Why Practicing Sports Increases Sales Success

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Abstract

Although scholars frequently stress the similarities between the competitive worlds of sports and sales, no empirical study to date has investigated the relationship between sports participation and sales success. In this research, we argue that sports participation has an impact on salesperson performance through goal orientations. An empirical study with salespeople from different industries shows that sports participation has a positive impact on hunting orientation, which, in turn, leads to higher salesperson performance. Moreover, the study shows that the type of sport serves as a moderator. The effect of sports participation on hunting orientation is stronger when salespeople practice competitive sports. The study also shows that sports participation has no effect on sales success through farming orientation, which is regarded as another important goal orientation. These findings contribute to existing research on the antecedents of sales performance.

Keywords: *Sports participation, Salesperson performance, Trait activation theory*

Track: *Sales Management and Personal Selling*

1. Introduction

Anecdotal evidence (e.g., Martin, 2015) indicates that successful salespeople practice sports. Although, scholars frequently highlight the similarities between the competitive worlds of sports and sales (Rich, 1998), no empirical study to date has investigated the relationship between sports participation and sales success (for meta-analyses in sales research: Johnson & Jaramillo, 2017).

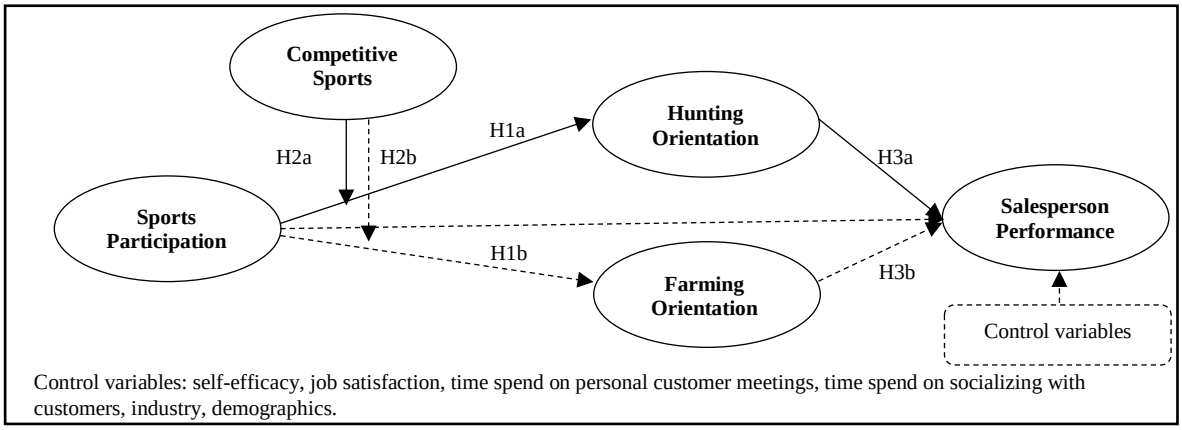
Against this background, we investigate the effect of sports participation on salesperson performance through goal orientations. Specifically, for sales jobs, two goal orientations are relevant, which have been characterized as surface level traits. That is, salespeople can either focus on prospecting for new customers (i.e., "hunting", or customer acquisition) or on maintaining and enhancing existing customer relationships (i.e., "farming", or customer retention) (DeCarlo & Lam, 2016). In our research, we propose that practicing sports has an impact on hunting orientation but has no impact on farming orientation. Hunting orientation, in turn, influences salesperson performance.

To investigate this idea, we draw on trait activation theory (Tett & Burnett, 2003) which focuses on traits and their effect on behavior. This theory proposes that behavior is influenced by trait-relevant cues that appear in certain situations. Importantly, cues from a certain context may lead to trait expression in a different context if both contexts share similarities. Research has argued that sports activities and sales activities share many similarities (Shannahan, Shannahan, & Bush, 2013). Specifically, sports and sales activities that involve hunting are both achievement contexts which require high effort to reach certain goals (e.g., winning a game against opponents, winning a new account against other salespeople outside one's own organization). Hence, sports activities may serve as cues for the expression of the hunting surface trait.

In this regard, our study with salespeople from different industries shows that sports participation has a positive impact on hunting orientation, which, in turn, leads to higher salesperson performance. Moreover, we identify type of sport as a moderating variable. That is, our study demonstrates that the effect of sports on salesperson performance is stronger when salespeople practice competitive sports. In sum, these findings add new facets to research on the antecedents of sales performance.

2. Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses

Figure 1 presents the conceptual model guiding our study. As mentioned above, anecdotal evidence (e.g., Martin, 2015) points out that successful salespeople practice sports. Even though, scholars frequently highlight the similarities between the competitive worlds of sports and sales (Rich, 1998), no empirical study to date has investigated the relationship between sports participation and sales success. Hunting and farming orientation are both surface traits. Particularly, successful salespeople possess a strong hunting orientation as competitiveness is inherent in that surface trait (Brewer, 1994). Such hunters have a "strong desire to have a new win" (DeCarlo & Lam, 2016, p. 419). They enjoy interpersonal competition and are focused on winning as well as being better than others in such competitions (Chelladurai, 2011). Instead, farmers are relationship builders and prefer nurturing their customer relationships where competition is negligible.



The dotted paths are also estimated in the empirical model.

Figure 1. Conceptual model

In line with research from DeCarlo and Lam (2016), we posit that both goal orientations, hunting and farming orientation, are situated surface level traits which reflect an individual's "enduring disposition to behave within a specific situational context" (Brown, Mowen, Donavan, & Licata, 2002, p. 111). Surface level traits, by definition, are close to individual responses (Brown et al., 2002). Based on Sengupta, Yavas, and Babakus (2015) who view customer orientation as a surface level trait, we define both goal orientations as a salesperson's inclination for engaging in either hunting or farming activities to achieve sales goals and regard both traits as determinants of salesperson performance.

Referring to the trait-based interactionist model of job performance, the process through which an individual's traits are expressed in trait-relevant situations is called trait-activation process (Tett & Burnett, 2003). That is, surface level traits can be activated within situations

that align with the needs of an individual and provide cues for the individual to act in "trait-related ways" and provoke a certain goal orientation (Sengupta et al., 2015). In other words, certain surface level traits will be triggered only when trait-relevant situational cues are existent. Drawing on findings about life skills transfer from sports to other life domains, similarity of context is central for situational cues to have an impact (Pierce, Gould, & Camiré, 2017). Therefore, it can be argued that trait activation is facilitated because both situations, sports and selling, are marked by competition and hence, viewed as similar.

Consequently, Judge and Zapata (2015) identify the level of competition requirement as one trait activation variable which is defined as "the extent to which the job requires workers to compete" (Judge & Zapata, 2015, p. 1158). The profession "sales manager" is described as a job with a high level of competition which is particularly true for hunting activities. At the same time, the varying degrees of competition in selling situations need to be considered as well. Specifically, salespeople focus on either competing against themselves where the level of competition is low, or they compete against opponents where competition is high. In the former selling situation, salespeople strive for achieving a certain personal sales goal (e.g., number of new accounts acquired), and are eager to beat their own record. Certain sports situations can be described in a similar way. Athletes also compete against themselves by achieving personal goals (e.g. number of kilometers run), and are also eager to beat their own record (Findlay & Bowker, 2009). In sport achievement behavior, this is called goal orientation when striving for noncompetitive personal goals.

Thus, on a basic level, sports participation is about achieving personal goals where goal orientation is predominant. We assume that salespeople who practice sports on a regular basis have a stronger hunting orientation. As they practice sports, hunting as a surface trait becomes more salient. On the other hand, farming activities are reflected by nurturing existing customer relationships. That is, goal orientation and competition are less pronounced. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

H_1: Sports participation has a positive impact on hunting orientation (a), but not on farming orientation (b).

Based on the above-mentioned explanation on competition as a trait activation variable (Judge & Zapata, 2015), hunting is even stronger activated in situations where salespeople compete against salespeople from other firms to win a new account. A similar situation can also be found in a sports context where athletes compete against opponents to win a game. In such sports situations, a win orientation with a focus on interpersonal standards and winning

in competitive challenges is predominant (Gill & Deeter, 1988). Thus, we assume that exercising competitive sports strengthens the relationship between sports participation and hunting orientation. Competitive sports is any type of sport that is described by two characteristics: 1. social interaction, 2. competing as an individual (e.g., racquet sports) or a team (e.g., basketball) against on one or more opponents (Downward & Rasciute, 2011). Compared to sports participation on a more basic level (e.g., jogging) where achieving personal goals is predominant, practicing competitive sports is marked by a strong win orientation where individuals eagerly approach competitive challenges with a desire to win. Comparable to hypothesis 1b where sports participation has no effect on farming orientation because of the absence of a competitive situation during farming activities, this is although true for hypothesis 2b where competitive sports is not a moderator variable. Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

H_2: Exercising competitive sports moderates the effect of sports participation on hunting orientation (a) but not on farming orientation (b).

The essence of a hunting orientation is seeking new customer and close sales. Practitioners often view "hunters" as more important than their counterparts (Hartmann, Wieland, & Vargo, 2018) because finding new business is critical for a firm's growth (Hancock, Hatami, & Rayan, 2011). As hunting activities are associated with winning new accounts that generate extra sales volume, the effect on salesperson performance is positive. This is more of a short-term effect where farming activities rather pay off in the long-run. In line with previous findings (DeCarlo & Lam, 2016), we assume farming activities have no effect on salesperson performance and propose the following hypothesis:

H_3: Hunting orientation (a) has a positive effect on salesperson performance whereas farming orientation (b) has no effect.

3. Empirical Study

3.1 Data Collection and Sample

To test H1-H3, we conducted an online survey with salespeople from various industries. We received complete responses from 243 salespeople. Salespeople were 41.2 years old on average, and 9.9% were female. In sales research, a predominantly male sample is common (e.g. DeCarlo & Lam, 2016). Salespeople had a mean sales experience of 11.3 years. The vast majority (92.1%) of respondents held an undergraduate degree or higher.

3.2 Measures

For all constructs, we employed self-reported measures from the relevant literature. All items used 7-point scales. If not stated otherwise, end points were labeled with *"strongly disagree"* (1) and *"strongly agree"* (7). We operationalized hunting and farming orientation based on the scales from DeCarlo and Lam (2016). After confirmatory factor analysis, we excluded two items from the farming orientation scale due to factor loadings lower than the recommended cutoff value of .70. Sports participation was measured by asking participants which type of sport they practice how often and how long. We then multiplied the number of practice sessions per week with the practice time for each session in minutes (Laborde, Guillén, & Watson, 2017). To operationalize competitive sports (Downward & Rasciute, 2011), two coders identified and categorized all stated types of sport either into competitive sport or noncompetitive sport based on the two characteristics already mentioned. Intercoder reliability was 96%. Finally, we adapted a measure for salesperson performance from Panagopoulos and Dimitriadis (2009) and employed a 7-point scale ranging from *"-10% or more"* to *"+10% or more"*. Each salesperson was asked to indicate how he/she has performed during the last 12 months relative to sales targets on the following four dimensions: units sold, sales volume (monetary value), bonus payments received, new accounts acquired. We also included various control variables such as self-efficacy, job satisfaction, time spend on personal customer meeting, time spend on socializing with customers, industry, demographics, e.g., sales experience, education. Gender was not included in our study due to the predominantly male sample. The corresponding scales were adapted from the relevant literature (Schmitz & Ganesan, 2014).

3.3 Results

We analyzed the data applying partial least squares (PLS) path modeling using the software SmartPLS 3. The PLS analysis shows that the empirical data fits the model well. We evaluated reliability using composite scale reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE) (Chin, 1998; Fornell & Larcker, 1981). For all reflective measures, the CR was well above the threshold value of .70, and the AVE exceeded the cutoff value of .50. In addition, we evaluated convergent validity by examining the standardized loadings of the measures on their corresponding constructs (Chin, 1998). We found that all measures displayed standardized loadings exceeding .70. Salesperson performance is explained at a reasonable level considering the total number of variables included ($R^2 = 0.21$). Furthermore, Q^2 values

are estimated by the blindfolding procedure. All Q^2 values are greater than zero which indicates that the model has predictive relevance (Chin, 1998) (see Table 1).

Constructs	SL	CR	AVE	Items
Hunting Orientation		.85	.60	
	.78			To "hunt" for a new sales opportunity is the most enjoyable part of the job.
	.76			I am at my best when I engage a new prospect that I have never met before.
	.81			I prefer to spend the majority of my day prospecting and closing new accounts.
	.74			The most enjoyable part of the job is selling to new accounts.
Farming Orientation		.87	.77	
	.90			Spending time working with current customers is the most enjoyable part of the job.
	.85			Of all my responsibilities, I most enjoy using my skills to maintain and grow existing accounts.
Salesperson Performance		.91	.73	
	.89			Number of units sold
	.88			Sales volume (monetary value)
	.77			Amount of bonus payments received
	.86			Number of new accounts acquired
Notes: SL = standardized loadings, CR = composite reliability, AVE = average variance extracted.				

Table 1. Reflective Measures and Items

We used the "path weighting" scheme to run the PLS algorithm for our estimated models (Henseler, Ringle, & Sinkovics, 2009). The bootstrapping procedure indicates that the hypothesized relationships are significant with parameter estimates in the expected direction (see Table 2). H_{1a} states that sports participation has a positive effect on hunting orientation, which is supported ($\beta = .14$, $p < .05$). H_{2a} is also supported because sports participation and competitive sports have a positive interactive effect on hunting orientation ($\beta = .18$, $p < .01$). As predicted in H_{3a}, hunting orientation has a significant positive influence on salesperson performance ($\beta = .22$, $p < .01$). As expected, effects on farming orientation (H_{1b}, H_{2b}, H_{3b}) are not significant.

Hypothesis	Path	Direction	Standardized coefficient (β)	t-value
H_{1a}	Sports Participation → Hunting Orientation	Positive	.14*	2.108
H_{1b}	Sports Participation → Farming Orientation	*No Effect*	.07 n.s.	0.633
H_{2a}	Sports Participation x Competitive Sports → Hunting Orientation	Positive	0.18**	2.872
H_{2b}	Sports Participation x Competitive Sports → Farming Orientation	*No Effect*	0.11 n.s.	1.174
H_{3a}	Hunting Orientation → Salesperson Performance	Positive	0.22**	3.642
H_{3b}	Farming Orientation → Salesperson Performance	*No Effect*	-0.03 n.s.	0.345
Control variables	Services Industry → Salesperson Performance		0.19**	3.347
	Self-efficacy → Salesperson Performance		0.17*	2.438
	Time spend on socializing with customers → Salesperson Performance		0.14*	2.139
	Education → Salesperson Performance		0.13*	2.174

* Significant at $p < .05$, ** Significant at $p < .01$, n.s. not significant

Table 2. PLS hypothesis testing results

The empirical model also considers several control variables for salesperson performance which influenced sales success in previous studies. Self-efficacy, services industry, time spend on socializing with customers and education emerged to have a significant impact on salesperson performance. Thus, we included these control variables in our final model.

4. Discussion

The intent of this research was to examine the impact of sports participation on sales success. We integrated two goal orientations, hunting and farming, in our model. However, practitioners often view "hunters" as more important for a firm's success than their counterparts (Hartmann et al., 2018). Therefore, the focus of our study was to investigate the effect of sports participation on hunting orientation as this orientation is particularly critical for business growth. We demonstrated not only that sports participation in general influences hunting orientation but also that practicing competitive sports strengthens the effect of sports participation on hunting orientation. We also found that there are no effects on farming orientation. These findings make several contributions to the literature.

While previous research has focused on many other determinants of sales success (for meta-analyses in sales research: Johnson & Jaramillo, 2017), to the best of our knowledge, our study shows for the first time that practicing sports has an impact on sales success. In this regard, we introduce a new antecedent to sales success. We also specify competitive sports as the type of sport that increases the impact of sports participation on hunting orientation.

These findings contradict the common practice of many companies to promote the distribution of fitness and activity trackers to their sales employees as part of workplace-based wellness programs (Goldstein, 2018). These fitness trackers are most frequently used for noncompetitive physical activities (e.g. jogging) (Ng & Ryba, 2018). When it comes to sales employees, companies should rather foster competitive sports activities to back hunting activities which are key to a firm's success. Moreover, when looking for sales job candidates, recruiters should keep an eye on the type of sport practiced during leisure time because practicing any type of competitive sports supports a hunting orientation.

Finally, we encourage future research to extend our findings using field experiments. Such research design allows altering salespeople's goal orientations, hunting and farming.

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