

The Influence of Sales Associates' Communication Skills, Attitude, and Physical Appearance on Consumer Purchase Intention

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ABSTRACT

There are several aspects in a transaction setting affecting the thought and decision-making process of a consumer. One factor that is essential to consider are the sales associates. However, insufficient research has been done to fully explain the role that sales associates play in terms of consumer purchase intentions. Previous studies focused more on external factors, including advertisements and new platforms. This research primarily aims to identify how sales associates' communication skills, physical appearance, and attitude impact consumer purchase intention. Descriptive-correlational research design was used to analyze the data gathered from 200 respondents. Specifically, ANOVA and regression were utilized to analyze the data and test the relationship of variables. The study revealed that sales associates have insignificant impact on consumer's purchase intentions. Furthermore, the findings implied that consumers purchase intention are not dependent on the sales associates' good communication skills, attractive appearance, and good attitude. The results will be useful to business owners, managers, and HR practitioners to investigate other facets of Sales Associates persona that can influence consumer journey.

Keywords: Consumer Behavior, Purchase Intention, Sales Associate, Good Communication Skills, Attractive Appearance, Good Attitude

INTRODUCTION

When a person enters a store, two things are most likely to happen: they are looking for something they could buy, or they already have something in mind, and they are just checking for its availability. Once they step inside, sales associates often provide as the major role in retail, service, and wholesale establishments in providing the necessary information and service that gives assistance to their consumers throughout the purchasing processes. Although majority of customers had experience where the store's sales associates seem to strangely go missing just when they are needed the most, studies have shown that shoppers still expect to have an informed, knowledgeable sales associate available when they want it (Goldman, 2016). In the midst of the buyer-seller interaction, sales associates are likely to influence the consumer purchase intention and behavior. Therefore, sales associates play a crucial role in bringing forth positive impressions to their consumers. It can be noted that

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consumers return to the stores not just because of the quality of products they offer, but because of the exemplary service that was accorded to them by the sales associates while inside the store doing transactions.

In today's highly advanced world where technology is involved in almost all if not all human activities and transactions, there had been questions about the role of Sales Associates in helping customers complete a sales transaction. Product reviews, price comparison, buying a product, payment, and after sales can be done virtually. In a study conducted by Fisher (2014) in collaboration with Expertvoice, a consulting firm, it was found that 50% of customers still ask for advice whenever they shop. The study also revealed that well-versed Sales Associates are able to increase the number of customers and reduce the likelihood of having product returns.

According to a study done by Mindtree, a global technology consulting and services company across 5 retail sectors, Sales Associates can significantly impact the decision to purchase of 7/10 shoppers. As a matter of fact, customers who interact with Sales Associates will buy more product and will likely visit the store again. The same study revealed how Sales Associates play an important role in supporting customers in improving their shopping experience. The results offered fascinating details about how a Sales Associate impacts a shopper's purchase decision. Additionally, the research refuted past assumptions that customers do not want to be disturbed when inside a retail store looking for something to buy.

With the outgrowing number of people who choose and aim to become sales associates, this study aims to identify how sales associates' communication skills, physical appearance, and attitude impact consumer purchase intention. This is part of analyzing consumer behavior which is a management theory that studies consumer shopping patterns from the time they interact with the business upon paying for their product. This is considered as one of most studied concepts in marketing that allows business entities on how they can further improve their interaction between them through the sales associates and consumers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sales Associate

Sales associates have been recognized as one of the major factors on how and why consumers gain knowledge about the certain product they are selling. The study of Beneke, Hayworth, Hobson and Mia (2012) revealed that physical aspects and personal interaction confirmed to have a positive effect and direct relationship to consumer satisfaction and has potentially shown results that lead to consumer loyalty. Aqmal and Ardyan (2019) emphasized that being able to communicate well and to show trustworthiness shows a relationship between adaptive selling and salespersons performance. This means that undergoing sales trainings can enhance customer smart response capacity. The research of Stoian and Danilet (2017) shows that consumers that has trust in a sales associate has a huge influence in consumers buying frequency. The more consumers trust the sales associate the more frequent they will buy the products. In addition, to have a positive outcome in the buying frequency of others, establishments must be solely aware on the importance of trust and satisfaction on the performance of a sales associate as the key to increase direct selling. The Islamic ethics-based salesperson behavior has a positive effect on customer trust in a salesperson and has positively and significantly influenced customer trust in Islamic banks and customer loyalty

according to the study of Wijaya, Nasuka, and Hidayat (2021). Moreover, consumers who are more satisfied with the salesperson have a higher degree of cognitive and affective confidence and forms of trust are positively linked to the intention to sustain a relationship with the salesperson (Twing-kong, Gerald Albaum, & Fullgrabe, 2013).

According to Marlien, Alimaskur, and Setiawan (2017), the capability of a collaborative work between consumer and sales associate in the process of transaction results into an important role in co-creation value. Its purpose is to form collaborative values between consumer behavior and intention that co-create with the sales associates to mediate what the consumer wants and needs. Partaking on the behavioral aspects in salespeople, Mayo and Mallin (2014) discovered that salespeople are more inclined to act something out of superstition when they believe in personal good luck and experience higher levels of role ambiguity. Sales outcomes like increase in confidence and motivation, good sales, behavioral intention, and performance outcomes were believed to be a result of the salespeople's superstition. Gammoh, Mallin, and Pullins (2014) found that the congruence of the salesperson's identity with his or her perceived brand image has a major effect on the salesperson's brand recognition. This recognition has a significant impact on sales force results, such as intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, mission self-efficacy, and both behavioral and outcome success. Singh and Pingali (2015) have presented an interesting customer orientation that leads to stronger salesmanship skills in salespeople, as they possess higher degree of knowledge around customer needs. Additionally, the study narrated that since there is an instantaneous change in technological information and consumer preferences, the consumer's condition for the products and services and their expectation for sales associate will keep increasing. This is provided that sales associates' customer should provide smart and effective response capability in the industry, customer smart response should be able to help and influence the salespersons performance (Jones, Stevens, & Chonko, 2005).

Communication Skills

Communication is a huge part in the marketing world, being able to be empathetic and to listen well. Communication also creates a positive sales outcome while the other was fulfilled by not just the product but also the service provided by sales associates (Aggarwal, 2015). It was pointed out that communication skills of sales associates are a clear factor on impacting customers purchase behaviors and as well as how they perceive sellers and organization customers (Missaoui, 2015). But talking isn't just the way to influence consumer's decision-making (Holland, 2016) and as such, successfully managing the customer behavior, sales associates must have solid communication skills, as well as good appearance, and attitude (Aggarwal, 2015). Sales associates must attain their customers' intention, be proactive and close deals which essentially require non-verbal communication skills with the help of verbal communication (Morwitz, 2012). A huge part of communication in the marketing world is being able to be empathetic and to listen well as this creates a relationship that positively influence the consumers and produce a satisfactory environment (Ramsey & Sohi, 1997). The significance of salesperson has been a foreground in directly interacting with the customers (Froböse, 2015). Missaoui (2015) argues that talking constantly isn't just the way to influence customers, providing the right information and being aware of all features or benefits of the product is also a must. Customers visit a physical store to receive information from sales associates in the traditional style of shopping thus it is expected that salespeople are well-versed in the product's characteristics and range ((Ivend, 2017).

H1: *Sales associates' communication skills have a significant impact on consumer's purchase intention.*

Attitude

Pauser, Wagner, and Ebster (2018) found a significant discovery that nonverbal messages such as attitude of sales associates can not only just create an impact to the consumers' judgment but also creates a beneficial consumer response. Ethical reputation has been always a powerful force in establishing a customer perceived value. According to Bateman and Valentine (2015) it there is a relationship among perceptions of ethical treatment of sales associates, trust, and customer purchase intention. The findings have shown that ethical treatment of sellers creates a positive influence in relation to purchase intention. Additionally, a stronger purchase intention will be shown by customers if sales associates treated them in ethical manner (Bateman & Valentine, 2015; Cham et al., 2021). Moreover, Punwatkarn and Verghese (2014) emphasized that the attitude of salesperson influences consumer purchase intention. Sales associates' attitude must at its best in order to positively affect consumer purchase intention (Shah, Aziz, Jaffari, Waris, Ejaz, Fatima, & Sherazi, 2012).

H2: *Sales associates' attitude has a significant influence on consumer's purchase intention.*

Physical Appearance

The salespersons' appearance, manner, and personality conformity show conclusive impact on the brand and relationship between customers who are more likely to perceive the sales associate as the representative of the brand which aids consumers to come up with a decision (Heekyung & Youjae 2018). Dealing with the subject of physical appearance, Wan and Wyer (2015) found that high attractiveness such as sales associates styling up properly with confidence has a positive effect on consumption behavior of consumers. Furthermore, Kim, Ju, and Johnson (2009), inferred that consumers are influenced by the appearance of sales associates in a study conducted in a specialty and department stores as evidenced by their appearance-oriented and evaluative comments, participants admitted to being influenced by associates' appearance.

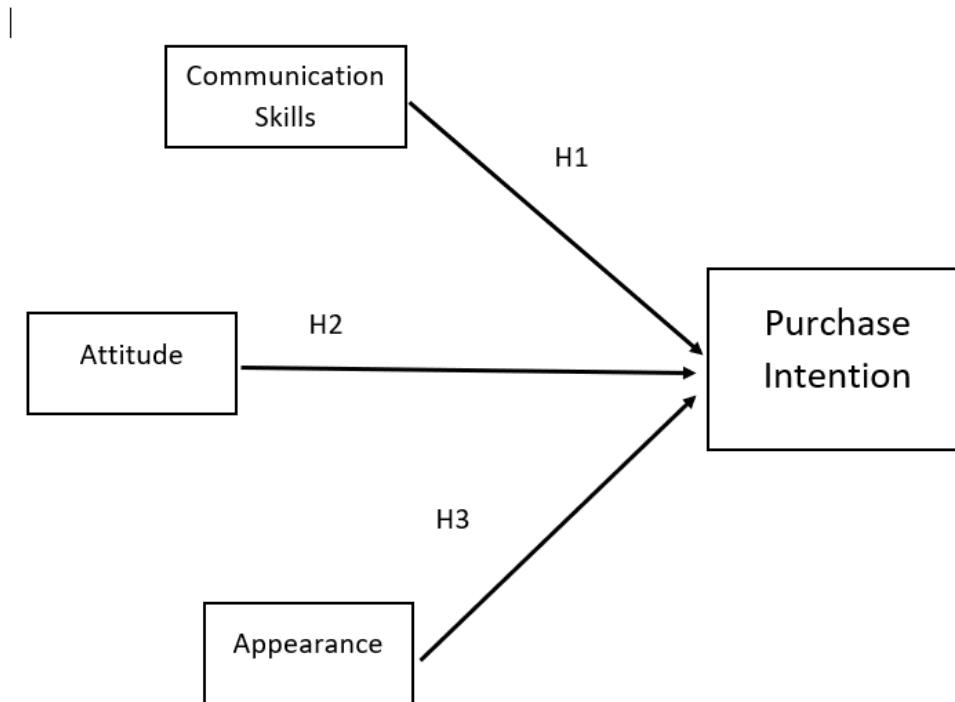
H3: *Sales associates' physical appearance positively influences consumer's purchase intention.*

Purchase Intention

Purchase intention is the willingness and attitudes towards availing products or services (Lacap et al., 2021; Lim et al, 2019; Morwitz, 2012). Ma and Yang (2018) suggest that employees in an organization have a critical role in the purchase intention of customers. Consumer purchase intention is often increased by salesperson skill (Khalilakbar, Heidari, & Jamshidian, 2015) and expertise (Oktavia, Rahayu, & Djawahir, 2019). Interpersonal abilities of salespeople have always been vital in influencing customers' purchasing decisions at various levels. Retail operations have become increasingly important in influencing salespeople's sales methods and customers' purchasing decisions as the number of retail outlets and merchandisers has grown (Muzumdar, Basyal, & Vyas, 2021).

RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

Figure 1: The Hypothesized Model



The hypothesized model presents the relationship between the independent variables and the dependent variable. As shown in Figure 1, the independent variables are the Sales Associate's communication skills, attitude, and appearance which were hypothesized to influence the consumer's purchase intention.

RESEARCH METHOD

Descriptive-correlational research design was used to satisfy the objectives of the research. There were 200 respondents who participated in the research and were selected using a purposive sampling. The research made use of a 4-point Likert scale self-made questionnaire which was tested for validity and reliability prior to distribution. ANOVA and regression analysis were used to analyze the data and test the relationship of variables. ANOVA or Analysis of Variance was used to discover whether the differences amongst groups of data have statistical significance. Moreover, regression analysis was utilized to test the relationship of variables specifically influence of sales associates' communication skills, physical appearance, and attitude to consumer purchase intention.

RESULTS

Table 1: Demographic Profile of the Respondents

| Factors | Category | Frequency | Percentage |
|---------|-----------|-----------|------------|
| Gender | Male | 114 | 57% |
| | Female | 86 | 43% |
| Age | 18 – 24 | 51 | 26% |
| | 25 – 34 | 53 | 27% |
| | 35 – 44 | 35 | 18% |
| | 45 – 54 | 33 | 17% |
| | 55 – 64 | 19 | 9% |
| | 65 and up | 9 | 3% |

Table 1 shows the summarized demographic profile of the 201 respondents. There were 114 male and 86 female respondents. As to age, 53 respondents belong to 25-34 years bracket, 51 respondents belong to 18-24 bracket, 35-44 years old with 35 respondents, 45-54 years old with 33 respondents, 55-64 years old with 19 respondents and 9 respondents belong to 65 years old and above.

Table 2: Sales associates' communication skills and consumer purchase intention

| Regression Summary for Dependent Variable: Var6 (Spreadsheet34) R= .11361484 R ² = .01290833 Adjusted R ² = ----- F (5,194) =.50739 p<.77047 Std. Error of estimate: .62834 | | | | | | |
|--|-----------|-----------------|-----------|----------------|-----------|----------|
| N=200 | b* | Std. Err. of b* | b | Std. Err. of b | t(194) | p-value |
| Intercept | | | 3.329527 | 0.416796 | 7.988380 | 0.000000 |
| [Fluency in Speech] | 0.111880 | 0.115063 | 0.114139 | 0.117385 | 0.972344 | 0.332090 |
| [Pleasant Voice] | -0.010296 | 0.103764 | -0.010290 | 0.103708 | -0.099223 | 0.921064 |
| [Presentation Skills] | 0.026189 | 0.095907 | 0.033175 | 0.121491 | 0.273068 | 0.785091 |
| [Product Knowledge] | -0.079356 | 0.108954 | -0.109498 | 0.150338 | -0.728347 | 0.467280 |
| [Responsiveness to my inquiries] | 0.012816 | 0.109199 | 0.016108 | 0.137249 | 0.117361 | 0.906696 |

Table 2 presents the regression analysis between the independent variable communication skills and the dependent variable consumer purchase intention. The results show that the p-value is not less than 0.05, thus the correlation between communication skills and purchase intention is not significant. H1 which hypothesized that sales associates' communication skills have a significant impact on consumer's purchase intention is consequently rejected.

Table 3: Sales associates' attitude and consumer purchase intention

| Regression Summary for Dependent Variable: Var6 (Spreadsheet34) R= .21850048 R ² = .04774246 Adjusted R ² = .02319974 F (5,194) =1.9453 p<.08860 Std. Error of estimate: .53531 | | | | | | |
|---|-----------|--------------------|-----------|-------------------|----------|----------|
| N=200 | | Std. Err. of b* | b | Std. Err. of b | t(194) | p-value |
| Intercept | | | 3.341722 | 0.383857 | 8.70565 | 0.000000 |
| [Fact-driven] | -0.257001 | 0.094791 | -0.275305 | 0.101542 | -2.71125 | 0.007305 |
| [Good listener] | 0.167580 | 0.089804 | 0.200569 | 0.107483 | 1.86605 | 0.063543 |
| [Preparedness] | 0.122644 | 0.101645 | 0.143271 | 0.118740 | 1.20659 | 0.229059 |
| [Professionalism] | 0.004491 | 0.097935 | 0.005531 | 0.120630 | 0.04585 | 0.963476 |
| [Outgoing and sociable] | -0.018722 | 0.082849 | -0.017938 | 0.079379 | -0.22598 | 0.821456 |

Table 3 summarizes the regression analysis between sales associates' attitude as the independent variable and consumer purchase intention as the dependent variable. The regression results indicate that the correlation between attitude and purchase intention is not significant considering that the p-value is not less than 0.05. The correlation results therefore led to the decision to have H2 rejected. This means that sales associates' attitude has no significant influence on consumer's purchase intention.

Table 4: Sales associates' physical appearance and consumer purchase intention

| Regression Summary for Dependent Variable: Var6 (Spreadsheet34) R= .16650676 R ² = .02772450 Adjusted R ² = .00266585 F (5,194) =1.1064 p<.35833 Std. Error of estimate: .74861 | | | | | | |
|---|-----------|--------------------|-----------|-------------------|----------|----------|
| N=200 | b* | Std. Err. of b* | b | Std. Err. of b | t(194) | p-value |
| Intercept | | | 2.534590 | 0.515429 | 4.91744 | 0.000002 |
| [Appropriately Dressed] | 0.003449 | 0.098100 | 0.004874 | 0.138623 | 0.03516 | 0.971987 |
| [Cheerful disposition] | -0.063414 | 0.083724 | -0.105397 | 0.139152 | -0.75742 | 0.449717 |
| [Clean appearance] | 0.151252 | 0.101868 | 0.234410 | 0.157876 | 1.48477 | 0.139227 |
| [Pleasant smell] | -0.101209 | 0.097260 | -0.151232 | 0.145332 | -1.04060 | 0.299357 |
| [Proper posture] | 0.104323 | 0.105782 | 0.145009 | 0.147036 | 0.98621 | 0.325258 |

Table 4 exhibits the 5 constructs that define physical appearance as the 3rd independent variable and its relationship to consumer purchase intention as the dependent variable. The regression analysis resulted to a p-value of not less than 0.05, hence the correlation between physical appearance and purchase intention is not significant. The results imply the rejection of the H3 which posited that sales associates' physical appearance positively influences consumer's purchase intention.

DISCUSSION

The study was conducted to establish the influence of Sales Associates' characteristics such as communication skills, attitude, and appearance on consumer purchase intention. The data analysis revealed very uncommon findings. All 3 hypotheses (H1, H2, and H3) were rejected since the p-values are not less than 0.05.

For H1, the results indicate that the Sales Associates' communication skills do not influence consumer purchase intention. The result strongly contradicts to the findings of Aggarwal, Castleberry, Ridnour, & Shepherd (2015) which suggests that communication skills will always be a huge part in the sales market, thus being able to interact well verbally could create a positive impact on the consumers and produce a satisfactory relationship between seller and buyer. Moreover, Morwitz (2012) accentuates the importance of both verbal and non-verbal communications skills of Sales Associates to persuade customers. On the other hand, Missaoui (2015) indicates that other than communications skills, it is imperative that sales associates must have product knowledge since there is a need to provide the right information and being aware of all features or benefits of the product thus it is expected that salespeople are well-versed in the product's characteristics and range (Ivend, 2017).

The regression results likewise rejected H2 which implies that the attitude of the Sales Associates does not influence consumer purchase intention. This result clearly disproves previous studies which found a significant relationship between Sales Associates' attitude and consumer purchase intention (Punwatkar & Verghese, 2014; Shah et al., 2012; Pauser et al., 2018). The seller's ethical attitude creates a positive influence and trust thus affecting purchase intention (Bateman & Valentine, 2015).

Lastly, H3 obtained a p-value of not less than 0.05 which led to the decision to have it rejected. The rejection of the 3rd hypothesis indicates that physical appearance does not influence consumer purchase intention. However, earlier studies suggest a strong relationship between the 2 variables. In a study conducted by Heekyung and Youjae (2018), salesperson's appearance impact the brand that they represent thus affecting the decision of the customer on whether to buy or not to buy the brand. Furthermore, sales associates' effort to style up, to dress neatly and appropriately, and to exude confidence have a positive effect on consumption behavior of consumers (Wan & Wyer, 2015; Kim et al., 2009).

STUDY IMPLICATIONS

The findings of the study although somewhat different from past literature provide valuable and differentiated insights on this topic. The differentiated insights clearly refute earlier studies strongly suggesting the relationship between the 3 attributes namely communication skills, attitude, and physical appearance on consumer purchase intention. The findings of the study can benefit business owners and human resource practitioners who have been very particular in hiring Sales Associates based on attractive physical appearance, impeccable communication skills, and spotless attitude.

The results of this study which veered away from the usual findings can help business owners identify other factors that influence the zest of consumer's purchase intention. Some may be

related to Sales Associate like authenticity and charisma rather than physical attractiveness, mastery of product knowledge rather than just communication skills, and warmth and professionalism rather than good attitude.

Furthermore, business owners including managers can investigate factors like but not limited to product quality, after sales support, store location, store layout and design, and promotions that could influence consumer purchase intention. In today's business environment where consumers are becoming more intelligent, Sales Associate could just be a superficial factor that influences the decision-making process of consumers.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Based on the results of the study, it can be inferred that Sales Associates' attributes such as communication skills, attitudes, and appearance have no conclusive influence on the purchase intention of the consumers. While previous studies have affirmed the significant relationship between these attributes to consumer purchase intention, the findings of the study revealed otherwise.

The researchers consequently recommend that a further study be conducted using a defined industry like cosmetics and clothing where constant assistance from Sales Associates is needed. Under normal circumstances, these product types require not just the immediate but also highly engaging assistance of a Sales Associate. Additionally, a comparative study between 2 generations can also be done to validate whether there is a generational difference on the influence of sales associate on purchase intention.

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