Sales Influence Tactics in B2B Sales: A Systematic Literature Review and Future Research Directions

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Abstract

Sales influence tactics (SITs) are critical in persuading buyers, shaping their perceptions, and ultimately securing business deals in today's complex B2B sales landscape. This systematic review of 53 peer-reviewed articles synthesizes the current state of knowledge on SITs, highlighting the key themes, arguments, and emerging practices in sales influence literature. The analysis reveals the significance of buyer characteristics, salesperson attributes, and relational factors in determining the effectiveness of influence tactics. It emphasizes the importance of adapting tactics to diverse buyers and situations, fostering stronger relationships, and ultimately driving sales growth. Additionally, it highlights the need to understand how salespeople can develop the skills required to navigate the multifaceted landscape of modern sales influence in digital environments. The review identifies existing research gaps and suggests future research directions, focusing on influence over digital interactions, personalized data-driven tactics, and ethical AI use.

Keywords: Sales influence tactics, Adaptive selling, B2B sales, Buyer-Seller interactions

1. Introduction

In the business-to-business (B2B) sales landscape, the ability to influence potential buyers is a keystone of salespeople's success. Sales influence tactics (SITs) encompassing the strategic communication approaches used by salespeople are instrumental in persuading buyers, shaping their perceptions, and ultimately securing business deals (McFarland et al., 2006). McFarland & Dixon (2019) state that all communication used by salespeople within buyer-seller interactions can be viewed as influence tactics. This is especially crucial in B2B sales, where transactions often involve complex decision-making processes (Rodríguez et al., 2020), long sales cycles, and multiple stakeholders (Bonney et al., 2022b).

While extensive research exists on SITs, knowledge in certain areas remains fragmented. The B2B sales landscape is constantly evolving, driven by technological advancements (Pöyry et al., 2017), shifting communication channels (Fraccastoro et al., 2021; Singh et al., 2020), and increased reliance on digital interactions (Bharadwaj & Shipley, 2020). Traditional sales tactics, which often rely on interpersonal relationships and face-to-face interactions, may be less effective or even counterproductive in the digital age as buyer expectations and processes have evolved (Bonney et al., 2022b). Research by Singh et al., (2020) suggests that successful face-to-face (F2F) sales techniques may not directly apply to digital negotiations. These changes necessitate a critical re-evaluation of traditional influence tactics, as once-effective tactics may no longer resonate with today's informed and digitally savvy B2B buyers.

The post-pandemic era has significantly transformed the organizational buying process, buyers' behavior, and expectations (Bonney et al., 2022b). This necessitates that salespeople discard outdated sales practices and adopt new strategies (Mattila et al., 2021). Today's B2B buyers are more informed (Hochstein et al., 2019; Kaski et al., 2017; Leach et al., 2021), which demands influence tactics to be aligned with their complex decision-making processes. Recent studies reveal buyers' decreased reliance on interpersonal connections with salespeople and increased hesitancy toward new suppliers (Bonney et al., 2022b), emphasizing the need for tactics tailored to specific industries and individual buyers. Additionally, the rise of data-driven sales analytics (Fergurson, 2020) and increasing ethical considerations surrounding persuasion and transparency underscores the need for a comprehensive understanding of the evolving sales landscape.

This review is driven by three primary motives:

- To offer a holistic overview of effective sales influence tactics in the contemporary B2B landscape.
- To illustrate recent trends, the evolution of tactics over time, and potential new influence strategies.
- To identify research gaps within the field of sales influence tactics that warrant further investigation.

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This literature review aims to identify key themes and arguments, synthesize existing research, evaluate the evolution of B2B sales influence tactics literature, and develop a unified framework that integrates traditional theories with emerging digital and virtual sales practices. Ultimately, it seeks to understand how salespeople can effectively and comprehensively influence B2B buyers today.

2. Methodology

Scholarly interest in the literature on SITs has been increasing, however, a systematic literature review (SLR) focused specifically on B2B sales remains unexplored. Following the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines (Page et al., 2021), a best practice in systematic reviews, we employed rigorous search protocols and predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria to identify, evaluate, and synthesize relevant studies, ensuring transparency and replicability of the study.

2.1 Information source and search strategy

A systematic search for relevant scholarly articles on SITs was conducted using three major scientific databases: Scopus, Web of Science, and EBSCO Business Source Complete. This approach mitigates potential biases associated with relying on a single database (Kraus et al., 2022) and leverages these databases' extensive coverage of business, management, and sales literature.

Each database search employed a combination of key search terms, connected by Boolean operators OR and AND to ensure comprehensiveness and relevance. The search was limited to titles, abstracts, and keywords. The search terms encompassed phrases such as sales influence tactics, persuasion, persuasiv*, impression management, sales interaction, sales negotiation, buyer-seller interaction*, B2B sale*, and business-to-business selling. The search strings for all the databases followed a similar structure with minor adjustments to accommodate each platform's search syntax.

The search was limited to peer-reviewed journal articles published in English between 2000 and January 2024, focusing on Business and Management studies. This timeframe was chosen to capture the most relevant and contemporary research on SITs, as the landscape of B2B sales has evolved significantly with technological advancements and changing buyer behavior over the past 20 years. The search yielded 383 articles from Scopus, 351 from Web of Science, and 483 from EBSCO Business Source Complete respectively. The refined results, spanning over two decades, provided a comprehensive dataset for further analysis, offering valuable insights into the evolution of research on sales influence tactics. To ensure rigor, the databases were cross-checked with the most up-to-date (present-day) literature. However, no additional relevant articles within the scope of this study were identified.

2.2 Eligibility criteria and selection process

The literature search across the three databases yielded 1217 articles, which were compiled into a single dataset. After removing 473 duplicates and standardizing formatting, the dataset was refined to 744 unique peer-reviewed journal articles.

Subsequent screening of articles based on titles, abstracts, and keywords was performed to ensure relevance to the study's scope. Inclusion criteria encompassed topics related to influence tactics in the context of B2B sales, attributes of influence tactics, persuasion types, appeal types, adaptive selling, ambidexterity, buyer orientation, relational selling, personal selling, and sales negotiation. Studies focusing on broader marketing communication strategies, advertising techniques, and consumer persuasion were excluded as they do not specifically address the unique dynamics of B2B sales interactions.

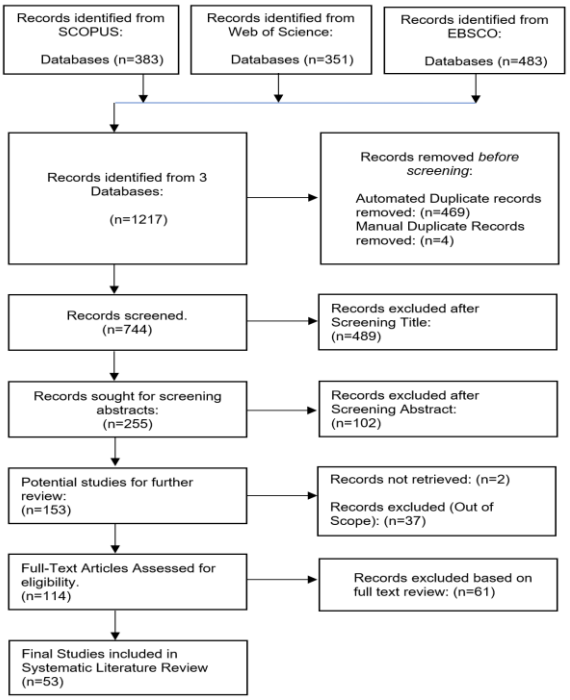

Figure 1. Flow diagram of literature search

The initial screening, excluded 489 articles, narrowing the pool to 255 articles. A second screening of the articles' abstracts led to the exclusion of 141 articles

that primarily focused on impression management within organizational contexts (influence over managers/superiors), and also excluded studies conducted in B2C sales contexts. This thorough filtering resulted in 60 articles being selected for full-text review, ensuring the focus of this study on B2B sales influence tactics within industrial buying contexts. Upon full-text review, 7 articles were deemed not closely relevant and removed, leaving a final sample of 53 peer-reviewed journal articles for the review. The flow diagram (Figure 1.) illustrates the structured and replicable literature search and selection processes followed in this study.

3. Theoretical background

Influence tactics are specific actions and communication strategies used by salespeople to persuade potential buyers during the buyers' journey to the purchase decisions (Bonney et al., 2022a; McFarland et al., 2006; McFarland & Dixon, 2019; Pöyry et al., 2017). A prominent theoretical framework that guides the study of SITs is McFarland, Challagalla, and Shervani's (2006) concept of adaptive selling and taxonomy of SITs. The framework explains tactics ranging from rational information exchange and recommendations tactics to more persuasive techniques like emotional appeals and coercive tactics (McFarland et al., 2006; McFarland & Dixon, 2019). Understanding these tactics and their effectiveness is essential in personal selling.

McFarland et al., (2006), employed Kelman's (1961) social influence theory, which provides a foundational framework for understanding how individuals respond to influence attempts, proposing three processes of attitude change: compliance, identification, and internalization. Building on this theory, McFarland et al., (2006) categorized SITs, showing that rational tactics (information exchange, recommendations) align with the internalization mechanism, emotional tactics (ingratiation, inspirational appeals) target the identification mechanism, and coercive tactics (promises, threats) leverage the compliance mechanism, which aim to fulfill the buyer's psychological needs and foster a positive connection with the salesperson or their offerings.

McFarland and Dixon (2019) expanded the theoretical scope of the taxonomy by refining the definitions and measurement approaches for the six original SITs and introduced a seventh influence tactic: "personal appeals". This new tactic recognizes the power of the interpersonal relationship between the salesperson and the buyer. It is defined as the salesperson appealing to the buyer's sense of friendship and loyalty when making a request, hinting at potential damage to the relationship if the buyer refuses. Building on the understanding that strong bonds often lead to reciprocity, this tactic falls within the coercive influence category. This addition reflects the evolution of sales practices and a greater understanding of how relationship-building and emotional connections play a role in buyer decision-making. (McFarland & Dixon, 2019)

Furthermore, adaptive selling is a key concept in personal selling that emphasizes the importance of tailoring the sales approach according to the specific needs and preferences of the individual buyer (McFarland et al., 2006; McFarland & Dixon, 2019). It involves understanding buyers' communication style (Reid et al., 2002), their buying goals, and their decision-making process (Mallalieu, 2006; Zboja et al., 2016), and adapting the sales message and tactics accordingly (Leach et al., 2021). Successful salespeople are those who can adapt their selling behaviors to different buyers, situations, and contexts (Evans et al., 2012; McFarland et al., 2006). This requires continuous learning, active listening, and asking probing questions. Salespeople must be able to modify their communication styles and tactics to fit the unique context of each sales interaction. To be effective, salespeople need a diverse repertoire of influence tactics and the ability to choose the most appropriate ones for each situation. This requires a deep understanding of buyers' psychology, effective communication skills, and the ability to adapt to different interpersonal dynamics (Borders, 2006; Guenzi et al., 2016; Hochstein et al., 2019; McFarland et al., 2006). Adaptive selling is increasingly crucial for success in today's dynamic B2B sales environments, where multiple stakeholders with different needs and priorities are involved in the buying process. Numerous studies emphasize the importance of adaptive selling in building trust, establishing rapport, and ultimately securing sales (Charoensukmongkol, 2019; Delvecchio et al., 2004; Guenzi et al., 2016; McFarland et al., 2006; McFarland, 2019; McFarland & Dixon, 2019; Wong & Tan, 2018).

4. Findings

This study identified key themes, comprehensively covering the main aspects of SIT literature, as shown in Figure 2.

4.1 Contingent nature of the influence tactics

A recurring theme is the contextual dependency of influencing tactics, highlighting the importance of adaptability for salespeople and emphasizing that there is no universal approach to influence effectively. The optimal approach depends on a complex interplay of buyer and salesperson characteristics, interpersonal relationship dynamics, and the specific sales context.

Figure 2. Themes generated from the literature

4.1.1 Buyer and salesperson characteristics. The literature emphasizes understanding buyers' unique characteristics when selecting influence tactics. These include distinct buyer types (Kaski et al., 2017; McFarland et al., 2006), buying style (Arndt et al., 2014), cultural factors (Bachkirov et al., 2016), decision-making stage (Mallalieu, 2006), regulatory focus, i.e. promotion vs prevention (Hartmann et al., 2020), buyer's knowledge level (Hochstein et al., 2019; Leach et al., 2021; Milgrom, 2008), and persuasion knowledge of the buyers (DeCarlo, 2005). To maximize influence, salespeople should tailor their tactics to the specific interaction context, considering the buyer's personality and their needs (Lunardo et al., 2018; Mallalieu, 2006).

Findings indicate that salespersons' attributes and personalities also play an important role in determining the success of influence tactics (Mai & Hoffmann, 2011; Plouffe et al., 2014). Plouffe et al., (2014) identified three distinct influence styles; Pragmatic (relying on information exchange, and threats), Enthusiastic (utilizing recommendations, threats, inspirational appeals, and promises), and Politician (employing ingratiation). Salesperson expertise, credibility, and relationship-building skills are essential for establishing trust with the buyers (Chakraborty & Harbaugh, 2010; Evans et al., 2012; Geiger, S. & Turley, 2005; Kaski et al., 2019). Additionally, the salesperson's regulatory focus (promotion vs. prevention) can influence their choice of tactics, with promotion-focused salespeople favoring rational and inspirational appeals, while prevention-focused salespeople lean towards coalition building, consultation, and pressure tactics (Hartmann et al., 2020). Furthermore, the salespeople's persistence in persuading the buyer significantly impacts the overall success of the influence (Chaker et al., 2018). While Clark (2020) found that stable salesperson traits like long-term orientation, buyer orientation, and adaptive selling behaviors do not directly impact the commitment-fulfillment relationship, the ability to select and implement appropriate influence tactics remains a critical salesperson characteristic.

4.1.2 Relational and situational factors. The buyer-seller relationship significantly impacts the effectiveness of influence tactics, with different tactics being more appropriate at different relationship stages (Arndt et al., 2014; Guenzi et al., 2016). The level of trust, commitment, and switching costs within the relationship significantly influence the choice and effectiveness of tactics (Liu et al., 2018). In high-trust relationships, emotional appeals and collaboration may be more effective, while coercive tactics might be suitable in situations with high switching costs, and rational tactics are preferable when both trust and switching costs are high (Liu et al., 2018).

Salespeople must be adaptable, adjusting their tactics to align with the specific selling context. The effectiveness of influence tactics may vary based on contextual factors, such as time constraints, product complexity, competitive landscape, purchase types (new task, modified rebuy, or straight rebuy), and the stage of the buyer's decision-making process (Plouffe et al., 2016; Reid et al., 2002). For instance, complex situations may require educating the buyer and building consensus, while time-sensitive scenarios may necessitate more direct and assertive tactics (Reid et al., 2002).

While a combination of rational, emotional, and even soft coercive tactics can be effective, the optimal mix depends on the specific context (Liu et al., 2018; McFarland & Dixon, 2019; Wu, 2020). Literature suggests that using a variety of complementary tactics in sequence is more impactful than relying on a single or consistent tactic (Liu et al., 2018; Pöyry et al., 2017). Ultimately, successful influence requires aligning tactics with the specific purchase situation, and cultural context (Bachkirov et al., 2016; Fraccastoro et al., 2021; Reid et al., 2002). This necessitates a deep understanding of buyer needs, market trends, and the competitive landscape to effectively navigate the complexities of real-world sales scenarios (Klarmann & Wouters, 2023).

4.2 The multi-facet nature of sales influence

Buyers are not passive recipients of influence tactics but actively initiate influence to shape salesperson behavior according to their own goals and motivations (Borders, 2006; Humă et al., 2019; Kirmani & Campbell, 2004). This dynamic interaction necessitates that salespeople adapt their tactics or negotiate with buyers to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes. For instance, Humă et al., (2019) highlight how salespeople actively manage this interactional dynamic through 'recipiency management', strategically designing their communication to elicit desired responses. This involves using tactics like pre-sequences to frame the conversation and minimizing contingencies to limit objections, thus influencing the buyer's decision-making process (Humă et al., 2019).

Furthermore, modern B2B sales often involve influencing not just the individual buyer, but also internal buying teams (IBTs) and external buying partners (EBPs). While influencing the buyer remains crucial, the growing significance of IBTs and EBPs necessitates a broader influence strategy. Effective influence over these additional stakeholders can provide salespeople with critical resources, information, and support, ultimately driving sales success (Plouffe et al., 2014; Plouffe et al., 2016). However, the presence of multiple stakeholders adds complexity, altering power dynamics and influencing the choice of tactics (Low, 2018). This complexity requires salespeople to strategically navigate a network of relationships and utilize influence tactics to gain support and resources from various stakeholders (Hartmann et al., 2020).

4.3 The central role of trust and relationships in sales influence

Trust is a foundational element in sales influence, with the effectiveness of influence tactics often depending on the level of trust in the buyer-seller relationship (Guenzi et al., 2016). Trust allows buyers to rely on the salesperson's expertise, recommendations, and promises (Dang et al., 2021; Hartmann et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2018). High trust levels amplify the positive effects of influence tactics and salespeople's perceived trustworthiness (Hohenschwert & Geiger, 2015), fostering buyer loyalty, commitment, and willingness to pay premiums (Hartmann et al., 2020). Conversely, low trust can render even sophisticated tactics ineffective. Notably, demonstrating a solution's value (demonstrability) enhances trust, especially with complex offerings (Hoffmann et al., 2020; Sparks & Areni, 2002).

In the current information-intensive era, where buyers are more informed and skeptical, establishing trust and credibility is important for effective sales influence (Evans et al., 2012; Hochstein et al., 2019; Koponen & Rytsy, 2020; Leach et al., 2021; McFarland & Dixon, 2019). The use of influence tactics should always aim to build trust and credibility with the buyer, as this is essential for long-term relationships and B2B sales success. (Dang et al., 2021; Koponen & Rytsy, 2020; McFarland & Dixon, 2019) This necessitates consistent ethical behavior, demonstrating honesty, integrity, reliability, and engaging in effective rapport-building (Jokiniemi et al., 2023; Niemi & Pullins, 2020). Salespeople must understand the buyer's business, be responsive to their needs, find common ground, and establish personal bonds (Geiger, S. & Turley, 2005; Liu et al., 2018). Sharing valuable information and educating buyers also contribute to building trust (Bonney et al., 2022a; Geiger, S. & Turley, 2005; Kaski et al., 2017).

Relationship-building tactics like rational persuasion, consultation, and collaboration, are associated with building trust, as they signal a buyer-oriented approach and a genuine desire to help the buyer achieve their goals (Borders, 2006; Dang et al., 2021; Hartmann et al., 2020). Conversely, influence tactics that are perceived as aggressive, manipulative, or coercive, such as threats or pressure, can erode trust, trigger reactance, negatively impact buyers' perceptions, and damage the relationship (Bompar, Laurent et al., 2023; Clark, 2020; Delvecchio et al., 2004; Zboja et al., 2016). Salespeople must also manage their own emotions and understand those of the buyers, recognizing the vital role of emotions in B2B sales interactions (Klein, 2021) and utilize socializing behaviors to enhance trust (Geiger, S. & Turley, 2005).

4.4 Ethical considerations in sales influence

The ethical dimension of sales influence tactics is a growing concern as buyers are becoming increasingly informed and empowered. While some degree of exaggeration is inherent in sales (Chakraborty & Harbaugh, 2010), ethical considerations and transparency should guide the choice and implementation of tactics (Evans et al., 2012; Kirmani & Campbell, 2004; Milgrom, 2008). Manipulative or deceptive tactics, such as withholding information (Milgrom, 2008), misleading information, or using high-pressure sales techniques may lead to short-term gains but can damage buyer trust and harm long-term relationship (Chakrabarty et al., 2010; Zboja et al., 2016).

However, even with some degree of exaggeration, communication can still be valuable, as partial truths can contribute to the buyer's informed decision-making (Chakraborty & Harbaugh, 2010). Salespeople must be mindful of how their actions and communication are

perceived by the buyer and avoid behaviors that might raise suspicion or appear manipulative (Oakley & Bush, 2016) and damage the relationship (Bompar, Laurent et al., 2023; Delvecchio et al., 2004). Coercive tactics, like threats, can negatively impact commitment and raise ethical concerns (Clark, 2020). Buyer reactance, or resistance to persuasion, is a potential consequence of perceived coercive or manipulative influence tactics, manifesting as negative attitudes, decreased purchase intention, and even complaints from buyers (Bompar, Laurent et al., 2023; Mallalieu, 2006; Zboja et al., 2016).

Salespeople must strive for a balance between persuasion and ethical conduct, ensuring that their influence attempts are transparent, respectful, and aligned with the buyer's best interests (Kirmani & Campbell, 2004). A key aspect of ethical influence is transparency and honesty in communication. This involves providing accurate information, respecting the buyer's autonomy, and avoiding exploitative tactics or creating unrealistic expectations. Salespeople should disclose their intentions, avoid any misleading or deceptive practices, and build trust with the buyer, which is essential for long-term success.

4.5 Evolving landscapes of sales influence in the digital age

The landscape of sales influence is undergoing a significant transformation, driven by the increasing use of digital interactions (Bonney et al., 2022b; Singh et al., 2020), digitalization of sales processes, and changing buyer behavior (Bonney et al., 2022b). Successful influence in this evolving context requires a deep understanding of how digital tools and platforms affect buyer-seller interactions and the efficacy of different influence tactics. Adapting sales strategies to the virtual environment is critical for optimizing buyer engagement (Bharadwaj & Shipley, 2020).

The virtual environment demands a responsive approach to maintaining social presence, with interactive, effective, and relationship-oriented responses significantly influencing buyer-seller interactions (Koponen & Rytsy, 2020). Additionally, as communication channels and buyers' preferences shift, salespeople must master digital communication, understanding how different communication foci (e.g., value, benefit, discount, feature) resonate with buyers in the digital channels (Klarmann & Wouters, 2023). Expanding on these aspects, specific digital or virtual skills essential for B2B sales professionals today include data-driven personalization, digital negotiation tactics, and managing multi-stakeholder relationships virtually.

The shift to digital interactions necessitates adapting traditional influence tactics to the virtual realm. While capturing and maintaining buyer attention remains vital in e-communication (Singh et al., 2020), the absence of non-verbal cues necessitates the adaptation of issue-based negotiation tactics (Geiger, 2017). Integrating social media for initial engagement, digital tools in the persuasion phase, and traditional communication tools across different stages of sales and relationship management enhances the reach and effectiveness of sales influence (Fraccastoro et al., 2021). The choice of communication channels (e.g., face-to-face, digital) and the salesperson's communication style (e.g., language power, humor) also moderate the effectiveness of tactics (Bompar, L. et al., 2018; Bompar, Laurent et al., 2023; Gadzhiyeva & Sager, 2017). Salespeople must embrace modern technologies while maintaining a focus on building trust and relationships through a multi-channel approach.

5. Discussion

This study reveals the dynamic and evolving nature of SITs in the complex B2B sales landscape. The B2B selling process is multifaceted, involving multiple sales cycles, numerous interactions, and various stakeholders in the decision-making process. Our analysis highlights that successful influence often requires the sequential use of influence tactics throughout sales interactions and combining complementary SITs depending on the context of selling (Pöyry et al., 2017; Singh et al., 2020). This context-specific focus enriches the theoretical framework for understanding how influence operates in B2B sales, emphasizing the need for personalized influence models that consider individual buyer preferences and dynamic sales environments.

Furthermore, the review emphasizes that trust is not simply a byproduct of sales interactions but a fundamental driver and a strategic asset that salespeople must actively cultivate and safeguard (Zboja et al., 2016). It serves as a cornerstone for effective influence, with numerous factors contributing to its establishment and maintenance (Dang et al., 2021). Salespeople who prioritize trust and relationship-building are more likely to create a strong foundation for influence, increase buyer satisfaction, and achieve sales success.

However, the effectiveness of SITs is not a one-size-fits-all phenomenon but depends on a complex interplay of various contextual factors. Our study highlights the critical role of buyer characteristics (Hochstein et al., 2019; Kaski et al., 2017), salesperson attributes (Hartmann et al., 2020; Plouffe et al., 2014), and relational factors (Liu et al., 2018) in determining the optimal influence strategy.

Moreover, the review emphasizes that sales influence should not be confined to the traditional buyer-seller dyad only. Instead, it is a dynamic interplay often

involving multiple internal and external stakeholders (Plouffe et al., 2014; Plouffe et al., 2016). This necessitates a broader approach, requiring a deep understanding of decision-making dynamics within the buying organization and the ability to build relationships and establish credibility with a diverse group of stakeholders. Successful influence involves adapting various tactics to the specific situation and leveraging political skills to understand and effectively engage with potential buyers (Chaker et al., 2018).

Finally, the analysis of the literature indicates a shift away from merely categorizing specific tactics, toward understanding the broader concept of adaptability in complex sales situations. The ability to adapt to evolving buyer needs, technological advancements, and shifting market dynamics is increasingly important for sales success. This shift highlights the need to focus on understanding how salespeople can develop the skills and strategies necessary to navigate the multifaceted landscape of sales influence. By understanding adaptability, we can gain more comprehensive insights into how salespeople can thrive in evolving sales landscapes.

5.1 Theoretical and practical implications

The findings of this study directly address the identified gap in B2B sales literature, offering a more comprehensive theoretical understanding of influence tactics in the B2B sales context. This review expands upon existing theoretical frameworks of SITs, extending them by introducing a B2B SIT framework that incorporates the evolving digital and virtual sales interactions prevalent in contemporary B2B sales practices. While the theoretical background provides foundational knowledge, the new framework synthesizes this with insights derived from recent digital sales trends to guide future research and practice.

This study offers valuable insights for B2B sales practitioners and strategists, offering a deeper understanding of the complex factors influencing the success of influence tactics. It provides actionable recommendations for developing more effective and adaptable strategies to navigate the changing digital sales landscape. The study emphasizes the importance of a personalized approach to influence, tailoring tactics to individual buyers' characteristics and preferences. Additionally, it highlights the importance of understanding and leveraging combined influence tactics, emphasizing the need to train and encourage salespeople to adapt to buyers' needs. By incorporating this knowledge into sales training programs, we can equip salespeople with the necessary skills, knowledge, and strategies to enhance their adaptability to various selling situations and ultimately drive sales performance.

5.2 Future research directions

Our review highlights that trust and relationships remain essential for effective sales influence, even in an increasingly digital landscape. However, establishing genuine trust is challenging as it needs authenticity in virtual interactions. This necessitates research into adapting trust-building and emotional influence tactics for virtual channels, as well as developing new metrics for measuring their effectiveness.

The role of a salesperson has evolved from an information provider to a problem solver and a trusted advisor. As buyers are now well-informed and information asymmetry is less prevalent, salespeople need to move beyond the traditional information exchange tactics and offer unique value beyond product/service knowledge. Future research should investigate influence tactics that are effective with well-informed buyers.

With the recent technological advancement in AI and automation in sales, it is necessary to explore its role in shaping sales influence strategies. Future research should explore the effectiveness of adaptive selling in the context of tech-savvy buyers and AI-integrated sales processes. Additionally, the ethical implications of personalized influence tactics using AI and factors contributing to adaptability, (e.g., cognitive flexibility, emotional intelligence, technology proficiency) require further investigations. Furthermore, research on the impact of cultural factors on influence tactics remains limited and requires investigation to understand cross-cultural variations. Potential future research questions are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1. Future research questions

Digital transformation and sales influence
• How does the increasing use of digital tools and platforms, and the resulting changes in the B2B buying process, impact the choice and effectiveness of sales influence tactics?
• What are the unique challenges and opportunities for using influence tactics in virtual sales interactions?
• How can B2B salespeople effectively adapt traditional influence tactics, such as building rapport and trust, to virtual sales interactions where non-verbal cues are absent?
• How does the effectiveness of influence tactics, deployed through various digital channels, vary across different stages of the B2B e-negotiation process (e.g., early vs. late stages)?
Buyer behavior and perceptions
• How do B2B salespeople adapt their influence tactics in response to the growing information asymmetry between themselves and increasingly informed buyers?
• How do different generations of B2B buyers (Millennials, GenZ) perceive and respond to various influence tactics employed through digital channels?
• What are the cross-cultural differences in the effectiveness of specific influence tactics in B2B sales and how can salespeople adapt their approach to different cultural contexts?

Effectiveness and measurement
• What are the specific digital influence tactics that are most effective in different stages of the B2B sales funnel? • How do different digital touchpoints contribute to the overall effectiveness of sales influence tactics? • What are the key performance indicators (KPIs) that B2B sales organizations should track to measure the effectiveness of their digital influence tactics across different stages of the sales funnel? • How can machine learning algorithms be used to analyze buyer behavior data and identify the most effective influence tactics for specific buyer segments in real time?
Salesperson skillsets in digital contexts
• How can B2B salespeople leverage social media platforms to establish thought leadership, build relationships with potential buyers, and ultimately influence purchase decisions? • What are the key skills and competencies that B2B salespeople need to develop to effectively use digital influence tactics and adapt to the changing sales landscape? • How can B2B sales organizations design training programs that equip salespeople with the skills and knowledge necessary to navigate the complexities of digital sales influence? • How does the lack of non-verbal cues in digital interactions affect the effectiveness of traditional influence tactics that rely on building rapport and trust?
AI and ethics in sales influence
• What are the ethical implications of using AI-powered sales tools to personalize influence tactics, and how can these risks be mitigated? • How can B2B sales organizations develop ethical guidelines for the use of AI in sales influence, ensuring transparency and fairness during interactions? • What are the potential unintended consequences of over-reliance on AI in sales influence, and how can these be addressed?

5.3 Study limitations

While this review provides a valuable synthesis of B2B SITs literature, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. The study's primary focus on B2B sales excludes a substantial body of research on influence and persuasion in the retail and B2C contexts, which may offer unique insights and potentially challenge assumptions derived from B2B contexts. Furthermore, although the review acknowledges the significance of cultural context in B2B sales, it does not investigate how cultural differences affect the efficacy of specific influence tactics. A more comprehensive analysis of cross-cultural variations in influence could be a fruitful avenue for future research.

6. Conclusion

This study provides a comprehensive overview of the current state of knowledge on sales influence tactics in the B2B context. The findings highlight the importance of adaptability, trust-building, and a multi-stakeholder approach to influence. However, achieving a holistic understanding requires consideration of a broader range of factors, including industry-specific dynamics, cultural nuances, and ethical implications. As the digital landscape evolves, AI brings both opportunities and challenges. Future research should investigate how AI can be ethically integrated to enhance SITs while preserving trust and ethical standards. By addressing these gaps, we can greatly enhance our understanding of sales influence dynamics and contribute to the development of more effective strategies for B2B sales success in a rapidly evolving landscape.

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