

ARE STUDENTS DRIVEN BY NEGATIVE OR POSITIVE PERCEPTION ABOUT SALES PROFESSION IN FRANCE?

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to investigate students' perceptions of personal selling as a career in France. Studies in the United States highlighting the negative perception of the sales profession by people are numerous, especially when it comes to issues of ethics and honesty (Futrell 2007). Lee et al (2007) argued that students generally try to avoid salespeople as best as they can; in addition, the lack of information about the profession perpetrates the negative image in their minds. Logistic regression and Z test are used in this research. The results confirm the findings of previous studies that personal factors play a significant role in predicting students' perception of sales profession as a career. The findings presented in this study show that French students have a biased perception about sales as a career. However, interestingly, few dimensions show a significant effect and results are contradictory to studies conducted in other countries.

Introduction

Most people view sales people as pushy, dishonest, aggressive and annoying. In fact, according to a study done by Gallup (as cited by Futrell, 2007), it was found that insurance salespeople, advertising practitioners and used car salespeople ranked among the lowest in terms of ethics and honesty, with car salespeople placed at the lowest rung. The roots of this 'negative' attitude towards salespeople can perhaps 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). As a consequence, salespeople were hired to sell as much of the products as possible and as quickly as possible. To achieve 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). It is this contradictory attitude towards the sales profession in general and the salespersons that motivated our current research. Specifically, what we are interested in finding out is whether students brought up and educated in vastly different cultures and educational systems also harbor different feelings towards the salespersons and choosing the sales profession as a career. The following section provides a review of the relevant literature. In the next section, we develop the conceptual framework for our analysis, which is based on the Marketing Lens Model (MLM henceforth) (Bristow 1998, Bristow et al. 2006, Licata et al. 1995). The penultimate section of this study describes the implications for the study. At a minimum, the findings can be used by sales managers, salespersons and marketing educators to make a conscious effort at eliminating the misguided notions that students have about the role of salespersons in our society. The concluding section acknowledges the limitations and provides suggestions for advancing the current line of research.

Literature Review

The selling profession dates back to ancient times. It is a profession that has made a major contribution to the economic development of countries around the world. It has provided advantages to both individual and groups by providing access and information about products that are available to satisfy the buyer's needs and desires (Futrell, 2005). Salespeople have been traditionally considered to be money-hungry, aggressive, eager-to-sell, hardworking, ambitious people. Such stereotypes and preconceived notions of salespeople are further fuelled 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 23rd (as quoted in Butler 1996). Such perceptions are prevalent not just in the US but also in other countries. In some cultures, as a matter of fact, evidence suggests that the profession of 'selling' is used as an insult or as a form of show off (Butler 1996).

Research 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) notes, most customers consider salespeople as lowly paid, monotonous, uneducated, high-pressure phony individuals whom 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 negative students' opinion of salespeople and the sales profession perhaps results from the low prestige status traditionally assigned to a sales job (Mason 1965, Ditz 1967). In other words, since salespeople come from diverse backgrounds and academic qualifications, and since the profession typically endows very little authority to the person, the sales profession is considered as one of the lowliest of its kind among comparable professions, even within the same organization.

Spillan et al., (2007), found in their study of American students that they perceived the sales profession as an occupation with low status, low prestige, had no need for creativity and that it was a job that did not have much chance for advancement. They also discovered that male students were more interested in obtaining a sales position than female students. Additionally, their findings indicated that there were differences between lower level undergraduate students and upper level undergraduate students with regard to sales personality, sincerity and deceit. In another recent study focusing on a cross-country comparison of U.S., Guatemalan and Peruvian students, Barat and Spillan, (2009) found that a Guatemalan student is more receptive to a sales position than a Peruvian or U.S. student. Students from Peru associated a level of 'stigma' with the sales profession. They described the sales profession as aggressive, cheating and unauthentic. They indicated that sales professionals would do anything to make a sale.

Finally, research suggests that recruiters fail to adequately articulate the qualifications for, demands, responsibilities and rewards of a sales profession in their recruitment efforts. Consequently, the ingrained negative perceptions in the students' mindset remain 'untouched' (Kurtz 1972, Dubinsky, 1981). The repercussions of such a phenomenon are twofold: first, students shy away from applying for sales jobs and second, those who do accept sales jobs behave in a manner that conforms to such preconceived notions and hence, continue to have negative perception towards sales (Lee et al., 2007).

Perception of Sales Profession in France

The perception of the sales profession in France is highly influenced by two major issues.

Researchers can find some interesting data in some reports published by the INSEE, a French research center, which indicates that salespeople represent only 15% of the French working population, with salaries ranging from 10,000 (US\$ 12,839) to 110,000 euros (US\$ 141,225) for senior salespeople. The biggest concentration is in Paris and only 13% are females. From another perspective, in a report from the French Sales Management Association entitled "Sales: Hard work for persistent or career path" published in 2009 managers believe that the sales profession is the most respected job in the market and it is an occupation that provides the best chance of career success. In the same report, students, however, perceived and ranked sales, in terms of career development, as fourth after marketing, finance and HR. The report further states that students classified the sales profession much worse than other business careers (French Sales Management Association, 2009). Unfortunately, the sales profession is poorly studied in France and thus there are no other research reports that confirm or deny this position.

Few researches have been conducted about the image of salesperson's profession in France. Generally speaking, the profession of salesman is not prestigious enough in France. Business schools have few courses about sales, which are always associated with other disciplines such as marketing, negotiation... Thus the courses offered will be Marketing and Sales, Sales and Negotiation, in which instructors are expected to stress marketing and negotiation strategies over sales techniques. In addition, there are much more professors specialized in Marketing than in Sales. This differentiation between strategic thinking and operational techniques somehow explains the way students perceive the sellers job. Being a salesperson is not noble. It is just operational and not intellectually challenging. A seller executes what the marketers decide strategically. Thus, there is a lot of rivalry between sales and marketing departments within the French companies, as they are supposed to cooperate but they compete instead. The marketing department is always situated at the highest floors in the French companies' buildings while the sales force is in the lowest ones. France is a hierarchical culture and the symbolic value of the floors people work at is of high significance among French professionals. It is a matter of image and prestige.

The French value prestige and privileges very much. Students attending a French business school are meant to be part of elite. Indeed, a very French concept in the French education system is the so-called 'Grandes Ecoles'. They are private, expensive and high quality schools with limited vacancies accessible via very selective admission exams. Unlike the public universities, where every candidate can study for free at the undergraduate level, but where there is high selectivity to enter a Master Degree program. Students graduating from private business schools are expected to be prepared to strategic thinking and not executing activities. The French culture is defined by its 'thinking' values. The French are thinkers while Americans are motivated by 'action' values. (Rapaille, 2006). From this point of view, all professions, which do not include strategic, thinking, have a bad image. They are associated with low intellectual abilities.

On the other hand, France is traditionally a non-capitalistic country, where earning money and showing off is not socially accepted. Talking about money is taboo and enjoying consumerism is condemned. The seller is thus that pushy person who 'oblige people to spend money and buy things they don't need'. There is still that image of the seller selling vacuums door to door. In addition, there is a whole discussion about selling and ethics (Xardel, 1992). As the salespeople work physically far away from their managers, it is believed that they are often tempted to practice bribery. This adds at the already bad image salespeople have in France.

The image of the seller is also incongruent with the relationship the French are willing to have with their clients. It is well known worldwide that services in France are very bad. One of the main reasons for that is that in the French mentality serving someone is humiliating. Being a salesperson is serving a client, what a Frenchman with dignity should not do. At best, the seller should respond to a client's need when he is asked for. This will put him in a superior position, as he has been asked to help someone thanks to his unique abilities and knowledge. Suddenly, his task becomes much more noble (D'Iribarne, 2002), rather than just promptly answering to customers' requirements. This client-seller relationship can create a kind of hierarchy between the client and the seller, which the French salespeople tend to reject.

In the French business schools, the profession of seller (*vendeur*) does not exist. We talk about commercials (*commerciaux*) or even commercial engineers (*ingénieur commercial*) or business engineer (*ingénieur d'affaires*). France has a tradition in engineering (D'Iribarne, 1989) thanks to the foundation of the first "Grandes Ecoles" which specialized in engineering (*Grande Ecole d'Ingénieurs*). Those were the most educated people in the country with high rigor, methodology, and incomparable intellectual skills. This tradition still remains as the official professions' classification (INSEE) names sales executives as *Cadres et Professions Intellectuelles Supérieures*, literally Executives with intellectual superiority!

Internships are compulsory in all French business schools and companies are used to recruit interns to accomplish or to help them in their selling activities. However, they will advertise the position and missions, as operational marketing which in reality will be phoning, creating clients' databases and prospecting. Companies know that no student will apply if they announce the real missions. Instead, they will promote a nebulous activity, which does not really mean anything such as 'operational marketing' and get them down to selling when they are already in the company.

Today, commercial activities are developing in the most "noble" side of the seller-buyer relationship. Several Master Programs develop specializations in Purchasing (but not in selling). The purchaser is perceived as powerful: the seller comes to them to beg for their generosity, budget and loyalty. The French are persuaded that the purchasers are always more powerful in a Negotiation and negotiation courses are much followed by purchasers (or potential purchasers) than by sellers. Interestingly, women are taking over men in purchasing departments in the French companies.

Selling was traditionally a male activity. People should be tough enough to persuade people to buy their products. They should also not be emotional about negative responses and persevere despite their lonely journeys on the roads. Indeed, selling also implies traveling and going where the clients are, what is easier to men than to women. As purchasers are more sedentary, the women are taking this comfortable position in companies and just waiting for men (sellers) to ask them to buy their products. They will then analyze the different possibilities they have and choose the one who better corresponds to their criteria. This will stimulate rivalry among men sitting at the waiting room. Back to the archaic relationship between males and female.

The most interesting observation is how the economic transformation has influenced the stereotypes. It is well known today that as France functions as an EU member nation, the free market system vigorously and aggressively promotes the sale of just about anything. The professional sales career in 2011 is much more attractive than it was during the command economy days.

Comparative Studies

Comparative studies in this field that contrast the different sets of factors such as perceptions of male/female, business/non-business, enrolled/not-enrolled in a selling course and student/salesperson present interesting but similar results. In a series of studies it was 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. 1993, p-53). Paul and Worthing (1970) on the other hand, found that when comparing students across different college majors, there were universal negative feelings about sales careers. Dubinsky (1980) compared students' perceptions of sales careers with other vocational needs to conclude that the majority of the respondents harbor a positive 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. In terms of comparison of the sexes, 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. 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 sexes. Bristow et al. (2006) found significant perceptual differences between students who had completed personal selling courses and those who had not. Weitz, Castleberry and Tanner, (2000); and Futrell, (2001) also investigated various attributes that are used to describe the sales career. These studies are similar to this study in that they investigated students' perceptions of the negative and positive attributes of the sales career. Hanley, Ouschan and Shanka, (2002) found in their study of students' perspectives on sales career that age had a major influence on the perceptions of the profession. Older students had higher scores on extrinsic attributes such as earnings, recognition, job security and prestige among others.

Based on the above review, therefore, we frame the following research question:

Are students driven by negative or positive perception about sales profession in France?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Data Collection

Collection of data for this paper was completed using a self-administered survey to students at French universities. The first part (Part A) of the survey required the students to state three thoughts that came to mind about sales people (Weeks and Muehling, 1987). Next to these thoughts, the students were asked to evaluate these thoughts as positive, neutral or negative. The second part (Part B) requested that the students indicate whether after graduation they would be interested in selling. Answers for this question could range from definitely would to definitely would not, with probably would, probably would not, and don't know as the intermediate answer possibilities. The third part of the survey consisted of attitudinal statements about personal selling (Paul and Worthing, 1970; Dubinsky, 1980, and Lagrace and Longfellow, 1989). The meaning and definition of personal selling was explained in the instruction part of the survey. The students responded to a 16-item scale, which measured attitudes towards personal selling using a five-point Likert type scale with anchors of strongly disagree (1) and strongly agree (5). The fourth part of the survey related to questions associated with socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents. A total of 221 students completed the survey (see appendix 1 for details of the survey).

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). There are two widely used research models that predict a two-group dependent variable based on a number of independent variables and these models are 1- discriminant analysis, 2- logistic regression. Researchers prefer logistic regression for a number of reasons. First, multiple discriminant analysis relies on strictly meeting the assumptions of multivariate normality and equal variance-covariance matrices across groups. Logistic regression does not face these strict assumptions and is robust when these assumptions are not met. Second, it has the ability to incorporate non-linear effects. In addition, it has the ability to incorporate non-metric independent variables (Hair, Black, Babin, and Anderson, 2009). Tsun-Siou, Yin-Hua & Rong-Tze (2003) used binary logistic regression model (BLRM) to test their research problem, they argued that it is superior to the linear regression model where normality assumptions of the independent variables are not met and it is simpler to read and to interpret because its values are bound to range between zero and one.

The use of the logistic regression model in this study is to evaluate the predictive power of the independent variables (students' statements) in classifying students' perception (dependent variable). The dependent variable is a non-metric measure and it is used to identify the two- groups. The independent variables are students' statements, which are subdivided into three major areas, which are knowledge, experience and expectations; they are captured in 21 statements. The first group is made of students with a negative perception about sales profession ($Y = 0$). The second group is made of students with a positive perception about sales profession ($Y = 1$). The independent variables are the sixteen statements that reflect the personal trait of students in terms of knowledge, experience and expectations; responses to these statements are used to classify students into one of the two groups based on their perception.

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

Binary Dependent Variable - Y

When predicting group membership, logistic regression predicts the probability of an event (student's perception) to occur and the predicted value is bound to fall within the range of 0 to 1. The log of Y estimate of the logistic regression is the odd of perception group, which is used to derive the probability.

The logistic regression like multiple regressions has a single variant comprised of an estimated coefficient for each independent variable. In multiple regressions, the coefficients are estimated based on the least squares methods that minimize the sum of the squares of errors. However, the logistic regression technique depends on the maximum Log-Likelihood procedure applied in an iterative basis to reach the most likely estimate. This results in the use of the Log-Likelihood value in calculating the overall fit measure.

Students' statements are used in the logistic regression model to predict the two perception groups. The predicted group is compared with the actual group of the same students. The answers are tallied to check the percentage of correctly classifying both groups. The over-all hit ratio is the weighted average of correctly classifying both groups.

Testing Reliability

In testing the reliability of the model, three measures are of critical importance to the procedure, which are the coefficient of determination [using Log-Likelihood value (-2LL)], the hit ratio, and Hosmer–Lemeshow test .

1- The overall measure of how well the model fits is similar to the residual error in multiple regression and is given by the Log-Likelihood value, which is multiplied by two to create a statistic that is distributed as Chi-Square distribution, with degrees of freedom equal to the number of predictor variables (Tabachnick and Fidell, 1996). - 2 times the Log-Likelihood value is referred to as -2LL. A well-fitted model will have a small -2LL value. It is a perfect fit when -2LL = 0.

-2LL_{null} represents the total variations in the model before including the predictor variables. -2LL_{model} represents the unexplained variations after the predictor variables are included in the model. The coefficient of determination (R^2_{logit}) is the proportion of explained variation divided by total variation.

$$R^2_{\text{logit}} = [-2LL_{\text{null}} - (-2LL_{\text{model}})] / -2LL_{\text{null}}$$

2- The overall hit ratio is measured by dividing the sample into ten groups. Then multiplying the weights generated in the logistic regression model with the raw data (cases) in the sample predicts the two groups (positive versus negative). The predicted group will be compared to the actual one. The total number of correctly classified items in both groups is added and divided by the total number of observations; the result is called the hit ratio. The higher the ratio, the better is the model (Hair, Black, Babin, and Anderson, 2009). A Z (normal) 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.

3- The Hosmer–Lemeshow is a statistical test for goodness of fit for logistic regression models. The test assesses whether or not the observed event rates match expected event rates in subgroups of the model population (Hair, Black, Babin, and Anderson, 2009). The Hosmer–Lemeshow test specifically identifies subgroups. Models for which expected and observed event rates in subgroups are similar are called well calibrated.

$$H = \sum_{g=1}^n \frac{(O_g - E_g)^2}{N_g \pi_g (1 - \pi_g)}$$

H is Chi-Square statistic; O_g , E_g , N_g , and π_g denote the observed events, expected events, observations, predicted risk for the g th risk decile group, and n is the number of groups. The test statistic asymptotically follows a distribution with $n-2$ degrees of freedom.

Testing Validity

The validation of the results is accomplished with the use of the holdout sample to address the internal validity and the use of the research model in a new market to address the external validity. Internal validity is established if the logistic regression function performs at an acceptable level in classifying observations of the holdout sample. The procedure applied to predict the group of holdout observations is the same as the one used in the case of wise diagnostic. Then, the hit ratio is computed to check the predictive accuracy of the logistic regression model by comparing it to the hit ratio of the analysis sample.

Selection of the Logistic Regression Method

Forward stepwise method was selected. It is a procedure of selection with entry testing based on the significance of the score statistic, and removal testing based on the probability of a likelihood-ratio statistic, which in turn is based on the maximum partial likelihood estimates. Variables with only significant predictive power are kept in the model.

Criteria Selection

Table 1 represents the elements of criteria selection of entry level of variables, removal of weak variables, classification cutoff, confidence interval of the coefficients, outliers, and the level of significance of hypothesis testing:

Table 1 - Criteria Selection

Criteria	Percentage
1- Probability of step wise	
Entry	5 %
Removal	10 %
2- Classification cutoff	50 %
3- Confidence interval for Exp (B)	95 %
4- Level of significance	5 %

DATA ANALYSIS

Testing the predictive power of students’ personal trait is done using a level of significance of 5%. The 21 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. The summary output (Table 2) showed the following overall hit ratio results:

Table 2 - Predictive Power of Personal Trait

	Predicted – 0 Observations	Predicted - 1 Observations	Correctly Classified % - Hit Ratio
<u>Step 01</u>			
Observed - 0	0	40	0
Observed – 1	0	181	100
Overall Hit Ratio			81.9
<u>Step 02</u>			
Observed - 0	7	33	17.5
Observed – 1	1	180	99.4
Overall Hit Ratio			84.6
<u>Step 03</u>			
Observed - 0	9	31	22.5
Observed – 1	4	177	97.8
Overall Hit Ratio			84.2

The model correctly classified students’ perception 84.2%. At the set 5% level, three statements showed significant predictive power and entered the model and these were: 1- “Interest in selling job” entered the model in the first step, which means it had the highest significant power, followed by 2- “Insincerity”, which entered in the second step and had the second highest predictive power; and 3- in the third step, “Much traveling” entered the model with a level of significance exceeding 5%.

Testing Reliability

Testing the reliability of the model is done by using three measures, they are the following:

1- Coefficient of determination (R^2) value, which represents the proportion of unexplained variation that is explained by the independent variables (statements). Table (3) shows the significance of the three statements as they enter the model by reporting the model’s coefficient of determination (R^2).

Table 3 - Coefficient of Determination - Nagelkerke R²

Step	Statement	R ²
1	Interest in selling Job	13.7 %
2	Insincerity	22.4%
3	Much traveling	25.7%

Table (3) shows that “Interest in selling job” statement had the highest significance, as it entered the model in step 1 and explained 13.7% of the total variations; “Insincerity” statement entered second in the model and increased the explained variations to 22.4%; and “Much traveling” was the last statement to enter the model, and it increased the explained variations to 25.7%.

2- Z distribution is used to test overall hit ratio. Z critical value at a level of significance of 5% is = 1.65, N = 221. The following are the output results (Table 4) when the three statements entered the model.

Table 4- Significance of Hit ratio - Steps

Step	Statement	Hit Ratio %	Z value	Critical Value	P-Value	Result
1	Interest in selling Job	81.9	9.48	1.65	0.0000	E. Significant
2	Insincerity	84.6	10.29	1.65	0.0000	E. Significant
3	Much traveling	84.2	10.17	1.65	0.0000	E. Significant

Table (4) shows that the three steps are extremely significant at a level of significance of 5% as they entered the model.

3- Hosmer and Lemeshow test

Table 5- Hosmer and Lemeshow test is used to assess whether or not the observed event rates match the expected ones in the subgroups of the model population.

Significance Test of Subgroups			
Step	Chi-square	df	Sig.
1	.687	3	.876
2	6.718	8	.567
3	19.926	8	.011

Table 5 shows that χ^2_{HL} had insignificant p-value in the first two steps when “Interest in Selling Job” and “Insincerity” statements were introduced; this means that expected frequency was close to observed frequency. In the third step, “Much Traveling” was introduced; reported χ^2_{HL} was significant as p-value was less than 5% (1.1%) and predictive ability of the model was weakened.

FINDINGS

Of the sixteen statements summarized directly from the survey (see appendix 1), only three of these statements revealed significant results by French students (Table 5). The coefficients of the three statements were significant at a 5% level of significance. The results support the research argument that French students are guided by perception. It is quite interesting to note that while “Interest in Selling Job” and “Insincerity” statements were negatively perceived (negative coefficient), “Much traveling” statement was positively perceived (positive coefficient). French students perceive that job requiring much traveling as a positive factor and not a negative one. It can be explained by the fact that students would expect a compensation for the effort they make in selling products for a company. They will take the job if there are several advantages, including traveling with all expenses paid by the company. Otherwise, it won’t be worth it. Moreover, the French are used to travel within the country and abroad, as European distances are pretty small and that transportation infrastructure within and across countries offer comfortable travels by car, train or plane.

Table 5- Coefficients of Independent Variables That Remained in the Model

	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)	95% C.I.for EXP (B)	
							Lower	Upper
Interest in selling Job	-.687	.214	10.311	1	.001	.503	.331	.765
Insincerity	-.762	.242	9.901	1	.002	.467	.290	.750
Much traveling	.493	.218	5.124	1	.024	1.638	1.068	2.511
Constant	5.405	1.506	12.878	1	.000	222.612		

CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The results of this study demonstrate and contribute to the literature on professional selling that the understanding and perceptions among French students have some of the same negative attributes that exist in other countries like the France, U.S., Peru and Guatemala. For example, the findings in this study are aligned with those of Lee et al., (2007) where students were discovered to shy away from sales jobs. This finding is similar to that found among French students who indicated that a sales career is not one that they are interested in pursuing. This study’s findings also parallel Spillan et al., (2007) and Barat & Spillan (2009), where they discovered that students perceived the sales career as a profession with no creativity and one that carried a negative stigma because of its being unauthenticated.

Our study confirms these findings and reinforces the notion that the sales profession has a variety of negative perceptions among student respondents around the world.

Another observation that seems to be important relates to the fact that the negative attributes that Kurtz (1972) and Dubinsky (1981) found more than 30 years ago still remain. They not only remain among students in the U.S. but also are also present among students in Poland, Guatemala and France. It appears that there is a general view that students have not been given a very positive view of the sales profession. This suggests that there are needs to be a better presentation of the sales profession’s positive attributes not only among the professionals themselves but also among educators who are responsible for educating the future professional work force. Reducing or minimizing the negative perceptions is an important goal that society should adopt. Since selling and marketing of goods and services are so critically important for the

survival of a free market society, it is recommended that university business schools to present the sales profession in a positive way so that more students will be attracted to the profession and thus help the economic development of their country.

Results showed significant evidence that French students' perception of sales profession is not neutral, which is consistent with the findings of other studies. However, their perception is driven by ideas/concepts that are different from what has been documented. Gender, major, and class of study were not significant. As such, the authors believe it was not necessary to more thoroughly analyze these variables. While, in harmony with other studies, the study supports the hypothesized relationships pertaining to cultural and sociological differences. From this perspective, the current study not only vindicates and strengthens existing research in this field but also provides substantial contribution to the literature because France is a country in West Europe where culture and social values play a major role in an individual's life.

Managerial Implications:

French companies that are active and successful in selling can no longer accept the past practices that allowed France to stagnate. As an active member of the European Union, France is intricately connected to the free market systems of the world. Moreover, the process of globalization demands that France, like other Western countries produce the human resources in the sales field that will allow it to be competitive and continue to bolster its economy. Selling is the essence of capitalism and free market systems. As such, the development of sales professionals to meet the growing demands that the huge French market requires will be a continuous challenge. Professional selling presents French university students with superb opportunities for economically and intellectually rewarding careers. As such, it is important that French university faculty prepare students for these opportunities and assist in the recruitment process so that students are prepared with realistic job expectations and skills, and the corporate recruiters achieve their goals by recruiting those students most likely to excel and stick with sales careers. This is not in the French mentality. There is a clear separation between education and workplace. Educators in France are savvy people which role is to prepare students to be intellectually developed people, not professionals, not sellers and even less consumers. However, the French educational system requires compulsory internships stretching from three to six months, from undergraduate to Master's Degree programs. Consistently, Business Schools' and Universities' role is to teach theory to students whereas practice is under companies' responsibility. The benefits of recruiting students inclined to enter the selling profession has various implications for industry. For one thing, employee turnover is costly. Not in France. Indeed, French legislation is protective to employees and companies can hardly dismiss them. Trade unions are powerful and can drag any company into court, which can be extremely expensive, take long time and be definitely bad for the company's image as it can end up with boycotting actions from the rest of the population. For example, shops cannot open on Sundays because the Unions are against making people work more than the 35 hours per week stipulated by law. Thus, jobs are long term in France.

Additionally, good sales require professional training. Moreover, sales professional turnover is an important resource issue because of the customer relationship. It is not easy to build a customer relationship with different sales representatives. Overall, it is much more efficient to build a durable customer relationship with one sales professional who can continuously service the customer's account (Sojka et al, 2000). As such, to assure French customer satisfaction and lower employee turnover costs, it is imperative that companies recruit students who have the likelihood of remaining in the sales profession. Academically trained sales students generally have more knowledge and realistic expectations of a sales career. Since they know what to expect, there is a greater propensity to be satisfied in a sales position and therefore, more

likely to stay in that job. Corporate recruiters are more likely to recruit long- term employees who have mastery in sales knowledge. This will decrease employee turnover costs and strengthen corporate-customer relationships. (Sojka et al, 2000).

Limitations of the study

There are three practical problems associated with this study.

- 1- As data is a primary type based on a survey, its quality is hard to assess.
- 2- The cost and the time limitations were the primary factors for using a relatively small sample of 221 observations only.
- 3- The internal and external validity of the model were not addressed in this study; it is recommended to conduct further studies in other countries to address both.

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Appendix 1

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					

Continued on next page

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