

**Approaches to Research and Academic Communication
(BMPF7100)**

**Sales-Leadership and Sales-Performance:
A Critical Literature Review**

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Abstract

This article critically reviews 8 selected studies into sales-leadership and sales-performance through philosophical and ethical lenses. Most adopt a realist ontology and positivist epistemology using quantitative surveys and hypotheses to test causal links. This traditional approach has shaped sales-leadership practice, to prioritise objective metrics and repeatable processes. In contrast Peesker et al., (2019) adopted a social-constructionist ontology, interpretivist epistemology and used qualitative interviews. Their findings identified perceived 4 sales-leadership behaviours which contribute to sales-performance mediated by 4 psychological factors. For future research the author recommends increased use of mixed-method research combining measurement discipline with interpretivist, qualitative studies, which contribute to both theory and practice.

Keywords: sales-leadership; sales-performance; Leader–Member Exchange; Transformational leadership; Servant-leadership; Authentic leadership; Adaptive leadership; Transactional leadership; Emotional intelligence.

Introduction

The aim of this literature review is to critically examine a selection of past research relating to sales-leadership and its impact on sales-performance. The analysis will make reference to related epistemological, ontological and ethical issues.

Sales-Leadership and Sales-Performance

Silva, (2016,p.4) describes leadership as “the process of interactive influence that occurs when, in a given context, some people accept someone as their leader to achieve common goals”. (Silva, 2016, p.3-4) identifies several implications: that leadership is not only a personal quality but a process; it involves influence; operates in a specific context; those being led accept the leader and shared goals are achieved (Rost 1993, cited by Silva 2016, p.4).

The most tangible aspect of sales-performance is a completed sale. Zallocco et al., (2009, p.598) recognise complexity and proposes an “organizing framework of sales-performance based on sales outputs, salesperson skill/capability development, sales activities, and market indicators.” It is therefore difficult to define.

Key Research Theories

Scotland (2012, p.9) argues that “what knowledge is, and the ways of discovering it are subjective”, and that a paradigm consists of: “ontology, epistemology, methodology and methods.”

Grix (2019, p.51), suggests that ontology and epistemology “are to research what ‘footings’ are

to a house: they form the foundations of the whole edifice” and that it is essential the researcher understands “the core assumptions that underlie their work and inform their choice of research questions, methodology, methods and even sources.” Pretorius (2024, p.2698/2699) describes ontology as the researcher’s “understanding of reality”.

Cohen (et al. 2007, p.7 cited in Scotland 2012, p.9), describe Epistemology as being concerned “with the nature and forms of knowledge” and Scotland (2012, p.9) suggests it is “what it means to know”, as epistemological assumptions are concerned with how knowledge is created, acquired and communicated”.

Pretorius (2024, p.2700) suggests Axiology “plays a pivotal role in shaping the ethical and moral dimensions of research” and “prompts researchers to consider the role of their own values, beliefs, and biases in the design conduct, and interpretation of their studies”.

Research Paradigms or Philosophies

Saunders et al., (2023, p. 145-146) describes five major research philosophies or paradigms including Positivism, Critical Realism, Interpretivism, Post Modernism and Pragmatism, which are a product of the ontologies, epistemologies and axiologies held by researchers. These are discussed in Appendix 1.

Ethics, Validity, Reliability and Bias

Bos (2020, p.31) argues that ethics is not a set of restrictions but an inquiry into “right and wrong,” “valuable and important,” and an attempt to answer the question of what a researcher ought to do.

Orb, Eisenhauer & Wynaden, (2001, p.93) suggest “ethics pertains to doing good and avoiding harm” and acknowledge that both quantitative and qualitative research have their own distinct ethical challenges and responsibilities. Ethics in qualitative research is not merely compliance with ethical regulations but ongoing reflexivity (Roulston and Shelton, 2015, p.333). A core challenge is balancing valid data collection with minimising harm and respecting autonomy, therefore, informed consent is essential, and ethical dilemmas are navigated through frameworks such as deontology and consequentialism (Bos, 2020, p.44). Deontology mandates strict adherence to principles like confidentiality and informed consent, regardless of outcomes. In contrast, consequentialism evaluates ethicality based on overall benefits, sometimes justifying deviations from strict norms for the greater societal good (Bos, 2020, p.44).

William (2024, p.289) asserts that “Ensuring the validity and reliability of research findings is fundamental to conducting high-quality academic research.” William (2024, p.288) defines validity as “the extent to which a study measures or reflects the concepts it claims to measure”. It can be internal or external which includes generalisability which is the practical application of findings to wider contexts and populations. Kimberlin and Winterstein (2008, p.2277) recognise

reliability as the consistency and stability of measurement and whether repeated application of the same method would produce similar results.

Roulston and Shelton (2015, p.335) recognise bias as a threat to validity. Šimundić, (2013, p.1) describes it as “any trend or deviation from the truth in data collection, data analysis, interpretation and publication which can cause false conclusions. Bias can occur either intentionally or unintentionally.”

Review of literature

Using Google Scholar and EBSCO, searches were made for “sales leadership”, “and / or” “sales performance”. 68 papers were identified (35 Google Scholar, 33 EBSCO). Having removed duplicates, the titles and abstracts of the remaining 48 were reviewed and those with the tightest reference to “sales leadership” and “sales performance” were retained.

A reading and quality analysis of the remaining 29, resulted in 2 articles being removed for contextual fit, 11 due to publication date and 8 as they did not refer to a clear leadership theory. The final 8 articles focused on differing sales leadership behaviours and the impact on sales-performance.

All articles reference sales leadership and the link with sales performance and were published since 2015, suggesting a relevant field of research. 7 are based on empirical research and 1 solely on conceptual typology development. Most papers have a US influence.

The analysis identified 7 broad leadership theories. These are summarised in Table 1 and more detail is provided in Appendix 2.

Table 1: Leadership theories with relevance to Sales-Leadership and Sales-Performance	
Theories of Leadership / Sales-Leadership	Relevant Literature referred to in this review
Leader-Member Exchange	Schwepker (2017)
Emotional Intelligence	Wilderom et al. (2015)
Adaptive	Crick et al. (2019)
Authentic	Shahzad et al. (2022)

Transactional and Transformational	Domingues et al. (2017) Gao et al. (2020)
Servant	Westbrook and Peterson (2022)
Behavioural	Peesker et al. (2019)

Data was extracted from the selected articles using the template in Appendix 3.

Review of Articles

This section provides a short critical review of the theories of leadership and approaches to sales leadership and sales performance found in the 8 selected articles and their relationship to Ontology, Epistemology and Ethics.

Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) Leadership (Schwepker, 2017)

The study explores how ethical climate (EC) and LMX affect salespeople's commitment to superior customer value (CSCV), reducing their unethical intentions (UI) and the impact on Sales Quota Performance (QP) in B2B settings (Schwepker, 2017, p. 72). LMX is the quality of the leader–subordinate relationship (Schriesheim et al., 1999 cited in Schwepker, 2017, p. 73). It consists of attraction, loyalty, effort, and professional respect (Ansari et al., 2007, cited in Schwepker, 2017, p. 73).

The study used a national data collection organisation and online cross-sectional mono-method survey of 408 cross-industry B2B salespeople, using validated Likert scales, hypothesis testing (Structural Equation Modelling (SEM)), and statistical analysis for reliability and validity checks (Schwepker, 2017, pp. 77–81).

The written style is academic, aimed at a specialist audience.

The researcher holds a realist ontology as EC, LMX and CSCV are treated as objective measurable constructs, suitable for analysis via standardised instruments and quantitative methods.

The objectivist, positivist epistemology assumes generalisable knowledge is obtained through literature review, hypotheses testing, validated Likert scales for EC, LMX, CSCV and UI, triangulated with prior research (Schwepker, 2017, pp. 74,78–79).

The axiology demonstrates the researcher's values, as ethical behaviour, integrity, CSCV and EC are key within sales-leadership and outcomes (Schwepker, 2017, pp. 80–81).

From an ethical and deontological perspective, the study describes invitations, response rates, exclusions and non-response bias tests, demonstrating solid rigour (Schwepker, 2017, p.77). No detail is provided relating to informed consent, independent ethics approvals, data safeguards and anonymity (Schwepker, 2017, p.77). As UI is potentially sensitive and because of the single source, clearer protections may improve deontological rigour. Of concern is the quantifiable framing of UI as this seems to over-simplify sales practice, which is ethically complex (Schwepker, 2017, p. 77).

Reliability was strong across all measures including, psychological EC, CSVC, with a Cronbach's alpha of .70 (Schwepker, 2017, p.78). Voluntary participants were invited by email, which raised representativeness questions but non-response bias checks indicated no significant difference between early or late responders (Schwepker, 2017 p.77). The use of self-reported measures may result in social desirability bias which is acknowledged (Schwepker (2017) p. 82-83). The sample is limited to B2B and not all potential antecedents or consequences are in scope (Schwepker (2017), p. 82). The model omits plausible variables including, role stress, motivation and behavioural sales performance potentially impacting reliability (Schwepker, 2017, p. 82). Generalisation beyond US B2B is limited. Research award funding may introduce bias.

The study adds value as it positively links EC and LMX to CSCV. CSCV remains central to ethical, effective selling leading to greater QP (Schwepker, 2017, p.80). It contributes to theory and practice for managers who wish to align sales ethical behaviours with performance goals and adds to LMX theory by identifying new antecedence and consequences increasing understanding of EC in building trust (Schwepker, 2017, p. 81-82).

Emotional Intelligence (EI) Leadership (Wilderom et al., 2015)

Wilderom et al. (2015, p.827) recognise EI as the extent to which an individual perceives, understands and regulates their own and others' emotions, by intentionally integrating thought and feeling to effectively manage personal, social and interpersonal challenges (George, 2000 cited in Wilderom et al., 2015, p.825).

The researchers explored whether a relationship exists between store managers' EI, the cohesiveness of a store, sales-directed employee's behaviour, and measurable store performance, and hypothesised that managers' EI influences store performance directly and indirectly via employee behaviour (Wilderom et al., 2015, p. 826).

The study is a multi-level, multi-source and quantitative survey across 261 stores of a major retail chain, based on company records using a sample of 253 store/sales managers (99% male) and 1,611 salespeople (54% male). Managers completed an online survey rating employees' sales behaviours, after one week salespeople completed paper surveys rating manager EI and store cohesiveness. Response rates were high at 99% for managers and 96%

for employees. One month later, objective monthly sales, adjusted for store size were collected (Wilderom et al., 2015, p. 833).

The writing targets researchers and academics.

Researchers hold a realist ontology, their worldview is that despite intangibles, manager EI, store cohesiveness and directed sales behaviour are measurable and can have an objective causal effect on outcomes. The constructs are measured using validated scales (Wilderom et al., 2015, p.833).

The epistemology is positivist, as knowledge is seen to be developed through defining hypotheses and statistically testing the causal path of EI, cohesiveness, sales-directed behaviour and independently reported sales outcomes, using explicit hypothesis and model testing (Wilderom et al., 2015, p. 828-834).

The Axiology values practical improvements and how leadership behaviours influence team, employee experiences and measurable unit sales performance (Wilderom et al. 2015, pp. 836).

Deontologically, the study reports culturally appropriate translation, voluntary participation and confidentiality, but head-office staff's role in physically distributing the sales employee questionnaire raises concerns around bias relating to social desirability and gatekeeping, potentially exacerbated by high response rates. Other concerns include no reference to ethics approval or data management, manager rating of their own teams and predominance of males, creating potential for several types of bias. Common-method bias is addressed using a random split-sample, anonymous voluntary surveys, and independent, objective sales data. There is potential EI self-report bias (Wilderom et al., 2015, p.832, 837). No external funding avoids bias.

External validity and generalisability is limited as the study was undertaken in South Korea within a retail chain, but in independently operating retail electronics stores which were sufficiently independent to allow inter-unit analysis to highlight differences in managers' EI, store cohesiveness and sales behaviours of employees (Wilderom et al., 2015, p. 831).

Reliability is strong and supported by validated instruments and statistical tests, within acceptable thresholds. Validity is underpinned by established scales, time lagged designs and audited sales data. External validity is limited by a single store-chain and country (Wilderom et al., 2015, p.832-836).

Findings show there is no direct link between EI and sales-performance, but rather an indirect relationship, as EI directly impacts salespeople's sense of cohesiveness, which shapes sales directed behaviours, that directly impact measurable sales-performance. Researchers conclude that EI contributes indirectly to store performance therefore, store managers' selection and development should include EI to positively impact sales-performance (Wilderom et al., 2015,

p.836). This supports the axiological position.

Adaptive Leadership (AL) Crick et al. (2019)

This study does not involve human participants, or primary data, as it takes a literature review based approach combining existing leadership and sales-leadership theories to develop a typology of leadership styles for sales-managers. Its output is a practical 2 x 2 matrix continuum; transactional versus transformational and hands-on versus hands-off, which enables sales-managers to adopt a leadership style which better meets the needs of each salesperson, enhancing organisational adaptability, effectiveness and potentially improving sales-performance (Crick et al., 2019, pp. 65, 72-75). The conceptual typology identifies four leadership types: autocratic, servant, charismatic, laissez-faire and these are mapped to the 2 x 2 matrix. The methodology has strengths in the breadth of leadership theories incorporated (Crick et al., 2019, pp. 64–65, 73). The writing targets academics and advanced practitioners.

The study presents a conceptual typology and not an empirical measurable test, but it does assume the underlying constructs and salespeople's needs, and sales-managers' AL styles can be fitted on the continuum of the dimensions. The ontological stance leans toward realism (Crick, et al., 2019, pp. 72-73).

Epistemologically, the study adopts a pragmatic approach to knowledge development through integration of broad-ranging leadership theories and situational analyses, into a framework which is practical and intended to be used in real-world sales settings. Should it be measured and validated in future, then the epistemic position will shift towards a more positivist stance.

Axiologically, the paper values adaptability, inclusivity and contextual fit over one-size fits all approaches, seeking ethical, effective practical leadership aligned to individual development (Crick et al., 2019, pp. 64–65).

From a deontological perspective, standard research ethics such as consent and confidentiality are not relevant, as there is no primary data. In their approach to typology development, the stance is one of academic integrity in selecting and bringing together existing research (Crick et al., 2019, p.65–72), although heavy reliance on existing literature may have resulted in selection bias. There is the assumption that some theories have practical applicability to sales, whereas others are discussed from the perspective of their limitations to sales (Crick et al., 2019, p 66), resulting in potential bias. No conflicts of interest or funding bias are stated.

As this typology is conceptual, the researchers acknowledged further research is needed to define best measures for the typology's constructs and dimensions, so the validity and reliability of the typology can be assessed (Crick et al., 2019, p.74).

The study provides a valuable conceptual contribution to adaptive sales-leadership. The needs-based typology contributes to both theory and practice, but its value is limited by the

constraints surrounding its reliability and validity.

Authentic Leadership (AL) (Shahzad et al., 2022)

The study examines how AL influences Transactive Memory Systems (TMS), Innovative Work Behaviour (IWB), and Customer-Directed Organisational Citizenship Behaviour (CDOCB) in B2B sales, and how these interact to drive team sales performance (Shahzad et al., 2022, p.1).

A quantitative, cross-sectional survey design was authenticated by prior qualitative interviews with sales-managers and sales-people. Matched dyadic data was collected from 348 salespeople and 87 managers across 52 pharmaceutical firms in Pakistan within high knowledge sharing and complex solution selling B2B environments. Data was gathered online and in person, and constructs measured across five validated scales (Shahzad et al., 2022, p.6).

The researchers hold a realist ontology, viewing AL, TMS, IWB and CDOCB as real, objective constructs which can be defined, captured and measured via validated scales (Shahzad et al., 2022, p.2).

The epistemological stance is positivist and deductive using hypotheses testing on earlier theories using dyadic survey data, and a range of statistical tools to test for relevance and variance (Shahzad et al., 2022, pp.2-10).

The researchers' axiology is ethical, pragmatic and performance orientated. They look to leadership which focuses on well-being and development of individuals to promote team collaboration, innovation, and customer orientation through practical sales-leadership goals (Shahzad et al., 2022, p.3). AL is framed as performance-enhancing, encouraging salespersons' discretionary effort above and beyond the norm (Shahzad et al., 2022, p.3).

Ethically, the authors meet their academic duty to build on theory, as Conservation of Resources (Hobfoll, 1989, cited in Shahzad et al., 2022, p. 2) and AL (Avolio & Gardner, 2005, cited in Shahzad et al., 2022, p. 2), were both explicitly cited as conceptual anchors. Regarding deontology and ethics, good practice was followed as organisation and data access permissions were obtained and selection bias addressed by pre-screening. Elimination of low responses and manager–employee dyads were matched to strengthen internal validity (Shahzad et al., 2022 p.6). No funding bias is reported.

The authors employed SEM, and reliability and validity checks to confirm robustness, high intra-class correlations, construct validity, and factor analysis to address discriminant and predictive validity (Shahzad et al., 2022, p.6). External validity is constrained by the pharmaceutical, Pakistan sample, limiting generalisability.

A potential weakness is limited reflection on how authenticity or innovation may be socially

constructed across cultures. Interpretivist elements are absent, although complexity of sales team dynamics is acknowledged.

Written style is academic and theoretically dense.

This is a robust empirical study, with clear theoretical and managerial value, as AL facilitates resource-building processes enhancing team collaboration, innovation and customer orientation, positively impacting sales team performance. Practically, sales-managers should be trained in AL behaviours to enable team knowledge-sharing and innovation (Shahzad et al., 2022, p.11).

Transactional (TAL) and Transformational (TFL) Leadership (Domingues et al., 2017)

The study investigates how TAL and TFL moderate the relationship between salespeople's goal orientations (learning orientation (LO) and performance orientation (PO)) and sales-performance (Domingues, et al., 2017, p.639-640).

The strategy is quantitative with data collected through field surveys; study 1 involved salespeople (410 across 145 shoe stores) and study 2, managers and salespeople across 28 car dealerships (Domingues, et al.,2017, p.641-642).

The study provides solid theoretical justification, methodology and clear results.

Across the two studies in Brazilian retail contexts, findings were that LO and PO positively affect sales performance (Domingues et al.,2017, p.644). TAL amplifies the positive effects of both LO and PO, consistent with path-goal theory (Domingues et al.,2017, p.643,646,638). TFL weakens these relationships, suggesting follower-dependency limits performance (Domingues, et al.,2017, p.647). These findings challenge the common perception that TAL is inferior to TFL and provides evidence that leadership effectiveness is contingent on context.

The ontology is realist, treating leadership behaviours and goal orientations as objective, measurable constructs existing independently of the researcher, and sales-performance as an external reality, quantifiable through sales records or self-reporting. The researchers utilise surveys, deductive structured hypotheses, quantitative and statistical analysis, assuming leadership style, goal orientation, and performance are measurable relationship constructs that interact in predictable and generalisable ways in sales contexts (Domingues, et al.,2017, p. 641-643).

A positivist epistemology assumes knowledge is built through systematic testing and hypothesis verification. Hypotheses were derived deductively from theory, and quantitative surveys, and statistical modelling (hierarchical linear models) used to test predictions. Variance and knowledge is validated through reliability and significance testing (Domingues et al.,2017, p.639-641).

The axiology values pragmatic, actionable sales-leadership insights which enhance

sales-performance via evidence-based guidance for sales-management. The researchers explicitly state that TAL may be more effective than TFL in specific sales contexts (Domingues et al., 2017, p.645-647). Broader humanistic values such as employee well-being are not central.

From an ethical and deontological perspective, researchers adopted safeguards including approaching participants personally and explaining research scope (Domingues et.al., 2017, p.641). There was no explicit discussion of anonymity, formal ethical clearance, informed consent, or data retention which weakens ethical transparency. No evidence of external funding was reported (Domingues et.al., 2017, p.641).

Regarding reliability, composite reliability scores exceed .70 and factor analysis confirms reliability and validity (Domingues et al., 2017, p. 643). Other considerations included self-report bias which may affect subjective sales-performance (Study 1), as scales from existing literature were modified, potentially affecting measurement consistency and validity (Domingues et al., 2017, p. 641-642). Cross-sectional data potentially limits or weakens causal inference and the acknowledged restriction to Brazil, retail and automotive sectors raises questions regarding external validity and generalisability (Domingues et al., 2017, p. 642, 647).

The written style is academic but the extent of statistical reporting makes it challenging for non-specialists.

The study makes key contributions, as it challenges the theoretical dominance of TFL by showing TAL's positive role in certain contexts (Domingues et al.,2017, p. 646); it provides evidence across two industries and salespeople and managers, offering managers guidance on when to adopt TAL over TFL for enhancing sales outcomes (Domingues et al., 2017, p.647).

Domingues et al. (2017, p.638,646) conclude sales-performance is impacted by the interrelationship between leadership style which can be TAL, TFL or mixed with the resulting differential impact on sales results dependent on a salesperson's PO or LO. The study advances theory and practice by reframing TAL as potentially superior to TFL in complex, performance-driven sales environments.

Transformational Leadership (TFL) Gao et al. (2020)

The study explores how salespeople's Psychological Empowerment (PE), Self-Efficacy, and vigour are influenced by TFL, impacting their pursuit of achievement and sales results. The study addresses a gap in the understanding of mediating attitudes and behaviours linking TFL to sales-performance outcomes (Gao et al., 2020, p.238). Findings show TFL has direct effects on PE and self-efficacy and indirect effects mediated by vigour, with accomplishment-striving positively affecting performance (Gao et al.,2020, p. 242).

The methodology was a cross-sectional online survey with 313 screened responses, and constructs were validated by the use of several established scales, SEM confirmed model fit (Gao et al., 2020, p. 241).

Ontologically, the paper reflects a realist stance as PE, self-efficacy, vigour, accomplishment striving and sales-performance are seen as real constructs that can be measured via related causality including attitudes, behaviour and outcomes. Acceptable statistical measures reinforce this (Gao et al., 2020, p.241-242).

Epistemologically, the researchers adopt a positivist approach. Knowledge is produced by testing hypotheses using statistical tools including SEM and factor analysis to verify acceptable standards, causal pathways of TFL, PE, self-efficacy, accomplishment striving and improved sales-performance (Gao et al., 2020, p. 239).

Axiology is pragmatic, oriented towards prioritising and improving salesperson-performance outcomes and well-being through improved understanding and practical application of TFL sales-leadership through recruitment and training (Gao et al., 2020, p..243). Other themes are not covered, for example, whether heightened striving may harm employee work-life balance.

From the deontological and ethics perspective, the study uses a Qualtrics panel with screening gates and removal of poor quality responses. Selection bias was managed using voluntary participation and screening. Response rate is not reported, and there is no explicit informed consent or ethics approval (Gao et al., 2020, p.240-241). Although researchers pursued transparency and methodological rigour, there are limitations relating to informed consent and ethics approvals. Based on no mention of funding, the assumption is, no bias (Gao, 2020, p.240, 243).

Reliability is strong, with construct factor analysis and Cronbach's alphas above acceptable levels for all constructs, and a single standardised online procedure supports procedural consistency. Validity was confirmed via several statistical tests to measure convergent, discriminant, nomological and structural validity, all of which were acceptable and common method variance was assessed using selected tools. Validity may be impacted due to the restricted sample within the Qualtrics population, cross-sectional design and self-reporting (Gao et al., 2020, p.241-242).

The article is academic and written for specialists.

The study's contribution to sales-leadership theory shows that attitudes affect performance indirectly through behaviour, as it integrates attitudes, behaviours and sales outcomes and in addition, findings suggest that recruiting sales-managers with TFL qualities and continuing their training, will increase empowerment, vigour and sales-performance (Gao et al., (2020), p. 242 para 2).

Servant Leadership (SL) Westbrook and Peterson (2022)

This study is the first with the aim of investigating whether SL has direct and indirect effects on

job satisfaction, self-efficacy, performance and turnover intentions of salespeople in a B2B setting and if self-efficacy serves as a mediator, and whether firm size, gender, and job demands moderate these relationships (Westbrook and Peterson, 2022, p.153).

Researchers quantitatively, surveyed 302 US sales professionals, using pre-validated multi-item scales for multiple constructs, including servant leadership, self-efficacy and models for mediation and moderated mediation testing (Westbrook and Peterson 2022, p.162-163).

The researchers' ontology is realist, using pre-validated multi-item, measurable scales for SL, self-efficacy, job satisfaction, performance and turnover intentions. The scales were rigorously validated for reliability and validity which underpinned the findings, suggesting real-world outcomes (Westbrook and Peterson, 2022, p.162-167).

The epistemology is positivist and deductive, with knowledge developed through hypotheses testing, a moderated mediation model tested with Hayes process, variance tests and other statistical analysis (Westbrook and Peterson, 2022, p.164-166).

The axiology is pragmatic, reflecting values to improve sales-management practices and leadership effectiveness, aiming to reduce turnover and enhance performance in B2B sales (Westbrook and Peterson, 2022, p.167). It explicitly emphasises creating value from ethical, servant-oriented leadership, positioning organisational leadership as responsible for fostering employee growth.

From a deontological perspective, the study ensured that data collected via a commercial panel was authorised by the Institutional Review Board (Westbrook & Peterson, 2022, p.162).

Selection bias was mitigated by using a diverse online anonymised quantitative survey of 302 consenting salespeople within cross-sector industries, ranging from small to large businesses using multi-item, multi-format validated scales to mitigate common method variance, with no non-response bias. A range of quality controls were used, to ensure truthful, high quality data and additional checks to compare early and later responses (Westbrook and Peterson, 2022, p. 162). There was no mention of data management and retention.

The study demonstrates strong internal reliability based on a range of tests for convergent and discriminant validity and common method bias (Westbrook & Peterson, 2022, p.163-164). Incentivisation of respondents may introduce bias relating to response, social desirability and motivation.

External validity and generalisability, may be constrained, due to reliance on US respondents (Westbrook & Peterson, 2022, p.153). The researchers' acknowledge that cross-sectional, self-reported data may constrain causal inference (Westbrook and Peterson, 2022, p.170).

The article is highly academic and not easy to access.

In summary, the study has value for academics and practitioners, as it clarifies mixed evidence in the SL literature. Key findings suggest that SL behaviours in sales-leaders can increase self-efficacy, job satisfaction and reduce turnover, however, there is no direct effect on sales-performance, as this is mediated through self-efficacy. Based on the range of positive outcomes with SL behaviours there is a strong argument for SL training within sales-leadership programmes (Westbrook and Peterson, 2022, p.167).

Behavioural Leadership (Peesker et al., 2019)

The empirical study by Peesker et al. (2019, p.319) aims to “develop a conceptual model of effective leadership in modern sales organizations. Specifically, we seek to identify the key leader behaviors that sales professionals perceive as enabling sales performance.” They acknowledge that leadership in sales-management is widely studied and many researchers have taken general leadership theories and applied these to sales-leadership. Researchers identified: Transformational; Servant; Authentic; and Adaptive leadership theories that “may have relevance to a sales context” (Peesker et al., 2019, p.321).

The study deliberately departs from the dominant positivist, quantitative tradition in sales-leadership research, as it “involves a qualitative analysis of interviews with salespeople and sales leaders by examining their statements through the lens of leadership theory” (Peesker et al., 2019, p.321). The methodology is exploratory, and draws on lived-experiences of 12 sales-leaders and 24 salespeople from 12 countries (50% European), in a complex enterprise B2B technical software/IT company. The sample was primarily male, 39% having 21+ years experience (Peesker et al., 2019, p.322). Data from 47 hours of in-depth semi-structured interviews in English was transcribed and thematically analysed by a single interviewer in NVivo through the “lens of leadership theory” using grounded theory principles, structured coding with Cohen’s kappa = 0.75 interrater reliability checks (Peesker et al., 2019, p.322-323).

Findings indicated that interviewees perceived 4 significant sales-leadership behaviours that can impact sales-performance: Coaching (developing sales capabilities in individuals); Collaborating (encouraging mutual learning); Championing (shielding and advocating internally) and Customer Engaging (role-modelling customer relationship building) (Peesker et al., 2019, p.323-328). This strengthens theory and practice by highlighting behaviours absent in traditional models (Peesker et al., 2019, p.326–327) and by offering a practical sales leadership development framework (Peesker et al., 2019, p.329–330). The study identified mediators, being the psychological factors of Trust, Confidence, Optimism and Resilience, that link “sales-leadership with sales performance” (Peesker et al., 2019, p.328-329) and specific leadership theories.

The researchers’ social constructionist ontology assumes leadership is socially constructed through interaction, not via a fixed set of traits, and recognises value in the subjective perceptions, experiences, interactions and relationships of sales-leaders and salespeople

(Peesker et al., 2019, p.321). This is evidenced by the importance attached to the 4 leadership behaviours referred to above, which are not fixed traits but can be developed or improved (Peesker et al., 2019, p.328-330).

The interpretivist epistemological position "emphasizes the importance of understanding people's perspectives in the context of the conditions and circumstances of their lives" (Ritchie et al. (2014), p.22, cited in Peesker et al., (2019), p.321), and recognises that their lived-experience of leadership in their work environment has meaning. Knowledge was participant driven and inductive, thematic analysis and pattern recognition with summary checks to ensure meaning, was faithfully captured (Peesker et al., (2019), p.322). Both the ontological and epistemological positions contrast with traditional realist, positivist sales leadership research.

Axiology focuses on practical application with the aim to improve sales-leader behaviours to benefit salespeople's sales-performance by capturing and interpreting real-world insight (Peesker et al.,2019, p.330). By recognising participants' values, treating their perspectives as legitimate sources of knowledge, trust and ethics emerge as integral to effective leadership (Peesker et al., 2019, p. 328-329).

Peesker et al. (2019) take a deontological stance prioritising respect for participants, truthfulness in reporting, and care in interpretation. Examples included: duties to participants as interviews were recorded only after informed consent and permission. From the ethical, and reliability perspectives, researchers emphasised methodological integrity by using a grounded, multi-stage coding protocol, which enhanced transparency and auditability (Peesker et al., 2019, p. 322-323). A single interviewer was used to eliminate multi-interviewer bias with frequent checks to confirm understanding (Peesker et al., 2019, p.322). A single researcher coded all transcripts and an independent academic conducted blind inter-rater checks ensuring fairness and minimising coding bias; agreement met the required threshold (Cohen's kappa = 0.75), evidencing robust, duty-bound verification (Peesker et al., 2019, p 323). Ranking of team performance ensured fairness in sampling with a spread of high/average/low performers. Rankings were not visible until after the interviews, limiting selection and confirmation bias (Peesker et al., 2019, p.321). Researchers did not collect or report actual performance data, because it was considered confidential by the participating company which is ethically responsible (Peesker et al., 2019, p.330). They reported no conflicts of interest, suggesting integrity (Peesker et al., 2019, p.331).

Validity is strengthened by the use of triangulation, as data from leaders and salespeople was collected, and was linked to the research question (Peesker et al., 2019, p.321). Construct validity is strengthened, as the 4 behaviours and 4 mediators emerge from participants' accounts. They are also found within established leadership theory, strengthening validity, however these are claimed, rather than validated through measurement (Peesker et al., 2019, p.329).

A potential deontological issue is that the researchers' messaging may result in sales-leaders viewing these 4 leadership behaviours as performance obligations (Peesker et al., 2019, p.330). The potential mediators of trust, confidence, optimism, and resilience signal that ethical, duty-aware conduct is necessary and relevant to sales-performance. The authors prescribed the training of leaders in these behaviours, provision of time to do them and measurement via pulse surveys, all of which are practical duties of care (Peesker et al., 2019, p.330). They acknowledge the risk that too much coaching or customer-engagement may be autonomy impacting micro-management (Peesker et al., 2019, p.324).

The researchers acknowledge validity risks including single-coder interpretation, use of a single organisation and absence of validation and measurement, and recommend cross-context application of theory, larger samples, and new scales to test reliability and generalisability (Peesker et al., 2019, p.330-331). Future research could strengthen robustness by de-linking manager-led participation, as well as tighten aspects of data governance (Peesker et al., 2019, p.321-333).

The paper is well written and is highly relevant to practitioners and academics.

The study is significant, as it successfully identified "leader behaviors that most effectively enable sales performance in today's global sales organizations" (Peesker et al. 2019, p.321), and the result was a Conceptual Framework which indicates that the 4 sales-leadership behaviours influence sales-performance directly and indirectly, through the identified mediators (Peesker et al., 2019, p.328).

Discussion

The obvious question arising from the analysis of the 8 papers is, why is there such a skew within sales-leadership research towards quantitative studies, where researchers overwhelmingly hold a realist ontology and positivist epistemology? This could be due to a number of factors.

The first is that in practice, sales-leaders frequently focus on outcomes which are measurable, actionable and repeatable involving the use of quantifiable objective data to obtain measurable results. This practice may represent a convenient and straightforward way to explain traditional positivist oriented sales-leadership in terms of levers which convert into clear, actionable, practices for sales-leaders aimed at achieving sales results.

Second, the established approach to sales-leadership research tends to view constructs as stable and measurable which, as evidenced by this study, has resulted in the predominant use of quantitative methodologies. Researchers are likely to have fallen into the tradition, or used this approach, due to familiar academic rigour, and the extent of existing literature and validated instruments. For similar reasons, academic journals are more likely to publish studies of this type.

Third, the use of measurable reliable and validated constructs, hypothesis testing and the associated relationships, potentially provide predictability in the cause-and-effect impacts. This is likely to be attractive to both researchers and practitioners who wish to improve performance in pressurised, sales-driven environments, where short-term results are prized.

Fourth, the larger sample sizes of quantitative studies may provide findings which have more generalisable application.

Peesker et al. (2019) signify a crucial paradigm shift in sales-leadership research by deliberately breaking from the prevalent quantitative, realist, positivist tradition. Their qualitative, interpretivist approach is significant, because it prioritises the lived-experiences and subjective perceptions of sales professionals which traditional approaches risk muting.

This provided contextually relevant, nuanced insight and understanding, into how sales-leadership is perceived to influence sales-performance in the complex real-world. This was previously missed by traditional quantitative approaches. By embracing an exploratory, inductive methodology, Peesker et al. (2019) move beyond simply testing pre-defined hypotheses, instead they unearthed new, contextually relevant leadership behaviours and psychological mediators, offering a potentially richer, more actionable basis for future research.

Which studies add most value?

All of the selected studies have contributed to academic thinking and sales-leadership practice. From the reviewer's perspective Peesker et al., (2019) makes the most significant contribution, for the reasons discussed earlier, but also because of its practical relevance and applicability.

The reviewer has practical experience of sales-leadership in complex B2B selling environments and his observation is that often sales-leaders and salespeople are pulled in many directions due to the complexity of what is a dynamic, fast changing, high-pressurised environment focused on short-term results. This aligns with the reported comments from sales practitioners in the study.

For the reviewer, this study resonates in a way in which the quantitative studies do not. His subjective reflection is that this relatability is because the findings echo the perceptions and lived real-world experiences of sales professionals and because the sales-leadership behaviours and mediators are highly relevant to, but lacking, in many modern sales environments, and they potentially provide actionable focus and priority.

Future Research

The researchers of each of the realist, quantitative studies identified specific areas of future research relating to their individual study. Common themes emerge including: improved research designs; better quality sampling; broader contexts; broader methods to deepen insight and the better use of comprehensive, rigorous tests to improve understanding of the relationships between variables and outcomes in cause and effect pathways. These recommendations will improve sales-leadership and sales-performance theory, sharpen causality, improve reliability, validity, and generalisability, leading to more practical context-relevant guidance for sales-leaders. The reviewer suggests greater use of mixed-methods including interpretivist, qualitative insights and lived experiences to strengthen findings, build knowledge, practical contribution and relevance. Further research into the practicalities of how the theories and knowledge can be implemented and used to build sales-performance, will be of value to sales-leaders.

Peesker et al., (2019, p.13-14), identified several areas for future research.

Quantification of the framework by undertaking robust quantitative tests including building and validating measurement scales for the 4 sales-leadership behaviour constructs and testing of inter-relationships.

Strengthening external validity and generalisability by replicating and extending the findings across cultures, industries, sectors, businesses types and use larger, more diverse samples.

Testing whether frequency or intensity of sales-leader behaviours changes their impact, and whether an over intensity of one or more, could be interpreted as micro-management with diminishing returns.

Investigating how short-term, target-heavy environments affect sales team moral judgement and ethical conduct.

The reviewer recommends research into how the 4 sales-leadership behaviours and 4 mediators can most effectively and sustainably be implemented into day-to-day practices, people development programmes and the shaping of sales culture.

Conclusion

As identified by Peesker et al., (2019) in their literature review and demonstrated in this limited critical review, it is evident that sales-leadership and sales-performance research has generally employed quantitative, realist, positivist approaches. The traditional emphasis on measurable outcomes has largely confined sales-leadership and performance studies to quantifiable constructs, influencing sales practice to prioritise objective metrics and repeatable processes.

As Peesker et al. (2019) demonstrate, the study of lived-experiences of sales-professionals, uncovered the perceived leadership behaviours of coaching, collaborating, championing, and customer-engaging, mediated by the psychological factors of trust, confidence, optimism, and resilience, forming new knowledge, which was not previously identified by prior quantitative research.

Based on his practical sales-leadership experience, the reviewer appreciates the contribution by Peesker et al., (2019), and the value of qualitative, interpretivist research and potential insights it can bring to modern sales-leadership and sales-performance.

Future research should integrate mixed methods, maintaining measurement discipline while increasing interpretivist studies, to bridge the gap between theoretical understanding and practical application.

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Appendix 1

Major Research Paradigm or Philosophies

Positivism aims to produce objective, accurate knowledge by placing emphasis on empirical methods and measurable data and by keeping human bias to a minimum. It treats social entities as real and independent, and relies on causal relationships to explain and predict events and relationships. The use of a hypothesis provides testable explanations that contribute to the development of theory. Positivist research aims to be neutral, however, it can be argued that full objectivity is not attainable, as researchers inevitably make subjective choices in study design, despite their ontological, epistemological and axiological stance (Saunders et al, 2023, p.146).

Critical Realism does not assume that a researcher's sensory experiences provide an accurate representation of reality, but rather that reality is structured, layered and independent of the researcher's perceptions. It recognises that empirical observations are only a representation of deeper, frequently unseen, real, causal mechanisms and that an understanding of reality involves sensory experience and reasoning to uncover underlying causes. It therefore aims to explain social and organisational phenomena by exploring structural and historical contexts. It uses epistemological relativism, recognising that knowledge is socially constructed and shaped by cultural and historical factors and therefore necessitates a mix of qualitative methods for deeper insights (Saunders et al, 2023, p.149)

Interpretivism is a subjectivist research philosophy, which acknowledges that human beings construct and apply meanings, and experience social realities, in multiple and different ways. It acknowledges that social sciences require distinct methodologies from natural sciences, as human experiences are shaped and defined by factors which are historic, contextual and cultural. Interpretivist research aims to explore these diverse perspectives through lived-experiences, cultural artefacts, and social interactions and is suited to context-dependent and complex scenarios. Researchers adopt an empathetic stance, recognising their own influence in the research process (Saunders et al, 2023, p.150).

Post-modernism critiques dominant ways of thinking typically in relation to language, power and truth, and challenges objectivist and realist ontologies, emphasising fluidity, instability, and the constructed nature of reality. Researchers view knowledge and truth as socially constructed and shaped by prevailing power relations and using deconstruction, interrogating dominant themes revealing suppressed perspectives and destabilising taken-for-granted assumptions (Kilduff and Mehra 1997). It requires reflexivity, acknowledging the researcher's position and the ethical implications of inquiry.

Pragmatism is a philosophical approach that evaluates concepts based on their practical utility and consequences (Kelemen and Rumens, 2008 cited in Saunders et al, 2023). It seeks to provide a bridge between objectivism and subjectivism, values and facts and theoretical knowledge with contextualised experience. It regards ideas, theories, and research findings not as abstract truths, but as tools for action, valued for their practical implications.

Appendix 2

Leadership Theories with Relevance to Sales-leadership and Sales performance

Theories, Styles and Forms of Leadership	Relevant Literature referred to in this review	Title of Paper
Leader-Member Exchange	Schwepker (2017)	"Psychological ethical climate, leader-member exchange and commitment to superior customer value: influencing sales people's unethical intent and sales performance."
Emotional Intelligence	Wilderom et al., (2015)	"From manager's emotional intelligence to objective store performance: through store cohesiveness and sales-directed employee behavior."
Adaptive	Crick et al., (2017)	"A review of the sales leadership style and type literature with adaptations for sales leadership."
Authentic	Shahzad et al., (2022)	"Linking authentic leadership to transactive memory system, team innovativeness, and selling performance: a multilevel investigation."
Transactional and Transformational	Domingues et al., (2017) Gao et al. (2020)	"The interactive effects of goal orientation and leadership style on sales performance." "Transformational leadership effects on sales people's attitudes, striving, and performance."
Servant	Westbrook and Peterson (2022)	"Servant leadership effects on sales person self-efficacy, performance, job satisfaction, and turnover intentions."

Behavioural	Peesker et al., (2019)	"A qualitative study of leader behaviors perceived to enable sales person performance."
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Appendix 3:

Research Article Data Extraction Template

Research Article Data Extraction
Title of Article:
Author(s):
Year of Publication:
Publisher/Journal Source:
DOI
Keywords:
Type: (Conceptual or Empirical)
Is it Peer Reviewed? (yes/no)
Aim of the research and key research questions:
Originality and Value:
Citation History:
Setting or Context of the Paper: (sector or industry context)
Quality of Communications Writing:
Ontology – science of what is, worldview/position - how the world is viewed)
Epistemology – theory of knowledge (what can be accepted as knowledge – what constitutes knowledge and how it is validated – what constitutes acceptable knowledge)
Ethical Considerations: (bias and funding)
Primary Theoretical Model of Sales Leadership:
Significance and contribution to field of knowledge:
Axiology (values brought to research)

Philosophical Position/Approach: (Positivism, Critical Realism, Interpretivism, Post-Modernism, Pragmatism)
Theoretical Perspectives/approach to theory development: (Deduction, Abduction, Induction)
Methodological choice/approach:
Strategies:
Time Horizon: (cross-sectional, Time Horizon)
Research Techniques and Procedures: (appropriateness of method, sample size)
Research Sample:
Data collection:
Selection bias:
Measures and Methods of Data analysis
Findings: Themes, theories, performance (validity, comparison)
Key Conclusions:
Gaps in Research or opportunities for future research
Practical implications /Usefulness: