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## **Influence of Ethnicity on Students' Sales Career Preference: Some Observations from a Developing Multi-Racial Country**

M. Sadiq Sohail<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** Sales recruiters have been paying their attention to diversifying their sales force. In order to attract students from diverse ethnic backgrounds, companies must be aware of their preferences and perception of different sales and sales-related careers. This paper presents the results of a survey conducted to assess the influence of ethnicity on students' preferences and perceptions to sales career. To address the paucity of research undertaken in the Asia-Pacific region, as compared to Western countries, data were collected in Malaysia.

Survey findings reveal that ethnicity of students generally does not influence on sales career preferences. The descriptors used by students to describe sales career are discussed. Students' preferences for various occupations were also evaluated. Further, the implications of the survey are discussed.

### **Introduction**

The issues relating to student attitudes to and perceptions of careers in selling have been a subject of interest to marketing educators, sales practitioners and researchers for well over half a century. For a variety of reasons, corporations have paid their attention to diversifying the sales force (DeVecchio and Honeycutt Jr, 2000). Sales managers and recruits also believe that minority job candidates hold negative attitudes toward careers in sales (Lucas 1996).

Surveys show that more money is being spent by companies on their sales forces than on any other element of the promotional mix (Corkindale et al, 1989; Kennedy et al, 1992). This trend is likely to continue as businesses, faced a number of very significant challenges in the years' ahead, struggle to maintain market share and profitability. Weak world economies, the growing power of global competitors, the increasing trend towards deregulation, the quickening pace of technological change, greater market fragmentation and better educated, more sophisticated and discerning buyers have led inevitably to an intensification of competition. Getting closer to the customer is commonly offered as one approach to overcoming these challenges, an approach which relies heavily on the kind of relationship building that can be initiated and fostered by a strong sales team. This, in addition to the declining effectiveness of the mass media and the growing costs of personal selling, has awakened new interest in the need for marketing managers to build a pool of talented salespeople.

Although efforts to study the students' attitudes towards career in sales have been made, few attempts have been made to specifically relate these facts to ethnicity of students. Moreover, much of the research has focused on the United States (for example Del Vecchio et al, 2000; Comer et al, 1998). In response to these gaps in current research, this paper attempts to investigate the influence of ethnicity students' career preference in the Asia –Pacific region.

A few compelling reasons in choosing Malaysia for this study are firstly due to the fact that Malaysia is a multi-cultural country par excellence. The population of 22 million includes 60% Malays, 26% Chinese, 8% Indians and the remaining 6% consists of about 40 other races. Secondly, Malaysia is a country where the ethnic integration has not yet happened (Hilley, 2001). Finally, we believe that comparing the career preferences of major ethnic groups i.e. Malays, Chinese and Indians should reveal new information.

In the next section, we review the relevant literature on this area. The following section describes the research methodology, which is then followed by the results of the survey. The paper concludes with a summary, and outlines some limitations of this study.

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## Literature Review

### *Attitudes and perceptions*

'The American Salesman' (1958) reported one of the earliest studies of student attitudes to careers in selling. Three thousand undergraduate students studying across thirty-one colleges and universities in the United States were asked to call the first five words that came to their mind in connection with the word 'salesman'. The ten most common replies obtained were travel, money, personality, sales, fast talker, commission, appearance, products, high-pressure, and aggressive. Printer's Ink (1958) concluded that the public's poor image of salespeople kept good talent out of selling careers. A later study by Thompson (1972) also suggested that the negative image of selling was fostered through anecdotes, stories, novels, stage productions and the mass media.

Another early study (Paul and Worthing, 1970) aimed to determine college students' attitudes towards sales careers. A cross-section of college students was surveyed. The researchers found that majority of students had low opinions regarding to sales careers. The literature suggests that students' negative impressions of sales careers are usually based on very limited information. While Bellenger et al (1974) found that students' attitudes towards sales careers were more positive than they had expected, Weeks and Muehling (1987) found that the stereotypical view of selling as a "door-to-door" profession remains quite prevalent in the minds of college students.

### *Preferences*

While much of the literature relating to careers in sales focuses on student attitudes and perceptions, a number of studies focus on student preferences. Swenson et al (1993), for instance, consider preference for a sales career to have an affective dimension, one that is closer to actual behavior with respect to a career in sales choice. Their findings support the work of Dubinsky and O'Connor (1983) who, while examining students preferences for an assortment of different sales positions had found that they differed among seven different types of sales positions. Swinyard (1981) took the grade-point-averages of students into account and found that those with higher grade-point-averages have a lower level of preference for careers in sales. This study also suggested that an industrial sales position is the least preferred among marketing-related careers.

Honeycutt et al (1999) compare the perceptions of sales careers of business students in the United States, New Zealand, and the Philippines. They conclude that students of all three nations have perceptual problems about sales careers. Student respondents from the American sample do not consider sales to be a desired career path. New Zealand respondents found this to be an unglamorous and repetitive career option. The Philippines students reflected similar feelings.

### *Gender based studies*

The scope of sales career research has expanded significantly to include gender differences, racial ones and comparative studies across countries and regions. While examining the attitudes of male students to personal selling an early gender-based study (Sales Management 1962a; 1962b; 1962c); revealed that only one of every seventeen students was opting for a sales career. This study also suggested that students who considered selling as a career were lacking in a sense of security, low in prestige, poor in financial rewards. In another gender-based study, it was found that female students were more reluctant to enter sales related fields compared to their male counterparts (Cook *et al*, 1986). Another study, however, reported that females had a more favorable disposition to personal selling than males (Muehling and Weeks, 1988).

### *Race Comparative Studies*

Ethnicity and the analyses of ethnic groups have long been the topics of discussions in both scholarly and popular literature. A review of literature reveals that several studies had been

undertaken to examine if racial differences influence for college students' evaluation of sales careers. Most of these studies, however, have been focused on the context of the United States.

The trade press has described the African-American community as taking an historically dim view of sales, of "frowning" on sales jobs, and not encouraging their children to pursue sales careers (example Lucas 1996; Rasmusson 1997). This sentiment appears to be a long held one and may be attributable to history of discrimination against racial minorities in sales (Jolson 1974). Lucas (1996) reports that less than five percent of all sales force members, excluding retail positions, are held by African-Americans and forty percent of them perceive poor opportunities for career advancement in their current positions.

Bellenger, Bernhardt and Wayman (1974) surveyed African-American students and reported that they expressed a higher interest in sales career than expected. In a subsequent study conducted two decades later, it was reported that the African-American students expressed less positive attitudes towards sales career than Caucasian ones (Honeycutt et al 1996).

In a recent study undertaken by DeVecchio and Honeycutt Jr (2000); the results dispel the assumption that African-American college students find sales to be less appealing than Caucasian students. For the majority of sales career option, no real difference in appeal of the sales career existed. The fact is that contradictory findings in the literature seem to be attributable to generalizing conclusions from small sample sizes and unique sample characteristics.

## Research Objectives

Our principal objective is to determine if racial differences in career preference are pervasive among Malaysian students. The second objective is to assess if there any difference in the preference for different sales careers among the different racial groups. The third is to identify, the factors that motivate the students to opt for careers in selling or discourage them from doing so by asking them to list their most appealing and least appealing aspects of sales careers.

## The Methodology

The sampling frame consisted of business students who were in their undergraduate degree program in the Klang Valley region of Malaysia. This region comprises the city of Kuala Lumpur and the neighboring suburbs of Petaling Jaya, Subang Jaya, Shah Alam and Klang. This region was chosen because an estimated 70% of the targeted student population pursues their studies here. The institutions in the sampling frame enrolled students from all races, without any form of discrimination. And were screened to determine student enrolment in proportion to overall population.

A survey instrument was designed to collect data. And it focused on:

- The perceptions of students towards 21 possible career areas. Respondents were asked to indicate their perceptions on the status of these occupations on a 5-point Likert scale (where 1 = lowest status and 5 = highest status);
- A list of 16 factors that describe the possible merits of a career in sales. Respondents were asked to indicate the factors (a maximum of five) which they considered the most appealing.
- A further list of 14 factors that describe the possible de-merits of a career in sales. Respondents were asked to indicate the factors (a maximum of five) which they considered the least appealing.

## The Sample

A total of 157 useable responses were obtained from student respondents in Malaysia. The sample had a majority of female respondents, 92 compared to 65 male respondents. A little over 40 per cent of the respondents in the sample were in the 16-20 years age group, and 48 per

cent of them were in the 21-25 years age group, which can be explained by the fact that Malaysians start schooling at a comparatively later age; therefore, by the time they reach the degree level they are slightly older. The age group with the lowest frequency is the 31 years and above; only six respondents fell into this category. A profile of the respondents is provided by Table 1.

Table 1

Profile of Respondents

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>(%)</b>
Male	65	41.4
Female	92	58.6
<b>Age group</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>(%)</b>
16-20yrs	66	42.0
21-25yrs	76	48.4
26-30yrs	9	5.7
31yrs above	6	3.8
<b>Race</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>(%)</b>
Malay	15	9.6
Chinese	127	80.9
Indian	10	6.4
Others	5	3.2
<b>Academic performance</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>(%)</b>
Pass (50-59%)	17	10.8
Credit (60-69%)	67	42.7
Distinction (70-84%)	60	38.2
High Distinction (85% and above)	13	8.3

## Research Findings and Discussion

### *Preferences of the different occupations*

To measure the students' preferred career paths; respondents were asked to indicate their perceptions towards a variety of alternative career paths. This was measured on a 5 point Likert scale (where 1=the lowest status and 5= the highest status). Table 2 provides an overview of the students' preference for the different occupations of students from Malaysia.

Table 2 shows that, it is evident that overall the occupation of Medical Practitioner/doctor has been the most preferred occupation. The next overall preferred career is in the engineering profession. Becoming a lawyer and university teaching were the other preferred occupations.

Table 2

## Students' preference of the different occupations

	Overall		Malay	Chinese	Indian	Others
	Mean	Std Dev				
Teacher: Primary School	2.83	1.27	2.87	2.76	3.10	4.00
Teacher: Secondary School	3.11	1.08	3.07	3.07	3.10	4.20
University lecturer	3.95	0.85	3.87	3.94	3.90	4.40
Lawyer	4.04	1.01	3.93	4.11	3.30	4.00
Nurse	3.29	0.97	3.33	3.23	3.60	4.00
Engineer	4.11	0.91	3.73	4.13	4.40	4.20
Social Worker	3.38	1.13	3.07	3.36	3.90	3.60
Sales Manager	3.42	0.84	3.27	3.44	3.50	3.20
Dentist	3.85	1.04	3.73	3.89	3.60	3.60
Accountant	3.80	1.02	3.13	3.91	3.50	3.60
Medical Practitioner/Doctor	4.29	1.02	3.40	4.46	3.40	4.60
Clerical Assistant	2.58	0.92	2.67	2.52	2.80	3.40
Bank Manager	3.62	0.96	3.27	3.64	3.80	3.80
Missionary sales person, Retail	2.48	1.01	2.67	2.39	3.00	3.00
Factory Helper	2.17	1.14	2.27	2.02	3.50	3.00
System Analyst	3.56	0.96	3.47	3.61	3.10	3.40
Politician	3.43	1.38	2.93	3.50	3.10	3.80
Sales Representative	2.84	0.93	3.00	2.76	3.60	3.00
Sales Engineer	3.67	0.88	3.60	3.69	3.60	3.60
Web Designer	3.50	1.04	3.40	3.50	3.60	3.60

However, a comparison based on ethnicity indicates that there are some differences in preferences amongst the different ethnic groups. While the occupation of Medical Practitioner/doctor has been the most preferred occupation of the Chinese, the Malays prefer the legal profession the most, while the Indian students have shown the greatest preference for a career in engineering profession. Table 2 provides an overview.

It is interesting to note the preferences of respondents to sales related jobs such as sales manager, sales representatives, compared to the other jobs in the same bracket (bracket defined the level of work and remuneration as the level of authority, responsibility, difficulty). Sales occupations hold an equal value/dignity compared to jobs falling in the same bracket. For example, occupations like those of clerical assistants, (mean 2.58) which are in the same designation as sales representatives (2.84) also fall in the same bracket. It can be seen that both jobs' perceptions are comparable; in fact, the sales job is perceived to be better. Both male and female respondents rated Sales engineer 3.62. There was consistency in the perceptions of respondents across all ethnic groups.

### ***Influence of Ethnicity on Sales Career Preferences***

For this study, we consider sales career to cover a wider range of possibilities. Consequently, four different sales related careers grouped distinctively as sales manager, sales representative, sales engineer, and missionary sales person have been chosen. Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) tests were applied to determine if the ethnicity of respondents influences the perceptions of these sales related occupations. A significance level of 0.05 was used in all tests (Table 3)

Table 3

ANOVA Results to Measure Influence of Ethnicity on Sales Related Occupations

Occupation	Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Sales Manager	Between Groups	.714	3	.238	.333	.802
	Within Groups	109.540	153	.716		
	Total	110.255	156			
Missionary sales Person	Between Groups	5.524	3	1.841	1.833	.143
	Within Groups	153.648	153	1.004		
	Total	159.172	156			
Sales Representa- tive	Between Groups	7.186	3	2.395	2.867	.039*
	Within Groups	127.833	153	.836		
	Total	135.019	156			
Sales Engineer	Between Groups	.175	3	5.850E-02	.074	.974
	Within Groups	120.602	153	.788		
	Total	120.777	156			

\* Mean significantly different across groups at 0.05 significance level.

As Table 3 illustrates, the perception towards the four related sales jobs does not depend on the ethnicity of respondents in three of the four chosen sales related careers. Only one of the occupations, that of 'sales representative' was significant. This indicates that there is a perceptual difference in the status of the occupation of Sales Representative across different ethnic groups in Malaysia. Further, a close to constant (least variation) and variance analysis indicates that all the sales related occupations have a insignificant dispersion between the responses from Malaysian sample, suggesting that respondents irrespective of the race have similar preferences for these occupations.

### ***Comparison of descriptors***

The final stage in the analysis involved an examination of the 'most'/ 'least' appealing factors in sales career. Respondents were provided with a list of factors to describe what they considered as 'most appealing' and 'least appealing' factors in a sales career. The respondents were asked to select a minimum of 1 and a maximum of 5 factors under each of the section. Table 4 provides an overview of the most appealing/least appealing descriptors of sales career path.

Overall, the respondents have chosen *money/commissions* (55.4%) as the most appealing factor in sales career. This is closely followed by the *opportunity to travel* as the second most appealing factor (53.55%). Other appeals ranked in the order are *fun/interesting/exciting* (42.7%). Product oriented ranked last. There is some uniformity in the choice of factors that make sales career most appealing by respondents from the different ethnic groups.

Table 4

## Most Appealing/Least Appealing Factors in Sales Career

<b>Most Appealing</b>					
	<b>Malay (%)</b>	<b>Chinese (%)</b>	<b>Indian (%)</b>	<b>Others (%)</b>	<b>Total (%)</b>
Fun/ Interesting/ Exciting	33.3	42.5	50	60	42.7
Money/ Commissions	40.0	59.8	50	0	55.4
Involves traveling	33.3	56.7	50	40	53.5
Exciting to work with people	20.0	36.2	30	40	34.4
Gives independence and flexibility	33.3	40.9	50	40	40.8
Challenging	33.3	34.6	30	60	35.0
Innovative	20.0	10.2	0	20	10.8
Product oriented	6.7	4.7	30	20	7.0
Keep alert	20.0	10.2	20	20	12.1
Public relations	33.3	34.6	30	0	33.1
Dedication/ Discipline	20.0	5.5	40	40	10.2
Rewarding	40.0	26.0	40	0	27.4
Independence/ Freedom from authority	6.7	31.5	20	60	29.3
Company car	13.3	15.0	20	20	15.3
High esteem in community	13.3	10.2	20	0	10.8
Others	20.0	2.4	0	0	3.8
<b>Least Appealing</b>					
Boring	20.0	17.3	20	20	17.8
Stressful/ Pressure	53.3	59.8	30	20	56.1
Repetitive/ Tedious/ Frustrating	40.0	27.6	30	40	29.3
Time consuming	13.3	26.8	50	20	26.8
Lying/ Deceit	6.7	26.0	0	80	24.2
Pushy/ uses persuasion	53.3	41.7	20	40	41.4
Hard work	20.0	24.4	70	20	26.8
Quotas	33.3	26.0	10	20	24.8
Patience	20.0	23.6	20	20	22.9
Exhausting	33.3	26.8	30	20	27.4
Limited opportunities for promotion	40.0	25.2	50	40	28.7
Constant traveling from place to place	20.0	12.6	30	0	14.0
Low esteem in community	6.7	16.5	30	40	17.2
Low salary/ financial returns	13.3	32.3	20	20	29.3
Lonely/ No camaraderie	20.0	13.4	20	20	14.6
Others	6.7	1.6	0	20	2.5
Each respondent was given a minimum 1 and maximum 5 factors to select for each section					



The second part of this analysis examines the factors that make sales career least appealing. Students choose *stressful/pressure* as a major factor that classified a sales career least appealing (56.1% respectively). The second factor to make sales career least appealing is *repetitive/tedious/frustrating* as perceived by respondents. The least important factor that makes a sales career least appealing is *constant traveling* (14%). This actually matches with the conclusion drawn from the first half of the table. Since traveling is the last factor to make the career least appealing. In other words, it actually means that it is a popular factor for making the sales career most appealing. In terms of comparison between the different ethnic groups, the analysis shows that while the most appealing factors are comparatively similar, the numerical popularity is not exactly of the same order.

### Summary and Implications

The findings of this study suggest that student perceptions of sales careers are comparable to other professions of the same level. It should be noted that the ethnicity of respondents does not affect the preference of sales career generally. These have direct managerial implications, particularly in multi racial societies. Sales organizations' seeking graduates need not necessarily target students from an ethnic group.

From the perspective of marketing educators, sales careers should be promoted by emphasizing the positive aspects of sales jobs to encourage students, irrespective of gender, to take up sales related careers. In addition, business schools should foster greater awareness and understanding in the classroom about the attractiveness of sales career. Negative perceptions of sales careers among students may be fuelled by myths in which describe sales careers as demanding in terms of incessant traveling and pushiness. Marketing practitioners should also play a role in improving the image, perhaps establishing closer links with institutes and universities, which provide sales-related courses. Practitioners could also provide scholarships or fee assistance to students pursuing sales management and sales-related courses.

The study does have some shortcomings, which leads to opportunity for future research. Firstly, the study generalizes and compares results for the entire Malaysian student populations ignoring possible regional differences in each context. This was however done because the Klang Valley region chosen for this study is widely considered as representative of Malaysia and therefore the best alternative under the circumstances. Secondly, the sample size, is considered as a small and an obvious limitation. Further studies with larger, more representative samples are suggested.

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