

# **Do Gender and Length of Employment Impact the Relationship Between Psychological Climate and Subjective Salesperson Performance?**

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*This study examines the impact of gender, employment length, and six dimensions of psychological climate on subjective salesperson performance. Data from 112 female and 201 male salespeople was analyzed. Results show subjective salesperson performance is significantly influenced by distinct psychological climate sub-dimensions, specifically when salespeople are separated based on employment length and gender. Subjective salesperson performance of females (2 years experience or less) is significantly influenced by cohesion. Subjective salesperson performance of males (2 years experience or less) is significantly influenced by innovation. Subjective salesperson performance of males (greater than 2 years experience) is significantly influenced by recognition and autonomy.*

*Keywords: gender, length of employment, psychological climate, subjective salesperson performance*

## **INTRODUCTION**

For years academic research in marketing has been attempting to determine the factors that lead to greater salesperson performance. Although a host of direct and indirect indicators of salesperson performance have been studied, significant focus has often been placed on broad categories, such as sales manager influence (Mayberry et al., 2018; Piercy et al., 2009), organizational climate factors (Gillespie et al., 2016; Shannahan, et al., 2013), and salesperson attitudes and behaviors (Bonney et al., 2016; Miao & Wang, 2017; Miao et al., 2007). Significant work in the areas of organizational climate and structure suggest that salesperson perceptions of organizational operations are important in shaping salesperson performance. One of those organizational factors, psychological climate, has been the focus of a variety of studies in selling and sales management. However, research has failed to examine the impact psychological climate has on subjective salesperson performance. The present study seeks to extend the knowledge of salesperson performance by examining the influence that separate dimensions of psychological climate dimensions have on subjective salesperson performance. Additionally, two underrepresented factors in sales management research, gender and length of employment, will be examined in terms of their impact on the relationship between individual dimensions of psychological climate and subjective salesperson performance.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Psychological Climate

Significant past research indicates that the climate of an organization is an important predictor of a variety of employee behaviors. While often viewed as an overall concept, it is important to note the distinction between two recognized forms of climate in organizations. Examined as an overriding influence of organizational behavior, *organizational* climate is most often viewed and measured at the organizational level. Conversely, *psychological* climate is an employee-level construct (Schneider & Snyder, 1975). A variety of studies have attempted to determine the impact of both organizational and psychological climate, and both concepts have been identified as critical influence variables in organizational behavior literature. However, research does suggest that employee perceptions of psychological climate are more useful in understanding the impact of climate on employee attitudes and behaviors (James et al., 1978).

In sales management research, the conceptualization of psychological climate developed by Koys and DeCotiis (1991) is often utilized to examine the construct (Martin & Bush, 2006). Koys and DeCotiis (1991) define psychological climate as “an experiential-based, multi-dimensional, and enduring perceptual phenomenon which is widely shared by the members of a given organizational unit. Its primary function is to cue and shape individual behavior toward the modes of behavior dictated by organizational demands” (p. 266). The same authors developed a measurement scale to assess psychological climate and determined that the construct consisted of eight distinct sub-dimensions. The eight sub-dimensions identified were autonomy, trust, cohesiveness, pressure, support, recognition, fairness, and innovation (Koys & DeCotiis, 1991). Later research in the area of sales management indicated that the original eight sub-dimensions of psychological climate might be better examined as six sub-dimensions, with the items of support, trust and fairness being combined as one item called support (Martin & Bush, 2006; Strutton et al., 1993; Swift & Campbell, 1998). Each sub-dimension of psychological climate is distinct. Autonomy describes an employee’s ability to make unfettered decisions at work. Employees perceive cohesiveness when organizations freely share information. Employees will have positive perceptions of recognition when their work and effort is acknowledged by superiors. Innovation is described as the perception that an organization proactively seeks creative solutions to problems. Support is perceived by an employee when supervisors provide encouragement, treat employees with fairness, and when trust exists between superiors and subordinates. Finally, pressure is a negative perception described as unnecessarily strict performance standards (Swift & Campbell, 1998).

Brown and Leigh (1996) examined the environment of sales organizations and found that specific dimensions of psychological climate positively impacted salesperson job involvement. However, their research also suggested that psychological climate did not influence salesperson effort. Further examination of psychological climate in a sales setting suggests that climates that are considered competitive encourage salespeople to set and meet more challenging sales goals (Brown et al., 1998). More recent research in the area of sales management has found that specific sub-dimensions of psychological climate have direct impacts on salesperson attitudes and behaviors. The results from Martin and Bush (2006) show that the psychological climate sub-dimensions of support, autonomy, and cohesion positively influence customer-oriented selling. Their results also indicate that the positive psychological climate sub-dimensions of support and autonomy, and the negative sub-dimension of pressure, are all direct predictors of salesperson perceptions of empowerment.

### Subjective Sales Performance

A quick review of the sales management literature would likely show that the greatest topics of interest are salesperson performance, and the factors that influence it (Mayberry et al., 2018). The focus on salesperson performance is an important one. Determining what influences salesperson performance, and how that performance contributes to organizational goals, gives organizations insight into the true impact of salespeople. The early focus of salesperson performance studies, including a large number examined in Brown and Peterson’s (1993) meta-analysis, focused on specific quantitative sales figures. Emphasis was

placed on understanding overall salesperson sales figures, quotas, and other easily-quantified sales calculations.

More recent sales management research found that the focus on quantitative sales figures alone was ignoring other non-quantitative factors that were important in determining successful salesperson performance. This research encouraged organizations to examine behaviors and attitudes not directly associated with quantitative sales outcomes, such as attitudes, efforts, and sales behaviors involving problem-solving, activity reporting, and product knowledge (MacKenzie et al., 1998; Rich et al., 1999). The resulting research found that organizations should evaluate salespeople on a combination of both objective, quantitative outcome measurements of salespeople, *and* subjective, non-quantitative salesperson attitudes and behaviors (Rich et al., 1999). The idea that quantitative and non-quantitative salesperson performance indicators are both important mirrored early research conducted by Behrman and Perreault (1982) and their attempt to develop a measurement scale to assess salesperson performance. Similar results appear in broad examinations of salesperson performance. Using in-depth interviews with sales managers and salespeople, Zallocco et al. (2009) found support for including a variety of salesperson skills and activities in evaluating salesperson performance. Shannahan et al. (2013) also confirmed the importance of subjective salesperson performance and its relationship with various salesperson attitudes and motivations.

## **Gender**

Although multiple studies in the areas of sales management and salesperson performance indicate that gender influences the workplace perceptions of salespeople, overall research in the area is inconsistent. One of the earliest studies on the topic suggested that women face obstacles in being accepted as professional salespeople (Swan & Futrell, 1978). Another early study examining gender differences in salespeople found that men and women are disciplined differently by sales managers when certain unethical behaviors occur in the workplace (Bellizzi & Hite, 1989). Conversely, in one of the earliest and most comprehensive examinations of the influence of salesperson gender, Schul and Wren (1992) discovered that there were only an extremely small number of gender differences when examining a multitude of salesperson attitudes and performance measures. The results of this study contradicted earlier recommendations in the literature that female salespeople should be placed in specialized training programs to assist in their integration into the sales staff.

More recent investigations into the impact of gender in salesperson perceptions found that female salespeople exhibited less role conflict and role ambiguity, and significantly higher levels of customer-oriented selling than their male counterparts (Siguaw & Honeycutt, 1995). Research by Comer et al. (1995) showed that saleswomen and salesmen preferred differing styles of sales manager leadership. Research also finds that the use of knowledge structures, described as the salesperson's ability to successfully categorize customers, has a greater positive impact on quantitative sales for men than for women (Sharma et al., 2007). Macintosh and Krush (2017) found that male salespeople gain sales benefits from a different form of networking than female salespeople. However, one of the most recent research studies focusing on salesperson gender showed that the impact of behavior-based and outcome-based control systems on salesperson performance did not vary based on gender (Samaraweera & Gelb, 2015). Taken in totality, research examining the influence of gender in salesperson work perceptions is inconclusive, with greater effort needed to examine specific constructs that might lead to important differences.

## **Length of Employment**

Previous research also shows that the experience of sales representatives, measured as time in the job as a salesperson, plays a part in terms of how they perceive certain organizational stimuli, and in salesperson performance. Hoffman et al. (1993), Brashear et al. (1997), and Dadrick et al. (1997) all found support for the contention that sales experience was positively related to sales performance, examined in a variety of different selling industries. Research also shows that salespeople use adaptive selling techniques more as they gain years of sales experience, but only to a certain point at which adaptive selling plateaus. (Levy & Sharma, 1994). Sales experience has also been validated as an important characteristic when examining sales manager impact. Important work in this area indicates that salespeople with significant time in a sales

job (defined as over 20 years sales experience) exhibit lower learning orientations under certain supervisory conditions (Kohli et al., 1998).

Recent research focuses on a greater level of specificity in terms of the impact of salesperson experience. One such study finds that salespeople with greater sales experience are best suited for introducing new products. Unfortunately, results from the same study also suggest that younger salespeople are more effective introducing new products, creating a challenge for sales managers of finding younger sales associates who also have significant years of sales experience when introducing new products (Fu, 2009). In one of the most expansive investigations of salesperson experience, Singh and Das (2013) analyzed multiple antecedents of salesperson performance, comparing the results for salespeople with less than five years of selling experience to the results of salespeople with greater than five years of selling experience. The results showed that job satisfaction, adaptive selling, and customer-oriented selling improve salesperson performance to a greater extent for salespeople with more than five years selling experience. Finally, greater sales experience is shown to decrease the salesperson's need for and use of emotion in the selling process, suggesting that as salespeople gain experience, their selling approaches and styles likely change (Nowlin et al., 2018).

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

Recent research in sales management suggests that psychological climate likely impacts salesperson performance. A meta-analytic review of psychological climate and work outcomes validates the direct relationship between psychological climate and salesperson performance. Results from the same meta-analysis also suggest that the relationship between psychological climate and salesperson performance is influenced by a variety of work-related attitudes and factors (Parker et al., 2003). It has also been posited that the relationship between psychological climate and job tenure is significantly underrepresented in organizational behavior literature. Using a survey of all employees of a public sector company, English et al. (2010) found that positive perceptions of psychological climate declined as job tenure increased. Although the study was completed using all employees and not focused on salespeople, the results do indicate that job tenure is an important variable when examining psychological climate in organizations.

Research in the areas of personal selling and service have suggested that an employee's perception of empowerment (closely related to the psychological climate sub-dimension of autonomy) can positively influence employee behaviors and attitudes. Fulford and Enz (1995) found support for the idea that empowered service employees exhibited greater self-reported achievement, empathy, and impact in their service organization. Research also indicates that empowerment perceptions positively influence employee performance as rated by superiors (Spreitzer et al., 1997), and productivity and effectiveness (Koberg et al., 1999). In a sales setting, studies have suggested that employee perceptions of empowerment will improve the employee's communication and analytical skills (Wotruba, 1996), and create salespeople who possess strong decision-making capabilities and improved selling skills (Knouse & Strutton, 1996). It has also been shown that specific dimensions of psychological climate act as critical antecedents of salesperson job attitudes (Hartmann & Rutherford, 2015).

Recent research encourages psychological climate studies to examine the impact of the specific elements comprising psychological climate, suggesting that greater knowledge will be attained by uncovering detailed relationships between those specific elements and other work behaviors and attitudes (Patterson et al., 2005). However, no known research has examined the relationship between psychological climate and salesperson performance while simultaneously examining the influences of gender and length of employment. Therefore two research questions will be examined in the present study examining the relationship between the sub-dimensions of psychological climate and salesperson subjective performance, based on gender and length of employment:

Research Question 1: What impact does gender have on the relationship between specific sub-dimensions of psychological climate (Support, Autonomy, Recognition, Cohesion, Innovation, Pressure) and salesperson subjective performance?

Research Question 2: What impact does length of employment have on the relationship between specific sub-dimensions of psychological climate (Support, Autonomy, Recognition, Cohesion, Innovation, Pressure) and salesperson subjective performance?

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Measurement Scales**

Psychological climate was measured using a scale that Koys and DeCotiis (1991) developed. Their original scale consisted of 40 items evenly distributed over eight sub-dimensions, including autonomy, cohesiveness, fairness, innovation, pressure, recognition, support, and trust. Salespeople responded to these items using a seven-point, "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (7) scale. A pretest and the results from a confirmatory factor analysis indicated that the psychological climate dimension of fairness, support and trust were highly related. Because of these procedures, we eliminated three individual items from the original psychological climate scale, and combined the concepts of fairness, support and trust into one sub-dimension labeled support before final analysis. Psychological climate was then analyzed as six separate sub-dimensions identified as support, autonomy, recognition, cohesion, innovation, and pressure. Subjective salesperson performance was measured using a 10-item self-report sales performance scale focusing on salesperson attitudes, efforts, and behaviors, adapted by Dubinsky et al. (1995) from an original scale developed by Yammarino and Dubinsky (1990). Subjective salesperson performance was assessed on a 5-point "poor" (1) to "excellent" (5) scale. Various demographic information was also collected in the survey, providing the data that was used to examine gender and length of employment in the present analysis. Reliability analyses on scale items exhibited acceptable Cronbach's (1951) alpha scores for measures of each psychological climate dimension (support .98, autonomy .93, recognition .95, cohesion .95, innovation .95, and pressure .86), and subjective salesperson performance (.94).

### **Data Collection and Sample**

Salespeople from a variety of organizations in the United States were asked to participate in the present study. Organizations exhibited differences in terms of size, customers (consumer and B2B), and products sold. Mail surveys and postage-paid return envelopes were used to gather information from salespeople representing five separate organizations. A total of 1,416 questionnaires were sent to salespeople, and 313 completed questionnaires were returned (response rate of 22%). The sample contained 201 male salespeople and 112 female salespeople. Overall, the salespeople in the present study were employed in sales-related positions for an average of 9.9 years.

## **RESULTS**

To examine the impacts of gender and length of employment on the relationships between six sub-dimensions of psychological climate and subjective salesperson performance, the sample for the present study was first divided into males and females, and then further divided into groups with two years of sales experience or less, and more than two years of sales experience. The end result of these groupings was four distinct samples to be analyzed: 1) females with 2 years of salesperson experience or less ( $n = 66$ ); females with more than 2 years of salesperson experience ( $n = 46$ ); males with 2 years of salesperson experience or less ( $n = 105$ ); and males with more than 2 years of salesperson experience ( $n = 96$ ). Determining the appropriate numerical cut-off between inexperienced and experienced sales representatives is difficult. Previous research in sales management identifies experienced salespeople as those with as little as one year of experience (Franke & Park 2007), and as much as twenty years of experience (Kohli, et al., 1998). The present study sought to identify a job experience number that did not rely on random assignment. In analyzing job turnover in business-to-business selling, recent research has shown that turnover at the largest technology companies in the world averages approximately two years. Included in this job turnover average were the individual turnover averages of Microsoft (1.81 years), Amazon (1.84), Apple (1.85), Oracle (1.89), Google (1.90) and Facebook (2.02) (Chaine, 2017). Therefore, using two years as an

important milestone for employee retention, the present study separated salespeople into the categories of two years of sales experience or less, and more than two years of sales experience.

To examine the strength of the relationships between the six sub-dimensions of psychological climate and salesperson subjective performance, a stepwise regression analysis was run for each of the four aforementioned sample groups based on gender and length of employment. Tables 1, 2, 3, and 4 report the stepwise regression results for each sample group.

Table 1 shows the results of the stepwise regression analysis for females with 2 years of salesperson experience or less. The regression model is significant (adjusted  $r^2 = .11$ ,  $F = 8.15$ ). The model indicates that the psychological sub-dimension of cohesion ( $p < .01$ ) is a significant predictor of subjective salesperson performance in this group, and that the psychological sub-dimensions of support, autonomy, recognition, innovation, and pressure are not significant predictors.

**TABLE 1**  
**STEPWISE REGRESSION RESULTS - PSYCHOLOGICAL CLIMATE SUB-DIMENSIONS AND SUBJECTIVE PERFORMANCE, FEMALES, 2 YEARS EXPERIENCE OR LESS**

<b>Construct</b>	<b>Standardized Coefficient</b>	<b>t-value</b>	<b>Significance</b>
Support*	.141	0.850	.399
Autonomy*	.068	0.499	.620
Recognition*	.087	0.541	.591
Cohesion	.351	2.855	.006
Innovation*	.180	1.077	.286
Pressure*	.084	0.668	.507

(\* = Constructs excluded in final model)

Table 2 shows the results of the stepwise regression analysis for females with more than 2 years of salesperson experience. The regression model is not significant (adjusted  $r^2 = .004$ ,  $F = 1.02$ ). The model indicates that no psychological sub-dimension is a significant predictor of subjective salesperson performance for this group.

**TABLE 2**  
**STEPWISE REGRESSION RESULTS - PSYCHOLOGICAL CLIMATE SUB-DIMENSIONS AND SUBJECTIVE PERFORMANCE, FEMALES, GREATER THAN 2 YEARS EXPERIENCE**

<b>Construct</b>	<b>Standardized Coefficient</b>	<b>t-value</b>	<b>Significance</b>
Support*	-.296	-0.860	.397
Autonomy*	.108	0.564	.577
Recognition*	.354	0.929	.361
Cohesion*	-.292	-0.871	.392
Innovation*	.486	1.583	.125
Pressure*	-.313	-1.342	.191

(\* = Constructs excluded in final model)

The results of the stepwise regression analysis for males with 2 years of salesperson experience or less are provided in Table 3. The regression model is significant (adjusted  $r^2 = .23$ ,  $F = 29.75$ ). The model indicates that the psychological sub-dimension of innovation ( $p < .01$ ) is a significant predictor of subjective salesperson performance in this group, and that the psychological sub-dimensions of support, autonomy, recognition, cohesion and pressure are not significant predictors.

**TABLE 3**  
**STEPWISE REGRESSION RESULTS - PSYCHOLOGICAL CLIMATE SUB-DIMENSIONS**  
**AND SUBJECTIVE PERFORMANCE, MALES, 2 YEARS EXPERIENCE OR LESS**

Construct	Standardized Coefficient	t-value	Significance
Support*	.061	0.402	.688
Autonomy*	.135	1.338	.184
Recognition*	.070	0.633	.528
Cohesion*	.144	1.183	.240
Innovation	.488	5.454	.000
Pressure*	-.121	-1.287	.201
(* = Constructs excluded in final model)			

The results of the stepwise regression analysis for males with more than 2 years of salesperson experience are provided in Table 4. The regression model is significant (adjusted  $r^2 = .73$ ,  $F = 122.84$ ). The model indicates that the psychological sub-dimensions of autonomy and recognition ( $p < .01$ ) are significant predictors of subjective salesperson performance in this group, and that the psychological sub-dimensions of support, cohesion, innovation, and pressure are not significant predictors.

**TABLE 4**  
**STEPWISE REGRESSION RESULTS - PSYCHOLOGICAL CLIMATE SUB-DIMENSIONS**  
**AND SUBJECTIVE PERFORMANCE, MALES, GREATER THAN 2 YEARS EXPERIENCE**

Construct	Standardized Coefficient	t-value	Significance
Support*	.067	0.288	.774
Autonomy	.393	3.017	.003
Recognition	.483	3.714	.000
Cohesion*	.014	0.110	.913
Innovation*	.218	1.802	.075
Pressure*	-.070	-0.912	.364
(* = Constructs excluded in final model)			

## MANAGERIAL RESULTS AND IMPLICATIONS

Overall, there are a limited number of psychological climate sub-dimension that are identified as significant predictors of subjective salesperson performance. This scarcity can actually be viewed as a positive result as organizations now have justification for focusing on specific sub-dimensions of psychological climate to encourage and increase subjective salesperson performance based on differences in gender and length of employment.

For female salespeople, there are two important takeaways. First, the psychological climate sub-dimension of cohesion is shown to be a significant and positive predictor of subjective salesperson performance for female salespeople with two years of sales experience or less. Cohesion as a sub-dimension of psychological climate refers to employees' perceptions of togetherness or sharing in the organization (Swift & Campbell, 1998). The construct of cohesion revolves around employees exhibiting interest in one another, and getting along with each other in the workplace. As this sub-dimension of psychological climate is the *only* significant predictor of subjective sales performance for females with two years or less of job experience, it becomes absolutely critical that sales managers and sales organizations go to great lengths to provide work environments that encourage perceptions of cohesion for inexperienced female salespeople. This extra effort could include hiring female salespeople who have common interests, and searching for female salespeople who have shown to be strong and encouraging members of workplace teams in past

employments situations.

The second important implication gleaned from the results for female salespeople is that no sub-dimension of psychological climate was shown to be a significant predictor of sales performance for women with over two years of sales experience. Although identifying specific psychological climate perceptions important to this group would be helpful, the results suggest that the relationship between psychological climate and subjective sales performance for females with more than two years experience is possibly mediated by specific job attitudes or workplace behaviors. Previous research has shown that the relationship between psychological climate and subjective sales performance is influenced by a salesperson's perceptions of empowerment, and by his or her customer-oriented selling behaviors (Martin & Bush, 2006). However, that study did not examine gender differences of the salespeople. As such, the present study appears to bolster the idea that for experienced female salespeople, perceptions of climate in the workplace do not directly impact sales performance.

For the male salespeople examined in the present study, length of employment appears to play an important role in distinguishing between the impact of specific sub-dimensions of psychological climate on sales performance. The psychological climate sub-dimension of innovation stands out as the sole significant positive influence of subjective salesperson performance for males with 2 years of sales experience or less. As such, organizations seeking to create environments conducive to increased sales performance for this group of salespeople should seek to encourage these salespeople of finding new ways or methods of conducting their sales presentations. Additionally, sales managers can positively influence newly-hired salesmen by showing appreciation when these salesmen utilize technology to adapt their sales approaches, and by striving to hiring salesmen who proactively seek new ideas to improve job performance.

The results of the present study identify two distinctly different psychological sub-dimensions as positive influences of sales performance for salesmen with more than two years of selling experience. While innovation is shown to be an important predictor of performance for inexperienced salesmen, autonomy and recognition lead to greater subjective sales performance for more experienced salesmen. The results here are relatively straightforward, suggesting that experienced salesmen value the ability to make their own decisions, and appreciate being acknowledged for their achievements. Experienced salespeople are often given greater flexibility in making decisions concerning sales methods. The freedom associated with this greater flexibility appears to positively contribute to sales performance for experienced salesmen. Likewise, these same salesmen appear to be driven by the recognition of their accomplishments, and produce at higher levels when they perceive that their contributions are being noticed.

In conclusion, results from the present study identify critical and distinct psychological climate sub-dimensions as predictors of subjective sales performance when the factors of gender and length of employment are taken into consideration. Sales managers and organizational executives will ideally be able to emphasize these specific sub-dimensions of psychological climate and create environments more conducive to salesperson performance.

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