

Organizational Sabotage: Antecedents, Independent Factors, and Their Implications for Performance Effectiveness

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the meaning of organizational sabotage within public service bureaucracy, focusing on its antecedent factors, cultural mediators, and implications for performance effectiveness in Kampar Regency, Riau, Indonesia. Employing a qualitative intrinsic case study design oriented toward Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with 22 employees from three organizational units: the Investment and One-Stop Integrated Service Agency (DPMPTSP) of Kampar Regency, a telecommunications company, and a private hospital operating within Kampar Regency. Data collection was complemented by 12 weeks of participant observation and organizational document analysis. Reflexive thematic analysis identified four major themes: sabotage as a “silent language” manifested through administrative exclusion and knowledge concealment; relational justice wounds and supervisor ostracism as primary triggers; ewuh-pakewuh norms and the quality of Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) as cultural mediating and moderating mechanisms; and the erosion of service timeliness, team trust, and investment reputation as cumulative yet largely hidden consequences. The findings extend the understanding of sabotage from an individual deviation to a culturally structured meaning-making practice, leading to the development of the concept of “polite sabotage” as a localized form of counterproductive work behavior. This concept integrates Social Exchange Theory, Affective Events Theory, and the Job Demands–Resources Model within a hierarchical collectivist context. The study highlights the importance of interactional justice, strengthening leader–member exchange quality, and culturally grounded emotional regulation training. Future research is recommended to employ longitudinal designs and cross-cultural comparisons to psychometrically validate the construct of polite sabotage.

INTRODUCTION

Organizational sabotage has evolved from a marginal issue into a central concern in global organizational behavior research. Within the context of knowledge management, sabotage is defined as a voluntary and deliberate act by an employee intended to damage, disrupt, or subvert the normal operations of an organization for personal benefit, utilizing informational dependency as its primary instrument (Perotti et al., 2022; Khan et al., 2025; Çivilidağ et al., 2025). A survey involving more than 300 individuals revealed that nearly half of the respondents had experienced knowledge sabotage from coworkers, while in frontline service settings, such behavior has been identified as the most common response to perceived injustice (Song & Park, 2022; Perotti et al., 2022; Khan et al., 2025). The consequences are twofold: at the individual level, sabotage undermines the psychological well-being of both perpetrators and victims, while at the organizational level, it impedes knowledge transfer, which constitutes the backbone of organizational effectiveness and performance (Perotti et al., 2022; Çivilidağ et al., 2025; Khan et al., 2025).

In Indonesia, this phenomenon is characterized by a distinctive structural context. Data from the National Civil Service Agency (Badan Kepegawaian Negara) indicate that disciplinary violations among civil servants have fluctuated with an overall upward trend. Furthermore, a descriptive study conducted in a government agency in Medan found that counterproductive work behavior was categorized as high among 90% of respondents, with behaviors directed more toward the organization than toward interpersonal targets (Pasaribu et al., 2024; Orchidiella et al., 2023). In contrast, a study of Generation Z employees in 2023 reported relatively low levels of counterproductive behavior, suggesting that sabotage is not uniformly distributed but rather depends on specific work contexts characterized by structural pressures (Orchidiella et al., 2023; Pasaribu et al., 2024). This fragmentation of findings indicates that sabotage behavior in Indonesia cannot be fully understood through universal frameworks developed in Western contexts; instead, it requires a deeper and more context-sensitive examination.

From a mechanistic perspective, recent research in China's service sector involving 503 employees demonstrated that supervisor ostracism is positively associated with knowledge sabotage behavior, and that this relationship is serially mediated by employee neuroticism and time theft (Khan et al., 2025). From an emotional perspective, emotional stability and mindfulness have been found to moderate the relationship between daily customer injustice and sabotage behavior, implying that emotional regulation capacity determines whether experiences of unfair treatment are translated into destructive actions (Song & Park, 2022). A systematic meta-analysis of 22 studies conducted across nine countries with a total of 7,331 participants identified a significant moderate relationship between organizational cynicism and counterproductive work behavior ($r = 0.448$, effect size = 0.482), reinforcing the argument that cognitive alienation from the organization constitutes an important antecedent of sabotage behavior (Çivilidağ et al., 2025; Khan et al., 2025; Song & Park, 2022). Social Exchange Theory provides a useful explanation for this mechanism: when employees perceive organizational treatment as unfair, they respond with cynical

attitudes and negative behaviors as a form of reciprocation that they consider equivalent to the treatment received (Ahmad et al., 2023; Çivilidağ et al., 2025; Khan et al., 2025).

Nevertheless, the existing literature contains three fundamental limitations that create opportunities for further investigation. First, the dominance of quantitative approaches including time-lagged surveys, daily diary designs, and meta-analyses has been effective in identifying correlations and estimating effect sizes, yet it provides limited access to lived experiences, sensemaking processes, and the construction of meanings surrounding perceived injustice in everyday workplace interactions (Perotti et al., 2022; Song & Park, 2022; Çivilidağ et al., 2025). Second, the conceptual framework of knowledge sabotage antecedents proposed by Perotti et al. (2022), encompassing individual-, group-, and organizational-level factors, represents the first comprehensive effort in this area and explicitly calls for deeper empirical validation, particularly beyond Western and East Asian cultural contexts. Third, and most critically, existing studies have developed their models primarily within cultures characterized by low-to-moderate power distance and individualistic orientations, thereby limiting their ability to capture the dynamics of sabotage within high power-distance and strongly collectivist societies such as Indonesia.

This gap constitutes the primary source of novelty in the present study. Indonesia is characterized by high power distance (PDI = 78), strong collectivism (IDV = 14), and social norms such as *ewuh-pakewuh* and hierarchical patronage, where expressions of dissatisfaction toward supervisors or organizations are generally not communicated openly or confrontationally (Dai et al., 2022; Li et al., 2023). Individuals who perceive injustice tend to adopt response strategies that preserve the appearance of compliance and social harmony while covertly engaging in behaviors that disadvantage the organization, such as withholding strategic information, deliberately slowing task completion, or providing incomplete knowledge to colleagues. This pattern is conceptualized in the present study as “polite sabotage.”

The concept of polite sabotage should be systematically distinguished from two existing constructs. Conventional organizational sabotage, as conceptualized by Perotti et al. (2022) and empirically supported by Khan et al. (2025), is generally characterized by active and destructive actions, relatively explicit intentions to cause harm, and the absence of a consistent effort to maintain appearances of conformity. In contrast, knowledge hiding, which has been extensively examined in previous studies (Qi & Ramayah, 2022; Kurniawanti et al., 2023), is a narrower construct focused on the intentional withholding of knowledge without necessarily involving an explicit intention to harm others. Polite sabotage, as a novel construct proposed in this study, differs from both in three key dimensions: (1) its mode of expression is covert, non-confrontational, and embedded within a façade of compliance; (2) its cultural mechanism is driven by face-saving norms and *ewuh-pakewuh*, which discourage the open expression of conflict; and (3) its target of harm is directed toward the organization and its knowledge flows in a systemic manner, rather than toward specific individuals. Therefore, polite sabotage represents a context-specific variant of knowledge sabotage that can only be fully observed through a culturally sensitive qualitative approach.

Based on this framework, the present study seeks to address the identified gaps in the literature through an interpretive qualitative approach with three primary objectives: (1) to explore how organizational sabotage, particularly in the form of polite sabotage, is understood and interpreted by its perpetrators in real workplace settings; (2) to identify contextual factors that reinforce or trigger such tendencies within Indonesian organizational culture; and (3) to examine its implications for performance effectiveness at both the individual and work-unit levels. Theoretically, this study extends Affective Events Theory and Social Exchange Theory by providing narrative evidence concerning triggering events, moral emotions, and exchange calculations within the context of Indonesian bureaucracy a contribution that remains largely absent from the existing literature (Perotti et al., 2022; Çivilidağ et al., 2025; Khan et al., 2025). Practically, the findings are expected to generate culturally sensitive intervention recommendations, including communication strategies that enhance interactional justice, the strengthening of leader–member exchanges to mitigate workplace exclusion, and organizational learning mechanisms aimed at preventing the normalization of knowledge sabotage within Indonesian institutional settings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Organizational sabotage is positioned within the spectrum of counterproductive work behavior (CWB), not as an individual anomaly but as a structured response to organizational dynamics (Perotti et al., 2022; Çivilidağ et al., 2025). Classical literature defines it as the perpetration of voluntary actions by employees intended to damage, disrupt, or subvert the normal operations of an organization for personal purposes, thereby harming either coworkers or the organization itself (Perotti et al., 2022). Within the CWB taxonomy, sabotage is classified as a severe organization-directed behavior, distinguishing it from less serious forms such as work slowdown or excessive breaks (Sabir et al., 2024; Zeeshan et al., 2024). Recent developments have extended this concept into the knowledge domain, where knowledge sabotage is regarded as one of the most extreme forms of counterproductive behavior, deliberately obstructing the flow of knowledge among organizational members (Perotti et al., 2022; Qi & Ramayah, 2022; Kurniawanti et al., 2023). This context is particularly relevant to Indonesia, where bureaucratic institutions and knowledge-intensive service organizations face substantial risks from invisible process disruptions that undermine organizational effectiveness (Pasaribu et al., 2024; Orchidiella et al., 2023).

The first major theory explaining this mechanism is Social Exchange Theory (SET). SET posits that workplace behavior is shaped by subjective social interactions governed by norms of reciprocity, whereby employees respond to organizational treatment with actions they perceive as equivalent in return (Ahmad et al., 2023). When employees experience psychological contract violations, procedural injustice, or unethical leadership, they may develop organizational cynicism, which consists of beliefs that the organization lacks integrity, negative affect toward the organization, and a tendency to engage in critical or oppositional behaviors (Çivilidağ et al., 2025; Rizvi & Siddiqui, 2024). Within this framework, sabotage is not viewed as a random impulse but rather as a form of negative

reciprocity. When organizations fail to meet employees' expectations regarding fairness and support, employees may perceive themselves as justified in harming the organization as a form of symbolic compensation or retaliation (Ahmad et al., 2023; Sabir et al., 2024). SET is particularly relevant to the Indonesian context because organizations operating within a high power-distance culture often constrain direct expressions of dissatisfaction, causing negative reciprocity to be communicated through covert rather than overt actions (Dai et al., 2022; Li et al., 2023).

The second theoretical perspective is Affective Events Theory (AET), which emphasizes the role of momentary emotions as mediators between workplace events and employee behavior (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). AET proposes that specific workplace events, such as customer injustice or supervisor ostracism, evoke particular emotional responses that subsequently generate affective outcomes and short-term behavioral reactions (Song & Park, 2022; Gu et al., 2024). One of the strengths of AET lies in its ability to explain why sabotage may occur on the same day as a triggering event rather than emerging as a stable attitude or enduring disposition (Song & Park, 2022). Research grounded in AET has shown that perceptions of injustice trigger negative emotions that mediate employees' desires to retaliate against the source of unfair treatment, while emotional regulation and personality stability can mitigate such tendencies (Song & Park, 2022; Al-Atwi et al., 2024). In the context of organizational sabotage, AET provides valuable insight into the affective dimensions that are frequently overlooked in structurally oriented studies (Khan et al., 2025; Mattar et al., 2025).

The third theoretical framework is the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) Model, which integrates structural pressures and supportive organizational resources (Bakker et al., 2023). The JD-R model distinguishes job demands as physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of work that require sustained effort and generate physiological or psychological costs, whereas job resources are aspects that facilitate growth, learning, and goal attainment, such as autonomy, feedback, and social support (Bakker et al., 2023). The model explains two fundamental processes: the health-impairment process, in which excessive demands combined with insufficient resources lead to burnout and cynicism, and the motivational process, in which adequate resources strengthen engagement and commitment (Bakker et al., 2023; Çivilidağ et al., 2025). In cases of organizational sabotage, the combination of high emotional demands, role conflict, and limited organizational resources creates conditions in which employees may adopt sabotage as a dysfunctional coping strategy to regain a sense of control over their work environment (Sabir et al., 2024; Gu et al., 2024).

Operationally, this study defines its core variables as follows. Organizational sabotage is measured through behavioral indicators, including: (1) intentionally slowing down work processes, (2) concealing or falsifying knowledge, (3) damaging relationships with customers, and (4) sabotaging information systems (Perotti et al., 2022). Knowledge sabotage is defined as behavior undertaken with the deliberate intention of harming organizational interests, a phenomenon that previous surveys indicate has been experienced

by nearly half of employees (Perotti et al., 2022; Kurniawanti et al., 2023). Its antecedents include supervisor ostracism, customer injustice, and organizational cynicism, all of which have been empirically shown to be positively associated with sabotage behavior (Khan et al., 2025; Song & Park, 2022; Zeeshan et al., 2024; Al-Atwi et al., 2024). Independent factors include emotional stability and mindfulness, which moderate the relationship between perceived injustice and sabotage (Song & Park, 2022), as well as leader–member exchange (LMX), which moderates the influence of workplace ostracism (Khan et al., 2025; Gu et al., 2024; Mattar et al., 2025). Performance effectiveness is defined as the achievement of unit objectives, service quality, and team collaboration, all of which have been found to decline as sabotage behavior increases (Perotti et al., 2022; Sabir et al., 2024).

Three major studies published within the last five years serve as critical references for this research. First, Perotti et al. (2022), in the *Journal of Business Research*, developed a conceptual framework identifying nine antecedents of knowledge sabotage at the individual, group, and organizational levels. Their study emphasized that knowledge sabotage represents one of the most extreme forms of counterproductive behavior because it obstructs knowledge sharing. The strength of this work lies in its comprehensive literature synthesis; however, its primary limitation is its universal orientation and lack of empirical evidence from Indonesia a limitation that also characterizes its subsequent extension on knowledge-sharing motivation (Perotti et al., 2023). Second, Song and Park (2022) examined the daily relationship between customer injustice and customer-directed sabotage, finding that customer injustice significantly increased sabotage behavior, although this effect was weakened among employees with high emotional stability. While methodologically rigorous through its diary-study design, the study was limited to the call-center service context and did not explore cultural meanings and interpretations. Third, Pasaribu et al. (2024) found that counterproductive work behavior among civil servants in Medan was categorized as high among 90% of respondents and was directed more toward the organization than toward individuals. Data from the National Civil Service Agency further indicated an increase in disciplinary violations since 2018, a pattern that has also been observed among younger generations, albeit with varying levels of intensity (Orchidiella et al., 2023). Although this study provides valuable national-level evidence, it relies on a descriptive quantitative approach and does not investigate the processes through which sabotage behavior emerges.

This body of literature reveals clear theoretical and empirical gaps. Empirically, a meta-analysis of 22 studies involving 7,331 participants identified a significant positive relationship between organizational cynicism and counterproductive work behavior ($r = 0.448$, effect size = 0.482) (Çivilidağ et al., 2025). While this finding confirms the existence of a relationship, it does not explain the contextual mechanisms underlying that association a limitation consistent with systematic reviews on workplace ostracism across different cultural settings (Al-Atwi et al., 2024; Zeeshan et al., 2024). Moreover, existing research remains fragmented across affective, social exchange, and job-demand perspectives (Rizvi & Siddiqui, 2024; Mattar et al., 2025). In Indonesia, no qualitative study has yet distinguished between direct antecedents (situational triggers) and independent contextual factors (such as

ewuh-pakewuh, patronage systems, and collectivist norms) that shape employees' decisions to engage in sabotage rather than voice their concerns openly (Dai et al., 2022; Li et al., 2023). It is this gap that the present study seeks to address.

Based on the foregoing synthesis, this study proposes an integrative conceptual framework that combines Social Exchange Theory (SET) (Ahmad et al., 2023), Affective Events Theory (AET) (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996; Song & Park, 2022), and the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) Model (Bakker et al., 2023) through an interpretive qualitative lens. Organizational sabotage is conceptualized as the outcome of interactions among three pathways. First, the exchange pathway, whereby violations of fairness trigger negative reciprocal responses (Ahmad et al., 2023; Sabir et al., 2024). Second, the affective pathway, whereby daily triggering events evoke emotional reactions that are translated into destructive behaviors (Song & Park, 2022; Gu et al., 2024). Third, the resource pathway, whereby imbalances between job demands and available support encourage dysfunctional coping strategies (Bakker et al., 2023). Individual factors, such as emotional stability and mindfulness, as well as contextual factors, including leader–member exchange and organizational culture, function either as protective buffers or as reinforcing mechanisms within these processes (Khan et al., 2025; Mattar et al., 2025; Dai et al., 2022). This framework will serve as the basis for thematic analysis aimed at uncovering the meanings, experiences, and processes underlying organizational sabotage and its implications for performance effectiveness within Indonesian organizations. In doing so, the study seeks to move beyond correlational explanations toward a deeper, context-sensitive understanding of sabotage behavior (Smith et al., 2021; Braun & Clarke, 2022).

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach using a hybrid design that combines an intrinsic case study with Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The integration of these two designs is complementary rather than overlapping. The intrinsic case study provides the analytical framework through an embedded case structure, in which the phenomenon of *polite sabotage* is examined in depth within the boundaries of three organizations in Kampar Regency as a single case understood holistically and contextually. Meanwhile, IPA provides the epistemological and procedural framework for exploring how individuals within that case make sense of experiences of injustice, ostracism, and work-related pressures that are translated into acts of sabotage (Smith et al., 2021). Thus, the intrinsic case study addresses the question of “where and within what boundaries this phenomenon is understood,” whereas IPA addresses “how individuals interpret and experience it.” These approaches operate at different but complementary levels of analysis: the case unit (the organizations and the cultural context of Kampar) serves as the contextual framework, while the individual meaning-making unit (each participant’s lived experience) constitutes the core analytical focus, examined idiographically before being synthesized into cross-case themes. This hybrid approach was selected because the phenomenon of polite sabotage is inherently dual in nature: it is both a context-bound event embedded within

specific institutional settings (requiring clear case boundaries) and a subjectively interpreted experience (requiring the phenomenological depth that cannot be achieved through descriptive case studies alone).

The study was conducted between May and August 2026 in three organizations located in Kampar Regency, Riau Province, which were purposively selected to represent two different institutional contexts. These included the Investment and One-Stop Integrated Service Agency of Kampar Regency (DPMPTSP) as a representation of the public bureaucracy sector, one telecommunications company, and one private hospital, all operating within Kampar Regency. The selection of DPMPTSP as the primary research site was based on its relevance as an institution directly exposed to investment-related pressures, the implementation of the Online Single Submission–Risk-Based Approach (OSS-RBA) system, and the dynamics of public service delivery, which constitute important structural contexts for the phenomenon of polite sabotage under investigation. The three organizations were treated as sub-units within a larger intrinsic case, namely the bureaucratic and service culture of Kampar Regency, thereby enabling internal comparisons of how polite sabotage manifests across different sectors that nonetheless share a common cultural architecture.

A total of 22 participants were recruited through purposive sampling using a maximum variation strategy, followed by snowball sampling (Nyimbili & Nyimbili, 2024). The inclusion criteria were: (1) a minimum of two years of work experience within the organization; (2) having experienced, witnessed, or acknowledged involvement in practices related to knowledge sabotage, deliberate work delays, or service manipulation; and (3) willingness to provide informed consent and participate in the member-checking process. Of the 22 participants, 8 were drawn from the local government agency, 8 from the telecommunications company, and 6 from the private hospital. In terms of organizational position, the sample consisted of 12 operational staff members, 6 first-line supervisors, and 4 middle managers. Participants' length of service ranged from 2 to 19 years, with an average of 7.4 years, providing sufficient institutional experience to support an in-depth analysis of meaning-making processes. Detailed participant characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Participant Characteristics

Code	Organization		Position	Years of Service	Involvement in the Phenomenon		
P01	Local Agency	Government	Operational Staff	5	Perpetrator (self-admitted)		
P02	Local Agency	Government	Operational Staff	8	Witness		
P03	Local Agency	Government	Operational Staff	3	Victim and witness		
P04	Local Agency	Government	Supervisor	11	Witness and indirect perpetrator		
P05	Local Agency	Government	Supervisor	14	Witness		
P06	Local Agency	Government	Middle Manager	17	Witness and conflict manager		

Code	Organization		Position	Years of Service	Involvement in the Phenomenon
P07	Local Agency	Government	Operational Staff	4	Victim
P08	Local Agency	Government	Operational Staff	6	Perpetrator (self-admitted)
P09	Telecommunications Company		Operational Staff	2	Victim and witness
P10	Telecommunications Company		Operational Staff	5	Perpetrator (self-admitted)
P11	Telecommunications Company		Operational Staff	7	Witness
P12	Telecommunications Company		Supervisor	9	Witness and conflict manager
P13	Telecommunications Company		Operational Staff	3	Victim
P14	Telecommunications Company		Middle Manager	12	Witness and indirect perpetrator
P15	Telecommunications Company		Operational Staff	6	Perpetrator (self-admitted)
P16	Telecommunications Company		Supervisor	10	Witness
P17	Private Hospital		Operational Staff	4	Victim and perpetrator (self-admitted)
P18	Private Hospital		Operational Staff	7	Witness
P19	Private Hospital		Supervisor	19	Witness and conflict manager
P20	Private Hospital		Operational Staff	2	Victim
P21	Private Hospital		Middle Manager	13	Witness and indirect perpetrator
P22	Private Hospital		Operational Staff	5	Perpetrator (self-admitted)

Data were collected through the triangulation of three complementary techniques. First, in-depth semi-structured interviews lasting between 60 and 90 minutes were conducted in two sessions with each participant. The first session focused on reconstructing triggering events, while the second explored participants' meaning-making processes and the exchange calculations underlying their actions. This two-session design specifically followed IPA procedures to achieve double hermeneutics, whereby the researcher interprets how participants themselves interpret their experiences. Second, limited participant observation was conducted over a period of 12 weeks during coordination meetings, shift handovers, and service interactions. The purpose was to capture covert manifestations of polite sabotage, such as deliberate response delays and strategically timed information withholding. These observational data served to enrich the case boundaries that characterize the intrinsic case study design. Third, organizational documents were collected, including standard operating procedures (SOPs), meeting minutes, quarterly performance reports, employee disciplinary

records, attendance summaries, and selected internal communication archives. Each category of documentation served a specific verification function: quarterly performance reports were used to verify the measurable effects of polite sabotage on unit-level performance outcomes; disciplinary records were examined to assess the consistency between participants' narratives and institutional records; and attendance reports and task-completion logs were analyzed to substantiate patterns of deliberate work delays. Access to all organizational documents was granted following the signing of confidentiality agreements with organizational leaders, and any documents containing personal identifiers were anonymized prior to analysis.

Data validation followed the parallel criteria of Guba and Lincoln, as adapted by Enworo (2023), encompassing four dimensions. Credibility was established through prolonged engagement, source and method triangulation, peer debriefing, and member checking. Dependability was ensured through an audit trail consisting of methodological decision logs, coding matrices, and documentation of thematic revisions. Confirmability was strengthened through the use of a researcher reflexive journal, while transferability was supported through thick descriptions of the organizational context within Kampar Regency.

Data analysis employed the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2020) in combination with the six-phase reflexive thematic analysis framework of Braun and Clarke (2022). Consistent with the layered analytical logic of IPA, coding was conducted first at the idiographic level, where each participant transcript was analyzed individually to identify personal meaning units through open coding. The analysis then proceeded to the cross-case level through axial coding, linking personal categories with shared contextual conditions, such as *ewuh-pakewuh* norms and hierarchical dynamics that operated across all case sub-units. In the final stage, selective coding was used to construct overarching themes concerning the manifestations of polite sabotage and their implications for performance effectiveness. This synthesis is consistent with the logic of intrinsic case study research, which views the case as a coherent and meaningful whole rather than merely a collection of independent individual units.

RESULTS

Reflexive thematic analysis of data collected from 22 participants across three organizations generated four major themes that sequentially explain how *polite sabotage* is understood, triggered, culturally mediated, and ultimately affects performance effectiveness. These themes are not merely linear-causal; rather, they are mutually reinforcing components of a meaning system embedded within the cultural architecture of Indonesian organizations. A summary of the themes, subthemes, and triangulated sources of evidence is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Summary of Themes, Subthemes, and Triangulated Evidence

Theme	Subtheme	Key Informants	Observational Evidence	Documentary Evidence
Sabotage as a Silent Language	Administrative exclusion	P07, P08, P15	Delayed document uploads ≥ 3 times per month	OSS logs: average delay of 2.1 days for "priority" files

	Knowledge concealment	P01, P17	P10,	Exclusive WhatsApp groups identified in two organizations	Meeting minutes: technical information undocumented for six months
	Responsibility shifting	P03, P20	P13,	Phrase “system error” used ≥ 5 times per month	Complaint records: 31% related to redirected service counters
Antecedents: Wounds of Injustice	Psychological contract violation	P04, P14	P06,	Tensions observed in meetings following OSS-RBA implementation	Performance reports: workload increased by 40%, incentives remained unchanged
	Supervisor ostracism	P02, P19	P12,	Absence of supervisors during conflict situations	Minutes: supervisors absent from 7 of 10 crisis meetings
	Customer injustice	P09, P17	P13,	Incidents of applicants verbally abusing staff ≥ 2 times per month	Disciplinary records: four reports involving aggressive applicants
Cultural Mediators	<i>Ewuh-pakewuh</i> norms	P03, P22	P08,	Consistent display of compliance while deliberately slowing work processes	
	LMX as a moderator	P05, P16, P19	P12,	Informal knowledge brokers identified	
Erosion of Performance Effectiveness	Slower service delivery	P06, P21	P14,	Increased repetition and resubmission of documents	OSS logs: processing time increased from 3 days to 5–7 days in “special” cases
	Erosion of team trust	P02, P18	P11,	Growing suspicion among employees	Minutes: three conflicts triggered by unequal information distribution
	Declining investment image	P06, P21	P19,		Community Satisfaction Index declined from 84.2 to 79.1; six recurring investor complaints reported by BKPM

The first theme reveals that polite sabotage functions as a “silent language”, interpreted by its perpetrators not as a moral deviation but as a legitimate survival strategy. All 22 participants consistently employed alternative expressions such as “*holding it for now*,” “*playing it safe*,” and “*protecting myself*,” reflecting a cognitive construction that operates beneath the threshold of explicit moral awareness. Through data triangulation, three recurring patterns were identified: administrative exclusion, knowledge concealment, and responsibility shifting. OSS processing logs documented an average delay of 2.1 days for “priority” files; observations identified two exclusive WhatsApp groups through which technical information was selectively distributed; and second-quarter 2026 complaint records

showed that 31% of complaints were associated with redirected service procedures. The sophistication of polite sabotage lies in its protective mechanism: procedural compliance is used as a shield. As P21 explained: “If the file belongs to someone who shouted at me before, I follow the procedure very carefully. Very carefully. I check it three times.” Similarly, P07 stated: “I tell them the system is under maintenance and ask them to come back tomorrow morning. In fact, I could process it right now.” Actions that outwardly appear to reflect professional diligence and procedural caution cannot easily be challenged through formal organizational mechanisms, making polite sabotage one of the most sophisticated and difficult forms of sabotage to detect.

The second theme identifies that the antecedents of polite sabotage are fundamentally relational rather than merely workload-related. Three recurring triggers emerged consistently across all three organizations: psychological contract violations, supervisor ostracism, and customer injustice. First-quarter 2026 performance reports documented a 40% increase in workload following the implementation of OSS-RBA without corresponding adjustments in incentives. At the same time, perceptions of promotion based on patronage rather than performance emerged spontaneously and consistently across interviews without direct prompting. As P04 noted: “I process 200 files a month, while my colleague handles only 80, yet he gets promoted first because he is close to the department head.” Supervisor ostracism emerged as the most immediate antecedent. Meeting minutes confirmed that organizational leaders were absent from seven out of ten crisis meetings. Staff interpreted this absence as a signal that the organization was unwilling to protect them, prompting a calculated withdrawal of reciprocal commitment. As P14 explained: “We learned something too. If he is not willing to stand up for us, then we are not going to stand up for the system either.” The public dimension of customer injustice particularly being humiliated in front of colleagues served as an additional and especially powerful catalyst. P17 recounted: “The applicant said, ‘Do you know who I am?’ in front of everyone. So I processed his file last.” The phrase “*we learned something too*” in P14’s narrative reveals that sabotage is not an impulsive reaction but rather the outcome of a rational and calculated process of social learning, in which employees interpret organizational experiences and adjust their behavior accordingly.

The third theme identifies cultural norms as mediating mechanisms that determine whether experiences of injustice are translated into sabotage or addressed through direct confrontation. The norms of *ewuh-pakewuh*, mutual consideration, and respect for hierarchy effectively close avenues for open conflict while simultaneously creating covert forms of expression as the only socially acceptable alternative. P03 articulated this mechanism with remarkable precision: “We are people from Kampar; it is unacceptable to challenge someone openly in front of others. It is better to remain silent, but we may hold a file for two days. That is simply our language.” The phrase “*our language*” constructs covert sabotage as a culturally legitimate communication system an inversion of conventional moral reasoning in which concealed resistance becomes a more culturally responsible response than open confrontation. This interpretation was reinforced by P22, who stated: “I cannot tell my supervisor directly that something is unfair. That would be disrespectful. But I can work more

slowly. That is still considered acceptable.” The quality of leader–member exchange (LMX) functioned as a moderator that shaped how *ewuh-pakewuh* operated. Participants with low-quality LMX relationships tended to display a façade of compliance followed by systematically delayed execution of tasks. In contrast, participants with high-quality LMX relationships emerged as informal “knowledge brokers” who actively facilitated information sharing. As P16 explained: “When my relationship with the department head is good, I am actually happy when my colleagues succeed, because my supervisor receives recognition as well.” This finding suggests that under conditions of high-quality LMX, *ewuh-pakewuh* operates as a motivation for knowledge sharing and collective support. Under conditions of low-quality LMX, however, the same cultural logic is reversed and functions as a mechanism of self-protection, encouraging covert resistance rather than collaboration.

The fourth theme documents how the accumulation of polite sabotage produces a gradual erosion of performance effectiveness through three mutually reinforcing cycles that remain largely invisible within formal reporting systems. The first cycle involves slower service delivery. OSS records indicated that the average processing time for business permits increased from three days to between five and seven days in “special” cases, with delays concentrated in units reporting the highest levels of complaints. The second cycle concerns the erosion of team trust. Knowledge concealment by some employees encouraged similar behavior among others as a defensive response, creating a process of progressive normalization. P11 described this dynamic as follows: “If I share new information, someone else gets the credit. So I wait first and see who actually needs it.” Meeting minutes further documented three inter-employee conflicts that were explicitly linked to perceptions of unfair information distribution. These findings suggest that knowledge sabotage can become self-reinforcing, transforming isolated acts of withholding into broader patterns of organizational behavior.

The third cycle involves the deterioration of the organization’s investment image and service reputation. Records from the Investment Coordinating Board (BKPM) documented six recurring investor complaints related to service inconsistencies. In addition, the Community Satisfaction Index (IKM) for the second quarter of 2026 declined from 84.2 to 79.1. A section head referred to this decline as an “*effect of moral fatigue*,” implicitly acknowledging the causal relationship between employees’ affective conditions and measurable service outcomes. The narrative provided by P19 illustrates a condition of learned organizational helplessness, which appears particularly conducive to the long-term normalization of sabotage: “Investors know that our services are slow, and they tell other investors about it. But we cannot force people to stay motivated when the internal conditions are like this.” This statement highlights how persistent perceptions of injustice, combined with limited opportunities for constructive voice, can foster a collective sense of resignation. Over time, such conditions create an organizational environment in which polite sabotage becomes normalized, embedded within everyday practices, and increasingly difficult to distinguish from routine procedural behavior.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study fundamentally reposition organizational sabotage from an individual deviation to a culturally structured practice of meaning-making. Viewed through the lens of Social Exchange Theory (SET) (Ahmad et al., 2023), sabotage across the three organizations emerged as a form of negative reciprocity in response to violations of interactional justice, rather than merely distributive injustice as commonly assumed in previous quantitative studies (Çivilidağ et al., 2025). What critically distinguishes the Indonesian context is that reciprocal responses do not manifest through confrontation or measurable reductions in effort. Instead, they operate through the instrumentalization of formal procedural compliance as a mechanism of delay that is difficult to challenge institutionally. Perotti et al. (2022) conceptualized knowledge sabotage as the exploitation of informational dependency; however, their framework did not anticipate the possibility that procedural compliance itself could become the most sophisticated form of sabotage. These findings further demonstrate that the concept of “polite sabotage” proposed in this study differs analytically from knowledge hiding (Qi & Ramayah, 2022; Kurniawanti et al., 2023) in three important respects: its covert mode of expression concealed behind procedural compliance, its face-saving mechanism grounded in *ewuh-pakewuh* norms, and its systemic target of harm directed toward organizational knowledge flows rather than specific individuals.

This study also revises the serial mediation model proposed by Khan et al. (2025), which identified the pathway of supervisor ostracism → neuroticism → time theft → knowledge sabotage. The present findings confirm supervisor ostracism as a powerful antecedent of sabotage; however, they indicate that within the Indonesian context, neuroticism is not expressed through overt aggression or identifiable time theft. Instead, it manifests as regulated covertness a form of dissatisfaction that is consciously managed and channeled into actions that remain socially defensible. The more relevant mediating mechanism appears to be the interaction between *ewuh-pakewuh* norms and the quality of leader–member exchange (LMX). When LMX is low, *ewuh-pakewuh* does not suppress sabotage; rather, it shapes sabotage into a more covert and persistent form. From the perspective of Affective Events Theory (AET), Song and Park (2022) identified emotional stability as the primary moderator of sabotage behavior. In contrast, the present study identifies a more influential moderator within hierarchical settings: hierarchical attentiveness, defined as the culturally constructed ability to recognize and interpret hierarchical cues. A notable paradox emerged from the data: participants with the highest levels of hierarchical attentiveness reported a greater tendency toward preventive sabotage because they were better able to anticipate potential injustice and prepare proportionate covert responses. This finding challenges the assumption that social intelligence necessarily promotes prosocial behavior within organizational environments characterized by perceived unfairness (Dai et al., 2022; Li et al., 2023).

Viewed through the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) Model, all three organizations were characterized by high emotional demands including aggressive performance targets,

investor pressures, and uncooperative clients without adequate relational resources such as supervisor support, decision-making autonomy, and procedural fairness. This imbalance fostered dysfunctional coping strategies in the form of polite sabotage. The findings support the meta-analytic evidence reported by Çivilidağ et al. (2025) regarding the relationship between organizational cynicism and counterproductive work behavior ($r = 0.448$), but they also introduce an important contextual nuance. In the Indonesian setting, cynicism does not typically manifest as open criticism, as commonly observed in Western samples. Rather, it takes the form of passive cynicism that is symbolically productive appearing compliant on the surface while functioning destructively within organizational systems. Compared with the national study by Pasaribu et al. (2024), which documented high levels of counterproductive work behavior among civil servants without explaining the underlying mechanisms, and unlike the universal framework proposed by Perotti et al. (2022), which identified nine antecedents without establishing contextual hierarchies, the present study demonstrates that within Indonesia's patronage-oriented bureaucratic culture, supervisor ostracism and psychological contract violations consistently outweigh individual characteristics as predictors of sabotage behavior. This finding offers a theoretically significant proposition that can be tested in future cross-cultural quantitative research (Perotti et al., 2023).

The practical implications of these findings are multi-layered and highly specific. At the interactional level, the most urgent intervention is not the revision of digital standard operating procedures but the restoration of leadership presence during conflict situations, as supervisor ostracism emerged as the most consistent and immediate trigger of sabotage escalation. At the structural level, incentive systems should be redesigned to move beyond a sole focus on quantitative performance outcomes and instead emphasize promotion transparency and the strengthening of leader–member exchange through structured formal mentoring programs. At the cultural level, emotional regulation training should be designed with sensitivity to *ewuh-pakewuh* norms rather than adopting Western models that encourage direct conflict expression. Such approaches may conflict with the underlying cultural architecture of Indonesian organizations and potentially intensify organizational dysfunction (Dai et al., 2022). This study is not without limitations. Its focus on a single geographical region and its cross-sectional design restrict the ability to draw causal conclusions. Consequently, longitudinal comparative studies across regions with differing cultural orientations particularly those comparing highly hierarchical bureaucracies with more egalitarian organizational settings represent a critical future research agenda for the psychometric validation and further refinement of the polite sabotage construct.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that organizational sabotage within the context of Indonesian bureaucratic and service organizations is a meaning-laden practice shaped by the interplay of relational justice wounds, daily affective dynamics, and hierarchical cultural norms, rather than merely an individual disciplinary violation. Through an Interpretative

Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) of 22 participants across three sectors in Pekanbaru, the study develops the concept of “polite sabotage” as a localized variant of counterproductive work behavior that differs from both conventional sabotage and knowledge hiding in three key dimensions: its covert mode of expression that instrumentalizes formal procedures as a protective shield, its face-saving mechanism grounded in *ewuh-pakewuh* norms, and its systemic target of harm directed toward organizational knowledge flows.

The findings reveal that the strongest antecedents of sabotage are not individual personality characteristics but rather supervisor ostracism and psychological contract violations. Furthermore, the interaction between *ewuh-pakewuh* norms and the quality of leader–member exchange (LMX) functions as a cultural mediator–moderator that revises the serial mediation pathway proposed by Khan et al. (2025). The study also identifies the paradox of hierarchical attentiveness, which challenges the conventional assumption that social intelligence necessarily promotes prosocial behavior. Instead, heightened sensitivity to hierarchical cues may increase the likelihood of preventive forms of covert sabotage when organizational injustice is anticipated.

The consequences of polite sabotage are cumulative and largely concealed, operating through three mutually reinforcing cycles of organizational erosion: slower service delivery, declining team trust, and a weakened investment image. These effects were empirically documented through a decline in the Community Satisfaction Index (IKM) from 84.2 to 79.1. Theoretically, this study advances the integration of Social Exchange Theory, Affective Events Theory, and the Job Demands–Resources Model by incorporating a cultural dimension that has largely been absent from previous research. In doing so, it proposes two novel propositions that can be tested in future cross-cultural studies. Practically, the findings underscore that effective interventions require the restoration of interactional justice, greater promotion transparency, stronger leader–member exchange relationships, and culturally sensitive emotional regulation training, rather than relying solely on the revision of digital standard operating procedures.

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