

Innovation leads to results: the impact of digitalisation, organisational innovativeness and salespeople's innovative behaviour on customer relationships

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ABSTRACT: This study examines how perceived organisational innovativeness and perceived organisational digitalisation influence innovative salesperson behaviour and customer relationship performance. Building on boundary-spanning theory, relationship marketing, and task–technology fit, it tests an integrated model in which organisational innovativeness shapes both the perceived digital environment and frontline innovative behaviour, which in turn affect relationship outcomes. Drawing on survey data from 233 Hungarian sales professionals, the analysis shows that perceived organisational innovativeness has significant positive effects on innovative salesperson behaviour, perceived organisational digitalisation, and customer relationship performance. Perceived organisational digitalisation also positively influences innovative salesperson behaviour, but its direct effect on customer relationship performance is not significant. Innovative salesperson behaviour has a significant positive effect on customer relationship performance and partially mediates the effect of perceived organisational innovativeness, whereas indirect paths involving

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perceived organisational digitalisation are not significant. The findings suggest that digitalisation alone does not automatically improve relationship outcomes; rather, its value depends on an innovation-supportive organisational context and on salespeople's ability to translate organisational and technological resources into innovative customer-facing behaviour. The study contributes by integrating organisational, technological, and behavioural mechanisms into the explanation of relationship performance and offers managerial implications for firms seeking to strengthen customer relationships through digitalisation.

KEYWORDS: innovativeness, sales digitalisation, customer relationship performance

JEL CODES: L25, M31, O33

1. Introduction

Personal selling is one of the most important elements of the interface between the company and the market. Salespeople simultaneously convey information between the organisation and customers, manage relationships, and are often key players in bringing new solutions and offers to the market (Leifer – Delbecq 1978; Rindfleisch – Heide 1997; Ryan – O'Malley 2016). In parallel, digitalisation, as an organisational-level capability and tool system, is transforming sales work. It changes customer interactions, decision support, information flow, and internal coordination (Ahearne et al. 2008; Ahearne – Rapp 2010; Vial 2019; Pelsóci et al. 2021). The interpretation of sales performance can therefore increasingly be limited to transactional indicators, as long-term relationship quality, trust, and commitment directly influence retention, repeat purchases, and recommendations (Morgan – Hunt 1994; Doney – Cannon 1997; Reinartz et al. 2005).

Digitalisation holds practical promise in facilitating faster, more consistent, and more personalised customer service. However, organisational outcomes depend not only on the introduction of tools but also on their actual use, their alignment with tasks, frontline employees' behaviour, and whether adoption is voluntary or mandated (Davis 1989; Goodhue – Thompson 1995; Kenesei – Cserdi 2018; Micallef et al. 2024). Research also suggests that organisational innovativeness and a supportive climate can foster individual innovative behaviour, which may be particularly important in sales work, including new customer solutions, customisation, and proactive problem-solving (Liu et al. 2019; Kör et al. 2021; Groza et al. 2021). Additionally, digital sales can impact readiness and performance by improving access to information, coordination, and customer value creation (Mullins – Agnihotri 2022; Trainor et al. 2014).

However, existing findings are less likely to provide a single, coherent explanatory chain of how organisational innovativeness is simultaneously linked to perceptions of digitalisation, innovative salesperson behaviour, and ultimately customer relationship performance. It is particularly appropriate to apply a model that interprets the organisational context (innovativeness), the technological environment (digitalisation) and individual-level behaviour (innovative salesperson behaviour) together in terms of relationship marketing outcomes, as trust-commitment logic is one of the most stable theoretical foundations of lasting business relationships (Morgan – Hunt 1994; Weitz – Bradford 1999; Wielgos et al. 2021).

This study addresses this gap with a quantitative, cross-sectional online questionnaire study, through which we test a path model on a sample of Hungarian sales professionals. In the model, we examine how perceived organisational innovativeness is related to perceived organisational digitalisation, innovative salesperson behaviour, and customer relationship performance. Further, we analyse the relationship between digitalisation and innovative behaviour and their impact on performance (Mullins – Agnihotri 2022; Trainor et al. 2014). When deriving the hypotheses, we start from the boundary role of salespeople and the emergence of innovation in the workplace (Leifer – Delbecq 1978; Ryan – O'Malley 2016), and then interpret the outcomes based on the performance logic of relationship marketing (Morgan – Hunt 1994; Reinartz et al. 2005). We then discuss digitalisation not simply as technology introduction, but from the perspective of task-technology fit and embeddedness in sales processes (Davis 1989; Goodhue – Thompson 1995; Ahearne et al. 2008). Finally, we organise the relationships into a coherent framework in which organisational innovativeness and digitalisation contribute to customer relationship performance through innovative salesperson behaviour (potentially directly) (Wielgos et al. 2021).

2. Literature review

2.1. Salesperson and organisational innovativeness: roles, forms, and mechanisms

Every organisation has employees whose work is concentrated on its boundaries, supporting interfirm exchanges through various activities. The literature refers to these employees as boundary spanners (Leifer – Delbecq, 1978), and this role is most often assumed by salespeople. Boundary spanners act as a bridge between the organisation and its customers (Rindfleisch – Heide 1997), and they also support innovation by acquiring resources and utilising or promoting the

firm's innovative outputs (Ryan – O'Malley 2016). This multifocal role requires salespeople to adopt an innovative mindset, but it also necessitates organisational-level innovativeness; thus, these two depend on each other.

Personal innovativeness is expressed in both behaviour and attitude (Schillewaert et al. 2005) and can be observed from different perspectives among salespeople. On the one hand, innovative salespeople engage in more extensive information searches to understand their customers and the environment in which they operate, and to identify solutions that enhance their effectiveness (Senecal et al. 2007). On the other hand, they tend to adopt novel practices and tools in the hope of delivering higher performance (Amyx et al. 2016). Innovative salespeople are often characterised as intrapreneurs within an organisation, who view and treat their customers in a more entrepreneurial, customer-centred manner through adaptive selling behaviour (Anderson – Oliver 1987). Thus, an innovative organisational climate that supports this behaviour is a prerequisite for success.

An innovative organisation should motivate its employees to explore novel approaches to problem-solving (Volery – Tarabashkina 2021) and adopt and exploit these approaches at the organisational level (Liu et al. 2019). This capability stems from processes, infrastructure, and management's approach to innovation, and all these elements should be aligned to create a truly innovative organisation. Firms that exhibit innovative behaviour often differ from others and are considered pioneers, and this role often yields higher returns in both customer acquisition and retention (Kunz et al. 2011). This further supports the role of innovativeness in sales, as Weitz and Bradford (1999) define effective boundary spanning as building long-term relationships with customers rather than depending on transactional interactions.

2.2. Customer relationship performance: trust, commitment, and relational outcomes

Over three decades have passed since the concept of relationship marketing emerged in the literature, fundamentally changing how sales performance is measured. Despite traditional transactional metrics (e.g., revenue, market share) remaining part of the evaluation framework, their role and nature have evolved over the years. Morgan and Hunt (1994) emphasised the importance of viewing customer relationships as long-term commitments and treating them as such. Evidence supporting this argument shows that organisations that adopt this approach can achieve a higher return on investment because customer retention costs less than acquisition (Reinartz et al. 2005) and committed customers are more likely to repurchase (Doney – Cannon 1997).

The literature identifies several key antecedents and consequences of long-term, commitment-based customer relationships. De Ruyter et al. (2001) argue that the characteristics of the offer (e.g., perceived value and quality), the relationship (e.g., support and communication), and the market (e.g., replaceability and the costs and risks associated with switching) affect the different aspects of commitment. Shukla et al. (2016) provide a more detailed view of these types of commitments. Although Morgan and Hunt (1994) theorise that trust is a direct antecedent of commitment, this view is not universally accepted in the literature. Commitment, in turn, can directly decrease the propensity to leave (Morgan – Hunt 1994), repurchase intention (Verhoef 2003; Mbang0 2018), and advocacy (Harrison-Walker 2001), all of which can later translate into performance increases measured by traditional metrics.

2.3. Digitalisation in selling: the task–technology fit across sales stages

Sales digitalisation is commonly approached as a question of how technologies become embedded in the work that constitutes selling. In this respect, the sales process provides a useful organising frame because its stages entail different task requirements. Given that salespeople operate at the interface between the firm and the market, the effective use of digital tools depends not only on access to technology but also on the capability to deploy it in ways that match the demands of specific activities, ranging from prospecting and qualification to post-sale relationship maintenance (Rangarajan et al. 2004). The task-technology fit perspective is particularly informative in this case, as it defines fit as the extent to which technology assists individuals in performing their task portfolio (Goodhue – Thompson 1995). This emphasis on fit resonates with broader information systems research, which highlights that perceived usability and ease of use are key drivers of adaptation and sustained utilisation (Davis 1989). Empirical work in sales similarly indicates that when technologies align with selling tasks, they can improve salesperson adaptability, facilitate knowledge acquisition, and enhance customer service, suggesting that digitalisation influences not only efficiency but also the substantive quality of salesperson work (Ahearne et al. 2008). This logic is consistent with staged models of the sales process, which treat pre-sales, sales, and post-sales as bundles of distinct sub-tasks and therefore as potential loci for differentiated digital support (Guenzi – Habel 2020).

At the same time, the relevant technologies are heterogeneous. Sales digitalisation typically involves a portfolio that spans relatively standard hardware and a diverse set of software-based systems, including CRM platforms, sales force automation, social media applications, mobile solutions, and analytics tools that

restructure workflows and customer interactions (Ahearne – Rapp 2010; Bányai 2016). These technologies can affect value creation by expanding data availability, reshaping customer expectations, and enabling new patterns of coordination and interaction, with downstream implications for organisational effectiveness (Vial 2019). Importantly, relationship outcomes are unlikely to follow from adoption alone. Rather, they depend on how salespeople appropriate digital tools in situ. Prior research treats personal innovativeness as an enabling condition for such appropriation because it is associated with technology exploration, more intensive information search, and a greater willingness to trial new solutions once tools are available (Schillewaert et al. 2005). When digital tools are used to introduce new customer-facing practices that elevate customer value, relationship performance may improve through mechanisms such as increased responsiveness and greater transparency, thereby supporting trust and commitment in interfirm relationships (Badrinarayanan – Ramachandran 2024). Taken together, these arguments imply a process-oriented interpretation of sales digitalisation: performance gains are most plausible when the technologies that are deployed fit the task demands of each stage of the sales process and when salespeople leverage them in novel, value-creating ways (Goodhue – Thompson 1995; Micallef et al. 2024).

2.4. Hypothesis development

Organisational innovativeness is often regarded as a contextual resource that enhances individuals' innovative behaviour, as employees detect from the organisational environment the extent to which experimentation, new idea adoption, and change are supported. For example, Kör et al. (2021) found that perceived organisational innovativeness affects employees' innovative behaviour, further supporting the claim that the organisational climate also shapes behavioural outcomes. Translating this mechanism to the sales environment, Groza et al. (2021) show that sales management and organisational operations can be shaped in a way that increases organisational innovativeness and its impact on performance, suggesting that if salespeople perceive the organisation as more innovative, they are more likely to choose new solutions and innovative tools in customer management. The broader logical chain between support, creativity, and innovativeness is also confirmed by Volery and Tarabashkina (2021). The latter found that perceived organisational support and the work environment have significant explanatory power regarding innovative work. Regarding the characteristics of the sales frontline, Mullins and Agnihotri (2022) show that, in relation to digital sales, the psychological climate shaped by organisational and managerial factors enhances the frontline's readiness and effectiveness in adopting new

solutions (Aleksandrova et al. 2024). Finally, Kalra et al. (2022) also provide sales-specific evidence that the perceived characteristics of the workplace environment (e.g., competition, climate) significantly shape creative sales behaviour, which is an expression of salesperson innovativeness. Therefore, we hypothesise that:

H1: Perceived organisational innovativeness positively affects innovative salesperson behaviour.

The impression that an organisation is open to new ideas and supports experimentation can be considered a key antecedent of perceived digitalisation, because innovation-friendly organisational operations are usually accompanied by strategic intentions and a willingness to invest in capability building and in digital technologies. Lin et al. (2020), for example, find that organisational innovativeness is associated with a stronger push towards e-business transformation, suggesting that more innovation-oriented firms are also more inclined to advance along a digitalisation path. Along similar lines, Mikalef et al. (2022) show that innovativeness helps explain the formation of AI-related capabilities, consistent with the idea that an innovative organisation is better positioned to absorb and normalise digital solutions. Evidence at the technology-adoption level points the same way. El-Haddadeh (2020) reports that innovativeness increases the likelihood of adopting cloud services, a core component of many digitalisation efforts. In industrial contexts, Moschko and Blažević (2023) further indicate that innovation-oriented leadership and governance can embed digital tools into innovation work and collaborative routines, reinforcing digitalisation through day-to-day practices. Finally, Cao et al. (2025) link cultures that prioritise innovation to stronger digital transformation capabilities, implying that when employees perceive their organisation as genuinely innovative, they are also more likely to interpret the firm's actions as meaningful progress in digitalisation. Therefore, we hypothesise that:

H2: Perceived organisational innovativeness positively affects perceived organisational digitalisation.

Customer relationship performance should be higher if customers perceive a company as truly innovative, as these attributes typically lead to more relevant solutions, faster adaptation to changing requirements, and a better overall customer experience. In business-to-business relationships, Woo et al. (2021) provide evidence that innovative service behaviour by suppliers is associated with stronger customer outcomes and greater loyalty, indicating that innovation on the provider side may translate into relationship-relevant outcomes. Simi-

lar patterns can be observed in consumer services. Hollebeek and Rather (2019) show that when customers view a service as innovative, they report higher satisfaction, stronger willingness to recommend, and greater loyalty – outcomes commonly used to capture relationship strength. Kurtmollaiev et al. (2022) likewise argue that innovation pays off mainly to the extent that customers notice it and attach value to it. Pilawa et al. (2022) find support for the attraction mechanism in a large retail sample, indicating that service-innovative retailers are more attractive. Finally, Keiningham et al. (2024) build on this idea over time and across industries, linking customer perceptions of innovation to stronger satisfaction dynamics and market performance patterns. This reinforces the idea that an innovative reputation can help build more lasting, valuable customer relationships. Therefore, we hypothesise that:

H3: Perceived organisational innovativeness positively affects customer relationship performance.

If the organisation is perceived by salespeople as seriously supporting their work with digital tools, data-driven analytics, and technology-enabled processes, it is reasonable to expect this will positively impact salespeople's innovativeness. Such a digitalised, supportive environment not only sends the message that trying new methods is acceptable but also generates concrete infrastructure, such as fast access to information, automated administration, and feedback, which reduces the effort and risk of implementing new solutions. According to Mullins and Agnihotri (2022), a favourable digital sales climate increases salespeople's digital readiness, a logical prerequisite for innovative behaviour, as those who confidently use digital tools are more likely to experiment with new customer management and sales solutions. Guenzi and Nijssen (2020) also point out that digital transformation can be both a resource and a burden, but when salespeople perceive digitalisation as a useful, supportive resource, they are more likely to invest energy in developing new routines, channels, and solutions. According to Giovannetti et al. (2022), during periods of technological and process change, not everyone remains in a merely adaptive role; some salespeople actively take a leading role in the change, which can be considered a behavioural manifestation of innovativeness. This micro-level mechanism is complemented by Biemans and Malshe (2024), who empirically demonstrate that sales and marketing use digital tools across multiple phases of innovation ideation; meaning that digitalisation provides a practical tool for generating, evaluating, and refining new ideas. Finally, according to Biemans (2023), digital tools are also transforming the connections and information flows between sales and marketing, and if this creates better coordination and greater transparency, it provides salespeople with broader access to resources and perspectives, which

is conducive to creative problem solving and the development of new customer solutions. Therefore, we hypothesise that:

H4: Perceived organisational digitalisation positively affects innovative salesperson behaviour.

Organisational digitalisation is expected to positively impact customer relationship performance, as a digitalised organisation can provide more consistent and personalised interactions, faster response times, and a more integrated customer journey, which typically leads to satisfaction, engagement, and loyalty. This mechanism is well supported by empirical evidence that digital business capabilities improve customer performance, indicating that organisational digitalisation is reflected not only in internal efficiency but also in customer-side outcomes (Wielgos et al. 2021). In B2B environments, customer relationship digitisation often includes CRM development. The implementation of artificial intelligence-based CRM systems can enhance performance by automating customer relationship management activities and providing better decision support, thereby indirectly supporting customer relationship effectiveness (Chatterjee et al. 2021). The digitalisation perceived by the customer is particularly impressive at the omnichannel and digital touchpoint levels, where higher channel integration quality increases customer engagement and openness to relationship programs, ultimately translating into higher loyalty (Gao – Huang 2021). A similar logic can be observed with digital customer service solutions, where the service and interaction quality of chatbots strengthens loyalty through satisfaction, so the quality of digitalisation can directly improve relationship outcomes (Hsu – Lin 2023). Finally, in the retail omnichannel context, the strategic orientation towards digitalisation increases loyalty through consumer experience, satisfaction and engagement, which together can be interpreted as a summary indicator of customer relationship performance (Cuesta-Valiño et al. 2023). Therefore, we hypothesise that:

H5: Perceived organisational digitalisation positively affects customer relationship performance.

Salesperson innovativeness is expected to improve customer relationship performance because novel ideas and non-routine solutions enhance customer-perceived problem-solving, value creation, and interaction quality, which typically translate into satisfaction, trust, engagement, and longer-term retention. In B2B environments, for example, improvisational, situation-specific solution creation has been shown to increase customer satisfaction (Hultman et al. 2019). Similarly, salesperson skills that support creative and co-creative interactions can enhance

customer participation and citizenship-like contributions, as well as engagement with salespersons, which is an important component of relationship durability and quality (Delpechitre et al. 2018). At the front line, the raising of ideas in the customer's interest and the constructive questioning of the status quo (customer-focused voice), as well as flexible deviation from the usual routines to solve the customer's problem, represent mechanisms that affect the customer's perceived service effectiveness and relationship performance (Gazzoli et al. 2022). In addition, how customers perceive the salesperson is important for customer relationship performance, as perceptions of trust, expertise, and interaction quality lead to stronger relationships and more favourable outcomes; therefore, innovative salesperson behaviour is expected to improve these perceptions (Arditto et al. 2020). Finally, the empirical operationalisation of creative selling and its role in sales also supports the view that novel, non-normative solutions can be integrated into performance logics in a relevant and measurable way, so the expectation that they will also improve customer relationship performance is well-founded (Locander et al. 2023). Therefore, we hypothesise that:

H6: Innovative salesperson behaviour positively affects customer relationship performance.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

This research utilised a quantitative design and tested the hypotheses through a cross-sectional online questionnaire. Measurement items were drawn from established scales (Ellonen et al. 2008; Siamagka et al. 2015; Schwepker – Schultz 2015; Gatignon – Robertson 1989; Trainor et al. 2014) and were translated into Hungarian using a cross-validation procedure, in which two researchers independently checked the wording and resolved any differences.

3.2. Sample and data collection

Participants were recruited using convenience and snowball sampling. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the quantitative survey was administered online via Qualtrics between 2020 and 2022. Our sampling aim was to include only sales professionals (salespeople and key account managers) who sell complex products and work in non-in-store selling roles. A total of 233 responses were col-

lected from sales professionals in Hungary, a country which requires improvement in digitalisation (Endrődi-Kovács – Stukovszky 2022). As shown in Table 1, the sample is balanced in terms of the years of data collection (2020: 32.2%, 2021: 33.5%, 2022: 34.3%), gender (female: 42.9%, male: 57.1%), and market type (B2B: 45.1%, B2C: 54.9%).

Table 1. Sample characteristics

		N	Valid percentage (%)
Year of data collection	2020	75	32.2%
	2021	78	33.5%
	2022	80	34.3%
Gender	Male	133	57.1%
	Female	100	42.9%
Sector	Commerce	52	22.3%
	Finance-insurance	46	19.7%
	Industry	38	16.3%
	Information-communication	14	6%
	Real estate	12	5.2%
	Services	11	4.7%
	Other	60	25.8%
Job position	salesperson	198	85%
	key account manager (KAM)	35	15%
Market type (B2B or B2C)	B2B	105	45.1%
	B2C	128	54.9%
		Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Years spent in sales		9.39	8.65
Age		35.2	11.5

Source: authors.

3.3. Measures

In this study, we relied exclusively on measurement scales that have been pre-tested and are suitable for a personal selling context. Perceived organisational innovativeness was measured with a three-item scale adapted for salespeople from Ellonen, Bloomqvist, and Puumalainen (2008) and Siamagka et al. (2015). Innovative salesperson behaviour was operationalised using Schwepker and Schultz's (2015) three-item value-added behaviour scale. Perceived organisational digitalisation was assessed with a four-item measure adapted from Gatignon and Robertson (1989) and reworded to reflect the use of digital tools in sales. In addition, to capture digital technology usage in sales, we followed

prior work that conceptualises sales technology as a portfolio of tools that can improve both process efficiency and customer engagement (e.g., Mullins – Agnihotri 2022). Accordingly, the framework focused on established categories that are widely used in day-to-day selling, including CRM systems, social media platforms, mobile devices (e.g., laptops and tablets), and communication technologies. Customer relationship performance was measured with Trainor et al.'s (2014) five-item scale. All constructs were assessed using 7-point Likert-type response formats.

In this study, “perceived organisational innovativeness” reflects how innovative respondents consider their organisation’s management practices and organisational climate to be; “perceived organisational digitalisation” captures the extent to which respondents believe their organisation relies on and uses digital technologies more intensively than competitors; “innovative salesperson behaviour” refers to respondents’ self-perceived engagement in creative and innovative selling practices; and “customer relationship performance” indicates the extent to which respondents perceive that they or their organisation can retain customers over the long term.

3.4. Data analysis

The data analysis was conducted using Jamovi software. To test the hypotheses, a path model was estimated using Maximum Likelihood, with bootstrap standard errors (5,000 repetitions) and 95% confidence intervals. The model is saturated; therefore, the interpretation of fit indices (e.g. CFI, TLI, RMSEA, SRMR) is not relevant (Hu – Bentler 1999; Kenny et al. 2015). To assess normality, the Shapiro-Wilk test (Shapiro – Wilk 1965) was run, and to test construct reliability, Cronbach’s alphas were calculated (Cronbach 1951).

4. Results

The Shapiro–Wilk tests were significant for all constructed variables ($p < .001$), which is common in such a large sample (Fagerland 2012); the skewness values indicated a slight negative skewness. The internal consistency of the measuring instruments was sufficiently high across all constructs (Cronbach’s alpha: perceived organisational digitalisation, $\alpha = .926$; perceived organisational innovativeness, $\alpha = .858$; innovative salesperson behaviour, $\alpha = .881$; customer relationship performance, $\alpha = .882$).

The model explained 44.0% (95% CI [0.342; 0.533]) of the variance of perceived organisational digitalisation, 16.5% (95% CI [0.086; 0.259]) of the vari-

ance of innovative salesperson behaviour, and 9.6% (95% CI [0.036; 0.178]) of the variance of customer relationship performance. A supplementary analysis further showed that COVID-19-related circumstances did not have a statistically significant effect on the model results.

According to the path estimates, perceived organisational innovativeness had a significant and positive effect on innovative salesperson behaviour ($b = 0.23$; $\beta = 0.27$; $z = 3.34$; $p < .001$; 95% CI [0.100; 0.375]), thus supporting H1. There was also a positive relationship between perceived organisational innovativeness and perceived organisational digitalisation ($b = 0.70$; $\beta = 0.66$; $z = 13.89$; $p < .001$; 95% CI [0.599; 0.802]), thereby supporting H2. Perceived organisational innovativeness also had a significant positive direct effect on customer relationship performance ($b = 0.17$; $\beta = 0.25$; $z = 2.88$; $p = .004$; 95% CI [0.057; 0.296]), which supports H3. Furthermore, perceived organisational digitalisation positively influenced innovative salesperson behaviour ($b = 0.13$; $\beta = 0.16$; $z = 2.17$; $p < .030$; 95% CI [0.013; 0.258]), thus supporting H4. In contrast, the direct effect of perceived organisational digitalisation on customer relationship performance was not significant ($p = .195$); therefore, H5 was not supported. Finally, innovative salesperson behaviour significantly positively affected customer relationship performance ($b = 0.15$; $\beta = 0.18$; $z = 2.80$; $p = .005$; 95% CI [0.050; 0.266]), supporting hypothesis H6.

Based on the results, innovative salesperson behaviour partially mediated the effect of perceived organisational innovativeness on customer relationship performance ($b = 0.03$; $\beta = 0.05$; $z = 2.15$; $p = .031$; 95% CI [0.011; 0.079]), indicating that the innovative organisational environment is partly translated into better customer relationship performance through salespeople's innovative behaviour. However, the indirect paths involving perceived organisational digitalisation (perceived organisational digitalisation \rightarrow innovative salesperson behaviour \rightarrow customer relationship performance, and the sequential path perceived organisational innovativeness \rightarrow perceived organisational digitalisation \rightarrow innovative salesperson behaviour \rightarrow customer relationship performance) did not prove to be statistically significant based on the results ($p > .10$). Overall, the model suggests that organisational innovativeness directly contributes to relationship building performance, and in addition, part of the effect is exerted through the activation of innovative salesperson behaviour, while perceived organisational digitalisation itself does not directly improve relationship management outcomes, but rather may have an effect through behavioural mechanisms. The results of the structural model are visualised in Figure 1, and the hypothesis-testing decisions are summarised in Table 2.

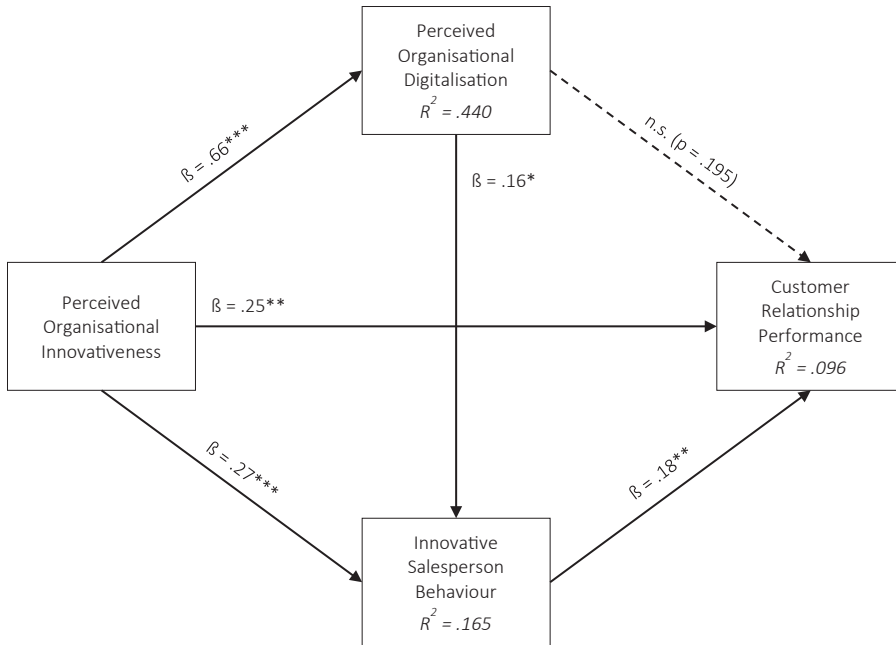


Figure 1. Results of the path analysis

Source: authors, based on Jamovi software outputs.

Note: Standardised path coefficients (β) are shown. The dashed line indicates a non-significant path. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. The indirect effect of perceived organisational innovativeness on customer relationship performance via innovative salesperson behaviour was significant ($\beta = .05$, $p = .031$). Indirect paths involving perceived organisational digitalisation were not significant.

Table 2. Results of hypothesis testing

Hypothesis	Decision
H1: Perceived organisational innovativeness positively affects innovative salesperson behaviour.	Accepted
H2: Perceived organisational innovativeness positively affects perceived organisational digitalisation.	Accepted
H3: Perceived organisational innovativeness positively affects customer relationship performance.	Accepted
H4: Perceived organisational digitalisation positively affects innovative salesperson behaviour.	Accepted
H5: Perceived organisational digitalisation positively affects customer relationship performance.	Rejected
H6: Innovative salesperson behaviour positively affects customer relationship performance	Accepted

Source: authors, based on Jamovi software outputs.

5. Discussion

Overall, the results at the level of hypotheses indicate that the organisational context (perceived innovativeness) and the technological environment (perceived digitalisation) are significantly related to salesperson innovative behaviour and customer relationship performance in the examined model at several points; however, not all hypothesised relationships were confirmed with the same strength. As data collection occurred in a period influenced by COVID-19, a supplementary analysis was conducted to assess whether the pandemic had a specific effect on the estimated relationships. No statistically significant effect was found, indicating that COVID-19 did not materially alter the study's main results. Below, we interpret the obtained relationships exclusively in terms of the hypotheses, focusing on their positioning within the literature.

The interpretation of the hypothesis regarding organisational innovativeness and innovative salesperson behaviour (H1) is particularly clear from the literature. The supporting result is consistent with the fact that an innovation-friendly organisational environment and climate are stable antecedents of individual innovative behaviour (Liu et al. 2019; Kör et al. 2021; Groza et al. 2021). In the sales context, this is emphasised because, due to the boundary-spanning role, salespeople often solve problems autonomously and situation-specifically, and the organisation's signals (e.g., how much experimentation is tolerated, how much initiative is supported) directly affect how much the front line dares to come up with new solutions (Leifer – Delbecq 1978; Ryan – O'Malley 2016).

Regarding the hypothesis examining the relationship between organisational innovativeness and organisational digitalisation (H2), the supporting result confirms that digitalisation is not just a technological investment but an organisational capability whose development and perception are also shaped by the company's openness to innovation, experimentation norms, and development orientation. This interpretation is consistent with the view that digitalisation is an organisational transformation or a capability-based phenomenon (Vial 2019), as well as with the view that the value of technological solutions stems from organisational embeddedness and task fit (Goodhue – Thompson 1995).

The hypothesis concerning perceived organisational innovativeness and customer relationship performance (H3) was supported, consistent with claims in the literature that innovative corporate operations can yield more relevant solutions, faster adaptation, and a more favourable customer experience, as reflected in relationship-side outcomes. For example, in a B2B environment, innovative service provider behaviour is associated with stronger customer outcomes and loyalty, which directly supports the translation of innovation into relationship performance. A similar pattern emerges in consumer services, where customer perceptions of innovativeness are associated with higher satisfaction, willing-

ness to recommend, and loyalty. Our results are also consistent with the argument that the returns to innovation are realised especially when customers perceive and value it, and when innovative service providers/retailers become more attractive to customers; this is also supported by longer-term, cross-industry evidence linking customer perceptions of corporate innovativeness to more favourable satisfaction dynamics and market performance patterns.

In the case of the hypothesis regarding the relationship between digitalisation and innovative salesperson behaviour (H4), the positive result supports the empowering role of digital tools. Digitalisation can improve access to information, decision support, and coordination, facilitating innovative solution-finding and proactive customer management (Ahearne et al. 2008; Trainor et al. 2014; Mullins – Agnihotri 2022). This conclusion also resonates with the idea of task-technology fit. If technology truly supports everyday sales tasks, it is more likely to become a “resource” for innovative behaviour, rather than an administrative burden (Goodhue – Thompson 1995).

The hypothesis of innovative salesperson behaviour and customer relationship performance (H6) can be interpreted within the logic of relationship marketing. The supported result suggests that innovative behaviour, such as solution-oriented adaptation, customer-specific offer design, or proactive problem prevention, can contribute to customer-perceived reliability and relevance, which improves customer relationship performance through increased trust and commitment (Morgan – Hunt 1994; Doney – Cannon 1997; Reinartz et al. 2005). In a sales context, this is also consistent with the basic idea of adaptive selling and the partner role concept (Weitz – Bradford 1999).

The rejection of hypothesis H5 is counterintuitive at first glance, because managerial discourse often suggests a direct, automatic relationship-improving effect of digitalisation. However, the result suggests that value in the case of digitalisation is not necessarily realised directly, but rather through conversion mechanisms, meaning that technological resources are converted into customer relationship performance when the organisation and the front line transform them into routines and capabilities that create customer value (Bharadwaj 2000). This pattern is also consistent with the classic productivity paradox, which addresses the performance effects of IT investments and concludes that the return on technological developments often becomes visible with a delay, through intermediate organisational changes and measurement issues (Brynjolfsson 1993). In marketing and CRM research, several empirical results support the logic of indirect effects: for example, the use of social media technology does not necessarily increase performance directly, but rather exerts its effect through CRM capabilities (Foltean et al. 2019), while the impact of technological resources on customer relationship performance can often be interpreted through capability-based mediators, such as social CRM capabilities (Trainor et al. 2014). Similarly,

the use of digital technology can strengthen customer relationship performance through intermediate value-creating mechanisms, such as customisation, thereby making the impact of digitalisation meaningful (Lin – Lin 2023). Overall, the rejection of H5 does not point to the irrelevance of digitalisation, but to the condition that relationship-side outcomes are better explained by the capabilities and behaviours enabled by digitalisation that are actually implemented in organisational and sales practice.

Finally, to the extent that the model also tested mediational relationships, the supported mediation conveys the theoretical message that the effects of organisational innovativeness and digitalisation on customer relationship performance are largely channelled through sales behaviour. This fits well with the boundary-spanning view, as the impact of the organisation and its technological infrastructure on customer relationships is embodied in frontline actions (Leifer – Delbecq 1978; Ryan – O’Malley 2016).

5.1. Theoretical contributions

This study contributes to the theoretical frameworks of boundary-spanning and relationship marketing in several ways. First, we extend the boundary-spanning approach in a micro-level way to the digital sales environment by conceptualising the salesperson not as a mere information broker but as a resource-conversion mechanism. Our findings suggest that organisational resources and conditions, especially organisational digitalisation, do not automatically translate into customer relationship performance; rather, they create customer value through the innovative behaviour of the frontline. This approach refines the interpretation of the boundary role by considering the action patterns and adaptive behaviours that transform organisational and technological inputs into realisable benefits in specific customer interactions as essential for performance (Leifer – Delbecq 1978; Ryan – O’Malley 2016; Weitz – Bradford 1999).

Second, the study nuances relationship marketing theory in a technology-intensive sales context by interpreting digitalisation not as a relationship-enhancing factor in itself, but as a conditional, indirect antecedent. According to the classical logic of relationship marketing, lasting business results are stabilised through mechanisms of trust and commitment; technological developments contribute to this by perceptibly increasing relevance, consistency, and service quality for customers. The rejection of H5 in the study accordingly indicates that the “presence” of organisational digitalisation does not necessarily translate directly into customer relationship performance, which theoretically reinforces the relationship marketing interpretation that relationship-side outcomes are fundamentally explained by the value creation and

consistent customer experience in interactions, rather than by the underlying technological infrastructure per se (Morgan – Hunt 1994; Doney – Cannon 1997; Reinartz et al. 2005).

Third, the study contributes to clarifying the relationship between organisational innovativeness and customer relationship outcomes by treating organisational innovativeness not only as an internal operational characteristic but also as a contextual factor relevant to customer relationship performance. Support for H3 suggests that an innovation-friendly, development-oriented organisational environment may be directly associated with more favourable customer relationship outcomes. This theoretically bridges organisational orientations and the performance logic of relationship marketing. Interpreted in terms of the boundary-spanning role, suggests that organisational-level perceptions of innovativeness may make behavioural and interaction patterns on the frontline more likely to increase relationship quality and performance in a way that is also perceptible to customers (Leifer – Delbecq 1978; Liu et al. 2019; Kör et al. 2021; Groza et al. 2021).

5.2. Managerial implications

Based on the study's results, the primary lesson for management decision-makers is that the expected benefits of sales digitalisation do not automatically translate into improved customer relationship performance. The rejection of hypothesis H5 warns that introducing digital tools cannot, in itself, be considered a relationship-building strategy, but should be treated as part of a capability- and process-development program that creates measurable value in salespeople's everyday customer interactions. Accordingly, it is advisable to link digitalisation initiatives to specific support for frontline work and to define the goal of technological developments not as increased tool usage, but as behavioural changes that lead to customer-side outcomes.

In practice, this means that when planning digitalisation investments, it is worth applying the task-technology fit logic. Systems and functions that reduce friction at critical points in sales tasks, improve information quality, and speed up decision-making are more likely to deliver relationship-side results. Usability, access to relevant data, and integration into sales processes are particularly important during implementation, as relationship performance improves when technology enables more consistent, accurate, and customer-specific sales responses, not when it creates additional administration or a sense of control.

Based on H3, organisational innovativeness can directly correlate with better customer relationship performance, so management should treat innovation not only as a product or process development issue but also as a customer relation-

ship strategy. One consequence is that it is advisable to consciously strengthen norms, opportunities for experimentation, and rapid learning cycles in the sales organisation, as these create a context in which salespeople more easily translate organisational capabilities into customer-level value. The leadership role here is twofold: on the one hand, the resources and autonomy necessary for innovation must be provided; on the other, a framework for experimentation must be established to ensure the consistency of the customer experience is not compromised.

The model's logic holds that innovative salesperson behaviour is a key to achieving strong customer relationship outcomes. This is why companies should work on building skills that link digitalisation and innovation. This can include training that is not based on general systems training but instead focuses on use cases specific to the customer's needs. For example, training in recognising customer data, making customised offers, preventing problems before they happen, and supporting multi-actor decision-making. Coaching and the formalisation of good practices are equally important: the dissemination of effective digital and innovative routines reduces usage variance and increases the chance that the benefits of digitalisation will also be reflected in relationship performance.

Finally, performance management systems should be aligned with relationship outcomes and the behaviours that drive them. If the organisation rewards only short-term, transactional metrics, salespeople will be less interested in using digitalisation to create value and to innovate in customer management. Based on the study's results, it is therefore justified to incorporate metrics and incentives that shift the frontline's focus to relationship quality, retention, recommendations, or customer satisfaction, while also making it clear how digital tools and innovative salesperson practices contribute to customer relationship performance.

5.3. Limitations and further research

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the cross-sectional questionnaire design is valuable because it can simultaneously reveal and test multiple relationships in a comparable manner, but it limits the power of causal inferences. Further research should use longitudinal or multi-level data collection to more reliably separate the dynamics of digitalisation and innovative salesperson behaviour, as well as the lagged effects of relationship marketing outputs.

Second, self-reported, single-source measures have proven well suited to practical research, especially when examining perceived organisational phenom-

ena, but they may increase the risk of common-method and perceptual biases. Future studies should include data from multiple sources, such as management evaluations, activity or outcome measures from CRM systems, and customer feedback, to achieve a more objective and triangulated operationalisation of key constructs and performance outcomes.

Third, the research findings can be interpreted within the context of a given country and sample characteristics, which may limit generalizability across industries and sales situations. A promising direction for further research would be a comparative analysis spanning multiple countries and industries, and the inclusion of moderators such as task complexity, customer uncertainty, the nature of products and services, or sales process standardisation, as these may influence when and how digitalisation translates into customer relationship performance. Despite these limitations, the study offers useful insight into how organisational innovativeness, digitalisation, and innovative salesperson behaviour jointly shape customer relationship performance.

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