

Empirical Testing of a Consumer Misbehavior Model in Automotive After-Sales Services: Examining Antecedents, Response Strategies, and Consequences Using Structural Equation Modeling



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Abstract: The present study aimed to empirically test a model of consumer misbehavior in automotive after-sales services, with emphasis on its antecedents, response strategies, consequences, and contextual and moderating factors. This study constituted the quantitative phase of a sequential exploratory mixed-methods design, in which the model had previously been developed during the qualitative phase using grounded theory. Data were collected from 350 customers of authorized Iran Khodro and SAIPA after-sales service centers in Tehran through multistage cluster sampling and a researcher-developed questionnaire. After confirming the validity and reliability of the instrument, the model was tested using partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) in SmartPLS 4. The results showed that sanctions ($\beta = 0.462$) and service disruption ($\beta = 0.289$) had positive and significant effects on consumer misbehavior, whereas the effect of pressure norms was not significant. Consumer misbehavior had significant negative effects on rebuilding trust and dialogue ($\beta = -0.207$) and returning to values and cultural identity ($\beta = -0.209$). Fear of imagined consequences also weakened both strategies, with coefficients of $\beta = -0.441$ and $\beta = -0.365$, respectively. Social distrust, organizational structure and accountability, and social erosion had significant effects on rebuilding trust and dialogue, whereas their relationships with returning to values, as well as the effects of initial interaction quality, were largely nonsignificant. Rebuilding trust and dialogue reduced damage to brand and cultural capital ($\beta = -0.303$) and the reproduction of the cycle of anger and dissatisfaction ($\beta = -0.118$). Returning to values also reduced damage to brand and cultural capital ($\beta = -0.210$), although its effect on the cycle of anger and dissatisfaction was not significant. Among the moderating effects, only the moderating role of organizational structure and accountability in the relationship between consumer misbehavior and returning to values was significant ($\beta = 0.091$). The findings demonstrate the multidimensional nature of consumer misbehavior and highlight the importance of organizational accountability and relationship repair.

Keywords: consumer misbehavior, after-sales services, automotive industry, trust rebuilding, service disruption, organizational accountability, structural equation modeling

1. Introduction

After-sales service has become a strategically important component of contemporary customer relationship management because the customer's evaluation of a product does not terminate at the point of purchase. Rather, post-purchase encounters involving maintenance, repair, warranty fulfillment, complaint handling, technical

support, and service recovery continuously reshape customers' perceptions of the organization and influence subsequent behavioral responses. In industries characterized by durable and technically complex products, such as the automotive industry, the quality of after-sales service can be particularly consequential because customers may repeatedly interact with authorized service providers throughout the product life cycle. Service quality, perceived price fairness, and the overall quality of the customer experience can therefore affect customer engagement and the continuation of the firm–customer relationship [1]. More broadly, service quality research has consistently emphasized the importance of reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and the systematic management of service encounters in shaping customers' evaluations of organizations [2]. Evidence from after-sales settings similarly indicates that perceived service quality contributes to customer satisfaction, retention, and loyalty, highlighting the strategic importance of post-purchase service systems for maintaining long-term customer relationships [3]. Accordingly, after-sales service should be understood not merely as an operational extension of the core product but as a relational arena in which customer expectations, organizational performance, interpersonal interactions, and perceptions of fairness intersect.

This relational arena is especially sensitive to service failure. Service failures occur when the service delivered deviates from customer expectations, contractual promises, procedural standards, or perceived norms of fairness. Their consequences can extend beyond temporary dissatisfaction because customers frequently interpret service failures as signals concerning organizational competence, integrity, responsiveness, or concern for the customer. The extensive literature on service failure and recovery demonstrates that the consequences of failure depend not only on the technical magnitude of the problem but also on how organizations acknowledge the failure, communicate with customers, compensate for losses, and restore perceptions of fairness and control [4]. The gap between customers' stated intentions and their actual post-failure behaviors further suggests that behavioral reactions to failure and recovery are contingent on both failure severity and satisfaction with recovery efforts [5]. In high-involvement contexts such as automotive services, where failures can involve substantial financial costs, delays, repeated visits, uncertainty, and disruption to daily activities, ineffective recovery may intensify dissatisfaction and transform a routine service problem into an adversarial interaction. Research on recall situations in the automotive sector likewise suggests that perceived distributive justice and the severity of the problem can influence affective trust and corporate reputation [6]. Thus, understanding customer behavior in after-sales services requires attention not only to the original service failure but also to the relational processes through which the organization responds to it.

One particularly consequential response to unsuccessful service encounters is consumer misbehavior. Consumer misbehavior can be understood as behavior that violates generally accepted norms governing marketplace interactions and that may harm employees, organizations, other customers, or the broader service environment. Such behaviors may include verbal aggression, incivility, intimidation, excessive hostility, deliberate disruption, opportunistic conduct, or other forms of norm violation during customer–employee encounters. The literature on customer mistreatment demonstrates that hostile customer behavior can generate significant affective, attitudinal, and behavioral consequences for service employees, making it an important organizational rather than merely interpersonal problem [7]. A systematic review of customer incivility similarly shows that inappropriate customer conduct can affect employee well-being, emotional responses, and service-related outcomes, while also creating broader operational challenges for service organizations [8]. During hostile encounters, employees must frequently regulate their emotions while simultaneously attempting to maintain service performance and protect the customer relationship, and different emotion-regulation patterns may have consequences for both performance and well-

being [9]. These findings indicate that consumer misbehavior cannot be adequately examined as an isolated expression of individual anger; rather, it should be analyzed as part of a dynamic service system in which customer behavior, employee responses, organizational structures, and previous service experiences mutually influence one another.

The development of consumer misbehavior may be particularly likely when customers perceive prolonged or repeated disruption in the service process. After-sales encounters often involve interdependent resources, including time, information, technical expertise, spare parts, communication, and customer cooperation. When these resources are depleted or poorly coordinated, service encounters can become co-destructive rather than value-creating. Research applying conservation of resources theory to after-sales service encounters indicates that resource losses and stressful interactions can contribute to co-destruction within the service process [10]. Internal organizational processes are also important because customers' perceptions of service quality partly depend on how effectively organizations coordinate procedures, information flows, personnel, and service delivery mechanisms [11]. In automotive after-sales services, service disruption may therefore encompass more than a single technical breakdown; it may include delays, inconsistent communication, lack of parts, repeated referrals, ambiguity regarding responsibility, and interruptions in the expected service trajectory. These conditions can increase frustration and perceived loss of control, potentially making hostile or norm-violating responses more likely.

Uncertainty provides another important psychological mechanism through which difficult service environments may shape consumer responses. Consumers exposed to ambiguous information, uncertain repair outcomes, changing costs, or unclear service timelines may intensify information seeking as they attempt to regain control over the situation, although the relationship between uncertainty and information search may not always be linear [12]. Decision-making under conditions of uncertainty can also be interpreted through the lens of prospect theory, according to which individuals evaluate outcomes relative to reference points and may respond differently to perceived gains and losses [13]. In service failure contexts, customers may interpret unexpected repair costs, delays, or unmet commitments as losses relative to what they believed they were entitled to receive. When repeated disruptions accumulate, customers may become increasingly sensitive to further negative outcomes, while imagined or anticipated consequences may influence their willingness to engage in constructive dialogue or relationship repair. This suggests that perceived and anticipated consequences should be incorporated into explanations of how customers respond after misbehavior has occurred.

Social influence is another potentially important antecedent of consumer conduct. Consumer behavior is rarely formed in complete isolation from the beliefs and behavioral expectations of others. Research on social influence has demonstrated that peers, reference groups, social norms, and interpersonal cues can shape consumer judgments and actions [14]. Normative social influence can motivate individuals to adjust their behavior to perceived group expectations, especially when conformity provides social acceptance or reduces uncertainty [15]. The broader conformity literature likewise shows that people may modify their judgments and behavior in response to explicit or implicit social pressure, although the strength of conformity depends on situational and individual conditions [16]. Consequently, pressure norms may provide a theoretically meaningful explanation for some forms of consumer misbehavior: customers who perceive aggressive complaining, public confrontation, or harsh treatment of service personnel as socially legitimate or effective may become more willing to reproduce such behavior. At the same time, social influence effects may vary across contexts, making empirical testing necessary rather than assuming that normative pressure will automatically produce misbehavior.

The cultural and symbolic meanings surrounding consumer behavior also deserve attention. Symbolic interactionism emphasizes that social behavior emerges through interaction and through meanings that individuals attribute to objects, roles, identities, and situations [17]. A service encounter is therefore not merely an economic transaction but also a symbolic exchange in which customers and employees interpret respect, status, fairness, responsibility, and recognition. Consumer behavior may likewise be shaped by cultural understandings that influence how individuals interpret marketplace relationships and socially acceptable responses [18]. Social identity processes may affect how people evaluate collective norms, relational cohesion, and appropriate behavior within a group context; research on social identity content has demonstrated that identity-related perceptions can influence cohesion, efficacy, and behavioral outcomes [19]. In the context of consumer misbehavior, these perspectives suggest that a return to values and cultural identity may function as a potential response strategy through which individuals reinterpret conflict, activate socially meaningful standards, and move away from destructive patterns of interaction.

Trust constitutes another core mechanism in post-failure relationships. Trust reduces relational uncertainty by allowing customers to expect that an organization will behave competently, reliably, and appropriately, whereas distrust can heighten vigilance and amplify negative interpretations of organizational actions. Contemporary research distinguishes trust and distrust as important drivers of customer behavior and shows that communication can play a central role in shaping their effects [20]. Customer satisfaction, perceived value, and trust are also closely associated with loyalty-oriented outcomes, reinforcing the importance of trust as a mechanism linking experience with continued relationships [21]. In complaint situations, customer and employee empathy may influence post-purchase behavior and complaint recovery by affecting the emotional quality of the encounter [22]. These findings are particularly relevant to the strategy of rebuilding trust and dialogue. Where previous interactions have become adversarial, a deliberate process of transparent communication, empathetic engagement, acknowledgement of customer concerns, and credible organizational response may help redirect the relationship away from escalating conflict.

Relationship repair, however, depends not only on interpersonal communication but also on the organizational context in which such communication occurs. Interpersonal relationships in organizations operate through relational structures that channel information, shape interpretation, and affect how organizational members engage with one another [23]. Customer relationship management similarly requires organizational systems capable of integrating information, responding consistently to customer needs, and developing coordinated strategies for relationship maintenance [24]. In the context of service failures, accountability is particularly important because customers need to identify who is responsible for addressing the problem and whether the organization possesses mechanisms for corrective action. Weak accountability, fragmented authority, or inconsistent procedures can make dialogue appear symbolic rather than substantive, whereas clear organizational responsibility may strengthen recovery efforts. For this reason, organizational structure and accountability can be expected not only to exert direct effects on relationship-repair strategies but also to condition the effects of consumer misbehavior on subsequent responses.

The consequences of unresolved misbehavior and failed recovery may extend from the immediate service interaction to customer engagement, organizational reputation, and brand-related outcomes. Negative customer engagement behaviors can emerge through a formation process involving adverse experiences, emotions, cognitions, and subsequent behavioral reactions [25]. Such negative engagement may include unfavorable communication, active opposition, or other behaviors that damage the organization's relationship with customers.

In digitally connected environments, these consequences can expand rapidly because customer grievances may move from private interactions to public communication spaces. Research on organizational social media crises illustrates the importance of managing contingent customer relationships and communication during periods of reputational threat [26]. Therefore, failures to rebuild trust and establish dialogue after consumer misbehavior may contribute to damage to the brand and its cultural capital, particularly when negative narratives become socially shared and incorporated into collective interpretations of the organization.

Repeated negative encounters may also contribute to a self-reinforcing cycle of anger and dissatisfaction. Dissatisfaction can intensify hostile interaction, hostile interaction can worsen the quality of the service encounter, and the deteriorating encounter can generate further dissatisfaction. Research on customers' perceptions of service settings demonstrates that evaluations of service emerge from multiple interconnected elements rather than isolated attributes [27]. In such settings, employees may perceive aggressive interactions as threatening or unfair, respond defensively, and inadvertently reinforce customers' negative beliefs. The resulting reciprocal escalation can gradually institutionalize adversarial patterns within service environments. By contrast, trust rebuilding and constructive dialogue may interrupt this cycle by reframing the conflict and creating opportunities for explanation, acknowledgement, and mutually acceptable solutions. A values-based response may similarly reduce some forms of reputational damage by reorienting interactions toward shared expectations and culturally meaningful standards, although its effects may differ from those of direct trust-repair mechanisms.

The automotive sector provides an especially important context for examining these relationships because it combines high financial involvement, technologically complex products, recurring maintenance requirements, and dependence on authorized service networks. In the Iranian automotive industry, governance, ownership, institutional arrangements, and policy implementation have created distinctive organizational conditions that influence firm performance and accountability [28]. At the after-sales level, research on ISACO has identified multiple strategic and communication-related factors associated with customers' satisfaction with automotive after-sales services, further demonstrating that satisfaction depends on a system of managerial and communicative components rather than on technical repair alone [29]. Under such conditions, external pressures can also intensify operational constraints. Sanctions may affect supply chains, access to components, service continuity, costs, and the ability of organizations to meet customer expectations, thereby creating an institutional backdrop against which customers interpret service failures and organizational responsibility. Consequently, sanctions and service disruption can be conceptualized as antecedent conditions that may contribute to consumer misbehavior, while organizational accountability can influence whether subsequent conflict is successfully repaired.

Despite the growing literature on service quality, customer mistreatment, service recovery, trust, negative customer engagement, and social influence, these streams of research are often examined separately. Service quality studies typically emphasize satisfaction and loyalty, whereas customer mistreatment research frequently focuses on consequences for employees. Service recovery scholarship concentrates on organizational responses to failures, while studies of social influence and identity address broader behavioral mechanisms. This fragmentation limits understanding of consumer misbehavior as a process that simultaneously includes antecedent pressures, problematic behavior, response strategies, contextual conditions, moderating mechanisms, and organizational consequences. A more integrated model is therefore required to explain not only why misbehavior occurs but also what happens after it occurs, which mechanisms can redirect the relationship, and under what organizational and social conditions those mechanisms become more or less effective.

Accordingly, examining consumer misbehavior through an integrated structural framework provides an opportunity to connect macro-level pressures, service-level disruptions, social influences, interpersonal dynamics, organizational accountability, trust repair, cultural responses, and brand-related consequences within a single empirical model. Such an approach is particularly valuable for automotive after-sales services because the customer relationship often persists for years and is repeatedly tested through repair and maintenance encounters. By simultaneously considering sanctions, service disruption, pressure norms, social distrust, social erosion, fear of imagined consequences, interaction quality, organizational structure and accountability, rebuilding trust and dialogue, return to values and cultural identity, the cycle of anger and dissatisfaction, and damage to brand and cultural capital, the analysis can provide a more comprehensive explanation of how dysfunctional service interactions emerge and evolve.

Therefore, the aim of the present study was to empirically test a multidimensional model of consumer misbehavior in automotive after-sales services by examining its antecedents, response strategies, consequences, contextual factors, and moderating mechanisms using structural equation modeling.

2. Methods and Materials

The present research was a quantitative study employing a descriptive-correlational approach and was conducted to empirically test the model of consumer misbehavior in automotive after-sales services. The conceptual model of the study had previously been developed during the exploratory phase, and in the present study, the relationships among its constructs were tested using quantitative data.

The statistical population consisted of customers of authorized Iran Khodro and SAIPA after-sales service centers in Tehran. Multistage cluster sampling was employed, through which a total of 20 authorized dealerships, comprising 10 Iran Khodro dealerships and 10 SAIPA dealerships, were selected from five geographical areas of Tehran. After incomplete or invalid questionnaires were excluded, data from 350 customers were included in the final analysis.

Data were collected using a researcher-developed 54-item questionnaire based on a five-point Likert scale. The questionnaire comprised the constructs of consumer misbehavior, sanctions, service disruption, pressure norms, social erosion, social distrust, return to values and cultural identity, rebuilding trust and dialogue, fear of imagined consequences, organizational structure and accountability, initial interaction quality, reproduction of the cycle of anger and dissatisfaction, and damage to brand and cultural capital. The content validity of the instrument was assessed by 10 experts using the Content Validity Ratio (CVR) and Content Validity Index (CVI), and a pilot study was also conducted with 15 customers. In the final stage, construct reliability and validity were evaluated using factor loadings, Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, average variance extracted (AVE), the Fornell-Larcker criterion, and the heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT).

Table 1. Structure of the Research Questionnaire

Construct	Number of Items
Consumer misbehavior	6
Sanctions	4
Service disruption	4
Pressure norms	4
Other model constructs	4 items each
Total	54 items

Partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) using SmartPLS 4 was employed to test the model and research hypotheses. The measurement model was evaluated using reliability and validity indices, while the structural model was assessed using the variance inflation factor (VIF), coefficient of determination (R^2), path coefficients, and the bootstrapping procedure.

3. Findings and Results

Data from 350 respondents were included in the final analysis. Of the respondents, 62% were men and 38% were women, with the largest proportion of the sample belonging to the 30–40-year age group (39.4%). In addition, 41.4% held a bachelor's degree, 38.9% had between three and five years of experience using after-sales services, and 89.7% had visited an after-sales service center during the preceding six months. Regarding overall satisfaction, 43.4% of respondents reported low or very low levels of satisfaction.

Before testing the hypotheses, the reliability and validity of the measurement model were examined. During the initial assessment, item Q15, which belonged to the pressure norms construct, was removed from the model because of its low factor loading. After model modification, the factor loadings of the remaining items ranged from 0.781 to 0.907. Moreover, Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, and AVE values for all constructs were within acceptable ranges. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Results of the Reliability and Convergent Validity Assessment of the Measurement Model

Construct	Factor Loading Range	Cronbach's Alpha	CR	AVE
Consumer misbehavior	0.798–0.887	0.923	0.940	0.723
Sanctions	0.795–0.884	0.866	0.909	0.714
Service disruption	0.794–0.879	0.870	0.911	0.720
Pressure norms	0.810–0.907	0.831	0.895	0.739
Social erosion	0.795–0.886	0.875	0.915	0.729
Social distrust	0.814–0.879	0.871	0.911	0.720
Return to values and cultural identity	0.808–0.892	0.860	0.905	0.705
Rebuilding trust and dialogue	0.833–0.887	0.891	0.924	0.754
Fear of imagined consequences	0.800–0.871	0.868	0.910	0.717
Organizational structure and accountability	0.810–0.884	0.859	0.904	0.702
Initial interaction quality	0.781–0.907	0.852	0.898	0.689
Reproduction of the cycle of anger and dissatisfaction	0.803–0.894	0.870	0.911	0.719
Damage to brand and cultural capital	0.856–0.878	0.890	0.923	0.751

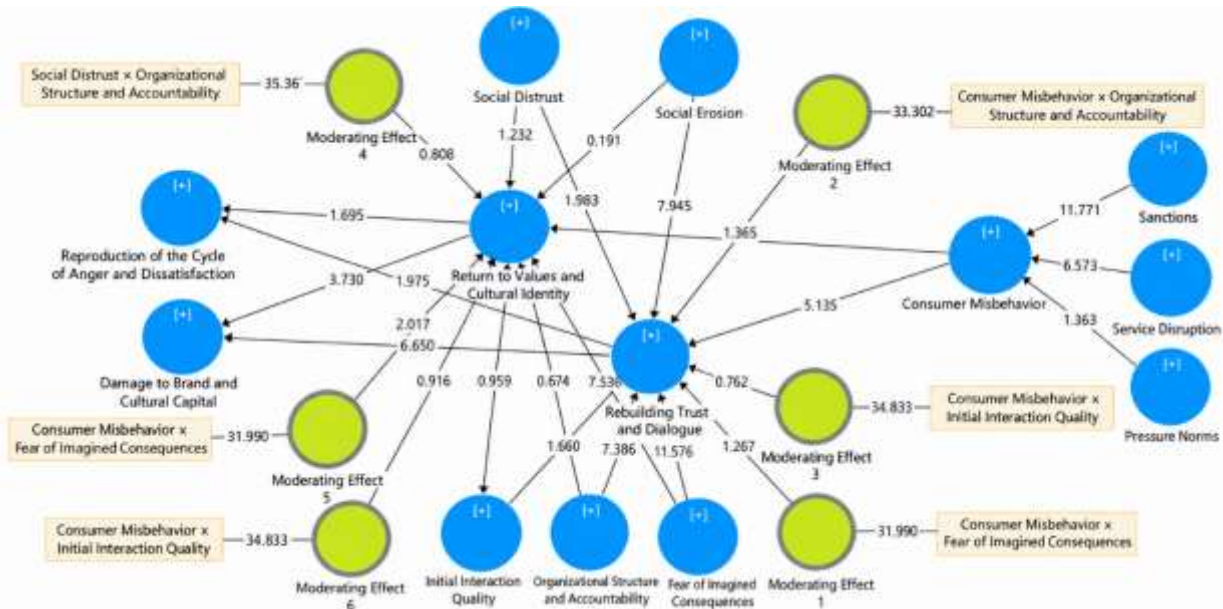
Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability values exceeded 0.70 for all constructs, while all AVE values were greater than 0.50; therefore, the internal consistency reliability and convergent validity of the constructs were confirmed. Discriminant validity was also established based on the Fornell–Larcker criterion and HTMT, such that the square root of the AVE for each construct exceeded its correlations with the other constructs, and all HTMT values were below 0.90.

After confirming the measurement model, the structural model was evaluated in terms of collinearity, explanatory power, and model fit indices. VIF values ranged from 1.604 to 3.171, indicating the absence of serious multicollinearity problems. The highest explanatory power was observed for rebuilding trust and dialogue, with $R^2 = 0.467$, followed by consumer misbehavior, with $R^2 = 0.357$. The principal structural model assessment results are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Structural Model Assessment Indices

Index	Value
VIF range	1.604–3.171
R ² for consumer misbehavior	0.357
R ² for rebuilding trust and dialogue	0.467
R ² for return to values and cultural identity	0.197
R ² for damage to brand and cultural capital	0.169
R ² for reproduction of the cycle of anger and dissatisfaction	0.029
SRMR – Saturated model	0.041
SRMR – Estimated model	0.101
NFI – Saturated model	0.828
NFI – Estimated model	0.799
RMS Theta	0.096

Bootstrapping was used to test the relationships specified in the model, with a *t*-statistic greater than 1.96 and a *p*-value below .05 considered the criteria for statistical significance. Figure 1 presents the structural model of the study based on the *t*-values.

Figure 1. Structural Model of the Study Based on *t*-Values

The results showed that sanctions ($\beta = 0.462$, $t = 11.771$, $p < .001$) and service disruption ($\beta = 0.289$, $t = 6.573$, $p < .001$) had positive and significant effects on consumer misbehavior; therefore, H1 and H2 were supported. Pressure norms did not have a significant effect on consumer misbehavior, and thus H3 was not supported. Furthermore, consumer misbehavior had significant negative effects on rebuilding trust and dialogue ($\beta = -0.207$, $t = 5.139$, $p < .001$) and return to values and cultural identity ($\beta = -0.209$, $t = 4.002$, $p < .001$); consequently, H4 and H5 were supported.

Among the contextual factors, social distrust ($\beta = 0.083$, $t = 1.983$, $p = .048$), organizational structure and accountability ($\beta = 0.314$, $t = 7.386$, $p < .001$), and social erosion ($\beta = 0.339$, $t = 7.945$, $p < .001$) had significant effects on rebuilding trust and dialogue; therefore, H6, H10, and H12 were supported. Fear of imagined consequences also had significant negative effects on rebuilding trust and dialogue ($\beta = -0.441$, $t = 11.576$, $p < .001$) and return to values

and cultural identity ($\beta = -0.365$, $t = 7.530$, $p < .001$); thus, H8 and H9 were supported. In contrast, the relationships associated with H7, H11, H13, H14, and H15 were not statistically significant.

Regarding the consequences of the response strategies, rebuilding trust and dialogue had significant negative effects on damage to brand and cultural capital ($\beta = -0.303$, $t = 6.650$, $p < .001$) and reproduction of the cycle of anger and dissatisfaction ($\beta = -0.118$, $t = 1.979$, $p = .048$); therefore, H16 and H17 were supported. Return to values and cultural identity also had a significant negative effect on damage to brand and cultural capital ($\beta = -0.210$, $t = 3.730$, $p < .001$), supporting H18, whereas H19 was not supported.

Finally, among the six hypothesized moderating effects, only the moderating effect of organizational structure and accountability on the relationship between consumer misbehavior and return to values and cultural identity was statistically significant ($\beta = 0.091$, $t = 2.017$, $p = .044$); therefore, H24 was supported. The remaining moderating relationships, corresponding to H20, H21, H22, H23, and H25, were not statistically significant. Overall, 14 of the 25 research hypotheses were supported, whereas 11 hypotheses were not supported.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study empirically tested a multidimensional model of consumer misbehavior in automotive after-sales services by examining antecedent conditions, response strategies, contextual factors, moderating mechanisms, and subsequent consequences. The findings showed that sanctions and service disruption significantly increased consumer misbehavior, whereas pressure norms did not exert a significant effect. Consumer misbehavior, in turn, weakened both rebuilding trust and dialogue and return to values and cultural identity. Among the contextual variables, social distrust, organizational structure and accountability, and social erosion significantly affected rebuilding trust and dialogue, whereas their relationships with return to values and cultural identity were not generally significant. Fear of imagined consequences had a strong negative effect on both response strategies. Rebuilding trust and dialogue reduced both damage to brand and cultural capital and the reproduction of the cycle of anger and dissatisfaction, while return to values and cultural identity reduced damage to brand and cultural capital but did not significantly affect the anger–dissatisfaction cycle. Among the proposed moderating effects, only the moderating role of organizational structure and accountability in the relationship between consumer misbehavior and return to values and cultural identity was supported. Collectively, these results indicate that consumer misbehavior in automotive after-sales services is shaped by the interaction of environmental pressures, failures in service delivery, organizational response mechanisms, and relational repair processes.

The significant positive effect of sanctions on consumer misbehavior suggests that broader institutional and environmental constraints can be translated into negative customer behavior at the service-contact level. In the automotive sector, sanctions may restrict access to parts, technologies, logistics, financial resources, and service inputs, thereby increasing delays, uncertainty, and perceived service inadequacy. Under such circumstances, customers may not directly distinguish between environmental constraints and organizational responsibility, and the consequences of macro-level disruptions may therefore be attributed to the service provider. This interpretation is consistent with studies emphasizing that customer experience in automotive after-sales services is sensitive to service quality, perceived fairness, and the ability of the organization to meet expectations under operational constraints [1]. It is also compatible with evidence that institutional arrangements and governance conditions in the Iranian automotive industry affect organizational performance and accountability [28]. When sanctions reduce organizational capacity and increase uncertainty, customers may perceive greater resource loss and reduced control, which can intensify frustration and dysfunctional interaction. This pattern is also conceptually consistent

with research on co-destructive after-sales service encounters, where resource depletion and stressful interactions contribute to deterioration of the service relationship [10].

Service disruption also had a positive and significant effect on consumer misbehavior, confirming that breakdowns in service continuity are an important proximal source of problematic customer behavior. Repeated delays, uncertainty regarding completion times, unavailable components, inconsistent communication, and fragmented service processes can increase perceived inconvenience and the sense that the service provider is unable or unwilling to fulfill its obligations. Previous research has shown that internal service processes are important determinants of customer-perceived service quality because weaknesses in organizational coordination are directly experienced by customers as poor service performance [11]. Similarly, the literature on service failure and recovery emphasizes that unresolved or poorly managed failures can intensify dissatisfaction and provoke adverse behavioral responses [4]. The present findings therefore suggest that consumer misbehavior should not be interpreted solely as an individual customer characteristic; rather, it may emerge partly as a behavioral reaction to repeated service interruptions. This is particularly relevant in automotive after-sales settings, where customers are often dependent on the service center for technically complex repairs and may have few immediate alternatives once a vehicle has entered the repair process.

In contrast, pressure norms did not significantly predict consumer misbehavior. This finding is noteworthy because social influence theory generally suggests that normative expectations can shape behavior [14, 15]. The conformity literature also indicates that individuals frequently adjust their judgments and actions in accordance with perceived expectations from important others [16]. However, the nonsignificant result in the present study suggests that consumer misbehavior in automotive after-sales encounters may be driven more strongly by direct personal experiences of disruption, loss, and dissatisfaction than by social pressure. In other words, customers may become aggressive, hostile, or norm-violating not because such behavior is socially encouraged but because they experience a specific service problem as consequential, unfair, or threatening. This may also reflect the highly situational nature of after-sales service encounters, where the customer's direct experience with delays, repair failures, or perceived irresponsibility can outweigh generalized social norms.

The negative effect of consumer misbehavior on rebuilding trust and dialogue demonstrates that once a service encounter becomes dysfunctional, relationship repair becomes more difficult. Aggressive or hostile behavior can reduce mutual openness, increase defensiveness, and make communication more adversarial. This result aligns with the customer mistreatment literature, which shows that inappropriate customer behavior adversely affects employees' emotional, attitudinal, and behavioral states [7]. Customer incivility can also impair employee well-being and influence the quality of subsequent service interactions [8]. During hostile exchanges, employees may devote cognitive and emotional resources to emotion regulation rather than to constructive problem solving, thereby reducing the likelihood of successful recovery [9]. The negative relationship observed in the present study therefore reflects a reciprocal deterioration process: customer misbehavior makes trust repair more difficult, while the failure to repair trust may further reinforce negative behavior.

Consumer misbehavior also had a negative effect on return to values and cultural identity. This finding suggests that as conflict escalates, customers may become less likely to activate culturally grounded norms of restraint, reciprocity, respect, and relational responsibility. Symbolic interactionism provides a useful interpretation because individuals assign meaning to interactions through social definitions of situations and roles [17]. Once an interaction is interpreted as disrespectful, unfair, or adversarial, customers may redefine the encounter in conflict-oriented rather than value-oriented terms. Cultural understandings play an important role in shaping consumption

behavior and interpersonal expectations [18], while social identity processes can influence relational cohesion and appropriate conduct [19]. Therefore, the observed negative relationship may indicate that severe conflict shifts the interaction away from identity-based and culturally regulated behavior toward immediate emotional reaction.

The significant effects of social distrust, organizational structure and accountability, and social erosion on rebuilding trust and dialogue further demonstrate that relationship repair is embedded in a broader contextual environment. Social distrust had a relatively small but significant effect, indicating that generalized distrust can shape how customers interpret organizational attempts at recovery. Trust and distrust are not simply opposite ends of a single continuum; both can independently influence customer responses, communication, and behavioral intentions [20]. When distrust is high, customers may scrutinize organizational explanations more critically and interpret ambiguous actions negatively. At the same time, the significance of organizational structure and accountability indicates that customers are more likely to engage in trust rebuilding when the organization provides clear responsibility, transparent procedures, and identifiable channels for resolving problems. This result is consistent with customer relationship management research emphasizing the importance of coordinated organizational structures in sustaining effective customer relationships [24]. It is also in line with work on organizational relationships showing that formal and informal relational structures affect communication and interpretation [23].

The positive effect of social erosion on rebuilding trust and dialogue may initially appear counterintuitive, but it can be interpreted as reflecting the increased need for corrective relational mechanisms under deteriorating social conditions. Where broader interpersonal relations are perceived as weakened, individuals may become more sensitive to the presence or absence of credible organizational dialogue. In this sense, social erosion may create a context in which rebuilding trust becomes more salient and necessary rather than automatically impossible. This interpretation is consistent with the broader finding that trust and communication are central to customer behavioral responses [20]. It may also reflect a compensatory process whereby formal organizational dialogue assumes greater importance when informal social trust is weakened.

Fear of imagined consequences had strong negative effects on both rebuilding trust and dialogue and return to values and cultural identity. This was among the strongest findings in the model. Customers who anticipate exaggerated, uncertain, or adverse future consequences may become less receptive to dialogue and less likely to adopt reflective or value-oriented responses. Research on uncertainty suggests that consumer behavior changes when people are confronted with ambiguity and incomplete information, and information seeking itself may vary depending on the level of uncertainty experienced [12]. Prospect-theory-based research also suggests that perceived losses and anticipated negative outcomes can strongly influence decision making [13]. In automotive after-sales services, fears concerning repair costs, vehicle reliability, future breakdowns, delays, or repeated service failures may therefore amplify defensive reactions. Once fear dominates the encounter, constructive communication may be interpreted as insufficient, delayed, or untrustworthy, reducing the effectiveness of repair strategies.

The results regarding the consequences of response strategies underscore the importance of rebuilding trust and dialogue. This strategy significantly reduced both damage to brand and cultural capital and the reproduction of the cycle of anger and dissatisfaction. This finding is consistent with evidence that trust, satisfaction, and perceived value are closely related to loyalty and continuing customer relationships [21]. It also aligns with service recovery research emphasizing that appropriate recovery efforts can restore relational stability following service failures [4]. Complaint interactions are not determined solely by the technical resolution of a problem; empathy and emotional intensity also influence post-purchase behavior and recovery outcomes [22]. Consequently, rebuilding trust

through transparent communication, acknowledgement of customer concerns, empathy, and credible corrective action can reduce the likelihood that a negative episode develops into longer-term hostility or reputational damage.

The finding that rebuilding trust and dialogue reduced the cycle of anger and dissatisfaction is particularly important because it supports the notion that dysfunctional service interactions can become self-reinforcing if they are not interrupted. Negative customer engagement behaviors often emerge through a process in which adverse experiences lead to emotional and cognitive reactions that subsequently produce further negative behavior [25]. If customers remain dissatisfied and employees respond defensively, subsequent interactions may become increasingly hostile. Effective dialogue can interrupt this process by allowing the organization to explain constraints, acknowledge mistakes, clarify responsibilities, and establish realistic expectations. Such communication is also important in crisis situations, where the management of contingent customer relationships can influence reputational outcomes [26].

Return to values and cultural identity also reduced damage to brand and cultural capital, suggesting that culturally grounded responses may help contain the broader symbolic consequences of conflict. When customers interpret service interactions through shared values and culturally meaningful expectations, disputes may be less likely to become generalized into negative judgments about the organization's identity and legitimacy. This interpretation is consistent with the importance of cultural understanding in consumer behavior [18]. However, the lack of a significant effect on the cycle of anger and dissatisfaction suggests that values-based responses may be more effective in shaping symbolic and reputational evaluations than in immediately reducing emotional escalation. Anger cycles may require more direct relational interventions, including concrete problem resolution, accountability, empathy, and dialogue.

The moderating results further strengthen the central role of organizational accountability. Of the six hypothesized moderating relationships, only the moderating effect of organizational structure and accountability on the relationship between consumer misbehavior and return to values and cultural identity was significant. This indicates that organizational systems can alter how dysfunctional customer behavior is translated into subsequent value-oriented responses. A clear, accountable, and responsive organizational structure may provide boundaries and cues that encourage customers to reinterpret the interaction within a more regulated and socially acceptable framework. The absence of the other moderating effects suggests that contextual variables do not necessarily change the strength of all relationships in the model, even when they exert direct effects. This finding reinforces the importance of distinguishing between direct contextual influences and true moderating mechanisms.

Overall, the findings support a process-oriented interpretation of consumer misbehavior in automotive after-sales services. Consumer misbehavior appears to emerge particularly when customers experience macro-level constraints and direct service disruption, and its occurrence reduces the effectiveness of relationship-restoration mechanisms. Trust rebuilding and dialogue appear to be especially important because they mitigate both reputational damage and the emotional cycle of dissatisfaction, whereas return to values and cultural identity primarily protects brand and cultural capital. These results extend previous research on automotive after-sales satisfaction and communication [29], service quality [2], post-failure behavior [5], and customer perceptions of service experiences [27] by integrating these issues into a single structural framework centered on consumer misbehavior.

The present study has several limitations. First, the data were collected from 350 customers of authorized Iran Khodro and SAIPA after-sales service centers in Tehran; therefore, the findings may not be directly generalizable to customers in other cities, other automotive brands, independent repair centers, or different service industries.

Second, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to establish temporal causality between service disruption, consumer misbehavior, response strategies, and subsequent consequences. Third, the study relied on self-reported questionnaire data, which may be affected by common method bias, social desirability, recall error, or respondents' subjective interpretation of sensitive behaviors such as misbehavior and aggression. Fourth, although the model incorporated multiple contextual and moderating variables, other potentially relevant factors, such as perceived justice, personality characteristics, severity of service failure, prior customer relationships, employee behavior, and digital complaint activity, were not included. Finally, some endogenous variables, particularly the reproduction of the cycle of anger and dissatisfaction, had relatively low explained variance, suggesting that additional predictors are needed to provide a more complete explanation of these outcomes.

Future research should replicate the model in other geographical areas, automotive brands, and service sectors to assess the stability and external validity of the findings. Longitudinal studies would be particularly valuable for examining how consumer misbehavior develops over repeated service encounters and whether trust rebuilding produces lasting changes in customer behavior. Future studies could also use dyadic designs in which both customers and service employees evaluate the same interaction, thereby allowing researchers to examine reciprocal escalation and differences in perceptions of fairness, aggression, and recovery. Experimental research could manipulate service failure severity, accountability, communication style, or recovery strategies to establish stronger causal evidence. Researchers should also consider integrating constructs such as perceived procedural and distributive justice, emotional exhaustion, customer forgiveness, perceived betrayal, employee empathy, digital word-of-mouth, and complaint channel characteristics. Finally, future models could examine mediation mechanisms in greater detail and test whether trust rebuilding, satisfaction recovery, or perceived fairness explain the indirect effects of service failures on brand-related and behavioral outcomes.

From a practical perspective, automotive after-sales service organizations should treat consumer misbehavior as a systemic service-management issue rather than merely an individual customer problem. Managers should reduce avoidable service disruptions by improving parts availability, appointment systems, communication accuracy, repair-time estimates, and coordination between technical and customer-service units. Clear accountability mechanisms should be established so that customers know who is responsible for resolving complaints and how decisions can be escalated. Frontline employees should receive training in de-escalation, empathic communication, complaint handling, and emotion regulation, while organizations should provide institutional support when employees encounter severe customer hostility. Transparent explanations of external constraints, including supply problems and delays, can reduce uncertainty when accompanied by specific corrective actions rather than generic excuses. Service centers should also create structured trust-rebuilding procedures following serious failures, including acknowledgement of the problem, explanation of responsibility, documented follow-up, and confirmation that corrective actions have been completed. Finally, customer communication should be designed to reinforce respectful interaction and shared values without substituting symbolic messaging for concrete service recovery, because the findings indicate that direct trust rebuilding and organizational accountability are more effective mechanisms for preventing reputational damage and repeated cycles of anger and dissatisfaction.

Authors' Contributions

Authors equally contributed to this article.

Ethical Considerations

All procedures performed in this study were under the ethical standards.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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