How the Use of Camera during Virtual Sales Calls Impacts Relative Performance

By Kristen M. Getchell and Vincent Onyemah

COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the practice of virtual sales calls, but there is evidence many salespeople still struggle with this trend especially when customers do not turn on their camera. Drawing on media synchronicity theory (MST), we investigated the influence of customers' use of cameras on salesperson effectiveness during virtual sales calls. Analysis of quantitative and qualitative data from two samples of business-to-business (B2B) technology salespeople showed that salesperson concern about customers not having their camera on during virtual sales calls appears to undermine salesperson relative performance. We offer future research ideas and insights to help sales organizations and salespeople navigate the challenges posed.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic reinforced the importance of virtual sales calls, especially for field salespeople who had relied heavily on in-person sales calls. It also changed consumer attitudes as buyers became comfortable with initiating relationships and closing deals without in-person interactions (Chaker et al. 2022; Rangarajan et al. 2021). With the reduction in travel budget, field salespeople, who typically traveled to engage buyers had no option but to sell virtually. Even inside salespeople, who normally did not travel, had to adjust to using meeting platforms that incorporated cameras because prior to the pandemic, most virtual sales calls took place over the phone (Khandelwal et al. 2021; Peterson 2017; Perkins and Peterson 2017).

Unable to support in-person sales calls during the lockdown, many sales organizations adopted camera-enabled sales meeting platforms to simulate in-person selling. This move however did not anticipate the impact of camera usage especially when buyers do not turn on their camera. This study aims to address this gap and offer potential antidotes. The ability to enable cameras is a key feature of modern virtual meeting platforms as they offer a reliable alternative to in-person communication (Standaert et al. 2022). Sales scholars have called for more research on the drivers of salesperson performance in technology-mediated buyer-seller interactions (Ahearne et al. 2022; Chaker et al. 2022; Homburg, Morguet, & Hohenberg 2021; Singh et al. 2019; Sleep et al. 2020). This research is in response to this call: what are the features of virtual sales call technology that, depending on how they are used by salespeople and buyers, might enhance or impede salesperson performance? To address this question, as a first step, we focus on one feature: camera. To our knowledge, scholars have not yet addressed the impact of cameras on salesperson effectiveness during virtual sales calls.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Computer-mediated communication technologies could increase efficiency and effectiveness in organizations and while many studies show positive relationships between communication technology adoption and organizational performance, results that fall below expectations have also been reported (Khandelwal et al., 2021; Millan et al. 2021). Virtual selling technologies (e.g., Chorus, Gong, WebEx, Zoom) are a group of computer-mediated communication technologies prevalent in sales organizations, and these platforms often create unique challenges for sellers (Singh et al. 2019; Zoltners, Sinha, & Lorimer 2019). Since communication is at the core of every sales interaction

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and the medium chosen could shape communication, and hence, sales call outcomes, we develop our hypothesis by drawing on two related theories at the interphase of communication and technology: media richness theory and media synchronicity theory.

Media richness theory (MRT) was developed to examine the ways that people process information of varying levels of equivocality. Media richness refers to "the ability of information to change understanding within a time interval within a particular media channel" (Daft & Lengel 2006, p. 560). Certain channels, due in part to their ability to provide immediate feedback and cues, have higher information richness (e.g., in-person and virtual meetings with activated camera). Other communication media (e.g., telephone and email) that lack immediate feedback have lower information richness. Daft and Lengel (1986) posit that tasks that include information with higher ambiguity should use a richer channel and tasks that include information with lower ambiguity can be processed through a less rich channel. Studies have suggested a "medium richness continuum" that arranges channels according to their ability to transmit (communicate) rich information (e.g., Trevino et al. 1990).

Media synchronicity theory (MST) (Dennis, Fuller, & Valacich 1999) builds on MRT by focusing on "the ability of media to support synchronicity, a shared pattern of coordinated behavior among individuals as they work together" (Dennis, Fuller, & Valacich p. 575, 2008). Later refined, MST was expanded to focus on two types of communication processes: conveyance (transmission within) and convergence (transmission among). Conveyance processes are characterized by the transmission of information for later internal processing and analysis. Convergence processes are characterized by negotiation, sense-making, and interpretation toward shared understanding as is the case with live interactions between buyers and sellers.

MST discusses five media capabilities: transmission velocity (the speed at which information is transmitted), parallelism (the capacity for simultaneous transmission), cues (the capacity for transmission of multiple cues simultaneously), rehearsability (the ability of the media to support a sender to revise or practice a message before sending), and reprocessability (the ability of a participant in the communication to reference or re-examine the message) (Dennis, Fuller, & Valacich 2008). The first three capabilities are positively associated with high media synchronicity and the latter two are associated with low media synchronicity. Since the presence of cameras facilitates the immediate and simultaneous transmission of cues, we surmise that virtual sales call technologies with activated cameras (of all participants) constitute high media synchronicity and therefore support convergence processes. Not all sales interactions require media with high synchronicity. Certain interactions (i.e., conveyance processes) such as the transfer of information, data, or documents are more efficiently and effectively conducted via media with low synchronicity (e.g., emails). In fact, MST argues that convergence requires greater levels of synchronicity while conveyance requires lesser levels of synchronicity (Dennis, Fuller, & Valacich 2008). MST has been used recently to examine professional communication phenomena such as negotiation medium choice (Geiger & Lauber 2018), social media use (Wang et al. 2016), email capability (Addas & Pinsonneault 2018), and professional thank you correspondence (Cardon, Christie, & Wong 2021). MST is also attracting interest from sales scholars.

As stated previously, selling, especially in B2B contexts, requires both convergence and conveyance processes. Pre-pandemic, multiple media with varying levels of synchronicity (e.g., email, messenger, in-person meetings) have been used to facilitate buyer-seller relationships and close deals (Anders, Coleman & Castleberry 2020). According to MST, familiarity with individuals, tasks, and communication medium also influences the required level of convergence processing necessary to reach a shared understanding as participants already have pre-established mental models of contextual elements, so they are able to rely more heavily on conveyance processes. In novel situations, more convergence is needed to co-create shared understanding and mental models. Moffett, Folse, & Palmatier (2020) examined multiformat communication using MST. They argued that formats should be examined by their characteristics (rather than as a unified whole) and that multiple, simultaneous, and potentially bespoke formats may need to be used to achieve goals. The authors also argued that the

rehearsability and reprocessability should be expanded to include a notion of revisability that examines the role of textual cues (Moffett, Folse, & Palmatier, 2020).

Media richness theory (MRT), a precursor of MST, places much emphasis on cues and instant feedback. Whereas in-person sales calls offer participants immediate feedback in a high-transmission environment that supports multiple transmissions and symbol sets, virtual sales calls in which the buyer's camera is off do not offer this benefit. The absence of feedback cues keeps the seller guessing and making assumptions, all of which could make sales more difficult since it is much harder to interpret buyers' comments and reactions. This uncertain and ambiguous environment in turn could increase the frequency and length of calls, thus making it more challenging to reach mutual understanding and agreement. Symbol sets may include nonverbal communication symbols which contribute to social coordination and "shared intentionality" (Dennis, Fuller, & Valacich 2008). Since selling is a social interaction, sales scholars have always been interested in nonverbal communication (e.g., Fennis and Stel, 2011; Limbu et al 2016; Peterson, 2005; Wood 2006). There is however a dearth of studies on nonverbal communication in virtual contexts but the surge in the use of virtual meeting technologies provides opportunity for research partly because of the dyadic data harvestable in virtual meeting platforms. Recently, Keating (2021) examined the nature of nonverbal communication in virtual meetings and Kazemitabar et al (2022) investigated the impact of nonverbal communication on social-psychological factors affecting virtual teams and found that camera use positively affects trust and satisfaction. We are yet to see studies on how salesperson performance may be impacted when buyers do not enable their camera. Our study aims to contribute to the literature by addressing this gap.

HYPOTHESIS

In summary, there are five MST capabilities and their impact on media synchronicity depends on various factors (Table 1). Transmission velocity refers to the speed at which information is transferred between parties. Its effect is sensitive to the strength of internet connection. Parallelism is the capability for simultaneous communications within a medium. Its impact on media synchronicity depends on the strength of internet connection and the status of cameras. For example, cameras in "off" position undermine the ability of participants to receive nonverbal communication cues in real time. Symbol sets are the different ways communication can be encoded within a medium. Their impact is limited either when cameras are off or virtual backgrounds are used. For example, while information can still be sent through screen sharing, a lack of camera limits visual cues related to nonverbal communication and background. Rehearsability refers to the ability of a sender to rehearse a message before transmitting to a receiver. Mutually accepted formal and informal conventions have the potential to increase rehearsability by allowing senders to anticipate certain features of their messages before sending. Finally, reprocessability is the receiver's ability to reference or re-examine a message for later processing. Activating the option to record meetings can enhance its influence on media synchronicity. Further, use of camera in a recorded video call will allow for increased reprocessing ability.

Given the critical influence of cameras on four of the five MST capabilities, conducting virtual sales calls without having all cameras on will likely undermine sales call effectiveness. Therefore, we posit that salesperson performance would be affected by a change in the level of synchronicity, specifically, when a customer reduces synchronicity by changing the capability of the medium. Turning a camera "off" limits the capabilities of symbol sets, parallelism, rehearsability, and reprocessability thus limiting the synchronicity of the medium, and hence, the shared cues necessary for building relationships and shared understanding. This limitation also has the potential to fuel the concern of parties in virtual sales calls, especially the party that has the camera on. Most times, buyers' use of cameras is outside salespeople's control. This external locus of control could generate salesperson discomfort which in turn undermines productivity. Therefore, we hypothesized that:

Salesperson concern about customers not turning their camera on during virtual sales calls is negatively related to salesperson relative performance.

Table 1
MST media capabilities and factors which affect their level of synchronicity

MST Capabilities	*Level*	*Influences*
Transmission velocity	High	Internet connection
Parallelism	High	Internet connection, camera use, availability of collaborative tools
Symbol Sets	High	Camera use; use of virtual background
Rehearsability	Low	Planning and scheduling; mutually accepted formal or informal conventions (including camera use)
Reprocessability	Low/High (higher if meeting recording is accessible	Accessibility of recording; camera use

Controlling for generational differences

Salespeople with greater technology orientation are better at leveraging information and this capability facilitates adaptive behaviors that are positively associated with effective selling (Hunter & Perreault 2006; Spiro & Weitz 1990; Sujan, Weitz, & Kumar 1994). More recently, studies of technology acceptance have shown a negative relationship between technology acceptance and age with the main driver of this diminished acceptance in older individuals attributed largely to perceptions of ease of technology use (Hauk, Huffmeier, & Krumm 2018). Thus, introducing age-group as a covariate will improve the statistical fit of our model.

METHODS

Study 1

Sample and Data Collection

We collected data through a Qualtrics survey of 400 business-to-business (B2B) technology salespeople working in the United States. We received 54 responses but only 45 (36% female, 64% male) of these were usable, representing an 11.25 percent response rate. Sales experience ranged from two to 50 years (μ=12.59, σ=10.79) and organizational tenure ranged from one to 30 years (μ=7.95, σ=6.72).

Measures

Exploratory factor analysis was conducted with SPSS to check the dimensionality of *salesperson concern about customers not turning their camera on during virtual sales calls and salesperson relative performance*. Cronbach's coefficient alphas suggest unidimensionality: *Salesperson concern about customers not turning their camera on during virtual sales calls and salesperson relative performance* have alphas of 0.85 and 0.81 respectively (Table 2) and are within acceptable limits (Gerbing & Anderson 1988). Our confirmatory factor analysis yielded overall fit statistics that are within acceptable limits: root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.059, comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.97 and minimum fit function Chi-Square = 31.93 (P = 0.20; df = 26).

Results of Hypothesis Tests

We regressed salesperson relative performance against *salesperson concern about customers not turning their camera on (explanatory variable) and salesperson age-*

group (covariate). The results (Table 3) are consistent with our hypothesis: salesperson concern about customers not turning their camera on during virtual sales calls is negatively related to salesperson relative performance (β = -0.316, t = - 2.190). Also, salesperson age-group is negatively associated with salesperson relative performance (β = - 0.519, t = - 3.597).

Table 2
Factor loadings

Item	Factor loading	Standard Error	t-statistic	Factor 1	Factor 2
I feel less comfortable when my audience does not have their camera on.	0.70	0.14	5.11	X	
I feel less effective when my audience does not have their camera on.	0.86	0.13	6.78	X	
I feel less effective when my audience does not have their camera on.	0.79	0.13	6.06	X	
I sell better when customers have their cameras on.	0.47	0.15	3.09	X	
Selling to customers who have their cameras off limits my ability to communicate.	0.81	0.13	6.27	X	
I am more effective in virtual sales calls than in-person sales calls.	0.65	0.14	4.52		X
Compared to in-person selling, sales cycles are shorter when selling virtually.	0.80	0.14	5.94		X
Compared to in-person sales calls, I close more deals in virtual sales calls.	0.88	0.13	6.73		X
During the global pandemic, my sales standing has improved.	0.57	0.15	3.86		X

Notes:

1. Factor 1: Salesperson concerns about customers not having their camera "on" during virtual sales calls. *Cronbach alpha: 0.85*
2. Factor 2: Salesperson's relative performance: *Cronbach alpha: 0.81*
3. Factor inter-correlation (phi) -0.35 (standard error = .15), t = -2.24

Table 3

Influence of age and concerns about camera being "off" on salesperson's relative performance

	Salesperson's relative performance		
Salesperson concerns about customers not having their camera "on" during virtual sales calls	-0.316	(-2.190)	**
Salesperson's age group	-0.519	(-3.597)	***

Variance explained (R-Squared) : 25%
Notes: Parameter Estimates (t statistics); ** p<.05, *** p<.01

Harman's-one-factor-test was conducted to assess the significance of common method bias. We found no significant common method bias in our data since the total variance extracted by one factor is 38.827% which is less than the recommended threshold of 50%.

Study 2

A limitation in study 1 was the absence of discomfort as an explanatory variable even though we referenced it during hypothesis development. Another limitation was the low survey response rate. We addressed these limitations by conducting a qualitative study to ascertain if indeed customers having their camera off created discomfort for salespeople and whether this discomfort impacted performance outcomes. This study consisted of individual semi-structured interviews. We focused our participant recruiting on B2B technology sales executives who were not exposed to study 1. We interviewed eight sales executives (two females and six males). We stopped recruiting more interviewees because there was no new information emerging by the fifth interviewee (e.g., Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Nguyen, Anderson, and Artis, 2022; O'Reilly, Paper, and Marx, 2012). Years of experience selling (in-person and virtual) ranged from one to thirty-five years. Interview duration was about 45 minutes on average. After introducing the study and formally registering their consent as required by our institution's IRB, we posed eight questions to each interviewee and followed up with probing questions to seek elaboration and clarification when necessary. The interview questionnaire is presented in the appendix.

The findings from these in-depth interviews corroborated the findings in study 1 and offered more nuances on the hypothesized relationship between camera use and salesperson relative performance. We classified interview responses into three categories: general preferences for camera use in virtual sales calls, perceived limitations and consequences of lack of camera use during virtual sales calls, and coping tactics for mitigating the negative impacts of lack of camera use by prospects during virtual sales calls.

General preferences for camera use in virtual sales calls

The salespeople we interviewed had a strong preference for camera use during virtual sales calls. All respondents indicated that they prefer calls where both parties are on camera. As one participant indicated, "I would definitely prefer to have the camera on because it is less intimidating to be talking to someone over a blank screen." Despite this preference, our respondents acknowledged that camera use was more important in some situations than others, as one participant shared: "Depends on which call—if it is the first call, then I definitely prefer the camera on. If I have already developed a rapport, camera off is okay." Another participant explained that going "camera off" was acceptable "Once we have established some type of trust."

There was general agreement across all participants that when cameras were off in virtual sales calls, there were negative impacts to sales cycles, especially the lengthening of sales cycles. According to one participant, "It slows down the process of a prospect evaluating me as a vendor or supplier." Another elaborated, "It might prolong a sales cycle because these meetings could take longer. If I am asking you questions, but you're okay with the information, then we're wasting time. If I can't see your face, I may come away from a meeting with a different understanding of what happened and if you saw the value in what I was proposing." As one respondent put it, "I feel like it is most important if you are trying to get them over the fence." There was also acknowledgement that the impact was much greater when the salesperson was participating in a dyad call versus a small group call. According to participants, the size and composition of the call affects the impact of camera use.

Perceived limitations and consequences of lack of camera use during virtual sales calls

In general, salespeople felt that the lack of camera use by prospects affected their overall performance. As one salesperson indicated, "I am not very good at that kind of selling dynamic because I think they're sending a subliminal message. Well, maybe overt actually, that they don't want to be there." One participant explained that this feeling was beyond just an individual preference, "I had a previous manager tell our whole sales team that deals are likely to close or go well if both parties have their cameras on."

In analyzing these interviews to better understand why concerns about buyers not turning their camera on would undermine salesperson relative performance, four themes emerged: absence of nonverbal cues, being at a disadvantage on a non-level playing field, distractions stemming from lack of camera use, and what participants describe as the inhuman nature of such interactions.

Table 4
Reasons why prospects' turning their camera off could undermine salesperson performance

Absence of nonverbal cues Use of cameras gives people the opportunity to leverage what is seen (cues, images, etc) in order to enhance mutual understanding and deepen engagement.	"I know I have their attention if I can see their facial cues and see if they are understanding when I am talking." "You can tell a lot from a person's face and space when they are answering a call on camera. You can gauge interest to see if they are interested or just trying to get through the call." "With camera off you miss the side of things where you can see reactions and gauge whether they are interested in a sales pitch or just kind of clicking around and not really paying attention to what I'm saying at the moment." "It is about building likeability and trust, seeing someone's face." "If I can't see you look at me or be upset, then we're going to take a lot longer to build the right kind of relationship."
Being at a disadvantage on a non-level playing field A non-level playing field introduces a power imbalance and a perception that the person with camera off has more information and hence an advantage over the party with camera on. This information asymmetry is perceived as unfair.	"If you can see me and I can't see you there's an imbalance. It doesn't feel right." "You should match what is happening so there is no imbalance." "It levels the playing field."
Distractions stemming from lack of camera use Feeling distracted by thoughts of what may be going on behind the inactivated camera and why. This makes the mind wander about, in addition to dealing with the potential distraction caused by the sole image of self on the screen.	"Often I think they might be in a place where they don't really want a camera on. Okay, or maybe they haven't showered yet. Maybe they don't feel presentable. I usually end up thinking something like that but also in the back of my head I'm like, this person doesn't want me to see them for whatever reason." "I'm looking at the screen like, yeah, I'm seeing myself." "My mind is going around in circles. What is going on? Are they watching the Patriots?"
The inhuman nature of such interactions This reflects a need to honor humanity in a human-to-human interaction.	"When you're trying to make that connection, and you can't see their face, you can't see their expression, it's almost, how do I put this, I guess not human." "Both of us having a camera on to have that human interaction." "It's almost a disregard for the person and the profession. Probably the organization as well because it is making a perfunctory exercise of showing up". "I'm feeling disrespected or disregarded. It has a physical impact on me."

Coping tactics for mitigating negative impacts of lack of camera use by prospects during virtual sales calls

The sales executives we interviewed reported several tactics for dealing with situations where prospects do not have their camera on. These tactics ranged from subtle verbal cues to nonverbal tactics to influence mimicry of camera use. As a last resort, our respondents indicated ways that they could change their own mindset to better adapt.

Using conversation to encourage camera use:

> Most respondents indicated some type of verbal tactic to somewhat coerce prospects to turn on their camera. As one respondent described, "I will say, hey, would you prefer to be off camera? A lot of times that will prompt the person to go on camera. Somehow challenges them to go on screen." Another sales executive used the following phrase to prompt other participants on the call: "... …, thanks for joining me today. I see you don't have your camera on. Would you prefer that we don't use cameras? If so, I'd love to turn mine off too." *So, I'm making them comfortable about it and also so I can turn my camera off.*" There was universal agreement that these verbal interventions should be casual and inviting and not forceful or prolonged. If these brief and early attempts were unsuccessful, they suggested that the salesperson move on.

Using nonverbal means to encourage camera use:

> When verbal conversations do not work, some salespeople resort to nonverbal tactics, including waiting to start the meeting to see if the delay encourages prospects to turn on their camera: "My silence has worked in the past. My silence made an impact and made a point. I thought, I'm just going to wait a bit. And then, what happens? The camera comes on. Or they explain why it was off. I think silence was the trigger there."

Relying on other tactics:

> Several respondents offered other solutions for when initial attempts to encourage camera use are unsuccessful: "When I am not looking at anything, but I know someone's on the other side, I think my listening skills go into overdrive. Because I can pull more or I hope I can attempt to pull more by really listening to the intonation, rhythm." Some sales executives described turning their own camera off so that there was more balance to the call and keeping their screen shared longer than they would on a call where prospects were using their camera, with the screen-sharing mitigating the imbalance of lack of camera use.

Adjusting seller's mindset:

> Multiple salespeople indicated that they shifted their own mental model for the communication from that of virtual meeting to thinking of the interaction more as a phone call. One salesperson likened it to a cold call: "Not having a camera on is a very cold call over the phone. It kind of reverts back to that." Others agreed, using the same shift in tactic to treat the interaction like a phone call: "So, in that case I would turn my camera off and just treat it as a phone call and I might even get away, get up and go get away from my desk, but I would try to engage."

DISCUSSION

Findings and Contribution

The COVID-19 pandemic amplified the role and importance of virtual interactions in all facets of life. The speed with which organizations transitioned to virtual operations left little room for planning. Pre-pandemic, academic literature was already witnessing an increase of research on the impact of technology on employees and organizations (e.g., Baumgartner, Hatami & Valdivieso 2016; Grove et al., 2018; Syam & Sharma 2018). The sales literature was also paving way for research on technology-mediated selling (e.g., Singh et al. 2019). Our study contributes to this burgeoning literature by examining the impact of camera use on salesperson performance during virtual sales calls. Our results from two studies (quantitative and qualitative) show that indeed, salesperson concern about customers not turning their camera on during virtual sales calls is negatively associated with salesperson relative performance. Salespeople are uncomfortable when prospects do not turn their cameras on and this discomfort

engenders feelings of unfairness and frustration. Our results are generally consistent with the parsimonious model proposed and provide diagnostic insights about the role of camera usage in explaining the effectiveness of salespeople during virtual sales calls. The estimated parameters show that the data are consistent with our conceptualization. Our model explains 25 percent of the variance in salesperson relative performance. The subsequent qualitative study corroborated the conclusion reached in our quantitative study.

Research Implications

Future research on virtual sales calls should go beyond examining and comparing platforms to studying the effects of specific platform features. Standaert et al. (2022) offered a decision-making framework for selecting how to meet virtually. Their four categories (i.e., audio-conferencing, videoconferencing, telepresence, and face-to-face) could be further subdivided to accommodate emphasis on platform features because, as our study demonstrates, the use of specific features alone or in combination can make a difference on productivity. We also recommend further research that explores other features (e.g., recording, screen background, audio-spacial features, and whiteboarding) to uncover how they influence salesperson effectiveness during virtual sales calls.

Early trends demonstrate that the use of computer-mediated communication technologies will accelerate (Ranagarajan et al. 2020). Virtual sales calls have come to stay and will get more prominence with rapid advancement in communication technologies. This trend will be relevant for both inside sales and field sales roles because it is increasingly difficult to justify the full cost of in-person sales calls, especially now that buyers are more comfortable with virtual sales calls and closing large deals virtually. Therefore, sales managers need to consider how they can develop effective strategies to support their salespeople as they leverage virtual communication technologies to enhance buyer-seller interactions (Rangarajan 2020).

Managerial implications

Our research reveals that salespeople are uncomfortable when prospects do not turn on their camera. Since this action is often outside the control of salespeople, some coaching and training might help salespeople adapt and respond better. Management intervention could take the following forms.

Develop strategies for addressing camera usage during virtual sales calls

Managers should work with their teams to determine the best course of action to encourage camera-on participation from their customers and prospects. If salespeople are reporting that they are more effective in calls where customers have their cameras on, sales managers and teams should discuss ways to incentivize customers to turn their camera on. Having the camera on before prospects arrive could trigger an unspoken quid pro quo and encourage prospects to activate their camera too. Asking friendly questions like, “Will I see you today?” “Are you denying me an opportunity to see you today?” or “What do I need to do to see your face today?” may be a possible way to encourage buyers to activate their camera. Other options like including a statement about expectations (regarding the use of camera) in the meeting invitation might help.

One of the concerns raised about *camera on - camera off* dyads is the feeling of unbalanced exchange because one of the parties has more cues than the other, thus giving the party a significant advantage. This asymmetry may be responsible for the discomfort perceived by salespeople in such dyads. One potential solution, particularly for salespeople with experience in phone selling, is to turn off their camera and treat the virtual call like they would a phone call. This removes the need to look at a screen and the temptation to assess their own appearance. This tactic may even include turning away completely from the screen and imagining the audience as if one were on the phone. Conceivably, this gesture may reduce stress levels as the salesperson feels more in control of the situation.

Provide training, coaching, and support

Sales managers should provide opportunities for salespeople to practice virtual calls where prospects do not have their camera on. The more they rehearse this scenario and receive coaching, the more they will be comfortable when faced with prospects who have their

camera off. We acknowledge that current technologies used for virtual sales calls are media with high synchronicity, but with appropriate expectations about meeting norms, salespeople will be able to better prepare to communicate effectively during virtual sales calls.

Take a holistic approach to technology choice

In their theoretical application of MST to B2B contexts, Wang et al. (2016) propose information security and control as an additional media capability when examining social media apps. While this proposition has not been empirically tested yet, it is worth exploring its impact in association with camera use because the reasons why prospects turn off their camera or blur their backgrounds during virtual sales calls may have to do with privacy and security. Early in the pandemic, Zoom found itself lagging Cisco's Webex and grappling with security breaches. The effects of these types of breaches in sales settings and the resulting effects on synchronicity are yet to be studied.

Age, experience, and a training conundrum

Our research suggests a possible conundrum for sales managers who often rely on more experienced salespeople to train new members of the sales team. Since virtual sales calls appear to be more challenging for older salespeople, sales managers would need to rethink their choice of trainers for the scenario investigated in this research. Soja & Soja (2020) highlight this conundrum: while each individual is different, research has found trends across time: "physical work capacity and cognitive abilities associated with basic information processing are decreasing with age. However, on the other hand, cognitive skills referring to knowledge and experience, resulting in an ability to understand and integrate culture- and context-dependent factors, are relatively higher in older age" (p. 409). This finding perhaps explains why sales scholars often include age, experience and/or tenure in models of salesperson performance (e.g., Good et al. 2022).

Limitations and future research

The context of our study is B2B technology sales. Thus, generalizability of our findings to B2C contexts is limited. For example, video-selling, where sellers use pre-recorded videos to promote their products and services is often asynchronous with zero to minimal buyer-seller interaction. The external validity of our findings is also limited by the focus on one sector–technology sales. Finally, the use of cross-sectional data prevents us from making claims about causality. Nevertheless, this research is a first step, and the use of controlled experiments or longitudinal data will be useful for establishing causality.

By virtue of their heavy reliance on computer-mediated platforms, virtual sales calls automatically generate and archive dyadic data which can be used to answer research questions about virtual sales calls and the management of salespeople who sell virtually. Access to primary and secondary data has always been a challenge for empirical researchers because of the resources needed to acquire reliable data. The automaticity and intelligence of platforms used for virtual sales calls could enable sales scholars to investigate research questions hitherto intractable due to lack of appropriate data. For example, a potential next step in our research is to use secondary data on platforms like Gong and Chorus to assess if indeed sales interactions where all parties have their cameras on yield better outcomes than those where at least one party has the camera off. Further, one could investigate the role of call duration, background types, pace of conversation, gaze, number of participants, etc. in virtual sales calls. Thus, in addition to replicating our study in other industry sectors, the examination of additional "meeting" characteristics could enrich and extend current knowledge about virtual sales calls.

Another under-researched aspect of virtual sales calls is the impact of participants' own video stream on the screen. While virtual meeting platforms have high synchronicity due to their ability to provide cues quickly, it is plausible that some of those cues come from one's own video stream. Thus conceivably, in addition to processing cues from prospects, salespeople may be processing cues from themselves. How does the ability to see oneself in real time affect performance? This and related questions are worthy of future research.

CONCLUSION

The past three years saw a surge in the use of virtual platforms for enacting and building buyer-seller relationships and both sides of the dyad appear to

be adjusting to a new normal. The race to get up to speed with virtual sales calls and the time constraint faced by organizations might have deprived sales professionals of appropriate training and support to excel in virtual sales calls. Our results show that the concern salespeople feel when prospects do not turn on their camera during virtual sales calls is negatively related to salesperson relative performance. In addition, age appears to be a contributing factor to the drop in salesperson performance. Norms for virtual sales calls are in their infancy and evolving. Merely transporting in-person norms to virtual settings might lead to missed opportunities and suboptimal performance.

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