

THE ROLE OF SALES STEREOTYPES IN STUDENTS' PERCEPTION: AN EXPLORATORY ANALYSIS ON ITALIAN STUDENTS

Silvio Cardinali

*Associate Professor in the Management Department at the Economics Faculty "G. Fuà"
and Vice Rector for Communication, Università Politecnica delle Marche, Ancona, Italy
s.cardinali@univpm.it*

Marta Giovannetti

*Università Politecnica delle Marche, Ancona, Italy
m.giovannetti@pm.univm.it*

Barbara Kulaga

*Università Politecnica delle Marche, Ancona, Italy
b.kulaga@pm.univm.it*

Lorenzo Governatori

*Università Politecnica delle Marche, Ancona, Italy
governatori.lorenzo@gmail.com*

Abstract

The present work intends to explore sales and salespeople stereotype among university students; previous literature has already pointed out students' lack of awareness, negative perception and stereotyping of sales and salespeople. Students in fact show to know little about sales and its evolution over the decades and the low propensity towards the possibility of working in sales has persisted for over 50 years. This exploratory analysis was conducted to analyze the perception of salespeople, in the context of university students, and understand the orientation of students to sales career. Data were collected and analyzed using qualitative research method. Results show that sales and salespeople stereotype is still present among students, and that selling as a process tends to be identified mainly as a single activity, as just direct interaction or negotiation. In addition, business (marketing) students tend to refer to the dichotomy between the transactional and the relational paradigm as a reference to define the stereotypical and the ideal selling approach. Findings suggest that a further exposition to sales issues could define and improve the students' knowledge and perception of sales and foster students' intention to pursue a career in sales.

Keywords: *salesperson, sales stereotypes, perception, university students, focus group*

Introduction

The present work intends to explore sales and salespeople stereotype among students; previous literature has already pointed out students' lack of awareness, negative perception and stereotyping of sales and salespeople, and the impact on their feelings toward selling (Karakaya, Quigley, & Bingham, 2011; Ballestra et al., 2017). Students in fact show to know

little about sales and its evolution over the decades and the low propensity towards the possibility of working in sales have persisted for over 50 years.

In addition, in today's competitive business environment, selling requires more and more professionalism, organizational capabilities, and knowledge of adaptive and consultative services (Cron,

Baldauf, Leigh, & Grossenbacher, 2014). Indeed, sales has shifted from an isolated and operational function to a more complex, cross-functional and strategic one (Honeycutt, Ford, Swenson, & Swinyard, 1999; Ingram, LaForge, & Leigh, 2002; Storbacka, Ryals, Davies, & Nenonen, 2009). Moreover, particularly in business-to-business, the salesperson has acquired a crucial role, not only in creating and developing relationship with customer, but also in being considered beyond a relationship manager, a value creator (Blocker, Cannon, Panagopoulos, & Sager, 2012; Weitz & Bradford, 1999). For these reasons, firms need salespeople that are solution developers, a definition that evidently contrast from the past ones, or at least from the stereotypical idea of the salesperson as opportunistic and manipulative. Nowadays' salespeople need to be bright, motivated, capable, and well-trained individuals who have the skills to adapt well to a quickly and continuously changing business environment (Pettijohn & Pettijohn, 2009). Scholars have already observed the tendency of companies to look for adequate and qualified salespeople among university graduates, to better face the challenges of modern business and selling (Weeks & Muehling, 1987; Swenson, Swinyard, Langrehr, & Smith, 1993; Amin, Hayajneh, & Nwakanma, 1995; Wiles & Spiro, 2004; Deeter-Schmelz et al., 2018).

Historically, students tendentially avoid applying or interviewing for sales positions (Dubinsky, 1981; Weeks & Muehling, 1987) despite personal selling can offer a rewarding and fulfilling career, because society in general and students in particular often have a negative opinion of selling and thus their intent to pursue a sales career is very low (Manning, Reece, & Ahearne, 2010; Karakaya, Quigley, & Bingham, 2011). Despite the stereotype though, many graduates in marketing and business disciplines often spend at least a period of

their professional life in sales, either while moving from one job to another or as a first job after graduation. Moreover, if students hold negative stereotypes of salespeople then this will influence their behaviour on the job and general well-being. Finally, there is also the possibility that those individuals who feel to conform to the negative stereotype will wish to take sales positions, following and adverse selection mechanism. This situation could lead to undesirable recruits and a higher level of negative selling behaviour – further perpetuating the negative stereotype of sales amongst the general public and potential recruits. This work tries to build on previous literature (Lee, Sandfield, & Dhaliwal, 2007; Karakaya, Quigley, & Bingham, 2011; Fournier et al., 2014; Ballestra et al., 2017) and to further investigate this phenomenon of the negative sales stereotype, often perpetuated by mass media, and even to study the misconception of what selling involves as a job and the consequent assumptions made towards salespeople.

This exploratory research was conducted to analyze the perception of salespeople from Italian university business students, where sales education research is scarce, trying to enrich the existing literature with a new work, specific on sales stereotype, in an under-investigated context, as Italy is, and to understand the orientation of students to pursue sales careers. Data was collected and analyzed using qualitative research method.

The paper is furtherly structured as follows: next paragraph includes a literature review concerning salespeoples' stereotypes, the following section illustrates the study methodology, then results are presented and discussed. Finally, some conclusions reflect on implications, limitations and possible further development.

Literature Review

Students' perceptions of personal selling as a less than desirable job has been recognized in the academic literature since the 1950s, and this negative sentiment has remained unchanged to the present days (Peltier, Cummins, Pomirleanu, Cross, & Simon, 2014).

Both salespeople and the sales profession suffer from a negative stereotype (Lee, Sandfield, & Dhaliwal, 2007) that inhibits entry into the profession by qualified people and makes it more difficult for salespeople to achieve success. Indeed, according to these authors, the negative stereotypes may attract salespeople not fully convinced of the importance or value of the sales profession, or attract people unable to fully fulfill the sales function in a professional manner, reinforcing adverse stereotypes and images of salespeople.

Studies on students and sales can be divided into three different streams: the first focuses on student attitudes, perception, or preferences for selling; a second group focuses on students' individual traits; and last, studies on the relationship between image and other actions, such as students' attitudes and perceptions of a sales career (Fournier, et al., 2014). In this work in particular we refer and try to contribute to the first stream of research, and also to add a few implications in terms of intention towards a sales career, which belongs to the third one. Therefore, in the first stream of research we find many works in which salespeople have been considered money hungry, aggressive, pushy, hardworking, dishonest, and ambitious people (Swenson, Swinyard, Langrehr, & Smith, 1993; Lee, Sandfield, & Dhaliwal, 2007; Spillan, Totten, & Ziemnowicz, 2007). Their reasons may include a misperception of what selling involves as well as the negative stereotypes often perpetuated by mass media, and the reason for this negative sentiment may be embedded in

the perception that selling involves manipulating others and is not considered a reputable activity (Lysonski & Durvasula, 1998; Lee, Sandfield, & Dhaliwal, 2007). However, other studies found that students' perceptions of salespeople and sales careers were generally positive (Dubinsky, 1981; Muehling & Weeks, 1988; Amin, Hayajneh, & Nwakanma, 1995).

As what regards the third research stream, most research has focused on the identification of possible predictive factors that influence students in pursuing a career in sales, such as gender (Muehling & Weeks, 1988; Amin et al., 1995), age, race (DelVecchio & Honeycutt, 2002), nationality (Honeycutt, Ford, Swenson, & Swinyard, 1999; Barat & Spillan, 2009; Karakaya, Quigley, & Bingham, 2011; Fournier et al., 2014), enrollment in sales management courses (Bristow, Gulati, & Amyx, 2006; Peltier et al., 2014), and familiarity with salespeople (among relatives or friends). Again according to Peltier et al. (2014), there are four dimensions that comprise students' intentions to pursue a career in sales: sales job attributes, salesperson attributes, knowledge of the salesperson's job, and, finally, the ethics of the profession.

Among those reasons why students have a negative perception of a sales career, there is the lack of a full understanding of the role assumed by salespeople (Dubinsky, 1981; Peltier et al., 2014). More specifically, recent research has defined many different 'types' of selling which are appropriate to different markets or products and services. For example, key account management and consulting styles of selling have evolved in various industries, which are considerably different from more traditional ideas of business to business and business to consumer personal selling (Blythe, 2005; Moncrief, Marshall & Lassk, 2006). However, students may still hold stereo-

types which are based around more 'traditional' modes of selling like cold-calling, delivery, order-taking, or missionary sellers. If this is the case, students may have even less accurate perceptions of selling as a career. In other words, stereotypes may not only be inaccurate representations of the sales career, but the focus of the stereotype itself (e.g. the type of salesperson it refers to) may be inaccurate (Lee, Sandfield, & Dhaliwal, 2007).

In fact, Peltier and colleagues (2014) have demonstrated that knowledge, experience or even exposure to sales (even only classes or seminars), allow them to become more familiar with sales, with a consequent positive impact on sales perception and orientation towards sales career.

It follows that a better understanding of the evolution and the importance of the salesperson's role may have a positive influence on students' intentions to choose a career in sales. Most of these studies, however, compare business to non-business students; students enrolled in a sales course versus those who are not enrolled; and students versus salespeople. There are not many works, done on measuring the students' level of comprehension regarding the evolution experienced by salespeople and the sales function (Ballestra et al., 2017).

In this regard, another important aspect to stress is that, despite the call for more international sales research (Lee, Sandfield, & Dhaliwal, 2007; Cummins, Peltier, Erffmeyer, & Whalen, 2013), students' perceptions and intentions to pursue a sales career have been studied primarily in the U.S., with only a few exceptions (Honeycutt et al., 1999; Lee, Sandfield, & Dhaliwal, 2007; Barat & Spillan, 2009; Fournier et al., 2014; Karakaya et al., 2011; Ballestra et al. 2017). This study is presented as a

response to several calls to conduct more international research coming from the areas of sales management (Panagopoulos et al., 2011; Fournier et al., 2014) and sales education (Cummins, Peltier, Erffmeyer, & Whalen, 2013).

Methodology

The chosen technique for developing this exploratory work is the focus group (Lederman 1990; Krueger & Casey, 2000), involving a total of 57 business university students from 5 EU countries (Italy, Spain, Slovenia, Poland, Bulgaria). This work focuses on the results from the analysis conducted in Italy (N=12).

Focus group technique was chosen to gather information, to ask information to participants and solicitate free discussion and contemporary are asked questions in an interactive setting and are encouraged to discuss thoughts freely with other participants.

During the focus group sessions, data was collected through different mean and techniques, primarily transcripts, students' notes and researchers' annotations (Kruger, 2000). The students were business courses attendees, from bachelor or master's degree programs. They were selected because in the last years firms have turned to universities, looking for business graduates to cover sales positions (Wiles & Spiro, 2004; Agnihotri et al., 2014; Deeter-Schmelz et al., 2018) therefore their perceptions and intentions towards sales are key inputs.

TABLE 1. DESCRIPTION OF THE SAMPLE

Participants	
Profile	Students
N.	12
Description	Master's degree students <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 11 Marketing • 1 Business Administration
Age range	22-26
Gender	F=7; M=5

The focus group was conducted in February 2018, in 2 consequent sessions (6 participants each, to maximize information gathering and participants' involvement), in the interviewees first language, and the research teams provided for translation.

Printed participation forms helped with data collection: there was one for every interviewee, to help following the discussion and taking notes.

The focus group interviews were conducted to ensure the best comprehensibility of the topic and to foster the discussion by every group of subjects, with different levels of education and experience (Bachelor or Master's Degree programs attendees). The group interview consisted of mainly two semi-structured questions, followed by a general participants' discussion.

Following an abductive approach, the first question asked students to associate an animal to the salesperson (Jensen, 2006), allowing them to look at this phenomenon through different lenses, looking for unique similarities and characteristics helping in defining the objects (salespeople / animals) that have similar traits or characteristics, furtherly developed the second question on attributes and traits: in order to investigate the pervasiveness and content of salesperson stereotypes amongst students, a projective word

association technique was used, as in other in sales and other psychological research (e.g. Andersen and Klatzky 1987; Babin, Boles and Darden 1995; Lee, Sandfield, & Dhaliwal, 2007). The aim of this stage was ultimately to form an set of 'most associated characteristics' (MACs) of salespeople, other than allow students providing more articulated responses and foster interaction. Finally, students were asked about the most important sales activities, to assess their effective level of knowledge and comprehension of sales roles and sales career.

Results

To better understand students' general perception of salespeople, we asked them to associate an animal to the salesperson, thanks to the metaphor technique: "associate an animal to the salesperson". Interviewees' responses are summarized in table 2.

It was not purposefully specified whether the salespeople of reference were B2B or B2C. When asked, the indication was to avoid referring to retail assistants or shopkeepers, but instead considering the focus on B2B salespeople.

Most of the responses were fox (3), chameleon (2), cat (2), then results show one reference for each of the following animals: lion, tiger, dog, elephant, shark/kangaroo.

TABLE 2. METAPHOR RESPONSES SUMMARY

<i>Animal</i>	<i>Relevant Quotations</i>
<i>fox</i>	<p><i>Fox, because it is sly, astute, agile, adaptable, but also, loyal and reliable towards its family, so the salesperson is with the client. I don't really picture myself like a fox, I think that a successful salesman is the one who's perceived as a rulebreaker and I'm not just like that. (Interviewee n. 2)</i></p> <p><i>Fox: communicative, sly, knows how to appear reliable even lying, knows the products' strength and weaknesses, knows how to lead/drive the conversation. (Interviewee n. 6)*</i></p> <p><i>Fox is sly, manipulative, waits for the right moment and occasion to acquire a customer, start a relation, it waits until the perfect moment to have to have an opportunity. (Interviewee n. 10)</i></p> <p><i>A fox knows the best techniques to capture the listeners' attention, to be captured and convinced by the salesman arguments. (Interviewee n. 12)</i></p>
<i>cat</i>	<p><i>knows how to be appreciated/loved, but is also very selfish. (Interviewee n.3)</i></p> <p><i>Cat. The salesperson is like a cat because it is reassuring with the boss/customer, suspicious and sly, it lets you think you're important but for its scopes, not indifferent but interested, charismatic and in long run relationships. (Interviewee n.4)</i></p>
<i>chameleon</i>	<p><i>Chameleon is small and agile, it transforms, can be more eclectic or professional, it changes based on the context, is present but not intrusive. (Interviewee n.1)</i></p> <p><i>It adapts to the environment, transforms, as the salesman adapts to situations and contests, considers both the rational and irrational aspects of the decision process. (Interviewee n.11)</i></p>
<i>lion</i>	<i>I choose lion for aggressivity, objective achievement, because it is confident and charismatic towards the client and it leads to relationship. (Interviewee n.5)</i>
<i>dog</i>	<i>Salesmen is dog: it easily interacts with anyone, is intelligent, friendly and cuddly, like a Labrador. He also knows its environment. (Interviewee n.7)</i>
<i>shark/kangaroo</i>	<i>I see the salesperson as a shark, which main trait is aggressivity. However, nowadays competition is not price based anymore, and here we speak about b2b, so... I see the salesman as what it should be: a kangaroo. Because it keeps the client, it takes care of it. (Interviewee n.8)</i>
<i>elephant</i>	<i>Salesman is an elephant: chameleon was good, however, elephant is as I think a salesman should be, because big ears makes it good listener, it is big, not to be overwhelmed by the client, it has fangs, those represent being valuable for the customer, it lives in a warm environment (because Africa or India) so it makes the customer feel comfortable and incline to a relationship, is strong but knows not to be the king (because the lion is). (Interviewee n. 9)</i>
<i>tiger</i>	<i>Goal-oriented, aggressive, firm, maintains the position. (Interviewee n. 6)*</i>

In the list we find mostly predators, felines, aggressive or transforming/manipulative animals, according to the stereotypical idea that salespeople need to be aggressive and borderline with honesty and clarity to be successful. A quick look to results' quotations underline that the main selling situation which students refer to are communication and negotiation, in addition to some spare references to after sales, particularly to customer relationship management. Nevertheless, a further look to quotations can help understanding the complexity of some answers.

Although, it needs to be furtherly stressed, the majority of answers refer to the negative stereotype, some answers are richer and slightly ambiguous, in the sense that there seem to be a complexity, a multidimensionality as well. For instance, interviewee n.2 chose fox because "it is sly, astute, agile, adaptable"; however, maybe because of the animal he chose, or purely because of idea he had about salespeople, he also specified the fox to be "loyal and reliable towards its family", as he felt the salesper-

son is with the customer. So, although at the end of the question he still remarked the lack of morality and values of salespeople (a successful salesman is the one who's perceived as a rulebreaker) he acknowledged a strong relational, almost familiar, bond between salesperson and customer.

Furthermore, it is worth focusing on the elephant response: the interviewee clarified that he referred to the ideal salespeople as good listener, solid and firm, not only creating value and comfort for the customer, but also for the "king" (entrepreneur/manager). Although this answer seems rich and out of the box, in a way it refers quite entirely to strategic marketing and the relational paradigm, because of the attention on external stimuli, to be composed with internal critical success factors. However, except from the reference to the sales' frontier position, as he mentioned both the customer and the "lion" (manager/entrepreneur), although this answer catches some emerging issues, as the need for a further integration between marketing and sales (Guenzi, & Troilo, 2006; Homburg, Jensen, & Krohmer, 2008), it appears missing the focus on sales to some extent, as in fact generally students tend to miss what sales are really about (see next paragraph).

The last answer was twofold: shark / kangaroo. The interviewee said she meant to refer to what many salespeople are (shark – aggressive) or used to be, as opposed to what she thinks they should be or act nowadays (kangaroo – taking care of the customer), referring to the customer relationship as a familiar, very natural and strong kind of relationship. This answer is not only interesting in being twofold, for the contraposition between ideal and real, but also because it refers to a past domain of the stereotype, as opposed to an ideal mature and

more professional, managerial approach to sales, that seems to be more on the relational side. This is interesting, especially thinking to emerging themes in the field of professional selling (Cuevas, 2018).

Moreover, each respondent was asked to provide a few specific characteristics or traits of the animal they associated to the salesperson to enrich their answers with projective word association technique (Andersen and Klatzky 1987; Babin, Boles and Darden 1995; Lee, Sandfield, & Dhaliwal, 2007), but also to stimulate further explanation and interaction. Since previous research using similar techniques has suggested that the initial thoughts of respondents are the most valid and representative of actual opinions (Stafford & Stafford 2003), respondents were instructed to only to name and take note of their immediate responses. The list of attributes resulting from interviewees' notes and dialogue, confronted, and controlled for redundancy, were coded (Hay, 2005) ensuing minimal interpretative bias, thanks to the animal metaphor previous discussion, resulted in a set of MACs (-Most Associated Characteristics-), the majority of which have negative connotations.

TABLE 3. ATTRIBUTE ANALYSIS

Attributes	Frequency
<i>smart</i>	5
<i>sly</i>	5
<i>loyal</i>	4
<i>strong</i>	3
<i>aggressive / predator</i>	3
<i>meditative (observes and attacks)</i>	2
<i>manipulative</i>	2
<i>flexible</i>	2
<i>confident</i>	2
<i>agile</i>	2
<i>protective</i>	2
<i>independent</i>	2
<i>friendly</i>	1
<i>persistent</i>	1

MACs are actually in line with the animal metaphor answers, since students mentioned qualities and traits coherent with aggressive or dangerous animals (smart, sly, strong, predator, etc.), with some exceptions, due to the already mentioned relational elements present as well (protective, friendly). Therefore, to sum up, in addition to the list and the frequency of the mentioned traits, an emerging aspect is the general presence of both positive and negative aspects:

- Positive: salesman is adaptable, agile, present but not intrusive, knows how to be appreciated, studies the situation and knows when to intervene, charismatic, solid, strong but not overwhelming, easily starts and develops relationships, good listener, faithful and reliable with his “family”.

- Negative: sly, aggressive, manipulative, false, selfish, insistent/persistent.

Sales activities

The second question asked to students was, “what do you think are the most important activities in a salesperson job”, was responded with a strong focus to

starting and building the customer relationship (top ranked activity for 6 on 12 interviewees).

A lot of answers also emphasize the study phase, with direct references to product knowledge, market analysis etc, those actually belong to the marketing field more than the sales one, (see the elephant answer). Another frequently mentioned type of answer is meeting the customer, negotiating and selling.

The interviewed students never mentioned activities like prospecting, (self) organization, budgeting, coordinating with other units for sales, problem solving, or service (after sales support). Students’ attention tended to be in the pre-selling, as communicating, in the selling itself (as negotiating), and post-selling, in terms of “relationship” strictly.

If students were asked what skills are associated to those core-activities in selling, they mainly answered with soft skills, with -positive- personal qualities and characteristics (“Soft-er skills”: communicative, good listener, empathic, persuasive, reassuring, reliable, honest, charismatic) more than technical, functional, organizational features (“Hard-er skills”: analytic, knowledgeable, organized). It is coherent with the students’ emphasis on communication and relation with customer. But still very close to the stereotype.

TABLE 4. ACTIVITY-RELATED SKILLS RESPONSE QUOTATIONS

<i>communicative (with direct contact with the customer), persuasive (with selling), reassuring. (Interviewee n.7)</i>
<i>being a good listener, communicative, analytical skills. (Interviewee n. 8)</i>
<i>interpersonal/relational skills, credibility, knowledgeable (being believable, convincing), persuasive. (Interviewee n.9)</i>

Findings

Results show that sales and salespeople stereotype is still present among students, and that sales as a process tends to be identified as a single activity, quite exclusively as negotiation, direct interaction and customer relationship. In addition, business (marketing) students tend to refer to the dichotomy between the transactional and the relational paradigms as a reference to define the stereotypical and the ideal selling approaches.

In particular, students were asked to associate salespeople to an animal and to a set of attributes, and to indicate the most important activities of a selling role. Students from the sample enlisted mainly of aggressive, feline, manipulative animals (tiger, lion, chameleon, ecc.), as opposed to some independent, clever and adaptable creatures (fox, cat) and some friendly, faithful and loyal ones (elephant, dog). They often referred to the stereotypical idea of the salesperson, or they explicitly addressed the answer dividing it in what a salesperson is, opposed to what they would like the salesperson to be, in some cases, with addition to the perception of the complexity of a frontier role.

In general, students supposedly took the sales prejudice as a benchmark: what the salesperson “is” (traditional hard-seller) and what should be (relational/partnering seller, which has a strategic and long-term approach towards sales and is strong in loyalty, ethics, preparation, problem solving and value co-creation).

Furthermore, in the attribute analysis,

the MACs, provided by the interviewees (Lee, Sandfield & Dhaliwal,2007) express both positive (salesman is adaptable, present but not intrusive, knows how to be appreciated, studies the situation and knows when to intervein, charismatic, solid, strong but not overwhelming, easily starts and develops relationships, convincing, good listener, faithful and reliable with its “family”) and negative (sly, aggressive, manipulative, false) attributes, in line with the previous results.

Differently from other studies, students have maintained to the above mentioned dimensions, avoiding expressing negative emotions, personal image characteristics or strong moral assumptions (besides being sly and manipulative). In fact, other studies’ results have emphasized personal appearance, misbehavior (annoying, a nuisance, rude) (Lee, Sandfield & Dhaliwal, 2007), personal/ethic judgement (disgusting relationships, always lying, sell their value for money) (Ballestra et al., 2017) and education (Fournier et al., 2014).

An explanation could be that these interviewees had been exposed to relational paradigm theories in their university curricula, and consequently have cues of some emerging issues in the evolution of personal selling. In fact, besides lacking experience and a complete understanding of sales roles, students perceive the importance of salespeople’s relationship with customers based on trust and collaboration, but some of them acknowledge, somehow, the hunting/proactivity attitude of salespeople, to acquire new clients

showing a more aggressive nature (Cuevas, 2018).

Somehow, education is still a missing theme in our results, in coherence with the stereotypical idea that the keys to success for a salesperson are personal intuition, perseverance and manipulation, rather than an equilibrated mix of education, organization, trust building, value proposition and co-creation with the customer.

Moreover, generally students seem to refer more to personal qualities rather than professional and technical skills, again referring to the importance they attribute to communication and negotiation.

Therefore, it can be suggested that students still hold stereotypes which are based on more 'traditional' modes of selling like cold-calling, delivery, order-taking, or missionary sellers, showing that students may have even less accurate perceptions of selling as a career. In other words, results show that stereotypes may not only be inaccurate representations of the sales career, but the focus on any type of selling (any type of sales of reference) (Moncrief, Marshall & Lassk, 2006) is very general, if not inaccurate, and only based on the stereotype (Lee, Sandfield, & Dhaliwal, 2007).

Finally, the students' top ranked sales activities, in their opinion were selling/negotiating, customer relationship, contacting/informing customers (in line with the traditional and relational paradigm simultaneously). This result, on one hand is encouraging and aligned with the theory, aiming for a closer interface and integration between marketing and sales, but on the other hand, again, students seem to have little knowledge of what selling is really about, with consequent low

opinions regarding the possibility of pursuing a career in sales (Karakaya, Quigley & Bingham, 2011).

In fact, students seem to look at selling as an act, not as a process, prioritizing negotiation and customer relationship, they do not pay much attention to customer insight and organization/reporting/budgeting, coherently with their scarce level of knowledge, experience and expectations towards sales.

Furthermore, when it emerged in the discussion whether students would like to work in sales, only one student responded positively. This is in line with prior studies those enhance the reticence of students towards the intention to pursue a career in sales. It is well known that it is important to know and understand the real dimensions of the sales profession (Peltier et al., 2014) and the teaching of strategic sales management (Cummins et al., 2015; Jaskari & Jaskari, 2016) to change he attitude toward pursuing a career in sales, otherwise the feeling towards selling (Ballestra et al., 2017) will continue being driven by the scarce understanding of salespeople role, as well as the misconception and stereotyping of sales job and salespeople attributes.

Findings suggest that a further exposition to sales issues could define and improve the students' knowledge and perception of sales and foster students' intention to pursue a career in sales (Allen, et al., 2014). And this is particularly important nowadays, since professional selling has become more complex, managerial and technical under many aspects (even the international ones, according to the global competitive evolution of businesses), needing for highly educated and work-ready sales recruits (Deeter-Schmelz et al., 2018).

Conclusion

This exploratory research was conducted to analyze the perception of salespeople from Italian university business students, where sales education research is scarce, trying to enrich the existing literature with a new work, specific on sales stereotype, in an under-investigated context, as Italy is, and to understand the orientation of students to pursue sales careers.

Data was collected and analyzed using focus group research method, involving Italian university students.

Results confirm that sales and salespeople stereotype is still present among students, that despite their high education, they still have a vague idea of what selling really consists of, and this is an indication also for (European) universities. Moreover, selling tends to be identified as a single activity, quite exclusively as negotiation, direct interaction or at least customer relationship. Quite interestingly, in addition, business (marketing) students tend to refer to the dichotomy between the transactional and the relational paradigms as a reference to define the stereotypical and the ideal selling approaches, seeming to refer to the continuity between marketing and sales, but also, intuiting the necessity for their integration.

In general, students supposedly took the sales prejudice as a benchmark: what the salesperson “is” (traditional hard-seller) and what should be (relational/partnering seller, which has a strategic and long-term approach towards sales and is strong in loyalty, ethics, preparation, problem solving and value co-creation), in coherence with the recent issues emerged in business and developed in sales literature.

One Reasoning could be that these

interviewees had been exposed to relational paradigm theories in their university curricula, and consequently have cues of some emerging issues in the evolution of personal selling. In fact, besides lacking experience and a complete understanding of sales roles, students perceive the importance of salespeople’s relationship with customers based on trust and collaboration, but some of them acknowledge, somehow, the hunting/proactivity attitude of salespeople, to acquire new clients showing a more aggressive nature (Cuevas, 2018).

Moreover, the students’ top ranked sales activities, in their opinion were selling/negotiating, customer relationship, contacting/informing customers (in line with the traditional and relational paradigm simultaneously). This result, on one hand is encouraging and aligned with the theory, aiming for a closer interface and integration between marketing and sales, but on the other hand, again, students seem to have little knowledge of what selling is really about, with consequent low opinions regarding the possibility of pursuing a career in sales (Karakaya, Quigley & Bingham, 2011). In addition, generally students seem to refer more to personal qualities rather than professional and technical skills, again referring to the importance they attribute to communication and negotiation.

The general knowledge and understanding of the selling process appeared limited, and consequently feeling towards selling and intention to pursue a career in sales, when emerged, were limited or poor. Besides, scholars enhance the importance of experience, relevant people in one’s life or exposition the sales profession and the teaching of strategic sales management to change the attitude toward pursuing a career in sales, otherwise the feeling towards selling will continue being driven

by the scarce understanding of salespeople role, as well as the misconception and stereotyping of sales job and salespeople attributes. As literature and findings suggest, a further exposition to sales issues could define and improve the students' knowledge and perception of sales and foster students' intention to pursue a career in sales, which should be very important for nowadays businesses, since the second most searched professionals worldwide are still salespeople (Manpower, 2008, 2018). Moreover, this is particularly important nowadays, since professional selling has become more complex, managerial and technical under many aspects (even the international ones, according to the global competitive evolution of businesses), needing for highly educated and work-ready sales recruits. In addition, it needs to be considered that generally in Europe sales courses are very limited in the university environment, particularly in marketing area university courses in Italy (N= 1050), within 126 universities, 413 degree programs include at least one marketing related exam. Only 15 courses (1,4%) include the word "sales" (sales management, sales and trade management ecc.). Therefore, there seem to be room not only for sales research, but also for further introduction of sales education in HEI.

This work presents some limitations due to the sample consisting of only Italian students, when in fact there should be the possibility of further research in a cross-cultural setting. An additional weakness of the study is that it follows the literature path in continuing analyzing business students' perceptions, even if usually they are the ones ending working in sales positions, and that literature indicates as particularly suitable to successfully work as tomorrow's successful professionals, enhancing their

businesses' performances and their own careers.

Further studies should therefore make an effort in trying to close these gaps in cross-cultural perceptions, even engaging different cultural models, to verify how cultural models interact with these perceptions. In addition, research could broaden its investigation spectrum involving more diverse samples in terms of preparation and background, other than business university students. Finally, these type of works on students' stereotype perceptions could provide quantitative testing of these research stimuli, engaging a social science multi-disciplinary approach.

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