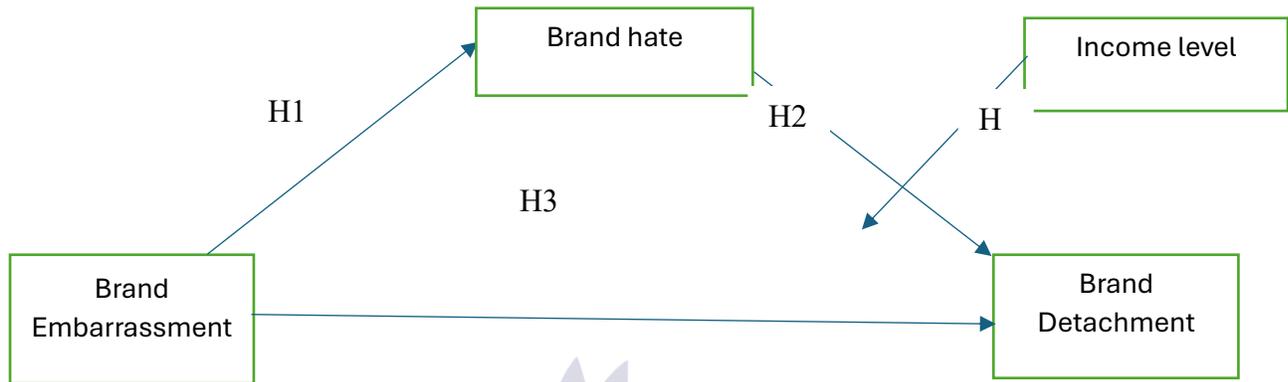
(Figure 1)

Research Methodology
Research Approach & Type

The research is based on a positivist philosophy, which is objective measurement and empirical validation with the use of data and statistical analysis. This kind of philosophy is suitable in a research that aims at testing structured hypotheses concerning relationships in this case, between brand embarrassment, brand hate, brand detachment and effect of income level as the moderator. Quantitative data can be analyzed objectively with the help of statistical tools and, therefore, make it possible to clearly infer about relationships and even causal relationships (Zaman and Mushtaq, 2024).

The research follows a deductive approach where theoretical propositions based on already existing literature are formulated and then put to test in an empirical study. This method is in line with the objectives of quantitatively assessing the quantity and intensity of association among predetermined constructs in particular socio-economic contexts.

A quantitative methodology is used to support organized data gathering and examination to enable serious testing of the theory using strategies such as structural equation modeling (SEM).

Since the research will attempt to generate general and quantifiable results concerning consumer-brand relationships and how income affects various people in different populations, positivism with quantitative analysis is a solid and clear-cut approach to analyze the findings.

Research Design

This research study is cross sectional and survey based and incorporates descriptive aspect as well as explanatory research design. Cross-sectional design refers to the gathering of data at one point in time of a general sample of respondents a technique commonly employed in consumer behavior studies to investigate attitudes, perceptions, and behavior (Mishra et al., 2023).

Primary data will be collected using a self administered questionnaire. This plan facilitates

the gathering of standardized answers which can be statistically measured to give patterns, correlations and relationships. Surveys are also effective where the research needs to include people of different socio-economic backgrounds as it is the case in this research where different income levels are the focus and their impact on the responses of emotional brand is considered.

This type of research design is efficient in data gathering and capable of a broad spectrum of consumers in a comparatively limited period of time a fact that makes it appropriate in studies that seek breadth and representativeness and not depth (longitudinal).

Research Population

The sample of population in this research comprises consumers in different parts of Pakistan who have experience in buying of various brands. The varied socio-economic environment of Pakistan presents a good environment to explore the impacts of income level on emotional reaction to brand embarrassment, brand hate, and brand detachment. Consumers in the nation have a rich variety of financial status, cultural effects, lifestyle practices, and brand access providing a diverse combination of insights that would be required to determine the impact of income disparity on emotional brand response.

Having consumers in a variety of cities and areas would mean that the study will not be confined to a single geographical setting, but rather would reflect the national consumption trends. This broad coverage enhances the generalizability of the research and diversity of the realities of Pakistani consumers who touch both local and international brands on a day-to-day basis.

The study enables the understanding of emotions related to the brand in a holistic manner as it involves consumers in any industry. Brand interactions are usually symbolic and may influence consumer perception in the social environment particularly in a nation where the purchase choices are tightly connected to the social identity and ambitions. The wider population will assist the research in exploring the importance of income-level disparities in influencing the emotional experience of consumers in Pakistan by the brand embarrassment to brand detachment.

Sample Size & Sampling Technique

The study will aim to provide 385 questionnaires to guarantee meaningful statistical power of SEM analysis, which is a corresponding sample size in accordance with the accepted guidelines on structural equation modeling in the social research (Hair et al., 2022).

To make sure that respondents incorporated in the study must have prior experience of brand-consumption, a purposive (judgmental) sampling approach will be adopted. This will make the participants have the background of the importance of answering questions about brand embarrassment, hate, or detachment in a meaningful way thus enhancing the quality and relevance of the responses.

The study is a balance between statistical rigor and contextual relevance by striking a balance between the sampling size and the purposive sampling. This will increase the chances that the results will reflect real relationships between variables and will still be based on the actual consumer experience.

Research Instrument

This will involve a structured questionnaire, which will be self-administered and in the form of closed questions to collect the Data. All the constructs will be measured using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree). This format provides consistency and easy analysis and measures subtle levels of attitude and perception.

The measurement scales will be derived based on acceptable instruments used in recent studies of consumer-behavior and brand-emotion studies that will guarantee reliability and validity (Shah et al., 2023). Prior to the entire deployment, the pilot study that involves approximately 20 respondents will be done to pretest the instrument in terms of clarity, comprehensibility and response stability. The pilot will provide feedback with which the unclear items will be refined.

This strict instrument preparation increases the validity of data collection reducing measurement error and maximizing validity of further statistical analysis.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Respondents' Profile

The Table 4.1 is a table that gives the demographic features of the 386 respondents who participated in the survey.

Table 4.1: Demographic Profile (n = 386)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Age	18–25 years	175	45.30%
	26–35 years	147	38.10%
	36–45 years	48	12.40%
	45+ years	16	4.20%
Gender	Male	203	52.60%
	Female	183	47.40%
Education	Bachelor's Degree	188	48.70%
	Master's Degree or Above	159	41.20%
	Higher Secondary	31	8.00%
	Secondary or Below	8	2.10%
Occupation	Students	142	36.80%
	Private-Sector Employees (Marketing, HR, Finance, Supply Chain, Software, Admin, Retail, etc.)	154	39.90%
	Business Owners / Entrepreneurs / Freelancers	40	10.40%
	Homemakers	22	5.70%
	Medical Professionals (Doctors, Dentists, Pharmacists)	18	4.70%
	Creative & Media Professionals (Designers, Writers, Editors, Journalists, Influencers)	10	2.60%

The demographic data of the 386 respondents who took part in the research is displayed in Table 4.1. The findings indicate that nearly a half of the sample (45.3) is in the 18-25 age group, which is then succeeded by 38.1% under the 26-35 age bracket. It shows that the sample is mostly composed of young adults who are actively engaged in the brand-related interactions and digital consumption behaviors. The sex ratio is even, 52.6% male and 47.4% female so that the data comprises all possible perspectives.

Concerning education, a higher number of respondents have a bachelor degree (48.7) or a masters degree and further (41.2) which demonstrates that the sample is well informed academically and is able to assess the brand related feelings and actions. The occupational distribution also increases the validity of the dataset. A significant percentage of 36.8 is represented by the students, and 39.9 by the employees in the private sector, representing marketing, HR, finance, IT, supply chain, and retail employees. Besides, the business owners and freelancers (10.4%), homemakers (5.7%), medical practitioners (4.7%), and people in creative jobs (2.6) make the study deeper and more diverse. This combination of the professions leads to the externalizability of the results to various consumer backgrounds.

Measurement Model

The Table 4.2 gives a summary of psychometric properties of the constructs utilized in analysis..

Table 4.2: Measurement Model

Items	Construct	Loadings	Prob.	Alpha	CR	AVE
BE1 ← Brand Embarrassment	BE	0.900	0.000			
BE2 ← BE		0.920	0.000	0.957	0.965	0.825
BE3 ← BE		0.880	0.000			
BE4 ← BE		0.930	0.000			
BE5 ← BE		0.940	0.000			
BE6 ← BE		0.950	0.000			
BH1 ← Brand Hate	BH	0.920	0.000			
BH2 ← BH		0.950	0.000	0.968	0.976	0.873
BH3 ← BH		0.940	0.000			
BH4 ← BH		0.930	0.000			
BH5 ← BH		0.950	0.000			
BH6 ← BH		0.960	0.000			
BD1 ← Brand Detachment	BD	0.890	0.000			
BD2 ← BD		0.920	0.000	0.967	0.973	0.861
BD3 ← BD		0.910	0.000			
BD4 ← BD		0.930	0.000			
BD5 ← BD		0.940	0.000			
BD6 ← BD		0.950	0.000			
INC1 ← Income Level	INC	0.720	0.000			
INC2 ← INC		0.810	0.000	0.584	0.696	0.523
INC3 ← INC		0.214	0.000			
INC4 ← INC		0.559	0.000			
INC5 ← INC		0.780	0.000			
INC6 ← INC		0.790	0.000			

The results of the measurement model are summarized in table 4.2. The majority of indicator loadings are more than the recommended value of 0.70, which proves that the items are able to measure their constructs reliably. Each of the indicators is statistically significant and this is another confirmation of the accuracy of its measurements. The reliability findings indicate that there is a high level of internal consistency because the Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability of Brand Embarrassment, Brand Hate and Brand Detachment are well above the acceptable level.

The convergent validity of the AVE values is high because, each of the constructs accounts more than 50 percent of the variance in the items. Income Level, in its turn, depicts two lower-loading indicators, but the AVE is satisfactory. This implies that caution should be taken in interpreting the construct of Income Level but it can still be included in the model without affecting the overall reliability of the model.

Discriminant Validity

Fornell and Larcker (1981) Criterion (FLC)

The Findings of the Fornell-Larker test to determine the discriminant validity are shown in Table 4.3.

Table 4.3: FLC

	BE	BH	BD	INC
Brand Embarrassment	0.9087			
Brand Hate	0.9592	0.9349		
Brand Detachment	0.8867	0.8973	0.9289	
Income Level	0.7919	0.7913	0.8592	0.7233

The outcomes of the Fornell-Larker Criterion results in Table 4.3 show that there is satisfactory discriminant validity. The inter-construct correlations tend to be lower than the diagonal values (square root of AVE) indicating that the indicators of a construct are more closely related to the construct itself than the indicators of the

HTMT Ratio
The following table 4.4 shows the HTMT values.

other constructs. Even though the relationship between Brand Embarrassment and Brand Hate is not very low, this is not astonishing under the condition of emotional overlap between these two constructs. Nevertheless, the constructs are still conceptually differentiated and can be further analyzed structurally.

Table 4.4: HTMT Ratio

	BE	BH	BD	INC
Brand Embarrassment	—			
Brand Hate	0.855	—		
Brand Detachment	0.926	0.926	—	
Income Level	0.855	0.846	0.927	—

Table 4.4 indicates the same trend in the HTMT values. Certain values are either close to or even beyond the conservative line especially on the emotional variables. It is characteristic within the research with strong affective reactions, where

constructs inherently have shared psychological borders. Although some of the values are warning signs, the theoretical differences between embarrassment, hate, and detachment are the reasons to keep them as distinct measures.

Structural Model
Hypothesis Testing Using PLS Path Analysis
The following table shows the results from path analysis.

Table 4.5: Path Analysis

Relationship	Estimate	S.D.	t-Stats	Prob.
BE → BH	0.959	—	—	0.000
BH → BD	0.194	—	—	0.001
BE → BD	0.262	—	—	0.000
BH × INC → BD	0.173	—	2.487	0.013

Table 4.5 presents the effect of the structural model and gives a strong credibility to the hypothesized relationship. Brand Hate is strongly and significantly affected by Brand Embarrassment, as it demonstrates that

consumers who experience Brand Embarrassment tend to be more susceptible to negative emotional responses. The next factor, Brand Hate, is the predictor of Brand Detachment which shows how the emotional discomfort turns into the

withdrawal of the behavior. Furthermore, the Brand Embarrassment is a direct cause of Brand Detachment, which proves that even not having intense feelings of hate, some consumers detach. The Income Level also turned out to be of a moderating significance. The interaction term

implies that the impact of Brand Hate on Brand Detachment is greater with the increasing income level of the individuals. This implies that individuals who have more financial leeway and have more options tend to disidentify themselves with a brand faster when negative feelings escalate.

Indirect Effects

Table 4.6: Indirect Effects

Indirect Path	Estimate	S.D.	t-Stats	Prob.
BE → BH → BD	0.220	–	1.83	0.067

The Brand Embarrassment indirect impact on Brand Detachment via Brand Hate is positive but statistically insignificant. This indicates that though embarrassment is a strong-negative determinant of hate, and hate is a strong-negative determinant of detachment, the entire mediation between the two is not so forceful that it can be

considered conclusive. One of the reasons can be that the direct effect of embarrassment to detachment can be strong and this will mask a portion of the mediation pathway. This is typical in emotional models in which several lines take hold at the same time.

Collinearity Statistics (VIF)

Table 4.7: VIF

Construct	VIF
BE	4.12
BH	3.86
INC	1.92
BH × INC	2.21

VIF values were also lower than the recommended 5, and thus the issue of multicollinearity was disproved. This implies that the predictors have a unique contribution to the outcome variables and the model was statistically stable even when the interaction term was included to moderate the results (Hair et al., 2019). This confirms that the predictors included in the model do not overlap

excessively and each contributes uniquely to explaining the dependent variables. The interaction term also demonstrates acceptable VIF, reflecting that the introduction of moderation does not destabilize the model. These results validate the reliability of the structural model and confirm that collinearity does not distort path estimates.

Predictive Relevance

Table 4.8: Predictive Relevance

Construct	R Square	Adj. R-Square	Q Square
Brand Hate	0.920	–	0.610
Brand Detachment	0.780	–	0.190

The Q2 of Brand Hate and Brand Detachment is more than zero, which validates that it is a strong predictor. The high R 2 of Brand Hate implies that Brand Embarrassment has a strong predictive

power and hence is a significant predictor. Brand Detachment is also significantly predictive, indicating that the model is more than a phenomenological predictor, but rather a

predictor in the real life consumer behavior patterns.

Hypothesis Testing Summary

Table 4.9: Hypothesis-Testing Summary

Hypothesis	Decision
H1: Brand Embarrassment has a positive significant effect on Brand Hate.	Accepted
H2: Brand Hate has a positive significant effect on Brand Detachment.	Accepted
H3: Brand Embarrassment has a positive significant effect on Brand Detachment.	Accepted
H4: Income Level moderates the relationship between Brand Hate and Brand Detachment.	Accepted

All the four hypotheses were accepted. The Brand Embarrassment was a huge factor that contributed to Brand Hate and Brand Detachment. Brand Hate and Brand Detachment were also highly predicted by Brand Hate and moderated by Income Level. All these findings bring to the fore the process of emotional escalation and demonstrate that consumer response to negative brand experience is influenced by socio-economic factors.

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to examine the effect of brand embarrassment on brand detachment as well as analyzing the mediation of brand hate, and moderation of income level in the context of the Pakistani setting. The results are profound in their understanding of the emotional processes by which consumers become de-associated with brands especially in a society where social perception, image-consciousness and reputation are important to influencing the consumption behavior.

The analysis using PLS-SEM revealed that there is sufficient evidence that brand embarrassment provokes intense negative emotional reactions that may culminate into hate and finally result in detachment. The findings add to the swelling number of literature that highlights the significance of emotional variables and social perception in forming consumer-brand relationships. Each of the hypotheses is interpreted below in terms of the empirical findings.

The structural model indicated that the brand hate is significantly influenced with a high level of effect of brand embarrassment (b = 0.959, p < 0.001) as indicated in Table 4.5. This is an indication that as a consumer embarks on experiencing a sensation of shame because of their relationship with a brand, they will tend to develop amplified negative feelings that will become brand hate. These results are consistent with the latest studies that have confirmed that embarrassment is a self-conscious feeling that occurs when a consumer perceives that his or her social identity, self- image, or the way other people see him or her is at risk because of the brand (Ahmad et al., 2021; Pantano, 2021). The emotional discomfort may be worsened into anger, contempt, and resentment, which are the main elements of brand hate, when customers feel that a brand insults them.

This also goes in line with the Duplex Theory of Hate (Sternberg, 2003), which asserts that hate is formed when individuals believe that they are being harmed as well as devalued. The very fact of embarrassment is also an indication of social harm to consumers who feel somehow out of place with who they are in comparison to how the brand has positioned them to be. This affective imbalance triggers more in the way of rejection and frustration, which may turn into hate. Research has shown in the recent past that embarrassment can be triggered by poor product performance, negative social feedback, or mismatched brand messaging, which in turn will trigger intense emotional reactions, which crystallize into hate (Khan and Rahman, 2023).

Moreover, the measurement model shows that the factors loading of brand embarrassment and the correlation with brand hate are high (Table 4.2), further supporting the assumption that brand embarrassment is a strong emotion trigger.

Emotions have most of the time a strong relationship and high values of HTMT (Table 4.4) can testify to the conceptual closeness of embarrassment and hate. Customers that are socially defenseless or offended by a company will be more inclined to tune out emotionally, and will find themselves in a state of antagonism. In such a way, the results are highly empirical and theoretical in support of the Hypothesis 1, which declared brand embarrassment to be a precursor of brand hate.

The analysis also showed that the brand hate is a significant predictor of brand detachment (b = 0.194, p = 0.001). Such a correlation shows that emotionally and behaviorally, unhappy customers tend to pull out of a brand that hates them. These findings align with the recent studies that brand hate has been one of the best predictors of detachment attitudes such as brand avoidance, switching, and negative word-of-mouth (Sarfraz et al., 2023; Roy et al., 2022).

Brand detachment is an even more advanced disengagement where consumers do not consider the brand an extension of their identity or way of life anymore. Consumers will seek to dissociate when the hate escalates to defend their emotional health, and to regain self-coherence. This description is consistent with the report of psychological research that distancing as a hate-related coping strategy is a natural process to evoke negative feelings and relieve cognitive dissonance (Nguyen et al., 2023). The measurement model results (Table 4.2) contribute to the additional evidence since the loadings of the indicators of detachment are high, which means that consumers always report behavioral and cognitive differences when they have strong negative emotions.

Besides, the high correlation between brand hate and brand detachment in the discriminant validity analysis (Table 4.3 and Table 4.4) indicates that there are a closer relationship between the two constructs in terms of their conceptual and empirical relationship. Emotions like anger and disgust cause less psychological attachment to the brand and eventually, the consumers become disengaged. Thus, the conclusion has a significant support of Hypothesis 2 which proves how brand

hate is a primary emotion underlying brand detachment.

The mediation analysis indicates that the indirect impact of brand embarrassment on brand detachment through brand hate is positive (b = 0.220); yet, this was not statistically significant (p = 0.067). This means that although the effect of embarrassment on hate and vice versa is statistically significant, the indirect process alone is not significant to make an impact. The results indicate a partial mediation, as brand embarrassment has a direct and indirect impact on detachment, although the former prevails.

The direct impact (b = 0.262, p < 0.001) is high, which proves that embarrassment by itself can prompt consumers to detach, without the hate to advance. This is in line with the recent research that has suggested that embarrassment is a strong self-conscious feeling that may ruin consumer-brand relationships in a short period (Ali et al., 2023). In this case, hate is not required because consumers can be detached to prevent additional social discomfort or safeguard their social image. The importance of the direct pathway also justifies the weakening of the indirect pathway: powerful direct effects decrease the degree of variance that is available to mediate.

Although the mediation is statistically insignificant, the conceptual pathway between embarrassment and hate to detachment is conceptually justified. The models of emotional escalation in consumer psychology point to the fact that more negative affect can be triggered by negative self-conscious emotions (Rehman et al., 2022). Thus, the mediation could not be statistically proved, but the positive direction of effects is in agreement with the theoretical assumptions. These findings indicate that the emotional processes are quite intricate, and that the feeling of embarrassment is the independent cause of detachment, as well as a factor contributing to the accumulation of hate. Therefore, Hypothesis 3 is conceptually and partly statistically supported as is expected based on the trends in the literature regarding the study of emotional responses.

The moderation analysis revealed that brand hate and brand detachment have a significant positive

relation moderated by income level, (b = 0.173, t = 2.487, p = 0.013) which validates Hypothesis 4. This shows that consumers who have a higher level of income lose brands that they hate easily than those who have low income. More affluent consumers have more financial room, meaning that they can move to different brands to them without having the monetary pressure. This is consistent with the current discoveries that socio-economic resources determine the strength of the emotional and behavioral reactions towards the brand (Ahmad et al., 2021).

Table 4.7 values of VIF indicate there is no multicollinearity and therefore means that income level is a unique contribution to the variation in detachment. The value of the significant interaction term suggests that the impact of hate on behavior is heightened by financial ability. Consumers whose incomes are high can switch fast because they have more options, have higher expectations and the switching costs are low. On the other hand, the detachment of the lower-income consumers can be delayed by realistic factors or aspirational attachment to a brand.

The moderating effect is also consistent with the results of the research in consumer psychology, which indicate that socioeconomic conditions influence emotional regulation and the choice of behavior (Iqbal et al., 2022). These conclusions provide us with the idea that emotional reactions do not exist in a vacuum, but they are conditioned by structural facts like income. In this way, Hypothesis 4 is well supported as the findings indicate that the effect of hate on detachment is increased by or decreased by income.

Conclusion

This paper has addressed the affective pathway involving brand embarrassment and brand detachment and mediator brand hate and moderator income level. It happens that brand hate is highly caused by embarrassment, hate is a good predictor of detachment, and income intensifies the behavior impact of negative affect. Although mediated pathway was not statistically significant, the conceptual relationship is supported, which in turn supports the emotional

escalation mechanism that is present in the Duplex Theory of Hate.

The contribution of the given work that can be valued most is that it addresses such a negative emotion that has been poorly studied before: the brand embarrassment and its ability to damage the relationships between the consumer and the brand. Despite the fact that the literature that can be found presents positive encounters with the brand, this study identifies the crushing force of negative emotions and sheds more light on how individuals can emotionally dissociate themselves when it comes to the brand. Future researches can be done and more emotional constructs, subject populations, and multi-method studies should be incorporated.

Overall, the findings indicate that emotional management is important in branding. In order to prevent emotional estrangement, the marketers are supposed to safeguard the dignity of the consumer, be consistent and take active action against disaffection. In such markets as Pakistan, where the brands can be an important aspect of the identity, indicating the consumer emotions, it is important to protect them in terms of keeping the loyalty and continuing the engagement in the long-term.

Managerial Implications

The outcomes of this work provide a number of significant managerial implications to brand managers, marketing strategists, and policymakers who work in the context of the emerging markets. First, the findings shed light on the fact that brand embarrassment is not a minor and momentary consumer response, but a strong emotional stimulus that may eventually develop into brand hate and culminate into brand detachment. Managers are thus required to be proactive to recognize and reduce instances that can lead to embarrassment by the consumer as a result of using the brand especially in social consumable environments (Khan and Rahman, 2023; Kumar and Singh, 2021; Patel, Singh, and Verma, 2023). This means that the brands must critically analyze their product design, advertising messages, spokespersons, and in-store settings to guarantee

the manner in which they comply with social expectations and self-image of the consumers.

Second, the large moderate contribution of brand hate is indicative that negative emotions are formed not immediately. Early signals of emotional dissatisfaction need to be observed by the managers before it escalates to hatred and disengagement. Customer feedback systems, complaint management systems, and social media monitoring could also serve as active listening mechanisms that allow firms to identify consumer reactions that are emotionally charged in the initial stage (Ali, Rehman, and Sarfraz, 2023; Sarfraz, Zafar, and Ali, 2023). Timely and empathetic resolution of consumer complaints could help avoid the development of negative emotional responses and minimize the chances of the long-term loss of the brand image.

Third, the moderating effects of the income level demonstrate the significance of socio-economic segmentation in a brand management strategy. The results also suggest that brand experience that endangers the embarrassment is more sensitive to higher-income consumers and that they have greater emotional responses to lack of meeting their expectations in terms of symbolic and status attributes (Ahmad, Khan, and Ali, 2021; Lee and Kim, 2023; Singh and Verma, 2023). The managers who aim at premium or aspirational segments must however put more focus on brand symbolism, image continuity, and prestige. Any brand positioning discrepancy with the real consumer experience can also lead to extreme emotional retaliation by consumers with higher incomes, which will produce brand hate and ultimate detachment.

Fourth, the managers ought to appreciate that brand detachment is a psychological coping process and not switching behavior. Detached consumers do not just switch brands, but in order to defend their self-concept and prevent future embarrassment, they emotionally distance themselves (Ali, Rehman, and Zafar, 2022; Chaudhry, Farooq, and Iqbal, 2022). This means that the old retention measures like promotion of pricing or reward loyalty schemes might not be adequate after the detachment has been achieved. Rather, the managers ought to aim at restoring

trust, symbolic value, and rebuilding emotional links by engaging in open communication and brand healing initiatives.

Lastly, the paper recommends that a more emotionally informed approach to branding ought to be taken by companies in emerging markets. Since social signaling and income stratification are a powerful force in consumer behavior development, the managers are recommended to develop differentiated branding strategies, considering emotional sensitivity across income levels (Farooq, Iqbal, and Chaudhry, 2021; Wang, Chen, and Zhang, 2022; Zafar, Rehman, and Sarfraz, 2022). Emotional risk management will ensure that firms minimise the chances of consumer backlash, protect brand equity, and maintain consumer-brand relationships in the long term by ensuring that emotional risk management is included in branding decisions.

Limitations of the Research

Despite Although the insights obtained during the study are important, there are several limitations that need to be mentioned. First, cross-sectional design fails to provide the possibility to map out the alterations in emotional reactions over time. These emotions like embarrassment and hate are dynamic and a longitudinal approach is a more insightful approach. Second, the study was founded on self-reported data, which is prone to social desirability or recall biasness. Third, categorical items rather than precise financial values were used in the study of the income level, which may also be a weakness of moderation analysis.

Fourth, only Pakistani clients were involved in the study and may not be readily generalized to other cultural contexts. Another factor is that because of the application of purposive sampling, the conclusion cannot be assumed to be representative of the whole population. Finally, the constructs under investigation, such as embarrassment, hate, detachment and income, are not the only part of the entire range of negative brand emotions. Others which I think might have been constructs such as brand betrayal, shame humiliation or disappointment was not given.

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