

Unlocking the Flow: Exploring the Antecedent, Moderator, and Consequence of Salespeople's Optimal Mental State

By Alexis Yim, Annie Peng Cui, Raj Agnihotri, Lin Zhao, Lixun Su, and Joseph M. Derby

Flow refers to a mental state in which individuals are fully engaged in and genuinely enjoy an activity. The concept of flow experience has been extensively studied in various fields, demonstrating its capacity to enhance performance in areas such as sports and music. However, despite the significance of flow experience, there has been limited research on its application in sales. Currently, little is known about what contributes to a salesperson's flow experience and what effects it may have on their performance. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to identify factors that contribute to a salesperson's flow experience and to investigate how this experience affects their sales performance. The results indicate that informal clan control systems within organizations and a salesperson's sales skills positively contribute to the flow experience, which leads to improved sales performance.

Organizations have long recognized the importance of ensuring the well-being and satisfaction of their sales force to reduce turnover rates among salespeople and improve their performance (Dugan et al. 2023; Habel et al. 2021). That salespeople face highly challenging work environments that lead to burnout is well known (Alavi et al. 2024). Without strong sales performance, a firm is unlikely to cover its costs, as sales are the primary source of revenue for most businesses (Pettijohn et al. 2008; Yim et al. 2023). Nevertheless, many organizations grapple with the substantial costs associated with salesperson turnover and underperformance (O'Connell and Kung 2007).

Conversely, when sales activities are highly enjoyable and engaging, salespeople often become deeply immersed, performing at their peak. This intense state of involvement and focus is known as the flow experience (Csikszentmihalyi 2000). Psychologists describe flow as a mental state where individuals feel genuine satisfaction while being fully absorbed in a task (Abuhamdeh 2020; Burt and Gonzalez 2021). Unlike other sales theories such as goal-setting theory (Locke and Latham 1990) or job engagement theory (Kahn 1990), flow theory emphasizes the balance between skills and challenges as the key to entering this optimal state (Csikszentmihalyi 1988). Whether it involves delivering a sales pitch, networking with clients, reviewing contract details, or closing deals, salespeople who experience flow describe it as an exhilarating and fulfilling mental state (Medhurst and Albrecht 2016). For example, a salesperson deeply engaged in explaining the innovative features of a product may feel genuine excitement during the interaction (Medhurst and Albrecht 2016). In such flow states, salespeople are better able to connect with prospects, understand their needs, and offer tailored solutions, ultimately enhancing their performance and customer relationships.

Flow experience represents an optimal mental state wherein individuals can operate at their maximum potential (Aydin Kucuk 2022). Therefore, understanding how salespeople experience flow could assist sales managers in developing strategies to support salespeople in demanding and challenging sales environments. Positive psychology research has identified several

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individual resources that contribute to flow experience, such as motivation (Engeser and Rheinberg 2008), mindfulness (Marty-Dugas et al. 2023), self-efficacy, hope, and resilience (Peifer and Wolters 2021), balance between skill and challenge (Fong et al. 2015), and clear goals (Chan and Ahern 1999). As a consequence of flow experience, studies have found that the flow experience has benefits on exam performance (Schüler 2007), operative performance (Jiang et al. 2022), and innovation performance (Gomezel and Aleksić 2020).

While scholars across diverse fields have underscored the significance of the flow experience and have extensively documented the tenets of flow theory, empirical investigations of this theory within the domain of sales remain sparse. Consequently, our comprehension of salespeople's flow experiences is limited, as it remains relatively unexplored in sales literature. Given that flow experience has been established as a beneficial phenomenon with far-reaching implications for productivity, decision-making, health, well-being, creativity, and performance (Dieser et al. 2015; Ilies et al. 2017), it is pertinent to explore the applicability of flow theory in the context of sales and investigate variables that may modify the theory within this domain. As mentioned above, salespeople, consciously or not, might experience flow during a sales pitch, a customer negotiation, or even during closing the sale. This research aims to provide preliminary insights into salespeople's flow experience.

To bridge the gap between the existing literature on flow experience and its application in sales, we conducted a multi-method study involving sales professionals, employing both experimental and survey studies. Our research sought to shed light on the intricate nuances of salespeople's flow experiences, explore the factors that strengthen or hinder these experiences, and introduce an organizational variable that is theoretically relevant and managerially important as a boundary condition. In doing so, this research contributes to the sales literature by applying flow experience theory, which is grounded in the theoretical domain of positive psychology, into the sales context. Accordingly, we expand flow experience theory by introducing a novel, previously unexplored boundary condition, thereby contributing to the sales research (Csikszentmihalyi 2014). Our study also

represents a pioneering empirical endeavor to explore the relationship between salespeople's flow experiences and subsequent sales performance outcomes.

Furthermore, our study responds to calls for more research on informal sales management control systems, known as "clan controls" (Malek et al. 2018), a control system frequently overlooked in sales research (Croitor et al. 2022). Both flow theory and clan control converge in their shared focus on cultivating positive work environments that enhance performance (Ströbele and Wentges 2018; Wiegand and Geller 2005). However, flow theory has traditionally concentrated on the individual level, often neglecting the environmental factors that affect employees' flow experiences (Csikszentmihalyi 2014; Tse et al. 2022). Our empirical findings highlight the crucial role that organizational clan control plays in enabling salespeople to immerse themselves in the flow state. In the following sections, we present the theoretical background for our conceptual model, develop and analyze the model, and conclude with a discussion of our findings and their limitations.

CONCEPTUAL MODEL AND HYPOTHESES

Flow Theory

Csikszentmihalyi is a pioneering positive psychologist studying the science of happiness, and he first introduced "flow state" as a mental state of optimal performance where people become completely absorbed in their actions and experience a holistic sensation (Csikszentmihalyi 2000 p. 36). For instance, musicians performing their beloved compositions and athletes competing in their passion-driven sports commonly experience flow (Bloom and Skutnick-Henley 2005). Numerous scholars have conducted in-depth research on this phenomenon, which is closely associated with concentration, persistence, and motivation (Aubé et al. 2014; Csikszentmihalyi 2000). Csikszentmihalyi identified six components of the flow experience, including merging of action and awareness, centering of attention, loss of self-consciousness, sense of control, clear goals, and autotelic nature or intrinsic motivation (Csikszentmihalyi 2000).

Flow experience has been studied in various fields, from sports to online shopping, and has been found to have a positive influence on performance (Bao and Yang 2022; Hyun et al. 2022; Stavrou et al. 2007). Individuals experiencing flow actively filter out irrelevant perceptions and thoughts, enabling deep concentration on the task at hand and reaching their optimal state of consciousness. This heightened focus and immersion, in turn, enhances joy and performance outcomes (Demerouti 2006; Engeser and Rheinberg 2008; Fagerlind et al. 2013). Researchers have identified two key reasons why flow experience improves work performance: first, because flow experience itself is a highly functional state; second, because individuals who have previously experienced flow are more intrinsically motivated (Engeser and Rheinberg 2008). However, despite increased attention to the flow experience in the workplace, no study has explored the dynamics behind flow experience in sales settings and organizational characteristics that may affect flow.

Self-determination theory, job engagement, emotional intelligence, goal-setting theory, and flow theory

each focus on distinct psychological mechanisms that drive motivation and performance. More specifically, self-determination theory focuses on autonomy and competence (Deci and Ryan 1985), job engagement sheds light on the importance of absorption in work (Kahn 1990), emotional intelligence emphasizes emotional regulation (Salovey and Mayer 1990), and goal-setting theory targets specific objectives (Locke and Latham 1990). Unlike the other theories, flow theory addresses the optimal psychological state where individuals perform at their best because they are completely absorbed in an activity that is both challenging and matched to their skills (Eisenberger et al. 2005; Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi 2002). Research across various and disparate domains, including music, sports, and academia, has consistently demonstrated that flow experience leads to optimal performance (Baaker 2005; Fullagar et al. 2013; Li et al. 2024). By highlighting the conditions necessary to optimize performance, flow theory offers valuable insights into sales literature and sales professionals seeking more pleasant and effective sales experiences (see Table 1).

Table 1. Summary of Relevant Theories

Theory	Key Antecedents	Dependent Variable
Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985)	- Autonomy - Competence - Relatedness	Self-determination
Job Engagement Theory (Kahn, 1990)	- Psychological meaningfulness - Psychological safety - Psychological availability	Job engagement
Emotional Intelligence Theory (Salovey & Mayer, 1990)	- Emotional perception - Emotional regulation - Emotional understanding - Emotional management	Emotional intelligence
Goal-Setting Theory (Locke & Latham, 1990)	- Specific goal setting	Task performance
Flow Theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988)	- Balance between skills and challenges	Flow experience

The Antecedents of Flow Experience

The balance of perceived challenges and skills is a key factor in achieving flow experience (Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi 2002). Skills refer to the ability to effectively and readily apply one's knowledge in execution or performance, while challenges pertain to any difficulties one faces in executing or performing a task (Merriam-Webster, 2023). When the level of challenges in an activity matches an individual's skill set, which is referred to the state of challenge-skill balance, it fosters focus, engagement, and flow experience (Csikszentmihalyi 2014; Fullagar et al. 2013). Research has shown that challenge-skill balance has a positive effect on adolescents' perceptions of concentration, motivation, involvement, and happiness (Moneta and Csikszentmihalyi 1999). In adults, this balance not only increases positive subjective experiences but also enhances performance (Keller and Bless 2008). In the context of sales, sales professionals often face numerous challenges, such as meeting high sales quotas, dealing with demanding customers, and navigating competitive markets (Rapp et al. 2014). When a salesperson's skills align with the challenges they face, they should be more likely to feel fulfilled and excited, leading to flow experience (Engeser and Rheinberg 2008; Fong et al. 2015).

H1a: The balance between challenges and skills positively affects salespeople's flow experience.

Literature on flow experience has consistently shown that even a slight imbalance between challenges and skills can lead to anxiety and displeasure (Fong et al. 2015; Swann 2016). However, we propose that an imbalance due to an abundance of sales skills may not decrease the likelihood of salespeople experiencing flow. Sales is a fast-paced career (Cameron Montgomery et al. 1996), and even when the sales challenge is low, salespeople rarely experience boredom. This is because they can excel in their performance, contribute to their organization's values, and receive high compensation (Moneta 2004). Salespeople are also motivated by a variety of factors, including achievement, recognition, competition, and bonuses (Friess et al. 2023). Even if the sales challenge is low, salespeople can still be motivated to perform well to achieve their goals and earn more rewards, unlike other professionals such as

those in music and sports (Chung et al. 2021; Fritz and Avsec 2007; Swann 2016). Therefore, an imbalance characterized by challenges exceeding skills may not negatively affect the flow experience in the sales context.

H1b: The imbalance characterized by skills exceeding challenges positively affects salespeople's flow experience.

Conversely, when a salesperson's skills are inadequate to address these challenges, the salesperson is less likely to experience flow (Csikszentmihalyi 2000). When challenges exceed skills, individuals often experience anxiety (Csikszentmihalyi 1988; Engeser et al. 2021). This imbalance presents a significant challenge for salespeople, for whom performance directly impacts their compensation (Lopez et al. 2006). Salespeople often find it difficult to fully engage in their work when they are stressed or under pressure. Therefore, if salespeople are confronted with high challenges but lack the requisite sales skills to address them, they are unlikely to experience flow.

H1c: The imbalance characterized by challenges exceeding skills negatively affects salespeople's flow experience.

The Moderating Role of Clan Control

Clan control, also known as soft control, is an informal form of organizational control that promotes goal and value congruence between employees and organizations by fostering a shared culture and socialization (Kirsch et al. 2010; Yang et al. 2022). Clan control prioritizes trust and open communication over rigid policies (Floyd and Lane 2000). For example, group meetings, company retreats, and open decision-making opportunities are forms of clan control (Indeed Editorial Team 2022; Strauß and Zecher 2013). Clan control aligns with positive psychology, as it aims to make employees feel included and valued by promoting shared values as a form of control (Chua et al. 2012; Ströbele and Wentges 2018). Both positive psychology and clan control intersect in their emphasis on fostering positive social environments and using positive reinforcement to enhance performance (Wiegand and Geller 2005). Social support is a positive aspect of social environment that contributes to flow state experience (Bakker 2005).

Thus, we argue that clan control, which focuses on utilizing positive psychology in the workplace as a form of control, impacts the flow experience. Clan control should benefit salespeople as it nurtures their skills, fosters open discussions about sales challenges (Croitor et al. 2022; Gopal and Gosain 2010), encourages teamwork, and creates an enabling work environment (Strauß and Zecher 2013). A supportive environment is especially important when salespeople face high challenges, as it can help them stay motivated and focused.

Conversely, when an organization maintains low levels of clan control, it may miss opportunities for effective communication and support (Chua et al. 2012). This deficiency can detract from flow experience of salespeople, even when there is a balance between their skills and challenges (Fullagar et al. 2013). Through clan control, salespeople can be supported by their colleagues and managers (Croitor et al. 2022). Consequently, even if a salesperson's sales skills exceed challenges, without a supportive control system, they may not be able to fully enjoy and experience flow during work (Pianese et al. 2023). Therefore, we argue that clan control should moderate the positive effect of skill-challenge balance on flow experience. In cases of low clan control, even if a balance is present, salespeople are less likely to attain flow experience due to the absence of informal social structures that offer support.

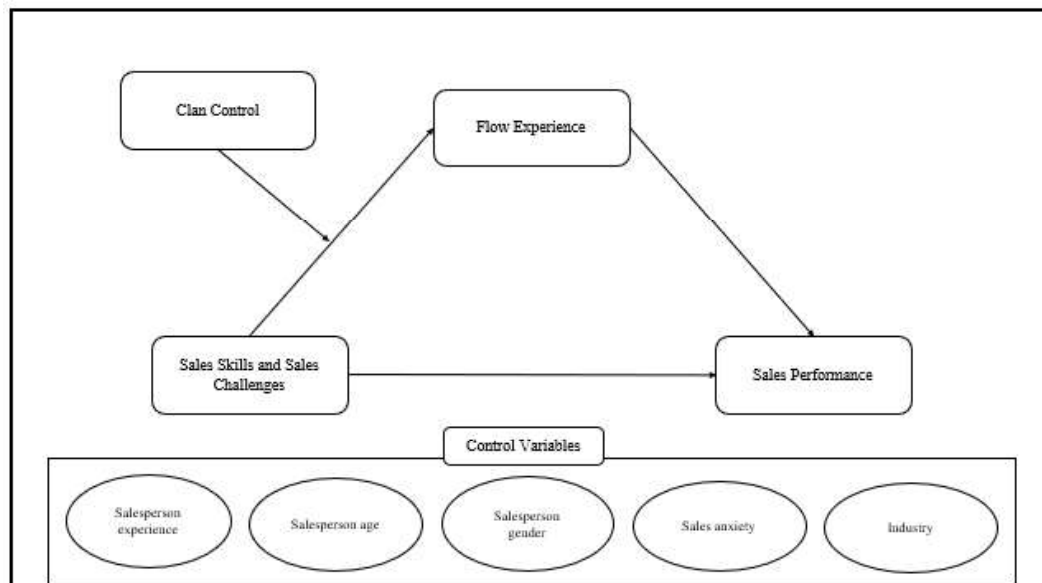
H2: Clan control moderates the effect of the balance between skills and challenges on flow experience. When clan control is low, even if there is a balance, salespeople do not experience flow.

The Consequences of Flow Experience

We posit that flow experience could contribute to enhanced sales performance. The neurological activity associated with flow states enhances attention and awareness, resulting in an optimal state of consciousness and improved performance (Bakker et al. 2011; Demerouti 2006). Employees who report they enjoy their work and feel happy are consistent with evaluations of flow experience (Bakker 2005). When experiencing flow, salespeople are likely to derive deeper meaning from their work through their service to their company and customers, and being part of something larger than themselves. Thus, they may be well equipped to actively and enthusiastically engage in their sales tasks, ultimately leading to improved performance. The discovery of the pleasure, joy, and meaning that salespeople realize from helping their customers, can help salespeople close more deals and achieve their sales goals by fostering focus, concentration, and perseverance (Peifer and Wolters 2021; Wang and Chen 2010). Therefore, salespeople's flow experience is likely to improve sales performance (Eisenberger et al. 2005).

H3: Salespeople's flow experience positively affects salespeople's performance.

Figure 1. Conceptual Model



METHODOLOGY**Study 1***Participants and Procedure*

We recruited 154 U.S. participants (33.3% female; $M_{age} = 38.62$) with sales experience from Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) in exchange for a small payment. The study employed a 2 (sales skill: high vs. low) $\times$ 2 (sales challenge: high vs. low) between-subjects design. We excluded participants in the low sales skill and low sales challenge condition from further analysis, leaving a total of 120 participants ($n = 41$ in the balance condition, $n = 38$ in the high skill condition, and $n = 41$ in the high challenge condition). 91.6% of them work in the service industry, while 6.7% work in the manufacturing industry (see Table 2).

Table 2. Sample Descriptive Statistics

	Value	Percent (Study 1)	Percent (Study 2)
Industry			
Service		91.6%	91.5%
Manufacturing		6.7%	8.5%
Others		1.7%	
Work experience			
Less than 1 year		1.7%	1.2%
1-3 years		24.1%	37.4%
4-6 years		60.9%	24.5%
7+ years		13.3%	36.9%
Age			
18-30		25%	40.7%
31-40		44.2%	32.1%
41-50		20.8%	13.8%
51-60		9.2%	7.7%
60+		5%	5.7%

Participants in the high skill condition (vs. low) were asked to choose their most (vs. least) effective sales skill from options including establishing rapport, obtaining information, identifying needs, persuading, overcoming objections, closing sales, and making recommendations. Based on their condition, participants were asked to describe their sales experience. For the high (vs. low) challenging condition, participants were asked to describe their sales experience when faced with a big, challenging (vs. small, easy) sales opportunity and whether they met (vs. did not meet) their sales goals.

Measure

Flow experience. Participants were asked to rate seven statements adapted from Bakker (2008), which aligned with the sales experience they had just described. The answers were averaged ($\alpha = .83$). Please refer to Table 3 for an overview of all the items used.

Controls. It is possible that sales anxiety, gender, age, sales experience, and industry type (manufacture vs. service) may alter salespeople's flow experience (Mathieu et al. 2007; Prendergast et al. 2014; Yoo and Gretzel 2008). Therefore, we have controlled for these variables.

Table 3. Scale Items for Study 1 (Experiment Study)

Flow experience (Bakker 2008)
I thought about nothing else during the sales experience.
I forgot everything else around me during the sales experience.
I was totally immersed in the situation during the sales experience.
The sales experience gave me a good feeling.
I felt happy during the sales experience.
I felt cheerful during the sales experience.
I enjoyed the sales experience.

Results

To assess whether the imbalance (vs. balance) between salespeople's sales skills and sales challenges affect salespeople's flow experience, we performed an analysis of covariance, with flow experience as the dependent variable; conditions (balance vs. imbalance characterized by challenges exceeding skills vs. imbalance characterized by skills exceeding challenges) as the independent variables; age, gender, sales anxiety, sales experience, and industry as the control variables. The results revealed that there is a significant difference in flow experience between salespeople who reported the imbalance characterized by challenges exceeding skills (i.e., high challenge) and salespeople who reported a balance between skill and challenge ($M_{\text{balance}} = 5.48$; $SD_{\text{balance}} = 1.05$ vs. $M_{\text{high challenge}} = 5.20$, $SD_{\text{high challenge}} = 1.18$, $F(1, 80) = 3.43$, $p = .07$). On the other hand, when the imbalance between sales skill and challenge happens due to high skill, there was no difference in flow experience ($M_{\text{balance}} = 5.48$, $SD_{\text{balance}} = 1.05$ vs. $M_{\text{high skill}} = 5.57$, $SD_{\text{high skill}} = 0.86$, $F(1, 76) = .76$; $p = .39$), supporting H1a, H1b, and H1c.

Study 2

The objectives of study 2 are twofold. First, we aim to replicate the results of Study 2 using a more comprehensive questionnaire to measure flow experience. In Study 1, we used a short-form survey to measure flow experience to reduce costs. Although its reliability and validity are acceptable, Study 2 adopts the full version of the questionnaire and includes a larger sample to reduce measurement errors. Second, Study 2 aims to test H2, which hypothesizes the moderating effects of clan control on the relationship between challenge-skill balance and flow experience, and H3, which posits a positive effect of flow experience on sales performance.

Participants and Procedure

We recruited 242 salespeople (52.6% female; $M_{\text{age}} = 34.98$) from Prolific in exchange for a small payment. A descriptive analysis of the sample shows that the salespeople in our sample have worked in sales for 8.3 years on average, 92.5% of them work in the service industry, and 7.5% of them work in the manufacturing industry.

Measure

A series of multi-item 7-point Likert measures (e.g., ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree") were used to measure the study constructs. An overview of all the items is presented in Table 4. Same as in Study 1, we included gender, age, sales experience, industry type, and sales anxiety as control variables. See Table 4 for the item loadings, Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, and average variance extracted (AVE) for each of the latent constructs in our model. Table 5 indicates the correlations between the constructs.

Common Method Variance

The issue of common method variance (CMV) may arise when both mediating and dependent variables are obtained from the same sources simultaneously, potentially leading to shared method bias (Podsakoff et al. 2003). In our research, to assess the influence of CMV, we utilized the correlational marker technique. We used the perception toward digital channels as a marker variable as it theoretically does not correlate with any constructs under study and examined its correlations with other constructs. By doing so, we aimed to mitigate concerns regarding common method bias (Lindell and Whitney 2001). Our analysis showed that the adjusted correlations remained significant, indicating that

Table 4. Measurement Items for Study 2 (Survey Study)

Variable	Factor Loading	Alpha	CR	AVE
Flow experience		.94	.95	.60
When I am working in sales, I think about nothing else.	.727			
I get carried away by my sales work.	.755			
When I am working in sales, I forget everything else around me.	.706			
I am totally immersed in my sales work.	.787			
My sales work gives me a good feeling.	.823			
I do my sales work with a lot of enjoyment.	.896			
I feel happy during my sales work.	.857			
I feel cheerful when I am working in sales.	.855			
I would still work in sales, even if I received less pay.	.722			
I find that I also want to work in sales in my free time.	.746			
I work in sales because I enjoy it.	.865			
When I am working in sales, I am doing it for myself.	.453			
I get my motivation from the sales work itself, and not from the reward for it.	.767			
Clan control (Yang et al. 2022)		.79	.87	.62
There is a lot of communication about my company's goals and strategy.	.817			
My company's incentive system motivates the accomplishment of long-term strategies.	.783			
My company values always have priority over following procedures.	.728			
My company promotes debating data, assumptions, and action plans rather than just following rules.	.815			
Performance (Kohli et al. 1998)		.9	.93	.72
Identifying significant accounts and selling to them.	.856			
Generating a high level of dollar sales.	.869			
Selling high profit-margin products.	.871			
Quickly generating sales of new company products.	.846			
Assisting your sales supervisor to meet his or her goals.	.800			
Sales anxiety (Spielberger and Sydeman 1994)		.91	.93	.69
I feel calm during working in sales.	.890			
I feel tense during working in sales.	.846			
I feel secure during working in sales.	.725			
I feel nervous during working in sales.	.860			
I feel relaxed during working in sales.	.829			
I feel worried during working in sales.	.810			

Table 5. Construct Correlations

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
Conditions (1)	1								
Clan control (2)	.049	1							
Flow experience (3)	.115	.350**	1						
Performance (4)	.191**	.247**	.362**	1					
Gender (5)	.116	.018	-.096	-.109	1				
Age (6)	.012	.062	.164*	.088	.112	1			
Sales anxiety (7)	.006	-.024	.287**	.080	-.110	-.017	1		
Industry (8)	-.044	.135*	.024	.157*	.020	.085	.732	1	
Experience (9)	.170**	.118	.207**	.262**	-.101	.602**	-.003	-.013	1

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

concerns about common method bias were alleviated. Consequently, we concluded that the results of our study are not expected to be biased by CMV.

Results

To test the mediation as well as the moderating effect, we utilized moderated mediation analysis (Macro PROCESS Model 7) with 5000 bootstrap samples. The challenge-skill balance condition was coded as 0, the imbalance condition characterized by skills exceeding challenges (i.e., high skill) was coded as 1, and the imbalance condition characterized by challenge exceeding skills (i.e., high challenge) was coded as 2. To run the moderate mediation model, the conditions was entered as the independent variable, flow experience as the mediation variable, sales performance as the dependent variable, and clan control as the moderator.

The analysis reveals a statistically significant interactive effect of clan control and challenge-skill balance on flow ($B = -.2153$, $SE = .0954$, $p = .0250$, 95% CI $[-.4032, -.0273]$). The results of spotlight analysis indicated that when clan control was low, the conditions did not significantly impact flow experience ($B = -.1828$, $SE = .1649$, $p = .2687$, 95% CI $[-.5078, .1421]$). However, when clan control was high, the conditions had a significant impact on flow experience for salespeople ($B = -.7210$, $SE = .1633$, $p < .001$, 95% CI $[-1.0427, -.3994]$). These results provided support for H2, suggesting the moderating role of clan control. Critically, salespeople do not have flow experience when clan control is low, even if there is a balance between challenges and skills.

Furthermore, the results of moderated mediation model revealed that flow experience was positively related to salespeople's performance ($B = .4453$, $SE = .1082$, $p = <.001$, 95% CI $[.2321, .6585]$). As H3 predicted, salespeople's flow experience positively influences salespeople's performance.

DISCUSSION

Theoretical Contributions

Our study makes significant contributions to existing literature in several profound ways, enriching our understanding of the interplay between flow experience,

sales performance, and organizational culture (Dugan et al. 2023; Vieira et al. 2022). First and foremost, we have introduced the concept of flow experience into the realm of sales, shedding new light on the dynamics that underlie the success of salespeople. With a survey study and an experimental design study, we have uncovered a crucial connection between salespeople's flow experience and sales performance. In essence, our findings underscore that when sales professionals enter a state of flow, they tend to perform exceptionally, aligning with prior studies that have highlighted the substantial impact of positive mental states on sales performance (Gomezel and Aleksić 2020; Tse et al. 2020).

Second, our research extends the boundaries of flow theory by deepening our understanding of its antecedents and a moderator (Bao and Yang 2022; Csikszentmihalyi 2000; Hyun et al. 2022). Traditionally, the literature on flow experience has posited that any significant imbalance between an individual's skills and challenges they face can adversely affect their flow experience (Larche and Dixon 2020; Ozkara et al. 2017). However, our study reveals that the detrimental impact of such imbalances is contingent upon contexts of skills and challenges. Unlike flow studies in other contexts (Fagerlind et al. 2013), salespeople's flow experience was not negatively related to the imbalance characterized by skills exceeding challenges. Our studies showed that in the context of sales, salespeople can still experience flow even if their skills surpass challenges (Csikszentmihalyi 2014). In addition, our findings demonstrated that clan control within an organization determines whether challenge-skill balance affects flow experience (Croitor et al. 2022; Kirsch et al. 2010; Yang et al. 2022). Specifically, we found that the challenge-skill balance positively affects flow experience (Csikszentmihalyi 2014; Moneta and Csikszentmihalyi 1999) only holds true when the organization has high clan control.

Third, our research contributes substantially to the literature on clan control (Malek et al. 2018; Yang et al. 2022). Our study responds to the call for a more in-depth exploration of informal control systems (Malek et al. 2018; Vieira et al. 2022). Interestingly, we found that clan control plays a positive role in facilitating salespeople's flow experience. When an organization

offers a high level of clan control, salespeople reported more flow experience than those working for organizations with a low level of clan control. Our second study demonstrates that flow experience of salespeople is influenced significantly by the prevailing organizational culture (Vieira et al. 2022). Specifically, a high level of clan control moderates the relationship between challenge-skill balance and salespeople's flow experience (Sihag and Rijdsdijk 2019).

Managerial Implications

Our study underscores the critical role of flow experience in driving sales success (Friend et al. 2016; Kemp et al. 2013). Our findings reveal that when salespeople experience flow, their performance improves significantly. Therefore, firms should prioritize creating an environment that fosters flow among their sales teams.

The key factor contributing to flow experience is the challenge-skill balance (Beard 2015; Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi 2002). Our findings show that flow experience is most likely to occur when this balance is maintained or when skills exceed challenges. Based on these findings, we recommend that sales managers strategically adjust sales goals—raising them when salespeople have well-developed skills but are not sufficiently challenged. This ensures that sales challenges remain engaging without becoming overwhelming, ultimately enhancing flow and performance. However, companies must carefully balance skills and challenges when setting sales goals. On the one hand, lowering sales targets for individual salesperson to align with their current skill levels may enhance individual flow experiences but could ultimately undermine overall sales performance within the company. On the other hand, continuously pushing to increase salespeople's skills to meet escalating challenges may lead to dissatisfaction and turnover, as employees may seek opportunities at larger or more prestigious firms. Therefore, organizations should exercise caution when adjusting sales targets and implementing training programs, ensuring that efforts to foster flow do not inadvertently harm long-term performance or retention.

Additionally, our study highlights the moderating role of clan control in shaping salespeople's flow experiences. Salespeople who operate in a high clan control environment, where shared values, collaboration, and support are emphasized, report a stronger flow experience compared to those in low-control environments. This finding suggests that clan control fosters a workplace culture that enables salespeople to thrive (Croitor et al. 2022; Malek et al. 2018). To cultivate a consistent state of flow, we recommend that organizations strengthen clan control through informal initiatives such as sales retreats, internal newsletters, social events, and peer mentoring (Chua et al. 2012; Stathakopoulos 1996). Furthermore, we recommend that organizations implement sales management training programs that support identifying and applying informal activities that build clan control.

Finally, given that sales skills play a crucial role in achieving flow, regardless of challenge levels, organizations should invest in continuous training and coaching programs to enhance these skills. When sales challenges outpace existing skills, targeted training initiatives become essential to ensure that salespeople remain confident and engaged (LaForge et al. 1997). This need has become even more pressing in the AI era, where evolving technologies and market uncertainties present new challenges for sales professionals (Good et al. 2022; Hartmann and Lussier 2020). By prioritizing sales training, companies can equip their teams with the skills needed to navigate complex sales environments, sustain flow experiences, and drive superior sales outcomes.

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