

# **Salesperson Motivational Traits and Linguistic Style as Markers of Sales Success**

**by  
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## **Abstract**

This dissertation explores the association between salesperson motivational traits, linguistic styles, and sales outcomes. Conceptually, in paper 1, I apply a previously overlooked lens of goal orientation theory to personal selling. The conceptual development culminates with a novel understanding of how salespeople can experience performance inefficiencies due to perceived situational threats. This contributes to extant research by explicating predicted detriments to sales performance in team-based sales environments. Paper 2 investigates the relationship between two fundamental traits of effective salespeople—empathy and ego-drive—and job satisfaction. I infer and measure these psychological traits using automated text-analysis of salespeople’s written company reviews. The findings show that B2B salespeople who are high in empathy and low in ego-drive tend to be most satisfied in their sales jobs. High ego-drive, whether combined with high or low empathy is associated with low job satisfaction. For personal selling scholars and sales managers, this research reinforces the need for empathetic salespeople and points to the limitations of hiring ego-driven salespeople. Paper 3 employs automated text-analysis to explore whether the pronouns salespeople use when writing about their work environment differ by degree of job satisfaction. When reflecting on their sales jobs, salespeople who are satisfied with their jobs tend to use a high frequency of “I”, while salespeople who are less satisfied with their jobs tend to use a high frequency of “they”. These findings are pertinent for sales managers to infer job satisfaction through non-self-reported data.

**Keywords:** Goal orientation; sales performance; empathy; ego-drive; job satisfaction; Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC)

## **Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to the small army without whom this lofty goal would not have been possible. To my friends and family who received fewer phone calls and visits than they deserved over these several years, thank you for your relentless support. To my Ontarian family, I am blessed to have had you with me on this journey. I would not have been able to persevere to the end without you being at the starting line. To my mentor, my friend, my supervisor, Leyland, thank you for teaching me in a few short years more than I thought I would learn in a lifetime. To my best friend, my protector, my love, thank you for being there to lift me up when no one else could, and for catching me when I fell. Without you, none of this would have been possible, nor nearly as fun. To my mom and dad, thank you for being the best people I know. Thank you for your unrelenting love and compassion, your guidance, and your unwavering support in all my pursuits. Ohne Euch ist alles doof.

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# Introduction

For decades, personal selling has been a critical part of the marketing mix across many industries (Hartmann, Wieland & Vargo, 2018). The most cited estimates of salesforce costs in the United States showed that firms spend \$800 billion and \$15 billion per year in salesforce incentives and training respectively (Zoltners, Sinha & Lorimer 2008). More recent data from B2B industries estimates that turnover rates hover around 35%, with 10% of companies experiencing turnover rates above 55% (Chaine, 2019). On top of the exorbitant costs of hiring and maintaining salespeople, companies need to contend with retaining their salespeople while they face more complex sales environments (Lam & Borgh, 2021; Sleep, Dixon, DeCarlo & Lam, 2020). Selling to businesses is especially complex (Verbeke et al., 2011). Given the considerable cost of maintaining a salesforce and the complexities facing salespeople, the question of what makes salespeople perform best is an important and difficult one to answer.

The question of what makes a good salesperson has always been central to research and practice in personal selling (Churchill, Ford, Hartley & Walker, 1985; Verbeke, Dietz, & Verwaal, 2011). Early research attempting to understand salesperson performance focused on the stable attributes of salespeople that were most conducive to sales success, such as one's empathy and ego-drive (Mayer & Greenberg, 1964), and height and education level (Lamont & Lundstrom, 1977). Other research focused on how behaviors lead to selling effectiveness, such as listening to the customer and acting in line with customer expectations (Webster, 1968), or managing effort based on compensation expectations and financial incentives (Darmon, 1974). Yet, sales success depends on more than just personal factors of salespeople. Even early research identified that sales performance depended on organizational factors, as well as personal factors such as salesperson skills, motivation, traits, aptitude, and role ambiguity (Churchill et al., 1985), and characteristics of the selling environment such as the type of buying task or the nature of the customer-salesperson relationship (Weitz, 1981). Since this early research, the personal attributes that contribute to sales performance have been found to include complex variables such as sales knowledge, salesperson cognitive aptitude, role ambiguity, propensity for adaptive selling, and work engagement (Verbeke et al., 2011). However, this is not to say that further

understanding into individual salespeople is not without merit. This is especially true when we consider the complexities of sales today.

Given the increasing complexities of selling environments (Lam & Borgh, 2021), the endeavour to better understand how salespeople make decisions and take actions that contribute to sales performance has grown more complex. Today's selling environments are complicated by more knowledgeable and better-informed customers, more intense competition, a greater need for cross-functional coordination, as well as pressure to be efficient (Sleep, Dixon, DeCarlo & Lam, 2020). As a result, to produce substantive contributions to the personal selling space, it is important to understand how sales performance and other important outcomes are affected by the interplay between the salesperson and the nuances of selling situations. To do so, we need to better understand how salespeople make judgments, decisions, and act within the context they exist. It is in this spirit that this dissertation is set out.

Research points to a number of reasons why this is an important area in which to build clarity. First, in this scholarly effort to identify the contributing forces of sales success, arguably the most important findings take into account how salespeople respond to cues in selling situations (Sujan, Weitz & Kumar, 1994; Weitz, 1978, Weitz, 1981; Weitz, Sujan & Sujan, 1986). For instance, sales performance has been shown to depend on a salesperson's ability to properly evaluate customer cues during the sales interaction (Weitz, 1981). This points to the predictive value of personal selling research that takes into consideration the situational context in which salespeople engage in judgment and decision-making. Second, there continues to be a lack of understanding around how salespeople's decisions and actions influence sales performance, leading to calls for more research and greater clarity in salesperson judgment and decision-making (Lam & Borgh, 2021).

In three essays, this work seeks to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how salespeople can be effective or ineffective in their sales jobs by highlighting the role of cognition in behavioral factors that influence performance. The first essay is a conceptual piece that stresses the importance of situated cognition in selling tasks by highlighting how perceptions of the selling situation can affect the efficiency with which salespeople engage in selling task behaviors. This essay delves into goal orientation, a prominent motivational construct from psychology, building on extant research into its

relationship with sales performance (e.g., Ahearne, Lam, Mathieu & Bolander, 2010; Kohli, Shervani & Challagalla, 1998; Sujan, Weitz & Kumar, 1994; Weitz, Sujan & Sujan 1986). Essay one concludes with several propositions about how salesperson judgment and decision-making can be affected by their goal orientation, which in turn affects performance through its positive or negative impact on situational self-efficacy and sales task efficiency. Essays two and three are empirical works that investigate the relationship between salesperson cognitive factors and job satisfaction—an important correlate and probable antecedent to sales performance (Franke & Park, 2006). Essay two uses automated text analysis to explore how empathy and ego-drive (Mayer & Greenberg, 1964), early precursors to learning and goal orientation in the selling literature, are related to job satisfaction. Essay three also uses automated text analysis to explore the psycholinguistic patterns of satisfied compared to unsatisfied salespeople as reflected in written descriptions of their sales jobs.

In the next section, I will introduce essay one. Following this, I will provide a detailed look at how goal orientation has evolved conceptually. This will detail the construct's origins and some of the irregularities that are characteristic of this field of research, which have contributed to the need for additional perspectives in this space. Following this is a review of the literature involving the intersection of goal orientation, performance outcomes and sales, which sets the groundwork for the proposed relationships between them. This is followed by the conceptual development, which culminates with propositions to inform future empirical work. This essay concludes with a general discussion, followed by an overview of the implications and the limitations of this work.

# **Paper 1: The Situational Influence of Salesperson Motivational Traits on Effective Selling**

## **Introduction**

Although the birth of the modern salesperson can be traced back to the turn of the twentieth century (Friedman, 2004), personal selling continues to be a critical part of the marketing mix across many industries (Hartmann, Wieland & Vargo, 2018). In fact, as markets have evolved and the decisions and tasks that comprise selling have become more complex (Lam & Borgh, 2021), the strategic importance of salespeople has arguably strengthened (Cron, Baldauf, Leigh & Grossenbacher, 2014; Hunter & Perreault, 2007). Yet, the increasing complexities facing sales contexts evidently present an additional challenge for personal selling researchers and practitioners. To better understand drivers and inhibitors of pertinent sales-relevant outcomes in this changing landscape, greater inquiry into the nature of salesperson judgment and decision-making (JDM) is needed (Lam & Borgh, 2021). Simply put, JDM concerns how individuals evaluate situations and choose actions based on those evaluations (Hastie, 2001). Judgment and decision-making is no stranger to marketing but has been largely confined to consumers in consumer research (Lam & Borgh, 2021). Given the growing complexities related to personal selling, understanding how salespeople engage in judgment and decision-making necessitates greater consideration for the decision-making context surrounding salespeople.

Decisions undertaken by salespeople in sales tasks are characterized by high levels of significance, in that they often have implications for career development and/or compensation for oneself and others, such as sales team members and managers (Lam & Borgh, 2021). The combination of the high significance of sales tasks and demands on sales-related knowledge, skills and abilities means that sales tasks are considered achievement situations (Sujan, Weitz & Kumar, 1994). Achievement situations, by definition, are those where competence is applied (Nicholls, 1984). Within psychology and its many scholarly tangents, the study of performance in achievement settings has been dominated by the goal orientation paradigm (DeShon & Gillespie, 2005). Goal orientation is a multidimensional construct describing distinct cognitive-behavioral approaches in achievement situations (Ames & Archer, 1980; Dweck & Leggett, 1988;

Nicholls, 1984). Although goal orientation has been investigated extensively in personal selling literature (e.g., Park & Holloway, 2003; Silver, Dwyer & Alford, 2006; Sujan, Weitz & Kumar, 1994), its application has not coincided with developments in the goal orientation literature. There is strong evidence from goal orientation theory to suggest it should have a situational impact on the decisions and actions performed throughout sales tasks. Given that personal selling scholars have long recognized that effective selling depends on both the characteristics of the salesperson and the nature of the selling situation (Giacobbe et al., 2006; Porter, Wiener & Frankwick, 2003; Weitz, 1981), conceptual and empirical clarity into goal orientation's role in the actions of salespeople may be currently held back by ignoring the situational context within which it is applied. Thus, I propose a situational approach that takes into consideration the interaction between motivational characteristics of the salesperson (goal orientation) and the surrounding context of the decisions made and actions taken in sales tasks. Improvements in the understanding of the dimensionality of the goal orientation construct and its stability within an individual offer novel insight to improve the epistemological perspective through which the relationship between salesperson characteristics and judgment and decision-making is investigated. Doing so will aid in understanding the efficiency and effectiveness with which salespeople engage in judgment and decision-making in the tasks they perform in pursuit of sales performance.

To address the aforementioned shortcomings, this work applies a mental framework model of goal orientation to assess its influence on the effectiveness of salesperson judgment and decision-making in sales tasks. This perspective takes the position that goal orientation can affect performance directly by affecting the efficiency with which behaviors are directed towards the completion of sales tasks. Inefficiencies arising from the interaction between the individual and the sales situation can be observed by looking at how the individual's efficiency changes depending on the situational factors present in the selling situation. Thus, the objective of this essay is to shed light on how goal orientation affects task behavior efficiency by considering how situational self-efficacy changes depending on the situation, through its interaction with a salesperson's perception of the situation. Specifically, I suggest that evaluative cues present in the sales situation can induce a focus on competence goals, which influences the efficiency with which one applies their available resources to the demands of the sales task. I propose that, for some salespeople, the presence of others during

significant selling tasks can lead to perceived threats to one's ability to be successful in these sales tasks. Specifically, goal orientation theory points to a predictable detriment in self-efficacy when individuals with a fixed belief must display sales competence in the presence of others. This increase in the perceived demand of the selling-task, even in the presence of real available resources, reduces situational self-efficacy. In turn, this will lead to a negative impact on task efficiency because the threat defers a salesperson's attentional resources away from the task and towards protecting one's sense of competence (Elliot, 1999). When this occurs, the perceived threat can overshadow the presence of beneficial motivational factors, such as intrinsic or extrinsic motivation and one's need for achievement. As a result, of great importance to researchers and practitioners is the proposition that when situational threats are perceived, the motivational drive from incentives and rewards is expected to be lessened, such that the perceived threats should be removed to create the opportunity for salespeople to perform to their potential.

The relevance of this essay is especially pertinent for personal selling literature and sales performance but offers other contributions as well. There exists a synergy of needs between personal selling and goal orientation with recent calls for greater clarity into judgment and decision-making of salespeople (Lam & Borgh, 2021). Furthermore, calls have been made from prominent goal orientation researchers for improved "conceptual coherence, construct validity, predictive power, and parsimony of the goal orientation construct" (VandeWalle et al., 2019, p. 137). For personal selling, a situational perspective of goal orientation in the selling context allows for greater clarity into how the effectiveness of salespeople's judgment and decision-making can fluctuate in selling tasks. For goal orientation theory, this work tests a situational, perception-based application of goal orientation, offering a setting where the boundary conditions of goal orientation can be examined.

The current understanding of goal orientation's influence on selling performance outcomes has been stymied by limitations of how goal orientation has been applied to the personal selling literature. To address this, the next section presents an in-depth look at the conceptual background of goal orientation.

## Goal Orientation's Conceptual Background

Goal orientation is a multidimensional construct that describes how individuals develop the necessary knowledge, skills and abilities that contribute to performance (Vandewalle, 1997). At its core, goal orientation concerns how and why individuals pursue distinct achievement goals (Elliot & Dweck, 1988; Dweck, 1986), which define the purpose behind one's actions and drive behaviour in achievement settings (Nicholls, 1984). The goal orientation construct and theory emerged from developmental and educational psychology, following research where scholars observed contrasting behavioral responses by children faced with completing a challenging task (Diener & Dweck, 1978; 1980). In these early studies, researchers found that children tended either to express a sense of helplessness and give up or to embrace the challenge and persist through it. Building off these observations, it was proposed that the observable differences in these behavioral response patterns were due to different types of achievement goals guiding the behaviour—namely performance or learning goals (Dweck, 1986; Elliot & Dweck, 1983). Performance goals were said to guide behaviors when competence was defined relative to others, making individuals focused on demonstrating ability. In contrast, learning goals were said to guide behaviors when competence was defined relative to the self, making individuals focused on developing ability (Ames & Archer, 1987; Dweck, 1986). The distinct patterns of behaviour associated with the pursuit of either learning or performance goals led to the development of goal orientations (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). Performance goal orientation was proposed to be characteristic of individuals who pursued performance goals in achievement situations, while learning goal orientation was proposed to be characteristic of individuals who pursued learning goals.

Subsequent research found that the dichotomous model of learning and performance goal orientations produced inconsistent results (e.g., Button et al., 1996; Elliot & Harackiewicz, 1996; Phillips & Gully, 1997). Research to address these limitations derived from achievement motivation literature. The central assumption of achievement motivation is that individuals strive to do well or avoid doing poorly (Elliot & McGregor, 2001). It was determined that goal orientation's influence on performance depended on whether individuals were focused on the attainment of positive outcomes (approach dimension) or the avoidance of negative outcomes (avoid dimension) (Elliot &

Church, 1997; Elliot & Harackiewicz, 1996; Vandewalle, 1997). This bifurcation of performance goal orientation led to a three-factor model in both education (Elliot & Church, 1997) and organizational research (VandeWalle, 1997) comprised of performance-approach, performance-avoid, and learning/mastery goal orientation dimensions.

Following the inclusion of approach and avoid to the performance goal, the learning/mastery goal orientation was found to contain distinct positively- and negatively-valenced goal dimensions as well. This resulted in division into learning/mastery-approach and learning/mastery-avoid orientations (Elliot & McGregor, 2001). Negative performance outcomes have been found to result most often from the avoidance dimension (Payne, Youngcourt & Beaubien, 2007). It was assumed in early research (and is an assumption that persists today) that the “avoid” dimension was due to a dispositional orientation towards a fear of failure, which is what makes individuals focus on the potential attainment of negative outcomes (Elliot & Church, 1997; Elliot & McGregor, 1999). Although the four-factor approach has been found to possess sufficient validity and improve predictability of the mastery goal orientation (Baranik, Barron & Finney, 2007; Baranik, Stanley, Bynum & Lance, 2010), its use has been limited in research within the context of the workplace with most empirical work excluding the mastery-avoid dimension (VandeWalle et al., 2019).

Due to goal orientation’s eclectic origins, and its subsequent development and use across different fields, the literature surrounding the goal orientation construct and its theory has been plagued with inconsistencies (Deshon & Gillespie, 2005; Payne et al., 2007; Vandewalle et al., 2019). Most researchers concerned with addressing these predictive shortcomings suggest that these inconsistencies result from the prevalence of different goal orientation measures, which have each been founded on different operationalizations and assumptions (DeShon & Gillespie, 2005; Hulleman, Schragar, Bodmann & Harackiewicz, 2010). For example, Elliot and Church (1997) conceptualize performance orientation as performing better compared to others, while VandeWalle (1997) conceptualizes performance goals as proving oneself to others. Hulleman et al. (2010) found through their meta-analysis that performance outcomes varied with the type of instrument used in the research investigating the connection between goal orientation and performance. Other researchers have posited that the inconsistencies



observed in these results stem from the fact that distinct goals influence performance outcomes depending on the situation (e.g., Harackiewicz et al., 2002).

The limitation of goal orientation in selling is that it has been looked at through the application of its dimensions, which have limitations themselves. For example, research has been dedicated to understanding how learning and performance goal orientations contribute to differences in adaptive selling (e.g., Park & Holloway, 2003; Sujan, Weitz & Kumar, 1994), which is a strong correlate of sales performance (Franke & Park, 2006; Spiro & Weitz, 1990). Some of the more recent seminal research into goal orientation and its impact on sales performance uses the three-factor model (e.g., Silver, Dwyer & Alford, 2006). Goal orientation is a construct that reflects cognitive origins, whose influence on the selling situation has been ignored.

Even within goal orientation literature, goal orientation has generally been connected to performance outcomes over time, rather than taking into consideration a mental perspective or the impact of the situation. For instance, the pursuit of achievement goals has been shown to lead to differences in the level of difficulty of the goals people set for themselves and the extent to which they commit to those goals (e.g., Carver & Scheier, 1990; Kanfer, 1990; Locke & Latham 1990). In turn, these choices lead to positive performance outcomes because setting more difficult goals and having greater goal commitment lead to better performance. Goal orientation has also been shown to contribute to differences in the extent to which individuals seek feedback about their work (Tuckey, Brewer & Williamson, 2002; VandeWalle, 2003; VandeWalle & Cummings, 1997), as well as the extent to which individuals exert effort and persistence to the pursuit of work-related goals (VandeWalle, Brown, Cron & Slocum, 1999; Sideridis & Kaplan, 2011). In these and other applications of goal orientation to performance outcomes, the influence on performance is predicted only insofar as it affects behaviors that, over time, are beneficial for performance. As mentioned, goal orientation is a mental framework through which an individual perceives and reacts in achievement settings (DeShon & Gillespie, 2005). As a result, goals can be made salient and affect behaviors automatically at a single moment in time (Bargh et al., 2001; Chen, Latham, Piccolo & Itzchakov, 2021; DeMarree et al., 2012; Latham, Brcic & Stenhauer, 2017). This begs the question of if and how goal orientation as a mental framework could be affecting variance in selling effectiveness in a way that has not yet been identified.

The next section seeks to illuminate the sources of the cognitive-behavioral mechanism underlying the goal orientation construct and its influence on the perception of the selling situation. To do so, I will connect the cognitive origins of goal orientation, which influence the behavioral patterns captured in the dimensions, to their influence on the perception of the achievement situation. From a bottom-up perspective from the situation to goal activation, the perception will be influenced by the presence of situational factors that make salient possible evaluative outcomes, which then inform one's perception of the achievement situation through either an opportunistic or preventative lens. This provides an additional perspective to address the inconsistencies related to goal orientation's impact on performance outcomes by introducing a situational perspective where self-efficacy—a necessary component of effectively applying effort to any situation (Bandura, 1977)—predictably fluctuates. This explains how situational cues in line with belief-sources of goal orientation can lead to differences in how available resources are felt and are applied by orienting salespeople to perceive threats during sales tasks. When present, this process should occur automatically, because possessing competence is considered an inherent need (Elliot, McGregor & Thrash, 2002; White, 1959). This mirrors recent advances in goal orientation research, which have begun to embrace the criticality of competence to any application of goal orientation (Elliot & Dweck, 2005; Van Yperen et al., 2013), as well as the automaticity of goal-directed behaviors (Bargh, 1996; Bargh et al., 2001; DeMarree et al., 2012; Latham, Brcic & Steinhauer, 2017). By taking into consideration the nature of one's definition of competence as reflected in their dominant goal orientation, we can look at an intrapersonal change in situational self-efficacy given situational cues present in an achievement situation—namely, those that cue competence beliefs. Following the conceptual development, I will provide implications of this to sales task efficiency.

## **Conceptual Development**

To begin this development, I describe connections between cognitive antecedents and goal orientation's dimensions. Then, I look at how performance can fluctuate depending on the nature of the achievement situation. This reflects a bi-directional process of situation interpretation and interaction, which influences salesperson judgment and decision-making depending on the nature of the situation. I begin by exploring the cognitive antecedents of goal orientation and the bi-directional

process of situational-interpretation and interaction captured by the theory of motivated action (DeShon & Gillespie, 2005). This theory provides the scaffolding for understanding the relationship between the individual salesperson and the selling context by capturing the process through which achievement goals can be activated and, in turn, influence behaviors.

## **Goal Orientation as a Mental Framework**

The most widely accepted situational model of achievement goal's influence on behavior is DeShon & Gillespie's (2005) motivated action theory. Motivated action theory derives its origins from goal theories of motivation (e.g., Austin & Vancouver, 1996; Carver & Scheier, 1981) and suggests that individuals possess a multitude of goals of varying degrees of strength and salience. In this model, as with other theories of goal pursuit upon which it is founded, goals represent one's desired end state, and actions are taken toward the attainment of salient goals (Austin & Vancouver, 1996; Carver & Scheier, 1981; Gollwitzer & Moskowitz, 1996). These goals are arranged hierarchically with higher-level goals relating more closely to one's sense of self and lower-level goals relating more closely to actions. Stated another way, goals at higher levels represent desired end states and specify the purpose behind one's actions. In contrast, lower-level goals represent the means through which higher-level goals are attained, such as behavioral choices (DeShon & Gillespie, 2005). Thus, higher level goals specify reasons why individuals engage in the actions they choose, which then translates into actionable behavioral goals that inform behaviors. For example, affiliation goals—derived from the need to belong or feel affiliated with others (McClelland, 1951; Murray, 1938)—motivate behavioral goals such as making and maintaining friendships and other close interpersonal bonds (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Thus, motivated action theory provides the basis for understanding how dispositional goal orientations affect behaviors through perceptions of the environment, as behaviors arise due to the desire to eliminate perceived discrepancies between one's current and one's desired state (DeShon & Gillespie, 2005).

The situation itself can influence which goals are activated due to the interplay between the individual's current set of active goals and the goal-relevant, salient features of the situation. When salient features result in a perceived goal discrepancy, actions are directed towards alleviating the felt discrepancy associated with the activated

goal (Deshon & Gillespie, 2005). During this process of goal activation and pursuit, attention is cued towards opportunities and means to goal satisfaction.

How these dispositional antecedents affect behavioral goals (and in turn, actions) though depends on the strength and salience of those goals, which can fluctuate depending on the person and the nature of the situation. Since goal orientation reflects the beliefs and values individuals hold about competence, looking at these beliefs, we can infer sources of intrapersonal performance variation in the presence of situational cues that result in a perceived achievement goal discrepancy. I build on this to propose that achievement goals can be cued when salespeople engage in behaviors directly related to their sales competence.

Should situational cues bring attention to felt discrepancies related to higher-level goals, such as competence-related goals, this will affect the behaviors salespeople engage in by heightening attention to the discrepancy and informing behaviors to address it.

This leads to the following propositions:

Proposition 1a: Situational cues associated with competence beliefs can result in a bottom-up goal-activation, such that competence goals can be unconsciously activated in salespeople.

Proposition 1b: Activated competence goals can manifest as salient competence goal discrepancy when a potential threat to competence is perceived.

Proposition 1c: Perceived competence threats affect salesperson behaviors by directing actions to behavioral goals in line with protecting competence.

Examining the interplay between individual competence beliefs and the nature of the situation allows for an understanding of which situational factors are conducive, not conducive, or inhibitive to situational self-efficacy. There are two important antecedent beliefs associated with goal orientation theory, which can have a situational effect—namely competence beliefs and malleability of intelligence beliefs. The next section considers how competence beliefs are captured in the dimensions of goal orientation and details how these lead to heightened attention to situational cues that can either lead to a focus on opportunities or threats to performance.

## Goal Orientation and Competence Beliefs

Learning and performance achievement goals are inextricably linked to self-held definitions of competence (Van Yperen & Orehek, 2013). Competence is defined as a quality or condition of ability, effectiveness, or success (Elliot, Dweck & Yeager, 2017). The psychological need to feel competent is widely believed to be inherent to humans (Elliot, McGregor & Thrash, 2002; White, 1959). Yet, how people define competence can be different from one person to the next (Dweck, 2002). If individuals define competence relative to other people, they are driven by the purpose of possessing or demonstrating competence relative to others. For example, when competence is defined relative to others, salespeople are driven by goals related to gaining favorable judgment or evaluations from their colleagues and managers (Sujan, Weitz & Kumar, 1994). If individuals define competence as self-development (i.e., relative to the self), they are likely to be driven by the purpose of developing their own competence relative to their past self (i.e., improving.) For example, when competence is defined relative to the self, salespeople are driven by goals relating to learning how to sell effectively for the sake of improving one's selling effectiveness (Sujan, Weitz & Kumar, 1994). Thus, these standards provide information about the standards salespeople use to evaluate themselves (Nicholls, 1984; Payne et al., 2007). A learning goal represents a self-based performance standard. When standards are self-based, motivation to commit effort occurs based on goals related to developing self-based competence (i.e., learning goals.) Related to selling, salespeople with self-based performance standards tend to be guided by learning goals and assess their current performance against their past performance. Alternatively, a performance goal represents an other-based performance standard. For people who use other-based standards, they tend to be guided by performance goals and their competence beliefs relate directly to others, in that they assess their performance relative to others. When standards are other-based, motivation to commit effort occurs based on demonstrating competence relative to others.

Although definitions of competence will predict the potential sources of motivation, how behavior is energized from that motivation depends on the valence associated with those goals (Elliot & McGregor, 2001). As previously stated, individuals tend to strive to do well or avoid doing poorly when their competence is evaluated (Elliot & McGregor, 2001). Actions in achievement settings, such as behaviors in sales tasks, are energized by either positive or negative possibilities. This occurs as individuals focus

on the likelihood of attaining competence or the prospect of avoiding incompetence (Elliot & McGregor, 2001). For example, a salesperson can be motivated to push for high performance because they want to succeed in reaching their sales target for the month, or they may be motivated to push for high performance because they want to avoid missing their sales target for the month. The force with which one is focused on the possibility of positive or negative outcomes depends on the weight of the salient achievement goal and the extent to which the person feels a discrepancy between their current and desired states. In this way, motivation leads to behavior either because an individual is focused on and motivated to put effort towards achieving a positive outcome or avoiding a negative one.

Comparing these competence definition distinctions at their core offers insight into the circumstances under which salesperson or environmental conditions can be conducive or restrictive to performance by looking at fluctuations to situational self-efficacy in sales tasks. Depending on one's definition of competence, this will determine if they may perceive opportunities or threats to competence attainment in such an achievement setting. Given that competence is an inherent need, perceived situational threats arise when competence is challenged. When situational threats are present, this represents a situation where situational self-efficacy is negatively affected. What this means is that other-based competence beliefs can induce a perceived threat in situations when they feel unable to display competence to others. When this occurs, salespeople may be prone to direct attention towards threats to achieving goal satisfaction, causing a potential goal discrepancy to become salient. It just so happens that a common belief antecedent of goal orientation, a fixed belief, describes a perspective whereby the presence of others presents a potential threat to one's competence.

### ***Implicit Beliefs about the Malleability of Intelligence***

Following her groundbreaking work in educational psychology, Dweck (1986) proposed that performance and learning goals derived from implicit beliefs children had about the malleability of intelligence. She proposed that children held one of two distinct implicit beliefs about the malleability of intelligence—fixed or incremental. Fixed beliefs hold that one's intelligence was relatively stable and unchanging over time. These beliefs formed the original antecedent to performance goals. Fixed beliefs led children to

give up when challenged because of concerns that their inability to successfully complete the puzzle was indicative of a lack of ability. In contrast, incremental beliefs hold that one's intelligence could be developed over time. These beliefs were associated with learning goals. Although the theoretical foundation of goal orientation rested on the idea that performance and learning goals derived from fixed and malleable beliefs respectively, research in adult populations has shown these beliefs to be moderators of the relationship between goal orientation and performance outcomes, rather than antecedents to performance and learning goal orientations (Vandewalle et al., 2019). Given that this work describes goal orientation profiles, fixed beliefs comprise a factor of the proposed goal orientation profile. This provides a diagnostic tool for identifying when individual salespeople would perceive a threat in their sales environment. When an individual holds an incremental belief, they assume that intelligence and ability are not fixed, but rather grow with effort. Thus, even if self-efficacy is low, as in sales training or learning, there is an appreciation that competence will improve with effort. In contrast, the attribution of performance to effort is not perceived as readily when individuals believe that abilities are fixed (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). If an individual holds a fixed belief of ability, they may perceive threats if cues in the situation indicate that they may be being perceived as incompetent, even if such 'incompetence' would be expected, as in sales training or learning.

Proposition 2: Salespeople with other-based definitions of competence with a fixed belief will perceive the most potential sources of environmental threats compared to other-non-fixed belief and self-based belief.

Since performance goals derive from the desire to demonstrate competence, the focus is inherently on how one is being perceived. With a fixed belief, this combination is proposed to be a strong factor in behavioral intention. If a salesperson possesses a fixed belief, they value being perceived as having competence because they believe skills and abilities are inherent rather than developed. As a result, such salespeople will be sensitive to situational cues that may challenge this belief. Given that a performance orientation is defined by the desire to be perceived as competent, this cue should activate a felt goal discrepancy and focus attention on alleviating the discrepancy. Thus, a fixed belief will heighten a focus on situational cues in line with the sources of those evaluations (i.e., other people).

Taken together, this leads to the next proposition:

Proposition 2b: Salespeople with fixed beliefs will perceive threats to performance when they perceive evaluative others. (When self-efficacy is low.) (Note: this is proposed to occur even if no explicit evaluation occurs).

In situations where situational cues make salient competence beliefs, an avoidance stance represents a desire to avoid greater goal discrepancy relative to that competence standard. Under these conditions, I propose that a preventative focus is taken, which represents the goal orientation's avoidance. The salience of avoidance-based goals entails avoiding a negative outcome, which when combined with low self-efficacy, induces a threatened mindset and a focus on the possibility of failure (Pekrun, Elliot, & Maier, 2006, 2009), reducing the extent to which one is able to focus on and allocate resources to a task (Elliot, Murayama & Pekrun, 2011).

Connecting this to salespeople, I propose that in the presence of others, salespeople who define competence relative to others and have a fixed belief will experience a negative effect on situational self-efficacy due to the perception of threats. In the end, these individuals are focused on behavioral goals of avoiding incompetence, leading to hesitancy and inefficiencies in situations where these threats exist (Elliot, Murayama & Pekrun, 2011). Taking into consideration the propensity for individuals to be oriented towards avoiding incompetence, I argue that avoidance behavior can arise from more than just a dispositional fear of failure, as proposed in the literature (Elliot & Church, 1997; Elliot & McGregor, 1999). Rather, it can be triggered by situational cues in line with competence beliefs, which induces a focus on the potential for negative outcomes from one's actions and a motivated stance to avoid such negative outcomes.

## **Discussion and Implications**

This work takes an intrapersonal approach to looking at the situational factors that lead to perceived threats associated with displaying incompetence. This conceptual development demonstrates how competence beliefs, which form the foundation of the achievement goal component of goal orientation, inform the standard against which individuals self-evaluate as they engage in behaviors that demand competence. For self-based standards of competence, individuals are proposed to be oriented towards behaviors associated with learning and improving because their definition of competence is dominantly related to the self as the standard. As a result, performance derives mainly from the acquisition of information that allows them to be prepared for performance



demands. In contrast, other-based competence standards can be problematic in the presence of others. The detriment to performance derives from perceived threats related to the prospect of being evaluated by others, which is proposed to occur for individuals with a fixed belief about the malleability of intelligence.

The efficiency with which salespeople engage in behaviors directed towards sales task goals will depend on the evaluative standard against which they assess competence. When situational factors make threats to one's achievement-related competence salient, attention can be cued towards threats to goal accomplishment, which will result in behavioral choices to minimize those threats. When these perceived threats overshadow motivational processes, the effect on resource allocation towards sales-task behaviors will be lower than without the presence of the threat. Effort in any task depends on self-efficacy or the feeling that a person has the ability to accomplish a task (Bandura, 1977). This truism points to the benefit of being aware of sources of fluctuations in self-efficacy. Thus, situations where this is predicted to occur should be managed in order to ascertain the right situational characteristics most conducive to task performance.

The relevance of this research is especially pertinent for sales performance but has other implications. First, it offers an investigation into the cognitive-behavioral process affecting how individuals effectively or ineffectively commit effort to their work-related goals. Extant goal orientation theory implies that performance is negatively affected when there are impediments to motivation. As a result, extant practical solutions to improving task performance focus on interventions attempting to increase motivation. This research offers insight for managers to identify when individuals may be performing below their potential. In this case, negative impacts to performance could arise due to issues with perception rather than motivational deficiency. Given that this effect is proposed to result from perceived environmental threats, it offers a unique way of looking at how salesperson characteristics can affect performance. Rather than the issue arising from low motivation, this effect can occur in highly motivated salespeople. This presents a valuable managerial implication, as it points to salespeople who are being held back by their own perceptions but who are motivated to perform well. In turn, this points to distinct solutions for improving performance. Rather than using interventions associated with enhancing motivation, it points to the need to identify salespeople who may be threatened by the prospect of showing incompetence around

others. Threat perceptions can be mitigated, for example, by enhancing sales self-efficacy or reducing the extent to which the sales environment is perceived to be evaluative. Should employees with expected high potential not meet expectations, it would be valuable to assess whether there is an issue with perceived threats to felt competence. Managers can be attentive to how energized or hesitant individuals are towards evaluative tasks, especially in the presence of evaluative others. Opening lines of discussion around competence beliefs can help to flesh out feelings and identify individuals who may experience threats. For example, managers can stress the importance of sales knowledge and skills development, rather than an expectation that perfection is expected at the outset. Research from psychology shows that when the limitations of fixed beliefs are explained, it can promote a malleable mindset, rather than an immediate expectation of performance (Dweck, 2008). As a result, if fixed mindsets are identified, their impact can be mitigated by discussing their source and potential hindrances to performance.

The implications of this work are that salespeople who want to perform well at sales can be most negatively affected by this, because sales competence, in whatever way it is identified, is important to them. Given that fixed beliefs entail a stationary perspective of ability, even in situations where low self-efficacy should be expected, such as a learning environment, a fixed belief can lead to salespeople being concerned with whether or not they are perceived as competent by others. It points to the fact that until some people feel self-efficacious in a given task, the presence of others in a setting can influence a focus on performance or evaluation. As a result, it is recommended that people with fixed beliefs learn and practice in a trusted environment with little competition, or when they are alone. Given that a fixed belief is more likely to exist in someone motivated by performance goals, the learning process should be tied to such goals, while creating an environment where self-efficacy can be maintained. For example, gamification of sales learning where sales trainees or sales students have dedicated time to learn on their own and apply their learning to the achievement of a team goal.

## **Conclusion**

The effectiveness of salespeople depends on the effectiveness of their behaviors in the sales tasks they perform. Behaviors themselves are actions taken in pursuit of

achieving salient behavioral goals. This work presents a situational perspective of salesperson judgment and decision-making whereby the presence of others in sales-competence-related tasks can induce an avoidance-based or preventative lens to the situation. A fixed belief presents a case where the presence of others inherently reduces self-efficacy if a salesperson's own perceived available resources or self-efficacy to be successful in the task is low. This is proposed to occur even if self-efficacy such as sales knowledge and skills would be expected to be low, such as in sales training of new salespeople. The effect is proposed to be sufficiently strong to over-shadow salesperson felt motivation. Substantive implications of this work point to novel interventions, such as focusing on alleviating perceived threats rather attempting to enhance motivation.

The dynamic nature of the relationship between the individual and the selling situation presents a more fluid context where the line between learning and performance is less pronounced. As the goal orientation literature has faced issues with its predictive value for performance outcomes and as the sales performance literature has stressed a greater focus on situational dexterity, the propositions derived from this work provide an appropriate starting point to empirically investigate this space.

# **Paper 2: Empathy and Ego-Drive in the B2B Salesforce: Impacts on Job Satisfaction**

## **Introduction**

Despite the effects that advances in electronic technologies have had on marketing and the firm-customer interface, personal selling remains one of the most powerful marketing communication tools for most business-to-business (B2B) firms. In these markets, the customer is not the ultimate consumer of the offering, but is an organization (a firm, NPO or government department) that purchases products and services to conduct their business. B2B products and services are in many cases more complex, often require customization, and can also entail significant investment on behalf of the buyer. Purchasing is usually undertaken by more than one single “buyer”, and the B2B marketing literature makes frequent reference to buying centers (e.g., Morris, Pitt & Honeycutt, 2001), in which a number of actors within the firm play a role in the purchasing process. These can include influencers, decision makers, gatekeepers, users and purchasers. In B2B, the purchasing decision is more rational than in the case of business-to-consumer (B2C) markets, and purchasing can often be more frequent and in larger quantities, depending on the type of product or service (Robinson, Faris & Wind, 1967; Johnston & Lewin, 1996). The relationship between buyer and seller is usually of longer duration, so building trust and fostering commitment are keys to B2B marketing success. B2B salespeople are custodians of this relationship, so that in many B2B markets an excellent salesforce is a source of significant competitive advantage.

The importance of personal selling to B2B firms is apparent in the amount of investment made into B2B salesforces (Limbu et al., 2016). The most cited estimates of salesforce costs in the United States showed that firms spend \$800 billion and \$15 billion per year in salesforce incentives and training respectively (Zoltners, Sinha, and Lorimer 2008). More recent data illustrates the current costs of keeping salesforces in turnover costs can be crippling. The average B2B salesforce turnover rate hovers around 35%, with 10% of companies experiencing turnover rates above 55% (Chaine, 2019). On top of the exorbitant costs of hiring and maintaining salespeople, B2B firms also need to contend with retaining their salespeople while they face longer sales cycles, more complex sales environments and sell more costly offerings compared to B2C

salesforces (MacDonald, 2021). Given the considerable investment in salesforces made by B2B firms, it is important that we understand how to keep salesforces performing well.

Extracting the best out of salespeople is not an easy task. Salesperson performance is multifaceted and complex, with many factors contributing to salespeople success and their ultimate influence on the success of firms (Sullivan, Peterson & Krishnan, 2012; Walker, 1979). The benefits of employing effective salespeople can include lower training and supervision costs, lower personnel turnover, superior customer relationships and better overall sales performance (Lockeman & Hallaq, 1982). Much of the research examining the influence of salespeople on firm-level performance points to salespeople creating direct value for companies by understanding customers' needs and offering solutions to satisfy those needs (Jaramillo, Ladik, Marshal & Mulki, 2007). However, taking into consideration the growing complexity of B2B sales and increasing sophistication of industrial buyers (Monczka, Handfield, Guinipero, & Patterson, 2015), in order to be successful, B2B salespeople need to press on in the face of these challenges and manage a job that can deliver considerable blows to one's confidence. A salesperson faces rejection to a far greater extent than any other positions within a firm: they don't always get the sale, and customers might not always be "nice people." An effective salesperson is able to deal with this and recognize it as part of the job. Ineffective salespersons tend to take rejection personally, and their performance suffers as a result. In simple terms, effective salespersons need to understand and accommodate customer needs and wants and be able to handle the rejection that is an inevitable part of every selling job.

The duality between understanding customer needs and protecting one's confidence has long been recognized as a critical characteristic of salespeople. Almost 60 years ago, Mayer and Greenberg (1964) suggested that salespeople need to possess empathy and ego-drive to be effective. Empathy fosters within a salesperson the desire to understand the customer's needs. Ego-drive motivates them to close the sale and provides a buffer to one's confidence, allowing them to press on and be satisfied even in the face of rejection.

Although Mayer and Greenberg proposed that both qualities offer advantages and that the best salespeople possess both empathy and ego-drive, it is mostly empathy

that has received scholarly focus. This is not without good reason, as empathy is associated with a customer orientation (Jaramillo et al., 2007) and with greater adaptive selling (Spiro & Weitz, 1990)—both of which are associated with higher levels of sales performance (Franke & Park, 2006). However, the potential for synergy between empathy and ego-drive within a salesperson seems to have been lost over the years. This is an important oversight to address given the need for value-creating company resources—including the effectiveness of salespeople—to help companies sustain their competitive advantage over time (Barney, 1991), especially in dynamic markets (Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000). Given that traits of empathy and ego-drive will affect an individual's approach to selling, it is important to understand how they relate to drivers of sales performance, such as job satisfaction. While each characteristic presents benefits to the sales job, no studies have investigated these attributes singularly to see how they might be similarly or differentially related to job satisfaction.

We investigate the relationship between these two fundamental salesperson characteristics—empathy and ego-drive—with a fundamental correlate of sales performance, namely, job satisfaction. As Mayer and Greenberg suggested, when these qualities exist within a salesperson, there is a synergistic effect, such that the best salespeople are those who possess both of these characteristics. Salespeople who are lacking in one or both of these attributes are expected to be disproportionately disadvantaged in their fit within a sales role.

Using content analysis of text-based reviews written by salespeople, we investigate the relationship of empathy with ego-drive within individual B2B salespeople and their job satisfaction. We use the powerful automated text-analysis tool, Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) (Pennebaker, Francis & Booth, 2001), which allows for the inference of the psychological traits of the person who expressed the words in a written or spoken and transcribed text. We measure these traits of B2B salespeople by analyzing text from Glassdoor.com—a platform where past and current employees rate and review their companies. Using a sample of over 1,000 reviews of 161 B2B companies, we assess the relationship between the interplay of B2B salesperson empathy and ego-drive and job satisfaction. It is commonly held that job performance precedes job satisfaction because job performance leads to benefits such as recognition, promotion, and increased recognition, which induces satisfaction (e.g., Yilmaz, 2002). However, meta-analyses have shown that job satisfaction influences

performance (Franke & Park, 2006; Ohiomah et al., 2020). As a result, investigating the relationship between trait empathy and ego-drive and job satisfaction of salespeople is warranted and valuable.

This paper proceeds as follows. First, we review the conceptual contexts of empathy and ego-drive and the impact on salesperson effectiveness. Following this, we discuss our study and present our results. Then, we discuss the managerial implications of the findings, and conclude with an overview of the limitations of the study and identify avenues for future research.

## **Empathy and Ego Drive in Salespeople**

The two fundamental characteristics needed for a salesperson to be effective are empathy and ego-drive (Mayer & Greenberg, 1964). When salespeople are empathetic, they can put themselves in the shoes of the customer and feel what they feel (Dawson, Soper & Pettijohn, 1992). The benefit of this attribute to salesperson effectiveness is that it increases the likelihood that a salesperson will try to understand the customer's needs, which is an important antecedent to sales success (Franke & Park, 2006; Spiro & Weitz, 1990). Empathetic salespeople are more likely to feel or imagine the customer's pain and have a real concern for solving the customer's specific problems (Bagozzi et al., 2012). Possessing empathy is especially influential in salesperson effectiveness because it allows for sensing and deviating from a stagnant sales process to serve the specific needs of customers (Franke & Park, 2006; Spiro & Weitz, 1990). In this way, empathetic salespeople nurture the sale out of prospective buyers.

Conversely, ego-drive refers to a felt need to conquer the sale (Mayer & Greenberg, 1964). Converting on the sale itself is the motivating factor because such an accomplishment satisfies the salesperson's desire to compete and win in sales situations (Lockeman & Hallaq, 1982). This is often referred to as a "will to win" or a "need to sell". Although Mayer and Greenberg proposed a synergy between empathy and ego-drive, ego-drive has had little scholarly focus from a sales perspective, especially when compared to empathy. This could be because ego-drive appears at face value to be synonymous with selling orientation. Selling orientation describes a motivational stance that contributes to a tendency to want to satisfy short-term sales interests, which can occur at the expense of the customer (Bagozzi et al., 2012).

However, this definition of selling orientation does not align with ego-drive, which describes a drive to close the sale as a means to personal gratification (Greenberg & Greenberg, 1976). Other than motivating salespeople to close sales, which may be especially vital for organizational success, ego-drive might provide a buffer against the constant rejection salespeople face (Mayer & Greenberg, 1964). Salespeople with both empathy and ego-drive should be motivationally attuned to the behaviors that are most conducive to job performance, since a salesperson who possesses both qualities is genuinely motivated to learn about and satisfy the needs of the customer, while also being driven to close the sale.

We are interested in the interplay of the balance between these attributes within a salesperson. Salespeople can be both empathetic and have ego-drive or may not possess either characteristic at all. Or, some salespeople can be highly empathetic, but low on ego-drive and vice-versa. The interplay of this balance should lead to differences in salesperson effectiveness. A high level of empathy and low ego-drive can lead to a salesperson who is very concerned for the customer but is less effective at closing sales. A high ego-drive and low level of empathy can lead to a “pushy” salesperson who “will bulldoze through some sales” (Mayer & Greenberg, 1964, p. 121) but is not sufficiently motivated to understand or satisfy the needs of the customer. Both low empathy and low ego-drive provide little motivational value to an individual to make them an effective salesperson because they possess neither the drive to understand the customer, nor the drive to conquer the sale on its own. The balance between empathy and ego-drive is illustrated in Figure 1 below, which shows how these characteristics are expected to contribute to salesperson effectiveness.

	<b>Low Empathy</b>	<b>High Empathy</b>
<b>Low Ego-Drive</b>	Ineffective salesperson	Attentive salesperson
<b>High Ego-Drive</b>	Pushy salesperson	Most effective salesperson

**Figure 1 Empathy and Ego-Drive as Factors of Salesperson Trait Effectiveness**

An individual who possesses both qualities is genuinely motivated to learn about and satisfy the needs of the customer and is driven to close the sale and will be most



effective in their selling job. Because of this we would expect that salespeople who are empathetic and who have ego-drive would also be the most satisfied in their sales jobs, leading to hypothesis 1.

H1: B2B salespeople who are high in both empathy and ego-drive will be most satisfied with their sales jobs compared to the other salesperson types.

If a B2B salesperson has neither the ego-drive to withstand rejection, nor the empathy required to understand the needs of customers, they will inevitably be ineffective in a selling job. As a result, they will likely also be less satisfied with their selling job. We expect low levels of such attributes to be least conducive to salesperson job satisfaction, leading to hypothesis 2.

H2: B2B salespeople who are low in both empathy and ego-drive will be least satisfied with their jobs compared to the other types.

The question of job satisfaction becomes interesting when looking at the archetype of a salesperson with an imbalance between attributes. On the one hand, having high empathy could lead to a salesperson who is intrinsically motivated to find the appropriate solution for their customers. On its own, this should contribute a positive impact on job satisfaction. However, adding to this a low ego-drive may be indicative of a salesperson who is not motivated by the sale itself, which could negatively affect job satisfaction for a job that entails closing sales. In addition, highly empathic salespeople with comparably lower ego-drives may be less equipped to deal with rejection (Mayer & Greenberg, 1964). Similarly, a high ego-drive may provide such a buffer to one's confidence, as well as the motivational fodder to want to close the sale, meaning a positive boost for job satisfaction. However, adding low empathy to this equation may indicate a salesperson type that is not intrinsically driven to deliver value for customers, potentially providing a detriment to job satisfaction. As a result, we make no predictions about the nature of the difference between these two types.

## **Method**

We look at the influence of salespeople's empathy and ego-drive on job satisfaction using content-analysis of text-based job reviews from Glassdoor.com. Glassdoor.com is a platform where employees can write reviews about the companies

they work for. In addition to reviews, employees can rate their employers on a five-point scale. In effect, Glassdoor.com serves a similar purpose for prospective employees as TripAdvisor does for prospective travelers. The platform has ratings and reviews for over 770,000 companies with millions of ratings and reviews by past and present employees (Glassdoor.com). Employees can rate their employer on a five-star system (1 star = worst employer, 5 = best employer) (Pitt et al., 2019). We operationalize job satisfaction using Glassdoor's "company rating", assuming that a 1-star rating is indicative of very low job satisfaction, and a 5-star rating is indicative of very high job satisfaction.

## **Data Collection**

Reviews from salespeople were scraped from the website, which produced over 50,000 individual reviews from current and former salespeople from 268 B2B companies. Glassdoor.com requires users who sign up for the platform to write at least one company review, so many reviews provide only a minimum number of words in their reviews. As the accuracy of content analysis tools increases with the word-count of individual cases analyzed, we sought to balance the word count with our final desired sample size. This was a minimum of 1,000 reviews, which was reached with 160 words as our cut-off point for the reviews to include. Given our population of interest, we also only sought reviews from current B2B salespeople. We specified current employees only to avoid issues with the accuracy of company ratings being affected by employees who no longer work at those companies. We selected reviews from those who identified as "salesperson," rather than other sales-related roles such as customer-service representatives, sales trainers, or sales managers. Following these restrictions, this left us with a sample of 1,103 reviews from current salespeople from 161 B2B companies. We analyzed this data using the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count text-analysis tool (LIWC).

### ***Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC)***

Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) is a powerful automated text-analysis tool that infers and measures individual characteristics from an individual's written or spoken and transcribed text. LIWC analyzes text by counting the occurrence of words in meaningful categories associated with one's emotion, cognition and other psychological processes (Pennebaker, Francis & Booth, 2001; Pennebaker, Boyd, Jordan &

Blackburn, 2015). To do so, the software uses built-in and customizable dictionaries to measure the extent to which people use psychologically meaningful categories of words in text (Tausczik & Pennebaker, 2010).

LIWC does not have an existing measure for empathy. Many studies test the factors of LIWC that correspond with empathy, but we sought to include a psychological measure of empathy. To do so, we employed a recommended methodology for creating a custom dictionary in LIWC. To begin our process of creating a custom dictionary, we first needed to identify a source for our empathy words. We used the empathy lexicon derived from the work of computer science researchers, Sedoc and his colleagues (Sedoc, Buechel, Nachmany, Buffone & Ungar, 2019). The lexicon represents the words that encompass the language of empathy. The lexicon comprises 9,357 words, rated on the extent to which they represent empathy. The authors semantically grouped the words into clusters, which were then rated using their weighted average score on empathy to provide a rank-order distribution of the words. From this lexicon, we used a median split to identify the words that would form the basis of our analysis by eliminating all word clusters below the median on empathy. With our set of words representing the 50th percentile and above on empathy scores, two independent judges determined the final dictionary by eliminating words that were not synonymous with or representative of empathy, as the dictionary methodology requires. This left us with precisely 200 empathy words and word stems, which then comprised our empathy dictionary.

We operationalize ego-drive using the “power” dimension in LIWC. Mayer and Greenberg (1964) conceptualize ego-drive as the ‘need to conquer’. While some research has conceptualized ego-drive as trait competitiveness (Locander, Locander & Weinberg, 2020), we believe this is not the truest reflection of this original conceptualization. Trait competitiveness describes a tendency to be motivated to compete with and perform better than others (Brown et al., 1998). As a result, one’s motivational drive is relative to the performance of others. In contrast, ego-drive represents a motivational tendency where performance is assessed against the sale itself (i.e., whether the sale was made or not.) While the nuance is subtle, it presents an important distinction from trait competitiveness. McClelland (1987) viewed the need for power as an implicit tendency in people, defined by exerting dominance and influence, which is in line with Mayer and Greenberg’s (1964) conceptualization. As a result, we utilize LIWC’s internal power dictionary as our measure of ego-drive.

## Data Analysis

We first performed a median split for empathy and power words to determine the cut-off point for high vs. low to determine the 2 x 2 framework of salespeople type by crossing high/low empathy and high/low power. As we were interested in the differences between each type's relationship with job satisfaction, we first assessed the relationship between the main effect variables. We conducted a Spearman correlation analysis among Company Rating, Power, and Empathy.

## Results

A significant negative correlation was observed between Company Rating and Power ( $r = -0.19, p < .001, 95\% CI = [-0.24, -0.13]$ ). This correlation provides evidence that as salesperson ego-drive increases, the lower their overall job satisfaction is. In contrast, a significant positive correlation was observed between Company Rating and Empathy ( $r = 0.16, p < .001, 95\% CI = [0.10, 0.22]$ ). This correlation provides evidence that as salesperson empathy increases, the greater their overall job satisfaction is. There was no correlation between empathy and power. Table 1 presents the results of the correlations.

**Table 1** Spearman Correlation Results Among Company Rating, Power, and Empathy

Combination	r	95% CI	n	p
Company Rating-Power	-0.19	[-0.24, -0.13]	1103	< .001
Company Rating-Empathy	0.16	[0.10, 0.22]	1103	< .001
Power-Empathy	0.00	[-0.06, 0.06]	1103	.994

Note. p-values adjusted using the Holm correction.

In order to test our hypotheses, we conducted an analysis of variance (ANOVA) to assess any differences between the four salesperson groups and job satisfaction. The means and standard deviations of company rating by group are shown in Table 2. The results of the ANOVA were significant,  $F(3, 1099) = 19.65, p < .001$ , indicating there are significant differences in job satisfaction among salesperson types (Table 2). The means and standard deviations are presented in Table 3.

**Table 2 Analysis of Variance Table for Company Rating by Empathy and Power Grouping**

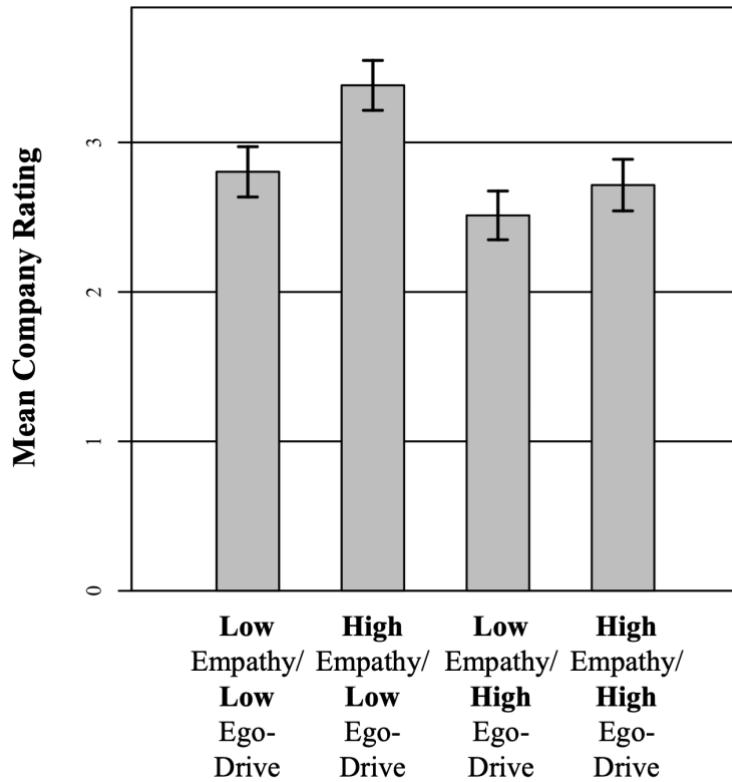
Term	SS	df	F	p
Empathy/Power	120.08	3	19.65	< .001
Residuals	2238.88	1099		

**Table 3 Mean, Standard Deviation, and Sample Size for Company Rating by Empathy vs. Power Grouping**

Combination	M	SD	n
Low Empathy/Low Power	2.80	1.46	290
High Empathy/Low Power	3.38	1.50	309
Low Empathy/High Power	2.51	1.31	248
High Empathy/High Power	2.71	1.41	256

Paired t-tests were calculated between each pair of measurements to further examine the differences among the variables. Salespeople characterized by high empathy and low power showed a significantly higher company rating compared to all other types. Specifically, the mean for High Empathy/Low Power ( $M = 3.38$ ,  $SD = 1.50$ ) was significantly larger than for Low Empathy/Low Power ( $M = 2.80$ ,  $SD = 1.46$ ), Low Empathy/High Power ( $M = 2.51$ ,  $SD = 1.31$ ), and High Empathy/High power ( $M = 2.71$ ,  $SD = 1.41$ ), all at the  $p < .001$  level. Although nothing can be said about the relative differences on job satisfaction among the salesperson types, it is worth noting that the greatest disparity with high empathy and low power is compared to high power salesperson types. Figure 2 shows a bar graph depicting the means of company rating by empathy and power category groupings.

**Figure 2 Means of Company Rating by Empathy and Power Categories**



**Summary of Results**

The results of our study show that possessing empathy appears to be associated with higher levels of job satisfaction, especially when combined with low ego-drive, as represented by LIWC’s power dimension. These findings appear to contradict prevailing expectations that ego-drive provides a buffer for salespeople to press on unaffected in their jobs. Although Mayer and Greenberg proposed a synergy for having both high empathy and high ego-drive, our results indicate that high levels of ego-drive are associated with lower levels of job satisfaction compared to lower ego-drive. Although the difference is only significant when comparing high empathy and low ego-drive to other types, a pattern persists. High power is associated with comparably lower job satisfaction, while low power is associated with higher satisfaction. Our results show that possessing high ego-drive may not be conducive to job satisfaction, even if a salesperson has high empathy.

## **Discussion**

Our results also show that job satisfaction is different depending on salesperson types defined by high vs. low empathy and high vs. low ego-drive. The salesperson type representing high empathy and low ego-drive showed significantly higher job satisfaction than other types. Perhaps the most significant implication of this pertains to what it means given the influence of job satisfaction on sales performance. Although a prevailing belief has existed that sales performance influences salesperson job satisfaction (Yilmaz, 2002), research has since made a strong case that the inverse relationship is critical. Franke and Park (2006) showed in their meta-analysis that job satisfaction leads to sales performance, rather than the other way around. The authors proposed that the direction of the relationship could be explained by the fact that job satisfaction improves key determinants of sales success, such as job-related skills and strategies, and the emotional quality associated with one's job. These findings have been confirmed through an additional meta-analysis to show that job satisfaction is a significant predictor of sales success (Ohiomah, Benyoucef & Andreev, 2020). Our results suggest that highly empathic salespeople may offer additional benefits to salesforces aside from being more adaptive and responsive to customers' needs (Ohiomah et al., 2020). When combined with low ego-drive, B2B salespeople who are high in empathy tend to be more satisfied in their jobs.

## **Limitations**

The intention of this work is to shed light on how empathy and ego-drive could influence salesperson performance by looking at how these traits relate to job satisfaction. There are limitations worth noting for this work. First, we use a measure of company rating as a proxy for job satisfaction. While we expect this measure should approximate job satisfaction, its validity is not ascertained in this study. In addition, our measure of ego-drive is operationalized as power words due to the conceptual proximity; however, the validity of this measure cannot be ascertained above face-level. As well, we develop and use our own measure of empathy to account for the absence of an empathy variable in LIWC. Although we exercised a rigorous methodology in its selection, we are unable to assert the extent of its validity as a measure of empathy. Another limitation is that we do not have a measure of sales performance. Although

there is strong support that salespeople who are satisfied with their jobs perform better (Franke & Park, 2006; Ohiomah et al., 2020), it is of course possible that this is not the case. A lousy salesperson could be satisfied with their job, and a high-performing salesperson could be dissatisfied with their job. So, while Mayer and Greenberg and other scholars have proposed empathy and ego-drive as the most important traits of successful salespeople, we are unable to show direct support to this conclusion. The use of Glassdoor also presents another limitation due to the potential for response bias. Individuals who contribute the most qualitative feedback about their companies are likely to be salespeople who are either happy or unhappy with their jobs. As a result, our sample may be missing responses from people who have more average levels of job satisfaction. We hope the number of observations in our sample alleviates some of these concerns. Although we speculate as to the influence of these traits on job satisfaction, this study does not provide evidence of any causal impact between any of the variables. Instead, we look at the association between them. As a result, although the implications of this work suppose that empathy and ego-drive are influencing job satisfaction, our study cannot rule out other reasons for the associations.

## **Managerial Implications**

This work suggests several implications for sales managers. First, managers should recognize the limitations of ego-drive in salespeople. It is possible that sales managers may be drawn to select salespeople by ego-drive-related attributes such as competitiveness and high extrinsic motivation. Selecting and rewarding salespeople with these attributes could be focusing on the wrong attributes of salespeople that should be fostered and incentivized. Sales managers should consider hiring salespeople with a balance between empathy and ego-drive, while prioritizing empathy in sales recruits. Being concerned about customers' needs can be difficult to engender in someone (Davis, 1990), but the benefits of ego-drive on sales success can be engineered using incentive structures. Ego-drive represents a moving-forward towards the sale in pursuit of personal gratification. Highly empathic salespeople with low ego-drive might be slower or less willing to close a sale. However, behavior can be motivated through the right incentives. Sales managers can set sales process targets for salespeople to hit in securing new customers. Such process targets can include financial or non-financial rewards tied to salespeople using the customer information they derive to sales



execution steps. For instance, a supplier of office equipment could devise an incentive structure where salespeople are rewarded a small amount by making contact with a lead, a slightly greater amount when the leads are follow-up with, and a greater amount for completing a sales presentation. Having incentives tied to adaptive sales behaviors is one way for sales managers to modify the sales environment to extract the drive to close the sale while maintaining the benefit of an empathetic sales force.

Sales managers should also consider Glassdoor.com as a source to understand the perspective of current and former salespeople. Using LIWC or other text analysis tools offers a data-driven way to explore how salespeople feel towards the company. Less formally though, Glassdoor offers a rich resource for sales managers to see how their own sales forces feel about the company.

## **Research Implications**

This work provides support for the direction of the literature, which has embraced empathy as an important trait of salespeople. We provide the additional contribution by showing that high levels of ego-drive, although seemingly beneficial for some sales outcomes, is negatively associated with job satisfaction.

Looking specifically at the combination of high empathy and low ego-drive, we can ascertain potential sources of the connection between this salesperson type and job satisfaction, which offer potentially fruitful areas of future research. Recent research from Ohiomah and his colleagues (Ohiomah et al., 2020) shows through meta-analyses that sales success at the salesperson unit of analysis is determined by salesperson competencies. These competencies include interpersonal skills, adaptive selling, and job satisfaction—all of which should be enhanced by the salesperson profile of high empathy and low ego drive. The combination of empathy and low ego-drive could be emblematic of a salesperson who considers the needs of others and is not concerned with winning sales. This could alleviate tension for the salesperson who is focused on and derives satisfaction from satisfying customers' needs, rather than being driven to satisfy the need to close the sale. This is echoed in practice where salespeople who are genuinely motivated to help customers have the most sales success (Hancock, Hatami & Rayan, 2011). Future research could investigate the proposed mediated relationship between empathy and ego-drive sales types, job satisfaction, and job performance.

Finally, additional implications may become more apparent, as we begin to better understand the profound influence of mental health in sales jobs. With the rising interest and notice in mental health in the workplace and in life, it is important to understand fundamental connections between characteristics of salespeople and job satisfaction. Given the relationship between salesperson type and job satisfaction shown in this work, we suggest future research can explore connections between ego-drive and empathy and the mental health of salespeople.

# **Paper 3: Linguistic Markers of Job Satisfaction: An Exploratory Investigation of Pronoun Use in Salesperson Descriptions of Sales Jobs**

## **Introduction**

Personal selling is, at its core, grounded in communication. When interacting with customers, salespeople encode meaning in their verbal communication and express meaning in their non-verbal communication. Personal selling happens as salespeople convey effective messaging to satisfy the unique needs of customers and buyers (Spiro & Weitz, 1990; Weitz, 1980). Salespeople are often the primary method of communication between the firm in the marketplace (Capon, Holbrook, & Hulbert, 1977; Dion & Notarantonio, 1992; Sheth, 1976), and the primary mechanism for successful selling is communication (Singh, Brady, Arnold & Brown, 2017; Williams & Spiro, 1985). Consequently, the nature and effectiveness of salesperson communication has been a topic of interest for personal selling and marketing scholars for decades (e.g., Bharadwaj & Shipley, 2020; Dion & Notarantonio, 1992; Sheth, 1976; Webster, 1968; Weitz, 1981; Williams & Spiro, 1985). Due to its importance in connecting with the customer in the sales process, research in this space has focused primarily on downstream consequences related to customers in B2C and buyers in B2B personal selling contexts. As a result, we have a strong understanding of salesperson communication within the context of salesperson-customer interactions. Advances in psycholinguistics and content analysis offer new ways to gain insight into how the words people use provide insight into the psychology of the speakers and authors themselves. Yet, no research has capitalized on such advances to assess what verbal salesperson communication tells us about salespeople themselves. Advances in psycholinguistics and content-analysis software offer an opportunity to assess how variability in the way salespeople communicate conveys differences in the thoughts and feelings of the salespeople authoring the words. We address this shortcoming by investigating patterns in how salespeople describe their sales jobs and offering a lens into how linguistic features reflect salesperson job satisfaction. Using a large sample of text reviews of their jobs written by salespeople, we provide the foundation for exploiting the words salespeople use to provide researchers and practitioners with important insight into the motivations and thoughts of salespeople themselves.

Of interest to personal selling researchers and sales organizations is understanding the linguistic patterns of salespeople describing their experience with their sales jobs. Given the social context of the work environment, the pronouns salespeople use to describe sales jobs are a fruitful source for detecting linguistic style patterns (Chung & Pennebaker, 2007) depending on job satisfaction. This work compares the use of first-person singular pronouns (“I” words) to third-person plural pronouns (“they” words) in company reviews written by salespeople. This provides a lens through which to gauge if and how the pronouns salespeople use when describing their jobs reflect differences in how they feel about their company. We employ an inductive approach with rich online data from thousands of salesperson reviews as our source. This work is intended to help identify trends of linguistic features reflecting how salespeople feel about their companies in a way that may produce more insight than self-reported responses. In this way, we can set the foundation for understanding how linguistic features in salesperson written or spoken communication reflects job satisfaction. Given the impact of job satisfaction on job performance (Franke & Park, 2006), increasing clarity around linguistic markers of salesperson job satisfaction compared to dissatisfaction is a critical issue to explore. This work is an initial step toward developing a concrete understanding of how the communication style of salespeople reflects their motivations and thoughts as they write about a company with whom they are satisfied compared to dissatisfied.

## **Literature Review**

Given the importance of effective communication for sales success (Bharadwaj & Shipley, 2020; Spiro & Weitz, 1990; Webster, 1968), verbal and non-verbal salesperson communication has been investigated thoroughly within the marketing and personal selling literature (e.g., Bonoma & Felder, 1977; Dion & Notarantonio, 1992; Lim, Lee, & Foo, 2017; Peterson, Cannito, & Brown, 1995). Most of what we know about how salespeople communicate verbally comes from research investigating how salesperson communication influences customer or buyer purchase-related decisions and actions. For instance, research has shown that when salespeople mimic some of the verbal expressions of customers, sales rates and salesperson and store evaluations are more favourable, and results in greater compliance with the salesperson’s suggestion (Jacobs et al., 2011). Other research has shown that customers tend to have more favorable

judgment of salespeople when they speak in an accent similar to the customer's manner of speaking (Tsalikis, DeShields Jr. & LaTour, 1991). As sales interactions have evolved with communication media, research has assessed the nature of effective verbal communication in digital sales interactions (Bharadwaj & Shipley, 2020). Some research in marketing has investigated pronoun use of customer-facing agents; however, it has been looked at from the perspective of the customer. Packard, Moore and McFerran (2018) show how greater use of "I" by customer-facing agents has a positive impact on customer satisfaction, purchase intentions, and purchase behavior compared to the use of "we" pronouns. Although inquiry into salesperson communication has increased in prominence, no work has investigated the linguistic features of salesperson communication to derive insight into the authors (salespersons) themselves.

## **Linguistic Features and Psychological Processes**

It has long been understood that language is a reflection of the internal mind (Chomsky, 1968). Since Pennebaker's early work on emotional writing (Pennebaker & Francis, 1996; Pennebaker, 1997), psycholinguistic scholars have systematically analyzed the features of writing or speech to determine meaningful markers of psychological processes of the speaker or writer. Salespeople, like all employees in any organization, have experiences in the workplace. From these experiences, they make logical conclusions and emotional assessments, which define their workplace experience and ultimately their satisfaction with their job (Parkinson, 2007). Therefore, by analyzing the text where these experiences are expressed, the use of pronouns can provide insight into the psychological states and intentions of the salespeople authoring the text (Chung & Pennebaker, 2007; Pennebaker, 2011). Using automated text analysis, namely the software developed by Pennebaker and his colleagues, Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) (Pennebaker, Francis & Booth, 2001), offers a valid and reliable way to explore how the words salespeople use reflect their thoughts and emotions related to job satisfaction (Humphreys & Wang, 2018).

Similar to Pennebaker, Sheth (1976) categorizes the nature of communication in sales as a function of both the content and style of language. Content represents the what of communication, while style represents the how. Content words, such as nouns and regular verbs provide concreteness to what is being spoken (Chung & Pennebaker, 2007). For example, the sentence, "the baby crawled around the kitchen" is mostly

comprised of content words (baby, crawled, kitchen). When analyzing speech for inferences into the speaker or writer, not only does the content matter, but the connective words between the content matters (Pennebaker, 2011). These words, termed function words, are common words that support the content of one's spoken or written words. Function words, such as pronouns, prepositions, and articles, largely go unnoticed but serve an important purpose by connecting content together in speech (Ireland et al., 2011). Even more than content words, function words provide clearer insight into one's motivations than the content of one's speech. For instance, research has shown that individuals who are depressed or contemplating suicide use more first-person singular pronouns, indicating a strong focus on the self, but do not use more content words referring to death (Stirman & Pennebaker, 2001). Of these function words, personal pronouns provide the clearest view into the psychological processes and motivations of the author (Pennebaker, 2011). The frequency with which different pronouns are used reveal critical information about the underlying cognitions and attitudes related to individual social environments (Chung & Pennebaker, 2007). In part, this is because pronouns reveal how people organize their social worlds and relate to other people, which is then reflected in consistent thinking and writing styles.

For this work, the words of interest are the frequency of personal and impersonal pronouns used in the narrative of the sales job experience. The use of pronouns provides insight into the focus of one's attention. The specific pronouns of interest in our case are "I" compared to "they." The reason for this is that the employee themselves and the company are the characters in this narrative. When an employee refers to their company, the most appropriate pronoun is "they." When salespeople refer to themselves, they will use "I." By exploring the writing of salespeople related to the favourability of their companies, we can see the propensity with which salespeople use certain pronouns over others when recounting favourable compared to unfavourable experiences.

To achieve our aim, we are guided by the following research questions: Do the pronouns salespeople use when describing their work experiences vary depending on job satisfaction? And, to what extent does pronoun-use differ depending on job satisfaction? Are there differences in how current- compared to former salespeople use pronouns depending on job satisfaction?

## Method

To address our research questions, we utilize content-analysis of text-based job reviews from Glassdoor.com. Glassdoor.com is a platform where employees can write reviews about the companies they work for or have worked for in the past. In addition to reviews, employees can rate their employers on a five-point scale. In effect, Glassdoor.com serves a similar purpose for prospective employees that TripAdvisor does for prospective travelers. The platform has ratings and reviews for over 770,000 companies with millions of ratings and reviews by past and present employees (Glassdoor.com). Employees can rate their employer on a five-star system (1 star = worst employer, 5 = best employer) (Pitt et al., 2019). We operationalize job satisfaction using Glassdoor's "company rating", assuming that a 1-star rating is indicative of very low job satisfaction, and a 5-star rating is indicative of very high job satisfaction.

## Data Collection

Reviews from salespeople were scraped from the website, which produced over 50,000 individual reviews from current and former salespeople. Glassdoor.com requires users who sign up for the platform to write at least one company review, so many reviews provide only a minimum number of words in their reviews. As the accuracy of content-analysis tools increases with the word count of individual cases analyzed, we sought to balance the word count with our final desired sample size. In previous research in this dissertation, this was determined by balancing word count with the desired number of reviews per salesperson type, which was reached with 160 words as the cut-off point for the reviews to include. We have maintained this word count as our cut-off for reviews to include. We selected reviews from those who identified as "salesperson," rather than other sales-related roles such as customer service representatives, sales trainers, or sales managers. Following these restrictions, this left us with a sample of 4,253 reviews. We analyzed this data using the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) text-analysis tool (Pennebaker, Francis & Booth, 2001; Pennebaker, Boyd, Jordan & Blackburn, 2015).

## ***Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC)***

Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) is a powerful text-analysis and computational linguistic software tool that infers and measures individual characteristics from an individual's written or spoken and transcribed text, by calculating the proportion of words of interest in relation to all the words in any discourse (in our case, the reviews.) The software has been widely adopted in social research (Pennebaker, Boyd, Jordan, & Blackburn, 2015). LIWC analyzes text by counting the occurrence of words in meaningful categories associated with one's emotion, cognition and other psychological processes (Pennebaker, Francis & Booth, 2001; Pennebaker, Boyd, Jordan & Blackburn, 2015). LIWC measures the linguistic category of style words, which include pronouns, articles, auxiliary verbs, prepositions and conjunctions.

## **Data Analysis**

To first get a sense of the nature of the relationship between the use of pronouns and job satisfaction, we performed a correlation between the use of first-person singular pronouns or "I" words (I, me, mine, my, etc.) and third-person plural pronouns or "they" words (they, their, them, they'd, they've, etc.) and Company Rating. Given that some reviews may not contain any pronouns of interest, we eliminated these reviews from our sample. As a result, the sample sizes of our observations differ depending on the presence of pronouns, so we performed a nonparametric Spearman bivariate correlation analysis.

## **Results**

The result of the correlations was examined using the Holm correction to adjust for multiple comparisons and reduce sources of potential error. A significant positive correlation was observed between the frequency of "I" words and company rating, with a correlation of  $r = .08$  ( $p < .001$ ), indicating a small effect size (Cohen, 1988). More telling is the use of third-person plural pronouns. A significant negative correlation was observed between "they" words and company rating, with a correlation of  $r = -.23$  ( $p < .001$ ). Table 4 presents the results of the correlations.



**Table 4 Spearman Correlation Results between “I”, “They”, and Company Rating**

Combination	r	n	p
I-Company Rating	.08	3098	< .001
They-Company Rating	-.23	3852	< .001

Note. P-values adjusted using the Holm correction.

These results indicate that as job satisfaction increases, so too does the use of first-person singular pronouns (“I” words); although, the strength of the relationship is relatively weak. Further analysis in subsequent sections delves deeper into the nature of this relationship. In comparison, as job satisfaction decreases, the use of third-person plural pronouns (“they” words) increases. Before speculating as to the meaning of such findings, we probe further into these results to uncover potential mechanisms at play.

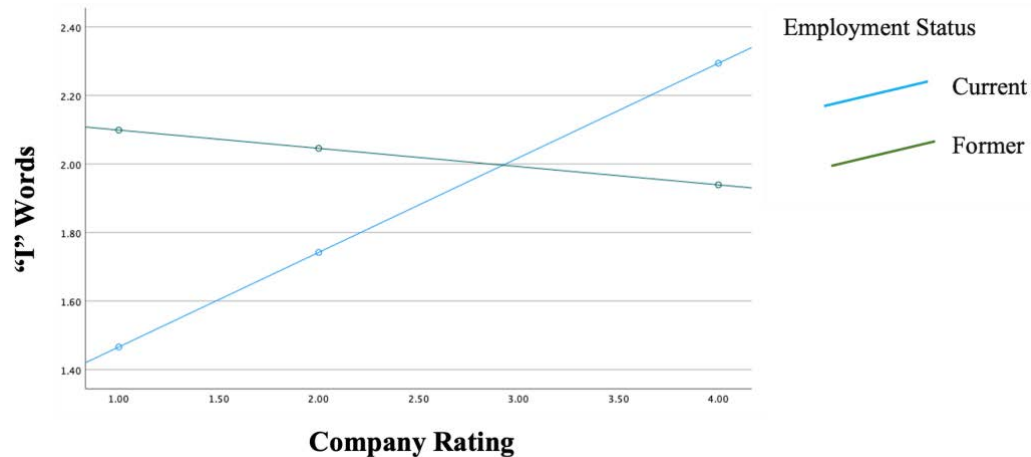
We further probed our findings to assess any differences between current compared to former employees. We performed regression analyses using Hayes’ PROCESS to test for any interactions between the use of pronouns and company rating by employment status (current vs. former). In order to explore these relationships, we ran two separate regression analyses—one for first-person singular pronouns, and one for third-person plural pronouns.

### ***Current Salespeople***

To examine the effect of company rating on the use of first-person singular pronouns, we used Model 1 of Hayes’ (2012) PROCESS macros with 5,000 resamples. We found a significant interaction effect between current and former employees,  $F(1, 3094) = 43.8, p < .001$ . Figure 3 depicts this interaction. Thus, there are significant differences in the frequency with which current- compared to former employees use “I” words depending on job satisfaction. To examine the nature of this interaction, we compared pronoun and company rating correlations between current and former salespeople. For current employees, there exists a positive correlation between the use of first-person (“I”) pronouns and company rating ( $r = .227, p < .001$ ). This relationship flips when looking at the relationship between first-person pronouns and company rating for salespeople who are describing former sales jobs ( $r = -.062, p = 0.015$ ). Although the negative correlation is weak, the flip from a significant positive to negative relationship is important. The strength of the positive correlation between the use of “I” and job

satisfaction is much stronger for current employees ( $r = .227$ ) compared to the main effect between “I” and company rating for both employment statuses ( $r = .08$ ).

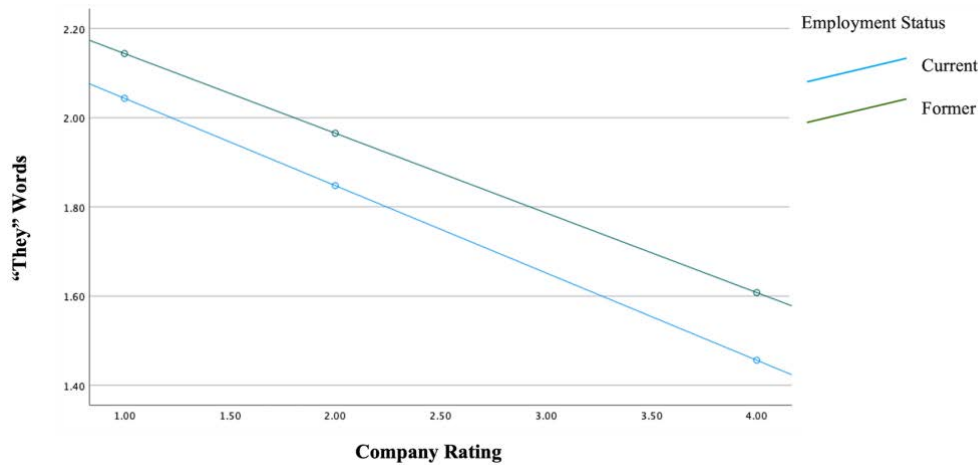
**Figure 3** “I” and Company Rating by Employment Status



### **Former Salespeople**

We also investigate whether the use of “they” words differs by job satisfaction between current and former employees. To examine the effect of company rating on the use of third-person plural pronouns by current- compared to former sales employees, we again used Model 1 of Hayes’ (2012) PROCESS macros with 5,000 resamples. The interaction was not significant between current and former employees,  $F(1, 3848) = .2969, p = .59$ ). For both current and former employees, the nature of the negative correlation between “they” and job satisfaction remains the same, as depicted in Figure 4. There exists a negative correlation between the use of third-person pronouns and company rating for both current ( $r = -.234, p < .001$ ) and former employees ( $r = -.156, p < .001$ ).

**Figure 4 “They” and Company Rating by Employment Status**



To further investigate the nature of the relationship between pronoun use and job satisfaction, we explored pronoun use at discrete levels of company rating for both current and former employees. We performed an analysis of variance (ANOVA) to determine whether there were significant differences in the use of first-person singular pronouns by discrete levels of company rating.

### ***Current Salespeople***

The results of the ANOVA were significant,  $F(4, 2,210) = 50.09, p < .001$ , indicating significant differences in the use of “I” words among company rating levels for current salespeople (Table 5). The means and standard deviations are presented in Table 6.

**Table 5 Analysis of Variance Table for “I” Words by Company Rating**

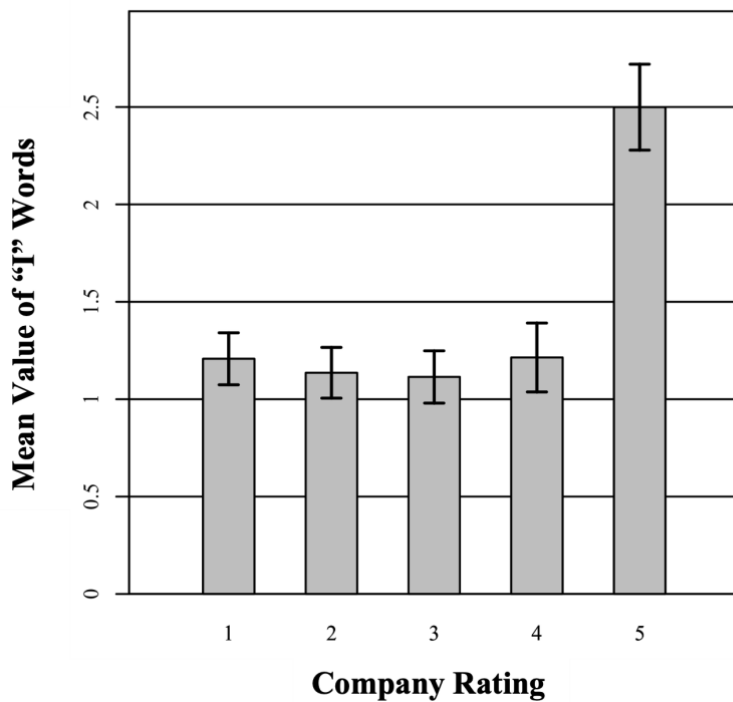
Term	SS	df	F	p	$\eta_p^2$
Company Rating	555.18	4	50.09	< .001	0.08
Residuals	6,123.66	2210			

**Table 6 Mean, Standard Deviation, and Sample Size for “I” by Company Rating**

Combination	M	SD	n
1	1.21	1.53	505
2	1.14	1.56	554
3	1.11	1.46	457
4	1.21	1.63	327
5	2.50	2.17	372

Paired t-tests were calculated between each pair of measurements to further examine the differences among the variables. The Tukey HSD p-value adjustment was used to correct for the effect of multiple comparisons on the family-wise error rate. The mean of “I” word-use for all company rating values of 1 to 4 ( $M = 1.21$ ,  $SD = 1.53$ ;  $M = 1.14$ ,  $SD = 1.56$ ;  $M = 1.11$ ,  $SD = 1.46$ ;  $M = 1.21$ ,  $SD = 1.63$ , respectively) were significantly smaller than the mean of “I” word use for company rating of 5 ( $M = 2.50$ ,  $SD = 2.17$ ),  $p < .001$ . This is depicted in Figure 5.

**Figure 5 Means of “I” Use by Company Rating**



### **Former Salespeople**

The results of the ANOVA for former salespeople were also significant,  $F(4, 2,033) = 13.35$ ,  $p < .001$ , indicating there were significant differences in the use of “I” words among company rating levels (Table 7). The means and standard deviations are presented in Table 8.

**Table 7 Analysis of Variance of “I” Words by Company Rating**

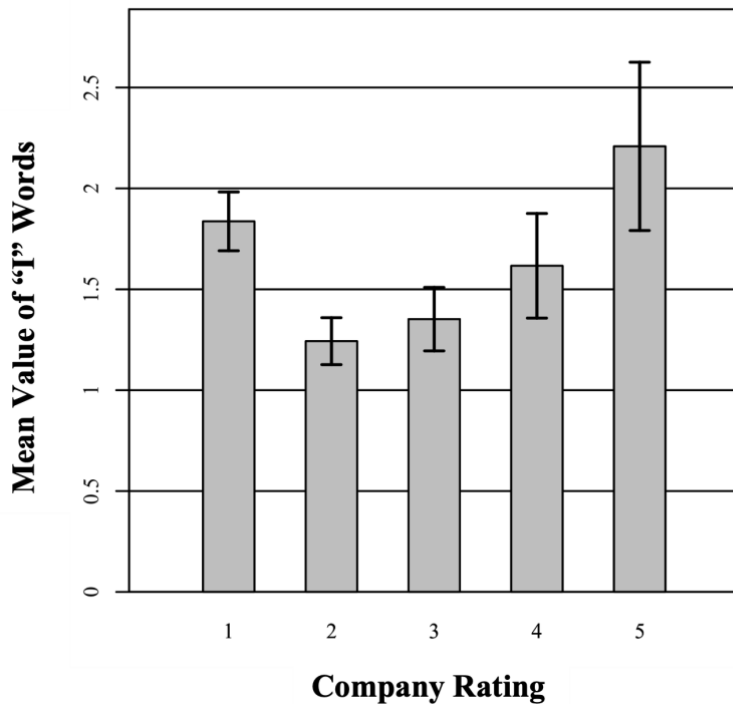
<b>Term</b>	<b>SS</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>p</b>	<b><math>\eta^2</math></b>
Company Rating	164.43	4	13.35	< .001	0.03
Residuals	6,261.90	2033			

**Table 8 Mean, Standard Deviation, and Sample Size for “I” by Company Rating**

<b>Combination</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>n</b>
1	1.84	1.97	705
2	1.24	1.50	639
3	1.35	1.64	419
4	1.62	1.91	208
5	2.21	1.74	67

Paired t-tests were calculated between each pair of measurements to further examine the differences among the variables. The Tukey HSD p-value adjustment was used to correct for the effect of multiple comparisons on the family-wise error rate. The mean of “I” word use for company rating of 1 ( $M = 1.84$ ,  $SD = 1.97$ ) was significantly larger than for company ratings of 2 ( $M = 1.24$ ,  $SD = 1.50$ ) and 3 ( $M = 1.35$ ,  $SD = 1.64$ ),  $p < .001$ . The mean of “I” word use for company rating of 5 ( $M = 2.21$ ,  $SD = 1.74$ ) was significantly larger than for company ratings for 2 ( $M = 1.24$ ,  $SD = 1.50$ ),  $p < .001$ , and 3 ( $M = 1.35$ ,  $SD = 1.64$ ),  $p = .002$ . Interestingly, contrary to the expectations set by the positive relationship between “I” and company rating, there is no difference in the use of “I” words between the most (company rating of 5) and least satisfied salespeople (company rating of 1.) This is depicted in Figure 6.

**Figure 6 Means of “I” Use by Company Rating**



## **Summary of Results**

Although we found an overall significant and positive relationship between the use of “I” and company rating, the size of the effect was quite small. Further analysis showed the nature of this relationship varied depending on employment status. A significant interaction by employment status showed that the strength and direction of the relationship between the use of first-person singular pronouns and job satisfaction depends on whether salespeople are currently or were formerly employed by the company. Current salespeople tend to use “I” more when describing job experiences when they are more satisfied in their sales job and less when describing job experiences with which they are less satisfied. We found the main effect between the use of “I” and job satisfaction for former employees was influenced by similar frequency of the use of “I” for highly satisfied (5/5 rating) and highly dissatisfied (1/5) salespeople. This is indicated by the lack of significant difference between former salespeople’s use of “I” at the rating extremes. For both employment statuses, the use of “they” tends to be more prevalent in reviews representing lower levels of job satisfaction. No interaction was found between current and former salespeople for the relationship between “they” and

company rating. Salespeople tend to use “they” more when describing job experiences with which they are less satisfied.

## **Discussion**

Our findings point to important linguistic patterns of salespeople depending on their level of job satisfaction. In general, greater use of “I” is associated with greater job satisfaction, with implications for sales managers given the strength of the relationship for current employees. Comparatively, greater use of “they” is associated with lower job satisfaction. Although the findings regarding former salespeople are less pertinent for sales managers and firms, the curvilinear relationship between “I” and job satisfaction for former employees is worth noting. The frequency with which formerly employed salespeople use “I” is not significantly different between the highest (5) compared to the lowest (1) level of job satisfaction. However, we observe significant differences between the lowest and highest company ratings compared to the mid-range points. This is worth noting, as the use of personal pronouns is associated with greater psychological ownership of a narrative (Pennebaker, 2011). For example, Cialdini et al (1976) found that sports fans tend to use the personal pronoun “we” more frequently in their team’s victory than in defeat— “We won! But, they lost!”. As well, individuals who are lying tend to create psychological distance by using “I” less frequently compared to individuals who are telling the truth (Newman, Pennebaker, Berry & Richards, 2003). As a result, the similarity in the use of “I” by dissatisfied former employees could indicate greater psychological ownership over the narrative compared to those who are dissatisfied and currently employed—for whom there seems to be a greater prevalence of psychological distancing. This could be a product of passing the responsibility to the company for poor job experiences. It could be that salespeople who are experiencing low job satisfaction in their current jobs feel real closeness to the experiences, and thus seek to detach psychologically from the negative experience. In contrast, the real distance between the salesperson and their former job could provide the space for salespeople to have ownership over their negative experience because it is no longer affecting them.

## **Limitations**

There are limitations worth noting for this work. First, we use a measure of company rating as a proxy for job satisfaction. While we expect this measure should approximate job satisfaction, its validity is not ascertained in this study. The use of Glassdoor also presents another limitation due to the potential for response bias. Individuals who contribute the most qualitative feedback about their companies are likely to be salespeople who are either very happy or very unhappy with their jobs. As a result, our sample may be missing responses from people who have more average levels of job satisfaction. We hope the number of observations in our sample alleviates some of these concerns.

## **Managerial Implications**

Our findings offer insight into the linguistic features reflecting salespeople's job satisfaction, primarily with greater frequency of "I" words associated with greater job satisfaction and greater frequency of "they" words with lower job satisfaction. Our findings suggest important implications for sales managers. First, it shows that salespeople use different pronouns when describing a work environment they are satisfied with compared to dissatisfied. This indicates that salespeople who rate their companies comparatively lower tend to focus on third-person plural pronouns, indicating a potential propensity to attempt to divert responsibility to the company or distance oneself psychologically from their negative experiences. In contrast, when salespeople are satisfied, they tend to use first-person pronouns more. These findings offer additional insight into how salespeople feel about their companies in a way that may be more telling than self-reported responses by going the numerical company rating and the content within reviews. Although the significant relationships are relatively small, they are high in power. Given the power strength, this work provides true insight into the psycholinguistic tendencies of salespeople describing positive compared to negative job experiences. The small effects provide considerable optimism, given the openness of the writing task of providing an open-ended review of one's current or past company. Managers can use these findings to develop writing tasks for salespeople asking for their input on their job experiences. Given the value of writing about experiences for mental health (Pennebaker & Francis, 1996; Pennebaker, 1997), writing tasks could serve the



dual purpose of providing salespeople with a mechanism through which to explore and process their thoughts and feelings related to their job experiences, as well as a source for text-analysis to be analyzed for job satisfaction patterns. Writing prompts or questions can be written to promote the use of pronouns with analysis on a comparison between the proportions of first-person singular compared to third-person pronouns in their writing. Alternatively, salespeople can be asked to describe their jobs verbally and their answers transcribed and analyzed. The prevalence and ease of use of content-analysis software such as LIWC can be easily employed by sales managers to analyze such text or transcripts.

## **Research Implications**

The capacity to understand the psychological process and motivations of individuals, as reflected in their writing or speech, provides an important foundation for understanding the personal beliefs, attitudes, and intentions of salespeople. We offer a psycholinguistic perspective by highlighting patterns of linguistic features based on salesperson job satisfaction, which offers scaffolding upon which researchers can build. This work offers insight into this space and specifies an approachable methodology for personal selling researchers to replicate or extend the findings in this work. While this research offers robust findings from a very large sample of salespeople, additional research with direct access to salespeople could ascertain more precise frequencies or proportions of first-person and third-person pronoun use that could be indicative of satisfied- compared to dissatisfied salespeople. To supplement the quantitative findings of this work, future qualitative research could seek to uncover the qualitative meaning behind references to the self (“I” words) compared to the company (“they” words) in company reviews written by salespeople. Finally, future research can delve deeper into the nature of the proposed differences in psychological ownership of current compared to former employees.

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