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Women's underrepresentation in business-to-business sales: Reasons, contingencies, and solutions

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Abstract

Sales faces the second-largest gender gap of any corporate function, with women's underrepresentation even more pronounced in business-to-business (B2B) sales and at higher hierarchical levels. Concurrently, the call for a more gender-diverse sales force is gaining momentum for social and economic reasons, moving the question of how to attract and promote women in B2B sales to the top of sales managers' agenda. Using an inductive approach, we uncover male-centricity of communication and job structures in B2B sales as the underlying reasons deterring women from entering and advancing in B2B sales. Specifically, male-centricity implies a misfit between B2B sales and women's self-conception and needs. By deriving contingencies of these relationships, we offer solutions to women's underrepresentation in B2B sales by showing, for example, which sales positions are less prone to signal or create a misfit to women and what gender-inclusive resources sales departments can provide and saleswomen can build.

Keywords Business-to-business sales · Sales management · Sales diversity

With a significant underrepresentation of women across hierarchies, sales faces the largest gender gap of all corporate functions except supply chain and logistics (Blum, 2020). While the share of sales positions held by women is low in general (35%), it is even lower in firms selling to organizational customers (business-to-business [B2B] sales) and as the hierarchical level rises. Thus, women hold less than 20% of B2B sales leadership positions (Blum, 2018; Shea et al., 2021). This lack of gender diversity in B2B sales is problematic for two reasons.

First, women's underrepresentation in B2B sales contrasts with socioethical arguments for greater sales force diversity. Socioethical arguments for a higher representation of women in the sales force build on the principle of equal opportunities (Mio, 2006), which posits that all individuals, regardless of gender or origin, should receive equal consideration when filling vacancies and equal opportunities to shape job structures. Relatedly, companies are under increasing legal pressure to adhere to the principles of equal employment opportunity (e.g., the setting of certain gender quotas).

Second, women's underrepresentation in B2B sales contrasts with economic arguments for greater sales force diversity. These economic arguments center on potential bottom-line benefits from a more gender-diverse sales force, such as higher sales quota attainment and customer satisfaction (Forrester, 2021; Jackson & Joshi, 2004). Specifically, research suggests that customer orientation (Srivastava et al., 2023), job satisfaction (Piercy et al., 2001), and also sales quota attainment, and thus sales productivity and company profits, rise as sales force diversity increases and women lead sales teams (Shea et al., 2021; Shoreibah et al., 2019; Voria, 2018; Xactly, 2019). Thus, a business case for a gender-diverse sales force exists beyond a social justice perspective.

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In B2B sales, three trends reinforce the economic importance of a gender-diverse sales force. First, B2B sales faces a significant talent shortage (Manpower Group, 2018), which makes leveraging often-overlooked female talent vital to sales departments' competitiveness, as failure to attract and retain female talent means revenue losses from inefficient use of scarce but valuable human resources. Second, B2B sales evolves into a consultative, long-term, and shared-value-oriented profession, which increases the importance of strengths linked to female talent, such as empathy, customer orientation, and relationship-building skills (Voria, 2018; Zoltners et al., 2020). Third, while increasingly more women move to senior roles in buyer teams, B2B sales currently fails to mirror this increasing diversity in the buyer landscape (Silverstein & Sayre, 2009), potentially evolving into a competitive disadvantage for selling firms. By contrast, ensuring gender diversity in the sales force may offer a vital benefit in sales pitches and proposals when selling to these increasingly diverse teams.

Surprisingly, although companies are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of increasing diversity in their sales force (CMO Survey, 2021, 2023), corporate actions to fight women's underrepresentation in B2B sales remain scarce. Symptomatically, a recent report shows that firms invest significantly more in communicating diversity externally than implementing internal measures (Moorman et al., 2021). Given the few actions taken, the share of women in B2B sales is increasing slowly, keeping B2B sales from reaping the benefits of a gender-diverse sales force. One reason for this awareness-action gap may be a lack of knowledge among stakeholders about the success factors for creating workplaces in B2B sales that are more attractive and conducive to women.

Despite the urgency to guide stakeholders in closing the awareness-action gap by informing them on successful approaches to attract and promote women in B2B sales, research on this topic is scarce. Specifically, most studies on diversity in sales date back more than 30 years, leading a recent literature review to conclude that research on diversity in sales has "lost traction in more recent years" (Kitanaka et al., 2021, p. 358). Given the dated and highly fragmented research on this topic (see the literature review section and Web Appendix A for details), extant research leaves stakeholders unclear about what keeps women from entering and advancing in B2B sales and how to address women's underrepresentation. As a result, prior scholarly insights add little to bridge the prevailing awareness-action gap related to gender diversity in today's B2B sales. To leverage this research opportunity and answer the call to inform "companies' efforts to promote inclusion and diversity" (Marketing Science Institute, 2020, p. 12), we examine how stakeholders can increase gender diversity in B2B sales. Specifically, we address two research questions (RQs):

RQ1 Which gender- and sales-specific barriers exist in B2B sales that keep women from (a) entering B2B sales and (b) advancing to B2B sales leadership?

RQ2 Which actions are required to (a) position B2B sales as a profession of choice for women and (b) create workplaces in which women can unleash their full potential?

To answer these RQs, we conducted extensive qualitative research comprising in-depth interviews with 60 salespeople across gender, industries, firm types, and hierarchical levels. We augmented these interviews with archival (e.g., diversity metrics in company reports) and quantitative (e.g., prestudy on B2B sales research samples, triangulation survey with university graduates) data. We further substantiated our insights by drawing on established frameworks in organizational psychology.

Our study offers two main insights. First, we provide an in-depth understanding of the specific perceptual and systemic reasons for gender- and sales-specific barriers to women's entry and advancement in B2B sales. With this, we shed greater light on the theoretical mechanisms explaining *why* current B2B sales positions in the labor market hinder women's entry and advancement. Specifically, we reveal that B2B sales labor market communication and job structures largely focus on the needs of men. Such male-centricity creates consequential barriers for (prospective) female salespeople through a (perceived) women-B2B sales misfit. Specifically, male-centricity creates entry barriers for women through a *perception-based process*, with women reluctant to enter B2B sales because of a misfit between their conception of themselves and their conception of B2B sales (perceived women-B2B sales misfit). Furthermore, B2B sales male-centricity leads to advancement barriers for saleswomen through a *performance- and motivation-based process*, with saleswomen unable to unleash their potential in the job because job structures in B2B sales do not align with their needs (women-B2B sales misfit).

Second, as the basis for solutions, we provide a nuanced understanding of the contingencies that explain *when* B2B sales positions are less likely to create gender-specific barriers for women. Specifically, we identify sales position characteristics (i.e., related to the industry, sales role, and incentive schemes) and gender-inclusive resources (i.e., job- and talent-focused) as important contingencies that may reduce barriers for women in that they mitigate the impact of B2B sales male-centricity on a (perceived) women-B2B sales misfit. In doing so, we reveal how the positioning and design of B2B sales positions in the labor market must change to make them more attractive and conducive to women, including a nuanced understanding of the theoretical mechanisms explaining this effect. Notably, as we identify both job- and talent-focused gender-inclusive resources vital to mitigating

the detrimental effects of B2B sales male-centricity, we consider the integrative efforts that organizations (e.g., in redesigning incentive systems) and women (e.g., in building psychological capital to cope with the high measurability in sales) can take to foster alignment between B2B sales and women's needs.

Overall, we enrich the often-scattered approaches to attract and promote women in B2B sales with theory-based and actionable intervention strategies. Specifically, we offer a roadmap for multiple stakeholders (e.g., in employer branding, sales management, or education) to increase women's representation in B2B sales by ensuring a greater alignment between current labor market communication, job structures, or educational programs and women's needs.

Review of literature and prestudy

Current state of knowledge on reasons for women's underrepresentation in B2B sales

A literature review on gender diversity in sales (Web Appendix A) shows that existing work either is dated or does not provide a comprehensive overview of the reasons for and solutions to women's underrepresentation in today's B2B sales. Notably, most work addressing diversity in sales dates back over three decades. This decline in research attention is concerning, as the issue of low gender diversity in sales has not lost relevance since then. Thus, while the issue of women's underrepresentation in B2B sales persists, the reasons for its persistence in the twenty-first century are little understood.

The lack of current insights into barriers to women's entry and advancement in B2B sales is particularly problematic because the existing work does not consider important changes in both the role of women and the focus of B2B sales as a profession. On the one hand, women have advanced tremendously in education and labor market participation in the last decades (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). On the other hand, B2B sales as a profession and the role of salespeople have changed significantly since the publication of these articles. For example, sales evolved from a short-term and transaction-oriented activity to a long-term and relationship-oriented profession (Hartmann et al., 2018). Given that these substantial changes are not reflected in older work on gender diversity there is a lack of clarity about the barriers to entry and progression for current female talent in today's relationship-oriented B2B sales environment.

Concurrently, the limited body of more recent literature (i.e., from 2000 onward) on the topic is subject to three limitations that impede the development of a holistic understanding of the reasons for and solutions to women's underrepresentation in B2B sales. First, recent studies primarily

focus on isolated and external barriers to women's entry and advancement in sales. These barriers include selective gender biases of sales managers, colleagues, or organizational clients in the evaluation of saleswomen (see Web Appendix A). These studies, however, largely overlook how a (perceived) misalignment between today's B2B sales and women's self-conception and needs might deter them from choosing a B2B sales career (i.e., internal entry barriers) and realizing their potential (i.e., internal advancement barriers). Second, these studies do not provide a clear picture of the external barriers either, as they provide mixed results on the presence and strength of gender bias in evaluating female salespeople. Third, the studies remain largely silent on possible contingencies and theoretical mechanisms that may account for such mixed results.

Therefore, more recent research fails to provide an overarching framework to identify which internal and external barriers contribute to women's underrepresentation in B2B sales. Specifically, the extent to which the low share of women in B2B sales (leadership) results from gender biases in evaluating women (i.e., external barriers) or previously neglected gender differences in the preferences and needs for an attractive and supportive workplace in B2B sales (i.e., internal barriers) remain unclear. Finally, potential interactions between internal and external barriers remain unexplored, though they may also explain the low gender diversity in B2B sales (Kossek et al., 2017).

As a starting point to address these gaps, we conducted a preliminary study to investigate whether a (perceived) misfit exists between today's B2B sales and women. Specifically, we aimed to test if such a misfit results from a closer alignment of B2B sales characteristics with the needs of (predominantly represented) men than those of women, a phenomenon we refer to as "B2B sales male-centricity."

Prestudy: B2B sales male-centricity

To test whether male-centricity exists in the job characteristics currently provided in B2B sales, we analyzed study samples used in current sales research to examine whether scientific recommendations for designing sales structures (e.g., incentive systems) reflect implicit gender biases. Specifically, we analyzed the samples used in publications in five major sales and marketing outlets over the last decade (see Web Appendix B for details). The results show that research in B2B sales works with predominantly male samples (70%). While the oversampling of male respondents may reflect the low gender diversity in B2B sales, this heavy representation of men in research may lead to scientific implications that include implicit gender bias. In other words, the needs of (oversampled) men are weighted more than those of (under-sampled) women. Notably, such gender biases are also likely in sales department data (e.g., data from employee surveys).

The resulting overemphasis on male salespeople's needs in (research) data is even more alarming because meta-analyses show that prior research neglects gender as a moderator (Good et al., 2022). Thus, combined with a neglect of potential gender differences in data analysis, the oversampling of men in research samples not only reflects women's underrepresentation in B2B sales but also might add to its reinforcement. For example, the oversampling of men limits understanding of gender differences in what constitutes an attractive and conducive workplace (e.g., the incentive systems linked to superior sales performance in prior research might be particularly conducive to male but not female salespeople).

Overall, the findings suggest that current job characteristics in B2B sales disfavor women by being more aligned with the needs of men than women (male-centricity of B2B sales). Building on this finding, we conducted qualitative research comprising expert interviews with B2B salespeople to further analyze the characteristics of B2B sales male-centricity and its consequences for women.

Qualitative main study

General methodological approach

Given the paucity of research on gender diversity in marketing and sales and the concurrent prevalence of established theories on gender diversity in related research fields (e.g., organizational psychology), we relied on a theories-in-use approach (Zeithaml et al., 2020), with an extensive qualitative field study at its core. Our approach focuses on theory elaboration, which entails using theory as a supporting framework to develop new conceptual insights through an inductive, qualitative approach (Fisher & Aguinis, 2017). To do so, we blended insights from in-depth expert interviews with salespeople with extant theoretical frameworks in organizational psychology and related literature in sales, diversity, and talent management (see Table C1 in Web Appendix C for an overview of the research process). By combining the principles of inductive (i.e., expert interviews) and deductive (i.e., theories in organizational psychology) reasoning, we ensured that our findings are grounded in prior knowledge of gender diversity in the workplace and best leverage our expert interviews to identify sales-specific insights related to women's underrepresentation in B2B sales.

Sampling and sample of expert interviews

To shed light on reasons for, solutions to, and contingencies of women's underrepresentation in B2B sales, we leveraged the personal experiences of salespeople working in B2B sales. We

recruited B2B salespeople through three channels: (1) a large social business network, (2) a network dedicated to women in sales, and (3) an extensive network of firms operating in the B2B sector. We included female and male salespeople in our sampling frame to avoid approaching the topic from a gender-biased perspective. We allowed theoretical sampling (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to direct the data collection process; that is, we selected interviewees by their ability to provide differentiated perspectives on our research topic. Thus, we performed initial data analysis after every 10 interviews and used the insights to identify interviewees who could offer novel views. We stopped data collection upon theoretical saturation (i.e., when subsequent interviews resulted in redundant information).

Theoretical saturation occurred earlier in the male sample, as the personal experiences of female salespeople proved more insightful for understanding women's underrepresentation in B2B sales. Specifically, while male salespeople's perceptions of the barriers to women's entry and advancement in B2B sales substantially mirrored those expressed by female salespeople, the women were able to provide more granular, nuanced, and novel insights into what causes or mitigates these barriers. Thus, the final sample consists predominantly of female salespeople ($n = 54$), while interviews with male salespeople ($n = 6$) helped test a potential gender-biased perspective. Overall, our sample size exceeds recommendations for exploratory research (McCracken, 1988) and samples of comparable qualitative work (e.g., Homburg et al., 2014; Ulaga & Reinartz, 2011).

Three aspects of our sample are worth mentioning. First, we achieved a high response rate of 61% despite not offering incentives beyond a study report, indicating our topic's high relevance to our research population. Second, our sample is highly diverse in terms of industries and firm types, which aligns with our aim to gain insights that hold across sales departments. Third, our sample covers a broad range of experience levels, ranging from interviewees who entered the profession recently (< 5 years) to B2B salespeople holding senior positions (e.g., head of sales). This sample allows accounting for the unique perspectives on women's entry and advancement barriers in B2B sales across hierarchies. Table C2 in Web Appendix C details the sample characteristics.

Interview design and facilitation

Interviews were semistructured and focused on three core themes related to our RQs: (1) barriers to women's entry into B2B sales, (2) barriers to women's advancement into B2B sales leadership, and (3) measures required to mitigate existing barriers. On average, interviews lasted 42 min.

As qualitative research inherently involves the interviewer becoming a cocreator of the data (McCracken, 1988), we carefully designed the interview guide and process to avoid biases (e.g., demand characteristics). After

obtaining general information about the interviewees' personal background (e.g., work experience) and sales department (e.g., department size, industry), we addressed each core theme in our interview guide with broad questions about personal experiences and general views on diversity in B2B sales. Next, we used several probing questions to follow up on specific experiences and views mentioned and to encourage their elaboration. When using such probing questions, we carefully phrased each interview question to prevent active listening (McCracken, 1988) and stated that there were no right or wrong answers and that we were not interested in a particular viewpoint (e.g., a feminist perspective). To carefully elicit elaboration on sensitive topics, we continuously consulted interviewees about whether they would feel comfortable disclosing more information about a sensitive topic (e.g., sexual harassment experiences) and always gave them the option not to do so. Throughout this process, we emphasized that we would keep the data confidential and that there was no way to trace the responses back to the company where they worked. With this, we aimed to create a sense of psychological safety in which interviewees felt empowered to express their opinions without fear of negative consequences. Table C3 in Web Appendix C details the interview guide. Web Appendix D details additional steps taken to ensure the reliability and validity of our interview design and facilitation.

Data analysis and trustworthiness checks

We coded the data with the help of MaxQDA, a software to systematize qualitative data. In line with Strauss and Corbin (1998), we engaged in open, axial, and selective coding. First, we used open coding to identify the main common themes in the data through a detailed analysis of interview findings, which resulted in a coding plan with all applicable codes and illustrative quotes. Second, we used axial coding to connect related information that was fragmented during open coding. Third, when using selective coding, we combined the principles of inductive and deductive reasoning (Good et al., 2021); that is, we constructed coding families by drawing on both interviewees' responses and additional data (i.e., prestudy results and theories in organizational psychology).

To ensure the trustworthiness of our findings, we took several steps to ensure the objective elicitation and interpretation of interviewees' responses. Moreover, we applied the principles of investigator and data triangulation. For investigator triangulation, we relied on independent coding by two researchers and reliability testing by a third researcher with no involvement in the study. For data triangulation, we relied on several additional data sources to validate our qualitative findings (i.e., a survey with university graduates, data on

B2B sales labor market communication, archival company data, and three management workshops). These trustworthiness checks are consistent with the criteria for assessing trustworthiness proposed for qualitative studies (see Lincoln & Guba, 1985). We detail the applied trustworthiness checks and triangulation approaches in Web Appendix D.

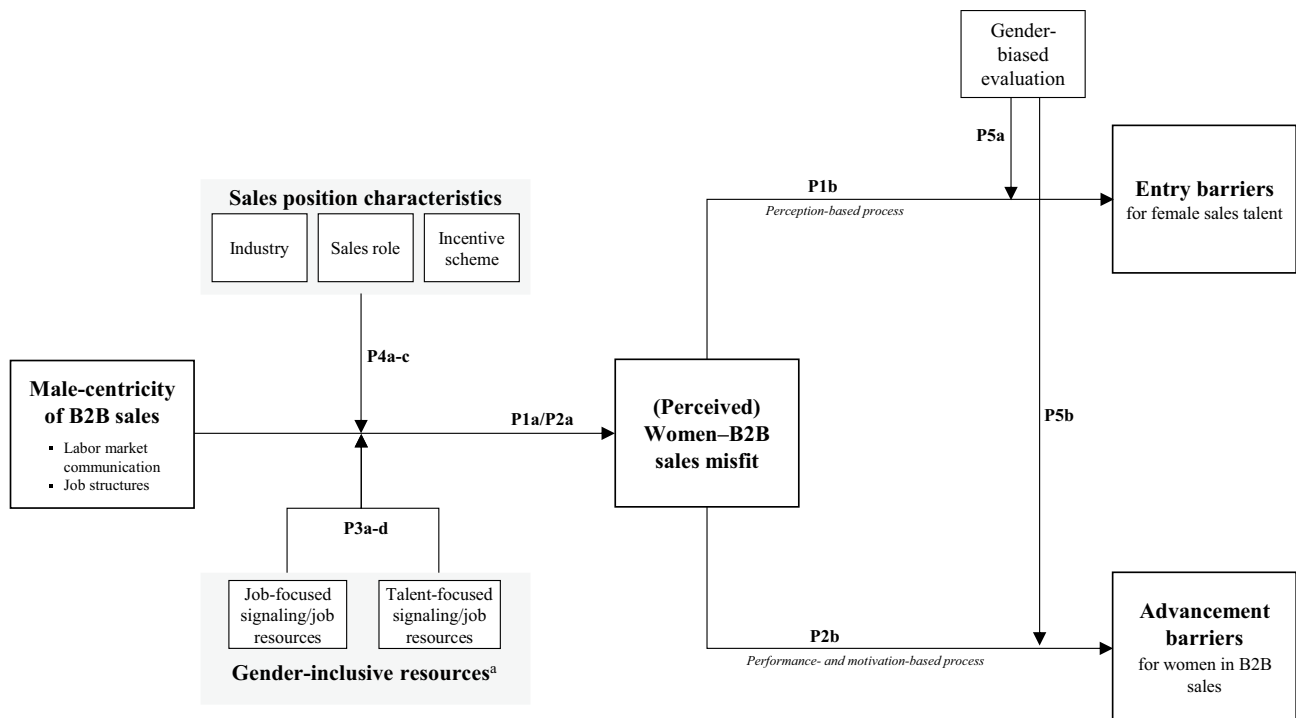
Theoretical background

In line with prior work combining the principles of deductive and inductive reasoning (Elsbach & Kramer, 2003; Good et al., 2021), we drew on two established theories from related research fields to substantiate our findings: lack-of-fit theory (Heilman & Caleo, 2018) and job demands–resources (JD-R) theory (Demerouti et al., 2001). In the following subsections, we present the theories' main tenets that underpin our conceptual framework to uncover sales-specific reasons for, contingencies of, and solutions to women's underrepresentation in B2B sales across hierarchies.

Lack-of-fit theory

The lack-of-fit theory is a framework in organizational psychology to understand gender gaps in work environments (Heilman & Caleo, 2018). Central to the theory is the assumption of a mismatch between the attributes society typically ascribes to men and women (gender stereotypes) and careers (career stereotypes). According to the theory, people typically ascribe *agentic* characteristics, such as assertiveness, competitiveness, and dominance, to men and *communal* characteristics, such as empathy, caring for others, and people-centeredness, to women (Abele, 2003). These perceptions are often overgeneralized but serve to simplify the environment by explaining how men and women typically are (descriptive gender stereotypes) and how men and women should be (prescriptive gender stereotypes).

Important to our research context, the theory proposes that people tend to ascribe agentic and communal attributes not only to other people (other-stereotyping) but also to themselves (self-stereotyping) and careers (career stereotyping). Thus, people differ in the degree to which they perceive others or themselves as agentic or communal (other- or self-conception) and the degree to which they ascribe agentic or communal characteristics to career options (career conceptions). This, in turn, can lead to a sex-typing of careers: some careers seem more suitable for one gender than others. For example, research shows a strong association between agency and management (Eagly & Karau, 2002), which makes management seem more suitable for men (i.e., agentic) than women (i.e., communal).



^aGender-inclusive resources work as signaling resources before women's entry in B2B sales (P3a) and as job resources upon women's entry in B2B sales (P3b). Though not the focus of our discussion, job resources can also have a signaling function to women before their entry into B2B sales. Both job- and talent-focused signaling resources (P3c) and job- and talent-focused job resources (P3d) interact in that their mitigating effect on the relationship between male-centricity and (perceived) women–B2B sales misfit is stronger if both are high.

Fig. 1 Conceptual framework explaining entry and advancement barriers for women in B2B sales

Job demands–resources theory

JD-R theory (Demerouti et al., 2001) originates from burnout and occupational stress research. In a business context, the model identifies workplace characteristics that positively or negatively affect health, job satisfaction, and job performance in highly demanding occupations, such as sales (Miao & Evans, 2013; Schmitz & Ganesan, 2014). According to the theory, workplace characteristics can be divided into two main categories: job demands and job resources. *Job demands* refer to “aspects of the job that require sustained physical or mental effort and are therefore associated with certain physiological and psychological costs” (Demerouti et al., 2001, p. 501). Examples of job demands are time pressure or discrimination by coworkers. *Job resources* are aspects of the job that help achieve work goals and personal growth (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). An exemplary job resource is social support from supervisors, such as sales managers, in the workplace.

Important to our research context, the theory proposes that job demands and job resources initialize two opposing processes. Job demands initiate a *health impairment process* that leads to negative personal and organizational outcomes

(e.g., reduced well-being or job performance). By contrast, job resources initiate a *work engagement process* linked to positive outcomes on a personal and organizational level (e.g., increased well-being or job performance). Moreover, the theory proposes that job demands and job resources interact, with demands being particularly detrimental to performance and well-being if resources are low. In other words, job resources can buffer the detrimental effects of job demands.

Conceptual framework, interview insights, and research propositions

Figure 1 illustrates our conceptual framework that blends our qualitative research findings with the theoretical frameworks on which we draw. Specifically, our emerging conceptual framework details *why* (antecedents and mediating constructs) and *when* (contingencies) barriers to women's entry and advancement in B2B sales exist. In what follows, we explain the key reasoning underpinning the conceptual framework as we derive research propositions from the findings of our qualitative fieldwork and its theoretical substantiations.

B2B sales male-centricity and its consequences for women

Our overarching conceptual framework is grounded in salespeople's observation of a greater alignment of current B2B sales job characteristics with the needs of men than women. In our interviews, male and female salespeople consistently noted that B2B sales job characteristics were closely aligned with the needs of men while often neglecting female-specific needs. Specifically, the interviewees observed that a (historical) orientation toward the male sales force currently manifests itself in (1) labor market communication and (2) job structures in B2B sales. We first discuss the adverse effects of male-centric labor market communication in the context of entry barriers for women in B2B sales and then discuss the adverse effects of male-centric job structures in the context of women's advancement in B2B sales.

Effect of male-centric labor market communication on perceived women–B2B sales misfit

Our interviewees consistently noted that current labor market communication focuses on the needs of predominantly prior generations of male talent. As such, interviewees felt that current communication does not sufficiently address the preferences and needs of a new generation of graduates in general and female graduates in particular. For example, interviewees observed that job ads frequently use masculine wordings (e.g., battlefield metaphors to describe sales tasks). Notably, this observation aligns with the results of a large-scale text analysis of a job portal provider that we gathered for triangulation purposes (see Web Appendix D). Specifically, the text analysis shows that sales ranks second among professions that use the most male-coded wording in job ads (Stepstone, 2021). Beyond such male-centricity in the wordings used, interviews revealed that job ads largely include benefits that focus on what was important to prior, predominantly male generations (e.g., focus on a company car and high commission). Moreover, interviewees identified a strong alignment of listed requirements with men's experiences (e.g., requiring proof of competitive sports activities or military experience).

Our interview findings revealed that prospective female salespeople primarily rely on labor market communication to form their conception of B2B sales, which they then use to anticipate the degree of fit between B2B sales and themselves ("Is B2B sales a career for me?"). According to many interviewees, the current male-centric communication signals to women that B2B sales is highly agentic (e.g., highly competitive or aggressive) but not communal (e.g., not relationship- or team-oriented). At the same time, interviewees reported that young women often largely draw on socially determined descriptive and prescriptive gender stereotypes

(i.e., women are communal and should not be agentic) to form their self-conception. As a result, and in line with lack-of-fit-theory, women's conception of B2B sales and their self-conception misalign. That is, a perceived women–B2B sales misfit arises.

Reflecting this line of reasoning, several interviewees reported that many young women feel that B2B sales is not a career for them because it lacks elements that are important to them (e.g., relation- and team-oriented business activities) and, at the same time, involves a range of activities that women cannot identify with or do not feel confident in mastering (e.g., tough bargaining with clients, competition with other salespeople). Specifically, the shared experiences of interviewed saleswomen in terms of their own experiences (e.g., thinking back to their younger selves) or observations of others (e.g., conversations with current university graduates) allowed us to identify three levels at which a perceived women–B2B sales misfit arises: job characteristics, competences, and personality.

On a *job characteristics* level, interviews revealed that a misfit often exists between women's preferences for communal job characteristics (e.g., teamwork) and their perceptions of purely agentic job characteristics offered in B2B sales (e.g., imaging B2B sales as a "lone-wolf club" with strong me-first mentality). On a *competences* level, interviews revealed that a misfit often exists between the competences women believe they possess (e.g., perspective-taking) and their perception that purely agentic competences (e.g., toughness, bargaining skills) lead to success in B2B sales. On a *personality* level, a misfit often exists between the personality traits women identify with (e.g., warm, empathetic) and the personality traits they attribute to a typical B2B salesperson (e.g., "a male tough guy"), which makes them feel as if they do not belong. Table 1 details the levels of perceived misfit, including illustrative interview quotes. In line with the interview findings, we put forth the following proposition (P):

P1a Male-centric labor market communication leads to a misfit between women's conception of B2B sales and their self-conception. This misfit exists at three levels: job characteristic preferences, competences, and personality.

Effect of perceived women–B2B sales misfit on entry barriers for women

In line with lack-of-fit theory, our interview findings suggest that a perceived women–B2B sales misfit creates entry barriers for women in B2B sales through a perception-based process. More specifically, interviewees noted that many women self-select against a career in B2B sales because they perceive the highly agentic characteristics of B2B sales

Table 1 Overview of levels of perceived women–B2B sales misfit (before career entry)

Levels	Definition	Illustrative quotes
Job characteristics	Perceived misfit between women's preferences for certain job characteristics (e.g., teamwork) and those offered in B2B sales (e.g., me-first mentality)	<i>Women often imagine sales as a lone-wolf club, in which manipulation or persuasion are key, which makes them feel that B2B sales is not for them</i>
Competences	Perceived misfit between women's competences (e.g., perspective-taking) and competences required to succeed in B2B sales (e.g., negotiation calculus)	<i>The feeling that skills women bring naturally to the table, such as listening and empathy, are not needed and that typically male skills, such as technical skills, are things women can't develop holds them back</i>
Personality	Perceived misfit between women's personality (e.g., warm, empathetic) and personality traits required to succeed B2B sales (e.g., cold, pushy)	<i>My stereotype was definitely male. Like the male tough-guy: aggressive, pushy, always be closing—made me feel I do not belong. However, this is not what complex B2B sales is about</i>

(as signaled by current male-centric labor market communication) as not fitting their communal preferences, competences, or personality (as they identify with based on gender role socialization). In line with this idea, many interviewees noted that they ended up in B2B sales “by accident” rather than intent, as they had (mistakenly) believed that B2B sales was not a career for them. In other words: Women do not apply for B2B sales since they feel they do not fit in. Thus:

P1b The greater the perceived women–B2B sales misfit, the higher the entry barriers for women in B2B sales.

Effect of male-centric job structures on women–B2B sales misfit

Regarding current job structures in B2B sales, interviewees consistently reported that job structures have historically been developed to meet the needs of an often exclusively male sales force and thus often do not sufficiently address the needs of saleswomen. Specifically, interviewees noted that job structures in B2B sales often reflect a high degree of agency (e.g., competition, aggressiveness) but a low degree of communion (e.g., teamwork, relationship orientation).

As such, these male-centric job structures misalign with the preferences and needs of interviewed saleswomen.¹ That is, a women–B2B sales misfit arises.

We identified three levels at which such a women–B2B sales misfit arises from male-centric B2B sales job structures: organizational, interpersonal, and task. On an *organizational* level, interviewed saleswomen consistently reported a misfit between their needs and the job structures B2B sales departments provide. First, they observed a misfit between their own needs and a masculine organizational sales culture that primarily serves the needs of male salespeople. For example, interviewees labeled the current culture as “macho” or a “kill-it culture” (see Table 2 for examples of masculine sales culture artifacts). Second, interviewed saleswomen reported a misfit between the endorsement of long working hours and face time as norms in many B2B sales departments and the obligations they often face for their families (family–sales conflict). This misfit is particularly pronounced for saleswomen with children.

On an *interpersonal* level, interviews revealed a misfit between the current male-centric social interaction patterns in B2B sales and women's needs. First, interviewees

¹ The interviewees were broadly consistent in rating the male-centric job structures in B2B sales as concerning from a general performance perspective. For example, they highlighted more communal job structures as crucial for success in today's increasingly consultative sales, a sentiment supported by research (e.g., Hartmann et al., 2018). Thus, the interviews suggested that many job structures in B2B sales positions misalign not only with women's needs for a conducive workplace but also with what leads to success when serving today's clients.

Table 2 Overview of levels of women–B2B sales misfit (on the job)

Categories	Prior knowledge and definition of key terms	Sales-specific interview insights	Illustrative quotes
Organizational level			
Misfit between a male-centric organizational sales culture and women's needs ("Kill-it culture")	<i>Organizational culture</i>: Shared values, norms, and beliefs, including cultural artifacts with strong symbolic meaning (e.g., language) that drive behavior in organizations (Deshpandé & Webster, 1989) In historical male-dominated functions, masculine norms become organizational norms, defining what it takes to succeed (e.g., be aggressive, put work above family; Glick et al., 2018)	- Performance expectations (e.g., quota pressure), pay structures (e.g., commissions), and constant client interaction create a unique culture in sales - Particularly sales culture artifacts create a misfit to women, manifesting in rituals, arrangements, and symbolic stories (e.g., use of battlefield metaphors, ringing the bell for a closed deal, legends of tough bargaining battles with clients)	- There is still this "kill-it culture," that kind of locker room style; always be closing - It begins with rewards structures and continues with the language used; all these sport and battlefield metaphors, this is a huge drawback for many women - It is about the organizational culture you encounter on the ground, this kind of bro culture that is often toxic to women
Misfit between male-centric work models and women's family obligations ("Mothers do not belong")	<i>Family–work conflict</i>: Interference between the time and investment to be allocated to family and work responsibilities (Netemeyer et al., 1996) - Family–work reduction efforts often focus on changing women but miss focusing on changing contexts that disfavor them (Kossek et al., 2017) - Family–work conflict has a greater impact on women (e.g., turnover) than on men (Netemeyer et al., 1996)	- Entrenched norms around long working hours, the need to adjust working hours to clients' needs, and managers and clients viewing sales and family as often contradictory or incompatible hamper family–work balance in sales - B2B sales departments lag behind in developing family-supportive work models (e.g., part-time positions, key account sharing)	- Being a woman in sales is tough. But being a mother in sales even more. They learn you're a mother and assume you cannot handle it. Managers but also clients - Finding a balance between a career and children is not valued in sales or not even possible. Turning the back to sales is often the only option
Interpersonal level			
Misfit between male-centric social networks and women's needs ("Boys club")	<i>Social networks at work</i>: Recurring patterns of interpersonal social relationships at work in which links between parties serve as channels for exchanging information and resources (Bolander et al., 2015) - Networking is more vital in sales than in any function, as it influences both internal decisions (e.g., promotions) and sales success (Plouffe, 2018) - The impact of salespeople's networking performance on sales profitability has sharply increased in recent years (Bolander et al., 2015; Homburg et al., 2023) - Women face unique networking challenges in opposite-sex environments (Morgan & Martin, 2006)	- Saleswomen are frequently excluded from (especially informal) networks and feel like "invaders in the boys club" when being the only woman at networking events - Two key reasons for this exclusion exist: - A similar-to-me bias leads men to prefer staying among their male peers and not giving up their "boys club." - Fear of being accused of ulterior motives makes men cautious about inviting women (especially young women) to informal meetings, such as dinners	- A different kind of networking happens if a woman is present. That's a fact. And not all men are comfortable with giving up their "boys club" - The reality was, we had the meeting, but the decisions were not made there. They were made when having that beer in the bar or on the golf course on the weekend - If the manager is a white man, it's easier for him to say, "Oh, I see myself in him," you know? And so, there's a natural, organic kind of mentorship happening that is harder to cultivate with women

Table 2 (continued)

Categories	Prior knowledge and definition of key terms	Sales-specific interview insights	Illustrative quotes
Misfit between male-centric, often sexist social interaction patterns and women's needs ("Sales girls")	Sexism: Unequal evaluation and treatment based on gender with sexual harassment as an important subform (Ciftci et al., 2020) • The risk of sexism is higher in male-dominated fields and when informal meetings outside working hours are frequent (Collinson & Collinson, 1996) • Sexism can be overt (i.e., easily observable sexual advances) and more subtle (i.e., less visible and often outside perpetrators' awareness; Ciftci et al., 2020) • The fear of being judged by others based on belonging to a reference group (stereotype threat) increases sales anxiety (Amin et al., 2023)	• Sexism is not a singular exception in sales, but a cross-industry and cross-hierarchical phenomenon, both within sales teams and in contacts with clients and sales partners • Overt sexism in sales is declining, but not its more subtle forms (e.g., sexist jokes, unwanted compliments), which undermine women's competence (e.g., asking women to win clients by wearing a short skirt). Though easily overlooked, these subtle forms can be equally draining • Saleswomen experience stereotype threats out of fear of being evaluated on the basis of their gender in interactions with clients	• <i>I was approached several times in an inappropriate manner by my customers. Especially as a young woman in construction, you get used to a lot</i> • <i>Sexism happens every day; maybe more subtle now, but it still exists, like jokes implying inability or unwanted compliments for our outfit every day</i> • <i>If one of my female sales reps doesn't know a minor detail of the product, the client will say: "Now the doll wants to sell me something she has no idea about." They won't test me on that as they do with her</i>
Task level			
Misfit between the tasks assigned to women and women's needs to unleash their potential ("Office mum")	Gender-biased task assignment: Assignment of tasks based on gender (De Pater et al., 2009) • Men often receive responsibility for strategically oriented tasks in teams, while women are in charge of support tasks with low visibility. Such gender-specific task allocation harms women's development across functions (Lyness & Thompson, 1997) • B2B sales is a highly results-driven and measurable function with a high correlation between assigned accounts and sales opportunities (Homburg, 2020)	• Two key reasons for gender-biased task assignments in B2B sales emerged: 1. Communal gender stereotypes create expectations that women are responsible for administrative duties in a team, such as maintaining the customer relationship management system 2. (Expected) motherhood bias makes managers reluctant to entrust women with important tasks (e.g., assign key accounts) as they fear their absence during motherhood and anticipate lower ambitions of women upon return	• <i>They see you as the office mum, responsible for all the admin stuff like making notes in meetings or organizing Christmas gifts. But that hardly ever helped you meet sales targets and get that promotion</i> • <i>Once you have kids, they put you on the mummy track: more back-office, less relevant clients.... The easiest way to stop a promising career of a woman is to take away responsible clients</i>

observed a misfit between their needs and highly male-centric sales networking events (e.g., events held at sports arenas or even striptease bars outside working hours), leading to the frequent exclusion of women from formal and informal networks. For example, female interviewees shared that they often felt like an “invader to the boys club” by being the only woman attending networking events. Second, they reported frequent experiences of sexism in interactions with clients and coworkers, including sexual harassment, which further reduced their feeling of belongingness on an interpersonal level (see Table 2).

On a *task* level, interviewees observed that a misfit often exists between women’s needs and the tasks sales managers assign to them. For example, they noted that sales managers tend to assign women sales-support tasks, such as managing the customer relationship management system, rather than client-facing tasks, such as selling to important key accounts (see Table 2). In line with these findings, we propose the following:

P2a Male-centric job structures lead to a misfit between B2B sales and women’s needs. This misfit exists at three levels: organizational, interpersonal, and task.

Effect of women–B2B sales misfit on advancement barriers for women

In line with JD-R theory, our interview findings suggest that a women–B2B sales misfit creates advancement barriers for saleswomen by limiting their opportunities to develop their full potential. Specifically, interviewed saleswomen reported frequent confrontations with B2B sales job structures that misaligned with their preferences and needs and thus were not conducive to their personal and professional development. For example, interviews showed that a misfit between job structures in B2B sales and many women’s obligations to their families (see Table 2) led to substantial costs at the individual level, including exhaustion and a psychologically draining role conflict between being a salesperson and a mother. Similarly, many interviewed saleswomen noted that the misfit to B2B sales on an interpersonal level (e.g., network exclusion, experiences of sexism) reduced their opportunity to bring their “true selves to work” and, in turn, their commitment to their sales team and organization. Furthermore, saleswomen reported that gender-biased task assignments create a disconnect between women’s responsibilities and what they need to enhance their visibility in the team and further grow personally and professionally.

Thus, the interviews revealed that saleswomen’s misfit to B2B sales translates into barriers to their advancement in sales leadership positions through a motivation- and performance-based process. On the one hand, interviewees

observed that this misfit between current B2B sales structures and women’s needs reduces saleswomen’s organizational commitment, job engagement, and performance expectations and, thus, their motivation to actively seek advancement opportunities (i.e., a motivation-based process). Importantly, interviewees noted that these adverse consequences of misfit extend to an increased likelihood of turnover, conceiving a women–B2B sales misfit not only as an advancement barrier driver for women in B2B sales but also as an exit driver. For example, interviewees observed “women turn their back on sales,” as B2B sales departments often fail to create job structures that meet women’s needs on an organizational, interpersonal, and task level. On the other hand, interviews revealed that a woman–B2B sales misfit impedes women’s advancement, as it leads to sales productivity costs such as missed sales quotas (i.e., a performance-based process). For example, interviewees noted that still-prevalent sexism among corporate buyers makes women less likely to close important deals. Similarly, the frequent exclusion of women from internal networks, particularly informal ones, makes women less likely to be considered for internal promotions. Thus:

P2b The greater the women–B2B sales misfit, the higher the advancement barriers for women in B2B sales.

Gender-inclusive signaling and job resources as contingencies

Our interviews revealed that B2B sales male-centricity creates consequential barriers for women by implying a misfit between B2B sales and women’s self-conception and needs. Against this background, our interviews helped us identify important contingencies of this relationship. As contingencies, we differentiate between gender-inclusive resources provided to prospective saleswomen in the recruitment process before entering B2B sales (signaling resources) and those provided to saleswomen on the job (job resources).

Gender-inclusive signaling resources

We propose that male-centric labor market communication contributes to a misfit between how women perceive B2B sales and how women view themselves (perceived women–B2B sales misfit). To mitigate the relationship between male-centricity and a perceived women–B2B sales misfit, our interviews helped us identify gender-inclusive signaling resources firms can provide to women in the labor market (i.e., when searching for jobs or in the recruitment process). Specifically, we assume that B2B sales male-centricity is less likely to lead to a perceived women–B2B sales misfit if gender-inclusive signaling resources exist that help

challenge women's conception of B2B sales (job-focused signaling) and reconsider their conception of themselves (talent-focused signaling).

Job-focused While the current male-centric positioning of B2B sales in the labor market generally signals a misfit to many women, interviews revealed that individual firms can weaken this effect by providing job-focused signaling resources that challenge the conception of B2B sales as purely agentic and non-communal and, thus, as not a fit for them. Our interviews reveal that such job-focused signaling goes beyond increasing communion in wordings used in job ads (e.g., the use of relationship metaphors). Individual companies can further mitigate the creation of a perceived woman–B2B sales misfit on the job characteristics and personality levels by adding communal elements in the description of job tasks (e.g., focus on consultative, customer retention activities), claimed benefits (e.g., focus on the importance of teamwork in today's B2B sales) and the description of an ideal salesperson (e.g., focus on personality traits related to warmth and empathy). Similarly, firms can mitigate the creation of a perceived women–B2B sales misfit on a competence level by listing only competences critical for the sales position to account for women's reluctance to apply when not meeting all criteria (Table 3). Another important measure that companies can take in this regard is revising sales requirements to allow different experiences as evidence of the suitability of male or female talent for a sales position (e.g., accepting volunteering as proof of high persistence in addition to competitive team sports or military experience; see Table 3).

Talent-focused Interviewees mentioned several pathways to mitigate the effects of B2B sales male-centricity on women by challenging women's conception of not being a fit for open roles in B2B sales. Specifically, interviewees highlighted the importance of fostering women's personal (e.g., sales workshops), vicarious (e.g., role models in sales), and educational (e.g., sales courses) exposure to sales to counteract their perception that neither their interests with regard to job characteristics nor their competences and personality match agentic careers such as B2B sales.

Two types of exposure emerged as particularly important contingencies: role models and sales competitions (see Table 3). Interviews revealed that these two exposure types help mitigate the creation of a perceived misfit at all three levels: job characteristics, competences, and personality. Specifically, they help counter women's perception that their interests, competences, and personalities are or should be communal but not agentic, leading them to believe that they do not fit agentic careers such as B2B sales.

According to the interviewees, these two exposure types play a particular role in mitigating the effect of B2B sales

male-centricity on women on all three levels because young women often have little exposure to these in their upbringing and development. Specifically, interviewees noted that women often lack female role models they can identify with, as well as experiences of competition in team-based settings (e.g., football clubs) that combine communion (e.g., teamwork) and agency (i.e., competition and measurability in B2B sales). In line with this reasoning, interviewees noted that even minor touchpoints with female role models (e.g., a saleswoman serving as a role model in a practitioner talk) or team-based competition (e.g., female graduates participating in a sales pitch as part of a university contest) were sufficient for women to reevaluate their potential fit for B2B sales.

Thus, while the current positioning of B2B sales in the labor market tends to signal a misfit to women in general, firms can mitigate this effect by fostering job-focused and talent-focused signaling resources that make women reevaluate their fit to B2B sales. We propose:

P3a Gender-inclusive job-focused and talent-focused signaling resources weaken the relationship between male-centric labor market communication and a perceived women–B2B sales misfit.

Gender-inclusive job resources

We propose that B2B sales male-centricity contributes to a women–B2B sales misfit on the job, that is, between the job structures provided in B2B sales and saleswomen's needs. Against this background, our interviews helped us identify the specific gender-inclusive job resources organizations can provide (job-focused) and women can build and cocreate (talent-focused) that can mitigate the relationship between B2B sales male-centricity and a women–B2B sales misfit. In line with this reasoning, our interviews with women who held executive ranks in sales revealed that women's advancement in B2B sales depends not only on the gender-specific challenges they face but also on the number of resources companies provide and women build to cope with these. Similarly, and in line with the proposed buffer effect of job resources in JD-R theory, saleswomen described B2B sales male-centricity as particularly detrimental to their advancement in the absence of gender-inclusive job resources.

Job-focused Interviewees revealed job-focused job resources on organizational, interpersonal, and task levels. To mitigate the effect of B2B sales male-centricity on a women–B2B sales misfit on an organizational level, interviewees stressed the importance of several resources, such as an inclusive sales culture that builds on the principles of diversity and inclusion and new work models that include new norms around working hours, flexibility, and balancing

Table 3 Gender-inclusive signaling resources that mitigate the relationship between B2B sales male-centricity and perceived women–B2B sales misfit

Categories	Prior knowledge	Sales-specific interview insights	Illustrative quotes
Job-focused signaling (“Position B2B sales as a fit for women”)	- Applicants will interpret virtually all informational cues in the recruitment process (e.g., job ads) to infer job characteristics (Connelly et al., 2011) - Job ads are the most visible and influential part of the hiring process. For example, pictures, wordings, or titles in job ads can substantially affect interest in a position (Hentschel et al., 2021) - Sales ranks second among corporate functions that use the most male-coded wording in job ads (Stepstone, 2021) - Women are less likely to apply for a position if they do not meet all requirements (Mohr, 2014)	Job-focused signaling resources in job ads mitigate the effect of B2B sales male-centricity on women’s perceived misfit on all three levels: - Job characteristics: <i>Example:</i> Focus on purpose, social contribution, and teamwork in job benefit descriptions - Competences: <i>Example:</i> Focus on key requirements by dividing between “can” and “must” criteria and identify how key competences in B2B sales differ between men and women - Personality: <i>Example:</i> Include communal characteristics and relational metaphors when describing an ideal salesperson	<i>Vision, purpose, teamwork. Sounds like buzzwords. But it’s more important today than the company car. Both from a gender and generational perspective</i> <i>Sales is more than just asking for business or cold calling. ... But again, if that’s what we equate it to... Why not talk about how you help your clients and may also contribute to society by launching your solution? And that you need a team for huge tech projects</i> <i>So I think that entry-level wise, the sales jobs out there aren’t marketed in the right way to women.... We’ve changed the way we talk about sales on our website. Ask the women on our team: how can we describe what you are doing in a way that appeals to other women? I do not have data yet, but we see first success</i> <i>If I see a job posting that basically says: the ideal candidate is an ex-marine or football player, it is no surprise that women won’t apply. Recruiters need to find out what these predictors of success are for women. Maybe volunteering, maybe managing multiple demands at home. Either way, we need to rethink</i> <i>Most job ads ask for hundreds of skills, although not critical. This puts many women off. Let’s focus on what is actually key</i>
Talent-focused signaling (“Show women that they can be a fit for B2B sales”)	- Applicants draw stronger inferences from labor market communication if their prior exposure to the career field advertised is low (Rynes et al., 1991) - Same-gender role models mitigate the negative effect of gender stereotypes on women (Marx & Roman, 2002) - Women are less likely to self-select into competitive situations than men but are more likely to choose competitive situations as teams (Healy & Pate, 2011)	Talent-focused signaling resources through personal, vicarious, and educational sales exposure mitigate the effect of B2B sales male-centricity on women. Two exposure types are particularly important for women to reduce the perceived misfit on all levels (job characteristics, competences, personality): - Sales role models <i>Examples:</i> mentorships, female testimonials in communication - Sales competitions <i>Examples:</i> university sales contests, team-based case studies	<i>I think it’s partially just that a lot of women aren’t shown that path, and they’re not pushed to try for these roles. Thus, many women will say: no, I can’t imagine that at all. That’s why, as long as no one explains and also shows you the reality in sales, we will always have difficulties finding women</i> <i>Once you’re looking for a job, you look for role models – young women like you doing the same. The problem with sales is, you hardly find any. Different situation if there is a woman, who made it in sales. Showing: this could be you</i> <i>Competition and team orientation are always perceived as incompatible. But it doesn’t have to be. There is also positive competition. However, this is hardly ever taught in Western cultures, especially in the socialization of girls. They are brought up to be nice and lovable. It is no surprise that they are deterred by the idea of measurability and competition</i>

private duties and a sales career. On an interpersonal level, interviewees consistently observed that mentors and role models, as well as corporate social support through human resource (HR) departments and sponsors in leadership, play an essential role in mitigating the effect of male-centric interaction patterns on women's felt interpersonal belongingness. On a task level, interviewees noted the importance of setting up organizational practices to ensure assigning women potential-oriented tasks and providing developmental feedback to counter misalignments between women's responsibilities and those crucial for their development. Table 4 details the specific gender-inclusive job-focused job resources identified in our expert interviews, including illustrative interview quotes and an overview of sales-specific aspects stakeholders must consider when building such gender-inclusive resources for their sales force.

Talent-focused In addition to the resources organizations can provide, interviewees consistently stressed the resources women can build themselves. Specifically, they highlighted the importance of women taking proactive strategies to change job structures to better align them with their needs, thereby ensuring the build-up of talent-focused job resources. The importance of such talent-focused job resources again relates to three levels: personal, interpersonal, and task. On a personal level, interviewees identified psychological capital and career planning proactivity as key resources for women to cope with the male-centricity of B2B sales job structures, thus, ultimately reducing its effect on a women–B2B sales misfit. On an interpersonal level, networking ability and personal social support emerged as key contingencies. For example, these resources help saleswomen penetrate male-dominated networks, which in turn mitigates a perceived misfit on an interpersonal level. On a task level, interviews cited the importance of taking ownership of tasks and proactively asking for more responsibility to counter the male-centricity of task assignments in B2B sales. Table 5 details the specific gender-inclusive talent-focused job resources identified in our expert interviews, including illustrative quotes and pitfalls women need to be aware of.

Overall, our findings show that, while the current job structures in B2B sales risk creating a misfit for women, not only firms but also saleswomen themselves can mitigate this effect by building job- and talent-focused job resources that help women better cope with the male-centricity of B2B sales. Thus, we propose:

P3b Gender-inclusive job-focused and talent-focused job resources weaken the relationship between male-centric job structures and a women–B2B sales misfit.

Interaction of job- and talent-focused resources

Interviews further indicated the incremental value of an interaction between job-focused and talent-focused resources. That is, the moderating effect of gender-inclusive resources is stronger when both job- and talent-focused resources exist, which applies for both the identified job- and talent-focused signaling resources (Table 3) and the job- and talent-focused job resources (Tables 4 and 5). The interviewees offered several insights into why this interaction helps mitigate the effects of B2B sales male-centricity.

Regarding signaling resources, interviewees shared that job-focused signaling often does not contribute to women's application intent unless talent-focused signaling complements it. For example, job-focused signaling initiatives intended to promote B2B sales as attractive to women are not sufficient to reduce their perceived misfit to B2B sales unless coupled with talent-focused signaling initiatives (e.g., working with female role models as testimonials) that challenge women's belief that they cannot succeed in B2B sales. At the same time, such talent-focused signaling initiatives have little chance of contributing to mitigate the creation of a perceived misfit to B2B sales among women unless complemented by corresponding efforts of B2B sales departments to change the B2B sales labor market positioning (e.g., changes in the benefits and requirements listed in job ads). Thus:

P3c Job- and talent-focused signaling resources interact, such that their buffering effect on the relationship between B2B sales male-centricity and a perceived women–B2B sales misfit is particularly strong if both job- and talent-focused signaling resources are high.

Regarding job resources, interviewees shared that job-focused resources often do not contribute to women's advancement unless talent-focused resources complement them. For example, the job-focused job resources that sales departments provide (e.g., establishing female networks) often add limited value and serve more to tick the “diversity” box if women do not invest time and effort in codesigning such structures to align them with their needs. That is, to mitigate the creation of a women–B2B sales misfit, it is not sufficient for sales departments to provide job-focused resources; women also need to build respective talent-focused job resources to gain the greatest advantage from these. At the same time, initiatives of women themselves to build talent-focused resources have little chance of mitigating the creation of a women–B2B sales misfit unless job-focused resources complement them. For example, women's activities on a personal (e.g., building psychological capital), relational (e.g., engaging in cross-industry networking), and task (e.g.,

Table 4 Gender-inclusive job-focused resources that mitigate the relationship between B2B sales male-centricity and women–B2B sales misfit

Categories	Prior knowledge and definition of key terms	Sales-specific interview insights	Illustrative quotes
Organizational level			
Inclusive sales culture (“ <i>Look beyond the surface</i> ”)	<i>Inclusive culture</i>: A culture in which employees feel like respected and esteemed members of a workgroup as they experience a treatment that satisfies their needs for belonging and uniqueness (Shore et al., 2011) - Continuously analyzing large-scale employee data is vital to ensure an inclusive culture (e.g., surveys, advanced analytics on performance or attrition; Minbaeva, 2017) - Higher management must endorse inclusion efforts to ensure lasting impact (Giscombe & Mattis, 2002) - To ensure the support of both minorities and majorities, combined communication of social and economic benefits of diversity policies is critical (Georgeac & Rattan, 2022)	- Building an inclusive sales culture goes beyond increasing the share of women in sales. Four elements are important to consider: - Continuous upward feedback from diverse employee groups (e.g., daily pulse checks) - Addressing entrenched elements of a masculine culture (e.g., symbolic rituals) - Situating inclusion goals next to sales quota attainment in incentive schemes at senior management levels - Transparency in the objectives and business case for any diversity and inclusion initiative	<i>We should not only ask: Do we have enough women? But: Do women feel safe and respected? Do we consider the needs of male and female sales employees equally?</i> <i>The culture must change. It can't just be about what's best for the white, old straight men at the top. But to do that, they have to listen. Mostly be forced to listen. The best way to do that is through salary. Putting diversity targets in incentive schemes</i>
New work models (“ <i>Make sales structures more flexible</i> ”)	<i>New work models</i>: Ability to make choices influencing when, where, and how long to engage in work-related tasks (Hill et al., 2008) - Workplace flexibility is particularly career-enhancing for women, but it can also be a double-edged sword by blurring boundaries between work and nonwork, reducing advancement opportunities, and leading to social exclusion (McKinsey & Company, 2020) - The mere existence of workplace flexibility is not enough if workers fear that using the options harms their career development (Hill et al., 2008)	- High measurability and performance-based pay (i.e., commissions for realized sales quota) allow decoupling performance and face time, which is crucial for the success of new work models - Managers often lack creativity and willingness to change to design new work models (e.g., assign two part-time sales reps to one sales territory) - To make new work models a resource for women, investments in (a) new norms around flexibility and (b) a supportive infrastructure for networking in a virtual setting are important	<i>In sales, salary depends on performance, not face-time, this makes it easier for managers to trust employees in flexible work models, at least in theory</i> <i>We need to establish new norms around flexibility. When we talk about New Work, it also has to mean that it has to be okay to say no to a late-night client event or a business meeting</i> <i>Make sure that working remotely does not mean missing out on networking</i>
Interpersonal level			
Role models and mentors (“ <i>See someone like you</i> ”)	<i>Role models</i>: Individuals serving as living evidence that certain achievements are possible (Filstad, 2004) <i>Mentor</i>: An experienced employee who offers support, direction, and feedback on career plans and personal development (Allen et al., 2004) - Tokenism (i.e., being the only woman in male-dominated fields) harms women's performance (King et al., 2010) - Mentorships (formal or informal) are crucial for women's development by offering emotion- and problem-oriented support (King et al., 2010)	- Female role models in sales leadership are particularly important for young women in sales - Informal mentorships often prove most important for saleswomen's advancement - Firms can support the creation of formal (e.g., assigning a career advisor) and informal (e.g., cross-hierarchy networking events) mentorships - Firms can support mentorships structurally (e.g., by providing code of conducts to alleviate men's fear of mentoring (young) women)	<i>We need more role models, female role models that women can look up to. It's hard to see yourself in a position where no one is like you</i> <i>Having a mentor. Yes, I think that was key to my advancement. We have formal assignments here, too. These can fit, but it won't always. For me, it was more the informal mentors that were important. People I could approach when facing problems</i>

Table 4 (continued)

Categories	Prior knowledge and definition of key terms	Sales-specific interview insights	Illustrative quotes
Corporate social support (“Be an ally for women”)	<i>Corporate social support</i>: Psychological or material resources offered by individuals at work (Jolly et al., 2021) • Social support from sales managers reduces salespeople’s emotional exhaustion (Lewin & Sager, 2008) • Career encouragement from senior managers helps women reach high levels (Tharenou et al., 1994) • A climate of psychological safety in which employees can express opinions regardless of hierarchy without fear of negative consequences increases performance and reduces turnover (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006)	• Leaders (i.e., direct reports) and sponsors (i.e., people in power in general) need to advocate for women and “wave the flag for her” in career decisions to counter B2B sales male-centricity • Beyond providing concrete action plans if faced with sexual harassment, HR must invest in a climate of psychological safety that allows for addressing more subtle, often overlooked cases of sexism (e.g., by offering bystander training on how to spot and address sexist behavior by colleagues or clients)	• You have to find your allies, people who support you and your goals. These are people like you, but also more influential people. Those who hold up the flag for you where needed. Say: she has what it takes for leadership • Most of the time, it comes down to the question: Is there a leader who trusts in a woman and supports her? • HR needs to do more: putting up a zero-tolerance for sexism sign won’t do it
Task level Potential-oriented tasks and developmental feedback (“Empower women”)	<i>Potential-oriented tasks</i>: Extent to which tasks are assigned by the potential of employees rather than seniority <i>Developmental feedback</i>: Information provided to employees that reveals how well they do their job and how they can improve and further develop • The required competences for field salespeople and key account managers vary (Sengupta et al., 2000) • Women tend to receive less concrete and actionable feedback than men (Doldor et al., 2021) • In B2B sales, sales cycles extend over several years (Homburg, 2020), implying potential interruption by paternal leave	• Sales managers often use past field sales experience as a criterion for assigning key accounts. Using objective, potential-, and competence-oriented metrics ensures greater gender fairness in client assignment • Saleswomen benefit from more regular and developmental feedback (i.e., constantly looking at the next career steps) • Feedback for saleswomen should also extend to parental leave and include opportunities to give women (financial) recognition for closed deals during their parental leave	• The fact that a woman does not ask for the next career step does not mean she is not ready for it. Women need more feedback and encouragement to take next steps • Give women credit during parental leave, particularly if sales cycles are long. I’ve spent 11 months getting a deal. A really big one. Then I got pregnant. My colleague took over and just closed, but got everything: the recognition and also the commission

proactively demanding ownership of key sales territories) level are often quickly stymied if B2B sales departments do not provide a supportive corporate culture (e.g., psychological safety) and infrastructure (e.g., coaching, networking options).

P3d Job- and talent-focused job resources interact, such that their buffering effect on the relationship between B2B sales male-centricity and a women–B2B sales misfit is particularly strong if both job- and talent-focused job resources are high.

Sales position characteristics as contingencies

Interviews further revealed that certain characteristics of a B2B sales position serve as contingencies of the relationship between B2B sales male-centricity and a (perceived) women–B2B sales misfit. Specifically, interviews showed that while the general male-centricity of B2B sales signals or creates a misfit for women, specific sales position characteristics can weaken or strengthen this effect. Specifically, sales position characteristics that signal or imply high agency (e.g., competition) strengthen the effect, while positions that indicate high communion (e.g., teamwork) weaken the effect. Interviews revealed that such contingencies exist on three levels: industry, sales role, and incentive scheme.

Industry characteristics

On the industry level, the proportion of goods (vs. services) in the portfolio of the selling company and the ratio of men to women in the specific industry emerged as key contingencies. For example, interviewees noted that while male-centric communication and job structures make many women perceive or experience B2B sales positions as unattractive (misfit to their self-conception) or not conducive (misfit to their needs), this tendency is more pronounced if the B2B sales position involves selling goods to a predominantly male customer base (e.g., manufacturing industries). By contrast, the effect is weaker if the position involves selling services in more female-dominated industries (e.g., tourism). Table 6 details rationales and illustrative quotes for sales position contingencies on all levels. We propose the following:

P4a The effect of B2B sales male-centricity on a (perceived) women–B2B sales misfit is weaker in service industries and industries with a predominantly female customer base.

Sales role characteristics

On the sales role level, the share of outside (vs. inside) sales and customer acquisition (vs. retention) activities involved in

a B2B sales position emerged as contingencies. Specifically, customer retention and inside sales activities tend to increase the (perceived) communal characteristics of B2B sales (e.g., opportunities for building long-term client rapport and teamwork) and thus mitigate the creation of a perceived misfit to women. Thus, while the current male-centric labor market communication and job structures in B2B sales signal or create a misfit for women in general, this adverse effect is weaker in inside sales roles and when firms focus on promoting and offering more customer retention (vs. acquisition) activities. Thus:

P4b The effect of B2B sales male-centricity on a (perceived) women–B2B sales misfit is weaker in inside sales roles and roles involving a high share of customer retention activities.

Incentive scheme characteristics

On the incentive scheme level, interviews revealed the share of individual-based (vs. team-based) incentives and high variable (vs. fixed) pay as key contingencies. Regarding individual- versus team-based incentives, interviews indicated that increased transparency and measurability of performance and stimulated rivalry (Homburg et al., 2023) through individual-based incentive schemes (i.e., high agency) strengthen the effect of B2B sales male-centricity. Regarding the share of variable versus fixed compensation, respondents noted that the income uncertainty associated with high variable pay often deters women, who they indicated have a lower tolerance for risk but a higher need for security than men (see Web Appendix E for details on changes in women's incentive preferences throughout their career). In turn, companies can mitigate the impact of B2B sales male-centricity on women by integrating more team-based incentives and offering a higher proportion of fixed (vs. variable) compensation. Thus:

P4c The effect of B2B sales male-centricity on a (perceived) women–B2B sales misfit is weaker if salary builds on team-based incentives and the share of variable pay is low.

Gender-biased evaluation of women as contingencies

As our interviews revealed, a (perceived) misfit between women and B2B sales mediates the relationship between B2B sales male-centricity and barriers to women's entry and advancement. Specifically, such a misfit drives entry barriers through a perception-based process that reduces women's likelihood to enter B2B sales, while driving advancement

Table 5 Gender-inclusive talent-focused job resources that mitigate the relationship between B2B sales male-centricity and women–B2B sales misfit

Categories	Prior knowledge and definition of key terms	Sales-specific interview insights	Illustrative quotes
Personal level			
Psychological capital (“ <i>Be your own ally</i> ”)	<i>Psychological capital</i>: Multidimensional construct consisting of self-reliance when facing challenges (self-efficacy), expectations of success (optimism), ability to recover from setbacks (resilience), and determination (hope; Luthans et al., 2007) - Psychological capital is a statelike construct, meaning it is largely malleable (Luthans et al., 2007) - Psychological capital is positively related to career commitment (Singhal & Rastogi, 2018) <i>Career proactivity</i>: Individuals’ ability to proactively manage their own careers to ensure achieving career goals and personal aspirations (Jiang et al., 2022) - Career planning positively correlates with measures of career effectiveness (e.g., salary, level; Gould, 1979) - Career plans for women are closely linked to family plans (Sandberg, 2015) and have a strong temporal aspect (Jiang et al., 2022), which makes gender-specific models for career planning vital (Tharenou et al., 1994) - In last decades, women’s career strategies moved from “family or career” to “family then career” over “career then family” to “career and family” (Goldin, 2021)	- Psychological capital is an important resource for women to cope with B2B sales male-centricity - Saleswomen can build psychological capital as a personal resource throughout their careers - Exemplary approaches include training (e.g., to build assertiveness in client interactions) or coaching (e.g., on strategies for dealing with clients’ sexist comments) and ongoing self-reflection on personal and sales-related goals - Women’s career planning must differ from that of men for two reasons: - double burden given greater involvement in unpaid work (e.g., housework, childcare) and - potential career disruption due to pregnancy - Saleswomen recommend dynamic adaptation of career strategies for women: - Before motherhood: not incorporating highly abstract family plans too early - During motherhood: stay in touch with clients - Upon motherhood: be transparent about the wish to take on more clients and territories - To penetrate male-dominated networks, saleswomen recommend suggesting alternative meeting venues and finding a male ally to encourage participation - To build new networks from scratch, saleswomen recommend building both female (i.e., to exchange gender-specific resources) and cross-gender (i.e., to learn from other perspectives and find sponsors) connections	<i>In sales, you need to be comfortable with rejection. Rejection happens every day. You will hear many no’s before getting to a yes. Women are not used to that. It starts with dating</i> <i>Building that assertiveness and confidence. This is important to advance in sales... I grew up with four brothers. Feel that helped me a lot</i> <i>Women want to be discovered; maybe it’s what they’re used to from dating.... Make their career plans a topic</i> <i>I had young women on my team who didn’t take the promotion due to vague family plans. Even if they didn’t have a partner yet.... Time to step back is when the child arrives, not years earlier</i> <i>Most sales managers are men. They have no idea how making a career works for women with children. Women need to find out for themselves</i> <i>Women need to engage in networking. In sales you need that network. To get things going, close the deal. Often, sales happens in those informal networks</i> <i>Female networks sound like good ideas. But in the end, it is a trap. You end up in a girls club</i>
Interpersonal level			
Networking ability (“ <i>Invade the boys club</i> ”)	(<i>Work</i>) <i>networking ability</i>: Ability to build and draw on interpersonal relations at work (Nesheim, et al., 2017) - Salespeople with active and far-reaching networks achieve superior sales performance (Bolander et al., 2015; Homburg et al., 2023) - A higher proportion of men in networks positively predicts income (Woehler et al., 2021) - Demands of gender-mixed groups for gender diversity are perceived as more legitimate (Hussain et al., 2022)		

Table 5 (continued)

Categories	Prior knowledge and definition of key terms	Sales-specific interview insights	Illustrative quotes
Personal support crafting (“Find your allies”)	<i>Personal support</i>: Support from the personal network that either addresses a recipient’s feelings (emotion-oriented) or assists by providing help to change the situation (problem-oriented; Boezeman and Elleners, 2007) • Having a family increases men’s work experience but adversely affects women’s careers (i.e., is a resource for men but a demand for women; Tharenou et al., 1997) • Cross-industry networks are particularly effective for women in terms of receiving task-oriented support and new perspectives (McCarthy, 2004)	• In light of the multitude of sales- and gender-specific demands women face, corporate social support is often insufficient and needs to expand to support outside the organization 1. Support from partners, friends, and family. This support can be emotion-oriented (e.g., encouragement upon client rejection) or task-oriented (e.g., taking on tasks at home) 2. Support from professional networks outside the organization. Here, task-oriented support proves particularly effective (e.g., learning about different sales approaches)	• Watch out when choosing a partner: Gender equality in the company is not enough • You need to have that conversation with your partner. What you need from him or her to support your career • People I trust; to have off-the-record conversations with or when I need a pep talk or a different opinion or approach. From a corporate perspective, there just aren’t enough resources available to you; you have to take care of it yourself
Task level Taking ownership (“Be top of mind”)	<i>Taking ownership</i>: The degree to which an individual is proactive in demanding more responsibility and more challenging tasks • Female salespeople expect a stronger correlation between their efforts and sales success than male salespeople (Dubinsky et al., 1993) • Assertiveness and likability positively correlate for men but negatively for women (Williams & Tiedens, 2016) • Female service employees risk negative evaluations by customers if they do not behave consistently with gender stereotypes (e.g., if assertive in addressing a customer complaint; Babin & Boles, 1998)	• Task ownership is vital for women to counter gender-specific task assignments and involves: 1. Saying no to sales-supportive tasks, that is, prioritizing tasks that help advancement over those that increase likability 2. Being proactive in demanding more responsibility and not falling into the trap of expecting more responsibility by simply doing a good job • Saleswomen need to be aware of social costs when taking task ownership (e.g., not being accepted by clients if behaving too assertively)	• Saying no to secretary task; you’re a woman, but you’re not the office mum • If you do not take up the space you wish to have, no one will offer it to you • Women expect that doing a good job is enough. But in sales, that’s harmful. If you manage all these background things well and help the sales guys at the top succeed, there is no reason for them to promote you. In the end, it is more convenient for them to have you as a worker down the line

barriers through a motivation- and performance-based process that diminishes women's aspirations and opportunities to advance in B2B sales.

Interviews revealed an important contingency of these relationships: *gender-biased evaluation*. Specifically, while the mismatch between many sales managers' prototype of a successful salesperson and their stereotype of women (i.e., women–B2B sales misfit) leads to a reluctance to hire and promote women, interviewees shared that from their experiences, gender biases in the evaluation of women strengthen these relationships. For example, several interviewees reported that highly qualified female applicants and team members were not hired or promoted even though they objectively outperformed their male counterparts.

Two focal types of gender biases in evaluating saleswomen emerged particularly frequently in our interviews: a similar-to-me bias and an (expected) motherhood bias. The *similar-to-me bias* describes people's tendency to prefer those with a similar background to themselves (McPherson et al., 2001). In B2B sales, this bias adds to favoritism to hire and promote men, given their similarity to the sales managers currently in power. An *(expected) motherhood bias* describes negative performance expectations of women with children or assumed family plans (Heilman & Okimoto, 2008). In B2B sales, this bias adds to sales managers' reluctance to hire, promote, and invest in young women. For example, managers fear negative consequences in the event of motherhood (e.g., having to find a replacement for selling to a critical key account during maternity leave). Moreover, managers implicitly attribute reduced career ambitions to women upon their return (see Table 2 for a discussion in the context of gender-biased task assignment). Thus:

- P5** Gender-biased evaluation of (prospective) saleswomen strengthens the relationship between a (perceived) women–B2B sales misfit and women's barriers to (a) entry and (b) advancement in B2B sales.

Triangulation survey

We conducted a quantitative triangulation survey with female and male university graduates to triangulate our findings on B2B sales entry barriers for women (P1). This study with university graduates served to confirm that our expert interview findings hold for current graduates who have yet to make their career choice. In addition, the study aimed to investigate whether the identified perceived women–B2B sales misfit is indeed greater for female students and hinders women, in particular, from entering B2B sales. Therefore, the objective of the survey was to answer the question: Do

female graduates still perceive a misfit between B2B sales and themselves (and more so than their male peers) that makes them reluctant to enter B2B sales upon graduation?

Methodology

Sample

We recruited participants by approaching soon-to-graduate students enrolled at a large university with a dedicated research department focusing on sales ($n = 107$). To increase our findings' generalizability, we recruited additional students via a crowdsourcing platform covering various universities without dedicated sales departments ($n = 78$). Thus, our final sample consisted of 185 students. Students' average age was 23 years, and 47% were female.

Measurement

Our key dependent variable is the perceived misfit between students' concept of B2B sales and their self-concept. In line with lack-of-fit theory, we used two core constructs to measure such a perceived misfit: agency and communion (see Web Appendix F for details). We used a dual scale (see Table F1) for agency and communion: one for students' career concept (how students see B2B sales) and one for their self-concept (how students see themselves). We then calculated the misfit measure for agency and communion by subtracting students' scores for their career concept from their self-concept. Thus, negative (positive) scores indicate that students believe that they lack (have an excess of) communal and agentic characteristics to succeed in B2B sales. We summed the absolute values of the two misfit measures to obtain an overall misfit measure. In this combined scale, higher scores indicate a greater misfit between students' B2B sales career concept and their self-concept (regardless of direction), with scores close to zero reflecting alignment.

Main findings

In line with our interview findings, for agency, we found a negative misfit score ($\Delta_{\text{Self-Career}} = -.51$, $SD = 1.33$; $p < .01$), suggesting that female students perceive themselves as less agentic than one needs to be in B2B sales. For communion, we found a positive lack of fit score ($\Delta_{\text{Self-Career}} = 1.42$, $SD = 1.33$; $p < .01$), suggesting that female students perceive themselves as more communal than a typical B2B salesperson. Thus, women perceive an overall misfit between themselves and B2B sales ($\Delta_{\text{Self-Career}} = 1.93$, $SD = 2.06$; $p < .01$). This perceived misfit negatively predicts students' career choice intent ($\beta = -.27$; $p < .01$); that is, the higher the perceived women–B2B sales misfit, the higher the entry barriers for

Table 6 Sales position characteristics that mitigate the relationship between B2B sales male-centricity and (perceived) women–B2B sales misfit

Category	Prior knowledge	Illustrative quotes
Contingencies: Industry		
Goods versus services	Production and consumption are inseparable in the service industry, which requires customer integration into the service process and thus makes relationship-building and perspective-taking particularly important for salespeople (i.e., skills often attributed to and appealing to women; Zoltners et al., 2020)	● <i>If it's in the service industry, where client rapport is key. That's where I usually see more women. What seems to be more for them. But also where they outperform</i> ● <i>I feel like looking at the areas where women are not that underrepresented might help. For example, pharmaceutical sales, but also more those service industries</i>
Male versus female	High proportions of men in industries create male-dominated working environments in which job ads, job structures, tasks and processes, and evaluation and promotion criteria are highly oriented toward men (Acker, 1990)	● <i>It's easy to get intimidated by sales, but even more in these male fields like IT. It's the idea; you need to be a tech expert, that male tech nerd</i> ● <i>...construction.... They simply can't imagine that a woman is out there knowing something about the products. And they won't give you a chance. Even more, if you are young</i>
Contingencies: Sales role		
Customer acquisition versus retention	Salespeople focusing on customer acquisition (i.e., hunters) differ from those focusing on retention (i.e., farmers). Research associates hunters with agentic traits (i.e., risk-taking, results-oriented) and farmers with communal traits (e.g., security-oriented, empathetic; DeCarlo & Lam, 2016)	● <i>When you're on the road looking for new clients. You will get many no's before you get to a yes. You need to get along with rejection. And that's often an issue for women. They are less used to that. It starts with dating</i> ● <i>In some roles, gender diversity is not an issue. We have many women in our key account roles. And they're good at it. My female [key account managers] are great</i>
Outside versus inside sales	Gender diversity is lower in outside sales than in inside sales. One reason for this could be more frequent experiences of sexism in interactions with corporate buyers (e.g., Dion et al., 1997; Liu et al., 2001)	● <i>If I look at my field salespeople, gender diversity is close to zero...in the field – no chance... remains a tough field for women. Lots of sexism, still</i> ● <i>Everyone is more comfortable at the home game, but you only win the season if you also win an away game. Women prefer to opt for the home game, not being out there and measurable</i>
Contingencies: Incentive scheme		
Individual- versus team-based incentives	Individual-based incentives stimulate rivalry, while team-based incentives encourage collaboration (e.g., promote advice-giving; Homburg et al., 2023). Women are more likely to self-select into team-based competition (Healy & Pate, 2011)	● <i>Give women the opportunity to try out sales in a safer environment. For example, by adding team-based incentives. Show them they've got it first. But also supporting inward mobility, like trying out sales as a marketer for some time</i> ● <i>Most women are team players. Individual-based incentives won't add to that</i>
Variable versus fixed pay	High commissions signal income insecurity and thus negatively affect salespeople's health (Habel et al., 2021). Women are more risk-averse than men in organizational settings (e.g., Varma et al., 2023), which might deter them even more from highly variable payment schemes than men	● <i>Women need more security. And believe less in themselves. A salary that is unsure and builds on their very own performance – that's the perfect combination of scaring women off</i> ● <i>So basically, if women tend to have a higher need for job or salary security, this might be one of the reasons why they don't feel that sales is a career for them</i>

women in B2B sales. Moreover, in line with our assumptions, the perceived misfit is greater for women ($\Delta_{\text{Self-Career}} = 1.93$, $SD = 2.06$) than for men ($\Delta_{\text{Self-Career}} = 1.35$, $SD = 1.68$; $p < .05$; see Table F2 in Web Appendix F).

Exploratory findings

Drivers of career choice intent

To gain further insight into entry barriers for women in B2B sales, we regressed female students' career choice intent on their self- and career concept. Regarding their self-concept, we found that those who perceive themselves as agentic are more likely to plan to enter B2B sales ($\beta = .21$; $p < .05$), while linear independence exists between their communal self-concept and their career choice intent ($\beta = .05$; $p > .05$). Furthermore, our findings revealed that female students' career concept of B2B sales as communal predicts their career choice intent ($\beta = .36$; $p < .05$) while their concept of B2B sales as agentic does not ($\beta = -.04$; $p > .05$). Importantly, this positive correlation between a communal conception of B2B sales and career choice intent also holds for male students ($\beta = .17$; $p < .10$), suggesting that increasing communion in B2B sales is not likely to result in reverse gender discrimination by reducing male students' interest in B2B sales.

Educational exposure differences

To determine the role of educational exposure to sales for women's perceived misfit to B2B sales, we tested for group differences in the perceived women–B2B sales misfit using their enrollment at a sales-dedicated (vs. non-sales-dedicated) university. The results showed that female students enrolled at the university with a sales department perceived a significantly lower misfit ($\Delta_{\text{Self-Career}} = 1.45$, $SD = 1.70$; $p < .01$) than the other students surveyed ($\Delta_{\text{Self-Career}} = 2.51$, $SD = 2.32$). Group differences in students' conception of B2B sales as communal ($M_{\text{Sales}} = 4.52$, $SD = .98$; $M_{\text{Non-Sales}} = 4.06$, $SD = 1.19$; $p < .05$) drove this effect. By contrast, no significant group differences emerged in female students' conception of B2B sales as agentic or their self-conception of either communion or agency ($ps > .05$; see Table F3 in Web Appendix F for detailed results).

Implications of findings

The results of the triangulation survey lend credibility to our proposition that a perceived women–B2B sales misfit constitutes a key career entry barrier for women, also for current graduates. The findings further help understand the mechanism underlying female students' reluctance to choose a B2B

sales career, which may guide intervention approaches. Most notably, they show that the expected lack of communion in B2B sales (more than the presence of agency) deters female (but notably also male) graduates from choosing a B2B sales career. These findings advocate fostering communion (e.g., by stressing the role of relationship-building and teamwork in B2B sales) as a viable strategy to position B2B sales as an attractive career option for today's male and female graduates alike. Notably, our exploratory analysis of the role of educational exposure in shaping students' conception of B2B sales provides initial support for the success of educational intervention efforts in this regard (see the “[Practical implications](#)” section for details).

Discussion

Contributions to research

Our study advances research in three major ways. First, we augment the limited research on diversity in sales with a theory-grounded conceptual framework to understand how women's underrepresentation in B2B sales unfolds and persists. Linking qualitative and quantitative research findings to extant theories in organizational psychology, we develop five research propositions that include testable assumptions about *whether*, *when*, *why*, and *which* specific barriers to women's entry and advancement exist. Specifically, we explain how male-centricity—in terms of labor market communication and job structures—ultimately creates barriers to women's entry and advancement in B2B sales by signaling or creating a misfit between B2B sales and women's self-conceptions and needs. Against this background, we detail the specific levels of such a (perceived) women–B2B sales misfit (Tables 1 and 2) and identify gender-inclusive signaling and job resources (Tables 3, 4 and 5) and B2B sales position characteristics (Table 6) that mitigate the effects of male-centricity on women. Consistent with an eminent objective of conceptual articles (MacInnis, 2011), we thus build an evidence-based framework that both advances our understanding of the problem at hand (reasons for and contingencies of women's underrepresentation in B2B sales) and guides the identification of an agenda for future research and practical solutions to women's underrepresentation in B2B sales.

Second, to our knowledge, we are the first to integrate lack-of-fit theory with JD-R theory and, thus, with diversity in a sales context. Such integrative linking of theoretical approaches from different research disciplines represents a central added value to conceptual and empirical work (Gilson & Goldberg, 2015). Specifically, the integration contributes equally to the theoretical foundation and advancement of

the state of knowledge in the newly considered application area (i.e., improving the understanding of gender diversity in sales) and to the development of theories already established in scientific research.

We advance lack-of-fit theory by incorporating the role of gender-inclusive resources in mitigating women's (perceived) lack of fit to male-dominated functions such as B2B sales. In doing so, we show that jobs need not be male- or female-oriented *per se*, as even small changes in the design of communication, job structures, and the provision of resources can substantially contribute to making any job more attractive to women. In this regard, we integrate both the supportive resources organizations can provide (i.e., job-focused resources, such as mentorships) with the resources women can build and cocreate (i.e., talent-focused resources, such as building psychological capital). We thus enrich our understanding of the interplay required between the efforts of organizations and women themselves to address the entrenched elements of male-centricity in B2B sales. This integration is novel, given the interdisciplinary divide between research on top-down-oriented job design and bottom-up-oriented job crafting, with most studies focusing on one of these two perspectives (what organizations *or* women must do; for a discussion; see Kossek et al., 2017). This integration is important because our extension of lack-of-fit theory allows us to move from a focus on curing the consequences of workplaces that do not align with women's needs to a more strategic and long-term-oriented prevention focus (i.e., establishing collaborations to build resources that impede a (perceived) women–B2B sales misfit in the first place).

We advance JD-R theory by extending its traditional scope (i.e., health psychology) to a diversity and sales context. This extension helps us broaden the scope of our thinking of *when* and *why* gender differences in the perception and experience of job characteristics create work environments that are less attractive and conducive to one gender than others. For example, our research propositions include testable assumptions about the industries, sales roles, and incentive schemes in which B2B sales male-centricity is particularly detrimental to women's sales force participation, well-being, and performance as they strengthen women's anticipation or experience of a misfit to B2B sales.

As such, our extension of JD-R theory provides an opportunity to advance current sales and diversity research in tandem. Sales researchers can draw on our extension of JD-R theory to better understand how to best structure, manage, and motivate sales teams to ensure that all team members reach their full potential, thereby ensuring the long-term competitiveness of sales departments. Specifically, our extension of the theory can guide sales job design by better aligning job structures with salespeople's varying inter- and intraindividual needs (e.g., adapting

incentive systems to interindividual differences in risk-taking and varying security needs throughout a career). This perspective is important because most research on sales job design implicitly assumes a homogeneous workforce and thus adds little to the question of how to incorporate salespeople's individual preferences and needs into the design of job structures (Steenburgh & Ahearne, 2012). Relatedly, sales researchers can apply our framework to address entry and advancement barriers for other minorities in B2B sales. From a general diversity perspective, we contribute a framework to understand the underrepresentation of women and other minorities in various business functions.

Third, we respond to Avery et al.'s (2022, p. 15) call for research to continue the “process of unpacking and deconstructing bias in academia.” Specifically, we uncover an important bias in academic research—an implicit gender bias of scholarly guidelines in favor of the needs of men due to an oversampling of male salespeople in research samples (see our pre-study results and Web Appendix B) and concurrent neglect of gender as a moderator in most sales studies (Good et al., 2022). Alarmed by these insights, we urge sales researchers to test whether the implications derived from their studies may add to gender bias in academic research as they do not hold across genders (e.g., by rerunning their analyses with gender as a moderator). Our research takes an important first step in deconstructing such bias by identifying gender-inclusive resources that can mitigate the detrimental effect of B2B sales male-centricity on women—in both practice and research. Relatedly, our findings help unpack other potential biases in sales and marketing research. For example, our findings highlight potential gender biases in evaluating saleswomen. Given that many studies in sales and marketing rely on supervisor-based performance evaluations (for a meta-analytical synthesis, see Verbeke et al., 2011), accounting for such potential gender-specific biases (e.g., by adding objective performance data based on sales quota achievement) is important.

Agenda for future research

Building on our comprehensive qualitative research, we put forth a detailed research agenda with several fruitful starting points for further empirical studies. While the opportunities for further research in this largely unexplored research field are vast, we emphasize the particular need for further studies in seven main areas. The first two research areas focus on better understanding the impact of gender diversity and both (1) sales performance and (2) B2B sales as a function. Specifically, we urge researchers to draw on large-scale cross-industry studies that combine primary and secondary data to investigate how gender diversity affects sales outcomes and reshapes sales roles. Considering the multiple types of sales

jobs and building on our initial findings on the importance of sales position characteristics (P4a–P4c), we call for further investigation of (3) sales job characteristics, but also sales team characteristics, as contingencies in these relationships.

Other important avenues of research include (4) in-depth investigations of the long-term effects of our proposed interventions in labor market communication, job structures, and education (see the “[Practical implications](#)” section) and (5) an expansion of the literature on incentives in B2B sales to encompass gender diversity and better consider inter- and intraindividual differences in salespeople’s needs. Answering both research questions is important for stakeholders seeking to implement sustainable change.

As gender is only one facet of diversity in sales, we also call for (6) research that explores other dimensions of diversity, such as ethnicity or religion. Last, concurring with Peñaloza et al. (2023) that important differences also exist within gender (e.g., women differ in the degree to which they aspire to agency in future careers) and building on our findings on similarities across genders (e.g., a shared desire for more communal B2B sales characteristics in both men and women), we encourage a more (7) nuanced focus on the differences within gender and similarities between genders. For example, rather than focusing on what differentiates women and men, future research could focus on how communication, job structures, and education can better accommodate the needs of all talent groups alike.

We highlight exemplary research questions in these seven main research areas in Table 7. In doing so, we aim to inspire ongoing research on (gender) diversity in B2B sales to inform and transform scholarship and practice.

Practical implications

Our research holds implications for increasing the share of women in B2B sales across hierarchies through organizational, personal, and educational changes. For organizational change, we guide stakeholders in employer branding, sales recruiting, and sales management to better align labor market communication and job structures to women’s needs. For personal change, we offer women a playbook to craft job structures more closely to their needs. We extend these insights for application in academic education. Table 8 details an exemplary roadmap for different stakeholder groups.

Implications for employer branding and sales recruiting

Our findings guide employer branding specialists and sales recruiters in developing tailored communication and talent programs that help women consider B2B sales a profession of choice. Our findings emphasize the importance of establishing a continuous development process that (1) monitors

potential implicit gender biases in communication (e.g., by performing A/B tests to determine whether job ads equally appeal to male and female talent) or hiring processes (e.g., by using multiple interviewers to test for gender-biased evaluations), (2) corrects such bias and (3) develops gender-inclusive resources to mitigate such bias. As such, we inform stakeholders where potential gender biases in the current labor market positioning of B2B sales might exist and which gender-inclusive signaling resources they can provide to mitigate its detrimental effects on women. Our interviews specifically highlighted the importance of incorporating communal elements into labor market communication and focusing on increasing women’s exposure to female role models and team-based competition when designing talent-focused resources management programs (see Table 3 for details). In this regard, our insights reveal that (4) collaboration with other stakeholders (e.g., sales managers to establish mentorship programs, universities to run university sales contests) is crucial for positioning B2B sales as an attractive career for women in the labor market.

To (5) sustain a truly gender-inclusive recruitment process, stakeholders also need to rethink established paths in talent attraction (e.g., how social media campaigns with female testimonials can increase a woman–B2B sales fit). Similarly, our findings encourage recruiters to rethink established avenues in assessing skills and experiences in B2B sales (e.g., How do the predictors of sales success differ between men and women? How can promotion decisions accommodate women’s career interruptions due to maternity?), which might also involve working on greater permeability of career paths (e.g., Which experiences of lateral entrants from marketing or product management can lead to sales success?).

Implications for sales managers

Our insights guide managers in creating B2B sales job structures that both attract women and support their advancement, from monitoring gender biases in job structures (see Table 2), to providing gender-inclusive job resources (see Table 4), to ultimately sustaining a culture of inclusion and psychological safety that supports women in building talent-focused resources (see Table 5). Table 8 details the five-step approach we propose in this regard.

Furthermore, our findings indicate which B2B sales positions might help mitigate the detrimental effect of B2B sales male-centricity on women, which offers important implications for job design. Drawing on the results of our triangulation survey, we particularly advise sales managers to redesign job structures to make them more communal (vs. less agentic). Importantly, these results suggest that these changes toward more communal job structures equally contribute to increasing the attractiveness of B2B sales

Table 7 Research agenda

Research areas	Exemplary research questions
1. Understanding performance ramifications of gender diversity in B2B sales	• For which performance metrics does gender diversity in B2B sales manifest (e.g., loyalty metrics, number of closed deals)? • What are the mechanisms through which gender diversity affects sales performance (e.g., enhanced customer orientation or creativity)? • How can the upsides (and potentially downsides) of gender diversity for sales teams be managed? That is, which actions can selling firms and saleswomen take to strengthen the positive impact of gender diversity on B2B sales performance?
2. Understanding the impact of gender diversity on the B2B sales function	• How does gender diversity in B2B sales affect collaboration within sales (e.g., team selling) and across departments of the selling firm (e.g., information sharing between sales and marketing)? • Is there an ideal level of gender diversity in sales teams (e.g., equal ratio of men to women, a specific level of female representation) to increase collaboration and sales performance? • How does gender diversity accelerate the blurring of inside and outside sales roles in hybrid or technology-mediated sales environments?
3. Understanding the impact of sales position and team characteristics as contingencies	• In which industries (e.g., selling services vs. goods) and for which tasks and sales teams (e.g., teams using hybrid vs. face-to-face selling approaches) is the gender diversity–performance link particularly strong? • How does gender diversity relate to sales team’s diversity characteristics? For example, how does gender diversity interact with the academization of the sales team or the gender role socialization of sales managers? • Are there circumstances (e.g., industries, sales team characteristics) in which gender diversity in B2B sales has an adverse effect on performance?
4. Understanding the short- and long-term effects of interventions across sales positions	• How do gender-specific demands and required gender-inclusive resources change over time/throughout a saleswoman’s career? • Are some sales positions more likely to benefit from interventions in labor market communication and job design (i.e., the promotion or creation of more team-oriented selling approaches) than others? • Is there an inflection point at which the integration of female-oriented resources leads to implicit discrimination of men?
5. Extending the incentive literature to gender diversity in B2B sales	• How do different incentive systems affect saleswomen’s performance, health, job satisfaction, and turnover intention (individual-level effects) as well as teamwork, networking, sponsoring behavior, or sexism in gender-diverse teams (team-level effects)? • How can self-selected incentives improve managers’ responsiveness to gender-specific incentivization needs? • How can incentive systems become more flexible to adapt to the changing personal circumstances of saleswomen, including motherhood, but also inter- and intraindividual differences in salespeople’s needs and evolving sales tasks at large?
6. Extending the findings to other diversity dimensions	• Which findings hold or differ for minorities across various diversity dimensions (e.g., based on ethnicity or religion), and how do these dimensions interact (e.g., which biases do black saleswomen face)? • How can an intentional oversampling of minorities in research samples help ensure the reflection of their voices in sales research data? • How do the findings relate to women’s deep-level diversity characteristics (e.g., personality traits, socialization experiences)?
7. Moving to a more fluid representation of gender in sales research	• Which demands and resources hold or differ for salespeople not identifying with binary gender categories? • Which differences exist not only between genders but also within genders regarding their preferences and needs in B2B sales? • Which similarities exist between genders? How can these findings be used to achieve gender-neutral talent management in the future?

Table 8 Roadmap for different stakeholder groups

	Process step	Employer branding/recruiting	Sales management	Saleswomen	Academic education
Constant iteration between steps as part of a continuous development process	Step 1. Identify explicit and implicit gender biases	Identify gender biases in labor market communication (e.g., in job ads) and salespeople's evaluations (in hiring, promotion, or salaries).	Identify communication patterns and job structures that reflect implicit gender biases by catering more to men's needs.	Identify communication and job structures that deter women from entering and realizing their potential in B2B sales.	Identify which beliefs about B2B sales and themselves deter female students from feeling qualified (e.g., lay beliefs, gender confidence gap).
	Step 2. Correct gender biases by reducing B2B sales male-centricity	Correct male-centricity in job ads (e.g., reduce battlefield wording) and correct prototype expectations ^a (e.g., competitive sports as proof of suitability to sales).	Correct male-centric organizational structures (e.g., late-night meetings), interpersonal patterns (e.g., sports bars for networking), and task allocation (e.g., unequal splits of sales-support tasks).	Correct (unconscious) gender bias by pointing out unfair treatment ("That's how this felt for me") and alert sales managers of job structures that are not conducive to own needs.	Correct lay beliefs about what a career in B2B sales encompasses and address the conception that agency and communion are incompatible (e.g., the idea that measurability means no teamwork).
	Step 3. Mitigate the effect of B2B sales male-centricity on women	Develop gender-inclusive job- and talent-focused signaling resources (e.g., increase women's exposure to role models and competitive sales situations).	Develop gender-inclusive resources at the organizational (e.g., hybrid work offerings), interpersonal (e.g., mentorships), and task (e.g., potential-based task assignment) level.	Personally develop gender-inclusive resources by engaging in personal (e.g., build psychological capital), interpersonal (e.g., build networks), and task-related (e.g., take ownership) job crafting.	Develop teaching formats that help women strengthen their personal sales resources (e.g., role-plays on how to deal with rejection) and sales self-efficacy (e.g., by promoting female testimonials).
	Step 4. Collaborate to leverage the value of interventions	Partner with sales managers and universities to increase women's sales exposure (e.g., through female role models or sales competitions).	Partner with female sales associations to ensure a culture and infrastructure that supports women's job-crafting efforts.	Partner with sales managers, HR, and educators to jointly develop gender-inclusive resources (e.g., parental leave policies).	Partner with sales departments to strengthen the academia–practice link in education (e.g., inviting sales managers for practitioner talks).
	Step 5. Sustain a gender-inclusive culture	Rethink attraction strategies and competence profiles and ensure greater career path permeability (e.g., from marketing to sales).	Build a climate of psychological safety and ensure top-down support of diversity initiatives (e.g., management as role models).	Empower other women to address subtle sexism, make unconscious biases conscious, and demand gender-inclusive resources.	Elevate the significance of sales in education and invest in positioning sales as a valuable career for (female) graduates.
	Exemplary tools	Gender decoder, ^b A/B tests, interviewer training, interview protocols, mentorship programs, female testimonials, job shadowing	Pulse surveys, advisory forums, dynamic and personalized incentive schemes, diversity goals in management incentives	Gender-specific coaching, same- and cross-gender diversity working groups, connection of desired diversity changes with a business case	Mandatory sales courses in all study fields, experiential learning techniques, practitioner talks, realistic job previews, role-plays

^a Prototype expectations entail what a successful salesperson is like

^b The gender decoder (<https://github.com/lovedaybrooke/gender-decoder/blob/master/License.md>) builds on the work of Gaucher et al. (2011) and analyzes the degree to which job ads predominantly cover terms coded as masculine (vs. feminine). To test job ads, see <https://gender-decoder.katmatfield.com/>

for current male graduates, meaning that the required job design is not a matter of increasing the attractiveness for male *or* female talent, but of increasing the attractiveness of the job for both men and women in today's generation of talent alike. Actions include situating team-based next to individual-based incentives and increasing the weight of customer retention goals in incentive schemes. Moreover, our findings stress the need to offer more individualized and dynamic incentive schemes that adapt to the varying needs of saleswomen on an interindividual (e.g., general personal risk-taking tendency) and intraindividual (e.g., changing need for security before and upon parenthood) level.

Moreover, our findings indicate which B2B sales positions are particularly prone to strengthen the creation of a woman–B2B sales misfit and thus inform sales managers where providing gender-inclusive resources is particularly critical. For example, our findings indicate that offering bystander training on how to spot sexist behavior of clients toward female colleagues might be even more critical in outside sales in male-dominated industries. Similarly, mentors who provide emotion- or problem-oriented support might be even more important if the sales position involves a high proportion of customer acquisition (i.e., the likelihood of rejection is high) and the salary relies largely on commissions (i.e., salary insecurity

is high). Thus, we guide sales managers on a more gender-inclusive job design by offering a roadmap of specific organizational actions and their prioritization (see Table 8).

Implications for saleswomen

Our interviews suggest that sales departments often lack sufficient insight into women's needs to adjust job structures accordingly, indicating the importance for women to support organizational efforts through personal job-crafting initiatives (see Table 5 for an overview of talent-focused job resources). For example, we encourage women to make sales managers and coworkers aware of their gender-specific needs and collaborate to create gender-inclusive resources (e.g., jointly developing gender-specific training). To ensure a culture in which female salespeople feel empowered to engage in job crafting, our findings imply that saleswomen should encourage each other in this area (see Table 8) and that sales departments should actively nurture such efforts.

Implications for educators

Our interviews and the results of our quantitative triangulation survey show that educators play a key role in

challenging prospective women's conceptions of B2B sales (i.e., by reducing lay beliefs about B2B sales being non-communal) and of themselves (i.e., by enhancing women's self-efficacy to succeed in B2B sales). For these approaches to be successful, such efforts should go beyond increasing the number of sales courses, which is low at most universities (Sales Education Foundation, 2020). Rather, educators should increase collaboration with sales departments, enrich classroom learning with experiential techniques, and invest in enhancing the prestige and significance of sales in education and as a career path for women (see Table 8). Our findings point to the two most promising avenues in this regard: fostering women's exposure to female role models (e.g., by inviting female sales managers for practitioner talks in lectures) and exposure to sales competition (e.g., through team-based university sales contests).

Overall, we offer a sound conceptual framework to understand the reasons for and solutions to women's underrepresentation in B2B sales. While the potential for intervention is vast, our findings show that easily implemented organizational "silo" interventions have limited impacts on addressing the deeply rooted and historical male-centricity in B2B sales. Instead, shaping a diverse, competitive sales force for the future takes joint efforts by researchers; stakeholders in recruiting, employer branding, sales management, and education; and women themselves. We hope that our research adds to these collaborative efforts.

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Declarations

Conflict of Interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest regarding the submitted manuscript.

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