

Skills, Effort, or Learning: How Do Salespeople Create Superior Value for Automotive Dealerships in China?

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In this study we attempt to examine the effects of automotive salespeople's skills, effort, and learning orientation on tangible and intangible value creation for automotive dealerships in China. We collected data from 238 sales representatives across 70 automotive dealerships in China. The results indicate that effort and learning orientation positively influence tangible value creation, while interpersonal skills and learning orientation positively influence intangible value creation. Further, salesmanship skills and effort have a negative interaction effect on tangible value creation, while interpersonal skills and learning orientation were found to have a negative interaction effect on intangible value creation. Based on the results, managerial implications are generated for the development of specific actions by automotive dealerships in China that will support salespeople in creating tangible value to customers and intangible value for the organization. In a broader sense, the findings offer insights into how to manage and incentivize distributor salespeople in China.

INTRODUCTION

The value creation process has been regarded as the key to business success as well as the source of a firm's competitive advantage (Woodruff 1997; Anderson and Narus 1998). In the value chain, a salesperson's value creation is understood as "the efforts and expertise that enable customers' value creation processes" (Agnihotri et al. 2012, p. 336). Sales force value creation is an integral part of a firm's value creation process (Blocker et al. 2012). Salespeople's value creation process not only helps to actualize the value of the physical product for customers, but also generates relationship value that can enhance customers' experience (Lapierre 2000; Eggert and Ulaga 2002; Möller and Törrönen 2003). The relational perspective of customer value is often seen as a long-term variable, which infers that salespeople need to go above and beyond transactional relationships with customers and develop relationships that provide long-

term value (Payne and Holt 1999; Ulaga and Eggert 2006; Palmatier 2008; Blocker et al. 2012).

While these previous studies on the role and impact of salespeople on value creation have established some interesting patterns, it should be expected that value creation processes will vary by industry and market. Therefore, it is critical that sales research continues to examine value creation processes in a variety of industries and settings. One large global industry that has received sparse attention in the selling literature is the automotive industry. In fact, Harrison (2013) stated that additional sales research on the automotive industry would be valuable because automotive dealers tend to focus closely on value creation processes. However, Harrison (2013) also noted that automotive dealerships face an interesting combination of factors when focusing on value creation. First, since the automotive repurchase cycle is often longer than the tenure of the typical automotive salespeople, they are less concerned about customer retention for the dealership. Second, automotive salespeople usually deal with inbound prospects whose perceived value is based on customer service during service encounters. Third, the sales techniques automotive salespeople apply are mostly geared toward selling and the short-term goal of achieving a sale. Finally, the financial success of automotive dealerships is typically not directly related to retaining salespeople.

These unique situations faced by automotive salespeople reflect a distinct selling process in which value is

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created and delivered. Consequently, the understanding of value creation through automotive salespeople may require an adjusted approach. An examination of how salespeople create superior value in automotive dealerships can extend the current understanding of sales force value creation. The objective of this study is to investigate how automotive salespeople's skills, effort, and learning contribute to tangible and intangible value creation for their dealerships in China. In this study, we seek to enrich the understanding of this issue in an exploratory manner by testing our research hypotheses in an empirical approach with data collected from automotive dealerships in China.

Through our empirical inquiry, we aim to make three main contributions to theory and practice. First, our study helps to clarify both tangible (monetary) and intangible (non-monetary) aspects of value creation by salespeople in China. Tangible value refers to revenue and profit (Möller and Törrönen 2003; Walter et al. 2003) and intangible value includes building customer equity, promoting brand/product image, and generating non-economic outcomes (Agnihotri et al. 2012; Blocker et al. 2012). Since many automotive dealerships focus on tangible value while neglecting their salespeople's intangible value creation behaviors (Harrison 2013), the pattern of the two aspects of value creation is unclear. This study will offer a balanced view in explaining the importance of both sides. A dual focus can better depict automotive salespeople's aggregated contribution to value creation, and provide automotive dealerships an enhanced understanding in the vital roles salespeople play. Ultimately, the findings can lead to evident outcomes for the conceptualization of value creation in automotive sales. In particular, creating intangible value can be better understood in the process of value creation. For example, buyer-seller interaction can generate intangible value, which is improved relationship and mutual understanding (Grönroos 2010). Thus, research effort offering a good understanding of the evolved pattern of tangible and intangible value creation by automotive salespeople in China is long overdue.

The second contribution is a better understanding of automotive dealership sales force performance in China. Generally speaking, creating value for

customers and appropriating value for the selling organization can be simultaneously achieved by salespeople (Möller and Törrönen 2003; Blocker et al. 2012). Thus, value creation may serve as the basis for rewarding salespeople. Campbell (1990) proposed that work performance should be evaluated based on task performance and contextual performance, which represents how well an individual performs the duties required by the job and how much additional positive outcomes his or her role creates for the organization. Robbins and Judge (2013) also mentioned other important measurements beyond the results of the work duty or sale productivity. These measurements include the attitude when dealing with problems at work and personal quality that has impact on peers and customers. In the sales literature, however, performance is commonly assessed by monetary measures (e.g., sales revenue or share of customer (Ahearne, Jelinek, and Jones 2007; Hughes and Ahearne 2010). Our findings will provide evidence that salespeople's intangible value creation should be included in the evaluation of salespeople's performance. Thus, the study offers a framework for automotive dealerships to understand multiple dimensions of performance. Along this line, the performance of automotive salespeople can be divided into two parts. The first part is sales performance, which refers to the sales record directly related to selling the automotive products. The second part is their working relationship outcomes, which refers to the peer-to-peer and salesperson-to-client relationships needed for the sales task. The two dimensions of performance can reflect automotive salespeople's tangible and intangible value creation, respectively.

Last but not least, our findings will enhance the understanding of how to incentivize and motivate value creation in automotive dealerships, with Chinese salespeople as an example. Sales force motivation is one of the core issues in sales force management (Chonko, Howell and Bellenger 1986; Greenberg and Liebman 1990). The simple logic is that sales performance is usually enhanced when monetary incentives are offered to salespeople (Chonko, Tanner, and Weeks 1992; Pink 2012). Thus, the current pattern of sales force motivation is centered on how incentive is used in stimulating various tangible value creation behaviors. Based on our investigation of how skills, efforts, and learning influence

tangible and intangible aspects of value creation, we can provide more effective strategies in incentivizing both sides of value creation. Although mixed methods aiming at achieving diverse organizational goals have been discussed (Miao, Lund, and Evans 2009), much of the extant literature in sales research has not yet emphasized the incentives for creating intangible value, neglecting the fact that a different set of incentives may be needed for intangible value creation by salespeople. The findings can also depict the mechanism between behavioral antecedents and value creation, offering automotive dealerships an incentive plan consisting of the improvement of skills, efforts, and learning. It can be expected that improved skills, efforts, and learning will enhance sales force value creation.

The study will proceed as follows. In the following section, the hypothesized relationships among key variables are developed in four steps. Subsequently, methodological issues such as data collection and instrument development are discussed. Finally, results, managerial implications, and limitations of the current study are presented.

CONCEPTUAL MODEL AND HYPOTHESES

In a sales context, there have been three distinctive aspects of intrinsic factors identified to be influential to salespeople's performance and sales outcomes. They are:

- (1) *Skills*. Salespeople's salesmanship and interpersonal skills are personal factors that are related to sales performance immediately and in the long run (Hutt and Walker 2006; Rentz et al. 2002; Wachner, Plouffe and Grégoire 2009).
- (2) *Sales Effort*. Salespeople's effort is intrinsic and self-driven, acting as an important determinant of sales performance (Badrinarayanan and Laverie 2011; Brown and Peterson 1994; Jaramillo and Mulki 2008).
- (3) *Learning*. Learning orientation is also intrinsic and proactive. It influences sales performance through knowledge acquisition (Sujan, Weitz, and Kumar 1994; Janssen and Van Yperen 2004; Wang and Netemeyer 2002).

Hereafter, we rely on the three focal aspects of antecedents to explain salespeople's value creation for automotive dealerships in China.

The Influence of Skills on Value Creation

A widely held belief is that employee skills related to sales will produce a myriad of potential benefits to the organization (Pettijohn, Pettijohn, and Taylor 2007). Salespeople's selling skills can contribute to their success in handling and persuading customers, but also are critical in creating financial return (Borg and Johnston 2013; Churchill et al. 1985). This conclusion has also been echoed by a handful of studies, where selling skills have been related to sales revenue brought in by salespeople (Hutt and Walker 2006; Rentz et al. 2002; Vinchur et al. 1998).

Salesmanship skills, simply understood as the ability to make sales presentations during the selling process, are essential for salespeople to accomplish assigned tasks (Rentz et al. 2002). Skilled salespeople are more creative in selling as well as dealing with different customers (Leong, Busch and John 1989). In a similar vein, other organizational studies also contended that employee performance is largely based on individual's specific ability to manage core value creation activities (Higgs and Aitken 2003; Woodruffe 1993). The salesmanship skills possessed by salespeople have been considered a crucial aspect of an organization's value creation competencies (Sullivan, Peterson, and Krishnan 2012). In a sales environment, salespeople need to acquire, practice, and advance a variety of salesmanship skills to enable them to sell effectively and gain superior performance that can contribute to tangible value creation for the selling organization.

In addition to the increasing awareness of the importance of skills that generates sales from customers, it has been argued that salespeople play a key role in creating strategic customer relationships and thereby constitute another potential competitive advantage – the strength of the buyer-seller relationship (Haas, Snehota, and Corsaro 2012; Simpson, Sigaw, and Baker 2001; Wachner, Plouffe and Grégoire 2009). The intangible value of stronger relationships in the form of relational exchanges contributes positively to the value creation process for an organization (Eggert and Ulaga 2002; Lane and Piercy 2004; Payne and Holt 1999; Wachner, Plouffe and Grégoire 2009). Previous research mentioned that interpersonal skills are important elements constituting the ability of salespeople and have

influential effect on long-term sales performance (Rentz et al. 2002; Wachner, Plouffe and Grégoire 2009).

Thus, interpersonal skills, which are defined as the set of abilities to cope with conflicts and build trust (Rentz et al. 2002), also helps salespeople perform more smoothly during customer interactions, eventually contributing to the value creation process in the long run. Humphreys and Williams (1996, p. 47) stated that “it is via the interpersonal activities at the customer-contact point that the value-added processes occur.” Building and maintaining customer relationships requires salespeople to focus on satisfying customers continuously (Simpson, Siguaw, and Baker 2001).

Drawing on emotional intelligence theory, Borg and Johnston (2013) contended that salespeople with higher interpersonal skills can accurately perceive the emotion of customers and use his or her knowledge about emotions to respond more appropriately, finally leading to better interaction outcomes. According to social exchange theory, interpersonal activities in and outside the selling process often create improved understanding and experiences for customers (Anderson and Narus 2004). A stronger relationship should lead to more frequent and effective information exchange, leading to higher customer trust as well as more accurate sales forecasting (Agnihotri et al. 2012; Bendapudi and Berry). In line with the service-dominant logic (SDL) (Vargo and Lusch 2004), such interpersonal skills will eventually increase customer-perceived value, which is typically co-created by the seller and the customer in service settings (Haas, Snehota, and Corsaro 2012). Overall, better interpersonal skills possessed by salespeople can lead to more advanced customer relationships, larger potential customer pool and enhanced brand reputation, all of which will significantly increase the intangible value for the selling organization.

Thus, we put forward the following two hypotheses about the value creation by automotive salespeople:

H1: Salesmanship skills positively influence automotive salespeople’s tangible value creation for the dealership.

H2: Interpersonal skills positively influence automotive salespeople’s intangible value creation for the dealership.

The Influence of Effort on Value Creation

Previous research has found that salespeople’s effort is an important indicator of sales performance (Badrinarayanan and Laverie 2011; Brown and Peterson 1994; Jaramillo and Mulki 2008; Krishnan, Netemeyer, and Boles 2002; Sparks and Schenk 2001). Salespeople’s effort can be understood as the self-driven input in sales that is aimed for better sales performance (Dubinsky and Skinner 2002). Sales effort is often seen as intrinsic motivation. For example, when distributor salespeople perceive a personal connection to a manufacturer’s brand identity, they are more likely to engage in a higher level of effort in selling this manufacturer’s products, resulting in higher sales for the manufacturer’s products (Badrinarayanan and Laverie 2011; Hughes and Ahearne 2010). It indicates that the effort generated from salespeople has a positive effect in the process of value creation. Moreover, the positive link between sales effort and value creation can also be established from a customer perspective. Mohr and Bitner (1995) suggested that the effort of salespeople is usually a factor taken into consideration by customers in their decision making. In a service encounter, the quality of service perceived by customers is largely shaped by the effort of the salespeople (Bettencourt, Gwinner, and Meuter 2001). Therefore, transactions can only take place after customers are satisfied in the service encounter (Webb, Mohr, and Harris 2008). Effort generated from the salespeople toward customers, as reflected by the energy and quality of service, help the selling organization in meeting customer needs (Testa 2001). When customer needs are met, tangible customer value is often actualized, accompanied by deals and transactions.

In addition, salespeople’s effort requires them to take an active role in the selling organization. For example, to achieve superior sales performance, salespeople need to connect with the entire sales team, other functional departments, and the central management within the organization (Bradford et al. 2010; Plouffe, Sridharan, and Barclay 2010). As the result of greater effort by salespeople, higher customer value is usually accompanied by better outcomes of working relationships with peers and other departments (Guenzi and Troilo 2007; Plouffe and Gregoire 2011).

As such, effort often drives salespeople to build strong social and working relationships with customers, peers, and supervisors, creating intangible value through relationship building and information exchange (Plouffe and Gregoire 2011). Ultimately, greater effort is executed to benefit the selling organization's interests (Hernandez 2012; Van Knippenberg and Sleebos 2006).

Thus, we put forward the following two hypotheses about the value creation by automotive salespeople:

H3: Sales effort positively influences automotive salespeople's tangible value creation for the dealership.

H4: Sales effort positively influences automotive salespeople's intangible value creation for the dealership.

The Influence of Learning on Value Creation

Another facet of salespeople value creation can be based on their attention directed toward learning (Bettman, Johnson, and Payne 1990). Learning orientation is defined as a concern for, and dedication to, developing one's competence in sales (Ahearne et al. 2010; Dweck 1999). In sales management, learning orientation is commonly measured by salespeople's intrinsic desire to improve their selling skills through knowledge acquisition (Sujan, Weitz, and Kumar 1994; Janssen and Van Yperen 2004; Wang and Netemeyer 2002). It reflects salespeople's strong intention to develop or improve own skill sets for the sake of creating more sales volume or better results (Ahearne et al. 2010; Kohli, Shervani, and Challagalla 1998).

It has been argued that the learning orientation of salespeople can impact organizational outcomes in a variety of ways (Ahearne et al. 2010; Dweck 1999; Kohli, Shervani, and Challagalla 1998; Sujan, Weitz, and Kumar 1994). First of all, listening and learning help salespeople better understand customers' situations and beliefs so that they can improve the effectiveness of selling efforts (Castleberry, Shepherd, and Ridnour 1999; Aggarwal et al. 2005). Through conscious learning activities, salespeople can also acquire up-to-date product information and in-depth product knowledge (Castleberry, Shepherd, and Ridnour 1999; Aggarwal

et al. 2005). Learning orientation has been found to be a key element in improving salespeople's creativity, resulting in the creation of greater tangible value for the selling organization (Gong, Huang and Farh 2009). Salespeople with higher learning orientation are more likely to be able to provide novel solutions to various problems by continuously updating their current knowledge (Honig 2004). Through learning, they are empowered in managing tough tasks even if they do not perform well in the beginning (Dweck and Leggett 1988). All the evidence suggests that salespeople's learning orientation is conducive to the acquisition of critical skill sets. As a result, salespeople who have high learning orientation are more likely to improve their sales performance over time (Brett and Vande Walle 1999), which leads to improved tangible value creation for the selling organization.

On the other hand, we think that salespeople's learning orientation is also closely connected to the process of organization-wide learning. Learning-oriented salespeople tend to accumulate critical market knowledge over time that is required for successful adaptation to market changes (Artis and Harris 2007; Jones, Roberts, and Chonko 2000). More importantly, such knowledge will be likely to spread in the entire organization (Huber 1991). As such, the selling organization is more likely to identify outdated, ineffective strategies with an intention to change or improve. Thus, it is reasonable to expect that salespeople who are highly motivated to learn on an individual level would be more likely to contribute towards the organizational learning process. Learning eventually helps to create intangible value for the selling organization through enhancing the positive brand image and working more effectively with customers.

Thus, we put forward the following two hypotheses about the value creation by automotive salespeople:

H5: Learning orientation positively influences automotive salespeople's tangible value creation for the dealership.

H6: Learning orientation positively influences automotive salespeople's intangible value creation for the dealership.

Interaction Effects

Extending upon arguments made earlier, proactive sales effort and learning may help improve the skill set and sales performance over time (Bonner and Sprinkle 2002; Brown and Peterson 1994; Jaramillo and Mulki 2008). Previous sales-related studies have found that personal factors such as self-efficacy and ability are related to salespeople's effort levels (Dubinsky and Skinner 2002; Jaramillo and Mulki 2008; Testa 2001). Thus, we think that salesmanship skills and sales effort may jointly create an interaction effect.

As Harrison (2013) found, automotive salespeople typically deal with inbound prospects whose purchase decision does not much influenced by automotive salespeople's presentations and sales techniques. Thus, when serving the customers during service encounter in hope to achieve a sale, automotive salespeople with relatively weaker salesmanship skills may benefit more from higher sales efforts than those with relatively stronger salesmanship skills. With a higher amount of sales effort, salespeople with weaker salesmanship skills can achieve a larger volume of increase in tangible value creation than those with stronger salesmanship skills and lower effort. In other words, putting more efforts and energy into sales tasks will result in greater change in sales revenue for less skillful automotive salespeople.

Learning may include sales-related training, information acquisition, and experience gained during sales job, all of which may enhance one's skills, leading to improved performance at later times (Dubinsky and Skinner 2002; Jaramillo and Mulki 2008; Testa 2001). This leads us to propose there is an interaction effect between interpersonal skills and learning orientation for automotive salespeople. According to Harrison (2013), as the automotive repurchase cycle is often longer than the tenure of the typical automotive salespeople, they tend not to be concerned about customer retention and learning customer needs in the long run. Based on a greater amount of learning activity, automotive salespeople with weaker interpersonal skills may achieve better results in intangible value creation in the long run than those with stronger interpersonal skills and less learning activity. In other words, greater learning orientation will result in greater intangible value improvement for less advanced automotive salespeople.

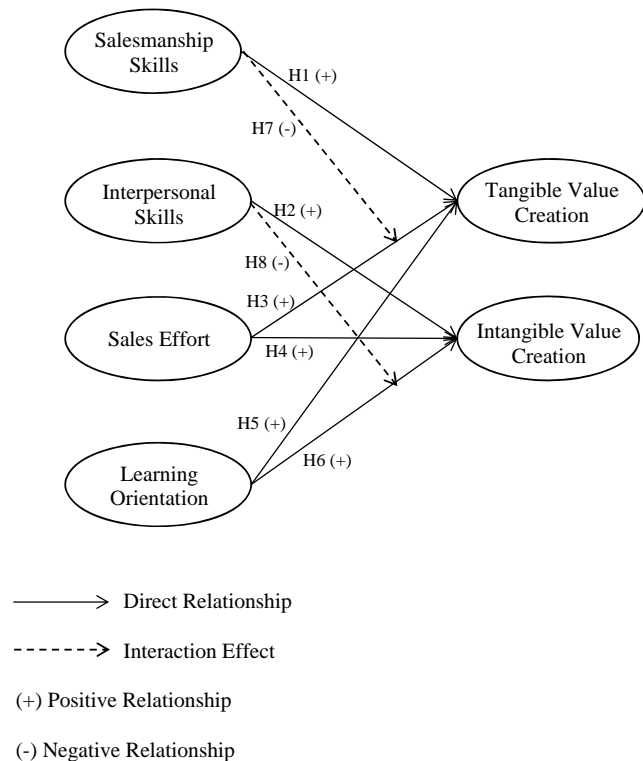
Thus, we put forward the following two hypotheses about value creation by automotive salespeople:

H7: Salesmanship skills and sales effort have a negative interaction effect on automotive salespeople's tangible value creation such that the combination of weaker salesmanship skills and higher sales effort can be used to achieve higher tangible value creation.

H8: Interpersonal skills and learning orientation have a negative interaction effect on automotive salespeople's intangible value creation such that the combination of weaker interpersonal skills and higher learning orientation can be used to achieve higher intangible value creation.

Altogether, we have a total of 8 research hypotheses. Our hypothesized research model is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Hypothesized Model



METHODOLOGY

Sample

The study was conducted using a sample of salespeople from 70 automotive dealerships that are partners with a large multi-national auto manufacturer operating in China. The manufacturer supported this research by providing the contact information of a list of automotive salespeople across China as well as requesting these automotive salespeople to respond to the research questionnaire. A total of 350 questionnaires were sent out based on the list of automotive salespeople, among which 258 were returned. The final data set consists of 238 usable cases, resulting in a valid response rate of 68%. The respondents were categorized into six age groups based ranging from “younger than 20” to “older than 40”. The “21 to 25” age group was shown to be the largest group that accounts for 46.2% of all the respondents. Female respondents account for 18.9% while male respondents made up 81.1%. About 75% of the respondents have at least two years of selling experience. Detailed demographic information of the sample is reported in Table 1.

Table 1
Demographic Statistics

Demographic Variable	Categories	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Gender	Male	193	81.1
	Female	45	18.9
Age	Younger than 20 group	0	0
	21-25 group	110	46.2
	26-30 group	95	39.9
	31-35 group	24	10.1
	36-40 group	7	2.9
	Older than 40 group	2	0.8
Years of Employment	Less than 1 year	22	9.2
	1-2 years	39	16.4
	3-4 years	113	47.5
	5-8years	61	25.6
	Over 8 years	3	1.3
Level of Sales Position	Junior level	127	53.4
	Senior level	111	46.6

Measures

We examined six constructs in this study, namely, salesmanship skills, interpersonal skills, effort, learning orientation, tangible value creation and intangible value creation. Given our research context and data collection are in China, all the six constructs were adapted to a Chinese automotive sales context, and the final questionnaire was in Chinese. Thus, we created measurement items that are both based on previous concepts developed in the West and contextually understandable by Chinese salespeople.

As two important dimensions of a salesperson’s skill set, salesmanship skills and interpersonal skills were adapted from previous studies related to salespeople skill sets (Rentz et al. 2002; Wachner, Plouffe and Grégoire 2009). Effort as a construct was created based on key studies in sales effort (Badrinarayanan and Laverie 2011; Brown and Peterson 1994; Jaramillo and Mulki 2008). Learning orientation was adapted from salespeople learning measures (Ahearne et al. 2010; Wang and Netemeyer 2002). Lastly, tangible and intangible value creation constructs were formed on

the basis of previous value creation measures (Guenzi and Troilo 2007; Singh and Koshy 2011; Sullivan, Peterson, and Krishnan 2012). A clear difference of tangible and intangible value creation was attempted in the measurement according to the conceptual differences. All the measurement items were based on five-point, Likert-type scales ranging from 1(strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The measurement items for the six constructs are presented in Table 2. We conducted an exploratory factor analysis using principle component analysis and a varimax rotation to evaluate the factor loadings in the constructs. All the measurement items loaded onto their factors as anticipated. Reliability for each scale was also calculated and deemed to be acceptable based on Cronbach's alpha values.

Table 2
Constructs and Measurements

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	Factor Loading
Salesmanship Skills	.700	
I know the best approach in making sales presentations to different types of customers.		.687
I am able to help customers discover their needs.		.712
I always find the best time to let customers sign the contract.		.727
I am able to handle objections when closing sales.		.772
Interpersonal Skills	.779	
I have excellent verbal and nonverbal skills in dealing with customer complaints.		.747
I am able to gain trust from customers.		.816
I always find a way to establish personal relationships with customers.		.805
I always utilize my network in prospecting.		.727
Sales Effort	.730	
I work hard to do well in my sales tasks regardless of the result.		.707
I put forth my best effort in my sales tasks.		.760
I try as hard as I can when encountering a sales task.		.806
I always work hard on a sales task even if it doesn't count.		.684
Learning Orientation	.778	
I try hard to learn in order to improve my skills continuously.		.709
I put a lot of energy in learning what is just right for the customers.		.799
I spend time to learn how to deal with difficult tasks.		.818
I spend a lot of time to improve my knowledge and skills.		.721
Tangible Value Creation	.861	
I always achieve the sales quota successfully.		.721
I always complete my sales tasks in time.		.814
I am excellent in making profit for the dealership.		.838
Sales revenue I completed satisfied the expectations of my supervisor.		.785
Intangible Value Creation	.933	
I always help the dealership to become better in the marketplace.		.867
In my assignments, I always aim at improving the dealership's position and image.		.902
I always look to gain customer equity for the dealership beyond making sales.		.842
I work to improve the effectiveness of the dealership's customer relationship management.		.874

Table 3 displays the descriptive statistics and the correlation matrix of the six measures.

Table 3
Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Matrix

	SS	IS	EF	LO	TVC	IVC	Gen.	Age	Posi.	YE
Mean	2.316	3.027	1.885	2.272	3.025	3.469	0.811	27.23	0.466	2.933
Standard Deviation	0.561	0.734	0.593	0.591	0.834	0.967	0.392	0.826	0.500	0.916
Correlation										
SS	0.725									
IS	.115	0.775								
EF	.319**	-.005	0.741							
LO	.573**	.164*	.334**	0.763						
TVC	.321**	.230**	.315**	.432**	0.791					
IVC	.203**	.359**	.060	.236**	.589**	0.871				
Gender	-.058	-.125	-.081	-.141*	-.127	-.116	NA			
Age	.019	.033	.040	-.048	-.062	.002	-.019	NA		
Position	-.013	.014	.037	-.060	-.076	-.070	-.108	.018	NA	
YE	.085	-.052	.092	.108	.099	.223**	.000	-.092	-.125	NA

Diagonal elements in bold are square roots of the average variance extracted. Off-diagonal elements are correlations between the constructs.

SS=Salesmanship Skills; IS=Interpersonal Skills; EF=Sales Effort; LO=Learning Orientation; TVC=Tangible Value Creation; IVC=Intangible Value Creation; YE=Years of Employment

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

Common Method Variance

Given the nature of the investigation method used, common method bias posed a potential problem. To check for the presence of common method variance, we used Harman's one-factor (or single-factor) test based on Podsakoff and Organ (1986) and MacKenzie, Lee, and Podsakoff's (2003) suggestions. The result yielded 6 factors with over 50% of the variance and the first factor explained 25% of the variance. Therefore, it indicates that common method variance is not a threatening issue in our study.

RESULTS

Multiple regression analysis was used for hypotheses testing. We included the four demographic variables, namely, gender, age, years of employment, and level of position as control variables. By multiplying two selected independent variables, the interaction effect between the independent variables was created (Aiken and West 1991). The interaction effects were entered to the regression model one at a time (Aiken and West 1991). Consequently, we built 8 multiple regression models in hypotheses testing, and the multiple regression analysis results on how skills, effort, learning orientation, and their interactions affect value creation are presented in Table 4. As shown in Models 2-4 in Table 4, taking into consideration the impact of the four control variables, salesmanship skills do not significantly impact

tangible value creation ($p > .05$). Thus, H1 was rejected. As shown in Models 6-8 in Table 4, interpersonal skills strongly influence intangible value creation ($\beta = .338$, $p < .01$), supporting H2. The results support a positive relationship between effort and tangible value creation ($\beta = .183$, $p < .01$). Thus, H3 was supported. The effect of effort on intangible value creation did not attain statistical significance ($p > .05$) and thus, H4 was rejected. The influence of learning orientation on tangible value creation is also positive and significant ($\beta = .304$, $p < .01$). Hence, H5 was supported. In addition, Learning orientation was found to be a significant predictor of intangible value creation ($\beta = .151$, $p < .05$), offering support for H6.

Table 4
Results of Multiple Regression Analysis

	TVC					IVC		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8
Gender	-.137*	-.073	-.069	-.073	-.121	-.058	-.063	-.077
Age	-.055	-.054	-.039	-.054	.021	.019	.011	.013
Position	-.080	-.067	-.067	-.066	-.056	-.044	-.039	-.047
YE	.084	.029	.036	.029	.218**	.221**	.222**	.217**
SS		.081	.079	.083				
IS						.338**	.332**	.303**
EF		.183**	.233**	.182**		-.013	-.023	-.024
LO		.304**	.293**	.307**		.151*	.151*	.150*
SS×EF			-.190**					
SS×LO				-.027				
IS×EF							-.055	
IS×LO								-.146*
Model <i>F</i> statistic	2.123	10.130	10.550	8.862	4.149	9.018	7.985	8.803
R^2	0.035	0.236	0.269	0.236	0.066	0.215	0.218	0.235
Adjusted R^2	0.019	0.212	0.244	0.210	0.050	0.191	0.191	0.208
Change in R^2		0.200	0.034	0.001		0.149	0.003	0.020

SS=Salesmanship Skills; IS=Interpersonal Skills; EF=Sales Effort; LO=Learning Orientation; TVC=Tangible Value Creation; IVC=Intangible Value Creation; YE=Years of Employment

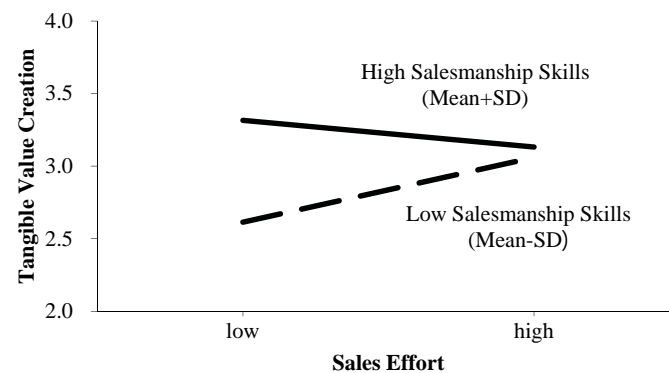
* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

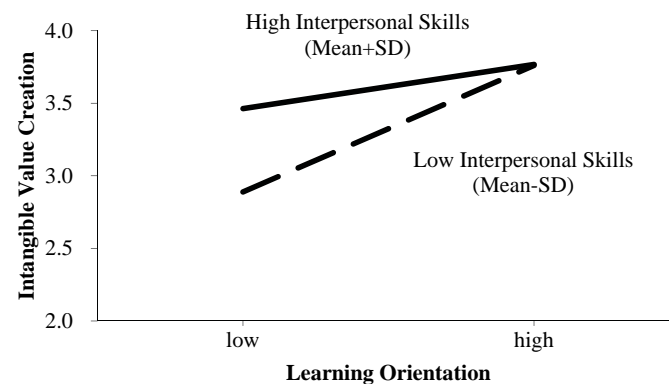
The interaction effects on value creation were tested subsequently. The result in Model 3 shows that the interaction between salesmanship skills and effort negatively impacts tangible value creation ($\beta = -.190, p < .01$). H7 was supported. The result in H8 reveals that the interaction between interpersonal skills and learning orientation negatively impacts intangible value creation ($\beta = -.146, p < .05$). Therefore, H8 was supported. Following Aiken and West's (1991) suggestions on plotting interaction effect, the interaction effects in our results are illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2
Interaction Effects

(a) Interaction Effect between Salesmanship Skills and Sales Effort



(b) Interaction Effect between Interpersonal Skills and Learning Orientation



DISCUSSION

What leads to salespeople's superior value creation for automotive dealerships in China? We investigated skills, effort, and learning orientation and found interesting patterns. Our results suggest that skills, effort, and learning are critical, but the effects of these factors on the two aspects of value creation differ. As a central tenet of an automotive salespeople's job, closing sales to create tangible value for their dealerships is the top priority. We found that effort and learning orientation of automotive salespeople are two significant predictors of tangible value creation by automotive salespeople in China. Many previous studies have regarded salesmanship skills as the key to success for salespeople (Rentz et al. 2002; Sullivan, Peterson, and Krishnan 2012; Wachner, Plouffe and Grégoire 2009). However, the effect of salesmanship skills on creating tangible, monetary value for the dealership is not significant in our results. We consider this finding very

crucial in understanding the salesperson value creation process within in the automotive sales industry in China.

By the essential nature of the industry and the short-term methods used to motivate and reward salespeople, automotive salespeople working at dealerships typically place an emphasis on closing deals with inbound prospects (Harrison, 2013). Advanced persuasive selling techniques during customer encounters as a result of superior salesmanship skills seem to directly influence customer decisions, leading to monetary gains for the dealership. Our study reveals that having salesmanship skills alone is not a guarantee of sales in the automotive sales context. Automotive purchasing decisions are most likely to be high involvement decisions. From a decision making perspective, the sales pitch has limited influence on customer decisions involving purchasing automotive products. Although automotive salespeople need to apply their selling skills in the entire transactional selling process that includes discovering customer needs, making sales presentations, handling objections, and closing, the selling techniques do not appear to be a sole determining factor for tangible value creation due to customers' rational, self-driven, and high involvement decision making style. Instead, we found that sales effort and learning, both of which are proactive selling activities, are positively related to tangible value creation in a Chinese setting. The findings offer practical knowledge to researchers and practitioners related to automotive sales in China. As a Chinese automotive salesperson, one can utilize advanced salesmanship skills for in-role selling when customers pay visits to the dealership. Customers may receive a similar sales pitch, either better or worse, in a dealership elsewhere. Rather, what can make a difference in customer decisions is automotive salespeople's active involvement in customers' situation with an intention to meet customer needs and wants.

In other words, tangible value creation by automotive salespeople in China relies on the self-driven intrinsic motivation towards selling during customer encounters as well as the dedication to developing competence through knowledge acquisition along the sales job. It highlights the desire to achieve, commonly reflected by the amount of energy invested in helping customers without being asked and/or updating knowledge

without being requested to do so. The findings support the conclusion that tangible value creation is based on prompt, instantaneous sales effort but is also derived from continuous learning, which is an extensive process that often requires extra time and training outside of normal working hours. For automotive dealerships in China, the central management should recognize the importance of salespeople's sales effort and learning towards the actualization of tangible value. Sales management programs accentuating intrinsic effort and motivating continuous learning may be adopted by automotive dealerships in China for this purpose.

On the other hand, we found that intangible value creation for automotive dealerships is a result of Chinese automotive salespeople's interpersonal skills and learning orientation. Sales effort does not help to create intangible value for the dealership, although it contributes to the financial aspect—the tangible value creation. The intangible facet of value is often related to the brand image and customer equity, and ultimately the long-term success of the business. As Harrison (2013) mentioned, the automotive repurchase cycle is often longer than the tenure of automotive salespeople. It is understandable that automotive salespeople do not find it in their best interest to build customer relationships for their own benefit because they will often not stay at the current job before a customer returns. Automotive dealerships should recognize salespeople's interpersonal skills in the creation of intangible value. They should understand that salespeople's interpersonal skills benefit the dealership in the long run rather than the salespeople themselves. Thus, automotive salespeople's interpersonal skills should be stressed and training for the improvement of interpersonal skills should be provided by automotive dealerships in China.

Automotive salespeople's learning orientation is another important determinant of intangible value creation in a Chinese context. Through learning, salespeople will be better able to adapt to new situations, eventually helping the dealership to become accustomed to change. Accordingly, learning-oriented salespeople are able to advance customer relationships in a changing environment, increasing the intangible value for the automotive dealerships. It provides the dealership with another benefit beyond monetary gains. It appears that a

corporate culture that can create a stimulating learning environment should be encouraged by automotive dealerships in China.

We found a covert pattern of interaction effects, which may be the most interesting findings of this study. We found that salesmanship skills and effort have a negative interaction effect on automotive salespeople's tangible value creation. It shows that the combination of weaker salesmanship skills and higher effort can achieve higher tangible value creation by automotive salespeople in China. At first glance, it may seem counter-intuitive that a weaker salesperson could significantly close the tangible value creation gap with a higher-skilled salesperson simply through higher levels of effort. However, research has previously indicated a direct relationship between effort and value creation and performance (e.g. Badrinarayanan and Laverie 2011; Brown and Peterson 1994; Jaramillo and Mulki 2008) so it is not surprising that a salesperson with lower sales skills could increase tangible value creation with increased effort at sales-related tasks. The automotive sales industry is very unique in terms of how inbound prospects make purchase decisions without the influence by salespeople's salesmanship skills. We have found that salesmanship skills are not related to tangible value creation. Those with low salesmanship skills and high sales effort can be viewed as helpful and sincere in customers' eyes. The negative interaction effect reflects the automotive salespeople's role in service encounter. On the other hand, salespeople with higher salesmanship skills exerting more effort may experience lower efficiency of their actions. Strong salesmanship skills may be more likely to minimize wasteful activities to achieve value creation with relatively low levels of effort. Increasing effort may lead to diminishing returns on value creation in highly skilled salespeople because they are engaging in unnecessary tasks and activities during the sales process simply by increasing effort.

Further, interpersonal skills and learning orientation were also found to have a negative interaction effect on automotive salespeople's intangible value creation. The result indicates that the combination of weaker interpersonal skills and higher learning orientation can be used to achieve higher intangible value creation. Again, this reflects the unique selling process

automotive salespeople are in—the repurchase cycle is too long, making automotive salespeople more short-term oriented. Thus, learning customers' needs as well as how to make self-improvement can have a stronger impact on improving dealerships' intangible dimensions in the long run, especially for those who have relatively low interpersonal skills.

The findings provide some in-depth understanding of value creation through salespeople in the Chinese automotive sales industry. Salesmanship skills are not an determinant of financial return. With higher amount of effort in the selling process, salespeople with lower salesmanship skills can achieve a larger increase in tangible value creation than those with stronger salesmanship skills. It indicates that salespeople in China with lower salesmanship skills are able to create superior value if stronger effort in sales activities is executed. In addition, having become more learning-oriented, those automotive salespeople with weaker interpersonal skills may achieve superior intangible value creation in the long run than their counterparts with stronger interpersonal skills. This indicates to automotive dealerships in China that skills should not be used as the sole criterion for salespeople selection and evaluation. Increased effort and learning orientation can help automotive salespeople with less advanced skills to achieve better value creation outcomes.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS

Although this study provides evidence regarding automotive salespeople value creation, it is important to note several limitations. We collected data from Chinese automotive salespeople who were affiliated with automotive dealerships that are partners with a large multi-national auto manufacturer operating in China. The sample itself limits the generalizability of our findings. All of the sales representatives are affiliated with one auto brand and located in one country. Thus, salesmanship skills and learning orientation in this study are brand-specific and the value creation process highly depends on the brand equity of this auto brand.

The national culture and the popular corporate culture in China differ from those in Western countries, where most sales research has been conducted. Therefore, the

concepts of salesmanship skills and interpersonal skills may be different from those in a Western context. We believe that another sample collected from Western automotive dealerships may show different results. Thus, the generalizability of our results depends on further research that replicates our conceptual framework with new data. Future studies should also consider the characteristics of culture to investigate cross-cultural differences in value creation, as culture silently determines work ethics and the understanding of value. For example, China is considered a culture featuring Confucian dynamics and long-term orientation. Thus, intangible value creation may be a priority, and effort and learning orientation may be considered more important in the eyes of Chinese dealerships.

It should also be noted that self-reported measures were exclusively used in this study. While self-reported measures are commonly utilized in survey research, it would be beneficial for future researchers to utilize direct measures by external sources where appropriate. This improvement is particularly important for the performance measures (tangible and intangible value creation) used as dependent variables. In the future, the validity of similar research would be improved if supervisors or other managers could provide actual performance results for salespeople rather than their self-reported performance levels.

We regarded skills, effort, or learning as direct determinants to value creation, as in a cause-and-effect relationship. Previous research such as Sujan, Weitz, and Kumar (1994) argued that learning may influence effort, which in turn results in better sales performance and value creation. Yet, in the current study we did not consider the causal relationships among the independent variables. Future research should take into consideration a complete structural model, with effort as a possible mediator, to explain the value creation process.

In this study, we have not investigated any antecedents to our independent variables. For example, factors such as self-efficacy, personality traits, management practices, job characteristics (task diversity, job autonomy, task importance), and environmental characteristics (company structure, competition level) have been linked to salespeople's effort level (Dubinsky and Skinner 2002; Jaramillo and Mulki 2008). Implied by previous

findings, we expect effort to be a moderating variable between the antecedent variables and value creation. To extend the research model, future research should take into consideration the internal and external antecedents to salespeople's effort and learning orientation. As such, it may greatly contribute to the understanding of how to motivate salespeople for better efforts and learning. Overall, the limitations in this research shed light on directions for future research to further extend and refine our results.

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