

The Structural Relationship among Students' Perceptions of Sales-Related Skills, Sales Careers, and Views of Others and the Intention to Pursue Sales Careers in Malaysia: The Mediating Effect of Feelings towards Selling
(*Hubungan Struktural antara Persepsi Pelajar terhadap Kemahiran Berkaitan-Jualan, Kerjaya Jualan, dan Pandangan Orang Lain dan Niat untuk Meneruskan Kerjaya Jualan di Malaysia: Kesan Pengantaraan Perasaan Terhadap Jualan*)

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ABSTRACT

Companies are increasingly looking for sales professionals. However, most university students are hesitant to consider sales as a prospective job option after graduation. Understanding the determining factors that influence graduates' willingness to work in sales in Malaysia is critical in persuading more students to engage in sales career and restoring market demand for sales employment. Thus, this study investigates the relationship between perceptions of sales-related skills, perceptions of sales careers, and perceptions of how others view salespeople and the intention to pursue sales career among students in Malaysia's universities. The effect of feelings towards selling as a mediator is also explored. The study analyses data from 276 business undergraduates using a structural equation modeling approach. The research findings indicate that perceptions of sales-related skills, perceptions of sales careers, and perceptions of how others view salespeople have positive impacts on intention to pursue sales career. There was also evidence that shows feelings towards selling influence intention to pursue sales career directly and indirectly. This study adds to the body of knowledge regarding sales education and provides universities practical insights into the factors determining student intentions to pursue sales jobs.

Keywords: Perceptions of sales-related skills; perceptions of sales careers; perceptions of how others view salespeople; feelings towards selling; intention to pursue sales career; Malaysia

ABSTRAK

Profesional jualan kini semakin dicari oleh banyak syarikat. Namun, pelajar universiti masih ragu-ragu untuk mempertimbangkan jualan sebagai prospektif pekerjaan pilihan selepas tamat pengajian. Pemahaman mengenai faktor penentu yang mempengaruhi kesediaan graduan untuk bekerja dalam bidang jualan di Malaysia adalah penting untuk memujuk lebih ramai pelajar untuk memilih bidang jualan sebagai kerjaya dan memulihkan permintaan pasaran untuk pekerjaan jualan. Oleh itu, kajian ini mengkaji hubungan antara persepsi kemahiran berkaitan jualan, persepsi kerjaya jualan, dan persepsi orang lain terhadap kerjaya jualan dan niat untuk meneruskan kerjaya jualan dalam kalangan pelajar di universiti di Malaysia. Selain itu, kesan perasaan terhadap kerjaya jualan sebagai pengantara juga diterokai. Kajian ini menganalisis data daripada 276 mahasiswa perniagaan menggunakan pendekatan structural equation modeling. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahawa persepsi kemahiran berkaitan jualan, persepsi kerjaya jualan, dan persepsi orang lain terhadap kerjaya jualan mempunyai kesan yang positif ke atas niat untuk menceburi kerjaya jualan. Terdapat juga bukti yang menunjukkan bahawa perasaan terhadap kerjaya jualan mempengaruhi niat untuk meneruskan kerjaya jualan secara langsung dan tidak langsung. Kajian ini menyumbang kepada literatur pendidikan jualan dan memberikan pandangan praktikal kepada universiti-universiti mengenai faktor-faktor yang menentukan niat pelajar untuk meneruskan pekerjaan jualan.

Kata kunci: persepsi kemahiran berkaitan jualan; persepsi kerjaya jualan; persepsi orang lain terhadap kerjaya jualan; perasaan terhadap kerjaya jualan; niat untuk meneruskan kerjaya jualan; Malaysia

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INTRODUCTION

There has been a positive demand for salespeople in recent years to meet the continuing trend in field sales. This trend is likely to continue as businesses confront ongoing challenges in maintaining a market share and profitability in the future. According to a recent Labour Force Report, the number people employed under the service and sales workers are growing positively from 2016 to 2018, with 3,176,300; 3,212,600; and 3,422,800 persons respectively. However, it declined slightly in 2019 to 3,411,600 persons. There is an increase in 2020 to 3,632,300 persons, but it declined slightly to 3,611,500 persons in 2021 (Department of Statistics Malaysia 2022). Although there is high demand for sales positions, it is becoming increasingly challenging for companies to attract qualified candidates (Cummins & Peltier 2020). A report in *The Wall Street Journal* on July 14, 2021 noted that there is a high demand for salespeople because as most companies emerge from the pandemic, they are switching to a growth mode. However, recruiters state that they are having trouble persuading people to take up sales career. Many industries in Malaysia are trying to convince graduates to take sales jobs in order to boost their businesses' potential. Sales professions can be a good opportunity to many graduating students because of the high request from the industry. As a result, it is the responsibility of business educators to enlighten students about job prospects in sales (Deeter-Schmelz et al. 2020).

Universities, particularly those that offer business degrees, play a key role in ensuring that enough competent salespeople are available to meet market demand. To provide excellent customer service without using aggressive selling techniques, students need to understand that sales no longer mean making cold calls and using high-pressure tactics. Instead, salespeople should be seen as trusted consultants or advisors (Thomas 2021). Several researchers (e.g., Deeter-Schmelz et al. 2020) stated that newly recruited salespeople need broad knowledge and many traits and personal attributes, including the capability to grasp customers' wants and expectations and the skill to solve problems (Chowdhury & Miah 2019; Deeter-Schmelz et al. 2020).

Although graduates are an excellent source of salespeople, the poor reputation of salespeople causes most business students to see sales as an undesirable career path (Cummins & Peltier 2020; Deeter-Schmelz et al. 2020). While businesses hope to attract undergraduates as salespeople and possible future sales managers, evidence shows that undergraduates have negative attitude toward selling (Cummins & Peltier 2020). According to Karakaya et al. (2011, p. 24), approximately 58% of business students in their study believed that pursuing a career in sales would be a complete waste of their time. Similarly, in Malaysia, although there were growing numbers of sales and marketing job offers, graduates were not attracted because sales jobs are associated with sales targets and the incentive payments are based on the sales achieved (Nghah et al. 2019).

Evidence suggests that students choose a course based on how they view its social or professional prestige (Allen 2014). Other studies showed that students who were exposed to a real professional sales job were likely to have positive feelings about pursuing sales career (Bahhouth et al. 2014). Employment criteria such as skills, talents, and experience also play a crucial role in choosing sales career (Rahman et al. 2014). For example, some students believed that fields such as accounting and information systems were well-suited to introverts and also paid well, while outgoing students would be attracted to disciplines such as marketing because they sought more glamorous jobs and creative experiences.

Previous research revealed that a lack of interest in sales careers among university students was due to a misunderstanding of what selling entails (Karakaya et al. 2014) and gaps in understanding which skills were required for marketing and sales jobs (Chowdhury & Miah 2019). Surprisingly, a majority of parents perceived sales as an unethical career that should be avoided after graduation (Fogel et al. 2012). Recent research on student career choices in sales indicated that most students view sales as a negative career that required cold calling (Cummins & Peltier 2020; Deeter-Schmelz et al. 2020). According to Jobber et al. (2019), many graduates entering the sales force lack a clear grasp of what the position comprises and have the misconception that it is a tough, competitive career where supply outpaces demand. As a result, the sales industry frequently experiences high turnover (Boles et al. 2012). A poor perception of the traits connected with sales jobs and salespeople contributes to the negative attitude toward sales. Several studies done in the 1950s and 1960s showed that salespeople were not held in high regard (Ditz 1967). A 1997 study by Cohen found that students had a poor impression of salespeople and the profession. HireDNA (2021) claimed that a lack of student awareness of sales careers was to blame for unfavourable and negative perceptions. According to Karakaya (2014), one reason students hesitated to choose sales career was because sales were typically linked with dishonesty, unethical behavior, and manipulation to keep a firm going. Thus, selling activities were often associated with negative images of aggressiveness, deceitfulness, and self-centeredness. Interestingly, the study by Karakaya (2014) found that perceptions of sales job attributes and feelings about selling were different according to culture and nationality. The study found that in Turkey, selling appeared to be considered a more respectable career than in the United States and Switzerland.

Despite the promising future of the sales industry, both the general public and students appear to have unfavourable social stigmas about the social perception of salespeople, the sales profession, and selling. Thus, many sales positions are unfilled. Although several studies have suggested that students' perceptions and intentions to pursue sales careers may vary by culture, these topics remained largely unexplored in developing countries (Diaconescu 2019), unlike in developed countries such as the United States (Cummins & Peltier 2020) and the United Kingdom (Karakaya et al. 2011). In order to fully comprehend students' desire to work in sales in Malaysia, there are some crucial understanding gaps that must be filled. Previous studies acknowledged that sales and marketing educators must explore the factors influencing student intentions to pursue sales careers in order to improve their programmes and curricula and persuade more students to choose sales career.

The sales education literature is comparatively underdeveloped and slow in responding to the needs of students and employers (Cummins & Peltier 2020). Most prior studies focused on the direct influence of students' perceptions of sales careers and their intentions to pursue sales careers (Cummins & Peltier 2020; Weber 2015). Studies that empirically tested feelings towards selling as a mediating factor in the relationship between perceptions of sales careers and students' intention to pursue sales career are few.

Based on these critical gaps, the purpose of this research is to a) examine students' perceptions of sales-related skills, their perceptions of selling as a career, and the perceptions of how others view salespeople on students' feelings towards selling, and b) examine the mediating effect of feelings towards selling between these perceptions and the students' intention to pursue sales career. This study is required due to the critical role of salespeople in the company's revenues and the high demand for salespeople. The study's findings will enhance awareness and provide new insights into how internal factors interact with one another and influence students' intentions toward sales positions, thereby overcoming the negative societal stigma associated with sales profession. This paper begins with a literature review on relevant theory: S-O-R model and hypothesis development. The methodology used in this study is explained in the following part, which is followed by data analysis and a discussion of the findings. This paper concludes with implications, limitations, and suggestions for future researchers.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

STIMULUS-ORGANISM-RESPONSE (S-O-R) MODEL

In this study, Mehrabian & Russell's (1974) S-O-R model is used, and the research model is represented in Figure 1. The S-O-R model comprises internal and external stimuli creating emotional processes resulting in behavioural response which offers a promising framework in explaining student behaviour. The Stimulus (S) are cues that trigger the internal states of the individual that leads to an action. These cues are categorized as internal and external stimuli; internal stimulus pertains to the consumer's characteristics whereas external stimuli include situational and marketing influences (Amarnath & Jaidev 2021). In this model, the organism acts as an intermediary between the stimulus and response (Eroglu et al. 2001). Organism (O) being the internal process taking place in reaction to an influence or stimulus is followed by the resulting behaviour as a Response (R). This study contributes to the knowledge base of S-O-R model by extending its application in student behavior research to determine the association of perceptions of sales-related skills, perceptions of sales careers, and perceptions of how others view salespeople (Stimuli) as antecedents for feelings towards selling (Organism) and these with intention to pursue sales career among students (Response) along with the mediating effect of feelings towards selling in the relationships.

PERCEPTIONS OF SALES-RELATED SKILLS AND FEELINGS TOWARDS SELLING

Since the late 1950s, sales have been perceived as a less desirable career (Ebey 1957). Past research revealed that the negative perceptions of selling have persisted across educational exposure (Bristow et al. 2006) and nationality (Karakaya et al. 2011). In recent years, many studies have researched the intentions of university students to pursue sales profession. This is because graduates are often perceived to have the motivation and professional skills to thrive in a shifting sales landscape. To date, studies on sales-related skills that most businesses look for in new sales hires have gotten little attention (Deeter-Schmelz et al. 2020). Although business is the major most commonly offered in institutions of higher education, it is not only limited to sales course, but also includes non-sales-related courses such as accounting, management, international business, human resource management, and logistics. Students who major in these non-sales courses may possess less interest in sales and they are unlikely to attend any courses or training in sales (Inks & Avila 2018; Spillan et al. 2007). This is aligned with Weber's research (2015), who discovered that students in college possess misconceptions about sales and hence are less enthusiastic about pursuing sales profession.

Studies also found that students' perceptions of sales improved when they have exposure to professional sales programmes or comparable educational forums. Consistent with Bristow et al.'s study (2006) which revealed that exposure to different sales-oriented educational offerings, such as information on sales careers, viewing how a

salesperson undergoes customer orientation, or learning how others view sales and sales skills, was likely to affect their intention to engage in sales profession. They also asserted that sales skills, for instance, could be fostered through sales-related courses, and that once students gained the skills, they could deal with client complaints, successfully complete transactions, be better listeners, and grasp the importance of customer needs. Additionally, it was found that sales and marketing students had the greatest desire to pursue sales career, and subsequently followed by students from other business disciplines (Deeter-Schmelz et al. 2020). Also, research showed that students are more likely to pursue sales career when they are aware that the sale activities, they would be engaging in are compatible with their skills (Cummins & Peltier 2020). Therefore,

H₁ Students' perceptions of sales-related skills have a positive influence on feelings towards selling.

PERCEPTIONS OF HOW OTHERS VIEW SALESPEOPLE AND FEELINGS TOWARDS SELLING

Another aspect that shapes students' perceptions of or feelings about selling and sales careers is reference groups, such as parents, friends, and instructors. A lot of parents perceive that sales is not a genuine profession and, thus, discourage their children from engaging in sales profession (Fogel et al. 2012). According to Bahhouth et al. (2014), students who have prior connections or interactions with a professional salesperson or those who have parents or guardians who work in sales are anticipated to have positive feeling about sales career, while those who do not have any interactions with people who work in sales are more likely to view sales negatively.

Furthermore, many families have a strong career tradition, where children pursue careers that mirror their parents' or relatives' careers (Spillan et al. 2007). A study found that students who have relatives or family members who worked in sales, exhibited some significant disparities in a number of factors (Spillan et al. 2007); implying that the views of others, particularly family members, may influence students' thinking about sales career. Additionally, it was shown that when students were exposed to people such as a professional salesperson, it was highly likely that their perceptions about sales and selling would change (Cummins & Peltier 2020). It was also posited that a combination of factors might be significant. For instance, students who were aware of the positive characteristics of sales careers (e.g., excitement, satisfaction, security, career advancement, and challenging work) plus certain characteristics of salespersons (i.e., sincerity or deceptiveness, sales-focused or customer-focused) plus others' views of salespersons (e.g., admirable, prestigious, trustworthy) might find the sales profession appealing and consider it as a prospective career (Spillan et al. 2007).

They might have been given exposure to the actual standards of sales and know what it took to achieve success in sales, therefore they have no unfavourable perceptions about sales career (Sojka et al. 2000). Teachers who provided an accurate view of professional selling may also influence students' perspectives about sales (Bristow et al. 2006). A study asserted a similar stand that the greatest influence on sales and sales career decisions was parents, followed by siblings; the reference group that yield the least amount of effect was friends (Inks & Avila 2018). Therefore,

H₂ Perceptions of how others view salespeople have a positive influence on feelings towards selling.

PERCEPTIONS OF SELLING AS A CAREER AND FEELINGS TOWARDS SELLING

People have distinct perceptions about sales as a professional career. Spillan et al. (2007) showed that students had diverse perceptions of prospective salespeople and who they were as individuals. They also discovered that gender did not make any significant difference in students' perceptions of sales careers; both genders had the same ideas about selling as a career. Nevertheless, they also found that men had a stronger desire than women to seek a profession in sales. Dubinsky (1981) explored perceptions of 24 job attributes of salespersons and students. Their findings showed that students had more positive perceptions than salespersons, particularly regarding positive attributes of sales career such as the opportunity to connect with individuals from various backgrounds, travel, and progress quickly within a company.

Additionally, a study by Castleberry (1990) suggested that sales career was intriguing and offered significant diversity and autonomy, attributes that could entice students to choose sales career. Later, in a study that examined the influence of sales-related university courses on students' perceptions, it was demonstrated that sales career was regarded as rewarding, satisfying, and exciting and that it could provide many career opportunities (Bristow et al. 2006). Moreover, high salaries and good perks may be inadequate to entice a lot of students. Thus, a realistic description of a type of work and good training are the most likely ways for new recruits to have the right perception and expectation about sales. The stigmatising normative views held toward salespeople degrade salesperson status and reduce the likelihood of becoming a salesperson (Cummins & Peltier 2020). Perceptions of sales careers have larger effects that go beyond individual students (Spillan et al. 2007). Recruiting future

salespersons is crucial to the growth and longevity of a firm. Negative perception of sales careers will lead to high employee turnover (Boles et al. 2012) and consequently influence the stability of a company's revenue. Therefore,

H₃ Students' perceptions of selling as a career has a positive influence on feelings towards selling.

FEELINGS TOWARDS SELLING AND INTENTION TO PURSUE SALES CAREER

A feeling is "a response to a stimulus". It is "an evaluation of, or judgement about, a specific object or thing" (Sandelands 1988). Simply put, a feeling is the outcome of the brain processing an emotion and allocating that emotion a certain meaning (LeDoux 2012). In the early 1960s, it was discovered that students typically had negative feelings about selling and that various misunderstandings about selling were present almost everywhere (Ditz 1967). However, in recent years, students perceive selling and sales careers in more positive ways (Karakaya et al. 2011). The study also revealed that students' feelings about sales were definitely positive because selling created a sense of achievement and could be thrilling, meaningful, productive, fascinating, and personally fulfilling. The findings concurred with other scholars (Deeter-Schmelz et al. 2020; Morrison. 2021).

Although the sales function is important in every firm, research that explores how people perceive selling as a career is still scarce except in the United States (Cummins & Peltier 2020; Fournier et al. 2014). There are a few studies exploring the influence of students' perceptions and its connection to their intention to pursue sales careers. Barat and Spillan (2009) explored discrepancies in perceptions among students from the United States, Peru, and Guatemala. They discovered that students from the United States perceived sales careers more positively compared to students from Peru and Guatemala. Karakaya et al. (2011, 2014) studied whether there were any differences among students in the United States, Turkey, and Switzerland. They found mixed findings and revealed that students from the United States and Switzerland were more reluctant to pursue a career in sales than students from Turkey.

However, none of these studies explained why such differences occur. Cummins & Peltier (2020) asserted that the influence of students' perceptions on the intention to pursue sales career is fairly well-studied for students in the United States. Therefore, similar studies in other countries are needed, especially about students' feelings and perceptions of salespersons and sales careers (Fournier et al. 2014). Though there were various works that attempted to understand how and why students choose to attend certain colleges and take up certain fields of study, there was little research on students' feelings about sales as a field of study or a job prospect (Inks & Avila 2018). Generally, it was found that college students had negative feelings about sales career (Bristow et al. 2006; Spillan et al. 2007). More recent study by Ab Hamid et al. (2022) and Scott and Beuk (2020) revealed that student's intentions to pursue sales profession are positively influenced by their feelings about selling. Bahhouth et al. (2014) asserted that students who had never met a professional salesperson were more inclined to look at sales career in negative ways. Hence, these negative feelings may influence students' intentions to engage in sales profession. Therefore,

H₄ Feelings towards selling have a positive influence on the intention to pursue a sales career.

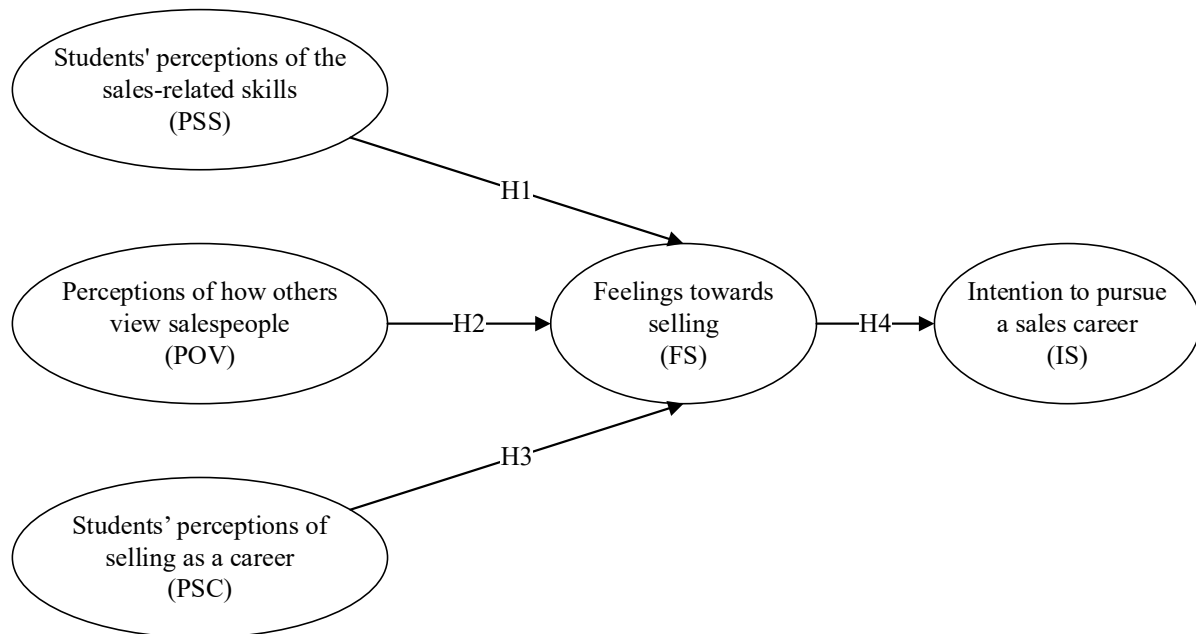
THE INDIRECT EFFECTS OF FEELINGS TOWARDS SELLING

In addition to the direct hypotheses proposed above, this study investigated the indirect effects of students' perceptions of sales-related skills, perceptions of how others view salespeople, and perceptions of selling as sales career on the intention to pursue sales career mediated by feelings towards selling. As described above, most prior studies focused on the direct influence of students' perceptions on the intention to pursue sales career, such as the perceptions of sales-related skills (Bristow et al. 2006; Inks & Avila 2018; Fogel et al. 2012; Inks & Avila 2018; Paa & McWhirter 2000; Sojka et al. 2000; Spillan et al. 2007); and the perceptions of sales career (Bristow et al. 2006; Spillan et al. 2007; Castleberry 1990; Dubinsky 1981). To the best of our knowledge, a study that focuses on the mediating role of feelings towards selling is still absent.

The mediating relationship of feelings towards selling is explained by the stimulus-organism-response (S-O-R) model. Mehrabian & Russell's (1974) S-O-R model, posits that the cues that trigger the internal states of the individual can lead to an action. In this model, the organism acts as an intermediary between the stimulus and response (Eroglu et al. 2001). Organism (O) being the internal process taking place in reaction to an influence or stimulus is followed by the resulting behaviour as a Response (R) (Kim & Johnson 2016). This implies that the effect of sales-related skills, how others view salespeople and selling as a career (the stimulus) on intention to pursue sales career (the response) are mediated by the feelings towards selling (the organism). Additionally, it is argued that students' perceptions of sales-related skills, how others view salespeople and perceptions of selling as a career influence feeling toward selling. Therefore,

- H5a Feelings towards selling mediate the relationship of students' perceptions of sales related skills and the intention to pursue sales career.
- H5b Feelings towards selling mediate the relationship of the perceptions of how others view salespeople and the intention to pursue sales career.
- H5c Feelings towards selling mediate the relationship of students' perceptions of selling as a career and the intention to pursue sales career.

Thus, the conceptual framework of this study is as depicted in Figure 1.



- H5a: PSS ▼ FS▼ IS*
- H5b: POV ▼ FS▲ IS*
- H5c: PSC▼ FS▼ IS*

FIGURE 1. Conceptual framework

METHODOLOGY

SAMPLING TECHNIQUE

This study collected information from students in business programmes at universities. The probability sampling is not viable for this research because the population is not well defined with vast sampling frame (Cooper & Schindler 2014). Hence a nonprobability snowball sampling method was used to generate more respondents, which was based on recommendations from original individuals (Etikan et al. 2016). Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, data were gathered via an online survey, which was an efficient and convenient option (Lefever et al. 2007). Research data were collected at two public and one private universities in Klang Valley, Malaysia as this location represent the most densely populated area with many universities (Hashim et al. 2013) from students in business programmes that offered majors in management, accounting, marketing, and finance. To increase the number of responses, invitations to respond were also disseminated by authorised class representatives across social media platforms (e.g., WhatsApp and Telegram). The targeted respondents received a link to the survey so they could complete the electronic questionnaire. The respondents were encouraged to recommend and share the link. Using this data collection method, the electronic questionnaire was answered by 276 students.

MEASUREMENT

The questionnaire had three parts. The first part had filtering questions and asked for general information that would show the respondents' current understanding of sales jobs and their eligibility to participate in the study.

The second part had measurements of variables, including students' perceptions of the sales-related skills, perceptions of how others view salespeople, perceptions of selling as a career, feelings towards selling, and the intention to pursue sales career. The last part of the questionnaire collected the respondents' demographic information, such as age, ethnicity, type of programme in which they enrolled, and year of study. The questionnaire was designed using items from past research. All variables used the five-point Likert scale (5-strongly agree, 4-agree, 3-neutral, 2-disagree, 1-strongly disagree) and were measured as unidimensional constructs. The predictor variables, namely students' perceptions of sales-related skills (e.g., recognize the importance of understanding customer needs), perceptions of how others view salespeople (e.g., most salespeople are trustworthy and honest), and perceptions of selling as a career (e.g., sales-related career would be fun and exciting), were measured by adapting six, four, and five items from Bristow et al. (2006), respectively. Following six and four items from Karakaya et al. (2011), respectively, the measurements for feelings toward selling (e.g., selling gives me a sense of accomplishment) and the intention to pursue sales career (e.g., obtaining a position in sales is a priority after graduation) were undertaken. All the measurements were validated as unidimensional construct. The partial least squares SEM (PLS-SEM) method was chosen because it estimates complex models with many constructs, indicator variables, and structural paths without imposing distributional assumptions on the data (Hair et al. 2019).

FINDINGS

The demographic profile of the respondents shows that 39.8% were male and 59.8% were female. The majority of the respondents (nearly 63%) were Malay. Chinese and Indians constituted 23% and 14% of the respondents respectively. The major age group was 24 years (24%), followed by 22 years (18%) and 23 years (15%). Most of the respondents were majoring in marketing (43%), followed by management (27%) and accounting (18%).

Given that both the dependent and independent variables in this study were derived from cross-sectional data collected from a single respondent using the same set of questionnaires, there is a chance that common technique bias could inflate the strength of the connections between these variables (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Several techniques that are normally utilized in social science research are adopted to resolve this issue during the research design phase. The first step in mitigating common method bias is to use procedural measures (Podsakoff et al., 2003), such as choosing respondents who have the necessary knowledge and skills to respond to the questionnaire and assuring them that their answers would be private and independent of any organisation. Second, by modifying pre-existing survey items from earlier research, pre-testing the survey, and updating the survey before fieldwork, the possibility for bias owing to context effects is also reduced (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Third, the VIF scores for every construct are all less than 10, proving that CMV is not a significant issue in this study (Hair et al., 2019).

MEASUREMENT MODEL EVALUATION

This study used Smart PLS-SEM 3.0 software as the primary statistical inferential analysis tool. PLS-SEM analysis involves a two-step approach: assessment of the measurement model and assessment of the structural model to test the hypothesized relationships (Hair et al. 2019). As shown in Table 1, the Cronbach's alpha of all of the constructs ranged from 0.700 to 0.926; implying that the indicators used in this study were highly reliable (Hair et al. 2019). The item loading was assessed based on the common rule of thumb to be 0.60 or higher. Based on the results, few items were deleted due to low loading. The composite reliability of the constructs ranged from 0.807 to 0.945, and this exceeded the cut-off level of 0.70, demonstrating that there was no major issue in the convergent validity of the scales.

TABLE 1. The analysis of the measurement model's results (n=276)

Construct		Loadings	Cronbach Alpha	AVE	CR
PSS	PSSP6	0.763	0.700	0.512	0.807
	PSSP7	0.771			
	PSSP9	0.653			
	PSSP11	0.667			
POV	PSSP18	0.800	0.774	0.688	0.869
	PSSP19	0.869			
	PSSP21	0.819			
PSC	PSSP24	0.780	0.795	0.617	0.866
	PSSP25	0.781			
	PSSP26	0.783			
	PSSP27	0.799			
FS	FTS62	0.717	0.700	0.524	0.815
	FTS65	0.734			
	FTS66	0.716			

IS	FTS67	0.729	0.926	0.812	0.945
	ITSS71	0.894			
	ITSS72	0.898			
	ITSS73	0.927			
	ITSS74	0.885			

Notes: AVE, average variance extracted; CR, composite reliability

Additionally, the average variance extracted (AVE) of the constructs ranged from 0.512 to 0.811, suggesting that the scales met the convergent validity requirements and above the cut-off threshold of 0.50 (Hair et al. 2019). The Fornell-Lareker criterion, cross loadings, and heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) criteria of the items were applied to estimate discriminant validity. All items were subsequently analysed for cross loading to ensure discriminant validity. All of the loadings were larger in the respective constructs than in the other constructs, pursuant to the cross-loading data. The findings of this study met the threshold criteria for an HTMT of 0.85, aligned with the HTMT results (Henseler et al. 2015). Likewise, all of the variables' correlations were smaller than their AVE square root estimations (see Tables 2 and 3). Hence, this study concluded that the discriminant validity was ascertained.

TABLE 2. Discriminant validity indicating AVE and correlations

	FS	IS	POV	PSS	PSC
1. FS	0.72				
2. IS	0.21	0.90			
3. POV	0.44	0.09	0.83		
4. PSS	0.44	0.21	0.19	0.71	
5. PSC	0.48	0.15	0.46	0.36	0.78

TABLE 3. Discriminant validity evaluation using Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio approach

	FS	IS	POV	PSS	PSC
1. FS					
2. IS	0.24				
3. POV	0.58	0.15			
4. PSS	0.61	0.27	0.293		
5. PSC	0.62	0.17	0.581	0.47	

STRUCTURAL MODEL EVALUATION

The variance inflation and the tolerance values were determined before the structural model was assessed. The variance inflation factors (VIF) were found to be range in value of 1.434 and 4.182, which was lower than the threshold of 5 and indicated that there were no severe problems (Hair et al. 2019). Thus, the collinearity among predictor constructs was not a concern in this research. The significance of the path coefficients was tested using a bootstrapping approach (cases=276, resample=5,000). The result appeared that the R² value for feelings towards selling (FS) was 0.373 and for the intention to pursue sales career (IS) was 0.048. According to Hair et al. (2019), an R² value of 0.26 indicates a significant predictive power, of 0.13 indicates an average predictive power, and of 0.02 indicates a weak predictive power. Therefore, the model demonstrated a high to weak explanatory capability based on the above result. The results showed that the effect sizes (f²) of the predictors ranged from 0.050 to 0.130, indicating the presence of small to medium effects (Henseler et al. 2015).

TABLE 4. The analysis of the structural model's results

	Relationship	Std. Beta	Std.error	t-value	F ²	BCI LL	BCI UL	Decision
H ₁	PSS ⊕FS	0.307	0.051	5.998	0.130	0.201	0.371	Supported
H ₂	POV ⊕FS	0.268	0.056	4.809	0.089	0.172	0.362	Supported
H ₃	PSC ⊕FS	0.243	0.053	4.594	0.066	0.144	0.327	Supported

H ₄	FS	IS		0.219	0.057	3.847	0.050	0.121	0.307	Supported
H _{5a}	PSS	FS	IS	0.067	0.022	3.016		0.033	0.103	Supported
H _{5b}	POV	FS	IS	0.059	0.019	3.156		0.033	0.092	Supported
H _{5c}	PSC	FS	IS	0.053	0.019	2.735		0.024	0.085	Supported

Note: BCI=Bias Corrected Confidence Interval, UL=Upper Level, LL=Lower Level

Table 4 indicates that all the relationship supported the hypotheses' positive (+) direction. Critical values for a one-tailed test were 1.645 (significant level=5%) (Hair et al. 2019). From the structural model results in Table 4 and Figure 2, PSS had the largest influence on the FA ($\beta=0.307$, $t=5.998$, $p<.05$), followed by POV ($\beta=0.268$, $t=4.809$, $p<.05$) and PSC ($\beta=0.243$, $t=4.594$, $p<.05$); the findings supported H₁, H₂, and H₃, respectively. Additionally, the findings indicated that FS ($\beta=0.219$, $t=3.847$, $p<.05$) had a significant positive influence on IS. Hence, H₄ was supported.

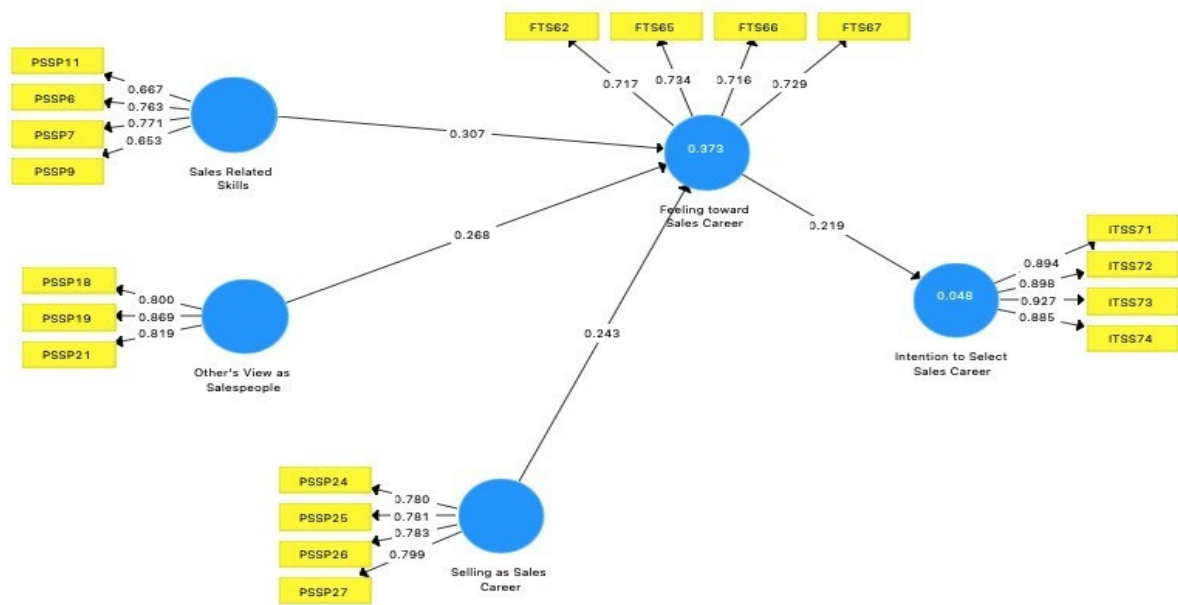


FIGURE 2. Findings of the Model

To test the mediating role of FS in the relationship between the PSS, POV, PSC and the IS, the structural path coefficients and statistical significance were estimated using the PLS method and bootstrapping technique on the full model in this study for both direct and indirect relationships (Hair et al. 2019; Preacher & Hayes 2008). In mediation hypotheses, the indirect effect is significant when its confidence interval of upper and lower limits does not include zero (Preacher & Hayes 2008). The results of the bootstrapping procedure for mediation hypotheses showed that all three indirect hypotheses were significant at t-values >1.96 and p-values <0.05. The bootstrapping analysis showed that all three indirect effects, $\beta=0.067$, $\beta=0.059$ and $\beta=0.053$, are significant with t-values of 3.016, 3.156 and 2.735, respectively. It was noted that the confidence interval for these relationships ([LL=0.033, UL=0.103], [LL=0.033, UL=0.092], [LL=0.024, U=0.085]) did not straddle zero, indicating that there were significant mediation effects. Specifically, the relationship of H_{5b} for POV toward IS via FS had the largest path coefficient at ($\beta=0.059$ at $p<.05$), followed by H_{5a} in the relationship of PSS toward IS via FS with ($\beta=0.067$ at $p<.05$) and finally PSC toward IS via FS hypothesized as H_{5c} with ($\beta=0.053$ at $p<.05$). Thus, the hypotheses H_{5a}, H_{5b}, and H_{5c} were supported. The results of mediation analysis are shown in Table 4.

DISCUSSION

This research was conducted to test the relationship between perceptions of sales-related skills, perceptions of the views of others about salespeople, and perceptions of sales career and students' feelings towards selling, and to determine if feelings towards selling were related to the intention to pursue sales career among students at higher educational institutions. The analysis demonstrated that students' perceptions regarding sales-related skills, perceptions of selling as a career, and the views of others could influence their feelings about sales career. Furthermore, this research also unveils the fact that among the three factors, students' perception of the sales-

related skills is the most influential factor in relation to feelings towards selling, whereas students' perception of selling as a career is the least influential. Interestingly, perceptions of how others view salespeople are the second influential factor promoting feelings towards selling. This indicates that perceptions of the views of others about salespeople are as crucial as students' perceptions of the sales-related skills and the perception of selling as a career.

These findings were aligned with past studies that found students with misconceptions about sales have less enthusiasm to pursue sales profession (Weber 2015). Additionally, reference groups such as parents and instructors, prior interactions with professional salespeople (Bahhouth et al. 2014), and perceptions of others of salespersons (Spillan et al. 2007) could also make sales career appealing to students and influence their sales career decisions. Cummins Peltier's study (2020) concluded that perceived sales knowledge was positively related to perceptions of salespeople and the sales profession. A study analysing help wanted ads discovered that adding information on relevant job traits enhanced respondents' positive impressions of sales jobs (Yüce & Highhouse 1998). It was also noted that a small change in students' levels of self-efficacy and perceived behavioral control led to significant changes in the intent to pursue sales career and performance. Other than that, Bristow et al. (2006) found that attributes associated with professional salesperson and sales career, such as excitement, rewards, sincerity, career advancement, and security, could potentially appeal to someone who might choose sales career. Thus, this study suggested that if students perceived sales career in a positive way that concurred with the views of others, and if they perceived that they had the sales-related skills needed to perform the requisite tasks for successful selling, then there was great chance that students would have pleasant feeling about sales career.

The findings also suggested that pleasant feeling towards selling could positively influence the intention to pursue sales career. The result was aligned with the findings of previous studies, which recognized that consumers' affective and cognitive perceptions had a significant influence on purchase intention (Boers et al. 2018). Interestingly, it was also found that students intending to pursue sales positions were likely to view sales careers more favourably (Deeter-Schmelz et al. 2020). Cummins & Peltier (2020) suggested that perceived sales knowledge and perceptions of the sales profession were significant and positively related to the intention to pursue sales career.

Just as a person's attitude might be shaped by feelings and emotions evoked by behavior, the marketing strategy used by universities in promoting marketing and sales courses should focus on understanding students' emotional needs to generate a pleasurable experience and stimulate their positive intentions toward sales jobs. Constant reinforcement of the association between pleasant feelings and sales jobs will increase the likelihood that students will experience positive feelings when confronted with marketing and sales job opportunities.

Based on the results shown in Table 4, feelings towards selling had a role in a mediating relationship between students' perceptions of sales-related skills and the intention to pursue sales career (H_{5a}); perceptions of how others view salespeople and the intention to pursue sales career (H_{5b}); and perceptions of selling as a career and the intention to pursue sales career (H_{5c}). All the tested hypotheses are significant. This shows that pleasant feelings towards selling are an important mediator within the proposed relationships. Hence, instilling pleasant feelings about sales jobs is one of the vital strategies that should be used by universities to encourage students to embark on sales-related careers.

Students' pleasant feelings about sales career achieved through their perceptions of sales-related skills, how others view salespeople, and perceptions of selling as a career can later increase students' intentions to pursue sales career. The results of this study are aligned with past studies (Srivastava & Kaul 2016, Sari & Giantari 2020), which showed that the motivation of pleasant feelings and satisfaction (consumers' affective responses) was often companies' goal that could serve as the link between consumers' perception of the company's offerings and the intention to repurchase the company's products. Several past studies have also shown the mediating role of pleasant feelings (satisfaction) on the influence of product attributes and pricing on the intention to make repeated product purchases (Goh et al. 2016) and service quality and loyalty (Ati et al. 2020).

IMPLICATIONS

The current study is the first to create an integrated model to examine students' perceptions of sales-related skills, selling as a career, and other people's perceptions of salespeople on the feelings towards selling, which in turn leads to students' intention to pursue sales career from the perspective of an emerging market (i.e., Malaysia). The results deepen our understanding of how internal factors (students' perceptions of sales-related skills, selling as a career, others' views on salespeople, feelings towards selling, and the intention to pursue sales profession) interact with one another. The study supports the conclusion by showing that the perceptions of other people about salespeople are also an important component that can influence students' attitudes toward selling. Despite being a great predictor of intention to pursue sales career, feelings towards selling also play a mediating role between students' perceptions of sales-related skills, perceptions of how others view salespeople, students' perception of selling as a career, and the intention to pursue sales career. These findings open the investigation for more subsequent studies to increase the importance of affective responses students' feelings toward selling—in higher

educational institutions. The significant finding of feelings towards selling as a mediator variable corroborates with prior research that found affective response as a potential moderating variable (Bonifield et al. 2007). In fact, Yang and Li (2021) stated that most past studies overlooked the role of affect as a mediating variable. Therefore, the findings of this research add to the limited research that assesses feelings (affective responses) that are not only directly related to intention but also play a mediating variable.

Based on the findings, the study concludes that positive attitudes toward selling will increase students' likelihood of pursuing a career in sales. To raise awareness of the lifetime value of sales career, higher education institutions might host discussions on careers in sales with students and professionals which can overcome the negative social stigma towards the social perception of salesperson, sales profession and their feeling towards selling. Due to positive perceptions of sales-related skills, perceptions of how others regard salespeople, and perceptions of selling as a career, this method improves the intention to pursue sales career through an increase in affective response (feelings). This strategy heightens intention through an increase in affective reaction (feelings) due to the pleasant perception of students towards sales career.

From the perspective of management implications, the results of this study showed that students' perceptions of sales-related skills are the greatest influences on their intention to pursue sales career, followed by perceptions of how others view salespeople and students' perception of selling as a career. Malaysian universities should offer degrees in professional sales or include professional sales module in any management or marketing course to emphasise the importance of selling knowledge and skillset needed in today's workplace. As a result, both students and their reference groups (i.e., parents, friends, and the general public) will perceive the sales profession as more prestigious and professional. Besides that, the present study provides support for the contention that feelings about sales career mediate between the perceptions of sales-related skills, perceptions of how others view salespeople, and perceptions of selling as a career and students' intention to pursue sales jobs. It demonstrates that feeling is the key to intention and explains 37% of the variance in intention.

Therefore, it is important for universities to design their course curricula to overcome negative misconceptions about sales positions. Marketing educators can assist with the shift by providing educational preparation and professional links to sales employment. Sales jobs have changed over time, and sales roles have become much more oriented toward consultation and problem solving than high-pressure tactics for convincing customers. Providing a more accurate depiction of what a career in marketing and sales, particularly for students in introductory marketing courses, could further overcome misperceptions. Additionally, positive experiences with qualified and experienced salespeople who are invited to participate in classrooms to offer descriptions of sales professions could dispel students' misperceptions about sales career. Given the ambiguity of the job market for recent graduates, it is important to give them a true grasp of the sales profession and help them better meet market expectations.

While there is established research on how students' perceptions influence their decision to pursue sales careers in college (Cummins & Peltier 2020; Fournier et al. 2014), research on students' attitudes toward studying sales as a profession (Inks & Avila, 2018) and their sales-related skills (Deeter-Schmelz et al. 2020) is still lacking in underdeveloped countries (Fournier et al. 2014; Diaconescu 2019). As a result, it's crucial to completely understand students' motivation to work in sales in Malaysia, as past research indicated that sales and marketing educators must investigate the factors influencing student intentions to pursue sales careers in order to improve their programmes and curricula and persuade more students to choose sales career.

CONCLUSION

The study has demonstrated the relationship between perceptions of sales-related skills, perceptions of how others view salespeople, perceptions of selling as a career, feelings towards selling, and the intention to pursue sales career in the context of students in business programmes at higher institutions in Malaysia. The findings demonstrate that there is positive and significant relationship amongst all the constructs involved. Intriguingly, this study also found that feelings towards selling had a substantial mediating effect between the three predictors and the intention to pursue a profession in sales. The research is essential for eliminating the unpleasant perception of selling among graduates, which can encourage more students to seek careers in sales and fulfil the market's need for sales jobs.

This study has limitations and identifies topics for further study, in addition to its contributions. Concerns about self-selection bias and generalization are brought up by the use of the non-probability snowball sampling technique. In order to apply the study's findings to a larger community, future research could ensure that the sample represents the population of interest. For this, they might use random sampling. Also, a sizable component of the sample used for this study included students enrolled in business programmes, therefore the behaviors and attitudes of these students toward a future in sales may have had a substantial impact on the study's findings. Moreover, future studies could replicate the study model across different personality traits and other psychological aspects to better understand students' intentions to pursue sales career after graduation.

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