

9-2-2020

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Recommended Citation

Shannon Cummins & James W. Peltier (2020) Understanding students' decision-making process when considering a sales career: a comparison of models pre- and post-exposure to sales professionals in the classroom, *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management*, DOI: 10.1080/08853134.2020.1811112

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Understanding Students' Decision-making Process When Considering a Sales Career: A Comparison of Models Pre- and Post-exposure to Sales Professionals in the Classroom

Businesses face a challenge recruiting and maintaining a high-quality salesforce. Increasingly, recruiting focus for entry-level sales positions has turned to university business students and sales centers. Unfortunately, research shows most students have persistent negative misconceptions about professional sales careers and there is little research examining comprehensive and structured decision-making frameworks used by students when evaluating a sales career. This paper develops and tests an integrative framework that maps students' decision-making process to their intention to pursue a sales career. Specifically, we examine how perceived sales knowledge, perceptions of selling ethics, perceptions of salespeople, and perceptions of the selling profession impact their intent to pursue a sales career both pre- and post-exposure to sales professionals in the classroom. Utilizing structural equation modeling, we investigate the interactive relationships of these four areas (sales knowledge, selling ethics, salespeople, and the selling profession) on intent to pursue. Results show empirical evidence of how sales professionals affect the structural orientation of students' intent to pursue a sales career and constructs hypothesized to impact this intent after only one interaction. The findings offer an opportunity for how businesses may increase student interest in both sales and their organization.

Keywords: intent to pursue sales, recruitment, ethics, sales knowledge, stereotypes

Although businesses face a myriad of challenges, one of the most critical is recruiting new college graduates seeking to pursue a career in sales (Levin, Hansen, and Laverie 2012; Wiles and Spiro 2004). Particularly challenging is the problem that most students enter college armed with an array of misperceptions about sales and selling (Bristow et al. 2011; Deeter-Schmelz and Kennedy 2011). Often negative, these misperceptions remain strong and lead to students discounting sales as a viable career choice (Karakaya, Quigley, and Bingham 2011; Peltier et al. 2014). Even when organizations can find potentially qualified candidates, many graduates entering the salesforce do not have a clear understanding of what the role will entail, often leading to higher turnover (Boles et al. 2012).

Overcoming students' stereotypes of salespeople and selling is complicated (Deeter-Schmelz and Kennedy 2011). Salesperson stereotypes are shown to be consistently negative across cultures and to negatively impact student recruitment (Lee, Sandfield, and Dhaliwal 2007) and consumer behavior (Babin, Boles, and Darden 1995). Research has generally shown that student perceptions of sales and selling impact their consideration of sales as a career (c.f., Ballestra et al. 2017; Bristow 2011; Karakaya, Quigley, and Bingham 2011). After a review of the extant literature, Peltier et al. (2014) created and validated an Intent to Pursue a Sales Career scale (ITPSC) across multiple universities. The ITPSC measures student perceptions related to five dimensions: (1) perceived sales knowledge, (2) perceptions of selling ethics, (3) perceptions of salespeople, (4) perceptions of the sales profession, and (5) intention to pursue a sales career. This scale is increasingly utilized across varied contexts to predict intent to pursue a sales career, including cross-cultural collaborations (Herlache et al. 2018), career choice of target populations (Inks and Avila 2018; Scott and Beuk 2020), and educational interventions (Cummins et al. 2015; Cummins, Loe, and Peltier 2016).

Sales educators are not the only group responsible for changing long-held views of the selling profession. Utilizing a stakeholder framework, Agnihotri et al. (2014) argue that the selling profession needs to take an active role in impacting students' decision to select a sales career. Reconfiguring this mindset requires exposure to a range of real-world learning activities designed to foster more favorable and realistic views of a sales career (Fournier et al. 2014; Mantel et al. 2002). Frontline salespeople offer insights many educators do not have about appealing aspects of the job while countering unethical sales stereotypes (Nielson and Cummins 2019). Utilizing salespeople in the classroom to convey accurate information about the selling profession offers a socializing mechanism that may open students' eyes to a potential career in sales (Bush et al. 2014). Sales exposure early in their college career may thus impact students' desire to proactively collect information about the reality of sales jobs (Miao, Lund, and Evans 2009; Waldeck, Pullins, and Houlette 2010). Research that helps understand how sales professionals may enhance perceptions of, and the intent to pursue a sales career, is thus warranted (Fu et al. 2017).

Despite the growing literature exploring factors that impact a student's decision to pursue a sales career, many research gaps remain. Specifically, while empirical research has investigated hypothesized main effects between various antecedent variables and the intent to pursue a sales career, missing are comprehensive frameworks of the interrelationships between these antecedents (Deeter-Schmelz and Peltier 2019). Research on how exposure to expert salespeople changes students' perceptions of sales and selling, and how these changes moderate the decision-making processes is non-existent. Selecting a career is, by itself, a difficult decision for many students (Moore and Burrus 2019). A better understanding of students' decision-making process for sales offers the opportunity for businesses and universities to develop

learning experiences and recruiting practices to help students improve career decision making and enhance the willingness to pursue sales careers (Cummins et al. 2020).

The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) offers the potential to explain complex decision-making processes (Ajzen 2015). TPB is based on the notion that intent to perform a behavior is predicted by one's (a) attitudes, (b) subjective norms, and (c) perceived behavioral control (Ajzen 1991). Relevant to the current study, TPB has been used to explain career choice across disciplines, including entrepreneurship (Gorgievski et al. 2018), STEM (Moore and Burrus 2019), and sales (Inks and Avila 2018). Specific to sales careers, TPB posits that directly challenging student-held stereotypes of their own sales skills, ethical intentions of salespeople, attitudes regarding how salespeople are perceived by others, and perceptions of the selling profession itself, has two outcomes: changing underlying beliefs and generating positive social norms (Inks and Avila 2019). Despite this promise, TPB has been criticized for lacking sufficient validity and utility for more complex and integrative decision-making processes (Sniehotta, Presseau, and Araújo-Soares 2014). Key criticisms relevant to the current study are that TPB is based on a limited set of concepts, potential theory and construct gaps, and a lack of empirical interventions that assess validity and reliability. Given these concerns, research is needed that extends constructs, contexts, and interactive relationships (Baranowski and Lytle 2015; Esposito et al. 2016). Especially needed are comprehensive behavioral and social-psycho models that examine complex decision-making processes (Roos and Hahn 2019).

Acknowledging these research gaps, we develop and test an integrative framework that maps students' decision-making process to their intent to pursue a sales career. Specifically, using Peltier et al.'s (2014) ITPSC scale, we examine how perceived sales knowledge, perceptions of selling ethics, perceptions of salespeople, and perceptions of the sales profession,

impact their intent to pursue a sales career prior to (naïve sample), and following (informed sample) exposure to sales professionals. Through structural equation modeling, we simultaneously assess the direct effects of the ITPSC subscale dimensions on the intent to pursue a sales career and the mediated interrelationships between these dimensions. For each dimension, we examine mean scores pre- and post-exposure to sales professionals to assess the impact that perceptual and attitudinal changes have on student intentions to pursue a sales career.

Given the above, this paper makes several important contributions to the literature. First, although the relationship between ITPSC subscale dimensions and intent to pursue a sales career has been studied, we model intent to pursue a sales career as a complex decision-making process, one that includes both direct pathways (main effects) and indirect pathways (mediated relationships). Our results show that the magnitude of indirect effects exceeded direct effects for two of the four ITPSC antecedent variables. This supports the need for mediated intent to pursue frameworks and is a unique contribution to the literature. Second, to the best of our knowledge, this is the first study that empirically assesses how sales professionals affect the decision paths of students' intent to pursue a sales career and constructs hypothesized to impact this intent. Our findings show that even after only one contact, sales professionals impact students' decision path to pursue a sales career; foreshadowing the benefits of a longer-term student-sales professional relationship. Lastly, responding to calls to extend and validate the TPB (Esposito et al. 2016; Head and Noar 2014; Roos and Hahn 2019), we contribute to the literature by incorporating additional theoretical concepts relevant for explaining TPB (self-efficacy, social identity, goal-directed behavior, and social and moral norms). We thus follow Armitage's (2015) advised response to criticisms by studying TPB within a broader theoretical and contextual framework. We empirically show that our intervention (pre- and post-exposure to sales professionals) had

clear perceptual and attitudinal changes, a requisite condition for extending the utility of TPB (Ajzen 2015; Steinmetz et al. 2016). Practitioners and academics can thus use the results for developing effective interventions. Combined, these contributions have important ramifications for recruiting practices and what companies, and faculty, tell students.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Theory of Planned Behavior

The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) is an expectancy-value model, predicated on the belief that human behavior is impacted directly by behavioral intentions and indirectly through attitude formation (Ajzen 1991; Ajzen and Fishbein 1977). Behavioral intent may be seen as a function of positive or negative evaluations of performing the behavior (attitudes), social views regarding the behavior (subject norms), and their self-efficacy, or the ability to perform the behavior (perceived behavioral control). Relevant to the current study, self-efficacy is, in part, based on whether students' perceived sales knowledge impacts career choice (Inks and Avila 2018). TPB posits that these psycho-social elements co-exist and interact, ultimately affecting the target behavior and its outcomes. It has also been found to explain intentions and behaviors across an extensive array of contexts (Michaelidou and Hassan 2014). TPB is especially useful for developing decision-making frameworks that investigate mechanisms for explaining deliberate and high stakes career choices (Gorgievski et al. 2018).

Fishbein and Ajzen (2010) identified two types of *attitudes* toward target behavior: experiential and instrumental. Experiential attitudes reflect whether performing the target behavior would be pleasant, fun, and/or enjoyable (e.g., selling activities), while instrumental attitudes focus on the utility and/or value of the outcomes of performing the behavior (e.g., monetary rewards). *Subjective norms* refer to perceptions others have about a particular target

behavior. Specific to career choice, external views about becoming a salesperson (e.g., ethical issues and perceived favorability) may affect students' decision-making process (Lee et al. 2018), thus impacting socially positive or negative behaviors once placed in a sales organization (Ameer and Halinen 2019). Lastly, *perceived behavioral control* (PBC) represents the decision-maker's belief that they have the knowledge, skills, and ability to perform the behavior. Based in part on the self-efficacy construct, individuals with higher levels of PBC related to a career see a greater range of opportunities for themselves (Johara, Yahya, and Tehseen 2017).

The Intent to Pursue a Sales Career Scale and TPB

Peltier et al. (2014) developed and empirically validated an ITPSC scale with four sub-dimensions (perceived sales knowledge, perceptions of sales ethics, perceptions of salespeople, and perceptions of the sales profession), and a four-item intention measure regarding pursuit of a sales career. Relevant to TPB and our proposed model, the perceived sales knowledge dimension aligns with students' self-efficacy regarding performance expectations and their perceived behavioral control (Gorgievski et al. 2018). Specific to sales careers, self-efficacy, or the ability to perform the behavior, is linked to the extent to which students feel they have the requisite knowledge to be a successful salesperson (Knight, Mich, and Manion 2014). Perceptions related to selling ethics and perceptions of salespeople are consistent with external social views and subjective norms related to becoming a salesperson (Inks and Avila 2018). Lastly, perceptions related to experiential attitudes and instrumental attitudes are subsumed under perceptions of the selling profession (Cummins et al. 2013).

Theory of Planned Behavior in the Context of Sales

TPB posits that directly challenging student-held stereotypes of their own sales skills, ethical intentions of salespeople, attitudes regarding how salespeople are perceived by others,

and perceptions of the selling profession itself, has two components: (1) changing their underlying beliefs and (2) leading to positive social norms. Figure 1 presents our decision-making model for explaining students' intent to pursue a sales career. Below, we first present our hypotheses linking each of the four ITPSC antecedent constructs to intent to pursue a sales career. Given that these direct, main effect paths have been previously addressed in the literature (see Peltier et al. 2014), we focus only on theoretical guidance offered by TPB. We then present each of our indirect path hypotheses in greater detail. In each section, our hypotheses pre- and post-exposure to sales professionals are identical when examining the consistency of the scale across interventions. We then provide change hypotheses regarding expectations of the strengths of the direct and indirect relationships before and after exposure to sales professionals.

Place Figure 1 about here

Hypothesis Development

Perceived Sales Knowledge and the Intent to Pursue a Sales Career

TPB offers a theoretical framework for explaining the link between perceived sales knowledge and intent to pursue. Specifically, TPB posits that perceived behavioral control, the extent to which someone feels that they have the ability to perform a target behavior (Fishbein and Ajzen 2010), is an antecedent to intentions. Framed in part on the self-efficacy construct related to TPB, students' intention to pursue a sales career is expected to be higher when they know that the sales activities they will be performing match their abilities, and thus, their expectation for doing well in that field (Arcidiacono, Hotz, and Kang 2012). Peterson's (2020) review of the self-efficacy literature on sales performance found that perceived sales knowledge, and related dimensions such as sales abilities and selling skills, are established proxies for self-

efficacy. Consistent with PBC, reticence to pursue a sales career is greater for students with less knowledge of sales and selling, and a lower perceived match between their skills and selling success (Inks and Avila 2018; Ballestra et al. 2017; Peltier et al. 2014).

H1: Perceived sales knowledge increases intention to pursue a selling career

Perceptions of Selling Ethics and the Intent to Pursue a Sales Career

Ethics is viewed as the moral values or principles that guide an individual's determination of right and wrong (Wotruba 1990). Ethics represent the social norm of a collective, such as the ethical norms of a group, industry, or occupation. The TPB literature asserts that normative beliefs about the behavior of a group influence subjective and moral norms regarding whether behaviors associated with the group are acceptable. For this study, TPB posits that beliefs about perceptions of selling ethics influence students' intention to engage in a sales career. A meta-analysis conducted by Rivis, Sheeran, and Armitage (2009) indicated that subjective norms consistently emerge as the weakest predictor of intentions, and thus advocated for an extension of TPB to include perceived moral norms. Moral norms are perceptions of an individual's moral correctness associated with performing a behavior. Unlike subjective norms that pertain to the normative influence of others, Roos and Hanh (2019) contend that personal moral norms are based on how individuals assess the ethical behaviors of others. Perceptions of salespeople's ethics have been shown to influence intention to pursue a sales career in the U.S. and across cultures (Fournier et al. 2014; Lee et al. 2018).

H2: Perceived unethical behaviors by salespeople lower intention to pursue a selling career.

Perceptions of Salespeople and the Intent to Pursue a Sales Career

The negative portrayal of sales ethics exists across media (for a review see Waldeck, Pullins, and Houlette 2010) and countries (Fournier et al. 2014). This portrayal aligns with TPB

in that the desirability of an individual performing a target behavior has been shown to impact intention to perform that behavior (Esposito et al. 2016). Additionally, Peltier et al. (2014) examined salesperson favorability, admiration, and respect. As with perceptions of sales ethics, the negative normative beliefs held toward salespeople lowers salesperson prestige and decreases the intention likelihood of becoming a salesperson (Avlonitis and Panagopoulos 2010; Ballestra et al. 2017; Bright et al. 2005).

H3: More favorable perceptions of salespeople increase intention to pursue a selling career.

Perceptions of Sales Profession and the Intent to Pursue a Sales Career

TBP research offers two related attitudinal constructs relevant for assessing perceptions of the sales profession and their impact on the intent to pursue a sales career: experiential and instrumental (Fishbein and Ajzen 2010). Positive experiential attitudes are most associated with the perceptions and feelings salespeople have when performing sales-related activities, such as interesting, fun, enjoyable, and exciting; while positive instrumental attitudes represent outcome-related measures like worthwhile, valuable, pay, and success (Bristow et al. 2011; Castleberry 1990). Extant research has found that students' perceptions of the sales profession—the personal satisfaction, value, and worth to society that the sales profession offers—increases the intention to pursue a sales career (e.g., Bristow, Gulati, Amyx 2006; Peltier et al. 2014). Extending TPB, Esposito et al. (2016) incorporated the model of goal-directed behavior to capture the desirability of performing an activity.

H4: More favorable perceptions of the sales profession increase intention to pursue a selling career.

Comprehensive and integrated frameworks for pursuing a career in sales are limited. Although the hypothesized direct effects noted for each of the four decision factors described

above has received some attention in the literature, these factors may not be equal in terms of their direct and indirect impact on career intentions. Below we present the ordered, indirect hypotheses shown in Figure 1.

Place Figure 1 about here

Perceived Sales Knowledge to Perceptions of Selling Ethics, Salespeople, and Sales

Profession

Framed within TPB, salespeople are knowledge workers who perform their duties through value-creating exchanges with their customers (Dixon and Tanner 2012). Sales organizations spend considerable resources to educate and train salespeople, with the end goal of having professional, knowledgeable, ethical, and profitable customer relationships (Rapp et al. 2014). Sales recruiters have long looked to universities to help prepare students to meet this potential. Because of its boundary-spanning role, degree of autonomy, and pressure to perform (Evans et al. 2012), hiring firms are increasingly interested in having educators play a role in communicating the importance of ethical behavior, what constitutes unethical behavior, and the negative consequences when salespeople breach the code of ethical conduct (Ameer and Halinen 2019). When tangible examples of ethical standards in selling are communicated, media portrayals can be offset (Waldeck, Pullins, and Houlette 2010). Sales knowledge would logically also include informing students that sales and selling is a stable, well-compensated, and enjoyable profession (Bristow et al. 2011). In their call for a new sales research agenda, Dixon and Tanner (2012) placed importance on increasing the visibility of the role salespeople play in co-creating value with their customers. In response, Ballestra et al. (2017) found support for the assertion that a greater understanding by students of the changing role of sales relationships increased their overall perceptions of salespeople and the selling profession. The TPB literature

views perceived behavioral control in terms of an individual's feelings that they can perform a target behavior (Ajzen 1991). This literature also suggests that perceived self-efficacy increases through the acquisition of new knowledge that in turn positively impacts target attitudes, subjective and moral norms, and the desirability of a target behavior (Fu et al. 2017; Rise, Sheeran, and Hukkelberg 2010).

H5: Higher perceived sales knowledge lowers perceptions of unethical behaviors by salespeople.

H6: Higher perceived sales knowledge improves perceptions of salespeople.

H7: Higher perceived sales knowledge improves perceptions of the sales profession.

Perceptions of Selling Ethics to Perceptions of Salespeople and Sales Profession

The impact of ethical concerns on recruiting is widely acknowledged (Agnihotri et al. 2014). The focus, and importance, of selling ethics in underpinning perceptions of both salespeople and selling as a profession is evident in the literature (Hawes, Rich, and Widmier 2004; Hartman 2006; Waldeck, Pullins, and Houlette 2010). Based on TPB, negative social or moral norms, and potential negative feelings (e.g., shame, guilt, regret) will impact affective responses toward individuals associated with those behaviors and the context in which those behaviors are performed (Rivis and Sheeran, 2003; Rivis, Sheeran, and Armitage 2009). Because selling ethics is a social and moral norm that students use to evaluate salespeople and the sales profession (Inks and Avila 2018), we posit the following:

H8: Heightened perceptions of unethical behaviors by salespeople lower perceptions of salespeople.

H9: Heightened perceptions of unethical behaviors by salespeople lower perceptions of the sales profession.

Perceptions of Salespeople to Perceptions of the Sales Profession

It is well documented that the selling profession is not held in high esteem (Mason 1965). While reasons are varied, perceptions of salespeople and social and moral norms likely play a role (Waldeck, Pullins, and Houlette 2010). For example, Karakaya et al. (2011) found a positive relationship between the perceived esteem of salespeople and beliefs about selling. TPB suggests that positive/negative perceptions regarding individuals working in a profession would positively/negatively impact feelings about working in that profession (Esposito et al. 2016).

H10: More favorable perceptions of salespeople improve perceptions of the sales profession.

Pre- and Post-ITPSC Hypotheses

Students know little about the sales process and sales careers when they graduate high school and prior to taking their first marketing course (Inks and Avila 2018). Research suggests that students' decision-making process regarding their intent to pursue a sales career may change as they learn more about sales and selling (Peltier et al. 2014). The means through which instructors communicate information needed to impact intent to pursue a sales career may take the form of classroom lectures, engagement in student organizations, work experience, or experiential learning exercises (Cummins, Loe, and Peltier 2016; Weeks et al. 2014). Other influencers of sales career selection are school advisors (Allen et al. 2014) and salesperson role-models (Sojka, Gupta, and Hartman 2000). We focus on sales experts and intervention information related to the ITPSC constructs including perceived sales knowledge, perceptions of selling ethics, perceptions of salespeople, perceptions of the sales profession, and intent to pursue a sales career. We expect that exposure to sales professionals will raise students' levels of self-efficacy and perceived behavioral control related to a sales career, causing them to see a greater

range of opportunities within the profession, and thus, strengthening the effects of their own perceived sales knowledge (Johara, Yahya, and Tehsee 2017).

H11a: Perceived sales knowledge will increase after exposure to sales professionals.

Students' baseline understanding of ethical sales practices and how organizations respond when unacceptable sales behaviors occur is low. We thus expect that exposure to expert sales professionals in the classroom outlining acceptable behaviors, and the severe consequences that exist when these behaviors are breached, will decrease perceptions of unethical behaviors by salespeople after exposure to sales professionals (Lee et al. 2018).

H11b: Perceptions of selling ethics will be more favorable after exposure to sales professionals.

Students commonly have negative impressions of salespeople (Bright et al. 2005). These impressions are due more to how salespeople are portrayed in the media, often misrepresenting the interaction salespeople have with customers and prospects on a regular basis (Ballestra et al. 2017). We thus posit that exposure to expert salespeople who provide positive affirmation of the importance of buyer-seller relationships and problem-solving activities will increase favorable perceptions of salespeople (Bristow et al. 2011; Karakaya, Quigley, and Bingham 2011).

H11c: Perceptions of salespeople will be more favorable after exposure to sales professionals.

As with the other ITPSC dimensions, students have been long uninformed regarding what a sales career is all about (Bristow et al. 2011; Castleberry 1990). While research has shown that exposing students to career information increases their perceptions of a sales career (Inks and Avila 2018), research is lacking specific to the role that sales experts have in increasing these perceptions. We posit that:

H11d: Perceptions of the sales profession will be more favorable after exposure to sales professionals.

Relatively few students consider sales as a possible career choice prior to or early in their college experience. Research has shown that each of the ITPSC dimensions positively impacts intent to pursue a sales career (Peltier et al. 2014). Combined, we expect that students will express greater perceived interest in a selling career after exposure to sales experts in the classroom (Cummins et al. 2015)

H11e: Intent to pursue a sales career will increase after exposure to sales professionals.

Moderation Hypotheses: Strength of Relationships Pre- and Post-exposure to Salespeople

A key objective of this research is to examine whether the strengths of the direct paths to intent to pursue, and thus the decision-making process itself, changes pre- vs. post-exposure to sales experts. TPB contends that behavioral intent is a function of attitudes, beliefs, social influences, and behavioral control; and that this decision-making process may be impacted by new knowledge and experiences (Ajzen 1991; Ajzen and Fishbein 1977). Although research is scant on how exposure to sales experts impact students' intent to pursue a sales career, we offer conceptual and empirical support from the TPB literature to guide our decision-making hypotheses pre- vs. -post-exposure to sales experts in the classroom. A key

Consistent with TPB, sales experts have the potential to become social influencers, driving student knowledge and experience. In this role, salespeople can alter students' opinions, beliefs, social norms, and ultimately, their intentions to pursue a sales career (Cummins et al. 2015; Lee et al. 2018). Looking beyond professional educators and to the sales recruitment function, expert salespeople are uniquely suited to impacting student perceptions of sales. Given job responsibilities and time constraints, recruitment of sales students is often done by human resource staff and not sales professionals. Of concern, most recruiters are not practicing salespeople and are often ill-prepared to meet the informational needs of students (Wiles and

Spiro 2004). Especially challenging for non-sales recruiters are quandaries related to personal sales experiences, changing job roles and competencies, ethical practices within the salesforce, and why sales and selling is a worthwhile career opportunity (Ballestra et al. 2017; Rapp et al. 2014; Schwepker 2015). Sales organizations and educators are particularly interested in altering the recruitment process via greater exposure to detailed sales and selling experiences (Levin, Hansen, and Laverie 2012). Limited research supports that exposure to the profession counteracts the societal bias against sales as a career and the negative stereotypes of salespeople (e.g., Bristow, Gulati, and Amyx 2006; Pettijohn and Pettijohn 2009). Below we provide theoretical support for how exposure to sales experts in the classroom impacts each of the direct paths to intent to pursue a sales career.

Perceived Sales Knowledge to Intent to Pursue: Moderation Effects

In the TPB literature, self-efficacy, or the perceived ability to sufficiently execute a specific behavior, has been associated with the intent to perform that behavior (Ajzen and Madden 1986; Sheeran, Trafimow, and Armitage 2003). This link between perceived execution ability and intent is stronger when perceived behavioral control, defined as the perceived ease (or difficulty) associated with that behavior, is higher (Fishbein and Ajzen 2010). Specific to sales, the TPB self-efficacy literature shows that this uncertainty is reduced when individuals have confidence that they have been adequately trained and prepared to undertake selling activities (Brown, Jones, and Leigh 2005; Fu et al. 2017). Recent research in the sales education literature has shown that consideration for a sales career is greater when students feel that they have the requisite skill set for achieving success as a salesperson (Arcidiacono, Hotz, and Kang 2012; Inks and Avila 2018). As noted earlier, most college students have little information about sales and selling and are thus uncertain of their ability to become a successful salesperson. Although

exploratory, we expect that increasing sales knowledge will serve as an accelerant for the positive association between perceived sales knowledge and perceived intent to pursue. We thus posit that the relationship will be stronger post-exposure to expert salespeople; assuming that this exposure helps build students' confidence in their abilities to succeed in the sales field.

H12a: The magnitude of the effect of perceived sales knowledge on the intention to pursue a selling career will be larger post-exposure to sales professionals.

Perceptions of Selling Ethics to Intent to Pursue: Moderation Effects

Students enter college with an array of negative perceptions about the motivations salespeople have in the selling process, and whether they have customers' best interests in mind. These are firmly held beliefs, leading to strongly held beliefs that salespeople utilize unethical sales practices during the selling encounter (Inks and Avila 2018; Karakaya, Quigley, and Bingham 2011). Exposure to education and training related to accepted selling practices reduces confusion about ethical standards and ethical conduct (Mulki, Jaramillo, and Locander 2009). Extant research is silent on how the career choice decision-making process is impacted by a greater understanding that salespeople seek equitable buyer-seller relationships. However, TPB suggests that exposing students to new information—that salespeople are trustworthy and that the failure to act ethically results in role termination—will reduce their previously held negative social and moral norms associated with entering the sales field (Manstead, 2000; Ravis and Sheeran, 2003; Ravis, Sheeran, and Armitage 2009). Although untested, we expect that exposure to sales professionals discussing ethical expectations and consequences in the classroom will work through TPB social norms development, diminishing the strongly held and negative effects of selling ethics concerns on student intent to pursue (Cummins et al. 2015; Inks and Avila 2018; Lee et al. 2018). Specifically, uninformed students often feel that salespeople are unethical

(Peltier et al., 2014). Thus, we posit that after learning about the personal consequences for salespeople found to act unethically, students will have fewer negative perceptions of selling ethics, thereby having less of an impact on their intent to pursue a career in sales.

H12b: *The magnitude of the effect of perceptions of selling ethics on the intention to pursue a selling career will be smaller post-exposure to sales professionals.*

Perceptions of Salespeople to Intent to Pursue: Moderation Effects

Although TPB research has shown that perceptions of individuals carrying out a specific target behavior may impact behavioral intent (Esposito et al. 2016), missing are studies that have examined how this relationship changes complex decision-making processes pre- and post-exposure to interventions, including intent to pursue a sales career. Two related constructs in the TPB offer theoretical guidance for assessing pre- and post-decision-making processes: social identity and self-identity. Social identities represent general perceptions associated with being a member of a target group (e.g., salespeople are admired), while self-identities refer to how individuals would see themselves if they were to perform activities related to that target group or occupation (e.g., As a salesperson, I would be admired) (Obschonka et al. 2012; Stryker 1987). Empirical findings from a meta-analysis found that social and self-identities help explain occupational intent beyond other variables in a model (Rise, Sheeran, and Hukkelberg 2010). TPB literature suggests that interventions designed to enhance students' perceptions of positive social identities related to being a salesperson, along with how they would view themselves in that role, will strengthen the relationship between perceptions of salespeople and intent to pursue a sales career after exposure to expert salespeople in the classroom (Obschonka et al. 2015).

H12c: *The magnitude of the effect of perceptions of salespeople on the intention to pursue a selling career will be larger post-exposure to sales professionals.*

Perceptions of the Sales Profession and Intent to Pursue: Moderation Effects

College recruiters routinely communicate the personal, social, and financial rewards of a sales career (Hawes, Rich, and Widmier 2004). *H4* posits that intent to pursue a sales career increases with higher levels of perceived attractiveness of the profession. Although untested in complex decision models and career choice, jointly the TPB literature and the model of goal-directed behavior suggest that interventions designed to increase the desirability of the sales profession will strengthen the impact between perceptions of the sales profession and intent to pursue a sales career (Esposito 2016; Perugini and Bagozzi 2001).

H12d: The magnitude of the effect of perceptions of the sales profession on intent to pursue a sales career will be larger post-exposure to sales professionals.

Methodology

Sample and Procedure

The pre- and post-intervention questionnaires were distributed in a large principles of marketing class at a Midwestern university. To control for knowledge effects, and to access baselines, students received the ITPSC scale (Peltier et al. 2014) via email three days before the classroom intervention and prior to any course or textbook coverage on sales (naïve sample). A total of 259 students participated in the pre-intervention survey. Post-intervention (informed sample) data were collected 24 to 48 hours following the sales expert intervention. A total of 249 of 278 students who were present in class during the sales expert intervention completed the post-test survey (90% response rate). Given the high response rate, the following sample characteristics were nearly the same pre- vs. post-exposure: (a) Gender: 59% male and 41% female pre- vs. 60%/40% post-; (b) Year in school: 86% sophomore/junior and 14% seniors for

both pre- and post-; (c) Major: 20% marketing, 73% business/non-marketing, and 6% non-business pre- vs. 22%/71%/6% post-, respectively.

Intervention

A key aspect for responding to criticisms and to extend TPB is the creation and assessment of interventions designed to motivate belief and attitude change (Steinmetz et al., 2016). This study answers the call by assessing the ability of a classroom intervention to motivate changes in intent to pursue a sales career. Three experienced salespeople were brought into the classroom to inform and overcome myths about sales and to spark interest in pursuing professional selling. Two of the three expert salespeople were women, and each had at least 15 years of experience. Each firm sold in a business-to-business context; two were product-oriented and one was services-based. The service firm had a longer decision process with contract renewals. The product-oriented firms also required long-term relationship building but required more interaction given shifting inventory needs. Each speaker was given a presentation guide for about a 30-minute talk to discuss topics related to individual dimensions of the ITPSC, including (1) the benefits of the selling profession, (2) the importance of selling ethics and what happens when ethical practices are breached, (3) a day in the life of a new salesperson in their firm and over a career, (4) the types of sales and selling skills students would need upon graduation, and (5) why students should consider a sales career regardless of their major. A one-item intervention check was utilized to assess the quality of the presentations. Overall presentations were perceived to be of relatively good quality by students (mean = 4.0/5.0, std dev = .46).

Measures

The Intent to Pursue a Sales Career scale (Peltier et al. 2014) was used for both the pre- and post-intervention tests. The ITPSC scale has been shown to be valid and reliable across

universities and educational interventions (Cummins et al. 2015; Cummins, Loe, and Peltier 2016; Herlache et al. 2018; Inks and Avila 2018; Nielson and Cummins 2019; Peltier et al. 2014; Scott and Beuk 2020). The scale has four independent variable subscales with 22 items, and a 4-item Intent to Pursue dependent measure. Individual dimensions and the final ITPSC scale items used in this study are summarized in Table 1. Note that for the Intent to Pursue a Sales Career dependent variable, we used the two items from Peltier et al. (2014) that more directly measured the likelihood of securing a sales position immediately upon graduation: (1) Obtaining a position in sales is a priority for me after graduation and (2) I am interested in pursuing a sales position when I graduate.

Analysis and Results

Exploratory Analysis

To assess the unidimensionality of the ITPSC, items used in this study were included in an exploratory factor analysis using principle axis factoring, varimax rotation on the aggregate pre- and post-test data. A factor analysis was also conducted on the individual pre- and post-test data, each with similar results. All five ITPSC dimensions loaded as expected. The factor item loadings are shown in Table 1.

Confirming Factor Structure and Validity Assessment

The ITPSC scale items were then subjected to a confirmatory factor analysis using the aggregate pre- and post-intervention data. Specifically, a model was estimated in which the items were required to load on their a priori specified factors with each factor allowed to correlate with the other factors (Gerbing and Anderson 1988). The measurement model was estimated using AMOS 25. After examining the modification indices, three of the 24 independent variable items from the original ITPSC scale were eliminated to enhance model fit: salespeople are more

unethical than those in other business fields (perceptions of selling ethics), salespeople are admired by others (perceptions of salespeople), and a sales career is valuable (perceptions of sales career). All of the final model fit statistics exceeded Hu and Bentler's (1999) recommended thresholds, indicating an excellent overall fit of the data (CMIN/DF = 1.4; CFI = 0.98; GFI = 0.95, NFI = .96; TLI=.98; RMSEA=.026; $\chi^2 = 563$, $df = 334$, $p < 0.001$). Table 1 presents the standardized regression item loadings for the CFA. Next, two tests were conducted to assess convergent validity. First, all indicator items loaded on their expected latent factor at $p < .001$, with the standardized regression loadings ranging from .59 to .94 (Mathwick and Rigdon (2004). Second, the average variance extracted value (AVE) for each construct exceeded Fornell and Larcker's (1981) threshold criterion of .5. Convergent validity was thus established. We assessed discriminant validity in two ways. First, the maximum shared variance (MSV) and average shared variance (ASV) were both less than the AVE for each construct (Hair Jr. et al. 2010). Second, as recommended by Fornell and Larcker (1981), the square root of the AVE exceeded all paired correlations shown in the diagonal of the correlation matrix in Table 2. Lastly, the Chronbach alpha (intra-item correlations for two-item scales) and composite reliability scores are shown in Table 2 and all exceeded .7. Separate CFA analyses were conducted on the pre- and post-intervention samples, all yielding similar results. The ITPSC construct correlation matrix for the combined pre- and post-samples and CFA reliability and validity measures are presented in Table 2.

Common Method Variance

We used two post-hoc techniques to check for common methods variance following the procedures outlined by Podsakoff et al. (2003). We calculated Harman's single-factor method in exploratory factor analysis. The single factor explained only 34% of the variance suggesting

common method variance was not an issue. Next, a common latent factor was created in the confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). Each item was allowed to load on its latent construct and the common latent factor. Each path was constrained and the square of the common variance was calculated (0.035). Next, the deltas of the standardized regression weights were calculated by comparing the results of the model with and without the CLF. No deltas were greater than the cutoff of 2 (absolute values ranged from .003 to .072). Common method variance does not appear to be a concern. Therefore, the final measurement model and structural path models did not control for common method bias. To ensure that the factor structure held for both samples, separate CFAs were run for the pre- and post-intervention data sets, each with consistent results.

Place Table 1 and 2 about here

Structural Models and Test of Hypotheses (H1-H10)

Pre-Intervention Model. We tested the hypothesized relationships (H1-H10) for the pre-intervention baseline model shown in Figure 1 using a structural equation model (SEM) estimated in AMOS 25. All model fit statistics exceeded Hu and Bentler's (1999) thresholds, indicating an excellent overall fit of the data (CMIN/DF = 1.2; CFI = 0.99; GFI = 0.93, NFI = .93; TLI=.98; RMSEA=.02; $\chi^2 = 398$, df = 328, $p < 0.01$). Alternate models were tested that eliminated variables and/or paths and that reversed the hypothesized directional relationships. None of these alternate models better fit theory nor had superior explanatory power. As shown in Table 3, eight of ten paths were significant pre-exposure to sales professionals in the classroom. A separate SEM was conducted on a pre-test control sample, yielding very similar results.

Direct Paths (H1-H4): As shown in Table 3, three of the four direct hypotheses to intent to pursue were significant and in the hypothesized direction, including (1) perceived sales

knowledge (H1: std β = .379, t = 3.6, p < .001), (2) perceptions of selling ethics (H2: std β = -.207, t = -2.4, p < .05), and (3) perceptions of the sales profession (H4: std β = .707, t = 3.5, p < .001).

The path from perceptions of salespeople to intent to pursue was not supported (H3). The strongest direct path was found for the sales profession to intent to pursue a sales career.

Indirect Paths (H5-H10): Five of the six indirect paths were significant, including (1) perceived sales knowledge to perceptions of selling ethics (H5: Std β = -.212, t = -2.9, p < .01), (2) perceived sales knowledge to perceptions of salespeople (H6: Std β = .390, t = 4.5, p < .001), (3) perceived sales knowledge to perceptions of the sales profession (H7: Std β = .174, t = 3.4, p < .001), (4) perception of selling ethics to perceptions of salespeople (H8: Std β = -.344, t = -4.2, p < .001), and (5) perceptions of salespeople to perceptions of the sales profession (H10: Std β = .295, t = 4.6, p < .001). Perceptions of selling ethics to perceptions of the sales profession were not significant (H9).

Post-Intervention Model. We next tested H1-H10 for the post-intervention baseline model (see Table 3). All model fit statistics exceeded Hu and Bentler's (1999) thresholds, again indicating an excellent overall fit of the data (CMIN/DF = 1.4; CFI = 0.98; GFI = 0.92, NFI = .93; TLI = .97; RMSEA = .03; χ^2 = 472, df = 328, p < 0.001). Alternate models were tested that eliminated variables and/or paths and that reversed the hypothesized directional relationships. None of these alternate models better fit theory nor had superior explanatory power. As shown in Table 3, eight of ten paths were significant for students post exposure to sales professionals in the classroom.

Direct Hypotheses (H1-H4): Three of the four direct hypotheses to intent to pursue were significant in the hypothesized direction, including (1) perceived sales knowledge (H1: Std β = .806, t = 5.5, p < .001), (2) perceptions of salespeople (H3: Std β = .261, t = 2.1, p < .05), and (3)

perceptions of sales profession (H4: Std β =.476, $t=2.8$, $p < .01$). The path from perceptions of selling ethics to intent to pursue was not significant (H2). The strongest direct path was from perceived sales knowledge to intent to pursue sales.

Indirect Hypotheses (H5-H10): Five of six indirect paths were significant: (1) perceived sales knowledge to perceptions of salespeople (H6: Std β =.318, $t=3.4$, $p < .001$), (2) perceived sales knowledge to perceptions of sales profession (H7: Std β =.286, $t=4.3$, $p < .001$), (3) perceptions of selling ethics to perceptions of salespeople (H8: Std β =-.292, $t=-4.8$, $p < .001$), (4) perceptions of selling ethics to perceptions of the sales profession (H9: Std β =-.118, $t=-2.9$, $p < .01$), and (5) perceptions of salespeople to perceptions of sales profession (H10: Std β =.397, $t=6.2$, $p < .001$). Perceived sales knowledge to perceptions of selling ethics was not significant (H9).

Combined, for H1-H10, six of ten paths were significant in the hypothesized direction for both models. Of the direct paths, perceived sales knowledge to intent to pursue (H1) and perceptions of the sales profession to intent to pursue (H4) were significant in both models. Of the indirect paths, perceived sales knowledge to perceptions of salespeople (H6), perceptions of selling ethics to perceptions of salespeople (H8), and perceptions of salespeople to perceptions of sales profession (H10) were significant in both models. Four of the paths differed across the two models, either by significance or path strength (see moderation analysis).

Place Table 3 about here

Subscale Comparisons Pre- and Post-Intervention (H11a-H11e)

It was hypothesized that students' perceived sales knowledge (H11a), perceptions of selling ethics (H11b), perceptions of salespeople (H11c), perceptions of the sales profession

(H11d), and intent to pursue a sales career (H11e) would improve after being exposed to professional salespeople in the classroom. H11a-H11e were supported. Table 4 contains the pre- and post- comparison of means for each of the individual subscale items, as well as the mean scores for the summated average of each ITPSC subscale dimension. As predicted, students' perceptions of each of the subscale items and their aggregates were positively impacted after exposure to sales experts. The greatest gain related to the independent variables was for the mean aggregate perceptions of selling ethics (reversed coded), which had a change score of .46 (pre = 1.62 vs. post = 2.08). The mean aggregate intent to pursue a sales career increased by .46 (pre = 2.39 vs. post = 2.85). We thus provide support that our intervention was effective in creating significant changes, a key criterion for assessing the utility of TPB (Esposito et al. 2016; Head and Noar 2014; Roos and Hahn 2019).

Place Table 4 about here

Moderation Hypotheses (H12a-H12d)

H12a, H12c, and H12d hypothesized that the direct paths to intent to pursue post-exposure to expert salespeople would become stronger for perceived sales knowledge, perceptions of salespeople, and perceptions of the sales profession, and weaker for perceptions of selling ethics (H12b). As shown in Table 3, the moderation results provide evidence for assessing pre- and post-intervention path changes. First, although significant in both models, the direct path from perceived sales knowledge to intent was stronger post-intervention ($p < .01$), providing support for H12a. Second, the direct path from perceptions of selling ethics to intent to pursue was weaker post-intervention ($p < .05$), supporting H12b.

As noted earlier, the path from perceptions of salespeople to intent to pursue (H12c) was only significant in the post-intervention model. One possible explanation may be found in self-identity theory, which argues that people set identity standards, and when activated, guide identity-relevant behaviors (Stets and Burke 2000). Because the naïve respondents had likely not thought much about being a salesperson, it was only after they were exposed to sales professionals that they were able to determine if being a salesperson aligned with their self-identity; thus activating the salience regarding the link between perceptions of being a salesperson and intent to pursue (Rise, Sheeran, and Hukkelberg 2010). In contrast, the path from perceptions of selling ethics to intent to pursue (H12b) was only significant in the pre-intervention model. Although we anticipated a weaker impact post-exposure because of less negative perceptions of selling ethics, this improvement in perceptions of selling ethics led to a non-significant path altogether.

Discussion and Managerial Implications

Decision Model of Student Intent to Pursue Sales Career

Although the impact on intent to pursue a sales career for each of the ITPSC dimensions has been previously investigated, we extend the literature by modeling and testing the interrelationships between these dimensions, and how they jointly affect career choice. Our interrelationship findings, and the fact that the magnitude of indirect effects exceeded direct effects for two of the four ITPSC antecedent variables, supports the contribution of our integrative framework (Deeter-Schmelz and Peltier 2019). In that some of the direct paths to intent to pursue were insignificant in either the pre- or post-exposure models, we also contribute to the literature by showing that main effects alone are insufficient for explaining intent to pursue a sales career.

Our work also extends the use of TPB in the career choice context. As noted, TPB has been utilized to understand and explain business career choice including entrepreneurship (Gorgievski et al. 2018) and sales among high school students (Inks and Avila 2018), but this work expands its usage to collegiate students' exposure to and evaluation of a sales career. We also extend TPB through understanding complex decision-making pre- and post-exposure to an intervention designed to change perceptions, attitudes, and intentions. We use TPB to drive our initial and moderation hypotheses. Although TPB is a mainstream theory used extensively across disciplines, it has received criticism in the literature. Responding to the criticism that TPB is too parsimonious, we contribute to the literature by employing additional theoretical concepts, including self-efficacy, social identity, goal-directed behavior, and social and moral norms. Our results show the value of intervention testing, a requisite for addressing criticisms of the utility of TPB (Ajzen 2015; Steinmetz et al. 2016).

An important contribution of this paper is its comparison of the decision-making of both naïve students' (without educational exposure to sales in a collegiate setting) and informed students' choice to pursue sales careers. The direct effects are largely consistent between the pre- and post-models, showing newfound strength in the underlying ITPSC model as the variance is shared in this SEM model. The direct effects of knowledge, profession, and selling ethics were significant and positive on student intent to pursue in the pre-(naïve) model as hypothesized. The direct effects of knowledge, profession, and salespeople were significant and positive on student intent to pursue in the post-(intervention) model. The direct effect of salesperson perceptions was non-significant in the pre-model, perhaps because students had not been exposed to an actual salesperson. In contrast, after exposure to three experienced salespeople in class, the post-model shows salesperson perceptions as a significant positive contributor to the intent to pursue. The

post-model's impact on selling ethics is insignificant, perhaps suggesting that students' original perceptions of sales and salespeople as unethical are challenged enough after classroom exposure to become less predictive of career decisions. Also consistent are the indirect paths between the pre- and post-models. For each, five of six indirect paths are significant. The pre-(naïve) model's path from selling ethics to the profession is insignificant, while the path from knowledge to selling ethics is insignificant in the post-(informed) model.

Impact of Salesperson Exposure in the Classroom

Of particular interest in this research was the possible impact of exposing students to actual experienced salespeople in an educational setting. While understanding and mapping the decision-making processes of students as they select career paths is meaningful, the opportunity to impact these decisions through education is what we, as sales educators, are most excited by. The moderation model explored these pre- and post-intervention path changes among students. We posited that expert salespeople in the classroom would be able to present new and applicable information to students about the reality of sales careers, and thus change the students' decision-making process for choosing a sales career. The results supported this hypothesis as the direct path from perceived sales knowledge to intent (H12a) was the strongest after exposure to salespeople ($p < .01$). The fact that this was the strongest moderation effect is somewhat surprising since the summated means for perceived sales knowledge pre- vs. post-exposure to expert salespeople in the classroom was lower than any of other summated changes (.21). Even a small change in the students' level of self-efficacy and perceived behavioral control leads to significant changes in intent to pursue a sales career. This is consistent with Fu et al. (2017) and Brown, Jones, and Leigh (2005), who showed that perceived self-efficacy is positively associated with intention and performance.

The moderation model also supports H12b, which posited a weakening of the negative impact of selling ethics on intent to pursue sales. Post exposure to salespeople in the classroom, the impact of sales-related ethical concerns on student decision-making about a sales career lessened ($p < .05$). This finding provides hope to the sales profession at large as concerns about selling ethics are well documented (Hartmann 2006) and the effects are shown to be persistent and detrimental to the profession (Hawes, Rich, and Widmier 2004). This result suggests that a willingness of sales managers and recruiters to share company ethical policies with recruits, explain ethical expectations, and discuss outcomes of ethical lapses, can be a means of expanding the talent funnel rather than shrinking it by scaring recruits away. This is theoretically important in that TPB suggests a link between social and moral norms and sales career intention (Inks and Avila 2018). Overall, the subscale comparisons pre- and post-intervention showed that students' perceptions of all ITPSC dimensions improved post-exposure to sales professionals.

Managerial Implications

Research suggests difficulty in hiring is related to the negative reputation of salespeople and the career (Hartman 2006; Waldeck, Pullins, and Houlette 2010; Lee, Sandfield, and Dhaliwal 2007), which decreases the number of high-quality candidates considering a sales profession. In practice, salespeople are trained to broaden the funnel, to prospect for new customers and new opportunities. Yet, this foundational aspect of sales is not well-applied to salesperson recruitment, which commonly is done by recruiters who are ill-prepared to share role information that students place importance on during job selection (Wiles and Spiro 2004). Salespeople's time is valuable, and it should be spent visiting classrooms and engaging with students. Recruiters should work in partnership with salespeople, providing support, but not representing the role alone. Sales organizations will benefit from participating in university sales

center partnerships, by participating in student sales competitions at universities and student organizations like the American Marketing Association and Pi Sigma Epsilon. When talking with students, salespeople should discuss the sales process, what they do daily, and the ethical standards they maintain. Salespeople need to be educators of those whose exposure to sales as a profession is only from popular culture. As a profession, sales must start to invest in education initiatives to impact the decision-making of the next generation of business and sales leaders. If sales is held in low-esteem by future CEOs, CMOs, CFOs, CIOs, etc., what potential for customer-driven, boundary-spanning change do organizations have?

For salespeople and the sales profession at large, it is important that we collectively begin to address what has been anecdotally known and empirically shown for some: that sales and salesperson stereotypes are persistent and negative among the population (Babin, Boles, and Darden 1995) and among students (Lee, Sandfield, and Dhaliwal 2007). This research offers paths forward. Professional sales and marketing associations can utilize this research as a starting point for countering negative stereotypes effectively through knowledge generation about sales roles and challenging ethical concerns. Public relations campaigns could highlight the importance of ethical standards in sales organizations. Firms that discuss and promote their ethical standards openly with customers and recruits may not only help to challenge widely held stereotypes about salespeople, but also draw in customers and candidates by challenging how they process messages (Babin, Boles, and Darden 1995). Messaging about how salespeople spend their time, and what salespeople enjoy about their roles may help to convey a deeper understanding of the sales process and highlight some of the positive traits already attributed to salespeople by Lee, Sandfield, and Dhaliwal (2007). For example, discussing the time salespeople spend training and learning about product and service offerings may highlight the

exiting positive salesperson trait beliefs such as helpful, professional, well-educated, and knowledgeable about products.

Our study demonstrates that salespeople can effectively serve as change agents in the classroom, leading to enhanced perceptions of the sales profession and sales career pursuit. Attracting students to sales through salesperson-led recruitment activities can “reduce the stigma of sales, pushing past stereotypes and other surface-level conceptions” as called for by Ahearne (2017). In only one classroom-based intervention, experienced salespeople impacted all facets of intent to pursue, driving down negative perceptions and increasing students’ intent to pursue a sales career. Lastly, because the research is conducted in a large principles of marketing class, a context in which sales education interventions are lacking (Cummins et al. 2015), we offer theoretical guidance on how salespeople impact intent to pursue a sales career early in students’ business education when major or concentration changes are most likely. These contributions are vital to businesses hoping to understand why students choose to pursue, or shy-away from, sales.

Limitations and Future Research

While the ITPSC scale has been used in career choice contexts, additional research into scale development might prove useful. Specific to TPB, the inclusion of additional model constructs, mediators, and moderators would help broaden the conceptual framework and potential utility of TPB. Moreover, most TPB studies, including the current study, use behavioral intent via self-reported measures as the final dependent variable and not actual behavior. Although there is no accepted time gap between the intent and actual behavior, research that empirically investigates the relationship between intent and actual behavior, and between antecedent constructs and that behavior, would extend TPB frameworks overall, and career choice specifically. Of interest, critics of TPB agree that the theory is most predictive for

younger participants over the short term (Sniehotta, Presseau, and Araújo-Soares 2014).

Although our intervention pre- vs. post-exposure is longitudinal in nature, the time gap is very short. Research that investigates the duration of intent to pursue and its relationship with the actual choice of sales as a career would be useful. In the case of the current decision-making framework, collecting data at the time of graduation offers an appealing opportunity to link intent to behavior. Such extensions would create a mechanism for assessing how intent impacted actual career choice, including whether this link holds for naïve students, informed students, other sales classes, and as time passes between intervention and career decision.

We also tested only a single intervention. Identifying, creating, and testing other interventions would help to expand the utility of TPB as a conceptual framework linking change to planned and actual behavior. We thus encourage additional research that extends the ITPSC to other sales contexts and learning methods. Future research could explore the differential results between the pre- and post-models for two direct paths. The path from salespeople to intent to pursue was only significant in the post-intervention model, and the path from selling ethics to intent was only significant in the pre-intervention model. Research is needed to further explore the impact of personal and relational exposure on career choice when careers have strong societal biases, either positive or negative. Research shows that discussing ethical choices and outcomes can impact ethical decision-making and sales-role success (Willingham 2003). Our research suggests that sales managers and recruiters may similarly be able to improve recruiting, not just training, by openly discussing ethical realities and penalties for ethical lapses. Future research could further explore these paths. Lastly, while the Theory of Planned Behavior has been used in a multitude of contexts, deficiencies exist in how TPB impacts complex decision making,

especially in the sales management literature. We thus encourage additional conceptual and empirical research that brings TPB into the sales literature.

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Table 1. Final sub-scale items, item loadings, and CFA fit statistics

| ITPSC Subscale Items | EFA Item Loading | CFA Item Loading |
|---|---------------------|---------------------|
| Perceived Sales Knowledge | | |
| I understand the sales process | .81 | .66 |
| I understand sales concepts and how to apply them | .78 | .73 |
| I know how to structure a sales presentation | .76 | .82 |
| I understand what a salesperson does on a daily basis | .75 | .59 |
| I am confident in my ability to apply sales techniques | .75 | .82 |
| I understand what a sales career is all about | .74 | .59 |
| Perceptions of Selling Ethics | | |
| Stretch the truth to make a sale | .83 | .82 |
| Take advantage of uneducated buyers | .75 | .79 |
| Make something up when they do not know the answer to a question | .72 | |
| Inflate the benefits of the products they sell | .72 | |
| Misrepresent guarantees and/or warranties | .71 | .81 |
| Sell products that people do not need | .63 | .80 |
| Perceptions of Salespeople | | |
| Are perceived favorably by others | .78 | .79 |
| Are respected by others | .76 | .93 |
| Perceptions of Sales Profession | | |
| Is doing something worthwhile on the job | .80 | .78 |
| Is interesting | .79 | .82 |
| Is exciting | .77 | .88 |
| Is personally satisfying | .76 | .80 |
| Is valuable | .75 | .88 |
| Perceived Intent to Pursue Sales Career | | |
| Obtaining a position in sales is a priority for me after graduation | .80 | .92 |
| I am interested in pursuing a sales position when I graduate | .76 | .94 |

Model fit statistics for CFA: $\chi^2 = 563$, $df = 334$, $p < 0.001$; CMIN/DF = 1.4; CFI = 0.98; GFI = 0.95, NFI = .96; TLI=.98; RMSEA=.026. CFA = confirmatory factor analysis; CFI = comparative fit index, GFI = goodness of fit; NFI = normalized fit index; TLI = Tucker-Lewis index; RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation; d.f. = degrees of freedom; CMIN/DF = minimum discrepancy per degree of freedom.

Table 2. Correlation matrix and CFA reliability and validity measures

| <i>Measure</i> | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|------------------------------------|------|------|------|-----|------|
| 1. Perceived Sales Knowledge | .71 | | | | |
| 2. Perceptions of Selling Ethics | -.15 | .72 | | | |
| 3. Perceptions of Salespeople | .38 | -.42 | .79 | | |
| 4. Perceptions of Sales Profession | .47 | -.39 | .64 | .79 | |
| 5. Intent to Pursue Sales Career | .53 | -.30 | .46 | .55 | .92 |
| Cronbach's alpha | .88 | .90 | *.76 | .90 | *.92 |
| Composite reliability | .86 | .90 | *.76 | .89 | *.92 |
| Average variance extracted | .51 | .60 | .62 | .62 | .85 |

Notes: (1) * $r=.76$ is the correlation for two-item measures related to perceptions of salespeople sub-scale, and * $r=.92$ for the two-item intent to pursue a sales career dependent measure; (2) All correlations are significant at $p<.01$; (3) The diagonal represents the square roots of the average variance extracted values. Measurement results in Table 2 are from the confirmatory factor analysis using the aggregated pre- and post-samples.

Table 3. Structural model results pre-intervention, post-intervention, and moderation

| | | | Pre-Intervention | | | | Post-Intervention | | | | Direct Path Moderation H12a-d | |
|------------------------------|-----|-------------------|---|------|------|----------------|--|------|------|----------------|-------------------------------|----------------|
| | | | Std Beta | t | Sig | Hypoth Support | Std Beta | t | Sig | Hypoth Support | Sig | Hypoth Support |
| Intent | <-- | Knowledge (H1) | .379 | 3.6 | .001 | Yes | .806 | 5.5 | .001 | Yes | .01 | Yes |
| Intent | <-- | Ethics (H2) | -.207 | -2.4 | .05 | Yes | -.001 | -.01 | ns | No | .05 | Yes |
| Intent | <-- | Salespeople (H3) | .078 | .61 | ns | No | .261 | 2.1 | .05 | Yes | ns | No |
| Intent | <-- | Profession (H4) | .707 | 3.5 | .001 | Yes | .476 | 2.8 | .01 | Yes | ns | No |
| Ethics | <-- | Knowledge (H5) | -.212 | -2.9 | .01 | Yes | -.028 | -.24 | ns | No | | |
| Salespeople | <-- | Knowledge (H6) | .390 | 4.5 | .001 | Yes | .318 | 3.4 | .001 | Yes | | |
| Profession | <-- | Knowledge (H7) | .174 | 3.4 | .001 | Yes | .286 | 4.3 | .001 | Yes | | |
| Salespeople | <-- | Ethics (H8) | -.344 | -4.2 | .001 | Yes | -.292 | -4.8 | .001 | Yes | | |
| Profession | <-- | Ethics (H9) | -.068 | -1.5 | ns | No | -.118 | -2.9 | .01 | Yes | | |
| Profession | <-- | Salespeople (H10) | .295 | 4.6 | .001 | Yes | .397 | 6.2 | .001 | Yes | | |
| Individual Model Fit Indices | | | CFI (.99) GFI (.93) NFI (.93) TLI (.98) RMSEA (.02) CMIN/DF = 1.2 $\chi^2 = 398, df = 328, p < 0.01$ | | | | CFI (.98) GFI (.92) NFI (.93) TLI (.97) RMSEA (.03) CMIN/DF = 1.4 $\chi^2 = 472, df = 328, p < 0.001$ | | | | | |

Table 4. Pre- vs. post-intervention comparison of means

| ITPSC Subscales | Pre | | Post | | Cohen | t | Sig |
|--|------|------|------|------|-------|-----|------|
| | Mean | SD | Mean | SD | | | |
| Perceived Sales Knowledge | | | | | | | |
| I understand what a sales career is all about | 3.29 | .92 | 3.66 | .77 | .37 | 4.8 | .001 |
| I understand what a salesperson does on a daily basis | 3.35 | .91 | 3.54 | .85 | .19 | 2.5 | .01 |
| I know how to structure a sales presentation | 3.10 | .98 | 3.32 | .93 | .22 | 2.6 | .01 |
| I understand the sales process | 3.51 | .84 | 3.66 | .81 | .15 | 2.1 | .05 |
| I understand sales concepts and how to apply them | 3.46 | .89 | 3.60 | .78 | .14 | 2.0 | .05 |
| I am confident in my abilities to apply sales techniques | 3.41 | .85 | 3.56 | .86 | .15 | 1.8 | .05 |
| Summated Average Knowledge Score | 3.35 | .73 | 3.56 | .65 | .21 | 3.3 | .001 |
| Perceptions of Selling Ethics (Higher = more ethical) | | | | | | | |
| Stretch the truth to make a sale | 1.42 | .80 | 1.92 | .98 | .50 | 6.3 | .001 |
| Inflate the benefits of the products they sell | 1.44 | .82 | 1.88 | .94 | .44 | 5.5 | .001 |
| Take advantage of uneducated buyers | 1.50 | .90 | 2.07 | .94 | .57 | 6.8 | .001 |
| Make something up when they do not know the answer | 1.77 | .95 | 2.25 | .96 | .48 | 4.4 | .001 |
| Sell products that people do not need | 1.68 | .90 | 2.01 | .93 | .33 | 4.1 | .001 |
| Misrepresent guarantees and/or warranties | 1.90 | .89 | 2.35 | .93 | .45 | 5.5 | .001 |
| Summated Average Ethics Score | 1.62 | .67 | 2.08 | .80 | .46 | 6.6 | .001 |
| Perceptions of Salespeople | | | | | | | |
| Are perceived favorably by others | 2.81 | .93 | 3.09 | .98 | .28 | 3.3 | .001 |
| Are respected by others | 3.02 | .84 | 3.34 | .94 | .32 | 4.1 | .001 |
| Summated Average Salespeople Score | 2.92 | .78 | 3.22 | .86 | .30 | 4.1 | .001 |
| Perceptions of Sales Profession | | | | | | | |
| Gives a sense of accomplishment | 3.84 | .74 | 3.98 | .75 | .14 | 2.2 | .05 |
| Is doing something worthwhile on the job | 3.61 | .81 | 3.85 | .73 | .24 | 3.5 | .001 |
| Is personally satisfying | 3.48 | .95 | 3.82 | .86 | .34 | 4.2 | .001 |
| Is interesting | 3.53 | .89 | 3.78 | .84 | .25 | 3.3 | .001 |
| Is exciting | 3.44 | .94 | 3.71 | .94 | .27 | 3.2 | .001 |
| Summated Average Profession Score | 3.58 | .71 | 3.83 | .70 | .25 | 3.9 | .001 |
| Intent to Pursue Sales Career | | | | | | | |
| I am interested in pursuing a sales position when I graduate | 2.53 | 1.15 | 2.95 | 1.14 | .42 | 4.2 | .001 |
| Obtaining a position in sales is a priority for me after | 2.24 | 1.11 | 2.74 | 1.12 | .50 | 5.2 | .001 |
| Summated Average Intent to Pursue Score | 2.39 | 1.04 | 2.85 | 1.09 | .46 | 4.9 | .001 |

Figure 1. Intent to pursue a sales career decision-making model

