FACTORS AFFECTING PURCHASE INTENTION THROUGH THE MEDIATING ROLE OF CONSUMER TRUST: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR EFFECTIVE SALES MANAGEMENT

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The nature of sales management emphasises of the reliance on individual salespersons to "push" a firm's products to attain contractual agreements with a clientele, a term familiarised as personal selling. Personal selling focuses on managing long-term customer relationships (Weitz & Bradford, 1999). This, therefore, links personal selling to relationship management, where building trust is a strategy aiming to go beyond meeting customer expectations – it also entails whether or not the salesperson could serve its customer long-term interest (Cron & DeCarlo, 2006; Kotler & Keller, 2016). A salesperson is regarded as skilful when they communicate effectively (Avila & Inks, 2017), possess customer service skills (Basir, Ahmad, & Kitchen, 2010), and apply the right set of selling skills (Pettijohn, Pettijohn, & Taylor, 2013).

When a consumer shops online, the online environment is the first touch point with the selling firm. Hence, the online platform plays a pertinent role in building trust. In the physical retail setting, the consumer plays a passive role in the buying process as the salesperson leads most interactions. However, in an online environment where salespersons are absent, the consumer needs to take on an active role, particularly when searching for information. Electronic word-of-mouth or eWOM is an important element in building trust (Yang, Mai, & Ben-Ur, 2012). As more consumers shift their spending to the online environment, it cannot be denied that eWOM will remain an important element for purchase decisions.

Personality traits of frontline service salespersons can assist in building trust and satisfaction during the service interaction with the adoption of emotional component (Aggarwal, Castleberry, Ridnour, & Shepherd, 2005). Possession of certain personality traits makes one more appeal to the customers. High extraversion salespersons are deemed to be more talkative, social, optimistic, affectionate, active, confident, ambitious, and energetic (Barrick and Mount, 1991). This may be because salespersons with high extraversion tend to be outspoken and, therefore, perceived as high achieving in the measurement sales activity. According to a study by Luo et al. (2018), extraverted employees are portrayed as more innovative and thus, salespersons would proactively make favourable deals to the company. Meanwhile, Liao and Lee (2009) also mentioned that extraverted salespersons are more appealing to customers as they tend to provide services ahead of time which facilitated the interpersonal interactions with customers.

An agreeable salesperson carries interpersonal relationships and are known to be warm, sympathetic, cooperative, helpful, and kind (Costa & McCrae, 1992). According to Boninsegni, Furrer, & Mattila (2021), friendly employees with agreeable attributes such as being warm, approachable, and cheerful while interacting with customers would make customers feel comfortable and welcomed. In addition, a conscientious salesperson is believed to be responsible, organised, dependable, self-disciplined, punctual, cautious, and achievement-oriented (Barrick & Mount, 1991; McCrae & Costa, 2003; Singh & Singh, 2009). Conscientious salespersons emphasise on accomplishments by engaging in positive interactions with customers to build long-term relationships (Turkyılmaz, Erdem, & Uslu, 2015). Thus, customers would be more attracted to salespersons with these mentioned attributes because these attributes lead to building of trust. Emotional stability refers to being calm, relaxed, secure and self-satisfied, all of which are inversely associated with neuroticism (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Salespersons that exhibit emotional intelligence can achieve job satisfaction, present excellent performance, and satisfy customers (Yao et al., 2019). They possess the ability to respond to and express emotions accurately and have an open mind to pleasant and unpleasant feelings (Prentice, Lopes, & Wang, 2019). This enables them to manage stressful work conditions and cope with demanding work environments. Salespersons' perseverance and
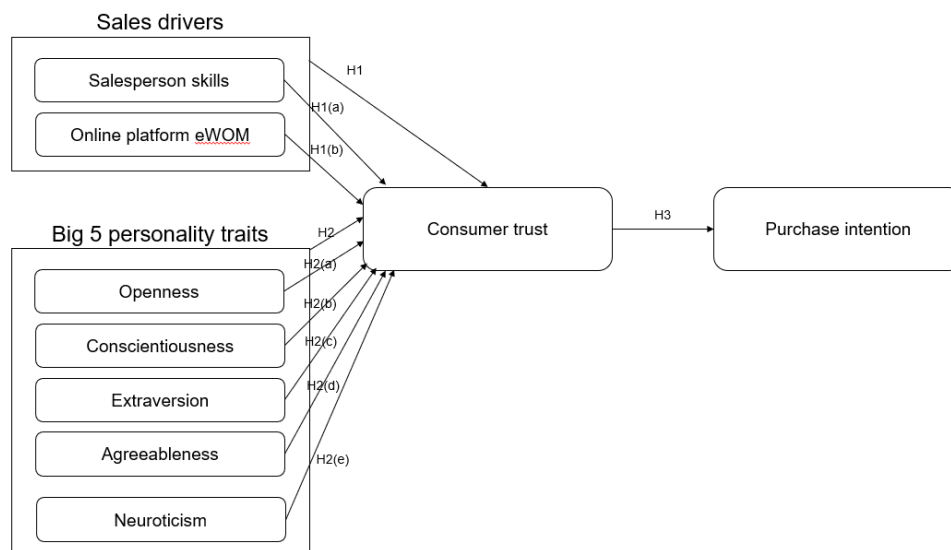
persistence also enable them to strive for customer satisfaction and customer trust continuously. Openness to experience is also an important attribute as it enables a salesperson to be imaginative, open and broad-minded, curious, intellectual, and analytical (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Additionally, highly innovative salespersons could develop creative solutions for their clientele instead of merely applying formal rules to reach out to customers (Agnihotri et al. 2019). They also have the flexibility to service customers without undergoing tremendous stress to close sales within a duration of time. Certainly, positive personality traits held by salespersons could build a sustainable relationship with customers (Umasuthan, Part, & Ryu, 2017). However, salespersons who lack these personality traits might have less desire to appeal to customers, allowing them to build long-term relationships.

A trusting environment is where salespersons within an organisation are being empowered to make their own decisions, innovative, and recognised in their dealings with their clients. Trust is indeed an important element in customer transactions and relations because it drives purchase intention (de Morais Watanabe, et al., 2020; Rehman, et al., 2019), which ultimately suggests that trust is an indicator of salesperson-customer relationship quality.

The model of purchase decision process also highlights that purchase decision is interceded by attitude of infomediaries and risk factors. Therefore, it is important for businesses to acknowledge and understand that the continual changes in selling environments affect consumers' spending (Cho & Sagynov, 2015). Studies on purchase intention also extend into understanding how consumers behave on different commerce platforms.

Thus, the main objective of this paper is to determine the roles of salespersons, e-word of mouth and salesperson personality traits (agreeableness, conscientious, neuroticism, openness, extraversion) as drivers of purchase intention through customer trust. By including consumer trust as the mediating role, this paper will be able to develop an understanding on whether this variable have an effect on the relationship between sales drivers and purchase intention. The findings of this study would allow sales and marketing management to leverage on effective ubiquitous platforms for the profit and market growth of businesses.

Proposed Conceptual Framework

Contribution of the study

This paper attempts to provide an insight of sales drivers can cultivate customer trust and purchase intention. To the best of the authors knowledge, there are a numerous studies investigating the customer's behaviour to initiate trust and purchase intention while limited research had been conducted to review the salesperson's initiatives and proactiveness in inducing customers perception of trust and in turn encourage purchase intention. The current study also included salesperson's personality traits as motivating drivers to appeal to customers' trust. In past research reviews on customers' personality traits, only a few (Umasuthan et al., 2017; Agnihotri et al. 2019; Yao et al., 2019) have incorporated salesperson personality traits in performance and sales. This could add value to literature in relation to sales management.

Past studies have focused on salesperson personality traits and review it as a uni-dimensional set of traits such as emotional (Prentice et al. 2019), innovativeness (Agnihotri, et al., 2019), leadership (Kirkland et al., 2021), and competitiveness (Schrock et al., 2021). This present study employed the Big Five Personality Traits or known as Five Factor Model to the salesperson personality to enable a comprehensive understanding towards the variable. This research is the first to propose the salesperson Big Five Personality Traits in appealing to customer trust and purchase intention in a virtual and physical platform.

The future of selling will integrate the multiple selling channels (Arif, 2020; Rigby, 2011). However, it is still arguable whether consumers in the post-COVID-19 era will be ready for selling environments that integrates online and offline platforms. It must be noted that online and physical platforms could no longer compete with one another – these two platforms would instead complement one another to deliver value to consumers. Hence, firms must be ready to review and update business models, upgrade salesperson skills, and enhance personality traits while incorporating social elements (such as ratings and reviews) from virtual platforms to build a positive word of mouth. Rigid yet traditional ways of conducting businesses may no longer be effective to develop customer trust and initiate purchase intention.

Finally, this study will also reveal which sales driver is more significant – this allows businesses to make accurate investments on either a more effective online platform, upskilling of salespersons, or nurturing positive personality traits among salespersons. Should the latter two be of higher significance, the marketplace could likely remain the way its businesses are being conducted. This study will also have implications particularly for the luxury market as it has been known for its effectiveness in selling due to customer-salesperson relationship (Kim, Kim, & Johnson, 2010). The reliance on salesperson in luxury markets is also explained by the level of involvement in purchase process. Ultimately, there is a need for firms to embrace the possible changes in terms human resource management and even include more technology-mediated programmes to enhance sales activity.

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