

## **Does the Personal Trait Play a Significant Role on Chinese Students' Perception of Sales Profession as a Career?**

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### **Abstract**

*The purpose of this study is to investigate students' perceptions of personal selling as a career in the developing nations, China in this case. Research has been conducted underscoring the negative perception of sales profession among students in the United States, particularly into the areas of ethics and honesty (Futrell, 2007; Lee et al, 2007); the scarcity of information relating to the profession can exacerbate the negative image that is presented by this profession. Logistic regression and Z test are used in this research to assess whether Chinese students are averse to careers in personal selling just as is the case in the United States. The results do confirm the results of preceding studies; personal factors play a significant role in predicting students' perception of sales profession as a career; Chinese students have a biased perception about sales as career, however, interestingly few dimensions showed significant effect.*

### **Introduction**

There is a perspective in society that salespersons are pushy, dishonest, aggressive and annoying. Actually, a study conducted by Gallup (as cited by Futrell 2007) detailed information indicating that insurance salespeople, advertising practitioners and used car salespeople were classified as among the lowest when measured in their ethics and honesty. The basis for this 'negative' attitude regarding salespeople can conceivably be traced back to the Industrial Revolution, when factories developed tremendous manufacturing capabilities, leading to a huge surplus of inventories that posed problems to manufacturers (Lamb et al. 2007). Accordingly, salespeople were employed to sell as much of the products as possible and as quickly as they could. To accomplish their sales 'target' these salespeople had to adopt an extremely aggressive approach, which is often referred to as 'sales (as opposed to 'market') orientation in marketing theory (Bristow et al. 2006). This attitude about the sales profession in general and the salesperson specifically were the reasons that motivated our current research. In particular, what we are interested is to find out whether students brought up and educated in a culture vastly different than that of the United States also harbors similar feelings towards the salespersons and choosing the sales profession as a career.

This paper is organized as follows. The first section provides a review of the relevant literature. In the next section, we develop the literature review regarding the ideas associated with students' negative views of the sales profession. The third section develops additional comparative studies and views on the notion of perceptions of the sales profession. These two sections allow for the hypotheses development and methodology sections to be presented. Next the findings are presented. Conclusions section describes the implications for the study. The concluding section acknowledges the limitations and provides suggestions for advancing the current line of research.

### **Literature Review**

Historically salespeople have customarily been described as money-hungry, aggressive, eager-to-sell, and ambitious people. These labels and notions about salespeople are supported by statistics.

A 1995 Gallup poll, for example, found that car sales were considered the least ethical occupation among 26 careers considered, with insurance salespeople voted 23<sup>rd</sup> (as quoted in Butler 1996). Such perceptions are prevalent not just in the US but in other countries as well (Barat and Spillan, 2009). In some data suggests that the profession of 'selling' is considered as an insult (Butler 1996).

Jolson's research (1972) shows that students' negative opinion about salespeople is also engendered by the negative experience many of them have had with salespeople (Jolson 1972). As Dubinsky (1981) comments, "most customers consider salespeople as lowly-paid, monotonous, uneducated, high-pressure phony individuals who they would never want to meet again". Even students who have actually not had any first-hand interaction with a salesperson tend to harbor and nurture such negative opinions. These derogatory students' opinion of salespeople and the sales professions perhaps results from the low prestige status traditionally assigned to a sales job (Mason 1965, Ditz 1968). In other words, since salespeople come from diverse backgrounds and academic qualifications, as well the fact that the profession typically endows very little authority to the person, the sales profession has been considered as one of the lowliest of its kind among comparable professions, even within the same organization.

Studies in the area of perceptions of sales professionals draw comparison between different sets of factors such as perceptions of male vs. female students, business vs. non-business, those who are enrolled in sales/selling courses vs. those who are not, and certainly students vs. salesperson. A series of studies conducted by the Sales Management journal (1962 a, b, c) concluded that the underlying attitudes of males towards sales was "...forceful, deceitful, holding positions with low status and prestige, with little security (Swenson et al. 1999). Paul et al. (1970) on the other hand, when comparing students across different college majors, found that there were universal negative feelings about sales careers. Dubinsky (1980) compared students' perceptions of sales careers with other vocational needs to conclude that majority of the respondents harbor a positive (or negative) feeling toward sales positions. In another study, Dubinsky (1981) compared salespeople's perception with students' perception of selling and found that students had misconceptions about sales positions when compared with that of sales people. Dubinsky et al. (1983) further found preferential differences also existed among students.

In terms of comparison of the genders, conflicting findings exist. While Cook et al. (1986) found that females are more reluctant than their male counterparts to accept sales positions, Muehling et al. (1988) found college women to be more favorably opinionated towards personal selling than males. Bristow et al. (2006) found significant perceptual differences between students who had completed personal selling courses and those who had not. Harmon (1999) used a randomized block design to conclude that depending on whether students were provided a general or a specific description of the sales job, attitude towards the sales job varied between the genders.

One final point, research suggests that recruiters failed to effectively communicate the essential qualifications, demands, responsibilities and rewards of a sales profession in their recruitment efforts. As a result, the entrenched negative opinions in the students' attitude remain 'unaffected' (Kurtz 1972, Dubinsky 1981). The consequences of such a situation are twofold: first, students may become indifferent about applying for sales jobs and second, students who do accept sales jobs may conduct themselves in a manner that corresponds to such predetermined perceptions about the sales profession and thus continue to foster the negative perception towards the sales profession (Lee et al. 2007).

### ***China and Personal Selling***

Over the last two decades China grew at an unrelenting pace. All indications point towards China maintaining this growth rate at least in the short term. With this increased growth comes a variety of opportunities and challenges. With the largest population in the world and a growth rate of 9% annually, the Chinese market demand for goods and services is increasing exponentially. In addition, Chinese families 'income has risen and their desire to shop and purchase items has also intensified. This state of affairs affords great opportunities for selling, salesmanship, and the sales profession. Western companies already set up operations in China and started to seek eager and ambitious workers who can sell their products and services.

As a consequence, the sales profession has become a major area of interest not only for the employers but also for the potential sales person who could make a good living selling Chinese made goods as well as foreign imported goods to the large Chinese population (Jobber and Lancaster, 2009).

At this point, it is of critical importance to understand Chinese perception of the sales profession, which is of equal importance to the employers and employees as well. At the core of any business transaction in China is culture. Chinese business people operate from very old traditions. For example: sales people visiting China to sell products and services must attend banquets while they are trying to negotiate business transactions. The tradition of frequent toasting during the meal or the conversations is a very important ritual and generally required of all visitors (Jobber and Lancaster, 2009). Sales negotiations in China take much longer time than those in the West. Punctuality is a very important aspect of the sales meeting and to be late is not acceptable. Chinese business people (sales persons) try to obtain as much information as possible before showing their position in the deal. Legal forms of business transactions such as contracts are important and become a foundation piece of any transaction (Jobber and Lancaster, 2009). In addition, the Chinese are astute business people, proper protocols for initiating, building and closing sales transactions are key features of a successful businessman.

Another issue associated the Chinese culture is that the sale person gender differences are highly evident and influential in personal selling. While men appear to score higher in the area of eloquent speaking, proficiency and hardworking categories, women seem to be more approachable in the sales situation. Research (Dongxia Tang, 2004) indicates that while people have different expectations of sales people and their performance, males seem to be more willing to profess personal selling as their career. They appear to be confident and motivated to succeed in the personal selling profession. There is a belief in China that those who have a psychological inclination to be involved in personal selling will more energetically learn more about the profession and pursue it as a career.

The sales profession in China generally requires the salesperson to travel frequently. This circumstance creates instability and in many cases causes the career to be a short-term endeavor. Moreover, the job is very stressful when the sales person has to promote unwanted products among his/her customers. These attributes are among the key factors that reinforce the negative perceptions about the sales profession (Lisheng Xu and Fuguan Wang, 2010).

The above review shows the importance of sales profession and the effect of culture in shaping sales traditions in China; the study sheds a light on Chinese students as being the main source to supply Chinese market with sales professionals, which are in great demand by international businesses as well as Chinese businesses. Therefore, we frame the following research hypothesis:

Does the personal trait play a significant role on Chinese students' perception of sales profession as a career?

## **Research Methodology**

### **Methodology**

The following steps are applied in developing the research methodology:

### **Research Model**

The purpose of the study is to examine the predictive ability of personal factors in determining students' perception of sales profession as a career. The procedure requires the identification of two groups of students (dependent variable). The first group is made of students with negative perception about sales profession ( $Y = 0$ ). The second group is made of students with positive perception about sales profession ( $Y = 1$ ). The independent variables are the personal trait of students (i.e. knowledge, experience and expectation) that are used to classify students into one of the two groups based on their perception.

Binary Logistic Regression Model (BLRM) is used to test the research problem. Logistic regression is superior to linear regression model where normality assumptions of the independent variables are not met. It is simpler to read and to interpret because its values are bound to range between zero and one (Tsun-Siou, Yin-Hua & Rong-Tze 2003).

The use of the logistic regression model in this study is to evaluate the predictive power of the Independent variables (personal trait) in classifying students into two groups (dependent variable). The dependent variable is a non-metric measure and it is used to identify the two-student groups. The independent variables are students' personal trait, which is subdivided into three major areas, which are knowledge, experience and expectation; they are captured in 21 statements. The following is the logistic regression equation:

$$Y (0 - 1) = A + B_1X_1 + B_2X_2 + B_3X_3 + \dots + B_nX_n$$

### Reliability of the Model

In testing the reliability of the model the following two measures are used:

**1. Coefficient of Determination:** it is similar to that of the ordinary least squares (OLS) regression:

$$R^2_{\text{Logit}} = 1 - (-2LL_1 / -2LL_0)$$

$-LL_0$  is the log-likelihood that represents the total unexplained variations of the model before including the independent variables.  $-2LL_1$  is the log-likelihood that represents the unexplained variations of the research model after the independent variables are included. In general, the interpretation of  $R^2_{\text{logit}}$  is similar to the coefficient of determination  $R^2$  in the multiple regressions. It has a value that ranges between 0 and 1. When  $R^2_{\text{logit}}$  approaches 0, the model is poor.  $R^2_{\text{logit}}$  approaches 1, the model is a perfect fit.

**2. Hit Ratio:** A Z (student) test is performed to test the significance of hit ratio (percentage of correctly classifying the cases). The following formula is applied:

$$Z \text{ test} = [ P - 0.5 ] / [ 0.5 (1 - 0.5) / N ]^{1/2}$$

Where P = hit ratio = proportion correctly classified results, N = sample size.

The hit ratio measures the percentage of times the model accurately classifies the cases into the two stock groups i.e. if the model completely explains the dependent variable, the overall hit ratio would be 100%. The “Z-test” tests the significance of the hit ratio. A level of significance of 5% is used in generating the logistic regression and testing the reliability as well.

### Cross Validity of the Model

Testing the cross validity of the model is done by applying it in different countries or different time periods or groups.

### Data Collection

The data was collected from a sample of 298 students taken at random from Chinese universities through a questionnaire. The instrument used a mix of statements and Likert scale rankings of attributes and was made of three parts. In the first part, students were asked to make three statements about their perception of sales profession (Weeks et al. 1987) and also to evaluate statements as being either “positive,” or “negative” by checking the appropriate box. In the second part, students were asked to provide answers in the form of agreement or disagreement to statements about their attitude (expectations) towards the sales profession. A Likert scale was used so that the respondent can select a numerical score ranging from 1 to 5 for each statement to indicate the degree of agreement or otherwise, where 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 denote “Strongly Disagree”, “Disagree”, “Neither Agree or Disagree (Neutral)”, “Agree”, and “Strongly Agree”, respectively. In the third part, students were asked to provide demographic information such as age, gender and education. The survey instrument used in this research is contained in Appendix A.

### Data Analysis

Testing the predictive power of students’ personal trait is done using a level of significance of 5% in two stages. In stage 1, the twenty-one statements are included in the model using “Forward Stepwise Likelihood Ratio” method. This procedure allows only those statements that exhibit significant predictive power to enter into the model. In stage 2, the predictive power of all statements is tested (i.e. all statements remain the model – enter method). The summary output of step (Table 1) showed the following overall hit ratio results:

**Table 1 - Predictive Power of Personal Trait**

	Predicted - 0	Predicted - 1	Correctly classified	% - Hit Ratio
<b>Stage 1:</b>				
<b>Step 01</b>				
Observed - 0	76	62		55.07
Observed - 1	41	92		69.17
Overall Hit Ratio				<b>61.99</b>
<b>Step 02</b>				
Observed - 0	87	51		63.04
Observed - 1	53	80		60.15
Overall Hit Ratio				<b>61.62</b>
<b>Step 03</b>				
Observed - 0	75	63		54.34
Observed - 1	39	94		70.67
Overall Hit Ratio				<b>62.36</b>
<b>Stage 2</b>				
<b>All Statements</b>				
Observed - 0	108	30		62.3
Observed - 1	29	104		65.4
Overall Hit Ratio				<b>78.2</b>

In stage 1, the model correctly classified students' perception 62.36% At the significance level of 5%, five statements showed significant predictive power and entered the model: (1) "Personality is crucial" statement entered the model in the first step, which means it had the highest significant power; followed by (2) "Money hungry" and "Uninteresting, no challenge" statements that entered in the second step and had the second highest predictive power, and (3) in the third step, the laststep, "Much traveling" statement entered the model. In stage 2, all variables were included in the model and correctly classified students' perception 78.2%.

### Testing Reliability

Testing the reliability of the model is done by using two measures: (1) Coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ ) value, which represents the proportion of unexplained variation that is explained by the independent variables (statements) and (2) Testing the significance of the overall hit ratio is done by using Z distribution. Table (2) depicts the significance of the three statements by reporting the corresponding coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ ) as they enter the model.

**Table 2- Coefficient of Determination - Nagelkerke  $R^2$** 

	Statement	$R^2$
<b>Stage 1</b>		
Step 1	Personality is crucial	9.18 %
Step 2	Money hungry, Uninteresting no challenge	11.49%
Step 3	Much traveling	13.87%
<b>Stage 2</b>		
	All Statements	49.5%

The coefficient of determination of the "Personality is crucial" statement had the highest significance, as it entered the model in step 1 and explained 9.18% of the total variations; "Money hungry" and "Uninteresting, no challenge" statements entered second in the model and increased the explained variations to 11.49%; "Much traveling" statement entered in the third step and increased the explained variations to 13.87%, which is relatively low. While in stage 2, all statements are kept in the model, they explained 49.5% of the variations, which is significant and is in support of the research argument that the personal trait (i.e. knowledge, experience, and expectations) of students play a significant role in forming the students' perception about sales profession in china. In addition, the three statements that were reported in stage one are the most significant ones.

2- Testing the significance of the overall hit ratio is done by using Z distribution. Z critical value at a level of significance of 5% is = 1.65, N = 271(remained in the study). The following are the output results (Table 3) of the statements that entered the model.

**Table 3- Significance of Hit ratio – Steps**

	Statement	Hit Ratio %	Z value	Critical Value	Result
<b>Stage 1</b>					
Step 1	Personality is crucial	61.99	3.94	1.65	Significant
Step 2	Money hungry, Uninteresting no challenge	61.62	3.82	1.65	Significant
Step 3	Much traveling	62.36	4.06	1.65	Significant
<b>Stage 2</b>					
	All Statements	78.2	9.28	1.65	Significant

The three statements that were reported in stage 1 as well as all statements that were tested in stage 2 showed significant results at a level of significance of 5%. The Z results are in harmony with that of the coefficient of determination ones and both are in support of the research hypothesis, the personal trait play a significant role on Chinese students' perception of sales profession as a career?

### ***Conclusions, Recommendations and Implications***

Results showed significant evidence that Chinese students' perception of the sales job and sales people is not neutral, which is consistent with the findings of other studies, primarily for the United States. However, their perception is driven by ideas / concepts that are different from what have been documented in earlier studies. Gender, major, and class were not significant in this case. On the other hand, our analysis supported the hypothesized relationships pertaining to cultural and sociological differences. From this perspective, the current study not only strengthens existing research in this field but also provides substantial contribution to the literature, because China is one of the leading nations in the global economy, and culture and social values play a major role in its peoples' lives. While study showed evidence that most college students in China have a negative perception of personal selling, there are two general perspectives that seem to be prevalent. The first view characterizes the sales person as a conman or one who sells useless stuff. The salesperson is said to be thick skinned able to accept many no's for an answer when selling products. The second view manifests the sales person as a person who is talkative, persistent and hardworking. These views seem to be in line with ideas about the sales perception in other part of the world (Barat and Spillan, 2009).

### ***Implications***

At the university level, it seems that high school students have no clear knowledge about personal selling, and therefore the marketing/selling curricula should cultivate students' interests and develop their potential; this is done by providing a learning environment conducive to personal selling and career development. Curricula should focus on skills to develop face-to-face communications and include theories and practices about selling that help students in networking and bring them into the world of selling. This can help the students to realize if they are suitable for this field or not.

At the professional level, businesses' good communications with universities complement the latter efforts in cultivating potential sales persons. They can provide some extra-curricular opportunities for the students to participate in personal selling practicum, and perhaps a reward system too. Scholarships for potential students will cultivate their interest towards the field and build loyalty towards the company, which makes a good foundation for students' future career that benefits the industry.

### ***Limitations of Study***

There are three practical problems associated with this study. First, data is a primary type, which is taken from a survey; it is subject to sample errors; second, cost and time were the primary factors limiting our sample size to 271 observations only; and third, the external validity of the model was not tested and needs to be addressed. Accordingly, it is recommended to use this model in studying students' perception in other countries.

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**APPENDIX A**

Survey of Students’ Perceptions of Personal Selling as a Career

**PART A:** Please write down in the boxes below the THREE (3) first thoughts (one word or phrase) that come to your mind about the words “PERSONAL SELLING” [i.e., related to the characteristics of *salespeople* and/or *sales job tasks*] and also evaluate each written thought as being either “positive,” “neutral,” or “negative” by checking (√) the appropriate cell.

Thoughts	Negative	Neutral	Positive
1.			
2.			
3.			

**PART B:** Please indicate your interest in a selling job after graduation (Check one):

- Definitely *would* like a selling job
- Probably *would* like a selling job
- Don’t know*
- Probably *wouldn’t* like a selling job
- Definitely *wouldn’t* like a selling job

**PART C:** Please indicate your degree of agreement—disagreement with the following statements by putting a check mark (√) in the appropriate cell.

I associate a job in personal selling with:	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Frustration					
Insincerity and deceit					
Low status and low prestige					
Much traveling					
Salespeople being “money hungry”					
Low job security					
High pressure forcing people to buy unwanted goods					
“Just a job” not a “career”					
Uninteresting/no challenge					
No need for creativity					
Personality is crucial					
Too little monetary reward					
Interferes with home life					
“Easy to get” job					
Inappropriate career option					
Difficult to advance into upper management positions					

**PART D:** Demographic profile:

- What is your gender?       Male       Female
- What is your class standing?
- Freshman     Sophomore       Junior       Senior       Graduate student
- What is your major? (Check one)
- Business      [Please specify: \_\_\_\_\_]
- Non-Business [Please specify: \_\_\_\_\_]
- Do you have anybody in your family or relatives who has or had a career as a salesperson?
- Yes       No

THANKS AGAIN FOR COMPLETING THIS SURVEY!