Selling Your Network: How Political Skill Builds Social Capital and Enhances Salesperson Performance

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Abstract

Research suggests that political skill affects how salespeople build and leverage social capital. However, there are important questions left unanswered in this relationship. First, although it is linked to specific structural characteristics of networks, it is unclear how political skill affects the overall quality of one's social network. Similarly, it is unclear if objective and subjective social network quality measurement approaches produce comparable results. Third, although theory positions political skill and social network quality as desirable personal and structural resources, it is unknown how these resources affect dyadic relationships between salespeople and clients. Finally, there is a need to assess how the dimensions of political skill differentially affect social network quality. To address these questions, we propose a new model of social network quality, examining how political skill influences social network quality and salesperson performance in a two-study investigation. We begin by predictively testing the unique contributions of objective and subjective social network quality in the relationship between political skill and sales magnitude one year later. We then extend these findings using dyadic salesperson and customer data to explore how political skill and social network quality predictively impact sales magnitude, sales frequency, and relationship performance.

Keywords: political skill, salesperson performance, sales frequency, relationship performance, social capital, social network quality

Significant effort has been made to identify antecedents to sales performance (see Churchill et al. 1985; Vinchur et al.1998; Verbeke, Dietz, and Verwaal 2011 for quantitative reviews), and political skill has emerged as a key variable operating within the sales process (e.g., Bolander, Satornino, Hughes, and Ferris 2015; Chaker, Zablah, and Noble 2018). Political skill is defined as the "ability to effectively understand others at work, and to use such knowledge to influence others to act in ways that enhance one's personal and/or organizational objectives" (Ferris et al. 2005, 127). From the construct's early conceptual development (Jones 1990; Pfeffer 1981), political skill has been thought to enhance work-related performance by enabling individuals to leverage social influence at work, and meta-analytic evidence has validated its effects across many work outcomes (e.g., Munyon, Summers, Thompson, and Ferris 2015; Summers et al. 2020).

Beginning with the predictions of Munyon (2009), research has linked political skill to the sales process. For example, this individual difference has been linked to salesperson performance (e.g., Blickle, Wendel, and Ferris 2010), customer satisfaction (Kalra et al. 2017), salesperson persistence and influence tactics (Chaker et al. 2018), and salesperson networking (Dugan, Rouziou, and Hochstein, 2019).

Theory (i.e., Harris, Ferris, Summers, and Munyon 2016; Porter and Woo 2015) also suggests that political skill changes how salespeople develop, maintain, and leverage advantageous positions within a social network. For example, political skill has been linked to salesperson relational centrality (Bolander et al., 2015), the number and strength of social network ties (Fang, Chi, Chen, and Baron, 2015), and communication centrality (Cullen, Gerbasi, and Chrobot-Mason, 2018), suggesting that political skill affects the structure of a salesperson's social network.

When combined, these two streams of research raise the intriguing possibility that political skill affects salesperson performance by enhancing the overall quality of a salesperson's social

network. To the extent that structural characteristics of a network reflect the social capital maintained by any individual (Lin 1999), political skill may affect performance by providing salespeople with an "advantageous" or "favorable" position (Harris et al. 2016) relative to competitors. High-quality social networks may also enhance status effects of salespeople, affecting the desirability and quality of their subsequent relationships with clients.

Accordingly, this two-study investigation seeks to shed new light on the operation of political skill as it affects social network quality and salesperson performance. We begin by proposing a new model of social network quality based on each salesperson's differential access to unique (non-redundant) information, reach, and power. We then test how political skill impacts both objective and subjective social network quality. Finally, we explore how political skill affects social network quality and salesperson performance in two studies from unique sales contexts.

Several contributions are intended in this investigation: We first extend political influence (Chaker et al. 2018; Ferris and Judge 1991) and work relationship (Ferris et al. 2009) theories by directly testing a key assumption that political skill impacts social network quality, modeling a relational channel through which political skill may operate. We next contribute to social capital theory (Lin 1999) by testing a new conceptualization of social network quality based on characteristics of a salesperson's structural position. Third, we contribute to relationship marketing theory (reviewed in Möller and Halinen 2000) by expanding the criterion domain of salesperson performance. Although salesperson performance is a multi-dimensional construct comprised of financial and relational outcomes (Weitz and Bradford 1999), the effects of political skill and social network quality on client dyadic relationship performance remain opaque (see Crosby et al. 1990 and Wotruba 1996 for discussion), even as work has identified a link to customer satisfaction (Kalra et al. 2017). Fourth, we contribute methodologically by testing objective and subjective

estimates of social network quality simultaneously, showing the unique contributions of each measurement approach. Finally, in a post-hoc test, we extend political influence theory by showing how the dimensions of political skill impact social network quality. Collectively, this multi-study investigation extends prior research exploring how political skill affects social capital and salesperson performance, offering new theoretical, methodological, and applied insights.

Theoretical Foundations and Hypothesis Development

Political Skill and Social Network Quality

Social capital refers to any aspect of the social structure that enables salespeople to create and/or capture value from their social contexts (Coleman 1988). The social resources perspective (Lin 1999) and the structuralist perspective (Burt 1992; Granovetter 1985) dominate the social capital literature. According to the former, social capital is determined by the quantity of resources embedded within the network and how such resources are mobilized, whereas according to the latter, social capital is derived from the pattern and strength of the social ties that comprise the network (Lin 1999). Regardless of the perspective, social capital theorists agree that access to social resources renders one's efforts more effective (Lin 1999), while position within a network affects individuals' access to resources (Liu et al. 2020).

Although some suggest that salespeople land in advantageous networks and/or network positions fortuitously (e.g., Brancaleone and Gountas 2007), the political influence perspective (Ferris and Judge 1991; Ferris et al. 2009; Harris et al. 2016; Pfeffer 1981) proposes that salespeople strategically build and leverage relationships to realize their personal objectives, which can include deliberate network positioning. Consequently, social network quality holistically reflects the caliber of relationships and embedded social capital salespeople maintain at any given point in time (cf., Lazarus and Cheavens 2017). Given that quality is often defined as "excellence"

or "value" (Reeves and Bendar 1994), we consider social network quality to be an attribute of an individual's network that is superior to others and offers value to the focal salesperson. Thus, we characterize social network quality based on its unique informational resources, reach, and power.

Social network quality first varies based on access to *unique informational resources* embedded in the network (Brass and Halgin 2012). This dimension is important because it suggests the access to and control of information for an individual salesperson, and access to knowledge from multiple domains can produce novelty (Marrone 2010; Taylor and Greve 2006). Betweenness centrality represents a salesperson's bridging relationships in the network, where the salesperson is the link or bridge between two otherwise unconnected others in the network (Hanneman and Riddle 2005; Wasserman and Faust 1994). Therefore, betweenness centrality captures the unique informational resources of a salesperson.

Next, social network quality also varies based on the *reach*, or circle of influence for a salesperson, which is often captured by connectedness. This dimension is important because it provides insight into the salesperson's ability to exert influence on a network by measuring how many people are either direct connections or "friends of friends." Thus, reach differentiates the number of contacts that can be influenced by a salesperson directly or indirectly.

Finally, social network quality varies as a function of the *power* provided by one's structural position. Early political influence theory (e.g., Pfeffer 1981) argued that power is above all a structural phenomenon. Indeed, Brass (1984) noted that personal characteristics, such as political skill, are efficacious in gaining a structural position of power. Together, our conceptualization of social network quality evaluates how structural positions provide differential access to non-redundant information, reach, and power.

Political skill is a social effectiveness competency comprised of four dimensions: social astuteness, apparent sincerity, interpersonal influence, and networking ability (Ferris et al. 2005). Theoretically, political skill enables salespeople to successfully configure advantageous networks, accumulate social capital, and reap social advantage (Ferris et al. 2012; Harris et al. 2016). For example, the social astuteness of political skill enables accurate diagnoses of social situations, including how to interpret the behavior of others (Ferris et al. 2007). As such, social astuteness provides individuals with information on behaviors needed to meet the needs of a given situation, or assist individuals in that situation. The ability to correctly identify the needs of others facilitates a sense of attraction toward salespeople because others believe such individuals understand and value them (Crosby et al. 1990; Harris et al. 2016).

The apparent sincerity characteristic of political skill reduces barriers that potentially impede the development of relationships, enabling salespeople to come across as genuine and likeable to others (Ferris et al. 2005). Similarly, the networking ability component of political skill potentially affects the desirability of relationships with salespersons (Harris et al. 2016), suggesting that others may be willing to maintain lower-than-desirable quality relationships with salespeople in order to capitalize on their resources or social networks. The interpersonal influence dimension of political skill should provide salespeople with greater access to influential peers (Harris et al. 2016), enabling salespeople to efficiently identify those who can help them realize their own objectives (Ferris et al. 2005). Given that political skill theoretically heightens opportunity recognition and capitalization (McAllister et al. 2018; Wihler et al. 2017), politically skilled salespeople may also waste less time on inefficient or ineffective client exchanges than their less politically skilled counterparts (cf. Bolander et al. 2015). Accordingly, as a function of their advantageous positioning in influential networks, ability to induce trust, and ability to display

artfully tailored and situationally appropriate behavior, we anticipate a positive relationship between political skill and salesperson social network quality:

Hypothesis 1: Political skill is positively related to social network quality.

Individuals with well-developed social networks are believed to reap numerous performance-related benefits that stem from their heightened social credentials (e.g., credibility, reputation, recognition), exposure to inconspicuous opportunities (coined "vision advantages" by Burt 2010), and greater influence over decision makers (Lin 1999). Accordingly, social capital is linked with informational access, access to resources, task performance, salesperson performance, and career success (e.g., Bolander et al. 2015; Burt 2004; 2005; Wei et al. 2012).

Prior research suggests that financial sales performance and relationship performance are metrics useful in assessing the success of sales exchanges. First, financial sales performance measures the effectiveness of salespeople in creating value (Chakravarthy 1986). This variable is captured by the magnitude, or level, of sales, and the frequency with which sales are made. Thus, *sales magnitude* reflects the total revenues accrued from each sale or within a time period, while *sales frequency* describes the count of unique sales transactions across an interval of time. While sales magnitude describes the financial size of transactions, sales frequency describes the rate with which sales are made. Both are important financial metrics, but sales frequency has important ramifications both for salesperson well-being and performance. For example, it is useful to understand how salespeople are producing sales both for cash flow considerations and also to inform the effective management of quota system expectations. Sales frequency also may affect salesperson financial security and strain (e.g., Munyon, Carnes, Lyons, and Zettler 2020).

Second, *relationship performance* is critical in facilitating future value creation by building customer loyalty, enhancing organizational reputation, and facilitating referrals (Gremler and

Gwinner 2000; Price and Arnold 1999), and may be defined as the client's estimation of dyadic

relationship quality with a salesperson (cf., Kalra et al. 2017). Such estimates act as probability

statements regarding the potential for future economic exchanges with organizations via their

salespeople (Crosby et al. 1990). For salespeople and clients alike, quality relationships also may

represent ends in themselves, in addition to means toward other outcomes (Ferris et al. 2009).

Collectively, these metrics gauge the financial and relational contributions of salespeople. Having

described how political skill theoretically impacts social network quality, we now consider the

direct and intervening effects of political skill and social network quality on an index of

salesperson performance – sales magnitude.

Political Skill, Social Network Quality, and Sales Magnitude

Once constructed, social network quality affects how salespeople identify new clients and

opportunities to close deals, which can be leveraged for value (Arenius and De Clercq 2005).

Specifically, social network quality enhances resources for salespeople because they provide

access to information and resources that are scarce in nature (*cf.*, Kilduff and Tsai 2003). In

support, Burt's (1992, 2000) theory of structural holes proposes that salespeople also may benefit

by linking two or more previously unconnected individuals in different social groupings. Because

information is valuable and flows readily within groups, but not easily between groups, salespeople

can benefit from brokering relationships between otherwise unconnected groups.

In a sales context, this suggests that salespeople can benefit from developing social network

positions that connect otherwise unconnected others within their organization (e.g., Kilduff and

Krackhardt 1994). High-quality network connections also should theoretically enhance a

salesperson's ability to generate novel solutions to client needs and challenges and ultimately

contribute to the acquisition of new business through referrals. Exposure to a larger number of

actual and potential clients also should engender greater sales. For example, well-connected salespeople likely would possess knowledge of resources, opportunities, and solutions not available to poorly-connected colleagues, enabling such salespeople to tailor sales solutions to meet clients' unique needs and close sales more readily. Thus, a social network position provides salespeople with information useful in facilitating efficient sales exchanges (Bolander et al. 2015; Verbeke et al. 2011), with anticipated concomitant effects on salesperson performance.

Finally, salespeople who maintain high-quality social networks can become resources to others through status effects (Ferris et al. 2009). We anticipate that salesperson social networks will serve as a signal to evaluative others (e.g., clients) regarding capabilities (*cf.*, Plummer, Allison, and Connelly 2015), reputation, and the likelihood of favorable exchange with particular salespeople. Additionally, salespeople who have more expansive, high-caliber, and less-redundant social networks (i.e., objective social network quality features) should perceive themselves to be greater performers, and thus pursue even more difficult (and potentially lucrative) leads. This is especially true within sales contexts, where sales pipelines are built over time through network and relationship building (Bolander et al. 2015). Taken together, we anticipate that political skill will enhance the social network quality of salespeople, providing them with informational and competitive advantages that enhance the amount of sales that they generate:

Hypothesis 2: Social network quality mediates the relationships between political skill and

sales magnitude.

Subjective and Objective Social Network Quality Estimation

The political influence perspective argues that perceptions of reality are more important than the objective conditions of reality (Lewin 1936). In the current context, this principle raises the question of whether salespeople can make valid assessments of their own social network

quality. Self-assessed global measures of social network quality are comparatively rare in the

social network literature (Brands 2013), but given the challenges in acquiring social network data,

may be useful to network scholars and practitioners alike. However, there are caveats to this

approach. For example, self-assessed, or cognitive, social network quality measures are subject to

the same potential biases as self-reports of performance (Brands 2013; Weis 2017).

Salespeople may also have self-inflated perceptions of their social network quality or

respond to these characteristics based on social desirability bias (Farrugia, Hurley, Payne and

Quigley 2011; Weis 2017). Conversely, tracking objective features of one's social network quality

is a time consuming and difficult process (De Leeuw, Mellenbergh, and Hox 1996). Further,

although measures of network characteristics often are viewed as "objective features" of position

in a structural network, ironically these indices are still subject to the same sampling and

measurement errors as global assessments of social network quality (Farrugia et al. 2011).

Accordingly, it is theoretically and practically significant to use indices of social network quality

that can be more efficiently measured while still validly predicting performance.

In order to convert opportunities and resources embedded within the network into

performance outcomes, salespeople must be able to develop strategic social ties and also accurately

assess the quality of their social network (cf., Li et al. 2015). Individuals who do not realize the

value of their social network quality may neglect to leverage the embedded assets contained in that

network. In turn, accurate self-assessments enable salespeople to identify potential opportunities

and resources within networks, which can be leveraged to enhance performance (Arenius and De

Clercq 2005). Thus:

Hypothesis 3a: Salesperson subjective assessments of social network quality are positively

and significantly related to objective social network quality.

Hypothesis 3b: Salesperson subjective assessments of social network quality and objective

social network quality positively predict sales magnitude.

Study 1: Method

Participants and Procedure

Data were collected as part of a multi-year data collection from a company based in the

U.S. whose outside sales agents sell high-end fashion apparel and beauty products to consumers.

This company does not utilize territory restrictions, and salespeople generally are free to pursue

sales in and around major U.S. metropolitan areas, such as Dallas, New York, or San Francisco.

Salesperson compensation is based solely on generated sales. Control variables, political skill, and

the subjective measures of social network quality and job performance were captured following

the social network questions. Of the salespeople who responded, 228 usable surveys were received

and matched to the corresponding network scores for each salesperson. The structural model was

analyzed using SmartPLS 3 (Ringle, Wende, and Becker 2014).

Measures

Political skill. We employed the 12-item scale of political skill used by Bolander and his colleagues

(2015), which was developed in consultation with the developer of the *Political Skill Inventory*

(Ferris et al. 2005). The complete measures are available upon request to the first author.

Social network quality. Social network quality was assessed subjectively and objectively.

Subjective social network quality was measured using a three-item scale from Munyon (2009; $\alpha =$

.79); items and anchors are shown in the Online Appendix. Our objective measure of social

network quality was developed using social network analysis (SNA). The participating company

had 516 active sales employees. Of those employees, 434 salespeople (59% male and 41% female)

responded to network questions (utilizing the free recall method; Wasserman and Faust 1994),

with at least one social tie. However, response rates for social network analysis are calculated as relational response rates because, for non-directed networks, either member of a dyad can provide information regarding the social ties, as well as from both members (see Bolander et al. 2015 for discussion on calculating the relational response rate; also Knoke and Yang 2008).

The number of possible ties in the sales network of interest in the present study is 265,740. With 434 responses (84% of total salespeople), we can account for 97.5% of dyads in the organizational network (Knoke and Yang 2008), providing a relatively complete picture of the organizational network. Furthermore, in addition to the ties between salespeople, support personnel who are not salespeople, but were named as social connections that were critical to salesperson performance, were also included in the network. This approach ensures that our net measures capture a rich representation of the organization's social network.

We then analyzed the positions of salespeople within the organizational network by examining their centrality. Centrality is a measure of the extent to which a given individual is connected to others in a network. Centrality is important because it is the structural property often associated with innovation (Ibarra 1993a) and power (Brass 1984), as well as interpersonal influence (Friedkin 1993), enabling salespeople to diffuse their opinions through shorter and more readily activated communication channels (Friedkin 2006).

We operationalized objective social network quality as a composite variable comprised of centralities that capture the benefits of strategically positioning oneself in a favorable position within the organizational network. Specifically, in order to develop a holistic and quantitative view of the quality of individual social networks, we calculated three centrality measures using UCINET (Borgatti, Everett, and Freeman 2002) for each individual salesperson: access to unique or non-redundant information, connectedness, and power. We measured access to unique or non-

redundant information using betweenness centrality because it represents a salesperson's bridging relationships in the network, where the salesperson is the link or bridge between two otherwise unconnected others in the network (Hanneman and Riddle 2005; Wasserman and Faust 1994). Therefore, this measure serves are a proxy measurement for unique information access.

We measured reach or circle of influence by calculating the two-step reach centrality measure, which is a measure of how many other people embedded in the network can be reached by the salesperson either directly, or by going through one other person. This measure is more accurate than traditional centrality measures because it counts "distinct others," and avoids the pitfall of eigenvector centrality, which assumes salespeople are well-connected simply because *their connections* are well-connected (Borgatti, Everett, and Johnson 2013).

Finally, we examined a measure of power in the network by using Bonacich's (1987) beta centrality. Beta centrality is related to both degree and eigenvector centrality but allows for the weighting of social ties depending on how long the walk is between the focal salesperson and another individual in the network. In other words, this measure accounts for the fact that distant connections have decreasing impact on the focal salesperson relative to close connections, particularly when there is a concentration of ties in a core group and the distant contacts are in the periphery (Bourgeois and Friedkin 2001).

Sales magnitude. Sales magnitude was operationalized as the mean sales size in the three months following the assessment of the network and survey data collection. The temporal separation between network construction and performance outcomes helps address concerns of endogeneity.

Control variables. We controlled for extroversion because it is often associated with salesperson behaviors, attitudes, and performance (see Dugan, Rouziou, and Bolander 2020). To avoid taxing respondents, we utilized an abbreviated measure of extroversion adapted from Gosling, Rentfrow,

and Swann (2003). We also controlled for sales tenure, which is likely to impact how developed a salesperson's network may be and also the accuracy of subjective measures of network quality and performance. It was calculated as the number of days with the firm from date of hire, and was information provided by the firm. Additionally, given the influence it can demonstrate on networking behaviors (Ibarra 1993b) and salesperson work attitudes (Macintosh and Crush 2014), we also included gender as a control (coded 0 for males; 1 for females).

Performance robustness check. We also incorporated a subjective assessment of salesperson job performance in our analyses as a robustness check. Specifically, we sought to account for the possibility that political skill and social network quality may inflate and bias estimations of self-assessed job performance, making salespeople feel as though they are performing better without actually generating additional sales. To account for this possibility, we asked salespeople to rate themselves on several dimensions of performance relative to their peers. The scale, adapted from Sujan, Weitz, and Kumar (1994), asked respondents to compare their ability to sell products with higher profit margins, generate high dollar sales, exceed sales targets and objectives, and identify and sell to major prospects in their territory, from -5 (much worse than the other salespeople in my company) to +5 (much better than the other salespeople in my company). Table 1 lists the descriptive statistics for all variables included in Study 1.

Data Analyses

Because the data analysis required testing hypotheses involving multiple methods, two analytical tools were employed. First, we employed UCINET (Borgatti, Everett, and Freeman 2002) to analyze the organizational social network and calculate the betweenness, 2-step, and beta centralities. Next, to analyze the structural model, we employed partial least squares structural modeling (PLS – SEM). PLS is appropriate for predictive analysis because the objective of PLS-

SEM is to maximize the variance of the endogenous variables explained by the exogenous variables (Hair et al. 2013).

Moreover, social network data distributions often are skewed and/or leptokurtic, and PLS does not require normally distributed data. Additionally, political skill is operationalized as a hierarchical component model (Hair et al. 2013; Lohmoller 1989), which is handled well by PLS-SEM. Finally, results for covariance-based structural equation modeling (CB-SEM) procedures and PLS-SEM results do not usually differ significantly (Hair et al. 2013). Given the advantages of PLS-SEM and that PLS-SEM results serve as good, and conservative, proxies for CB-SEM, it follows that PLS-SEM is an appropriate tool for testing the hypotheses.

We assessed the reliability and convergent and discriminant validity of the measures for each construct. For the scales, Cronbach's α coefficients exceeded .83, rho A values all exceeded .08, composite reliabilities were> .85, and all items loaded on their respective constructs. The square root of the average variance extracted (AVE) for each construct exceeded the correlation with other constructs in the model, indicating discriminant validity (Fornell and Larcker 1981), and the heterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT) were significantly lower than .90, also supporting discriminant validity. Political skill is a multi-dimensional construct (Ferris et al. 2005); therefore, we modeled political skill as a second-order, reflective-reflective construct (Hair et al. 2013). The average AVE for each dimension of political skill also exceeded the squared correlation with the other constructs in the model, indicating that each dimension of political skill exhibited discriminant validity.

We evaluated the predictive relevance of the model using Stone-Geisser's Q^2 value (Geisser 1974; Stone 1974) and the blindfolding procedure in *SmartPLS* (Hair et al. 2014). When predictive relevance is demonstrated by the model, it indicates that the model accurately portrays

the items in reflective measurement models of latent constructs. Q^2 values for objective and subjective measures of social network quality were substantially greater than zero, indicating that the model displays predictive relevance for the endogenous latent variables tested in the following.

Study 1: Results

The purpose of Study 1 was to explore the relationships between political skill, social network quality (H1), and sales magnitude (H2). Additionally, we sought to extend the findings by examining the interplay between objective and subjective measures of social network quality (H3a and H3b). The specific results of the analysis are discussed in the following sections.

H1 predicted a positive relationship between political skill and social network quality, which was measured in both subjective and objective forms. The results suggest that political skill is positively related to subjective assessments of social network quality ($\beta = .32$, $p < .001$) and objective social network quality ($\beta = .19$, $p < .01$), supporting H1.

H2 predicted that social network quality would mediate the relationship between political skill and sales magnitude. To test for the mediation, we bootstrapped the sampling distribution of the indirect effect. The bootstrapping technique does not require normal data distribution of the statistic and, compared to the Sobel test, yields higher levels of statistical power. The indirect effect of political skill on sales magnitude is positive and significant ($\beta = .18$, $p = .00$). However, in the presence of subjective social network quality as the mediator, the direct effect was non-significant ($p = .60$). This suggests that, in Study 1, the effects of political skill on sales magnitude are fully mediated by social network quality, thereby providing support for H2.

H3a predicted that subjective assessments of social network quality would be positively related to objective social network quality, which was supported based on the positive correlation between the two forms of social network quality ($r = .42$, $p = .00$). H3b posited that subjective and

objective network quality would have a positive and significant effect on objective sales performance. The results partially supported the hypothesis: objective social network quality does positively impact objective sales magnitude at Time 2 ($\beta = .20$, $p < .01$). However, contrary to our expectation, in the presence of objective network quality as a mediator, subjective social network quality does not demonstrate a ***direct*** effect on objective sales performance ($p = .19$), suggesting that the actual network quality, rather than perceived network quality, drives sales magnitude, or financial performance. Therefore, H3b is only partially supported.

Interestingly, subjective social network quality does show a significant indirect effect on objective performance via self-assessed performance. Therefore, given the moderately high and significant correlation between objective and subjective performance, subjective network quality assessments may provide an adequate approximation of underlying structural characteristics for salespeople especially given the difficulty in acquiring objective network quality measures.

Control Variables

Control variables also yielded significant effects on performance and salesperson network quality. Specifically, tenure exhibited significant positive effects on subjective network quality, subjective sales performance at Time 1, and sales magnitude at Time 2 ($\beta = .21$, $\beta = .20$ and $\beta = .12$; $p = .00$, respectively). Gender also showed a significant and negative direct effect on objective sales performance at Time 2 ($\beta = -.13$, $p = .00$). Table 2 and Figure 1 highlight Study 1 findings.

Post-Hoc Dimensional Test

In response to the dimensional implications of political skill discussed by Munyon and his colleagues (2015), we tested how social astuteness (CR = .85), interpersonal influence (CR = .88), and apparent sincerity (CR = .88) dimensions impacted the dimension of networking ability (CR

= .88), and its subsequent relationships with social network quality. Social astuteness, apparent

sincerity, and interpersonal influence loaded positively and significantly on networking ability

(β = .145, p = .03 one-tailed; β = .22, p = .00; and β = .33, p = .00, respectively). Moreover,

networking ability significantly and positively impacted both subjective (β = .42, p = .00) and

objective measures of social network quality (β = .15, p = .02).

The indirect effects of social astuteness, apparent sincerity, and interpersonal influence on

subjective social network quality were positive and significant, (β = .07, p = .05; β = .10, p = .00;

and β = .15, p = .00, respectively). Also, objective social network quality was impacted by both

apparent sincerity and interpersonal influence (β = .03, p = .04, one-tailed; β = .05, p = .03,

respectively), but not by social astuteness. Thus, the post-hoc results suggest that the dimension of

networking ability intervenes in the relationships between apparent sincerity, interpersonal

influence, and social astuteness and social network quality.

Study 1: Discussion

Study 1 offers several insights and implications. First, the results indicate that political skill

impacts future sales performance through both subjective and objective salesperson's social

network quality. For managers, this suggests that political skill is a critical competency that should

be cultivated in the salesforce. Political skill helps salespeople build higher quality social networks

and also leverage the opportunities embedded in those network ties. Importantly for scholars,

Study 1 also demonstrates the usefulness of our subjective measure of general social network

quality. The correlation between subjective and objective social network quality is r = .42. This

suggests that while subjective measures capture other variance, they can serve as a reasonable

proxy for the objective measurement of social network quality when such structural data are

unavailable. Further, results indicate that females experience less value from their social networks than males, which may suggest the presence of implicit or explicit biases.

Finally, our post-hoc tests reveal that the social astuteness, interpersonal influence, and apparent sincerity dimensions of political skill impact social network quality by enhancing a salesperson's networking ability. This is consistent with the theory of Porter and Woo (2015) and suggests, in essence, that networking ability is the behavior through which political skill is enacted. Having tested these effects, we now expand the sales performance criterion to consider how political skill and social network quality affect sales frequency and client relationship performance. We also seek to functionally replicate the findings of Study 1 on sales magnitude.

Expanding the Sales Performance Criterion

Sales Frequency

Beyond the traditional conceptualization of sales magnitude, the timing of sales is also an important dimension of sales performance. As noted earlier, sales frequency describes the count of sales made across an interval of time (cf. Guimaraes and Sheedy 2011) and can be expressed also as a rate for comparison purposes. Sales frequency has important implications for organization and salesperson cash flows. Specifically, infrequent sales, even of a high-magnitude, necessitate the retention of earnings to defray incurred and anticipated costs until additional revenues are gained. Infrequent sales may also be a source of stress for salespeople and the supporting staff due to the insecurity that accompanies them (see Sager 1990 and Munyon et al. 2020 for discussion). Thus, in addition to earning a high magnitude of sales, it is desirable for salespeople to produce sales with regularity.

Political skill theoretically differentiates how salespeople interpret and understand client needs and tailor the presentation of themselves and their saleable services or products to maximize

perceived value for the client. This increases the efficiency of sales exchanges (Bolander et al. 2015), and theoretically reduces uncertainty and perceived risk for clients relative to competitors. Politically skilled salespeople are able to adapt their behavior in such a way to fit the needs of the environment (Chaker et al. 2018), meaning they may be viewed as more attractive exchange partners. In combination, political skill theoretically enables salespeople to understand client needs, tailor their display and presentation of goods and services to fit these needs, and reduce threats from competitors. Thus, we anticipate that political skill will enable salespeople to realize sales more frequently as a function of their strong interpersonal perceptivity (Pfeffer 1992), opportunity recognition (McAllister et al. 2018), and efficiency (Bolander et al. 2015).

Similarly, social network quality should impact sales frequency through several channels. Notably, variance in unique and non-redundant information available to salespeople should impact how salespeople identify and leverage new sales leads (cf. Brass and Halgin 2012). Non-redundant information also enables salespeople to theoretically close deals more quickly as they are able to connect clients with the right services or products that fit their needs. Second, the reach associated with social network quality enables salespeople to more efficiently connect buyers with the products and services they are seeking (see Bolander et al. 2015 for discussion). Finally, power theoretically makes salespeople more attractive to potential clients (Brass, 1984), increasing their visibility. Power may also increase the leverage of salespeople in negotiations, improving the efficiency and speed of their sales exchanges that would otherwise languish in negotiations. Together, political skill and social network quality both theoretically impact the frequency with which sales are generated, and we propose:

> *Hypothesis 4*: Social network quality mediates the relationship between political skill and
> sales frequency.

Relationship Performance

In addition to offering competitive prices and products in a reliable manner, the sales literature has long recognized that high-quality interactions are critical in the development of an "enduring buyer – seller relationship" (Crosby et al. 1990, 68). High-quality client relationships also theoretically reduce the risk of adverse selection between clients and salespeople (cf., Gulati 1995), and thus represent a critical outcome of the sales process (Kalra et al. 2017).

Work relationships are "patterns of exchanges between two interacting members or partners" (Ferris et al. 2009, 1379), and dyadic relationship quality ultimately reflects the relative value and ongoing anticipation of future exchanges between salespeople and clients (cf. Liden, Sparrowe, and Wayne 1997). Thus, the quality of a dyadic relationship is derived from prior experiences and expectations, acting as a signal regarding the probability and magnitude of fulfilled exchanges in the future (e.g., Kalra et al. 2017).

Dyadic work relationships also offer benefits for the involved parties. In particular, relationships set boundaries on acceptable levels and types of conduct, providing salespeople with normative role expectations (Katz and Kahn 1978) and identity (Sluss and Ashforth 2007). High-quality relationships also enhance affect and attitudes directed toward salespeople. For example, Price and Arnold (1999) found that high-quality friendships strongly predicted customer satisfaction, loyalty, and positive word of mouth. Relatedly, Gremler and Gwinner (2000) found that rapport (i.e., a dimension of relationship quality) was positively related to customer satisfaction and loyalty. In a sales context, high-quality relationships thus open doors by reducing client resistance to products or services (Palmatier, Dant, Grewal, and Evans 2006). Accordingly, the body of available theoretical evidence suggests that high-quality dyadic relationships represent a positive outcome for salespeople and clients alike (Kalra et al. 2017; Palmatier et al. 2006).

However, high-quality relationships require finite personal resources (Ferris et al. 2009). Individual constraints thus limit the development and maintenance of high-quality relationships. Work by Granovetter (1985) suggests a potential tradeoff between the quantity and quality of relationships. Holding other factors constant, salespeople often possess too few resources to adequately develop and maintain numerous high-quality dyadic relationships. Thus, salespeople may seek to exchange with well-connected partners, and we anticipate that a salesperson's overall social network quality will impact perceptions of subsequent exchanges with that dyadic exchange partner. Specifically, salespeople should be able to benefit new exchange partners (i.e., clients in a sales context) more as the quality of their social network increases. Thus, the quality of a social network, be it located within an organization or community, theoretically impacts the subsequent dyadic exchanges that sales professionals maintain with their clients in the future. By extrapolation, high-quality social networks at one point in time should enhance the accrual of additional social capital in the future, positively impacting relationship performance:

> *Hypothesis 5*: Social network quality mediates the relationship between political skill and
>
> dyadic relationship performance.

Study 2: Method

Participants and Procedures

Data were gathered from real estate agents and their clients affiliated with a regional real estate association in the southern United States. At Time 1, all agents[1] affiliated with the regional real estate association were contacted via e-mail, informed about the research project, and asked to participate in a two-part online survey. The Time 1 survey asked agents to report on a number of individual differences (e.g., position tenure, negative affectivity, positive affectivity, political

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[1] The Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that 430 salespeople worked in real estate in this population during the study period.

skill). One week later, agents were asked to report on social network quality. As an incentive, all participants were offered a chance to win one of three $100 cash prizes in exchange for participation. Further, the president of the regional real estate association e-mailed agents and encouraged their participation.

A total of 203 agents responded to at least one of the surveys, with 141 agents responding in Time 1 (33% response rate) and 133 agents responding in Time 2 (31% response rate). Nonetheless, data were removed from the analyses due to either a large amount of missing data or failure to adequately answer the quality assurance item, resulting in a sample of 71 agents for whom we had complete data at both Time 1 and Time 2.

Next, for the 71 agents for whom we had complete data across both time periods, we used multiple list service (MLS) records to generate a list of each salesperson's clients within the thirty-six-month period prior to the start of data collection. The MLS is the database used to record all buyer and seller real estate transactions for a given regional association. These records provided buyer names and street addresses of homes purchased, but not city and zip code information. Accordingly, client mailing addresses were located by searching individual county property appraiser records for the four-county region covered by the regional real estate association within which agents worked (i.e., within which clients purchased homes).

These searches yielded a total of 1,344 clients with valid mailing addresses. These addresses were run through the U.S. Postal Service search, which allowed us to match client names with the local mailing addresses to ensure we had accurate and up-to-date information. After cross-checking client e-mail addresses, clients were mailed a brief paper-and-pencil survey which asked them to indicate basic demographic information as well as to assess the perceived relationship quality with their agent; only 16 mailed surveys were returned as undeliverable. All client surveys

were accompanied by a cover letter addressed to the respondent detailing the purpose of the

research study as well as a pre-addressed stamped return envelope. In efforts to increase

participation, clients were given a link to reply online if they preferred an electronic format. In

addition, they were offered a chance to win one of three $100 cash prizes. In total, we received

256 completed responses from clients. This resulted in an adjusted response rate of 19%[2].

Measures

Political skill. We assessed salesperson self-reported political skill ($\alpha = .92$) in Time 1 using the

18-item *Political Skill Inventory* (*PSI*; Ferris et al. 2005). "I always seem to instinctively know the

right things to say or do to influence others" (social astuteness), "I am able to communicate easily

and effectively with others" (interpersonal influence), "When communicating with others, I try to

be genuine in what I say and do" (apparent sincerity), and "I spend a lot of time at work developing

connections with others" (networking ability) represent sample items. Responses ranged from 1

(strongly agree) to 7 (strongly agree).

Sales frequency. Agents' sales frequency was obtained through Multiple List Service (MLS)

records, and reflects the number of months within the study period that the agent completed a home

sale. Specifically, for each month in the study period, we reported whether a sales agent had at

least one sale (1) or no sales (0), and then summed these numbers. Thus, higher numbers indicate

more consistent sales across the study period.

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[2] We also assessed the representativeness of the data to ensure our inferences would be valid. Sample representativeness, rather than response rate, is the most critical condition regarding the validity of criterion-related inferences (Cook, Heath, and Thompson 2000). To test representativeness of our salesperson data, we calculated mean real estate agent income using agent sales data over the most recent year prior to the study period, and compared that income to reported annual income for agents in the same population in the same time via the Bureau of Labor Statistics Occupational Employment Statistics report. Income was chosen because it is a proxy for financial sales performance in a commission sales context. Agents reported a mean income of $35,306 ($SD$ = $50,688) in the last 12 months before the survey period, compared with a mean reported income of $36,570 ($SD$ = $42,598) for the same population in the same time in the Occupational Employment Statistics report. A *t*-test of means showed no significant difference ($t = .23$, *ns*) between our agent sample and the population, suggesting that our sample is representative of the targeted population.

Sales magnitude. Mean monthly sales captured by MLS records was used to estimate agents' sales magnitude. This reflects the total dollar value of homes sold by the agent divided by the number of months in the study period. Higher numbers indicate larger mean sales numbers.

Relationship performance. Client ratings of relationship quality with their agent were measured using a 5-item scale ($\alpha = .85$) adapted from the *LMX-7* (Graen and Uhl-Bien 1995). Two items adapted from the original scale were excluded from the overall composite as they were not relevant in the real-estate agent – client relationship context. Retained items and anchors are shown in the Online Appendix. Further, because the majority of agents had more than one client respond to the survey ($M = 4.34$; $SD = 4.57$), we aggregated the clients' ratings of relationship quality by averaging the relationship quality scores at the item level within agents. The $ICC(2) = .86$ (LeBreton and Senter 2008) provided sufficient evidence to warrant aggregating the client ratings.

Social network quality. We measured social network quality ($\alpha = .79$) the same as in Study 1.

Control variables. In efforts to conduct a rigorous test of the hypothesized relationships, a number of theoretically relevant control variables were included in the analyses. Specifically, we controlled for the effects of salesperson positive and negative affectivity at Time 1 on their-self-reported social network quality. Individuals demonstrating high levels of positive affectivity tend to experience positive emotions and have a more positive outlook (e.g., of work, life, the world in general), whereas the opposite is true for those high in negative affectivity (Watson et al. 1984). Accordingly, it is possible that salespeople with tendencies towards either very positive or very negative outlooks may over- or under-estimate the status of their social networks. Thus, positive and negative affectivity were each measured using scales from Mueller, Iverson, and Jo (1999). "For me, life is a great adventure" and "Minor setbacks sometimes irritate me too much" represent sample items for positive ($\alpha = .64$) and negative affectivity ($\alpha = .86$), respectively. In addition, we

controlled for the effects of salesperson position tenure in years ($M = 7.46$, $SD = 8.33$) on all predictor and criterion variables in the model.

Data Analyses

Data were analyzed via path analysis (i.e., completely aggregated structural equation modeling) in *AMOS* 18.0, due to the relatively small sample size and our focus on the structural relationships *between* constructs rather than the relationships of the latent constructs with their measures. Subsequent to the examination of the structural model, we employed the bootstrapping approach recommended by Preacher and Hayes (2008) to evaluate the mediation hypotheses. The bootstrapping procedure was conducted with the list-wise file ($N = 52$; complete data for agent *and* client responses), as such a procedure requires complete data across all variables.

Study 2: Results

The means, standards deviations, and intercorrelations among study variables can be found in Table 3, followed by the path analytic results in Table 4 (or displayed graphically in Figure 2). Three path analytic models were examined. Model 1 ($X^2 = 8.66$, $df = 8$, $p = .37$; CFI = .99; TLI = .98; RMSEA = .03) examined the direct effects of political skill on the outcomes of interest, controlling for the effects of agent's position tenure. The complete Study 2 research model (Figure 2) was examined in Model 2. The test of the path model suggested that the data fit the model well ($X^2 = 16.68$, $df = 11$, $p = .12$; CFI = .97; TLI = .89; RMSEA = .06). Further, all of the hypothesized structural paths were significant and in the intended direction. Specifically, political skill was positively and significantly related to social network quality ($\beta = .54$, $p < .01$; Hypothesis 1), and in turn, social network quality was positively and significantly related to sales magnitude ($\beta = .26$, $p < .05$), sales frequency ($\beta = .31$, $p < .01$), and relationship performance ($\beta = .27$, $p < .05$).

Next, we tested the mediating effects of social network quality on the relationships of

political skill with our three outcomes of interest (i.e., sales frequency, sales magnitude, and relationship performance) using the bootstrap test of the indirect effect (Preacher and Hayes 2008). Results (Table 5) indicated that social network quality mediated the relationships between political skill and all three of the criteria of interest. Specifically, the indirect effects of political skill on sales magnitude ($a \, x \, b = .13$; $CI_{95\%} = [.01, .33]$; Hypothesis 2) and sales frequency ($a \, x \, b = .17$; $CI_{95\%} = [.07, .35]$; Hypothesis 4) through salesperson social network quality were both positive and significant, whereas the indirect effect of political skill on relationship performance through social network quality was marginally significant ($a \, x \, b = .14$; $CI_{90\%} = [.00, .34]$; Hypothesis 5).

Further, to determine the nature of the mediated relationship, the direct effects of political skill on the mediator, social network quality, and criteria of interest were examined simultaneously in Model 3 (Table 4). The direct effects of political skill on sales frequency ($\beta = .17$, $p < .10$), sales magnitude ($\beta = .29$, $p < .05$), and relationship performance ($\beta = .27$, $p < .05$) remained significant or marginally significant when included in the structural model. Therefore, the results of Study 2 provide additional evidence supporting the mediating effects of political skill on sales frequency, sales magnitude, and relationship performance through social network quality.

Study 2: Discussion

The objectives of Study 2 were to ascertain how political skill affects two additional criteria of sales performance and explore whether social network quality would mediate the positive effects of political skill on these outcomes. Results suggest that social network quality transmits the positive effects of salesperson political skill on sales magnitude, sales frequency, and client relationship performance. We also constructively replicated the findings from Study 1, showing that political skill positively affects subjective social network quality and sales magnitude.

General Discussion

In this two-study investigation, we examined *how* political skill enables the construction and leveraging of social network quality, which in turn exercises influence over financial and relational forms of sales performance. In Study 1, we found that political skill positively influenced sales magnitude through both a formative and objective and a subjective measure of social network quality. In Study 2, we tested a model showing that overall political skill was related to sales magnitude, sales frequency, and relationship performance, and these associations were transmitted through the mediating mechanism of subjective social network quality.

Thus, in summary, the results suggest that political skill exerts a positive influence on relationship and financial sales performance, and this effect is mediated by social network quality. This investigation contributes to the developing stream of research in sales and organizational behavior highlighting political skill's unique and important influence on social networks, client relationships, and objective sales metrics. The use of replication also significantly strengthened our inferences by showing how these effects manifest in unique sales environments.

Contributions to Theory and Research

Political influence expansion. Empirical evidence to date indicates that political skill relates significantly to subjective and objective forms of job and sales performance (Bing et al. 2011; Munyon et al. 2015), but the intervening mechanisms through which this effect occurs remained unclear. Our investigation illustrated one such mechanism, social network quality, through which political skill affects objective sales performance and future relationship performance, representing an important theoretical contribution to the social network and political skill literatures, and further application of political skill to sales contexts (Bolander et al. 2015; Li et al. 2015).

Social network quality. Our results also highlight the important role of employee social capital in a sales context (cf., Li et al. 2015). Prior research has shown how low-status salespersons' social

capital benefits from high-status salespeople through reputation, information, and control (Kilduff and Krackhardt 1994); our results suggest a similar effect. For clients, the instrumentality of a given exchange is paramount (Price and Arnold 1999), and our findings suggest that high-quality social networks enable clients to tap into valued networks. High-quality networks enabled salespeople to turn over sales more frequently, and to do so at a higher magnitude, thus contributing directly to financial performance across both studies

Social network quality also was related to time-lagged assessments of relationship performance (i.e., mean client ratings of relationship quality) in Study 2. Specifically, clients in our study reported significantly higher-quality relationships with well-connected salespeople than those who were less well-connected. Thus, these findings suggest that employee social network quality (i.e., social capital) positively enhances future dyadic relational performance, acting as a gauge regarding the potential for future economic and social exchanges with a given agent (Crosby et al. 1990). Thus, the results suggest that high-quality networks enhance future assessments of relationship quality, suggesting a positive upward cycle for social capital expansion.

Perceived and objective measurement. Political influence theory rests on a key tenet that perceptions of reality are an important motivating force driving attitudes and behavior. Our investigation found that perceived social network quality intervened in the relationship between political skill and objective sales performance outcomes. Perceived social network quality accounted for similar levels of variance as our formative structural (i.e., objective) measure of social network quality, showing that perceptions exert an important influence on sales, and may serve as a substitute for traditional methods of network estimation (cf., Weis 2017) that are more time-consuming and resource-intensive.

Sales performance. Sales magnitude is often modeled in the sales literature, but our study is one of the first to model multiple financial and relational dimensions of sales performance at once. In doing so, we make important contributions by showing how individual (i.e., political skill) and structural (i.e., social network quality) variables affect sales performance. To the extent that sales frequency is an important complement to sales magnitude, our results also provide value to management and marketing professionals. The key findings about relationship performance are also critically important, suggesting that short-term financial performance gains (i.e., captured by sales magnitude and sales frequency) do not necessarily offset against long-term client relationship performance. Finally, our measurement of client relationship performance suggests an important alternative means of measuring relationship performance in sales exchanges.

Overall contributions. Collectively, the present two-study investigation provides evidence that political skill influences the extent to which salespeople are able to develop and leverage social networks. We find that political skill influences subjective and objective forms of social network quality, which then positively affects relational and sales performance. Thus, our findings bolster the political skill literature in that they move beyond establishing bivariate correlations between political skill and performance to describe intervening effects that impact sales performance.

Practical Implications

Our research poses a number of practical implications as well. First, political skill and social network quality explained a practically significant amount of variance in sales magnitude in both Studies 1 and 2, and sales frequency in Study 2. Accordingly, there is a real bottom-line impact for sales professionals who are able to utilize their political skill to develop higher-quality social networks. Thus, sales professionals would stand to benefit from developing and perfecting this trainable, learnable, and comprehensive set of social competencies (Ferris et al 2020). For

managers, this suggests a need to provide training around not just product knowledge and client influence, but also providing a safe space to cultivate interpersonal influence skills with colleagues within the organization in a noncompetitive and supportive environment where experimentation is welcome (Ferris, Perrewe, Anthony, and Gilmore 2000).

Further, findings indicate that organizations employing politically skilled salespeople are better able to coordinate with the external environment and satisfy stakeholders (e.g., clients). Thus, political skill is an attractive individual difference that organizations would be justified in pursuing in their new hires, and one that is worth emphasizing in training and development programs. With a more informed understanding of the specific political skill dimensions and how they work with and through each other, such training and development programs can be designed more effectively. Role play and individual coaching may also represent viable mechanisms of improving salesperson political skill at work.

Finally, there are career success implications for the development of high-quality social networks, and sales professionals would be well-advised to mentor and coach sales professionals to invest in the development and leveraging of social capital. For example, sales managers would be well-advised to mentor and coach sales professionals to invest in the development and leveraging of social capital, which may be a critical differentiator of success. For hiring managers, asking about perceived social network quality, assessing professional network reach through the vetting process (such the breadth and depth, as well as engagement, in professional networks such as LinkedIn and professional associations) might serve as valuable clues to a potential hires networking ability. Organizations may also choose to sponsor participation in executive education courses, partnering with sales institutes, host networking events, and measure and reward investments of time and energy into network cultivation.

Strengths and Limitations

The contributions of this investigation should be considered alongside its strengths and limitations. Strengths include the ability to constructively replicate and extend support for our hypothesized model across two independent samples of sales professionals (i.e., Study 1: business to consumer (B2C) salespeople within one firm; Study 2: real estate agents from a number of different firms). Accordingly, this study design allowed for maximal contextual realism and external validity of results (Scandura and Williams 2000), and responds to the appeals by scholars for the use of replication to advance theory and research in the field (Tsui 1999). The study also features data (i.e., sales performance, client reports, network reports) from multiple sources that are difficult to collect and comparatively rare in organizational science and sales research.

Further, to ensure the most robust test of the research hypotheses, predictor and criterion variables were separated in time in efforts to help mitigate consistency and transient bias effects (Podsakoff et al. 2003). Also, the survey instruments were designed so as to include multiple response formats and scoring protocols, as well as a quality assurance item to minimize the likelihood of programmed responses. Furthermore, data were collected at multiple points in time in both studies, incorporating objective financial sales performance data. Next, our results were found using two different scales for political skill (i.e., Bolander et al. 2015 and Ferris et al. 2005) and after controlling for alternative personality explanations. Finally, we demonstrated that both perceived and objective social network quality influence sales performance.

Notable limitations include the relatively small sample size of Study 2, although dyadic data reflecting both customer and salesperson perspectives is notably difficult to acquire. A second notable limitation stemming from the small sample size of Study 2 was the inability to use disaggregated structural equations modeling to evaluate study hypotheses due to power concerns

and emphasis on structural relations between constructs. There are also other demand-side factors that may have affected real estate sales transactions that we were unable to capture. Similarly, our relationship performance measure was adapted from a leader – member context, and we encourage the development of other relationship quality measures that more adequately capture this dyadic context. Similarly, our sales frequency measure was based on actual counts, and alternate conceptualizations may be more useful. Last, due to the study design, we were unable to test repeated measures of the constructs that would enable stronger causal inferences and the exploration of within-individual change (Bolander, Dugan, and Jones 2017; Childs et al. 2019).

Directions for Future Research

There are a number of worthwhile avenues for future research that warrant mention. First, research should continue to examine the mechanisms, or "black boxes," through which political skill operates. For instance, Ferris and colleagues (Ferris et al. 2011) theorized that political skill operates through both intrapsychic (e.g., self-esteem) and interpersonal (e.g., affability) effects to influence work relationships and ultimately well-being.

We also encourage researchers to examine these mechanisms and others to understand how political skill affects positive salesperson well-being and relationships, and stressor – strain processes. Similarly, researchers have found that politically skilled salespeople exercise their networking abilities across work and non-work domains (Treadway et al. 2010). Thus, future research should examine the development, maintenance, and decay of social networks over time.

There is also great potential in exploring the resources that accrue to salespeople and clients as a function of their social capital. For example, it is possible that social capital of salespeople enables enhanced knowledge exchanges with clients that facilitate a service dominant logic and competitive differentiation. Similarly, salesperson social capital may also impact the perceived

value of the salesperson to the organization, and impact how the organization seeks to guard salespeople from potential interlopers. Similarly, we encourage research into boundary conditions that may affect how political skill and social network quality unfold across time. These likely include other person (e.g., personality, ability) and situation (e.g., job design factors; demand-side factors), and motivational mechanisms (e.g., quota systems, compensation structure, competition).

Next, our results were tested in a business-to-consumer (B2C) sales context, but it would be insightful to test this model in a business-to-business (B2B) sales context. Such contexts often have longer sales cycles than B2C markets, and political skill and social capital may exert even stronger effects in this context than a B2C context (Palmatier et al. 2008). Finally, there is a need to investigate the stress and strain consequences associated with social network development and maintenance. Given that such efforts require the investment of scarce energy and time, there is the potential that salespeople may experience negative strain and even burn tradeoffs as a function of efforts spent networking, even as social networks can provide social support that offsets negative strains.

Conclusion

The purpose of this two-study investigation was to explore how political skill impacted social network quality and sales performance. Our results suggest that the relationships between political skill and financial and relational performance are mediated by a salesperson's social network quality, suggesting that political skill helps salespeople improve performance, in part, by enhancing the quality of their social capital. We hope these results stimulate further interest in how political skill and social capital operate in sales and marketing environments.

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Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Intercorrelations among Variables (Study 1)

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1.	Political Skill												
2.	Subjective Social Network Quality	.42											
3.	Objective Social Network Quality	.19	.42										
4.	Subjective Sales Performance	.28	.41	.25									
5.	Sales Magnitude (*T2*)	.10	.30	.32	.48								
6.	PS - Apparent Sincerity	.64	.24	.14	.13	.05							
7.	PS - Interpersonal Influence	.84	.30	.13	.18	.06	.39						
8.	PS - Networking Ability	.78	.49	.19	.29	.13	.36	.50					
9.	PS - Social Astuteness	.75	.19	.10	.23	.04	.31	.59	.40				
10.	Control - Extroversion	.34	.18	.07	.02	-.12	.11	.35	.28	.25			
11.	Control - Gender	.05	-.02	-.05	-.16	-.19	.18	-.03	.02	.02	.18		
12.	Control - Tenure	-.02	.17	.09	.23	.25	-.01	.02	-.06	-.01	-.32	-.38	
	M	5.82	5.31	76.75	7.95	99.61	6.39	5.91	5.27	5.73	4.41	1.37	4066.07
	SD	0.59	1.21	47.66	1.78	56.98	0.60	0.76	0.98	0.81	1.36	0.48	3582.60
	Average Variance Extracted	*(HOC)*	.75	*(FC)*	.78	-	.68	.72	.70	.68	.75	-	-
	Composite Reliability	.88	.90	-	.93	-	.86	.88	.88	.87	.90	-	-
	Adjusted R2		.32	.03	.21	.29							

Note. (HOC): Higher order construct comprised of apparent sincerity, interpersonal influence, networking ability, and social astuteness
(FC): Formative Construct
T2: Time 2

Table 2. Results of PLS-SEM Analysis (Study 1)

	Subjective Social Network Quality			Objective Social Network Quality			Subjective Job Performance			Objective Sales Performance: Sales Magnitude (time 2)		
	Direct	Indirect	Total	Direct	Indirect	Total	Direct	Indirect	Total	Direct	Indirect	Total
Political Skill	.32 (.000)	.06 (.017)	.38 (.000)	.19 (.008)	-	.19 (.008)	.16 (.015)	.12 (.000)	.28 (.000)	-.04 (.572)	.18 (.000)	.14 (.037)
Subjective Social Network Quality				-	-	-	.28 (.000)	-	.28 (.000)	.09 (.189)	.11 (.001)	.20 (.007)
Objective Social Network Quality	.34 (.000)	-	.34 (.000)				.08 (.289)	.10 (.005)	.18 (.009)	.20 (.002)	.10 (.004)	.30 (.000)
Subjective Job Performance	-	-	-	-	-	-				.39 (.000)	-	.39 (.000)
PS - Apparent Sincerity	-	.10 (.000)	.10 (.000)	-	.05 (.013)	.05 (.013)	-	.07 (.000)	.07 (.000)	-	.04 (.041)	.04 (.041)
PS - Interpersonal Influence	-	.14 (.000)	.14 (.000)	-	.07 (.008)	.07 (.008)	-	.10 (.000)	.10 (.000)	-	.05 (.035)	.05 (.035)
PS - Networking Ability	-	.15 (.000)	.15 (.000)	-	.07 (.010)	.07 (.010)	-	.11 (.000)	.11 (.000)	-	.05 (.042)	.05 (.042)
PS - Social Astuteness	-	.12 (.000)	.12 (.000)	-	.06 (.010)	.06 (.010)	-	.08 (.000)	.08 (.000)	-	.04 (.042)	.04 (.042)
Control - Extroversion	.10 (.166)	-	.10 (.172)	-	-	-	-	.03 (.180)	.03 (.184)	-.13 (.061)	.02 (.236)	-.10 (.130)
Control - Gender	-	-	-	-	-	-	-.10 (.114)	-	-.10 (.112)	-.09 (.040)	.04 (.108)	-.13 (.005)
Control - Tenure	.18 (.000)	.03 (.191)	.21 (.000)	.09 (.176)	-	.09 (.180)	.14 (.048)	.07 (.006)	.20 (.002)	-	.12 (.001)	.12 (.001)

[a] Numbers in the parentheses represent the p-values for the effect coefficients.

Table 3. Means, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelations among Variables (Study 2)

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Position tenure	—							
2. Positive affectivity	.07	**.64**						
3. Negative affectivity	-.09	-.14	**.86**					
4. Political skill (composite)	.09	.40**	-.22	**.92**				
5. Social network quality (T2)	.21*	.40**	-.16	.62**	**.79**			
6. Sales frequency	.36**	.33**	-.06	.33**	.29*	—		
7. Sales magnitude	.32**	.38**	-.04	.37**	.38**	.82*	—	
8. Relationship performance (T3)	.11	.13	-.19	.33**	.33**	-.02	.05	**.85**
M	7.46	4.04	2.64	5.88	4.16	34.36	268200.46	4.24
SD	8.33	.52	.97	.64	.67	28.99	306722.09	.45

Note. $N = 52 – 120$; Cronbach's alpha is reported in bold along the diagonal

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. (T2) = Time 2; (T3) = Time 3

Table 4. Path Analytic Results (Study 2)

Variables	Model 1			Model 2				Model 3			
	Sales Freq.	Sales Mag.	Rel. Perf	Sales Freq.	Sales Mag.	Rel. Perf	SNQ	Sales Freq.	Sales Mag.	Rel. Perf	SNQ
Position Tenure	.32**	.28**	.08	.28**	.26**	.07	.16	.29**	.27**	.06	.16
Positive Affectivity	–	–	–	–	–	–	.17	–	–	–	.17
Negative Affectivity	–	–	–	–	–	–	-.02	–	–	–	-.02
Political Skill	.30**	.34**	.34**	–	–	–	.54**	.17†	.29*	.27*	.54**
Social Network Quality	–	–	–	.31**	.26*	.27*	–	.20†	.08	.12	–
R^2	.21	.22	.13	.21	.17	.09	.45	.23	.21	.14	.45
Fit Statistics	$X^2 = 8.66$ ($df = 8; p = .37$) CFI = .99 TLI = .98 RMSEA = .03			$X^2 = 16.68$ ($df = 11; p = .12$) CFI = .97 TLI = .89 RMSEA = .06				$X^2 = 8.85$ ($df = 8; p = .36$) CFI = 1.00 TLI = .98 RMSEA = .03			

Note. Standardized parameter estimates are reported. All available data (i.e., $N = 52$ -136) were used to evaluate the structural models. The error terms between sales frequency and sales magnitude were correlated ($r = .77$). CFI: Comparative Fit Index; TLI: Tucker Lewis Index; RMSEA: Root Mean Square Error of Approximation

† $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Table 5. Results of the Bootstrap Test of the Indirect Effect (Study 2)

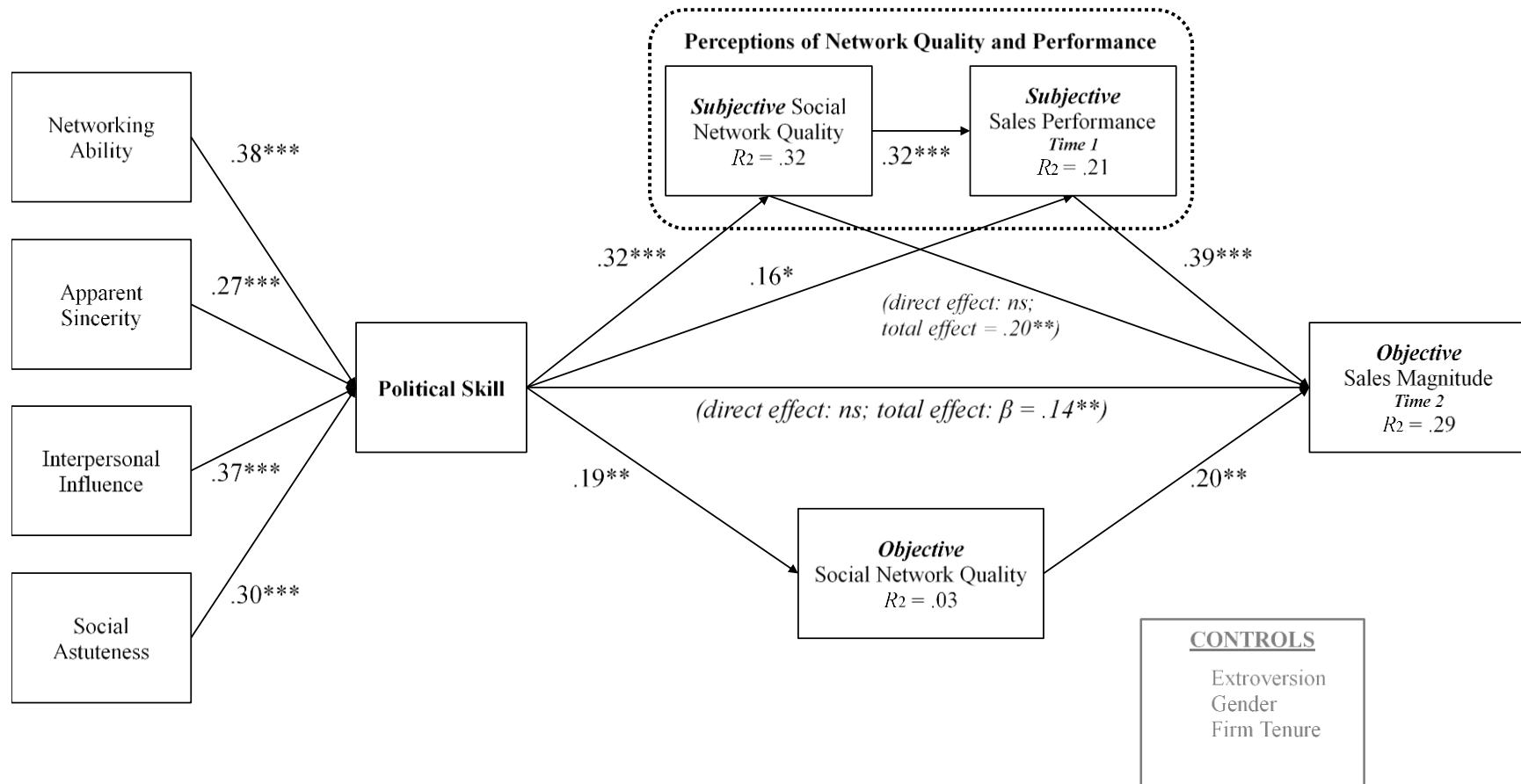|	Mediator: Social network quality		
	$a \times b$	90% CI	95% CI
Political skill → Sales frequency	.17**	[.09, .32]	[.07, .35]
Agent political skill → Sales magnitude	.13*	[.03, .29]	[.01, .33]
Political skill → Relationship performance	.14†	[.00, .34]	[-.03, .38]

Note. Analyses based on 1000 replications. The bootstrap test of the indirect was conducted using list-wise deleted data ($N = 52$).
†$p < .10$. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$

Figure 1. The Mediating Roles of Subjective and Objective Social Network Quality (Study 1)

Perceptions of Network Quality and Performance

Subjective Social Network Quality
$R_2 = .32$

.32***

Subjective Sales Performance
Time 1
$R_2 = .21$

Networking Ability

.38***

Apparent Sincerity

.27***

Political Skill

Interpersonal Influence

.37***

Social Astuteness

.30***

.32***

.16*

*(direct effect: ns; total effect = .20**)*

.39***

*(direct effect: ns; total effect: β = .14**)*

.19**

Objective Social Network Quality
$R_2 = .03$

.20**

Objective Sales Magnitude
Time 2
$R_2 = .29$

CONTROLS
Extroversion
Gender
Firm Tenure

Note. *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; *$p < .05$

Figure 2. The Role of Salesperson Political Skill on Social Network Quality and Multidimensional Performance (Study 2)
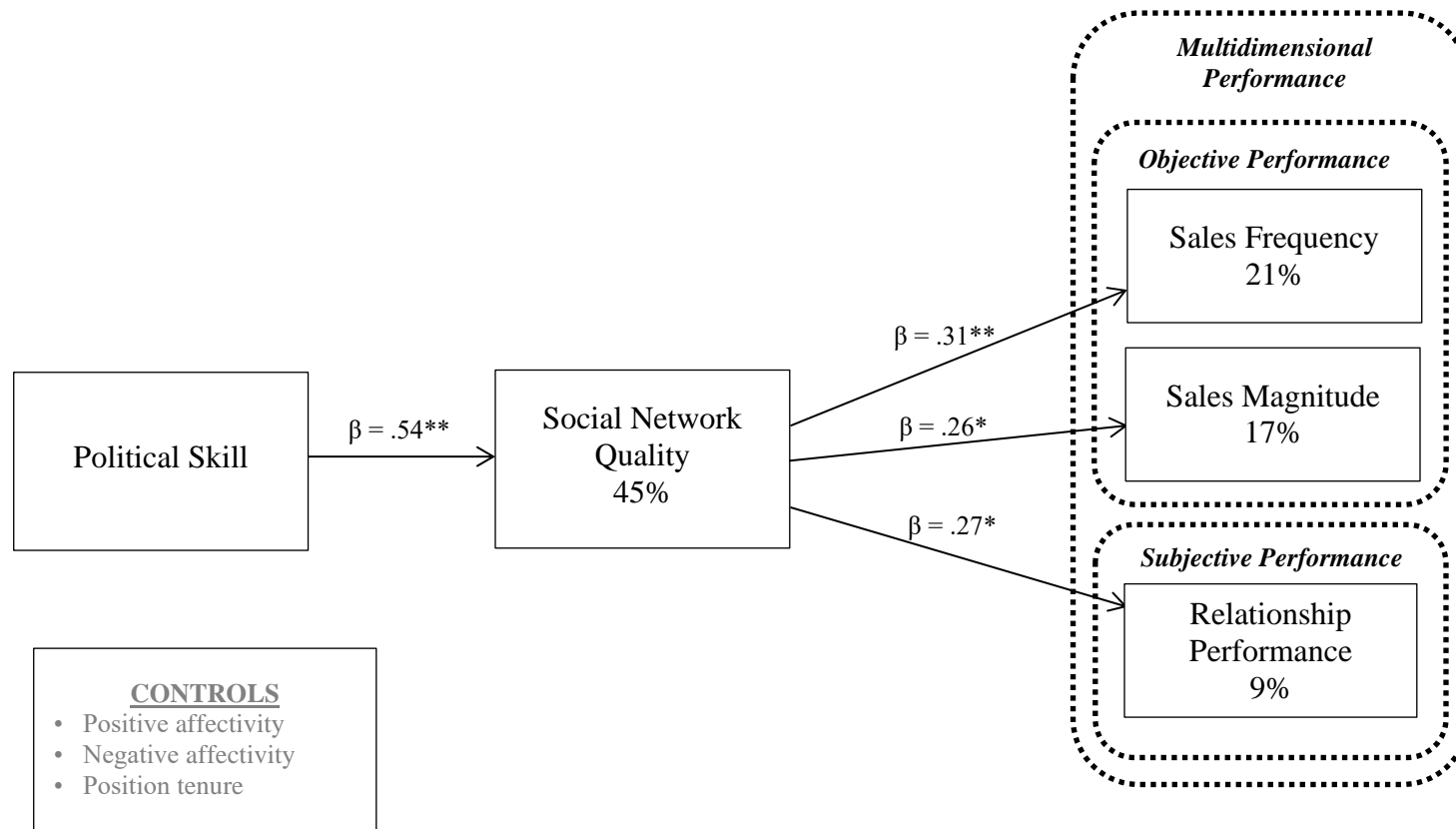
Note. Standardized parameter estimates are reported. Variance explained is shown underneath the construct name.