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OPERATIONS, INFORMATION & TECHNOLOGY | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Antecedents of salesperson performance in information service industry: The role of guanxi, adaptive selling behaviors and customer orientation

Thi-Thuy-Linh Nguyen¹, Xuan-Quynh Hoang², Pham Thi Lien³, Thanh-Hang Pham^{4*} and Hiep-Hung Pham⁵

Abstract: This research aims to investigate the determinants of salesperson performance with a focus on the role of customer-centric selling behaviors in the interaction with Guanxi—a measure of the quality of customer–salesperson relationship. The study examines two well-established constructs in the body of sales literature, namely customer orientation and Adaptive selling behavior to shed light on the inconclusive relationship between these antecedents and sales performance in prior works. Using a sample of 204 salespeople in the Information service industry, the authors tested several hypotheses employing the structural equation model (SEM). The results suggest that the adoption of adaptive selling and Customer-oriented behaviors may help salespeople improve performance. Moreover, Guanxi does play some role in explaining sales performance of B2B

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

In the business-to-business (B2B) context, salespeople are the critical link between a company and its customers; however, due to the complex nature of selling activities, the scholars have not agreed upon the universal factors that may ensure salespeople's success. This research aims to investigate the determinants of salesperson performance. It examines two well-established constructs in the body of sales literature, namely customer orientation and adaptive selling behavior. It also considers the China-originated construct called Guanxi, which is expected to reflect the quality of the relationship between salesperson and customer. Few studies have grouped guanxi with selling behaviors in an explanatory model of sales performance. Therefore, studying this interaction may provide more insights into how to improve the performance of the salesforce. The results suggest that the adoption of Adaptive selling and Customer-oriented behaviors may help salespeople improve performance. Moreover, Guanxi does play some role in explaining sales performance of B2B salespeople. Theoretical contributions and managerial implications, as well as suggestions for future research, will also be presented.

salespeople. Based on the findings, theoretical contributions and managerial implications, as well as suggestions for future research, will also be presented. In the business-to-business (B2B) context, salespeople are the critical link between a company and its customers; therefore, understanding their performance is a key concern of sales managers as well as researchers in the discipline. However, due to the complex nature of selling activities, the extant literature has not agreed upon the universal factors that may ensure salespeople's success. The research also takes into account the China-originated construct called Guanxi, which is expected to reflect the quality of the relationship between salesperson and customer. Few prior studies have grouped guanxi with selling behaviors in an explanatory model of sales performance. Therefore, studying this interaction may provide more insights into how to improve the performance of the salesforce.

Subjects: Customer Relationship Management; CRM; Consumer Psychology; Economic Psychology; Sales; Media, Information & Communication Industries

Keywords: business-to-business sales performance; adaptive selling behaviors; customer orientation; guanxi; information service industry

1. INTRODUCTION

In the business-to-business context (B2B), salespeople are critical for the success of firms as they are the vital link between a company and its customers, especially with current rapid changes in competition and the dynamics of customer preferences (Beverland, 2001; Y.-C. Chen et al., 2018; Kienzler et al., 2019). Therefore, understanding the performance of the sales force is a key concern of sales managers as well as researchers in the discipline (Høgevoid et al., 2022). However, selling activities are acknowledged with a complex nature in which “there is no one sales situation and no one way to sell” (Thompson, 1973, p. 8). Consequently, marketing scholars have been putting continuous efforts to explain the variability of sales performance for decades. Various factors are proposed to have impacts on sales performance, including aptitude, external and internal environment, motivation, personal factors, job-related psychological factors, skills of the salespeople and strategic and non-strategic activities as indicated in the systematic review of determinants of sales performance (Chawla et al., 2020). However, no single groups of determinants have been proved to be of significant effect (Churchill Jr, Ford, Churchill et al., 1985; K. R. Evans et al., 2012; Jaramillo et al., 2007; Singh & Koshy, 2010). This indicates ample opportunity for sales performance research and suggests a necessity for explanatory models to examine multiple factors in the interaction with each other to explain sale performance.

Moreover, improving sales performance in today's marketplace becomes more challenging and requires a new strategic focus. Since the selling environments are increasingly more complex with fiercer competition and higher customers' demand for customized solutions, building strong long-term relationships with customers is imperative for ensuring business success (K. R. Evans et al., 2012). In fact, a positive seller-buyer relationship is proved to result in lower customer turnover, future purchase intention, and more referrals (Boles et al., 1997; Crosby et al., 1990). Salespeople in the B2B context are therefore required to demonstrate selling behaviors that nurture long-lasting relationships with customers through effectively satisfying their needs rather than just closing the deals.

In the recent sales literature, customer orientation (CO) and adaptive selling behaviors (ASBs) are two remarkable behavioral constructs of customer-centric nature that are positively related to sales performance (SP; Franke & Park, 2006; Kaynak et al., 2016; Singh & Koshy, 2010). While the former emphasizes the determination of the customer needs (Saxe & Weitz, 1982), the later allows a salesperson to select appropriate selling activities that match those needs (Franke & Park, 2006;

Weitz et al., 1986). Although the positive impacts of ASB on sales performance are largely supported by researches, there are conflicting results regarding CO-SP and ASB-CO relationship (Franke & Park, 2006; Singh & Das, 2013). In particular, while customer orientation is proved to result in positive sales performance in a number of studies (e.g. (Keillor et al., 2000; Schwepker, 2003; Singh & Das, 2013), other findings show either an insignificant or no association (e.g. (Franke & Park, 2006; Jaramillo et al., 2007; Joshi & Randall, 2001). In the relationship with adaptive selling, customer orientation may be considered both antecedent and consequence (Franke & Park, 2006). The reciprocal relationship between these two behavioral constructs is, therefore, still inconclusive. In addition, meta-analysis indicates that these two factors only explain a small proportion of salesperson performance variance (Jaramillo et al., 2007).

The limited ability of individual behavioral constructs to explain sales performance has been addressed by the postulate that the effectiveness of sales behaviors is influenced by various factors including the customer–salesperson relationship (Weitz, 1981). Specifically, a good relationship with customers may help adaptive selling behaviors to be more effective in gaining customer satisfaction. Based on this proposition, it is reasonable to examine the impact of adaptive selling and customer orientation on sales performance with consideration of customer–salesperson relationship.

The quality of the relationship between salesperson and customer can be reflected in a China-originated construct called *Guanxi* (Yen et al., 2011). In Chinese culture, *guanxi* refers to a connection on the personal and reciprocal social level, which serves as the foundation for collaborating effectively (Charoensukmongkol, 2022). Given increasing importance of China as a worldwide business partner, this culture-specific concept has received growing acceptance and popularity in Western mainstream business literature (X.-P. X.-P. Chen & Chen, 2004). It is also proved to help forming business relationship and transaction success as well as being the basis for knowledge sharing (Luo et al., 2012; Y. Miao et al., 2022; Park & Luo, 2001; Su et al., 2017; Wu, 2020; Yen et al., 2011; Zhou et al., 2007). However, research has rarely grouped *guanxi* with selling behaviors in an explanatory model of sales performance. Therefore, studying the interactions between *guanxi* and selling behaviors may provide more insights about how to improve the performance of the salesforce.

Information service industry is an appropriate context for this research. The industry, which consists of professional publishing, syndicated information, and related advisory services for decision-makers in various fields (Benson-Armer, 2009), is developing rapidly and plays a critical role in the era of globalization (Benson-Armer, 2009; M. K. M. K. Chen & Wang, 2010; Kurokawa & Nishimura, 2006). However, the sector is currently under-researched. In addition, B2B and B2G (business-to-government) are the dominant business models in this industry (Benson-Armer, 2009; M. K. M. K. Chen & Wang, 2010; Rodriguez et al., 2012), in which building long-term relationship with customers is of strategic importance (K. R. Evans et al., 2012; Singh & Koshy, 2010).

To extend the understanding of sales performance with incorporation of customer-centric behaviors and customer–salesperson relationship in a new B2B context, i.e. information service industry, this study aims to investigate the impact of adaptive selling behavior, customer orientation and *guanxi* on salesperson performance. This is based on a view that strong *guanxi* with customers and a high level of concern for customer’s long-term needs may facilitate customer-tailored selling behaviors, therefore help improve sales performance.

2. Theoretical Background And Hypothesis Development

2.1. The context of the information service industry

Among various B2B contexts, this study focuses on the information service industry. In this modern era, both governments and business communities around the world consider the information service industry to be “strategic” industries (Kurokawa & Nishimura, 2006). By definition, the information service industry consists of professional publishing, syndicated

information, and related advisory services for decision-makers in many industries, such as finance, law, health care, media, and scientific research (Benson-Armer, 2009). Within this industry, publishing has been considered “a means for scholars to share their research” to the community and the bridge for end-users to gain knowledge and information via books, magazines, data, and electronic textbooks, encyclopedia, etc. (Fyfe et al., 2017, p. 2). There are three groups of businesses in this publishing sector. First, traditional publishers deliver both electronic resources and print publications such as Springer Nature, Wiley, Pearson, Emerald, SAGE, etc. Second, “aggregators” are third-party publishers who provide e-resource packages comprising many e-journals or e-books and data across disciplines from various publishers. These include companies such as ProQuest, EBSCOHost, JSTOR, etc. Finally, data analytics companies, for example, Elsevier Analytics, Clarivate Analytics or Dimension, focus on extracting and categorizing data to identify and analyze behavioral data, and patterns by using varied techniques according to organizational requirements. All these types of companies are characterized by knowledge-intensiveness, in which human capital is not only a labor input but also an input of knowledge and wisdom (Lin & Zhang, 2005).

In terms of business models, companies in the publishing industry usually use B2B and B2G because the transaction and cooperation with institutions or government offices often bring diverse and effective benefits, faster results, and competitive advantages. Compared to the B2C model, building relationships with buyers’ representatives will be more sustainable than that with end-users. However, it is stated that B2B sales face one significant obstacle of finding the right customer group, as well as identifying the decision-makers in those organizations (Rodriguez et al., 2012).

Furthermore, building long-term relationships with customers is crucial for this market. In order to successfully build these connections, the companies require a very skillful and knowledgeable workforce. This is especially important for the product’s specialists and salespeople to deliver consultancy services for knowledgeable customers, such as top colleges and universities. These consultancy services cannot be limited to the basic collection, screening, or transmission of information; instead, they should include the practical and strategic information that is derived from in-depth research on intelligence. Information service enterprises, therefore, need to improve their human resource and business performance to adapt to these challenges.

2.2. Sales performance

Sales performance has long been extensively studied in the body of the literature. The earliest study dates back to the late 1890s (Singh & Koshy, 2010). In one seminal work, Walker et al. (1979) define sales performance as the behaviors of the sales force that are assessed based on their contribution to the organization’s goals. In a later work, Anderson and Oliver (1987) conceptualize sales performance as consisting of salespersons’ outcomes as well as their behaviors. The former refers to the quantum of sales units, revenue, market share, new accounts, and profitability, while the latter include selling skills such as adaptive selling, teamwork, effective communication, and customer orientation, as well as activities such as making sales calls, managing time and territory (Anderson & Oliver, 1987). This is consistent with several studies like Challagalla and Shervani (1996), Cravens et al. (1993), and Oliver and Anderson (1994). For a more recent period, sales performance has been measured based on the achievement of sales quotas, and a comparison of a salesperson’s performance to his or her sales unit (Babakus et al., 1996; Cravens et al., 1993).

2.3. Adaptive selling behavior

Adaptive selling has been well documented in the literature of selling as a distinctly defined selling approach (Weitz, 1981). The concept is defined as “the altering of sales behaviors during a customer interaction or across customer interactions based on perceived information about the nature of the selling situation” (Weitz et al., 1986). This selling strategy helps salespeople adapt their messages to fit with individual customers’ needs and preferences.

Adaptive selling behavior helps the salesperson to customize their behaviors to adapt to the selling context; it entails focusing on customers' individual needs and preferences (Singh & Das, 2013). A large body of literature supports the positive relationship between adaptive selling behaviors and salesperson performance across multiple business settings (e.g., Boorum et al., 1998; Spiro & Weitz, 1990; Weitz et al., 1986). Therefore, we hypothesize that:

H1: Adaptive selling behaviors increase salesperson performance

2.4. Customer-oriented selling

Another major stream of literature focused on the customer-oriented selling strategy. This is defined as applying the marketing concept at the level of individual sales staff and customer (Saxe & Weitz, 1982). In addition, it is stated that salespeople who have high levels of customer orientation genuinely care about customers; therefore, they tend to participate in the activities that customers value, for example, problem-solving or feedback receiving (Jaramillo & Grisaffe, 2009, p. 167). In other words, these sales staff would attempt to tailor their behaviors to adapt to the selling context and focus on customers' individual needs and preferences, which involves adaptive selling behavior.

Therefore, we suggest that:

H2: Customer orientation increases adaptive selling behavior.

Moreover, some studies suggest that there is a positive effect of customer orientation on salesperson performance (e.g., Keillor et al., 2000). Salespeople who have customer orientation can avoid short-run selling method that may negatively influence on customer interests and engage their relationships with customers in the long run (Saxe & Weitz, 1982). Schwepker (2003) also concludes from a review of the literature that this relationship holds in multiple business contexts. Therefore, we propose the following:

H3: Customer-oriented selling increases salesperson performance.

2.5. Guanxi

Guanxi is described as a special type of relationship that bonds the exchange partners through reciprocal obligations to obtain resources through continued cooperation and exchange of favor (Davies, 1995). C. L. Wang (2007) further argues that a relationship does not necessarily mean guanxi, as the latter is a special type of relationship. (Luo & Chen, 1997) conceptualize guanxi as drawing on connections or networks to secure favor in personal or business relationships. A. A. Wong and Tjosvold (2010) point out that a high level of guanxi is by nature a quality, close relationship characterized by bestowing and receiving of benefits from each other. X.-P. X.-P. Chen and Chen (2004) regard guanxi as an informal, particularistic personal connection between two individuals bounded by an implicit psychological contract to follow the social norms such as maintaining a long-term relationship, mutual commitment, loyalty, and obligations.

Regarding the cross-cultural selling nature of the information service industry, the seller-buyer relationships are also affected by cultural differences among countries (Hansen et al., 2011). The cultural distance is generally considered as a liability to firms and might even lower the performance of multinational enterprises (Beugelsdijk et al., 2014). The disparity in national cultures, as analyzed in (Hofstede, 1980)'s model, can be compared across five dimensions: individualism/collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, power distance, masculinity/femininity, and long-term orientation. These also provide important implications to the relationship between salespeople and customers, apart from the formation of guanxi.

The extant literature indicates that the guanxi concept has been discussed in terms of three closely related sub-constructs, namely, *ganqing*, *renqing* and *xinren* (Hwang, 1987; Jacobs, 1979; C. L. Wang, 2007), and these three constructs collectively are considered to reflect the quality of guanxi (Kipnis, 1997). Based on that, in this study, guanxi is considered as a multi-dimensional construct of which the three sub-constructs are regarded as individual dimensions.

Ganqing, which can be translated into English as “feelings”, refers to the degree of emotional understanding, connections, and the sharing of feelings of happiness and fears alike. Additionally, it refers to a sense of loyalty and solidarity, the willingness to take care of each other under all circumstances (X.-P. X.-P. Chen & Chen, 2004). *Renqing* often incorporates humanized obligations, such as gift or favor (Kipnis, 1997), and is often used as the special treatment of an individual, the allocation of resources to another party as a “gift” in the process of a market transaction, to tighten up the bonds between parties (Y. Y. Wong & Leung, 2001). Finally, *xinren* is a Chinese word relating to trust (X.-P. X.-P. Chen & Chen, 2004). In a guanxi network of business, *xinren* is gradually developed among members of the network, through repeating activities of favor-exchanges (Y.-H. Y.-H. Wong & Chan, 1999). In addition, it is often linked with another word, *xinyong*, which implies the trustworthiness of a person and consists of a person’s reliability and sincerity (X.-P. X.-P. Chen & Chen, 2004).

Various studies also demonstrate Guanxi as a predictor of sales performance, which creates a positive impact on increasing sales performance (e.g., (Wu, 2020; Zhou et al., 2007)). Guanxi is also argued to have a bridging role between salespeople and customers; therefore, salespeople should utilize guanxi as an effective solution to increase sales performance (G. Wang et al., 2011).

Nevertheless, Western scholars have a negative attitude towards guanxi, linking guanxi with bribery and partiality, and believe that it undermines the principle of fairness. X.-P. X.-P. Chen and Chen (2004) argued that guanxi should not be employed as a strategy to alter or violate the business rules, as companies are responsible for evaluating the ethical side as well as the impact of its actions. Instead, the author suggests that this kind of practice should be considered merely as an option to make the business progress smoother within legal boundaries. It is further claimed by Dunfee and Warren (2001) that the back-door policy, despite being a part of the guanxi practice, is not encouraged, especially for Western companies, due to the negative consequences that may occur.

Because of conflicting views about the impact of guanxi on sales performance, this study is motivated to conduct cross-country research to explore the role of guanxi as a predictor variable among the relationship between adaptive selling behavior and customer orientation towards sales performance in the B2B and B2G context of a particular industry, namely the information service industry.

2.5.1. *Xinren*

In particular, the first dimension of guanxi is *xinren*, which can be translated as “trust” or trusted relationship (X.-P. Karlan et al., 2009; Lee et al., 2018; X.-P. Chen & Chen, 2004), or “reliance”, “credence”, “belief” (Yen et al., 2011). Many previous scholarly pieces of research indicate that “trust” is mandatory for successful cooperation because “consumers are hesitant to make purchases unless they trust the seller” (Kim et al., 2008, p. 544). A study in 1994 by Ganesan asserts a positive relationship between a manufacturer and its customer on a trust basis (Shi et al., 2011). Most of the collaborative relationships were built up from an exchange agreement, which is characterized by high levels of trust (Dwyer et al., 1987; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). The high levels of trustful exchange can enable stakeholders to focus on the long-term benefits (Ganesan, 1994), ultimately enhancing competitiveness and reducing transaction costs (Noordewier et al., 1990). Moreover, trust has a positive relationship with adaptive selling behavior (Guenzi et al., 2016). These findings suggest this research to hypothesize that salesperson’s adaptive selling behavior could be more effective in a trusted relationship with customers, or the trusted relationship could enhance the effect of adaptive selling behavior. Given the above discussion, *xinren*, conceptualized as “trust” (Yen et al., 2011), is predicted as a positive factor influencing on SP, with two following hypotheses:

H4- Xinren (as part of Guanxi) has a positive impact on Salesperson Performance in the information service industry.

H5- Xinren (as part of Guanxi) has a positive impact on Adaptive Selling Behavior in the information service industry.

2.5.2. Renqing

The second dimension of guanxi composite is *renqing*, which can be translated as “sensibility, human sympathy, and human kindness”, “favor-exchanges” (Yen et al., 2011), or “reciprocity” (Tsai et al., 2009). A study by Douglas A. Bosse et al. indicates that reciprocity positively affects firm performance (Bosse et al., 2009). It is confirmed that “*renqing* explains a very large proportion of the variations in levels of customer relationship commitment” under the Chinese insurance industry context (Shi et al., 2011, p. 501). In other words, favor-exchange between a salesperson and his customer will help to strengthen relationships, which leads to better selling effectiveness or sales performance.

Renqing is considered an important factor recommended to be examined with selling behavior under the relationship of selling behavior with sales performance (Tsai et al., 2009). It has been shown by many scholars that excellent salespeople tend to adjust their selling behavior on case-by-case consideration (Leong et al., 1989; Sujan et al., 1994). Based on the reciprocate attentiveness theory in purchasing activities, it is suggested that salespeople with *renqing* orientation are more sensitive to their customers’ needs and more flexible in response to the needs of customers. The following hypotheses are developed as results of these perceptions:

H6- Renqing (as part of Guanxi) has a positive impact on Salesperson Performance in the information service industry, especially academic publishing and data analytics companies

H7- Renqing (as part of Guanxi) has a positive impact on Adaptive Selling Behavior in the information service industry, especially academic publishing and data analytics companies

2.5.3. Ganqing

The third dimension of Guanxi is *ganqing*, which could be translated in Western terms as “feelings”, which indicates the meaning of a social relationship between firms or individuals and an emotional attachment among network participants (C. L. Wang, 2007). Regarding B2B and B2G business models, salespeople often have to build a good relationship with the representative of the purchasing department, or decision-maker of the targeted institution, so the good feeling between the representatives of the buyer-supplier themselves will decide their success of their cooperative or business partnership. As stated by LeBoeuf and Sumbaže (2000), customers make buying decisions only when they have positive feelings about the sale person and the company’s products and services. It is also discussed that the satisfaction of customers and employees is determined by their own perceptions as well as the perceptions of those with whom they interact (Van Dolen et al., 2002).

Based on the above academic findings, the interaction in feelings between a salesperson and his customer is considered as a potential factor influencing on selling behavior and sales performance, two hypotheses are proposed as:

H8- Ganqing (as part of Guanxi) has a positive impact on Salesperson Performance in the information service industry, especially academic publishing and data analytics companies

H9- Ganqing (as part of Guanxi) has a positive impact on Adaptive Selling Behavior in the information service industry, especially academic publishing and data analytics companies

Based on the hypothesis development, this study proposes the conceptual framework as follows:

3. Research methods

3.1. Questionnaire and measurements

The questionnaire, which is written in English, is divided into two sections. In section 1, we collect personal profiles of participants, including gender, age, selling experience, and working area. In section 2, we aim to measure all the constructs' items. In order to ensure the validity, we adopt prior established measurements to measure all studied constructs' items. Specifically, the measurements of three constructs of Guanxi (Xinren, Renqing and Ganqing) are adopted from GRX scale developed by Yen, Barnes and Wang (Yen et al., 2011). This scale particularly measures the perceived quality of Guanxi between buyer and seller in three dimensions. The measurement of Customer Orientation is adapted from research by (Lam et al., 2010), which utilizes the short form of Saxe and Weitz's Selling Orientation-Customer Orientation (SOCO) scale (Saxe & Weitz, 1982). The adaptation is to focus on customer orientation scale for sales representatives. Adaptive selling behavior is measured by a seven-item scale drawn from the ADAPTS scale developed by (Spiro & Weitz, 1990), which captures multiple facets of adaptive selling. The items are selected to measure the only behavioral dimension of adaptive selling, as suggested by (Fang et al., 2004). The measure of sales performance is adapted from the self-evaluated scale used by (C. F. Miao & Evans, 2013) in which salespeople assess their contributions to company's objectives such as market share and dollar sales amount. In addition, some adjustments in terms of terminology for all constructs' items have been conducted in order to fit with the context of our study. All constructs' items are measured on a Likert scale five, and some of them are in reversed code (see Appendix 1 for details of the survey questionnaires). [Table 1](#)

3.2. Face validity and pilot test

Face validity is an indispensable step in any study using survey questionnaires (Hardesty & Bearden, 2004). Given this, we have asked two experts (one is a marketing scholar, and another is a senior salesman) to revise the initial version of our questionnaires.

Parallely, a pilot test was undertaken with 50 salespeople. The participants in this pilot test were not only requested to fulfill the survey questionnaires but also to provide feedback in terms of the clarity of our wording.

Based on the qualitative feedback of two experts and 50 piloted participants, some further adjustments have been made to ensure the appropriateness of measure items to the study context as well as the respondents.

3.3. Data collection

An online survey was selected as the means to collect data. Compared to the traditional paper-and-pencil survey, an online survey has had several advantages, such as faster responses, lower

Table 1. Measurement scales

Scale	Total items	Adapted from
*Sales performance	4	Miao and Evans (2013)
*Adaptive selling behaviors	7	Fang et al. (2004)
*Customer orientation	7	Lam et al. (2010)
*Xiren	7	Yen et al. (2011)
*Renqing	6	Yen et al. (2011)
*Gangqing	7	Yen et al. (2011)

*Items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 being "Strongly disagree" to 5 being "Strongly agree"

surveying costs, potentially higher response rates, easier generation of data, and importation into data analysis programs with the same quality of data (J. R. Evans & Mathur, 2005).

Data collection was undertaken for 7 weeks, from March to April 2019. A message was sent via Facebook or LinkedIn to a circle of salespeople and account managers of top multinational publishing and data analytics companies in Asia-Pacific region, such as Emerald, Elsevier, Springer, Skillsoft, Oxford, Cambridge, SAGE, EbcoHost, Taylor & Francis, Euro Monitor, IG Publishing, Vietnam Education Publisher, Thai ha Book, Clarivate Analytics, Wall Street Journals, IDT Vietnam, iGroup Publishing, to name a few.

The message starts with a brief description of the purpose of the study and then invites respondents to click on a URL to be redirected to the Google Form's online survey. Thanks to the ease of use and ease of accessibility, Google form has been widely adopted by the previous studies (e.g. (Tran et al., 2020)) and was used as a platform for the current survey. Eventually, we obtained 207 answers from out of 700 invitation messages. It does mean a rate of return of nearly 29.6%. However, after refining the data, three respondents were eliminated due to incomplete answers. Thus, a final sample of 204 respondents was assessed in the empirical analysis.

4. Findings

4.1. Descriptive results

Table 1 presents the personal characteristics of our sample of 204 respondents. Regarding gender, 63.73% are male. The majority of participants fall into the age group of 25–35 and 35–45 years old, with a proportion of 37.25% and 33.82%, respectively. Working experience of respondents varies greatly from less than 1 year (14.22%), 1–3 years (25%), 3–6 years (23.04%), 6–10 years (19.61%) to over 10 years (18.14%). In terms of geographical working areas, respondents are mainly from Asia (81.37%). However, the sample is also diversified with salespeople working in other parts of the world: Europe and North America (14.71%), Australia and New Zealand (3.43%) and Middle East (0.49%).

4.2. Confirmatory factor analysis

The first step in the analysis of the full latent structural model is to test for the validity of the measurement model (Marin-García et al., 2011). In order to access the validity of the measurements' items, we adopted the confirmatory factor analysis (L. S.-L. L. S.-L. Chen & Chen, 2018) using SAS 9.3. First, factor loadings were accessed. As evident in Table 2, items with factor loadings higher than the predetermined threshold of 0.7 were eventually used in the further analysis, whereas items with factor loadings smaller than 0.7 were eliminated (Pham & Lai, 2016).

Second, multiple fit indices were considered. These include chi-square, degree of freedom, goodness of fit (GFI), adjusted goodness of fit (AGFI), normed fit index (NFI), comparative fit index (CFI), root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), and comparative fit index (BCFI). The results of this study all satisfied the rule of thumb as follows: chi-square divided by degree of freedom should be less than 5 (Wheaton et al., 1977); GFI, NFI, CFI are to be larger than 0.9, AGFI should be more than 0.8; RMSEA should be smaller than 0.08 (Browne; Hooper et al., 2008; Schermelleh-Engel et al., 2003). Details of these multiple fit indices are presented in Table 3.

Table 2. Personal characteristics of 204 respondents

	166	81.37%
Asia		
Western (Europe/North America)	30	14.71%
Australia/NZ	7	3.43%
Middle East	1	0.49%

Table 3. Results of factor loading

Items	Mean	Std Dev	Factor loading
ASB4 I vary my sales style from situation to situation	4.33824	0.75483	0.71
ASB6 I like to experiment with different sales approaches	4.18137	0.87181	0.80
ASB7 I change my approach from one customer to another	4.03922	0.7614	0.71
CO4 I have the customer's best interests in mind	4.19608	0.67378	0.89
CO5 I try to help customers achieve their goals	4.35294	0.63784	0.72
GQ4 I consider this buyer's representative as being almost as close to me as family	2.86275	1.1277	0.73
GQ6 I have a brotherhood feeling towards the buyer's representative	3.13725	1.0414	0.84
GQ7 I would try my best to help out this buyer's representative when he/she is in need because he/she is a friend of mine	3.51471	0.90689	0.77
RQ2 I think that "calling in" favors is part of doing business with this buyer's representative	3.48529	1.04329	0.69
RQ5 I know that it is a bad business not to return favors to this buyer's representative	3.31863	1.05581	0.72
RQ6 I am happy to do a favor for this buyer's representative, when he/she requests one	3.72059	0.87402	0.82
XR1 This buyer's representative has been frank in dealing with us	3.72059	0.82173	0.80
XR2 This buyer's representative does not make false claims	3.4951	0.8334	0.76
XR3 We think this buyer's representative is completely open in dealing with us	3.52941	0.87331	0.78
SP1 I am very effective in contributing to my firm's market share	3.97059	0.81797	0.85
SP2 I am very effective in generating a high level of dollar sales	4.01471	0.77826	0.96

Table 4. Results of multiple fit indices

Table 4. Results of multiple fit indices		
Fit Summary		
Modeling Info	N Observations	204
	N Variables	16
	N Moments	136
	N Parameters	47
	N Active Constraints	0
	Baseline Model Function Value	8.0146
	Chi-Square	1626.958
	Degree of freedom	120
	Pr > Baseline Model Chi-Square	<.0001
Absolute Index	Fit Function	0.9055
	Chi-Square	183.8232
	Degree of freedom	89
	Chi-Square/Degree of freedom	2.0425
	Pr > Chi-Square	<.0001
	Z-Test of Wilson & Hilferty	5.5237
	Hoelter Critical N	124
	Root Mean Square Residual (RMSR)	0.0457
	Standardized RMSR (SRMSR)	0.0551
	Goodness of Fit Index (GFI)	0.9017
Parsimony Index	Adjusted GFI (AGFI)	0.8498
	Parsimonious GFI	0.6688
	RMSEA Estimate	0.0724
	RMSEA Lower 90% Confidence Limit	0.0575
	RMSEA Upper 90% Confidence Limit	0.0873
	Probability of Close Fit	0.0079
	ECVI Estimate	1.4109
	ECVI Lower 90% Confidence Limit	1.2347
	ECVI Upper 90% Confidence Limit	1.6291
	Akaike Information Criterion	277.8232
	Bozdogan CAIC	480.7749
	Schwarz Bayesian Criterion	433.7749
	McDonald Centrality	0.7926
Incremental Index	Bentler Comparative Fit Index	0.9371
	NFI	0.887
	Bentler-Bonett Non-normed Index	0.9152
	Bollen Normed Index Rho1	0.8477
	Bollen Non-normed Index Delta2	0.9383
	James et al. Parsimonious NFI	0.6579

Third, the convergent validity is examined through construct reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE). CRs and AVEs are higher than the cutoff points, which are 0.7 and 0.5 (Gefen & Straub, 2005; Hair et al., 2010), respectively, as illustrated in Table 4. Finally, we test the discriminant validity by verifying if the square roots of AVEs scores exceed the correlation coefficients

Table 5. Confirmatory factor analysis for convergent and discriminant validity

Construct	CR	AVE	Factor Correlation	CO	GQ	RQ	XR	SP
ASB	0.78	0.55	ASB 0.74					
CO	0.79	0.65	0.43	0.81				
GQ	0.83	0.62	0.34	0.11	0.79			
RQ	0.79	0.55	0.41	0.04	0.65	0.74		
XR	0.83	0.61	0.47	0.45	0.63	0.61	0.78	
SP	0.9	0.81	0.49	0.41	0.37	0.13	0.34	0.9

Note: Italic written numbers are the square roots of the respective AVEs

among the latent variables. The results also show that the discriminant validity of all constructs in the model is acceptable.

4.3. Structural equation model

Table 5 represents the findings of SEM. Overall, 34% of the variance of SP is predicted in this model, and 39% of the variance of ASB is explained. Among the path analyses, six hypotheses in this study are supported by our empirical analysis of SEM, while the other four hypotheses are not supported. In particular, ASB has a direct impact on SP ($\beta = 0.38$, $t = 4.12$). Then, CO also influences directly on SP ($\beta = 0.32$, $t = 2.36$). Therefore, hypotheses 1 and 2 are supported. Furthermore, CO is found to be influential to ASB ($\beta = 0.36$, $t = 3.75$), so H3 is supported as well.

Regarding the role of Guanxi, there is a considerable variation in the influence of three components (Ganqing, Renqing, Xinren) on SP and ASB. The relation paths Renqing—SP ($\beta = -0.24$, $t = -2.37$) and Xinren—SP ($\beta = -0.05$ and $t = -0.33$) are found to be insignificant; therefore, H7 and H4 are not supported. The only component of Guanxi that influences significantly on sales performance is Ganqing ($\beta = 0.38$, $t = 4.12$); consequently, H8 is supported.

ASB are similar, with these paths found insignificant (Ganqing—ASB: $\beta = 0.02$, $t = 0.18$; Xinren—ASB: $\beta = 0.07$, $t = 0.60$). As a consequence, H5 and H9 are not supported. The only component of Guanxi that directly affects ASB is Renqing ($\beta = 0.19$, $t = 2.49$), and hence H7 is supported Table 6.

5. Discussions and conclusion

Given the importance of salespeople in the survival and success of a business, particularly one in B2B setting, this study aims at investigating several factors that influence sales performance in the information service industry. Based on the literature review, we indicate adaptive selling behavior, customer orientation and guanxi as the factors that may have an impact on sales performance.

Among the nine hypotheses proposed in this study, five of them are supported while the other four are not. The results present several insights about salespersons' customer-oriented selling and their perceived guanxi with customers as predictors of sales performance via the mediation of their adaptive selling behaviors. In particular, the study confirms the long-established relationship that adaptive selling behavior increases salesperson performance. This is in line with other studies such as Franke and Park (2006), Kaynak et al. (2016), Singh and Das (2013), and Spiro and Weitz (1990), and Yeo et al. (2019). Evidence from our study also confirms the positive effect of

Table 6. Results of structural equation model

	Beta coefficient	t-value	Hypothesis
Dependent variable: SP			
ASB	0.53	4.46***	supported
CO	0.32	2.36**	supported
GQ	0.38	4.12***	supported
RQ	-0.24	-2.37	not Supported
XR	-0.05	-0.33	not Supported
R ²	34%		
Dependent variable: ASP			
CO	0.36	3.75***	supported
GQ	0.02	0.18	not Supported
RQ	0.19	2.49**	supported
XR	0.07	0.6	not Supported
R ²	39%		

customer-oriented selling on sales performance, which is consistent with findings in other researches (Kaynak et al., 2016; Keillor et al., 2000; Schwepker, 2003). Moreover, it can also be drawn from the findings that the partially mediated relationship between CO and SP is stronger than the direct relationship between the two constructs (0.75 compared to 0.23). This indicates that the adoption of customer-oriented selling only is not enough for salespersons to ensure high performance. To be effective, customer orientation should provide inputs and therefore facilitate adaptive selling behaviors of salespersons. Good understanding of customers' needs, and preferences will allow salespersons to customize selling strategies that are suitable and help create long-term values appreciated by customers.

The highlight of the paper is on *guanxi*, a proposed antecedent of sales performance. In the selling literature, there has been limited empirical evidence regarding the impact of this construct on output of salespeople. Consequently, this study aims to shed light on this relationship. In particular, the results indicate that among three components of *guanxi*, namely *ganqing* (GQ), *renqing* (RQ) and *xinren* (XR), only the first sub-construct is proved to be positively related to salespersons' performance. Furthermore, one interesting finding is that the direct relationship between GQ-SP is stronger than that between CO-SP (0.44 compared to 0.23). This may provide an implication that for a salesperson in the information service industry, building positive feelings with customers may be more important for performance than focusing on understanding customers' needs.

On the other hand, among the three components of *guanxi*, only *renqing* is found to impact adaptive selling behaviors. Interestingly, while *renqing* may contribute to good sales performance via mediation role of adaptive selling, *renqing* by itself is negatively related to sales performance. This may indicate that in the information service industry, the practice of favor-exchange can only support salespersons when they apply adaptive selling. Practically, favor-exchanges between salesperson and his partner may tighten their close relationship, as the salesperson's relationship investment causes their customers to feel that they owe *renqing* to the salesperson and have a moral obligation to continue the business relationship. However, customers still may not buy product due to pricing policy, product value, etc. In this case, these favors may cause dilemma in this business relationship or a pseudo-relationship, which may confuse customer and reduce the sales closing chance. According to previous study, this kind of relationship is actually a pseudo-relationship in that it tends to be one-sided with customers kept in the relationship, even against their will (Barnes, 1994).

Finally, one of the striking results from the study is that *xiren*, which can be translated as trust, though being central to all relationship exchanges (X.-P. X.-P. Chen & Chen, 2004), is found to have no significant impact on both adaptive selling and sales performance. In fact, the current body of literature, despite limited empirical evidence, provides a normatively positive view of trust. However, it is argued that trust also carries a risk of betrayal and therefore this favorable view of trust needs more reassessment and extension.

In conclusion, our study contributes to the body of knowledge by extending the empirical evidence about factors that may enhance salespersons' sales performance. The results confirm the role of customer-centric selling behaviors (such as customer-oriented and adaptive selling) on sales performance in a new B2B context, i.e. information service industry. The research also provides additional insights about the interplaying relationship between customer orientation and adaptive selling behavior towards sales performance. In particular, customer orientation supports adaptive selling behavior and altogether enhances performance. Most importantly, the findings help clarify the role of *guanxi* in enhancing sales performance.

6. Implications

This study provides various implications for managers, especially those directly in charge of managing sales performance. It has been shown that customer-oriented selling and adaptive

selling can be useful; therefore, salesforce should be encouraged and trained to adopt these selling strategies effectively. Specifically, the training should emphasize how customer orientation may support adaptive selling towards enhancing sales performance. In addition, as ganqing has a positive relationship with sales output, building favorable feelings while interacting with customers can be a useful way to winning contracts. On the other hand, the practices of favor-exchange may have some effect on sales performance but should be applied/used with caution.

7. Limitations and suggestions for future studies

Even though our research extends and enriches the sales performance literature, we fully acknowledge the limitations of this research that should be taken into account in the interpretations of the findings. Although data are collected from many countries' contexts, it is still limited to a single industry. Therefore, the findings may not be generalizable to other industrial contexts. Future studies may validate the findings in other industries. Additionally, the insights about the influence of different factors on sales performance gained from our study may not be complete due to the way sales performance is measured. While salespersons' performance can be evaluated both subjectively by salesperson and sales managers as well as objectively using sales outcome indicators, the level of performance in the current study is measured by salespersons' self-assessment only. Even though the self-assessment provides the consistent results as manager assessment and quantitative measurements (Behrman & Perreault, 1984), future research can be more comprehensive with incorporation of different SP measurements. Also, the survey and data collection are cross-sectional with inherent limitations. Additional studies may examine the constructs over an extended time using longitudinal method. Moreover, this research has not taken into account the length of the relationship between the salespeople or their company with customers, which should be examined in further studies as positive relationships between buyers and sellers, especially in the B2B industries, usually refer to long-term relationships that bring benefits for both parties. Last but not least, this study does not examine the moderating role of relevant factors, such as gender, selling experience and cultural context. For cultural-specific construct like Guanxi, future studies that look at the impacts on sales performance of salespersons from Asia compared to Western markets may provide more insightful findings.

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