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Female consumer entrepreneurship in Asia: capabilities for micro-entrepreneurial success and the role of coaching and training

Darwina Arshad
School of Business Management, College of Business, Universiti Utara Malaysia, Sintok, Malaysia

Ian R. Hodgkinson
School of Business and Economics, Loughborough University, Loughborough, UK

Paul Hughes
Management School, Lancaster University, Lancaster, UK

Munirah Khamarudin and Muhammad Zulqarnain Arshad
School of Business Management, College of Business, Universiti Utara Malaysia, Sintok, Malaysia, and

Adibah Bari
Trulooks Beauty Cosmetics, Kangar, Malaysia

Abstract

Purpose – The direct selling model adopted in the beauty and cosmetics industry puts female consumer entrepreneurs at the heart of the business model. A neglected phenomenon in female entrepreneurship, this study aims to focus on female sales agents' capabilities that are linked to sales performance and examine which capabilities might be shaped and enhanced through coaching and training in an emerging economy context.

Design/methodology/approach – Survey data were generated from a sample of 249 female sales agents who agreed to participate in a coaching and training programme run by a focal firm. Data were collected in two phases to investigate the capabilities linked to sales performance pre-intervention and the impact of coaching and training on the relationships between the capabilities and sales performance post-intervention. The time-lag data were analysed using partial least squares structural equation modelling.

Findings – For female sales agents, self-efficacy and sales experience have a significant positive effect on adaptive sales performance both before and after the coaching and training intervention. In contrast, intellectual capital and self-motivation had a non-significant relationship with sales performance before the intervention. However, after the intervention, the relationship between these variables became positive and significant.

Originality/value – The study demonstrates the effects of pre- and post-coaching and training on female consumer entrepreneurs' capabilities and the links to sales performance. These findings add critical empirical knowledge on how female consumer entrepreneurship may be developed and the role of entrepreneurship for female empowerment in the Asian context. Collectively, the findings bring to the fore the female sphere in consumer entrepreneurship research in emerging economies.

Keywords Female consumer entrepreneurs, Consumer entrepreneurship, Female micro-entrepreneurs, Direct selling model, Sales agents, Sales performance

Paper type Research paper

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Introduction

In recent decades, an increasingly diverse workforce, technological and social advances, as well as globalization have influenced the work environment and the labour market (Duong and Vu, 2023), which has carried significant consequences for female entrepreneurship. In Asia, the beauty and cosmetics industry has grown dramatically, and women have played a critical role in the year-on-year growth (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2022). The industry is dominated by a "sales agent" business model (Amenuvor *et al.*, 2022), where local female agents engage in direct selling via local networks and relationships and typically receive a proportion of the sale with the potential to earn a significant income through commissions or bonuses. In this context, female sales agents have emerged as micro-consumer entrepreneurs since they are "users/consumers and not organizations/firms or entrepreneurs in the classic 'business' sense" and whose activities "reflect 'informal entrepreneurship'" (Chandra and Coviello, 2010, p. 231). The employment of female consumer entrepreneurs as sales agents is common in the beauty and cosmetics industry and serves to help organizations build distribution systems by using the agents' personal networks (Scott *et al.*, 2012). The individual agents often face a degree of risk, sometimes having to invest their own time and money into building a customer base, working autonomously, and often being responsible for developing their own sales strategies.

There is, however, a distinct lack of attention on women entrepreneurs in the general entrepreneurship field (Crittenden *et al.*, 2019), with very little examination of their role as consumer entrepreneurs, especially in Asia. Consumer or user entrepreneurship concerns "all cases in which one or more consumers start up a new venture dedicated to the products or services that they normally consume" (Pedeliento *et al.*, 2018, p. 431). To date, most extant studies focus on innovation management and new venture creation at the start of an enterprise' journey, but this neglects other forms of consumer entrepreneurship and stages of the venture creation journey and implications for the creation of wealth, employment and knowledge (Chan and Mustafa, 2021). For example, the direct selling model, where consumers become independent sales agents under the umbrella of a large corporate, has not been considered within the fledgling sub-domain of consumer entrepreneurship (Pedeliento *et al.*, 2018). The direct selling of cosmetics and beauty products is an example of how "trading partnerships between corporations and women's informal exchange networks" create micro-enterprises (i.e. new ventures), which can offer financial empowerment to women in emerging economies (Dolan and Scott, 2009, p. 203). Despite this long-standing observation, the capabilities required for female entrepreneurs in this setting to prosper and thrive are unclear, which is a critical knowledge gap given the centrality of individual motivations, skills and capabilities to entrepreneurial action (Duong, 2022).

Clearly, female sales agent's capabilities will play a critical role in improving sales performance in the cosmetic and beauty industry. What is not clear, however, is what these capabilities look like, nor the role that coaching and training might play in augmenting relevant capabilities for increased performance. Coaching and training are the basic platforms that most firms establish to develop salespeople's skills (Guenzi and Nijssen, 2020). While the literature has observed the central role of training for the business model described (Scott *et al.*, 2012), there is no evidence of when and how training might benefit female sales agents in the Asian context. Coaching and training are assumed to influence key capabilities such as self-efficacy (Peterson, 2020), intellectual capital (Peñalba-Aguirrezabalaga *et al.*, 2022), sales experience (Peñalba-Aguirrezabalaga *et al.*, 2021) and self-motivation (Kwak *et al.*, 2019), but two related research questions arise:

RQ1. Do these capabilities improve *female consumer entrepreneurs'* sales performance?

RQ2. Does coaching and training enhance the relationship between *female consumer entrepreneurs'* capabilities and sales performance over time?

In response to these research questions, we focus on a single firm, Cosmoz, a pseudonym, which was founded by a female entrepreneur in the past decade and has headquarters in Malaysia. The study draws on survey data to examine the relationship between female sales agents' capabilities (intellectual capital, self-motivation, self-efficacy and sales experience) and adaptive sales performance in two phases, before and after a four-month coaching and training programme. In doing so, three contributions to the field of female entrepreneurship are made. Firstly, empowering women and, especially women in emerging economies, is a critical objective of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, as observed by Crittenden *et al.* (2019). However, the entrepreneurship field has often neglected women in entrepreneurship research (Hughes *et al.*, 2012) despite the clear and positive contribution female entrepreneurs make towards economic growth and social development (Dheer *et al.*, 2019). The study contributes new empirical evidence on how female entrepreneurship can be developed for the social and economic advancement of the country, providing a more nuanced understanding of women's entrepreneurship in Asia.

Secondly, the direct selling model adopted by multinational corporations from the Western world has been a feature of consumer entrepreneur research. An example is Avon (Chelekis and Mudambi, 2010), which in 2012 was reported to be drawing 50% of its sales from the developing world (Scott *et al.*, 2012). While the focal firm adopts the same business model of direct selling, in contrast to extant studies, it is not a foreign multinational operating in an emerging economy but rather was founded by a local female entrepreneur and operates out of Malaysia. It is, therefore, an apt research context to examine female consumer entrepreneurship, one that has been associated with Western business practices and largely overlooked in developing countries (Dolan and Scott, 2009). This is a critical advancement since research focused on Western multinationals has played a central role in diffusing assumptions about gender practices globally (Koveshnikov *et al.*, 2019) that may or may not translate to the experiences of women entrepreneurs in emerging economies.

Finally, as reported by Pedeliento *et al.* (2018), consumer entrepreneurship research is "still little explored in current theoretical and empirical research" (pg. 431) and "scholars are far from a full and shared understanding of this phenomenon" (pg. 432). The study's focus thus advances insights on consumer entrepreneurship by focusing on female consumer entrepreneurs specifically. This is of critical importance if there is to be a gender balance in the development and advancement of consumer entrepreneurship as a sub-domain of the wider entrepreneurship field (Hughes *et al.*, 2012), as well as for increasing the economic prosperity of Asian economies that have been dominated by a traditional male sphere that has undermined the vital role played by women (Dolan and Scott, 2009).

In the next section, we present the theoretical background of the study and its hypotheses. Following this, the research methods are outlined, and results presented. Next, a discussion of the contributions to theory made by the study and its implications for practice is offered. In the final section, the limitations of the study are considered, and directions for future research identified.

Background and hypotheses development

Direct selling micro-entrepreneurs are provided with a "business-in-a-box" that is backed by established brands, and in the majority of cases, these micro-entrepreneurs are women (Crittenden *et al.*, 2019). This is due, in part, because of the typical nature of products sold (e.g. cosmetic and beauty), the sales venue (e.g. domestic setting) and the nature of local

exchanges, which occur with relatives, neighbours, friends and acquaintances (Dolan and Scott, 2009). Direct selling micro-entrepreneurs can be found across developing economies (Chelekis and Mudambi, 2010; Scott *et al.*, 2012); however, "these 'female' spheres are often ignored or trivialised by men" (Dolan and Scott, 2009, p. 208).

The journey to being a direct selling micro-entrepreneur (i.e. sales agent) begins as a consumer of the product, and then the role shifts to becoming an entrepreneur (Pedeliento *et al.*, 2018). This is at the heart of early work on consumer entrepreneurship, where end users become founders of new ventures (Agarwal and Shah, 2014). However, early conceptualizations of consumer entrepreneurship had not considered different business models nor how direct selling specifically offers a mode of consumer entrepreneurship; hence, the bias towards a product innovation focus and an inadvertent neglect of female spheres. By focusing solely on traditional new venture creation, the consumer entrepreneurship literature favoured male perspectives since "women are less likely to start new ventures compared to men" (Dheer *et al.*, 2019, p. 2). The direct selling model has appeared to rebalance the opportunities for women to create new ventures by offering a new "business-in-a-box" (Crittenden *et al.*, 2019), which, in turn, provides an appropriate model to examine female consumer entrepreneurship in Asia.

As discussed, female consumer entrepreneurs have flourished under the direct selling model. Female sales agents are "embedded in communities, and in a nexus of market relationships involving several actors", which is a core conceptual characteristic of consumer entrepreneurship (Pedeliento *et al.*, 2018, p. 432). It is because of such networks that the "sales agent" is often heralded as the central reason for the reported global successes of MNCs adopting the direct selling model. There is now a need to advance understanding of how consumer entrepreneurs might differ, or not, from the established understanding of entrepreneurship (Pedeliento *et al.*, 2018). In addition, there is a need for new insights on female consumer entrepreneurship, specifically as a valid and worthy sub-domain of consumer entrepreneurship and as a mechanism to show the vital role played by women in advancing emerging economies.

In the context of "selling", cognitive and non-cognitive elements such as self-efficacy, intellectual capital, sales experience (Tolentino *et al.*, 2014) and self-motivation (Conde and Prybutok, 2020; Kwak *et al.*, 2019) are reported to have a significant impact on the performance of sales agents. Moreover, several studies have shown that an individual's self-efficacy and intellectual capital (Peñalba-Aguirrezabalaga *et al.*, 2022), knowledge and skills gained from experience (Peñalba-Aguirrezabalaga *et al.*, 2021) and self-motivation (Ahmad *et al.*, 2021) can have a positive effect on overall organization performance. It is not necessarily the case, however, that these individual capabilities will be beneficial to the success of direct selling female micro-entrepreneurs. We, therefore, seek to build study hypotheses to better account for the capabilities that are linked to their performance and which might be shaped and enhanced through coaching and training in the emerging economy context.

Intellectual capital and adaptive sales performance

In the sales context, recent years have seen academics focus on intellectual capital at the individual level. According to earlier research, intellectual capital is made up of three key elements: human capital, structural capital and relational capital (Fiano *et al.*, 2022). Human capital, which enhances organizational performance through knowledge, experience and skills to respond to environmental changes, is the most inventive organizational component (Tarus and Sitienei, 2015). A company's procedures, systems, structures and intellectual assets are included in the second component, structural capital, which includes both tangible

and intangible assets. The third element is relationship capital, which is a combination of relational skills like investor relations, public relations, supplier relations and consumer interactions.

The development of employees boosts their job satisfaction, their dedication and their performance (Tastan and Davoudi, 2015). Intangible assets include the knowledge, skills and connections of individuals within organizations (Kabul *et al.*, 2021). It can increase the efficiency of the operation, profitability and competitiveness of the business. Numerous studies have implicated human intellectual capital in improving employee performance, sustaining competitive advantage and retaining employees (Buallay *et al.*, 2021). Numerous extant works have examined the relationship between intellectual property and performance at the organizational level (Fiano *et al.*, 2022; Peñalba-Aguirrezabalaga *et al.*, 2022; Peñalba-Aguirrezabalaga *et al.*, 2021; Tarus and Sitienei, 2015). However, there has not been much research done on intellectual capital and adaptive sales performance, particularly among sales agents. Building on previous research that suggested a link between intellectual capital and performance, we hypothesize that providing effective coaching and training to sales agents will help to increase the agents' levels of intellectual capital, which will, in turn, have a major impact on their sales performance. Thus:

H1. There is a positive significant link between intellectual capital and adaptive sales performance (Phase 1); when coaching and training are performed, the relationship becomes stronger (Phase 2).

Self-motivation and adaptive sales performance

Self-motivation is a psychological state that compels someone to carry out behaviours or make decisions (Good *et al.*, 2022). The degree to which salespeople perceive their work as a means of obtaining external incentives like money, recognition, promotion and bonuses is known as extrinsic motivation, whereas intrinsic motivation encourages people to strive for things they find appealing for themselves (Minh Luan *et al.*, 2021). Pride, satisfaction and enjoyment are examples of intrinsic rewards. According to a study by Dugan *et al.* (2019), motivated salespeople believe their work to be intrinsically interesting and gratifying. Salespeople that are intrinsically motivated derive fulfilment, pride and happiness from their professional successes.

The most successful salespeople are typically those who have tremendous intrinsic motivation. This is because intrinsically motivated salespeople work hard to improve their job performance, persistently look for novel ways to win over consumers, accept responsibility for their actions and participate in training, all of which will lead to improved outcomes (Conde and Prybutok, 2020). Salespeople must have a great willingness to explain and understand their customers' behaviours to engage in adaptive selling (Dugan *et al.*, 2019). Additionally, sales representatives need to be pushed to adapt their sales presentations based on the situation. Thus, through greater self-motivation, sales agents can make necessary adjustments to secure sales (Alnakhli *et al.*, 2020). The ability of sales agents to learn, grow and work towards company goals will likely be impacted by coaching and training (Çetin and Aşkun, 2018); however, there is no evidence to support these empirical links in the context of female consumer entrepreneurs. Therefore:

H2. There is a positive significant relationship between self-motivation and sales performance (Phase 1); when coaching and training are performed, the relationship becomes greater (Phase 2).

Self-efficacy and adaptive sales performance

Self-efficacy and sales performance have a long-standing relationship in the wider sales literature. Typically, a person will perform only tasks that they believe they can accomplish efficiently. Previous studies have supported that individuals with higher self-efficacy will achieve higher sales performance (Bari and Arshad, 2020; Peterson, 2020; Vieira *et al.*, 2022). People with low self-efficacy tend to avoid challenges they perceive as difficult, whereas those with strong self-efficacy tend to perform better (Maheshwari and Kha, 2022). Indeed, no agent or person is truly autonomous nor defined only by their environment (Nowiński *et al.*, 2020). Salespeople who have a high level of self-efficacy tend to set relatively high goals for themselves because they have the courage to grab market opportunities and meet the sales targets set for them, as well as confidence to learn how to perform new tasks (Bari and Arshad, 2020).

This evidence suggests that high self-efficacy will lead to higher achievement in meeting sales quotas and sales volume set (Peterson, 2020), which thus likely results in better sales performance. Self-efficacy is also suggested to have a mediating role in the relationship between information load and sales performance, and the degree of effect is different among male and female salespeople (Shamsudheen and Mahomed, 2022). This means that gender differences play a role in determining the influence of self-efficacy on sales performance (Bhaskar Reddy and Thomas, 2016). However, there is still limited research on self-efficacy and adaptive sales performance, especially pre- and post-coaching, among female sales agents, especially in rapidly developing emerging economies. Therefore, while there is a lack of empirical research to close this theoretical gap, we would expect the following:

H3. There is a positive significant link between self-efficacy and adaptive sales performance (Phase 1); when coaching and training are performed, the relationship becomes stronger (Phase 2).

Sales experience and adaptive sales performance

The degree of sales experience a sales agent has is another factor that shapes their probability of success. The number of times salespeople have worked professionally in sales is known as sales experience (Harindranath *et al.*, 2019). When experience serves to increase the degree of salespeople's knowledge and abilities, it can be converted into a capability (Tolentino *et al.*, 2014). Previous studies have shown that the growth rate of sales performance was significantly accelerated by sales experience.

The necessity for principals and agents to constantly manage and gain new sales expertise has increased because of information technology breakthroughs and environmental upheavals. For example, the huge advancements in information communication technology, which "includes all devices and applications, such as mobile phones, personal computers, and social media applications" (Crittenden *et al.*, 2019), enable sales agents to extend and develop their network in the virtual world. With more sales experience, it would be expected that female consumer entrepreneurs will have a much wider and fuller knowledge base as to how to cultivate personal networks for greater sales performance. In turn, we would expect that greater sales experience will optimize the sale potential of women's informal exchange networks (Dolan and Scott, 2009). Hence:

H4. There is a positive significant association between sales experience and performance (Phase 1); when coaching and training are performed, the relationship becomes stronger (Phase 2).

The research model is depicted in Figure 1, based on the development of the hypotheses.

Research methodology

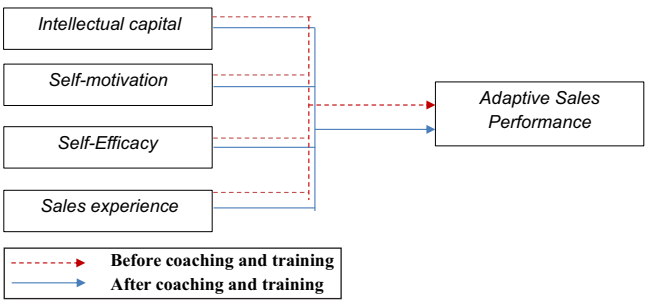
Setting and data collection

The focal case organization, Cosmoz, adopts a direct-selling model and employs 1,000 female sales agents responsible for promoting and selling Cosmoz products in the local market. Prior to data collection, we used G*power software to determine the minimal sample size required to test the empirical model. With a minor effect size of 0.02 and a power of 0.9, the minimum sample size required was 124 observations. An online survey questionnaire notification was sent to the full population of sales agents employed by Cosmoz, and a total of 249 female sales agents agreed to participate in the survey. In developing the survey questionnaire, a time-lag strategy was used by dividing the survey into two phases (Idris and Dollard, 2014). In Phase 1, the data was acquired before the coaching and training intervention and phase two of the survey was then administered four months afterwards. This procedure is consistent with similar studies of women entrepreneurship that account for training programme interventions (Ni *et al.*, 2022). Online questionnaires were distributed via email to all 249 female sales agents who completed the questionnaire in both phases.

Across the 249 respondents, there is a mix of ages represented: 24.1% below 30 years, 52.6% aged between 31 and 40 years, 16.9% of the respondents aged between 41 and 50 years and 6.4% are aged between 51 and 60 years. In terms of race, 98.8% of the respondents are Malay, 0.8% are Chinese and 0.4% are Indian. Moreover, in terms of education level, 35.3% of the respondents received secondary education, 28.9% hold a postgraduate award and 0.8% are PhD holders. Most respondents (67.8%) have up to five years sales experience, just over a quarter (26.9%) have 6 to 10 years of sales experience and a small proportion (5.2%) have over 11 years of sales experience. In terms of time spent with the focal organization, 189 respondents (75.9%) have been with the organization for between 1 and 5 years, and the rest for less than 12 months.

Measures

All measurement items for the variables of interest were adapted from reliable scales used in past studies. Measures of intellectual capital were drawn from the work of Wang *et al.* (2014). Measures for self-efficacy were drawn from the work of Vieira *et al.* (2018) and Chen *et al.* (2001). Self-motivation measures were adapted from the battery developed by Umar (2010). Sales experience scales were adapted from the work of Gmedhine (2020).



Source: Authors' own work

Figure 1.
Conceptual model

The dependent variables of adaptive sales performance, based on the conceptualization of adaptive selling developed by Spiro and Weitz (1990), was measured by ten items adapted from the works of Spiro and Weitz (1990) and Sujan *et al.* (1994).

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics for all constructs. Tables 2 and 3 show the measurement items adapted and the sources of these items, along with all internal consistency data. Following guidance established by Bagozzi and Yi (1988), Hair *et al.* (2014), Hair *et al.* (2017) and Hu and Bentler (1999), all items exhibit acceptable factor loadings and reliability values represented by both Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability all exceed acceptable thresholds. Similarly, average variance extracted values exceed the accepted 0.5 threshold. As such, it is concluded that the model constructs are reliable, valid and display convergent validity. The Fornell–Larcker criterion was used to assess discriminant validity. According to Hair *et al.* (2014), this technique is the most traditional approach, which is through comparing the square root of the average variance extracted (AVE) with the latent variable correlation, and the AVE must be greater than the squared correlation with any other construct. Table 4 illustrates the Fornell-Larcker evaluation results for Phase 1 and Phase 2. As presented in Table 4, the Fornell–Larcker criteria for Phase 1 and Phase 2 have been achieved as the value in the diagonal is higher than other values in the same row and in the same column, thereby demonstrating discriminant validity.

Analysis and results

After the measurement model was verified to be reliable and valid, data were analysed using partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) to test the hypothesized relationships between the main variables of this study. To do so, this study used the PLS algorithm and the procedure of standard bootstrapping. To examine the path coefficient significance, the number of 500 bootstrap samples and 249 cases was applied (Hair *et al.*, 2014; Hair *et al.*, 2017). Table 5 presents the path coefficient values and the bootstrapping outcomes describing the hypothesis relationships among the variables in the current study.

As presented in Table 5 for Phase 1, out of four direct relationships tested, two relationships are supported, while the other two links are not supported. Results show that self-efficacy towards adaptive performance has a significant, positive effect on agent adaptive performance ($\beta = 0.170, t = 2.297, p < 0.011$), including the findings on experience ($\beta = 0.599, t = 9.176, p < 0.01$) towards adaptive performance. However, intellectual capital represents insignificant relationship with adaptive sales performance ($\beta = 0.011, t = 0.197$ $p > 0.05$), as well as self-motivation to adaptive sales performance, which is also insignificant ($\beta = 0.001, t = 0.005, p > 0.05$).

The value of the coefficient of determination, also termed as R^2, is the most common measure used to evaluate the model's predictive power. The R^2 represents the variance

N	Variables	Mean	SD
249	Intellectual capital	3.086	1.305
249	Self-motivation	3.212	1.297
249	Self-efficacy	2.533	1.552
249	Sales experience	2.741	1.281
249	Adaptive sales performance	2.880	1.319

Source: Authors' research findings

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for variables

Constructs	Items	Loadings	CA	CR	AVE
Intellectual capital	I hold suitable work experience for accomplishing the job successfully	0.853	0.970	0.973	0.724
	I have excellent professional skills in particular jobs and functions	0.843			
	I have excellent academic ability	0.768			
	I often develop new ideas and knowledge	0.817			
	I have excellent professional skills to resolve problems in my work	0.891			
	I have a good methodology to deal with the problem	0.868			
	I have a mature way of thinking and dealing with problems	0.756			
	I have a clear decision logic to face change	0.829			
	My operation procedure (i.e. process) is very efficient	0.849			
	I am skilled at collaborating with each other to handle problems	0.825			
	I am used to learning from each other in the workplace	0.912			
	I have a good relationship with my stakeholders	0.889			
	I am good at communication with different people	0.896			
	I always maintain appropriate interactions with different people	0.903			
Self-motivation	I am motivated by any form of rewards	0.624	0.924	0.939	0.692
	I am influenced by flexible working hours	0.841			
	I am influenced if given the opportunity for further training	0.913			
	I love independence and autonomy to improve my performance	0.867			
	The annual recognition awarded by Cosmoz increases my performance	0.899			
	Cosmoz has given me the opportunity for special personal savings	0.858			
	Cosmoz has provided commission-based pay	0.785			
Self-efficacy	I am an excellent salesperson	0.884	0.966	0.972	0.831
Sales experience	I always sense exactly what customers want	0.937			
	I can easily use a wide variety of sales approaches	0.951			
	I know the applications and functions of Cosmoz products very well	0.923			
	I will be able to achieve most of the goals that I have set for myself	0.862			
	When facing difficult tasks, I am certain that I will accomplish them	0.901			
	In general, I think that I can obtain outcomes (i.e. sales/rank) that are important to me	0.920			
	My selling experience enables me to gain a clearer understanding of my work	0.924	0.965	0.672	0.852
	My experience helped me to develop different selling skills	0.948			
	My experience increases my ability to easily understand customers' traits	0.875			
	I identify and sell to major customers who deal with me closely	0.898			
	My confidence during interacting with customers increases with my experience	0.942			
	I learned from the outcomes of different sales approaches used in varied contexts throughout my experience	0.949			

Table 2.
Internal consistency and convergent validity (Phase 1)

(*continued*)

Constructs	Items	Loadings	CA	CR	AVE
Adaptive sales performance	I contribute to Cosmoz's monthly sales target	0.868	0.946	0.954	0.674
	I sell Cosmoz's high demanding products	0.841			
	I generate a high level of sales revenue	0.863			
	I identify and sell to major customers who deal with me closely	0.847			
	I exceed sales targets	0.832			
	When I feel that my sales approach is not working, I can easily change to another approach	0.696			
	I like to experiment with different sales approaches	0.733			
	I am very flexible in the selling approach I use	0.778			
	I try to understand how one customer differs from another	0.842			
	My monthly sales growth	0.887			

Notes: CA = Cronbach's alpha; CR = composite reliability; AVE = average variance extracted
Source: Authors' research findings

Table 2.

contributed to the endogenous variable(s) by one or more predictor variables (Elliot and Woodward, 2007; Hair *et al.*, 2014). The main aim of the PLS-SEM algorithm is to maximize the R^2 values of the endogenous latent variables and, thereby, their prediction. The R^2 value ranges from 0 to 1, with higher levels indicating higher levels of predictive accuracy. The R^2 for the main effect model before sales training is 46.7%.

After training, the study's second phase looked at the importance of path coefficients. This significance was determined by bootstrapping 249 instances using 500 bootstrap samples. A method that uses this approach aids in evaluating the robustness and dependability of path coefficients (Hair *et al.*, 2014; *Hair et al.*, 2017). As a result of the analysis, the path coefficients found in Table 6 were determined to be positive and negative. Correlation coefficients represent the direction and strength of correlations between the variables of a study. In addition to the correlation data, the table also shows the outcome of the bootstrapping procedure.

It can be seen from Table 6 that the results for Phase 2 of the study are in line with what was expected. Thus, it can be said that all four hypotheses have been confirmed. With a route coefficient (β) of 0.18, the hypothesis posits, as the first hypotheses, that self-efficacy towards adaptive performance allows agents to perform more effectively in adaptive abilities. There is a statistical significance in the association between the two variables indicating that the coefficient is over 0.01, and a t-value of 2.433 and p-value of less than 0.01 inferring that there is a strong association between the two factors.

Moreover, Phase 2 lends support to the hypothesis that experience plays a significant role in the adaptive performance of individuals. A significant and positive link is shown by the path coefficient (β), which is stated as being 0.564 with a high t-value of 7.970 and a p-value of less than 0.01. Additionally, Phase 2 of the study examined the relationship between adaptive sales performance and intellectual capital. With a path coefficient (β) of 0.079, a t-value of 1.999 and a p-value of less than 0.05, the relationship is significant, which was insignificant in Phase 2. Showing that training plays a vital role.

The research also found that adaptive sales performance self-motivation enhances performance significantly, with coefficients of 0.168, t-values of 3.160 and a p-value less than 0.01. According to the main effect model's stated R^2 value of 84.7%, the training intervention significantly affected the variables under examination. This suggests that the independent

Constructs	Items	Loadings	CA	CR	AVE
Intellectual capital	I hold suitable work experience for accomplishing the job successfully	0.848	0.970	0.973	0.724
	I have excellent professional skills in particular jobs and functions	0.834			
	I have excellent academic ability	0.767			
	I often develop new ideas and knowledge	0.806			
	I have excellent professional skills to resolve problems in my work	0.887			
	I have a good methodology to deal with the problem	0.859			
	I have a matured way of thinking and dealing with problems	0.783			
	I have a clear decision logic to face change	0.819			
	My operation procedure (i.e. process) is very efficient	0.852			
	I am skilled at collaborating with each other to handle problems	0.837			
	I am used to learning from each other in the workplace	0.911			
	I have a good relationship with my stakeholders	0.883			
	I am good at communication with different people	0.893			
	I always maintain appropriate interactions with different people	0.916			
Self-motivation	I am motivated by any form of rewards	0.581	0.915	0.932	0.766
	I am influenced by flexible working hours	0.815			
	I am influenced if given the opportunity for further training	0.898			
	I love independence and autonomy to improve my performance	0.854			
	The annual recognition awarded by Cosmoz increases my performance	0.898			
	Cosmoz has given me the opportunity for special personal savings	0.843			
	Cosmoz has provided commission-based pay	0.781			
Self-efficacy	I am an excellent salesperson	0.873	0.962	0.969	0.816
	I always sense exactly what customers want	0.933			
	I can easily use a wide variety of sales approaches	0.946			
	I know the applications and functions of Cosmoz products very well	0.916			
	I will be able to achieve most of the goals that I have set for myself	0.829			
	When facing difficult tasks, I am certain that I will accomplish them	0.908			
	In general, I think that I can obtain outcomes (i.e. sales/rank) that are important to me	0.914			
Sales experience	My selling experience enables me to gain a clearer understanding of my work	0.922	0.971	0.976	0.872
	My experience helped me to develop different selling skills	0.944			
	My experience increases my ability to easily understand customers' traits	0.920			
	I identify and sell to major customers who deal with me closely	0.917			
	My confidence during interacting with customers increases with my experience	0.950			
	I learned from the outcomes of different sales approaches used in varied contexts throughout my experience	0.948			

Table 3.
Internal consistency and convergent validity (Phase 2)

(*continued*)

Constructs	Items	Loadings	CA	CR	AVE
Adaptive sales performance	I contribute to Cosmoz's monthly sales target	0.877	0.950	0.957	0.690
	I sell Cosmoz high demanding products	0.858			
	I generate a high level of sales revenue	0.884			
	I identify and sell to major customers who deal with me closely	0.853			
	I exceed sales targets	0.719			
	When I feel that my sales approach is not working, I can easily change to another approach	0.754			
	I like to experiment with different sales approaches	0.759			
	I am very flexible in the selling approach I use	0.831			
	I try to understand how one customer differs from another	0.899			
	My monthly sales growth	0.887			

Notes: CA = Cronbach's alpha; CR = composite reliability; AVE = average variance extracted
Source: Authors' research findings

Table 3.

Variables	Intellectual capital	Self-motivation	Adaptive sales performance	Self-efficacy	Sales experience
PHASE 1:					
Intellectual capital	0.851				
Self-motivation	0.709	0.832			
Adaptive sales performance	0.772	0.819	0.821		
Self-efficacy	0.720	0.811	0.818	0.912	
Sales experience	0.778	0.812	0.791	0.899	0.923
PHASE 2:					
Intellectual capital	0.851				
Self-motivation	0.728	0.896			
Adaptive sales performance	0.774	0.814	0.831		
Self-efficacy	0.759	0.803	0.824	0.924	
Sales experience	0.789	0.868	0.818	0.898	0.933

Source: Authors' research findings

Table 4.
Fornell–Lacker's criterion

Hypotheses testing	Beta	SD	*T*-statistics	*P*-values
Intellectual capital→Adaptive sales performance	0.011	0.057	0.197	0.422
Self-motivation→Adaptive sales performance	0.001	0.078	0.005	0.498
Self-efficacy→Adaptive sales performance	0.170	0.075	2.297	0.011
Experience→Adaptive sales performance	0.599	0.064	9.176	0.000

Source: Authors' research findings

Table 5.
Hypothesis testing (Phase 1)

variables used in the model can account for 84.7% of the variability in the dependent variable. There was a significant increase in the R^2 from Phase 1 to Phase 2, which indicates that the training intervention had a positive impact on the relationship between the variables in the study over a period of two phases.

Discussion and implications

Contributions to theory

The study sought to answer two research questions: do the capabilities of intellectual capital, self-motivation, self-efficacy and sales experience improve female consumer entrepreneurs' sales performance? And, does coaching and training enhance the relationship between female consumer entrepreneurs' capabilities and sales performance over time? Two phases of data collection were administered to address the research questions. While extant studies suggest that intellectual capital, self-motivation, self-efficacy and sales experience are important capabilities for agents' sales performance, the "female sphere" has been neglected in this narrative (Hughes *et al.*, 2012; Crittenden *et al.*, 2019), as too has the emerging economy direct selling context (Dolan and Scott, 2009). It would, therefore, be inappropriate to assume the same capabilities as identified in the extant literature are beneficial to the sales performance of female consumer entrepreneurs in Asia.

In Phase 1, the survey findings reveal that self-efficacy and sales experience had significant positive effects on sales performance only. However, in Phase 2, all four capabilities demonstrate a positive significant effect on agents' sales performance. The results confirm that all hypotheses are supported in in Phase 2. The capabilities of self-efficacy and sales experience continued to hold a significant positive impact on sales performance, which was further augmented by the coaching and training intervention. While intellectual capital and self-motivation, which did not hold a significant relationship with agents' sales performance in Phase 1, became significant positive capabilities for agents' sales performance after the coaching and training intervention.

Evaluating the findings across both phases, several observations can be made. Firstly, female consumer entrepreneurs are clearly not a homogenized group and should not be thought of in this way. Female consumer entrepreneurs who have a high belief in their own ability (i.e. high self-efficacy) and have experience in sales appear to thrive in the direct selling model in the absence of formal coaching and training. Coaching and training can help tap further sales performance potential from these capabilities, as in Phase 2, we observe an incremental performance increase. These insights are consistent with the works of Tolentino *et al.* (2014) and Harindranath *et al.* (2019) for sales experience and Vieira *et al.* (2022), Bari and Arshad (2020) and Peterson (2020) for self-efficacy. In all but one of the extant studies listed, the sample examined was either mixed gender or the gender mix in the sample not reported, except for Bari and Arshad's (2020) study that focused on female-owned SMEs only. The findings here show how self-efficacy and sales experience are critical to the success of female consumer entrepreneurs in the absence of coaching and training, specifically in the context of direct selling in Asia. We do not infer that training is not helpful for such capabilities, but simply that the benefit of training focused on this type of capability development is incremental rather than transformational (Crittenden *et al.*, 2019).

Table 6.
Hypothesis testing (Phase 2)

Hypotheses testing	Beta	SD	*T*-statistics	*P*-values
Intellectual capital and performance	0.079	0.040	1.999	0.023
Self-motivation and performance	0.168	0.055	3.060	0.001
Self-efficacy and performance	0.182	0.075	2.433	0.008
Experience and performance	0.564	0.071	7.970	0.000

Source: Authors' research findings

When examining the findings from Phase 2, intellectual capital and self-motivation become explanators of female consumer entrepreneurs' success. While extant studies have shown the value of intellectual capital (Peñalba-Aguirrezabalaga *et al.*, 2021; Peñalba-Aguirrezabalaga *et al.*, 2022; Tarus and Sitienei, 2015) and self-motivation (Taylor *et al.*, 2023; Pegah, 2020) in the sales context, such understanding has again been derived from samples that do not focus squarely on the "female sphere", with mixed samples reported or gender not reported on specifically. Coaching and training programmes play a critical role in developing these capabilities among female consumer entrepreneurs to realize performance gains. While the absence of training has been observed as an inhibitor to consumer entrepreneurs realizing new product innovation (Agarwal and Shah, 2014), we show how coaching and training are key to developing a repertoire of capabilities for female consumer entrepreneurs to succeed. The importance of training has been observed within the direct selling model, with inferences made about its importance for helping female entrepreneurs (Dolan and Scott, 2009; Crittenden *et al.*, 2019). However, such insights do not clearly demonstrate "how" this occurs. By showing the impact of a coaching and training intervention on two specific capabilities that subsequently benefit agents' sales performance, the study offers new empirical evidence on where coaching training intervention should be directed to benefit female consumer entrepreneurs. This advances recent observations of the value of training in consumer entrepreneurship more broadly (Pedeliento *et al.*, 2018).

Taken collectively, the findings from this time-lagged study reveal the relationship between female consumer entrepreneurs' capabilities and sales performance and the role and value of coaching and training in direct selling. The study is an important advancement of the female entrepreneurship literature and the sub-domain of female consumer entrepreneurship specifically, because it shows how entrepreneurship can facilitate female empowerment in Asia "through improved earnings and poverty alleviation, altered family dynamics, and improved self-perceptions" (Hughes *et al.*, 2012, p. 436). Collectively, the study contributes much-needed theoretical advancement of female entrepreneurship in Asia and emerging economies more broadly, which has been recently noted as a limitation of the existing body of research on the topic (Anderson and Ojediran, 2022).

Implications for practice and society

Not only do the findings advance the study of female consumer entrepreneurship in non-traditional settings, but they carry key insights to guide the development of female entrepreneurship in emerging economies. Nearly half of the world's population resides in emerging economies, which produce a fifth of global GDP (Mehrotra and Jaladi, 2022), and yet the important role played by female entrepreneurs has been largely overlooked (Rao, 2014). By focusing on a single case organization situated within Malaysia, the study shows how, through the better understanding of female sales agents' existing capabilities, skills gaps in intellectual capital, self-motivation, self-efficacy and sales experience can be identified and developed through coaching and training. Adopting this approach will ensure that female consumer entrepreneurs are provided bespoke coaching and training that fills gaps in those capabilities that have been shown to be of benefit to their new ventures. Such a focused coaching and training programme that addresses skills gaps in these capabilities will, in turn, carry a significant boost to the sales performance of female agents in the direct selling business model. Cumulatively, this performance will then continue to drive social and economic development of Asia through the empowerment of women:

> [. . .] whereby women become able to organise themselves to increase their own self-reliance, to assert their independent right to make choices and to control resources which will assist in challenging and eliminating their own subordination. (Rowlands, 1995, p. 104).

While others have shown the value of education-based programmes for micro-level female entrepreneurs in South Asia (Rao, 2014), we add greater nuance to these insights by showing which capabilities need to be targeted specifically in coaching and training programmes within the Southeast Asian context. Consequently, we truly believe that the insights generated in the current study can serve to create an initial roadmap for empowering women in Southeast Asia and female entrepreneurship. This is a key implication for practice and Southeastern Asian society, as to date, most extant studies of female entrepreneurship in Asia have focused on the reported barriers women entrepreneurs encounter rather than the enablers of entrepreneurial success (Anderson and Ojediran, 2022).

By outlining how the direct selling business model can be maximized by female entrepreneurs for their own economic and social prosperity, as well as serving to benefit organizational performance, the study speaks directly to the United Nations 2030 Sustainable Development goal number 5 – achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls – which is particularly pertinent to emerging economy contexts (Crittenden *et al.*, 2019). The direct selling model common to industries like beauty and cosmetics affords a "female sphere", often ignored by men as well as the wider entrepreneurship literature, that provides female consumer entrepreneurs greater freedom over their activities and income generation (Dolan and Scott, 2009). Subsequently, the elevation of women entrepreneurs has the potential to contribute to a more equitable distribution of wealth within emerging economies across South Asia, as called for by Pio and Syed (2013). Through the generation of income and accumulation of wealth, individuals have the potential to make significant contributions towards poverty reduction and the enhancement of quality of life for both individuals and families.

Nevertheless, female consumer entrepreneurs must be given the appropriate investment in their coaching and training to realize the full potential such a business model offers for women's empowerment. In emerging countries like Malaysia, government assistance for female entrepreneurs can be a key factor in promoting economic growth, gender equality and general development. Programmes, workshops and mentorship initiatives can provide female consumer entrepreneurs with the tools they need to lead and operate profitable enterprises outside of the traditional "male sphere". Demonstrating "how" this can materialize is key to advancing the contribution made by female entrepreneurs to economic development across emerging economies in Asia (Sobhan and Hassan, 2023).

Limitations and future directions

It is important to reflect on some of the limitations of this study and the opportunities for future research that arise. Firstly, this research is a cross-sectional study of female consumer entrepreneurs in a single industry and based on only one focal firm. There should, therefore, be caution exercised in generalizing the study findings to other business model outside of direct selling. For future research, a comparison of different female consumer entrepreneurship modes and the characteristics within and across modes would be a worthy next step. Secondly, the study investigates the impact of a coaching and training intervention on the relationship between female sales agents' capabilities and sales performance. We do not, however, account for the specific engagement of individual sales agents with the coaching and training programme. Though this is consistent with extant studies, there may, for instance, be variance among those agents who engaged fully and those that did not and the relationship between capability development and sales

performance. Moreover, we did not seek to capture the specific form "development" may have taken; thus, future research may consider digital literacy and development with different digital platforms to observe the impact on sales processes and interactions with potential and existing customers across women's informal exchange networks. Thirdly, we only examine four capabilities, which have been well documented in "male spheres" without having been considered in a specific "female sphere". To further the insights garnered, in-depth qualitative research should explore whether there are specific capabilities that resonate only within the female sphere, as opposed to the traditional "male sphere"; doing so would advance the study of female consumer entrepreneurs and help to build this sub-domain of consumer entrepreneurship research.

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About the authors

Darwina Arshad (PhD, Loughborough University) is an Associate Professor of Strategic Management at the School of Business Management (SBM), Universiti Utara Malaysia. Her research interests surround strategic management, improvisation, entrepreneurship and sustainability with a specific focus on the Asia Pacific. Her work is published in respected journals including the *Journal of World Business, Asia Pacific Journal of Management, Journal of Strategy and Management, Sustainability*, among others. Darwina Arshad is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: darwina@uum.edu.my

Ian R. Hodgkinson (PhD, Loughborough University) is a Professor of Strategy at the School of Business and Economics, Loughborough University, UK. His research focuses on strategic decision-making in complex environments to help transform established strategic thinking for more effective strategizing. Ian has published extensively on a broad array of topics, including customer experience-driven service models; agile decision-making practices; digital transformation and digital decarbonization. His work has appeared in leading academic journals such as *Journal of World Business, Public Administration, Public Management Review and Research Policy*.

Paul Hughes (PhD, Aberystwyth University) is a Chair in Strategy at Lancaster University Management School, UK. Paul's research interests revolve around strategy-making, with a particular interest in planning and improvisation in strategy-making; strategy adherence; resource-based theory; and strategic exploration and exploitation (ambidexterity). Paul has published in leading academic outlets, including *Strategic Entrepreneurship Journal, Public Administration, Journal of World Business, Public Management Review and Journal of Product Innovation Management*, among many others.

Munirah Khamarudin (PhD, Universiti Utara Malaysia) is a Senior Lecturer at the School of Business Management, UUM. Her PhD research focuses on relationship marketing which examine the antecedents and outcomes of relationship quality of courier services providers among online entrepreneurs in Malaysia. In 2019, she obtained a professional certificate in Digital Marketing Customer Engagement, Social Media, Planning and Analytics through online learning from the Emeritus Institute of Management, Columbia Business School. She teaches a variety of courses in marketing for undergraduates, namely, principles of marketing, relationship marketing, services marketing and consumer behaviour. Her research interests are in the areas of relationship marketing, internet marketing, services marketing and consumer behaviour.

Muhammad Zulqarnain Arshad (PhD, Universiti Utara Malaysia) is a senior Lecturer at the School of Business Management, Universiti Utara Malaysia. Zulqarnain's areas of specialty are innovation, intellectual capital and performance. He collaborates with different researchers around the globe. His work has been published in several good articles, such as *Sustainability, International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health and Frontiers in Psychology Sustainable Production and Consumption*, among others.

Adibah Bari (PhD, Universiti Utara Malaysia) is the founder of Trulooks Beauty Cosmetic and also the Managing Director at Trulooks Global Group Sdn. Bhd. She owns a local brand cosmetics and skincare company in Malaysia, Trulooks and Truskin. Her research interests surround entrepreneurship, strategic management, improvisation behaviour, business success and women entrepreneurship. As a successful woman entrepreneur, she won many entrepreneur's awards, such as the Industry Leadership Award – Fast Growing Cosmetics Niagatimes 2022, Superbrands Award Malaysian Choice 2021, Entrepreneur Icon Negeri Perlis 2022 and Best Halal Skincare – Nona 2022.

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