

The Evolution of Buyer-Seller Relationships in the Digital Age: A Philosophical Approach

Abstract. Rapid technological advancements have led to a significant diversification in the media through which buyers and sellers interact. This shift encompasses a broad spectrum of communication channels, extending beyond in-person communication to include technology-driven and multiformat interfaces. Digitalization and staggering amounts of information have played a catalytic role in reshaping and reassessing the relationship between informed buyers and sellers. This chapter draws on the literature of Service-Dominant Logic and Service Ecosystems by incorporating a philosophical depth to address the emerging challenges. In the same vein, this chapter tries to shed light on the interplay between individual seller capabilities and broader institutional arrangements, emphasizing the need for sellers to act as drivers of both institutional and societal well-being. Finally, this chapter offers further conceptual insights and outlines key challenges while framing the path ahead for continued exploration in the field of sales.

Keywords: Selling, Value Creation, Eudaimonia.

Introduction

The era we live in constitutes a turning point in the history of mankind. Even though there is a long history on sales research, the technological upgrade and the revolution of digitization call organizations to rethink the selling process. In order to preserve human connection and the fundamental importance of relationships, scholars need to re-conceptualize the basic principles of communication and exchange, so as to marry the new with the classic. Such concerns can contribute to the discussion of exploring ways to uphold the universal spiritual and mental needs of humanity (Brodie et al., 2011; Hartmann, Wieland and Vargo, 2018).

For centuries, human societies have been structured around the principles of exchange. Philosophers and academics have explored the nature of exchange as a fundamental human activity. Nowadays, however, technological developments have transformed the way people work and collaborate with significant societal impact (Benk et al., 2024). This chapter is guided by two main questions:

- How does digitalization affect the foundational human behaviors that govern the selling process?
- What are the philosophical implications of recent transformations on value creation?

Innovation and technology are reshaping not only the mechanics of sales but also the ethical, emotional, and cognitive dimensions of buyer-seller relationships. These relationships are increasingly mediated by algorithms, big data, and multiformat

communication (Bitner, Brown and Meuter, 2000; Fernandes and Oliveira, 2021). The chapter will reassess the philosophical foundations of this evolving interaction and explore the competencies required for salespeople to navigate this ever-changing environment. This chapter focuses on conceptual aspects and the foundations of the phenomenon itself in order to initiate a fruitful dialogue on how marketing scholars can explore related consequences of technological advancements on seller and consumer interactions.

1 Exchange: A Foundational Perspective

Trade and exchange intrigue humanity for centuries. As early as 350 BC, Aristotle has been dealing with these concepts in the context of fulfilling human needs. For Aristotle, fairness in exchange existed when there was mutual benefit and proportionality, contributing to both individual well-being and social harmony (Crisp, 2014). Also, Aristotle in his work “The Art of Rhetoric”, he wrote about “persuasion”, that encompass the rhetorical strategies of logos, pathos and ethos, which overlap with a number of influence tactics used today by the management and marketing field (McFarland & Dixon, 2019).

In the 18th century, Adam Smith, in a different direction, emphasized the importance of the functioning of the market through individual action, i.e. “It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest” (Smith, 2001, p.30) He argued that economic transactions do not require explicit moral criteria of justice, as Aristotle implied, but instead, that transactions can lead to collective welfare through individual action. In other words, the market works best when people pursue their self-interest, as this develops a form of equilibrium in the market, also known as the “invisible hand”.

These approaches set the stage for Clark and Mills (1979) who argued that people exist simultaneously in two different worlds. First, people live in a world that social norms prevail, where there is no immediate need to repay someone, and thus reciprocity is not immediately necessary. The relationships created in this world are also labeled as “communal” relationships, and people assume that each individual is genuinely concerned about the welfare of the others. On the other hand, there is a second world dominated by market norms that work very differently. In this world, people form their relationships based on self-reliance, resourcefulness and individualism. The relationships are called “exchange relationships” and members expect mutual benefits and prompt reciprocity. Interestingly, today some companies, take this theory a step further, trying to benefit from the flexibility, concern and willingness that accompanies “communal” relationships. In other words, they attempt to enter the world of social norms, engaging both employees and customers. This is a very difficult task because when social norms collide with a market norm, the social norm disappears, or as Ariely (2009) concluded «for market norms to emerge, it is sufficient to mention money” (p.74).

These foundational ideas about exchange have evolved throughout the years in response to the societal, technological and market developments. Today, these ideas have integrated with a systemic approach that emphasizes the value creation. More precisely,

selling has been recently defined as the interaction that aims to build long term relationships and maintain exchanges that are easy and efficient, while building trust and optimizing gradually the relationship (Hartmann et al., 2018). Academics zoom out from the linear dyadic view to gain a more holistic and realistic perspective that reveals additional external actors and intrafirm stakeholders that facilitate value co-creation (Bolander, 2015).

In conclusion, it seems that humanity transitioned from the philosophical analysis of Aristotle, to the economic thought of Smith and finally to the modern theories of transactions and the differentiation of social and economic relations. While the nature of exchange has evolved, the natural human tendencies behind trade, like the desire, need, trust, and value, still remain consistent (Ganesan, 1994; Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Voorhees et al., 2017). Similarly, the business world has evolved over the years, trying to find ways to create meaningful, mutually beneficial exchanges with their customers. In this concept, marketing conveys value that aligns with customers' ethical and cultural principles, rather than merely promoting a specific service or product (Vargo and Lusch, 2004, 2016). Companies struggle to fulfill their goals while focusing simultaneously on trust, as without trust there cannot be joint commitments, long-term relationships and partnerships (Voorhees et al., 2017).

2 The transformative role of Technology in Buyer-Seller Relationships

Technological disruptions and the information revolution have brought about a novel reality in the way buyers and sellers communicate and collaborate with each other (Singh et al., 2019). Today, their communication has shifted largely from in-person communication to technologically enabled interaction (Grewal et al., 2020; Ahearne et al., 2022). As shown in Fig.1, digital technology has become a vital part of day-to-day activities for many European consumers. This particular research shows that the extensive use of technological devices, not only shows the widespread acceptance of technology by almost all age groups, but also highlights the need for personalized approaches to sales and communication. Multiformat communication refers to the simultaneous use of multiple communication channels to engage with buyers (Moffett, Folse and Palmatier, 2021), which enables sellers to reach a broader audience and connect with buyers on their preferred platforms. Research has shown that personalized multi-format communication can lead to enhanced customer satisfaction, boosted sales, and strengthened customer loyalty (Voorhees et al., 2017).

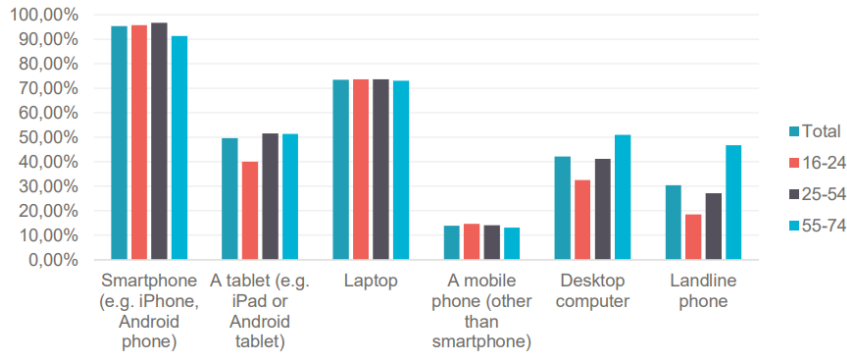


Fig. 1. Ownership and Usage of Communication Devices Among EU Age Groups

Nowadays, both, buyers and sellers, have access to a range of digital platforms, including social media and mobile applications, and use various electronic means of communication, including email, websites, online chats, video conferencing and app-based messaging (Khan and Ebner, 2019). These contemporary communication methods offer new ways for information sharing, negotiation, and transactional activities to take place (Mofett et al., 2021). Furthermore, customers are progressively transforming into informed buyers due to online research, reviews, and recommendations. Instead of relying solely on traditional communication methods, such as phone calls and in-person meetings, sellers must now adopt a multiformat approach to effectively engage with informed buyers (ibid.).

The growing importance of digital technology for Europeans in the process of buying, selling products and services and customer service is also highlighted in the European Commission's Special Eurobarometer 532 (2023). In particular, the European consumers appear to be increasingly familiar with digital platforms, with a significant 74% of respondents across the EU believing that digital technologies will be vital in their lives by 2030 for engaging in Online Shopping, Selling and Customer Service. This highlights the widespread expectation that digital technology will remain an integral part of consumer activities, which places a strong emphasis on building trust and maintaining customer loyalty.

In the same vein, AI, as a field that combines multiple disciplines to engineer machines that can learn and adapt, make decisions and operate intelligently within the environment (Ferrario, Loi and Viganò, 2020), creates higher expectations for a more personalized and frictionless customer experience (Marinchak, Forrest and Hoanca, 2018). These systems enhance efficiency by adapting autonomously and handling complex tasks. Both employees and customers simultaneously use AI to guide purchasing and other decisions. Inevitably, human agency in the buyer-seller relationship has shifted (Hartmann et al., 2018). Traditionally, sellers used to leverage a number of fundamental human tendencies to influence consumer's purchasing decision. For example, responding to consumers' impulse buying, sellers would offer immediate incentives. Or in another context, sellers would simplify choices or highlight key features of a product to lead buyers towards a more predictable behavior. Today, in-person

communication is reduced but more sophisticated, and still needs to respond to the fundamental human tendencies that still remain the same (Marinchak, 2018).

3 Selling – Contemporary Theoretical Grounding

For decades, marketing scholars have tried to uncover the determinants of sales performance. A couple of decades ago, Anderson (1996), had identified a number of forces that impact selling, like the behavioral forces, i.e. the evolving customer expectations; the technological forces, i.e. the various electronic sales channels; and the managerial forces. In the same vein, contemporary sales literature has identified a number of realities that influence the modern sales process, like for example the technological advancements, customer access to information and their increasing demands (Hartmann et al., 2018). Nowadays, these employees often manage projects, develop strategic partnerships and even act as general managers (*ibid.*). In the same vein, Rapp et al. (2017) formalized the concept of “sales-service interface”, to highlight that salespeople take on various roles and are under tremendous pressure while engaging with both sales and service activities. They regularly play an ambidextrous role, responding to all the aforementioned tasks, regardless of their formal position (*ibid.*).

Based on the theory of Service-Dominant Logic, buyer-seller relationship is collaborative in nature (Vargo and Lusch, 2004). Buyers actively contribute to this relationship by providing feedback, demanding a more personalized service, and simultaneously engaging and interacting through digital platforms. Consequently, selling is not considered a simple exchange based on transactions and transferring tangible goods. On the contrary, exchange is about delivering value through service, which becomes central to the notion of exchange (*ibid.*), and thus, service becomes the vehicle for value co-creation.

Another important concept introduced in literature is the “service ecosystem”, which implies that selling takes place in a contextual infrastructure that involves a complex and dynamic network of actors (Vargo and Lusch, 2016). In other words, sellers’ function within shared institutional arrangements, like rules, meanings, symbols and practices that affect the value co-creation (*ibid.*). These shared institutional arrangements govern the relationships and ensure trust and stability. Sellers need to synthesize various information and coordinate interactions with multiple actors and various resources (*ibid.*). All these evolutions generate the contemporary knowledge, skills, competencies and abilities (KSCAs), sellers need in order to foster cooperation, optimize relational exchanges, and create and deliver value (Rapp et al., 2017).

Moreover, recent research shed light on the importance of in-person sales interaction within the context of omnichannel selling (McFarland and Dixon, 2019; Kim and McFarland, 2024). In-person interactions facilitate the identification of customer needs and adaptation of sales practices and behaviors accordingly, known as “adaptive selling”. However, despite the extended research on this topic, there are still important gaps in the literature of adaptive selling (Hochstein et al., 2019; Kim and McFarland, 2024).

4 Theoretical Enrichment for Future Research

All these synthesize a complex and dynamic environment in which sellers cannot rely on the technological advancements to fully replace their ability to foster trust, respond to subtle cues and strengthen ongoing relationships (Hochstein, 2019). The changes that constantly come from the macro-environment, like the various legislations and regulatory frameworks, along with the dynamics of intra-organizational network, inevitably affect sellers' performance (Bolander et al., 2015). Accordingly, the seller must be a person who is aware and willing to be constantly educated about the developments that affect the nature of his or her work (Rapp et al., 2017).

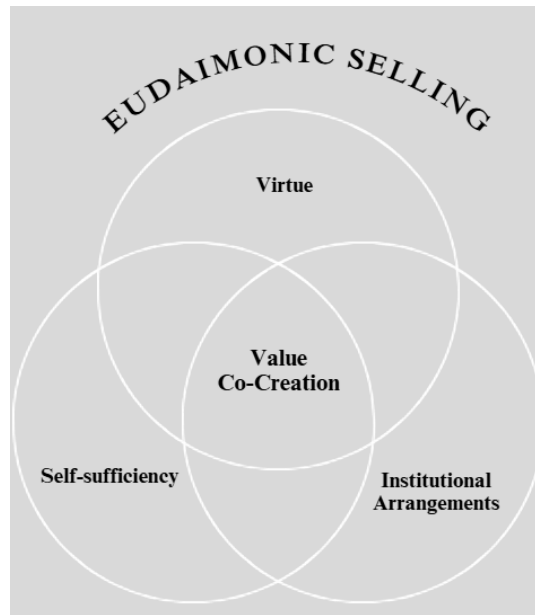
This reality calls for a more in-depth approach to the nature of selling (ibid.). It is Aristotle's contention that every human activity aims at the creation of some sort of "good", which in turn serves some other "good", and so on. This chain of "goods", however, should have "an ultimate end". Aristotle considers "eudaimonia" to be the activity of living ethically, guided by moral virtues and practical wisdom, and achieving the highest level of intellectual activity (Broadie, 1993). In selling we consider the ultimate end to be the value creation (Voorhees et al., 2017). Aristotle urges as a first and necessary step the determination of each person's "ergon", or in other words function (Nagel, 1972; Crisp, 2014), so as to be able to measure how well they perform. Continuing with our analogy, in the case of sellers, the reference point is the clarification of their role, tasks and responsibilities, which will showcase at a later stage, the quality level of their performance. "Eudaimonia" is a concept that must be cultivated in sellers, in the name of which they must ultimately regulate their behavior. Selling becomes a contribution to the broader service ecosystem and sellers ensure that every single interaction enhances the institutional well-being and value (Voorhees et al., 2017).

Sellers are expected to be agile and adopt to this transforming landscape (Rapp et al., 2017). Inevitably, sellers are expected to acquire a set of evolving competencies that will help them succeed in the digital world (ibid.). For example, sellers are expected to understand and handle vast amount of data and critically engage with it. This competence of critically approaching the data is a contemporary form of "phronesis", or, in other words "practical wisdom", which according to Aristotle, is 'a true and reasoned state of capacity to act with regard to the things that are good or bad for man' (Noel, 1999, p. 273). Today this competence is about the ability to apply reason to experience to make an ethically sound decision. Modern sellers are expected to understand the data and critically interpret them in order to foster trust and cultivate long-term relationships (Rapp et al., 2017).

In an attempt to provide a conceptual bridge between philosophy and business practices, we introduce the concept of "Eudaimonic Selling", which emphasizes the ethical practices and the mutual value creation in the pursue of long-lasting relational exchanges. In this context, selling resonates with modern sustainability and contemporary regulations emphasizing values, honesty, fairness and empathy, that promote institutional flourishing and human well-being. A formal requirement of "eudaimonia" is "self-sufficiency", which means that "eudaimonia" does not depend on only one element but rather on the integration of various factors that relate to morality, wisdom and action (Heinaman, 1988). In the context of selling, "self-sufficiency" translates to the

holistic approach towards meeting the customer's needs and ensuring that the overall experience will also meet their evolving expectations.

Fig. 2. Conceptual Framework of «Eudaimonic Selling»



As illustrated in Fig. 2, “Eudaimonic Selling” represents a dynamic interplay between the foundational pillars of “eudaimonia” and the contemporary theory of selling. On the one hand, there is “virtue”, which is about the ethical principles (Nagel, 1972), and “self-sufficiency” that refers to the sustainability required for long-term relationships (Heinaman, 1988). On the other hand, there is “institutional arrangements”, identified by contemporary academics, that enable value co-creation (Vargo and Lusch, 2016), which is exactly the intersection of the circles. This conceptual model provides a holistic approach towards the complex dynamics of contemporary selling practices, highlighting the importance of ethical judgment and agility in the evolving environment.

5. Framing the Future: Challenges and the road ahead

As noted at the outset of this chapter, the aim is to explore the evolution of Buyer-Seller Relationships in the Digital Age and to encourage a productive dialogue on how technological mediation has transformed these interactions and how human behavior adapts to the transforming landscape.

First, in an effort to understand buyer-seller interaction within the new paradigm, we need to adopt a reflective thoughtful approach in interpreting the technological advancements. Despite the fact that it is hard to predict upcoming technological

breakthroughs, it is likely that more advanced AI systems could bring about impactful social change, since the core purpose of the field of AI has long been to create a machine capable of exhibiting humanlike “common sense” (Gruetzemacher and Whittlestone, 2022). Thus, we need to discover the links between different elements in buyer-seller interactions and to uncover ways of managing these relationships in the digital environment (Kim and McFarland, 2024). For example, up until today we have known “Trust” to be the reliance in another person’s voluntarily accepted responsibility to recognize and safeguard the interests of all parties engaged in a joint endeavor or financial exchange (Hosmer, 1995). Today, this definition still applies to interpersonal and organizational context, as “Trust” is still the cornerstone of effective communication. On the other hand, when it comes to the interaction with technology, trust is widely regarded as instrumental for efficiency and effectiveness (Benk et al., 2024). This deeper understanding of the theories, methods and contexts, will improve academic knowledge and inform practitioners on how to adopt to these emerging dynamics.

The second key challenge is to investigate how salespeople can establish a basis of reliability and credibility to influence informed consumers in today’s challenging environment (McFarland and Dixon, 2019). For this, scholars could integrate theories and constructs from diverse disciplines to strengthen their explanatory power. For instance, Behavioral Sciences can shed light on trust and loyalty and how perceptions of these concepts are shaped by online behavior. At the same time, Sociology can help us understand how social interactions function in digital communities and the way these relationships affect decisions. Meanwhile, Marketing can explain how digital marketing tactics, like for example content marketing and personalization, can impact loyalty, and further analyze customer journey and brand loyalty. Finally, but not exhaustively, Information Systems and Technology can reveal the platforms that enable digital interaction, as well as the role of AI in shaping these interactions, by personalizing the whole experience and building trust.

The third challenge is to recognize the evolving role of sellers and address the changes by systematically examining the complexity of these interactions through a multilevel approach within the service ecosystem. This approach recognizes the importance of organizational dynamics in supporting sellers for successfully adapting to the new environment. It also offers grounded theoretical explanations that extend our knowledge on the evolving role of sellers, including the scope of knowledge, skills, behaviors and abilities that are essential to perform these expanding tasks (Bolander, 2015).

The fourth challenge is to place sellers at the forefront of Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) compliance. Sellers, as the boundary spanners who implement the companies’ strategies, could drive such initiatives forward by acting as ambassadors of a company’s ESG values and goals. This approach is both timely and relevant since the European Union has recently intensified its focus on ESG practices through a number of regulations and guidelines, like for example the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive, under which companies need to disclose their ESG practices (Directive EU 2022/2464). These regulatory requirements impact the selling process as sellers are now expected to align their offerings with ESG practices and support sustainable purchasing decisions. Today, this is more likely than ever, as digital marketing

communication and tools effectively convey information about the organizations' values (Jahdi and Acikdilli, 2009), like sustainability, thus, can play a key role in helping sellers promote environmental protection. In other words, research should explore the possibilities of investing in the digital connectivity, to facilitate the pursuit of sustainable approaches, and simultaneously invest in equipping employees with the knowledge and tools to integrate ESG values into their practices (Directive EU 2022/2464). For example, sellers can guide consumers by raising awareness about the organizations' socially responsible products.

In conclusion, research should examine the methods and processes used to acquire the required KSCAs, needed to accelerate sellers' performance in the increasingly interconnected world. Responding to these fundamental realities, companies need to focus on the entirely new set of KSCAs and implement a more sophisticated method in the recruitment of sellers, as well as the training to support these dynamic capabilities. Importantly, organizations need to acknowledge and embrace the complexity that accompanies this role, by integrating sophisticated performance management tools to manage and maintain employees' motivation (Rapp et al., 2017). It is in this context that the concept of "Eudaimonic Selling" is proposed, which, although it leads to an effortful growth, ultimately leads to a sense of purpose and personal expressiveness (Ryan and Deci, 2001).

Conclusion

In this chapter, the focus lies on the complexities of buyer-seller interactions, considering important concepts, such as human communication and trust. While simplifications are often tempting, they do not capture the depth and richness of these relationships that are currently mediated by technology. This philosophical, multidisciplinary and multi-level approach has several empirical implications for future studies on this area. Achieving a deep level of understanding will enable a more strategic approach towards successful interactions in the digital environment, by helping salespeople to navigating the complexities while maintaining the fundamental humanistic principles. Lastly, scholars need to shed light on the changing role of sellers by investigating contemporary communication strategies and tactics to effectively engage with informed buyers and cultivate strong relationships.

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