# EFFORT, OPTIMISM AND SALES PERFORMANCE: RETHINKING THE ROLE OF MANAGER SUPPORT

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*Varied forms of organizational resources (i.e., manager support) and self-regulated resources (i.e., effort and optimism) available to salespeople combine to influence salesperson performance. Using insights from organizational support theory and social exchange theory, this paper proposes an interactive relationship whereby manager support will differentially interact with effort and optimism in influencing salesperson performance. More specifically, our overarching research propositions are: manager support (1) positively moderates the link between sales effort and performance and (2) negatively moderates the link between optimism and performance. The empirical results obtained, from a sample of 81 B2B field salespeople in an emerging market, provide support for both the propositions. This research reveals important insights into how sales performance is shaped by the interplay of external and internal resources available to salespeople. Key implications are discussed.*

## INTRODUCTION

Understanding the factors influencing salesperson performance has been the object of sustained research interest for a long time (e.g., (Churchill Jr., Ford, Hartley, & Walker Jr., 1985; Stan, Evans, Arnold, & McAmis, 2012; Verbeke, Dietz, & Verwaal, 2011; Wachner, Plouffe, & Grégoire, 2009). Much sales force success depends on how well salespeople balance accessible external and internal resources (e.g., Arndt & Harkins, 2013; Stan et al., 2012). To illustrate, a salesperson integrates personal and organizational resources (Plouffe & Barclay, 2007) and coordinates interfirm activities to meet the differing behavioral expectations of diverse role partners, i.e., clients and firms (e.g., Lewin & Sager, 2009; Schmitz & Ganesan, 2014; Singh, Marinova, & Brown, 2012). In the same vein, salespeople engage in "exploratory navigation" (Plouffe, Sridharan, & Barclay, 2010) and work through the "white spaces" (Maletz & Nohria, 2001) of organizations to discover resources and contribute to the firm's ability to provide value added solutions. Similarly, based upon conservation of resource theory, (Mallin & Mayo, 2006) document how "net resource loss" influences the attributions that account for sales setbacks.

Congruence between salespeople and sales managers plays a significant role in reducing role conflict and ambiguity, thereby exerting a positive influence on salesperson performance (e.g., Ahearne, Haumann, Kraus, & Wieseke, 2013; Hamwi, Rutherford, & Boles, 2011; Kemp, Borders, & Ricks, 2013; Mullins & Syam, 2014; Shannahan, Bush, & Shannahan, 2013). At the same time, internal resources such as knowledge, skills, and motivation, each in a distinct way, also influence sales performance. Among the variety of internal resources, two of the most vital are effort and optimism, which are the focus of this research. Extensive studies have shown effort (e.g., Jaramillo & Mulki, 2008) and optimism (e.g., Stajkovic, Lee, Greenwald, & Raffiee, 2015) to be associated with superior sales performance.

The purpose of this research is to understand how the interactions between the external (i.e., manager support) and internal resources (i.e., sales effort and optimism) available to salespeople may affect sales performance. To this end, we draw on literature from organizational support (Eisenberger, Stinglhamer, Vandenberghe, Sucharski, & Rhoades, 2002) and social exchange theories (Blau, 1964) and develop and empirically test a conceptual model, which demonstrates that manager support will strengthen (weaken) the relationship between effort (optimism) and sales performance. This potential tension between the external and internal resources available to salespeople is of considerable

theoretical and practical interest and yet research insights into this intriguing issue are scarce. We test the proposed model using a sample of automobile salespeople operating in India. The empirical results offer strong support for our hypotheses and underscore the importance of these interactive relationships.

Four aspects of this research enhance its contribution. First, although there is consensus that intraorganizational factors can shape employee attitudes and behaviors (e.g., Piercy, Cravens, Lane, & Vorhies, 2006; Ryals & Humphries, 2007), this understanding has not been translated adequately into the role that sales managers can play. Our understanding of interpersonal identification processes between sales managers and salespeople and their linkage to performance is limited and insights for managers remain scarce (e.g., Ahearne et al., 2013; DeConinck, 2010). In advancing this inquiry, the current research adopts a new perspective of manager support by examining its moderating role in explaining two important sales management links. In so doing, this study enhances a deeper understanding about the mechanism through which manager support can enhance or hinder sales performance. We argue that this approach provides more insightful outcomes than extant research, which has tended to focus on different main effects of manager support. Furthermore, we conduct a qualitative study to conceptualize the construct at a greater depth by documenting various activities carried out as manager support. By offering new insights into the sources of enhanced salesperson performance, we address scholars' calls for gaining more meaningful understanding of factors that shape sales performance (e.g., Stewart, 2006).

Second, delineating the relational process involving internal and external resources available to salespeople brings into sharp focus the multifunctional and interconnected problems that organizations often face. A more profound understanding of such phenomena will help sales managers coordinate various sales related functions. The contingent model advanced in this research enables us to extend the theoretical understanding of when higher levels of manager support may create conditions that may not always lead to better sales outcomes. This research broadens recent

research on organizational support and its potential to interfere with salesperson performance (Stan et al., 2012).

Third, this research uncovers a condition under which high optimism might be potentially ill suited. To the best of our knowledge, this is a first such attempt in the literature; by empirically demonstrating a possible negative interaction between optimism and manager support, this research makes conceptual advances pertaining to the optimism-sales performance link. This contribution adds to the existing literature, which has thus far focused mainly on the positive association between optimism and sales performance (e.g., Dixon & Schertzer, 2005). Furthermore, by assessing the moderating role of manager support, we enrich the current understanding about effort-performance link (e.g., Powers, Jennings, & DeCarlo, 2014).

Fourth, owing to the study's context, fleet salespeople in India, the insights gained from the empirical analysis is an opportunity to test our theory in an emerging market. Sheth (2011, p. 180, emphasis added) asserts that research on emerging markets is not just a "Nice thing to do; it is increasingly becoming a *necessity*." Most extant sales research is grounded in certain countries, such as the United States or "similar, Western developed eco-nomy" (Baldauf & Lee, 2011, p. 212), calling into question the generalizability of findings to other economies. As emerging markets are evolving from the periphery to the core of marketing practice, and experiencing rapid growth, they pose serious challenges to theoretical development, strategic choices, and to the practices of multinational firms (Sheth, 2011). Sales functions assume important roles in the emerging markets of India and China where product options are abundant (Gopal & Srinivasan, 2006). Our findings are of interest to both academics and practitioners as multinational firms expand to foreign markets through direct investments and employ local salespeople.

The remainder of the article proceeds as follows: We begin by advancing our conceptualization of manager support. Next, drawing on interviews with practicing managers, we report the key findings about

manager support. We then propose our conceptual framework and develop an account of our interactive hypotheses as summarized in Figure 1. The next section describes our study methodology and findings. We conclude by discussing the article's implications, summarizing its limitations and identifying directions for further research.

## CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

### Manager Support

We define manager support as the "degree to which the salesperson's immediate supervisor assists them with selling-related tasks and challenges and provides them with guidance, mentoring, and reassurance," (Plouffe et al., 2010, p. 541). In the context of sales management, manager support can take many forms, including clarifying his or her own, and salespeople's roles and responsibilities, setting clear task guidelines, specifying procedures, and providing direction for task completion. In essence, by providing a trusting and respectful atmosphere, manager support seeks to improve salespeople's critical skills related to planning,

negotiating, closing and maintaining customer relationships. Research conducted to date suggests that sales managers play an important role in defining the work environment and shaping organizational effectiveness, and in turn, directly or indirectly account for salesperson performance (e.g., Kraus, Haumann, Ahearne, & Wieseke, 2015). In the same vein, Ingram, LaForge, Locander, MacKenzie, & Podsakoff (2005), in their analysis of sales leadership literature, indicate that sales managers play a pivotal role in influencing salespersons to become successful at selling.

Another construct, labeled as perceived organizational support, used extensively in the management literature (Maertz Jr, Griffeth, Campbell, & Allen, 2007) and in the marketing literature in a limited way (DeConinck, 2010; DeConinck & Johnson, 2009), describes the equivalent generalized concept. Although different constructs are reported in this space, the general consensus is pervasive: how much do employees value supervisors' contributions? Sales managers help salespeople perform not only different sales functions at different stages of a sales encounter and customer solution
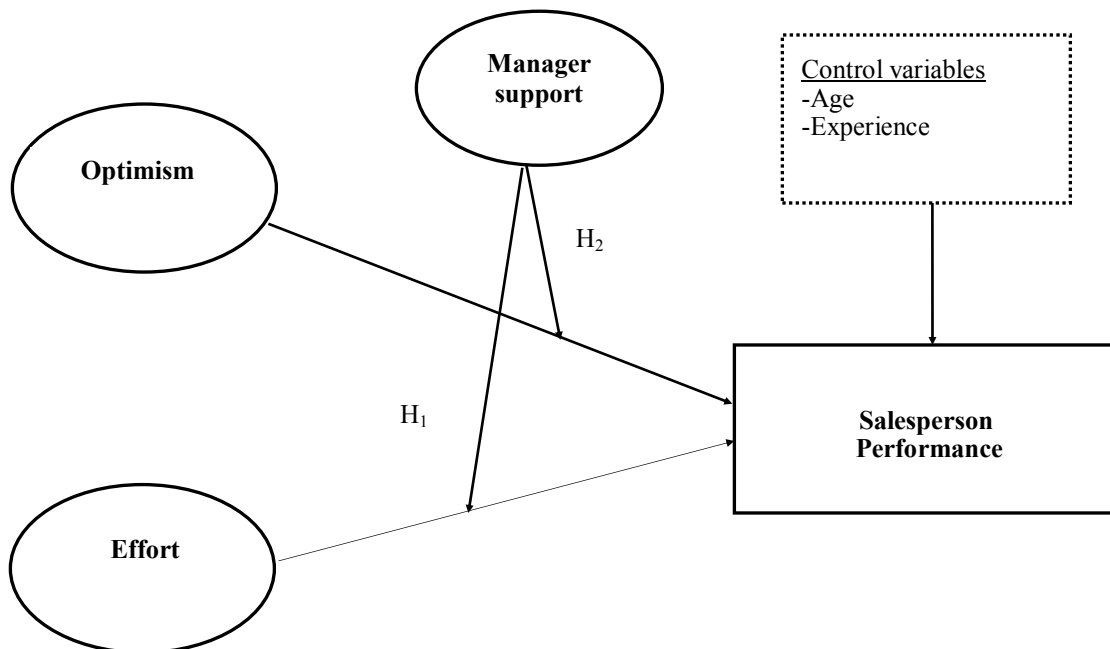
**FIGURE 1:**
**Conceptual Model**

**TABLE 1:**
**Qualitative Study Findings on Manager Support**

| Salesperson activities during sales encounter (Tuli, Kohli and Bha-radwaj, 2007, p. 5). | Manager Support Activities |
|---|---|
| Need identification definition | Support salespeople in lead generating activities inside and outside the firm.<br>Assign outside leads to appropriate salesperson.<br>Review and approve prequalification activities and risk assessment of the prospects.<br>Help salespeople to identify low hanging fruit.<br>Help salespeople to delineate customers' current and future needs.<br>Settle disputes in regards to sales territory issues. |
| Presentation | Allow salespeople time to prepare and provide them with the resources for developing the presentation.<br>Discuss the current situation and strategy pertaining to prospects.<br>Assist salespeople in adapting the presentation according to the need rather than having a scripted presentation.<br>Encourage salespeople not to have a non-customized presentation. |
| Handling Objection | Collaborate with salespeople in finding integrative solutions to possible customer objections at different interfaces.<br>Assist salespeople in developing lyrics to combat common objections.<br>Help salespeople to turn the most common objections into your ammunition for the sale: When the client says, "I cannot afford your program."<br>Coach salespeople to be comfortable in putting that right out there from the beginning: "You can't afford to not have my program" |
| Negotiation | Guide salespeople in deal structuring and carrying out the proper financial conversation.<br>Delegate the necessary authority to salespeople.<br>Be accessible as salespeople seek to achieve a possible agreement.<br>Aid salespeople to maintain composure in presence of a negative emotion. |
| Closing the sale | Provide salespeople necessary information to close the sale.<br>Teach salespeople the appropriate closing technique that sets up a satisfactory purchase decision.<br>Prepare salespeople to say "thank-you" as soon as customers agree and execute the paperwork so that they do not talk clients out of buying something by talking too much after the sale.<br>Build an effective follow-up system. |
| Post deployment support | Help salespeople to:<br>Lead multiple and concurrent sales campaigns.<br>Track customers' first 30 days experience, as well as on-going customer satisfaction monitoring beyond the first 30 days.<br>Maintain multi-level relationships across different functional units to meet customer needs on a prompt basis.<br>Develop a complaint resolution plan.   . |
| Non-sales activities (Weitz, Castleberry and Tanner, 2011) | |
| Paperwork | Build an effective processing order and billing practice to expedite the administrative process.<br>Implement automation tool to encourage online submission of paperwork.<br>Increase efficiency of salespeople by modifying reporting rules as needed.<br>Standardize reporting and documentation, and problem-solving meetings.<br>Develop seamless reporting for salespeople and ensure access to records that are pertinent to any accounts that they manage. |

**TABLE 1: (*Continued*)**
**Qualitative Study Findings on Manager Support**

| | |
|---|---|
| Training and Development | Help salesperson to know ins and outs of all the products and competitors' offerings.<br>Emphasize salespeople's learning about the innovative and differentiating aspects of newly introduced products.<br>Train salespeople on-the-job through instruction and demonstration.<br>Identify training needs of salespeople and design appropriate training program.<br>Improve the social skills of salespeople so that high pressure-selling can be avoided.<br>Conduct monthly account review and one-on-one meetings.<br>Educate salespeople about intraorganizational dynamics so that they can navigate well within their own organization. |
| Relationship Management | Assist salespeople:<br>In building relationships with key decision-makers in key accounts.<br>In exploring cross-selling and up-selling opportunities.<br>In getting involved with influential communities such as government and trade organizations, to help develop leads and relationships. |

process (Tuli, Kohli, & Bharadwaj, 2007), but also carry out several non-sales activities (Weitz, Castleberry, & Tanner Jr., 2011). Table 1, based on our interviews with four sales directors, three sales managers, and five entry-level sales executives operating in the USA, expands on manager support activities. The contributing sales professionals have a significant amount of work experience and represent a broad cross-section of firms and industries and the table reflects their perspectives grounded in field-based-knowledge. Although the interviews were recorded, interviewees were assured confidentiality.

Researchers have explored employee relationships with immediate managers at some depth (e.g., Richard, Ismail, Bhuian, & Taylor, 2009). We believe that the social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), and organizational support theory (Eisenberger et al., 2002) provide powerful theoretical lenses for viewing a variety of employee work attitudes. These theories rely on norms to explain exchange behaviors and specifically posit that human interactions are based on exchange of social and material resources that include both the notion of a relationship, and shared obligation, in which both parties perceive responsibilities to each other (Falk and Fischbacher, 2006). In addition to explaining relationships between individuals, these theories also provide important insights into relationships between an organization and its employees. Manager support plays an important role in shaping salespersons' attitudes and subsequently influencing important organizational outcomes

such as perception of well-being (Kemp et al., 2013) and higher retention (Eisenberger et al., 2002).

**Effort and Manager Support**

Effort is conceptualized as the amount of energy expended by salespeople on both the physical and cognitive demands of performing sales related activities (Rangarajan, Jones, & Chin, 2005). Effort represents the force, energy, or activity by which work goals can be accomplished by salespeople. (Sujan, Weitz, & Kumar, 1994, p. 40) have aptly put it as "persistence -- in terms of the length of time devoted to work and continuing to try in the face of failure". They conceptualize the direction chosen to channel effort as "working smart," while the overall amount of effort that salespeople devote as "working hard." In this paper, the conceptualization is based on the latter. Superior sales performance is associated with salespeople's willingness to put forth effort into their jobs (e.g., Jaramillo & Mulki, 2008; Mulki, Caemmerer, & Heggde, 2015). Salesperson effort can play a critical role in stimulating consumer interest in the product and converting needs into purchases by reinforcing customers' desires and addressing their concerns. Serving the vital boundary-spanning role (Singh et al., 2012), salespeople occupy a central role in forging long-lasting relationships with customers (Palmatier, Scheer, & Steenkamp, 2007) and generating revenue (Raynor & Ahmed, 2013).

Based on prior research, we suggest three accounts through which manager support can

positively moderate the relationship between effort and sales performance: (1) by increasing salesperson confidence; (2) by providing the salesperson with a more clearly defined work structure; and (3) by reducing salesperson's perceived role ambiguity and conflicts.

By way of genuine care and respectful treatment of the salesperson, manager support lends confidence to the salesperson in his effort and engagement. Recognition and positive feedback from managers can create a climate of psychological safety for a salesperson (Mulki et al., 2015). Consequently, when salespeople feel they can work without fear of retribution, the impact of their effort is enhanced. Further, manager willingness to make adjustments will make salesperson effort and engagement more effective and enduring, which in turn will lead to superior sales performance. This is in line with Mayer & Gavin's (2005) assertion that workers' ability to stay focused on value-adding activities is influenced by supervisor support. Conversely, a lack of trust in supervision will leave employees spending time and mental energy speculating about their future in the firm. In this view, under the condition of low manager support, effort will be misdirected.

Manager support includes a defined work structure and a clear direction for interacting with different organizational parties. Thus, manager support enhances the salespeoples' ability to navigate within their own organization to make things happen and get what they need to be successful (Mehra, Dixon, Brass, & Robertson, 2006; Plouffe & Barclay, 2007), thereby enhancing the positive effect of effort. As salespeople frequently experience a high degree of role ambiguity and role conflict in resolving company and customer requirements, they worry excessively about reducing stress, and may spend cognitive and behavioral resources to draw up mechanisms to protect themselves. We argue that manager support is of sufficient salience to reduce the negative impact of role conflict. Conversely, salespeople who are not certain about the tasks at hand and do not expect fair treatment from supervisors, will develop stress (Schmitz & Ganesan, 2014; Singh et al., 2012). As a result, the impact of effort on sales performance is tempered.

The preceding discussion leads us to predict that manager support is likely to enhance the impact of effort on sales performance. That is, salespeople exerting more effort are likely to achieve higher sales success under the condition of high manager support. Formally:

$H_1$: Manager support will positively moderate the relationship between sales effort and salesperson performance: under condition of high manager support, effort will have a stronger effect on salesperson performance than under condition of low manager support.

## Optimism and Manager Support

Optimism is viewed as a general disposition to expect positive outcomes regardless of circumstances (Alarcon, Bowling, & Khazon, 2013; Carver, Scheier, & Segerstrom, 2010; Strauss, Niven, McClelland, & Cheung, 2015). Given the psychological demand and uncertainty associated with it, a typical sales job is perceived as challenging and prone to failure (Boichuk et al., 2014). Engaging in the process of a sales call and interacting with different types of customers can be demanding. An optimistic explanatory style helps a salesperson interpret the causes of success and failure and subsequently select more active coping strategies (e.g., rebounding quickly and persisting versus giving up following rejections from prospects). In one of the few studies in the sales arena, by Seligman and Schulman (1986), life insurance sales agents who were viewed as having an optimistic attribution style were shown to stay at the company longer and to outsell their pessimistic counterparts. By employing more problem-focused coping tactics, dispositionally optimistic salespeople tend to be more resilient and productive; for example, dispositionally optimistic students were more likely to return the following year and predict higher income years later (Carver et al., 2010).

With this line of research established, we investigate the contextual effect of manager support on the optimism-performance link. We argue that optimistic salespeople are self-motivated and may not actively seek out the manager's input to perform tasks. That is, they are likely to operate best in the absence of or at

a minimal level of managerial presence. The emerging selling landscape, with salespeople working in remote locations with fewer interactions with managers, warrants salespeople to be self-empowered and able to deal with task difficulties independently (Ingram et al., 2005; Panagopoulos & Ogilvie, 2015).

Consequently, we propose that manager support may create an environment wherein the usually positive effects of optimism will be suppressed. Optimistic salespeople perceive situations to be under control, and their strategies have usually worked well in the past. In light of this, manager support may be misconstrued as an attempt to undermine salesperson confidence, as ineffective micromanagement, as curtailing autonomy and flexibility, and not as value adding. This suggests a potential incongruity between manager support and optimism and, as such, high manager support will cause a disingenuous behavioral intention among optimistic salespeople, which in turn will nullify the positive performance impact of optimism. Prior research has asserted that in the context of established products, close guidance from a sales manager is interpreted as surveillance, causing motivation of salespeople to diminish (Merchant & Van der Steede, 2012).

In a similar vein, Plouffe et al. (2010) argue that overdoing management support could dampen sales performance. Their argument is based on the notion that 'overprotecting' salespeople does not prepare them well to deal with internal process-related hurdles. We contend that optimistic salespeople prefer to learn on their own about "cutting through the red tape" and getting things done. Based on this, manager support will not stimulate any internal drive for optimistic salespeople; rather likely elicit a negative response.

The preceding discussion leads us to predict that manager support is likely to diminish the impact of optimism on sales performance. Therefore,

   **H$_2$**: Manager support will negatively moderate the relationship between optimism and salesperson performance: under condition of strong manager support, optimism will

have a weaker effect on salesperson performance than under condition of weak manager support.

## METHOD

### Sample Selection and Data Collection

To test the proposed linkages, we surveyed automobile fleet salespeople operating in India. Salesperson effort, optimism, and manager support, focal constructs of this study are relevant to the context. Sampling frame consisted of three large automobile dealers, located in Mumbai, India, within 50 miles of each other. At the time of the study, participating dealerships had 120 active salespeople working with assigned territories of small and mid-sized organizations and under identifiable managers. Data collection efforts were facilitated by the active support of general managers of these dealerships. They introduced the paper-and-pencil survey, and encouraged participation. A week later, we delivered the cover letter and hard copies of the survey. The cover letter explained the purpose of the study, emphasized the voluntary nature of participation, and guaranteed full confidentiality and anonymity of individual responses.

A total of 81 surveys were returned, for a 67.5% response rate. Twenty questionnaires were returned by mail while others were picked up from the dealerships over a period of three weeks. We conducted a series of *t*-tests to see if there was a significant difference in the means of early respondents and late respondents. In addition, mean ratings provided by salespeople responding by mail were compared with those of others. The comparison indicated that no significant differences existed between the two groups (*p* > 0.05). Thus, nonresponse bias did not appear to be a concern (Armstrong & Overton, 1977). Overall, 92% of the respondents were below 35 years of age, and 66% were males. Sample salespeople had average sales experience of 4.3 years, of which 1.8 were with the present dealership.

## Survey Development and Measure Purification

We developed a self-administered cross-sectional survey to measure all variables at the individual level. Although established scales were used for all measures, we had to adapt a couple of items. Accordingly, to examine validity, first, item-to-total correlations were calculated and the items were submitted to an exploratory factor analysis. This resulted in factor solutions as theoretically expected. Internal consistency values for all four multi-item reflective scales were respectable, exceeding the recommended .70 benchmark (Nunnaly, 1978). Next, all scale items were subjected to principal component analysis with a varimax rotation. All items loaded on their intended factors with substantial loadings, and all cross-loadings with non-intended factors were below maximum cross-loading (< .40) thereby confirming convergent and discriminant validities, respectively. Table 2 reports the complete measurement statistics.

To minimize potential common method bias, we used a series of procedural remedies in developing the instrument (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Jeong-Yeon Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). First, following Rindfleisch, Malter, Ganesan, and Moorman (2008) recommendations, we used a combination of semantic differential and Likert scales for different constructs. Second, through the pretest, we ensured that there was no ambiguous item. Third, we informed respondents that there was no right or wrong answer and fourth, predictor variables did not precede the criterion variable on the survey instrument. Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) showed only four factors with eigenvalues greater than 1 and the largest contribution to variance (sales performance, variance explained = 22.06%) was less than half the sum total of the variance explained by all four factors (69.52%) (Menon, Bharadwaj, Adidam, & Edison, 1999, p. 31). Thus, method bias does not pose a risk to interpretation of the data. However, we could not include an MV marker, a construct that is theoretically unrelated to our study; therefore, we could not apply the method recommended by Lindell & Whitney (2001) to further test for common method bias. Table 3 presents the descriptive statistics and correlation matrix.

## Measures

We employed a four-item scale from Dixon, Spiro, and Jamil (2001) to measure effort. The seven-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (7), asked respondents to indicate their level of agreement with the statements. We measured optimism by adapting Rich's (1999) scale by adding one item: "I always look at every experience as a learning opportunity." All responses were obtained on a seven-point Likert scale "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (7). We added one item to Rich's (1999) manager support scale: "My manager usually trusts me to do the right thing." All responses were obtained on a seven-point Likert scale "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (7). We measured sales performance based on the scale developed by Behrman and Perreault Jr. (1982). This self-report scale has been extensively used in past research (e.g., Wachner et al., 2009). Respondents were asked to rate each dimension of their sales performance as "Compared to most salespeople I …" on a seven-point semantic differential scale (1 = "much worse" to 7 = "much better"). Adaptations were made to capture the automobile sales context and one item, "Converting prospect to customer," was added. Consistent with prior research, in order to rule out well-known effects of demographic variables on performance, we controlled for salesperson's age and tenure with the firm.

## Analyses and Results

The model was estimated using ordinary least squares (OLS) regression. The basic model required to test our research hypotheses can be expressed as:

$$\text{Sales Performance} = b_0 + b_1\text{Effort} + b_2\text{Optimism} + b_3\text{Manager Support} + b_4\text{Effort x Manager Support} + b_5\text{Optimism x Manager Support} + b_6\text{Age} + b_7\text{Tenure} + e.$$

Although we had no a priori theoretical reason to model the three-way interaction among effort, optimism, and manager support, in the interest of being comprehensive, we ran the analysis to test the three-way interaction. Sure enough, the three-way interaction term was not

**TABLE 2:**
**Measures, Sources, Factor Analysis and Reliability Results**

| Construct and Measures | Factor Loadings | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Sales Performance (Behrman and Perreault, 1982: α = 0.89) [a] | | | | |
| Compared to most car salesperson I contribute to my dealership's acquisition of market share. | 0.505 | 0.081 | 0.222 | 0.398 |
| Compared to most car salesperson I sell high profit margin products. | 0.67 | 0.247 | 0.115 | -0.102 |
| Compared to most car salesperson I generate high volume of sales dollars. | 0.79 | 0.101 | -0.048 | 0.107 |
| Compared to most car salesperson I quickly generate sales of new additions to car inventory. | 0.673 | 0.004 | -0.004 | 0.314 |
| Compared to most car salesperson I correctly identify prospects. | 0.823 | -0.049 | 0.007 | 0.241 |
| Compared to most car salesperson I convert prospects to customers (Newly developed scale). | 0.822 | 0.174 | 0.061 | 0.168 |
| Compared to most car salesperson I exceed sales targets. | 0.743 | 0.117 | 0.053 | 0.033 |
| Compared to most car salesperson I assist the sales manager at achieving goals. | 0.66 | 0.111 | 0.062 | 0.277 |
| Optimism (Rich, 1999; α = 0.75) [b] | | | | |
| I always look on the bright side of things. | 0.274 | 0.013 | 0.099 | 0.689 |
| I'm always optimistic about the future. | 0.21 | 0.106 | -0.159 | 0.792 |
| I always look at every experience as a learning opportunity. (New item) | 0.125 | 0.106 | 0.074 | 0.796 |
| Manager Support (Rich, 1999; α = 0.95) [b] | | | | |
| My manager demonstrates genuine care about me. | 0.082 | 0.825 | 0.239 | 0.012 |
| My manager shows respect for my individual needs. | 0.061 | 0.937 | 0.099 | 0.027 |
| My manager shows respect for my individual feelings. | 0.096 | 0.909 | 0.106 | 0.112 |
| My manager usually trusts me to do the right thing. (Newly developed scale) | 0.257 | 0.83 | 0.127 | 0.128 |
| My manager treats me like a real person, not a subordinate. | 0.136 | 0.927 | 0.107 | 0.058 |
| Effort (Dixon et al., 2001; α =0.88) [b] | | | | |
| About last sale-I tried very hard to make this sale. | -0.019 | 0.245 | 0.845 | 0.025 |
| About last sale-I put in a lot of effort for this sales calls. | -0.01 | 0.072 | 0.885 | 0.05 |
| About last sale-I put in the time needed to make the sale. | 0.042 | 0.12 | 0.88 | 0.009 |
| About last sale-I gave the effort needed to make the sale. | 0.217 | 0.145 | 0.768 | 0.003 |
| Eigenvalues | 4.4 | 4.19 | 3.08 | 2.2 |
| [a] Seven-point semantic differential scale ranging from "much worse" (1) to "much better" (7) [b] Seven-point Likert scale anchored by "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly disagree" (7) | | | | |

**TABLE 3:**
**Correlation Matrix and Descriptive Statistics**

| Variable | Mean (SD) | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1.SP | 5.32 (.73) | 1 | | | | | |
| 2.Opt. | 6.1 (.77) | .553** | 1 | | | | |
| 3.MS | 5.50 (1.47) | .342[C] | .255* | 1 | | | |
| 4.Effort | 5.70 (1.04) | .229** | .183 | .376** | 1 | | |
| 5.MS x Opt. | | .125 | .366** | .051 | .104 | 1 | |
| 6.MS x Effort | | .371 | .112 | .355** | .113 | .252 | 1 |
| Note: * $p < 0.05$; and ** $p < 0.01$ (two-tailed distribution) | | | | | | | |

significant ($p > .10$) and all other first order and second order coefficients remained unchanged.

Results from the regression are summarized in Table 4. We have followed step by step the recommendations of testing multiple regressions with interaction terms (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken L.S., 2003): control variables were first entered followed by the main-effects, and then the full model with the two-way interaction terms. Constituent variables were mean-centered before creating the interaction terms to minimize multicollinearity between predictors (Cohen et al., 2003). Variance inflation factor (VIF) for all variables was below the suggested cutoff value of 5 (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2010), indicating that multicollinearity among the variables was unlikely to be a concern.

We compared the models to examine whether addition of the interaction terms significantly increased explanatory power of the full model over the main effects model. Results in Table 4 show that the control-only model explains 3% of the variance. Addition of the independent variables increased $R^2$, the explained variance, by 35% ($\Delta$ F = 13.73, $p<.01$). We added the interaction terms in the full model, which resulted in a further increase in $R^2$ by 13% ($\Delta$ F = 10.04, $p<0.01$). This indicates that the full model with the two-way interaction terms has significantly more explanatory power than the main effects model. Because both interaction effects are significant, we focus on the description of the full model.
Overall, the set of predictors displayed a strong relationship with sales performance, with $R^2_{Adj}$

= .47, (F[7,79] = 10.83; $p < 0.01$). The regression analysis revealed a significant main effect of optimism ($b_2$ = .43, $p < 0.01$) on sales performance; while we did not find support for the effects of effort and manager support (both $p > 0.15$). More important, in support of our hypotheses, both the two-way interactions were significant. The interaction between effort and manager support was positively related to sales performance ($b_4$ = .18, $p < 0.01$), in support of $H_1$. As we predicted in $H_2$, the interaction between optimism and manager support was significant and in the predicted direction ($b_5$ = -.11, $p < 0.05$). Thus, $H_2$ was also supported, thereby suggesting a negative moderating effect of manager support.

In terms of control variables, age did not exhibit any impact, but tenure at the company had a positive impact on sales performance ($b_7$ = 0.01, $p < 0.05$). This is in line with previous literature (e.g., Wachner et al., 2009). Average sales experience of our sample is on the lower side (1.8 years). This leads us to conclude that salespeople in our sample were still learning their jobs and had not reached a state of 'disengagement' (Carver et al., 2010) that may negatively impact sales performance.

**Post-hoc Analysis**

To facilitate interpretation of the interactions, we conducted a post-hoc analysis where two significant moderation effects were analyzed with simple slope analysis (Cohen et al., 2003). This technique overcomes the need to create subgroups of continuous independent variables. It indicates whether and how intercepts and

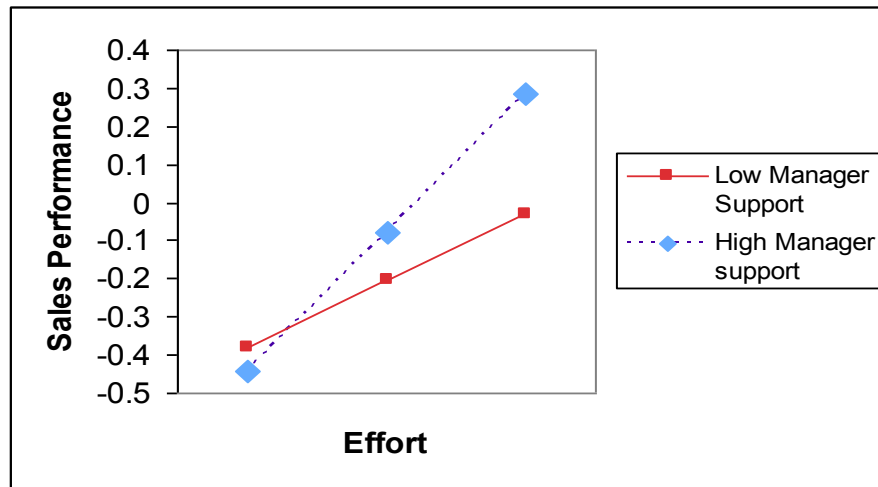**TABLE 4:**
**Regression Analysis Results: DV Sales Performance**

| Predictor Variable | Hypotheses | Control-only Model | Main-effects–only Model | Full (main + inter-action effects) Model |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Control variables | | | | |
| Age | | -0.14 (-0.79) | -0.08 (-0.63) | -0.17 (-1.31) |
| Experience | | 0.00 (1.49) | 0.00** (2.07) | 0.01*** (2.67) |
| Main effects/Independent variables | | | | |
| Effort | | | 0.06 (0.97) | 0.08 (1.42) |
| Optimism | | | 0.43*** (4.93) | 0.47*** (5.68) |
| Manager support | | | 0.09** (1.97) | 0.02 (0.32) |
| Interaction effects | | | | |
| Effort x Manager support | $H_1$ | | | 0.18*** (4.36) |
| Optimism x Manager support | $H_2$ | | | -0.11** (-2.09) |
| | | | | |
| Model $R^2$ | | 0.03 | 0.38 | 0.51 |
| Model $R_{Adj.}^2$ | | .05 | .34 | .47 |
| F-value | | 1.19 | 8.96*** | 10.83*** |
| Change in F | | | 13.73*** | 10.04*** |
| F critical | | | 1.44 | 1.45 |

Note 1: For each variable, the reported values are unstandardized beta (*t*-values in parentheses). *N*=81.
Note 2: Two-tailed significance tests **$p < 0.05$; ***$p < 0.01$.

slopes of the regression equation differ at various levels of moderators. We fixed the contingent variable at high versus low levels, defined as one standard deviation above or below the mean. For this, first the coefficient of the moderator (in case of $H_1$, the moderator is manager support and its coefficient = 0.01) is multiplied by values of Z (moderator, manager support) one standard deviation (1.47) below and above the mean, to obtain two equations in X (independent variable, effort in $H_1$) terms. Next, the X coefficients in the two equations are multiplied by values of X one standard deviation (1.04 for effort) below and above the

mean, and at the mean (X=0), to obtain a two by three matrix of coefficients. We placed effort on the horizontal axis and sales performance on the vertical axis. Two lines were then positioned on the graph to illustrate how the slope changes at different levels of manager support. The corresponding plot appears in Figure 2.

Consistent with $H_1$, Figure 2 shows that 'high effort and high manager support' are associated with the highest levels of sales performance. A high level of effort leads to greater sales performance only when it is accompanied by a

**FIGURE 2:**
**Interaction of Manager Support x Effort**



high level of manager support. Salespeople with low effort do not appear to benefit from manager support. This supports our notion that the strength of the positive relationship between effort and sales performance is more pronounced when manager support is high.

In a like manner, Figure 3 shows the interaction plot of manager support moderating the relationship between optimism (standard deviation = 0.77) and performance. Optimism is on the X-axis and sales performance is positioned on the Y-axis with two lines representing the differing levels of manager support. Specifically, it indicates that for lower levels of optimism, a higher level of manager support is more beneficial. In contrast, this effect is reversed for higher levels of optimism, at which, lower level of manager support is more favorable. This provides clear evidence that manager support weakens the relationship between optimism and salesperson performance, substantiating $H_2$.
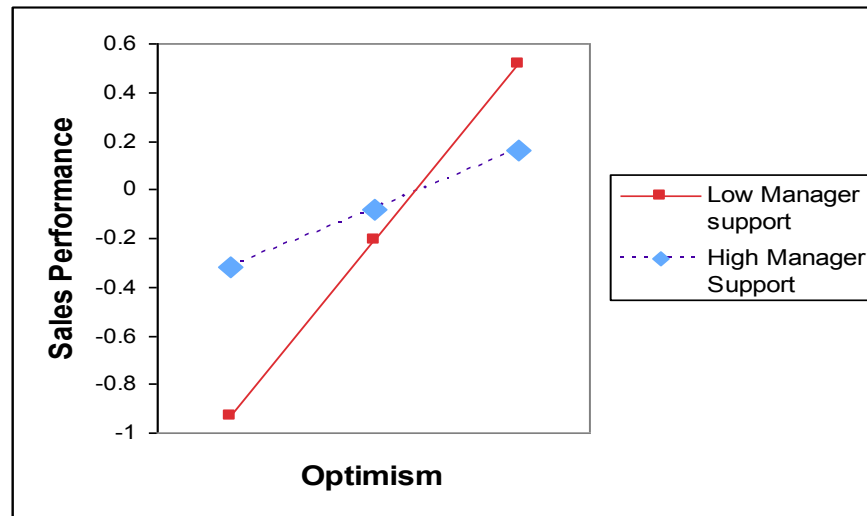
**DISCUSSION**

**Implications**

As salespeople increasingly assume the role of relationship managers rather than that of order-takers to maintain complex relationships with customers (Storbacka, Ryals, Davies, & Nenonen, 2009), it is imperative that firms

deploy effective management practices to configure appropriate sales support structures (Arndt & Harkins, 2013). As such, understanding how internal and external resources may influence sales performance is a key strategic imperative for marketers. We anchor our work on theories of organizational support (Eisenberger et al., 2002) and social exchange (Blau, 1964) and investigate the broad role of manager support, paving the way for understanding of factors that enhance salesperson performance. At a more granular level, the research reported herein investigates the contingent effect of manager support on the relationship between effort and sales performance, as well as the relationship between optimism and sales performance. The post-hoc analysis of the interactions ratifies the moderating role of manager support. Despite much work and interest in positive impact of effort and optimism on performance, research thus far has neglected to examine whether manager support improves or impedes these two links. We identify limiting conditions on these links. Specifically, our results indicate that manager support positively moderates the effort-performance link; and negatively moderates the optimism-performance link. Thus, this research adds an important caveat to known positive effects of manager support.

The most significant contribution of our research is to offer a theoretical account and

**FIGURE 3:**
**Interaction of Manager Support x Optimism**



empirical support for the extent to which manager support can enhance or mitigate the impact of two very valued internal resources (i.e., effort and optimism) on sales performance. Our findings illustrate the impact of manager support to be far from a simple one, and suggests that firms should refrain from forming a blanket assumption that manager support always exerts a positive influence.

By taking account of interdependencies between salespeople and sales managers, this research builds on recent scholarly interests in intra-organizational behavior of sales managers (Ingram et al., 2005; Plouffe & Barclay, 2007) and the relational aspect between salespeople and sales managers (Kashyap, Puga Ribeiro, Asare, & Brashear, 2007; Mulki et al., 2015). Of particular interest is the observed positive interaction between manager support and sales effort. Contrary to past research, this finding shows that expending effort does not automatically lead to better performance, rather in interaction with manager support, it will have a greater predictive value in explaining performance. That is, sales managers spur the effect of salesperson effort, and thereby, facilitate positive sales outcomes. In essence, success of salespersons will depend on how manager support might marshal firms' resources. This notion is also captured in our qualitative study such that manager support is perceived as a key resource in overcoming

customers' competitor-related objections and in closing a sale.

Our results also challenge the conventional wisdom that manager support always leads to higher performance. We uncover a situation in which the performance impact of manager support could be restraining. Our findings empirically document that higher levels of manager support weaken the positive effect of optimism on sales performance. For highly optimistic salespeople, a higher level of manager support seems to get in the way of psychological empowerment and reduces its positive effect on performance. This negative interaction between manager support and optimism is markedly different from a traditional view and offers important implications for sales management practice: It draws managers' attention to the fact that optimistic salespeople may not have to be jump-started. They are self-assured, can take the rejection on a daily basis, and primarily like to rely on themselves to flourish. Thus, a higher level of manager support may disrupt their momentum and derail their overall game plan. Our results support and enrich Stan et al.'s (2012) findings that too much support provided by an organization may interfere with salespeoples' internal resources. That is, organizational support may generate a sense of performance obligation within the salesperson such that the desire to work for the benefit of

the organization may override the desire to satisfy customer needs (Falk & Fischbacher, 2006; Stan et al., 2012). Such an obligatory feeling may induce a salesperson to focus on short-term reward, to the detriment of long-term outcomes.

This research adds depth to extant literature examining managers' influence on salesperson performance (e.g., Chakrabarty, Oubre, & Brown, 2008) by enabling a new perspective on the role of manager support and its complex ramifications. Prior work in this vein has tended to focus on various main effects. Our focus on boundary conditions of two widely researched links is novel and offers a more nuanced view. Our findings are of direct importance to managers as they identify conditions under which manager support is a benefit or a hindrance. A firm might focus attention on training and development to enhance managers' behavioral control skills. This may provide more effective governance systems for firms. This is in accordance with prior findings that social mechanisms may be used as control tools to influence a variety of sales outcomes (Brashear, Boles, Bellenger, & Brooks, 2003).

Our model and results suggest that improved performance may depend not merely on diligent efforts, but also on key organizational support in the form of manager support. In this way, managers can play a transformational role in improving salesperson performance. However, in tandem with this finding, this research also suggests that optimistic salespeople tend to prefer being self-supported. Therefore, a key priority for sales managers will be to engage in empowerment of optimistic salespeople. Our findings bring a new understanding to the work of Panagopoulos & Ogilvie (2015), who show that leadership can originate in individuals and salespeople can lead themselves to better performance.

**Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

While this research demonstrates some meaningful effects and offers interesting insights into sales management practices, it is important to consider several limitations

related to the scope and depth of this research. At the same time, our findings pave the way for several worthwhile avenues for further research. First, our model was constrained to a few constructs of theoretical importance and did not attempt to represent possible antecedents of manager support. Further research should include other intervening factors to obtain a better understanding of mechanisms through which manager support may influence job consequences. For example, a robust area of inquiry would be to explicitly consider the distinction between "process effort" and "outcome effort" and the corresponding interactions with manager support. Second, in studying the role of manager support, we considered only the traditional mold of dyadic relationships. Recent research has emphasized a network of simultaneous relationships that sales managers have to manage (Flaherty, Lam, Lee, Mulki, & Dixon, 2012). Future researchers should develop a way to consider other stakeholders in sales managers' constellation of relationships and how they may influence sales performance. Third, we wish to acknowledge the limitations associated with cross-sectional design that relies on a single informant measurement. Although our methodology reduced subjective biases by offering respondent anonymity and curtailed the motivation of self-presentation, as recommended by Singh (2000), more objective measures are desirable. Our study's design enables us to examine the salesperson side of the story, but it does not permit us to match these thoughts with supervisors'. Our results may be strengthened by inclusion of supervisor perspectives. Thus, future researchers should examine these linkages from a dyadic perspective. Furthermore, our approach does not facilitate testing of the causal sequence and thus, cannot capture the temporal dynamics and the underlying process explanation. Use of longitudinal data will enable researchers to tease out these linkages more clearly and yield richer process information. As an emerging market, it is very likely that India's industrial sales context has also evolved since the data was collected. More recent research would add value and might also lend a form of longitudinal perspective. Finally, this study employed a one-industry research design. Although we believe automobile salespersons are quite appropriate to study manager support, and the controlled extraneous variations

afforded us with a cleaner environment in which to examine the focal effects, every industry has its own idiosyncrasies: cost structure, compensation systems, rate of new product introduction, to name a few. Thus, caution must be exercised in generalizing these findings. Even though the fundamentals of selling in other settings are not dramatically different, further research is warranted to explore how these relationships hold across multiple settings, and industries.

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