

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ROLE OVERLOAD, DEPERSONALIZATION AND COMMERCIAL PERFORMANCE:

Hypotheses Proposal

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1. Introduction

Today, the relationship with the customer has become central to a company's brand image. As a matter of fact, a customer who is satisfied with the quality of a service offered by a sales representative will draw more satisfied customers to the company. This will improve consumers' perception of the company's image.

The proliferation of research dealing with service quality leads us to consider a variable that can hinder the fulfillment of this goal, namely the depersonalization of sales representatives. The problematic at the heart of the current study is whether the depersonalization of sales representatives is a trait inherent to the human being or a consequence of an overload of work and whether it has an impact on the quality of service.

To answer the research questions, we will attempt, through a literature review, to highlight the main factors involved in the depersonalization of sales representatives and to define their influence on perceived performance.

2. Literature review

Research works conducted on sales representatives so far are scarce. In what follows, we will focus on the relationship between role overload and depersonalization in sales representatives and on its consequence on perceived performance.

2.1.Role overload

Role overload as a construct that is rarely used in research about sales force. According to Maslach and Leiter (1997), role overload occurs when work demands exceed human capabilities. People are called to do many things in a short time with very few resources. This is a permanent and not a one-off work situation that does not allow the worker to rest and restore balance. It can be described as a lack of individual resources to perform distinct roles (Peterson *et al.*, 1995). Larson (2004) defines it as a state that is perceived at work when the demands in tools, skills and knowledge are beyond what the person could offer. Other authors describe it as the situation when the amount of work to be performed requires more time than available, which can lead to an uncertain performance (Cooper *et al.*, 2001; Cooper and Dewe, 2004).

In other words, there is role overload when the expectations and demands that come from the sales representative's environment are beyond his capabilities, personal resources and motivation to complete a task.

2.2.Depersonalization

In the literature, depersonalization is referred to as withdrawal or cynicism (Demerouti *et al.*, 2001; Bakker *et al.*, 2004). Depersonalization is also called dehumanization. It is a stress described as an unduly onerous magnitude of role requirements (Schaubroeck *et al.*, 1989; Schick *et al.*, 1990). It is a state of physical withdrawal and psychological distancing on the part of a person. Employees are detached from their work and have no feelings towards customers any more. They start treating them as objects rather than as human beings.

Persons are regarded as mere objects, no emotion and no affinity are no longer created with the customer. People are gradually detached from others, which makes them incapable to perform their work.

This depersonalization is the result of an emotional limit in the individual to continually meet the demands imposed by work.

2.3. Customer relationship and depersonalization

Several researchers have investigated the relationship with the customer and depersonalization. Jamal (2005) identified depersonalization as a dimension of burnout that occurs in people-oriented professions. Commercial representation is a concrete example of a profession where there is direct contact with people. Indeed, professionals in direct contact with customers undergo chronic stress that can result in total depersonalization towards the customer. In fact, according to Jackson and colleagues (1986), the employee-customer relationship could contribute to the depersonalization of sales representatives.

Hypothesis 1 : The relationship with the customer plays a role in depersonalization.

2.4. Role overload and depersonalization

Different findings of several empirical studies have shown that the employees' perceptions of role overload can be connected to the stress of work (Donnelly & Ivancevich, 1975; Churchill, Ford & Walker, 1976).

However, Karatepe and Uludag (2008), Singh *et al.* (1994), Um and Harrison (1998) confirmed the fact that overwork leads to depersonalization. Cordes *et al.* (1997), Mulki *et al.* (2008) equally showed that overwork leads to depersonalization.

Hypothesis 2: Role overload plays a part in depersonalization.

2.5. The relationship between personality traits and depersonalization

In the field of sales force, Peterson and Bellenger (1989) suggested that recruiting experienced salespeople would improve the company's performance. In the same line of thought, Freudenberger (1980) found out that the company would take a risk in hiring a sales representative whose profile is predisposed to reach a state of depersonalization. Nowack (1987) showed that type A individuals are more susceptible to depersonalization, the effect being direct. Type A personality can be characterized by several behavior traits such as ambition, desire to succeed, competitiveness, promptness, animosity and firmness of gestures and voice.

Hypothesis 3 : The trait of personality is involved in depersonalization.

2.6. Depersonalization and perceived business performance

Sales representatives are the main interfaces between service providers and customers in different organizations. They play a pivotal role in influencing customer satisfaction as they are responsible in case the service fails (Malhotra & Mukherjee, 2004; Mukherjy & Malhotra, 2006). An employee suffering depersonalization becomes an aggressor of the quality of services rendered to the customer, and this is a crucial issue for the company.

Schaufeki and Enzmann (1998) and Total N (2000) found that depersonalization is correlated solely with perceived work performance. As for Taris (2006), he also detected a link between depersonalization and confirmed performance.

Similarly, Demerouti *et al.* (2001) and Bakker and Demerouti (2007) demonstrated the existence of a negative influence between depersonalization and work performance.

Hypothesis 4 : The salesperson’s depersonalization impacts on perceived performance.

2.7. Proposal of a preliminary model

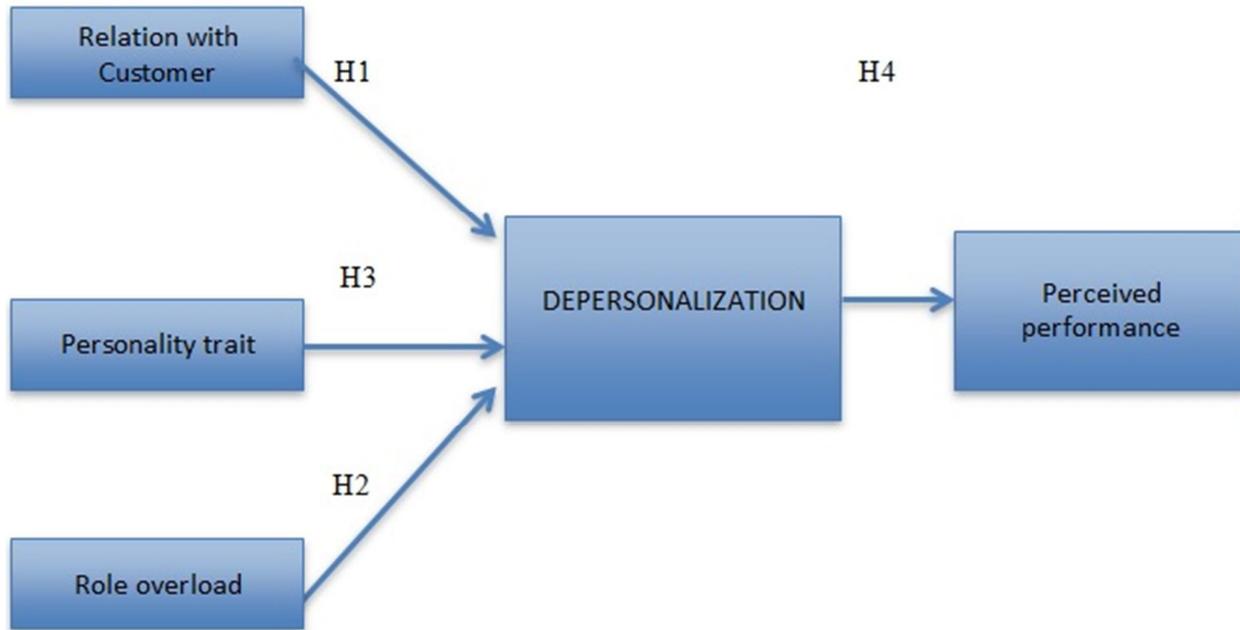


Figure 1: Preliminary model of the salesperson’s depersonalization

3. The research methodology

Prior to starting our field survey to measure the effect of depersonalization and its antecedents on perceived performance empirically, we selected the measurement scales that will be used to design our questionnaire.

3.1. Specification of measurements

Following the review of the various measures available in the literature, we selected the ones we believed to be most appropriate.

At this level, four scales were selected (see table).

Table 1: Selected measurement scales

Scale	Number of items	Authors
Role overload	4items	Rizzo,House and Lirtzman, (1970)
Depersonalization	8 items	Singh <i>et al.</i> (1994)
Trait of personality	5items	Norman (1963)
Commercial performance	7 items	Bush <i>et al.</i> (1990)

The scale of the relationship with the customer will be developed through an exploratory study. Besides, we note that once these scales are defined, we will test them in order to check their factorial structure and their reliability.

Conclusion

The main objective of this research was to show the relationship between key determinants of depersonalization in salespersons. More particularly, our goal was to identify the explanatory variables that contribute most to a state of depersonalization.

This research presents a theoretical point of view, an integrative model combining concepts that had been covered previously in the field of sales force. Other variables that seem relevant have not been taken into account, which shows the limits of this research work.

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