



ارائه شده توسط:

سایت ترجمه فا

مرجع جدیدترین مقالات ترجمه شده

از نشریات معتبر



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

## Industrial Marketing Management



## Understanding the sales-marketing interface dysfunction experience in business-to-business firms: A matter of perspective

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## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 27 April 2016

Received in revised form 17 October 2016

Accepted 20 October 2016

Available online xxxx

## Keywords:

Sales-marketing interface

Dysfunction experience

Sensemaking

Qualitative

## ABSTRACT

Despite its importance, the sales-marketing interface (SMI) in business-to-business (B2B) firms is often dysfunctional. While scholars have proposed functional-level impactors of SMIs, research that examines how sales and marketing personnel, at an individual level, perceive, evaluate, and respond to SMI dysfunction is sparse. Our study employs a discovery-oriented, theories-in-use approach and uses in-depth interview data collected from 42 participants in 21 sales-marketing dyads across multiple levels from a variety of B2B industries to examine this phenomenon. Findings reveal that the same dysfunction may trigger vastly different sensemaking processes in sales and marketing personnel's minds wherein they sense and interpret the same dysfunction encounter differently. These interpretations lead them to resort to activities that may, at times, be counterproductive to resolving the dysfunction. In addition, sales and marketing personnel view the interface dysfunctions as following a bidirectional pattern, as opposed to a sequential pattern that has been documented in the literature. Collectively, differential dysfunction experiences within the SMI have implications for whether and to what extent the dysfunction is addressed.

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### 1. Introduction

To function efficaciously, firms must engage in myriad interfaces internally (e.g. between departments) and externally (e.g. with customers). Of the interfaces occurring within the organization, the interface between sales and marketing has been identified by scholars as one of the most critical ones since sales and marketing have a pivotal role in organizations' successful interactions with business customers (Malshe, 2011; Malshe & Sohi, 2009a; Rouzies et al., 2005). Accordingly, understanding how to optimize functionality of the sales-marketing interface (SMI) in B2B firms is of paramount importance to academics and practitioners alike.

Constructive interaction between marketing and sales can lead to desirable outcomes such as better strategies in the marketplace (Malshe & Sohi, 2009a), superior customer value (Guenzi, Pardo, & Georges, 2007), and enhanced organizational performance (Rouzies et al., 2005). However, in many B2B firms, SMIs are plagued by deeper-level problems such as misaligned systems, processes, and compensation plans, as well as sub-optimal organizational structures

(Malshe & Biemans, 2014). These problems, in turn, may give rise to interface dysfunctions such as lack of communication or collaboration, or sometime overt conflict between sales and marketing personnel, which may individually, or collectively, impede firms' ability to achieve the desirable strategic outcomes noted above (Beverland, Steel, & Dapiran, 2006; Kotler, Rackham, & Krishnaswamy, 2006; Montgomery & Webster, 1997). Furthermore, these dysfunctions can compound upon each other exacerbating problems within the SMI. Specifically, poor communication quality and lack of bidirectionality in communication can engender dysfunctional conflict (Massey & Dawes, 2007), which, in turn, can have a strong negative impact on collaboration between sales and marketing in business to business firms (Le Meunier-FitzHugh, Massey, & Piercy, 2011).

The existing SMI literature considers how structural, systemic, cultural, and processual factors may address the SMI dysfunctions and harmonize it at a functional level (Rouzies et al., 2005). In this regard, many factors such as joint marketing and sales customer interaction, job rotation, personnel training, group orientation, structured meetings, information systems quality, company culture, and compensations have been proposed as impactors of the SMI in conceptual and qualitative SMI inquires (Guenzi & Troilo, 2006; Johnson & Boeing, 2016; Malshe & Sohi, 2009a; Paliwoda, Marinova, Biemans, & Makovec Brencic, 2007; Rouzies et al., 2005; Smith, Gopalakrishna, & Chatterjee, 2006).

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Additionally, quantitative research in the SMI domain has tested several factors impacting the efficacy of the SMI such as communication frequency, organizational justice, reward structure, senior management support, marketing information systems, communication technology, and informal interaction opportunities (Arnett & Wittmann, 2014; Dawes & Massey, 2005; Hulland, Nenkov, & Barclay, 2011; Le Meunier-FitzHugh & Lane, 2009; Le Meunier-FitzHugh & Piercy, 2009; Le Meunier-FitzHugh et al., 2011).

While advancing understanding of these functional-level impactors has unarguably contributed to knowledge germane to the SMI, theoretical insights that will provide understanding of how individual-level variables impact the functioning of the SMIs are needed. Interface dysfunctions such as the lack of communication or collaboration, or overt conflict are a lived experience for sales and marketing personnel. When the SMI is dysfunctional, it is the sales and marketing personnel who (a) have to confront it, (b) are deeply impacted by it, and (c) have to navigate the roadblocks the dysfunction creates in their day-to-day work. It is plausible that sales and marketing personnel, owing to the many differences between them in terms of their world-views and perspectives (Homburg & Jensen, 2007) as well as their personalities, motivations, drive, orientation and domains of competence (Biemans, Makovec Brencic, & Malshe, 2010) may experience the same interface dysfunction differently – that is, they may perceive, interpret, and respond to the same interface dysfunction in a dissimilar manner. Further, their likely differential dysfunction experience may plausibly shape their perspectives about how these dysfunctions are interrelated.

Thus, scholarly inquiry that explores sales and marketing personnel's interface dysfunction experience at an individual level, and further understands how they view the interrelationships among these dysfunctions is likely to not only generate new theoretical insights but also shed greater light on how sales and marketing personnel may be equipped to tackle the interface dysfunctions (Malshe & Sohi, 2009b).

Against this backdrop, this paper examines the following research questions:

- (a) What makes SMI dysfunctions salient to sales and marketing personnel in B2B firms?
- (b) How do sales and marketing personnel in B2B firms interpret SMI dysfunctions?
- (c) How do sales and marketing personnel in B2B firms respond to SMI dysfunctions?
- (d) How do sales and marketing personnel in B2B firms perceive the interrelationship among SMI dysfunctions?

Since there is a lack of prior research that would elucidate in a nuanced manner how the sales and marketing personnel experience interface dysfunctions at an individual level, we utilize a discovery-oriented, theories-in-use approach (e.g. Challagalla, Murtha, & Jaworski, 2014; Zaltman, LeMasters, & Heffring, 1982) and use data collected from 42 informants made up of 21 marketing and sales dyads from within 17 B2B firms to study this phenomenon.

Our findings provide novel insights to SMI research by illustrating how marketers and salespeople experience pervasive SMI dysfunctions. Three interface dysfunctions emerged consistently in our inductive data analysis: communication paucity, lack of collaboration, and interface conflict. We find that the same interface dysfunction may trigger substantially dissimilar sensemaking processes for sales and marketing personnel. Specifically, their individual perceptions of each dysfunction, as well as their interpretations in terms of the situational and existential meanings they ascribe to the dysfunction (what the dysfunction tells them about their role in the immediate and global situation respectively) are markedly different. Consequently, sales and marketing personnel respond differently when experiencing the same SMI dysfunction, and many times, their responses are counterproductive in that they contribute to the dysfunction festering over time.

Our informants' perspectives further indicate that the interface dysfunctions do not follow a specific sequence with communication paucity preceding and giving rise to conflict and sub-optimal collaboration. On the contrary, our data insights suggest that the timing and/or sequence of the dysfunction's occurrence may follow a bidirectional and/or a circular pattern.

In the following section, we discuss our methodology followed by the study findings. Consistent with the theories-in-use approach, we then situate our findings within the existing body of work on SMI in the Discussion to offer theoretical advancements. We also highlight how the study's findings can guide managerial practice, as well as note study limitations and espouse future research directions.

## 2. Method

To identify and understand the various dysfunctions that may manifest in the SMI, a qualitative, discovery-oriented methodology was employed. Qualitative research concentrates on the perceptions of decision-makers and is useful in generating a rich understanding of complex phenomena through participants' perspectives and voices (Creswell, 2007). Given the espoused complexity and paucity of research in the SMI domain around how dysfunction manifests and is experienced by individuals living with these dysfunctions, a qualitative approach fits the research need well. Specifically, we conducted multi-firm qualitative inquiry using a theories-in-use approach (Challagalla et al., 2014; Zaltman et al., 1982). As Zaltman et al. (1982, p. 98) note, a theories-in-use approach is ideal for the purpose of "generating concepts, propositions, and theories by observing multiple subjects of cases where theories are in apparent use." A theories-in-use approach is a useful means of gaining multifaceted insight germane to a complex phenomenon consistent with our research objectives. We strived to accumulate a wide range of experiences, perspectives, and narratives on the topics under consideration from sales and marketing personnel from multiple companies within a variety of B2B industries. Our approach is similar to other investigations in the marketing literature using a theories-in-use approach (Challagalla et al., 2014; Friend & Malshe, 2016).

### 2.1. Sample and data collection

Consistent with the tenets of a theories-in-use approach, we used theoretical sampling in this study. This sampling technique requires the researcher to go to places, people, or events that will maximize the opportunities to identify variations among the concepts under investigation and help densify themes in terms of their properties and dimensions (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 201). Accordingly, we sampled from firms of all sizes across multiple B2B industries to accumulate a wide range of experiences, perspectives, and narratives on the topics under consideration (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 215).

We used the following three criteria to ensure that we spoke with the most appropriate individuals within the sampled companies: (a) the informant had at least two years of experience in their current company, (b) their companies had distinct sales and marketing departments, and (c) they had an existing working relationship with their sales or marketing counterpart. Since we wanted to explore the likely differential interface dysfunction experience of sales and marketing personnel, we collected dyadic data. A dyad consists of a sales and marketing person from within the same company at the same hierarchical level. Eight dyads in our sample represent the bottom level, ten dyads represent the middle level, and three dyads represent the top level of the organizational hierarchy in their respective companies. We ascertained the informant's level based on their job responsibilities, who they reported to in their company, and whether or not they had direct reports. Our final sample consists of 42 informants (21 dyads) from 17 different B2B companies across 10 industries. Table 1 provides the detail for each informant.

We collected data through depth interviews. We told our potential informants that we aimed to understand the challenges sales and marketing personnel encounter in B2B firms. The interviews were open-ended and discovery oriented, averaging 55 min- the shortest being 45 min and the longest 82 min. All interviews were conducted face-to-face at a place and time convenient to the informant. To gain the respondents' unedited perspectives, members of the dyad were interviewed separately. This allowed respondents to answer questions honestly, even those that may have been contentious with their counterpart.

While we stuck to our interview protocol (provided in the Appendix A), we allowed informants to guide the flow and content of discussion and tried to reduce interviewer-induced bias (McCracken, 1988) and asked clarifying questions when necessary. These questions gave our informants an opportunity to correct anything we might have misunderstood or elaborate on certain aspects. The interviews were conversational. We audio-taped all interviews and transcribed them verbatim. Our 42 interviews resulted in 39 h of audio recordings, which amounted to 410 pages of interview transcripts.

## 2.2. Data analysis, reliability, and validity

We used QSR International's NVivo software to manage our interview data. Following qualitative inquiry practices, we coded the data iteratively, seeking to find common themes. We constantly refined our themes on the basis of subsequent interview data. We began with open coding to identify central concepts and their properties (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Subsequently, axial coding helped us relate various dimensions emerging from the data to the central themes. When subsequent data did not raise any questions about the themes we had identified or add anything new to our understanding, we realized that we had reached theoretical saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 2009; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). At such time, we stopped our interviews.

We ensured analytical rigor and validity/reliability of our interpretation by following several established procedures (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Silverman & Marvasti, 2008). First, we ensured the accuracy of our data interpretation using member checks in that we sought opinions of 16 informants regarding our data interpretations and study findings. Next, we randomly selected 18 interview transcripts and asked three qualified, independent researchers to read through the transcripts and

assess our coding. All three researchers concurred with our data interpretation and conclusions thereby confirming our analytical objectivity and the plausibility of our conclusions. We further employed a sequence of procedures including refutability, constant comparison, comprehensive data treatment, and deviant case analysis to ensure data trustworthiness and analytical rigor (see Malshe & Sohi, 2009a for details of these techniques; Silverman & Marvasti, 2008). In Table 2, we provide an overview of each procedure.

## 3. Findings

Our inductive inquiry revealed that sales and marketing personnel most commonly experience three dysfunctions: (a) communication paucity, (b) lack of collaboration, and (c) overt conflict. These emergent SMI dysfunctions from our data are consistent with extant studies that discuss the problematic nature of SMIs in business firms (Dewsnap & Jobber, 2002; Le Meunier-FitzHugh et al., 2011; Massey & Dawes, 2007). Further, the themes related to each of these dysfunctions revealed that sales and marketing personnel's dysfunction experience - that is, their perception, interpretation, and response to each of the dysfunctions - is different. Last, our informant perspectives suggest that the interface dysfunctions follow a bidirectional and/or a circular pattern, as opposed to a sequential pattern that has been documented in the literature. In the subsequent sections, we explicate our findings in greater detail.

### 3.1. Communication paucity

Our informants mentioned that communication paucity is a commonly encountered interface dysfunction, which refers to sub-optimal information exchange between marketers and salespeople on an ongoing basis (Kotler et al., 2006). Our informants identified different facets of communication paucity such as salespeople and marketers not (a) seeking each other's inputs, (b) engaging in a dialog to discuss strategies and/or tactics, or (c) keeping each other apprised of their marketplace activities and the related outcomes.

Our sales informants' perceptions of communication paucity were shaped by a variety of factors such as the number of days/weeks that would go by without having any interactions with marketing, or complete absence of any meaningful dialog between them and their

**Table 1**  
Informant details.

Dyad #	Informant (SLS: sales; MKTG: marketing)	Org. level	Age and gender	Titles	Industry	SBU size (employees)
1	1SLS; 2MKTG	Bottom	35/M; 40/F	Sales representative; Marketing specialist	Medical equipment	350
2*	3SLS; 4MKTG	Middle	55/F; 30/F	Regional sales manager; Marketing manager	Electronics	300
3	5SLS; 6MKTG	Middle	45/M; 29/F	District sales manager; District mktg. manager	Technology services	100
4	7SLS; 8MKTG	Middle	50/F; 35/M	District manager; Senior mktg. manager	Manufacturing	230
5	9SLS; 10MKTG	Bottom	38/M; 44/M	Sales representative; Marketing support II	Manufacturing	600
6	11SLS; 12MKTG	Bottom	43/F; 46/F	Sales representative; Marketing specialist	Food and beverage	90
7	13SLS; 14MKTG	Bottom	32/F; 36/M	Sales liaison; Marketing coordinator	Industrial goods	200
8***	15SLS; 16MKTG	Bottom	28/M; 39/M	Sales representative; Marketing support	Machine tools	450
9*	17SLS; 18MKTG	Middle	44/F; 40/F	Sales manager; Marketing director	Electronics	300
10	19SLS; 20MKTG	Middle	39/M; 60/M	Regional sales manager; Marketing manager	Electronics	345
11****	21SLS; 21MKTG	Middle	55/F; 51/M	Regional sales manager; Marketing manager	Engineering	80
12	23SLS; 24MKTG	Middle	25/F; 42/F	District sales director; Sr. marketing manager	Technology services	235
13	25SLS; 26MKTG	Bottom	28/M; 29/F	Sales representative; Marketing specialist	Automotive	88
14****	27SLS; 28MKTG	Bottom	30/F; 34/F	Sales representative; Marketing specialist	Engineering	80
15	29SLS; 30MKTG	Bottom	44/M; 40/F	Sales coordinator; Marketing support mngr.	Industrial goods	120
16	31SLS; 32MKTG	Middle	46/M; 39/M	District sales manager; Marketing manager	Consumer products	400
17	33SLS; 34MKTG	Middle	30/F; 38/M	Regional sales manager; Sr. marketing manager	Consumer products	200
18**	35SLS; 36MKTG	Middle	44/M; 40/F	Regional sales manager; Marketing director	Food and beverage	100
19	37SLS; 38MKTG	Top	66/M; 59/M	Sales VP; Marketing VP	Industrial goods	335
20***	39SLS; 40MKTG	Top	50/M; 58/M	Regional sales director; Director of marketing	Machine tools	450
21**	41SLS; 42MKTG	Top	49/F; 55/M	Sr. sales director; Marketing controller	Food and beverage	100

\*-\*\*\*\* Our sample of twenty-one dyads came from seventeen companies. Thirteen companies contributed one dyad each, four contributed two dyads. The dyad pairs from these four companies are dyad #s 2 and 9, 18 and 21, 8 and 20, and 11 and 14.

**Table 2**  
Analytical procedure summary.

Procedure	Definition	Implementation
Refutability	Researchers seek to find evidence in the data that would question the assumed relationships among the various concepts.	We examined whether our findings in one context (e.g. industry, company size, informant gender, informant age) could be refuted in other contexts. No systemic differences were found.
Constant comparison	Researchers group answers to common questions and compare different perspectives on the central issues; as the data collection progresses, they try to find additional cases that will validate emergent findings.	Engaged in iterative process of adding cases to the analysis until theoretical saturation was achieved. Theoretical saturation was achieved while interviewing the 21st dyad.
Comprehensive data treatment	Researchers examine the data in a comprehensive manner - that is, they examine all the data on hand collectively and thoroughly, and then draw their conclusions.	We transcribed all interviews and used the QSR NVivo software to manage our qualitative data. This allowed us to store all our data in one place and inspect it in a comprehensive manner.
Deviant-case analysis	Researchers keep an eye out for those cases where the insights/findings may be substantially different (i.e., outliers); if such cases are found, they ascertain the plausible underlying logic that would explain the discrepancy.	We actively sought to identify and did not find any cases that would be considered deviant.

marketing colleagues on strategic and/or tactical issues. In the quote below, Jenny (23SLS) indicates she cannot remember her last interaction with marketing and laments this dearth.

I don't even remember when I spoke with our marketing manager last...it is not that we are pals...but our work requires that we keep each other posted of what we are doing. However, as far as I am concerned, I feel like I am completely out of the loop. I do not really know what they are cooking up there [in marketing] because we have not heard anything from them...I have no clue which way we are headed  
[[23SLS, District Sales Director, Technology Services]]

Working in the field, salespeople would capture important market insights, which, if used by marketers, can substantially benefit the company's strategies. However, owing to communication paucity, sales personnel had no opportunity to share their insights with marketers. Overall, salespeople interpreted the lack of marketer's eagerness to listen to them to mean that they were *undervalued by the organization*. In the quote below, Steve (25SLS) shared how marketing's utter lack of communication was a signal to him that they did not think much of sales. He espouses the deleterious nature of communication paucity as he notes that salespeople can provide robust contributions to the strategy-making process if asked.

They could not care less...I don't even know if they understand what we do in the field...I am sure they don't think much of us, otherwise, why would not they ask for our ideas and inputs. Maybe they want to own their strategies and not share much with us...but we have a lot to contribute, only if someone cared to ask.  
[[25SLS; Sales Representative, Automotive]]

Communication paucity also made sales personnel question their place in the organization. Many sales informants noted that communication paucity limited their participation in strategic conversations. This made them feel as if they existed on the periphery with no one recognizing their existence or trying to integrate them in the life of the organization. In sum, it made them feel as if they were *ostracized members of the*

*organization*. This insight is consistent with extant research, which suggests that salespeople often feel that there is a social distinction between marketers and themselves with marketers occupying higher position in the social hierarchy and salespeople residing at the bottom-most level on the organization totem pole (Malshe, 2010; Malshe & Sohi, 2009b).

As Brenda (3SLS) notes, even as a regional sales manager, she is often uninformed about their company's next strategic or tactical moves. She has no input in her company's strategic initiatives and therefore she feels that she is expected to simply execute the initiatives that 'come down the pike.' She laments that even when she is used to such set of events, every such instance reinforces in her mind that she exists on the fringes and has a limited role in the organization.

Not being informed about what is coming down the pike is not new to us.... Even at my level when I am leading a team of four sales reps...it is not new. I would say I and my team are quite used to it ...but every time this happens, I feel like I am an outsider in my own company... and the same is true for my team...it kind of reinforces our belief that we are on the fringes. We play a very limited role and I am not sure if our efforts even matter or make any difference to anyone.

[[3SLS; Regional Sales Manager; Electronics]]

Salespeople's perceptions of communication paucity and their consequent interpretation as being undervalued and ostracized members of their organization may potentially trigger adverse, and in some cases, anti-organizational behaviors. Ronaldo (31SLS) discusses how he and his team had to adapt to communication paucity. Instead of making concerted efforts to enhance interface communication, the feeling that they were being ignored by marketers led Ronaldo and his team to employ *active ignorance*. Specifically, they returned the favor by tuning out operational directives that came from marketing. This insight thus brings forth the plausible driver that may underlie salespeople's ignorance of marketing's directives related to field activities as documented in the extant literature (Malshe, 2010; Rouzies et al., 2005).

In the quote below, Ronaldo also speaks of it being a 'learned behavior' and discusses the secretive nature of this phenomenon. Ronaldo's experience is a prime example of how this oft-experienced SMI dysfunction can trigger a vicious cycle - paucity of communication, and the resulting self-evaluations motivate sales personnel to engage in behaviors that would further decrease communication with marketing, contributing to a greater chasm within SMI.

I am with this company for five years and I have worked with three different regional teams. I studied psychology and I know something about learned behavior. While it felt odd at first that marketing rarely communicated with me or my team, over time, we [our team] just got used to it...we don't broadcast it but we have an understanding in our team that our work is not governed by marketing's ideas...we do not necessarily pay attention to what they tell us...you may call it active ignorance but we go about doing our work based on what we know about our customers...and not necessarily on what marketing advises us to do.

[[31SLS; District Sales Manager; Consumer Products]]

We draw upon the above discussion to propose the following:  
P1: The scarcer the SMI communication,

- the stronger is the salespeople's perception of being undervalued by the organization.
- the stronger is the salespeople's perception of being an ostracized member of the organization.
- the greater is the likelihood that salespeople will ignore marketing's directives.

The manner in which marketers experienced communication paucity differed substantially from their sales counterparts. Specifically,

marketers' perceptions were shaped by the fact that they had to reach out to sales personnel multiple times before they could initiate any communication with them. Marketers mentioned that salespeople were hard to get in touch with, in spite of their earnest desire to interact with them. David (36MKTG) describes the difficulty he has in obtaining information from salespeople in the quote below. Instead of the pertinent information he desires, he receives excuses from salespeople.

We want to hear from them, we want to ask them questions and know what is going on in the field...it is just so hard to get someone from the field to speak with us...there is always some excuse- they are busy or they are preparing for a customer presentation...sometimes, it feels like they are avoiding us...they are hiding from us.

[[36MKTG; Marketing Director; Food and Beverage]]

When marketers' numerous attempts to connect with salespeople generated no response, they interpreted salespeople's unwillingness to communicate as signaling that they did not wish to be bounded by marketers' strategic guidelines. The sales profession attracts people who are appreciative of job autonomy (Wang & Netemeyer, 2002). Relatedly, marketers interpret salespeople's behavior as *autonomy overkill* - that is, salespeople putting their desire to remain independent above the need for their work to be guided by a broader marketing strategy. Andy's (20MKTG) quote below illustrates this point.

I have no explanation for this behavior [salespeople not responding to their requests for meetings/phone calls]... I feel like they just want to be free agents...independent and on their own...not really bounded by our guidelines or ideas or ways of doing things. Maybe they have their own agendas and they want to drive those agendas...and they don't want us to be meddling in their efforts.

[[20MKTG; Marketing manager, Electronics]]

Repeated instances of marketers needing to chase down sales personnel to engage them in meaningful conversations made marketers question whether they had any role to play in salespeople's work-life, and/or any influence over how the strategies that they have crafted may actually get operationalized. Being kept at bay makes marketers wonder about their value and they begin to view themselves as a mere *nuisance* to salespeople. In the quote below, Mary (21MKTG), a marketing informant notes how the interface communication paucity makes her feel that she is just a noise that salespeople cannot wait to tune out.

I have begun to believe that we are no more than just a noise in the environment for the salespeople- the noise that they have learned to successfully tune out. How else would you explain being kept at arm's length? It is my belief that a majority of salespeople actually view us as nuisance...something, that is not going to go away and therefore they just have to learn to live with it. So, the lesser they see us, the lesser inconvenience we cause them...and they want just that.

[[21MKTG; Marketing Manager; Engineering]]

Marketers' perceptions regarding SMI communication paucity and their consequent interpretations regarding their place in the organization and salespeople's work-life elicit negative responses. This is evident in a quote below from Joe (40MKTG). The paucity of SMI communication was brought into the spotlight for Joe when his team launched a new market initiative. It was hard for Joe to connect with salespeople and receive market feedback on the new initiative, which made it difficult for him to make timely changes to their strategic and tactical efforts. Devoid of salesperson input, he felt as if he had no connection with market reality and his team was operating in a vacuum. He noted that in such situations, he would not think twice about *usurping* the salesperson's position and directly contacting customers.

We need market input after launching the strategy so that we know how our ideas are working. Lacking any feedback from sales, it makes our job much harder. Unless I pick up the phone and speak

with some customers that I have business relationships with, we would not know how our strategies are received. Or otherwise, we have to depend on our secondary data sources, but there is a time lag there and we cannot make any timely course corrections.

[[40MKTG; Director of Marketing; Machine Tools]]

Repeated experiences, such as what Joe describes above, increase the possibility that marketers will refrain from seeking out salespeople for market information and either take on the task of gathering market intelligence themselves or cultivate alternative channels, such as dealers, distributors, and loyal customers who would do the job for them. In the process, marketers would begin to view salespeople as a redundant and dispensable entity, which would further deteriorate their communication with salespeople. The preceding discussion suggests:

P2: The scarcer the SMI communication,

- the stronger is the marketers' perception of salespeople's desire for autonomy.
- the stronger is the marketers' perception of them being a nuisance to the sales force.
- the greater is the likelihood that marketers will usurp salespeople's position.

### 3.2. Lack of collaboration

SMI collaboration refers to cross-functional teamwork between marketing and sales (Le Meunier-FitzHugh & Piercy, 2007). Within our data, lack of SMI collaboration manifested in multiple ways such as marketing and sales personnel (a) not providing the timely support or making promises to support the initiatives of the other party but not keeping them, (b) ignoring each other's requests for specific contributions to the joint projects, or (c) discouraging the other function from engaging in a specific marketplace activity.

Salespeople's perceptions of this dysfunction were shaped by their experiences, such as marketers delaying the requested field support, shirking their responsibility in the joint tasks, or actively dissuading salespeople from pursuing those initiatives that, while benefitting the company, would harm their functional interests. In the quote below, Paula (33SLS) highlights how, when two of her salespeople sought marketing's support for a campaign they had developed, they were handed out discouragement rather than marketing support.

I don't think we consider marketing to be a support function because we receive no backing for our initiatives. Here is an example...two of my sales reps came up with new marketing program for grocery buyers...it was specific to MN, SD, and ND...and they were pretty excited about it. They had done a lot of the legwork in developing their plan... it was to last six weeks and they were looking for some promotional materials and about \$5k marketing dollars ...when they sought marketing's support, not only did they not get the support, they were handed out discouragement...all they heard marketers telling them was how their ideas were counterproductive and how it would undermine marketing's larger brand push...they just killed that plan right then and there...it was pretty unfortunate.

[[33SLS; Regional Sales Manager; Consumer Products]]

Lack of marketing support was not only a big discouragement, but it also made salespeople believe that marketers cared about their functional interests more than customer interests. In other words, they felt that marketers were obsessively *self-oriented* rather than customer oriented (Slater & Narver, 1994). When marketers fail to support salespeople's customer-oriented initiatives and activities, it disincentivizes them to take the risk. As Marko (5SLS) states, his salespeople will not be willing to go out on limb for their customers if they know that they are not going to be supported by marketing.

If I am a salesperson fighting out big battles in the field. I have a lot going on and I cannot do it alone. I need folks in marketing to back me up. I have the customers' best interest in my heart...however, if I go out on limb for my customer and receive no support from marketing because they don't think my activities are strategically aligned... I am going to stop and think...why should I go the extra mile and get into trouble for trying harder? It does not make sense.

[[5SLS; District Sales Manager; Technology Services]]

Harriet's (13SLS) case below points to the exacerbation in salespeople's perceptions of *role conflict* resulting from the lack of marketing support. As she noted, salespeople feel that they are simultaneously serving multiple constituents - customers, themselves, and their company, among others. When marketing fails to support their customer-oriented initiatives, salespeople do not feel motivated to strike it out on their own, even when they clearly believe that their proposed initiatives are likely to benefit their customers. Such instances make them feel conflicted - as if they are sacrificing customers' best interests to protect their self-interests, and they struggle to understand their role in the organization.

It is very bad for salespeople's morale...their lives are tough...they hear rejections often...and when their ideas are rejected by marketing, who are supposed to be on their team...they feel very disheartened and frustrated...they feel conflicted about whether they are working for customer, themselves, or their marketing colleagues...it is not a happy situation when salespeople believe that they are not supported in their endeavors to do something for their customers.

[[#13SLS; Sales Liaison; Industrial Goods]]

Our analysis suggests that salespeople's perceptions of lack of interface collaboration and the consequent concerns it raises in their minds have the potential to trigger undesirable responses. Specifically, salespeople may develop *learned lone-wolfism* whereby they may simply cease going to marketing for any kind of support of their activities or initiatives. Lone-wolf behavior is a salesperson behavioral manifestation whereby the salesperson retreats within themselves and eschews other members of the organization (Mulki, Jaramillo, & Marshall, 2007). Philip (7SLS) saw this change manifest in his salespeople in that the lack of support caused his salespeople to question the role marketing played in their company and they began to dissociate themselves from marketing and begin to operate in a siloed manner.

When they [salespeople] do not receive support for their ideas, as a frontline manager, I sense the change in their [salespeople's] approach right away...it makes them further disconnected from marketing...and definitely affects their willingness to go back to marketing for any support. They begin to question the purpose of marketing department in the company.

[[7SLS; District Manager; Manufacturing]]

The preceding discussion suggests the following propositions.

P3: The scarcer the SMI collaboration,

- the weaker is the salespeople's perception of marketing's customer orientation.
- the more exacerbated is the salespeople's role conflict.
- the greater is the likelihood that salespeople will exhibit lone-wolf tendencies.

Marketers' perceptions of salespeople's unwillingness to collaborate were reinforced by instances such as sales personnel challenging a majority of the strategic proposals made by marketing, or poking holes in such proposals thereby signaling that they would not invest their resources into implementing those strategies. Below, Esther (12MKTG)

laments how salespeople offer discouraging remarks on her proposed ideas. She views it as salespeople setting a stage to not support its implementation. Further, even when salespeople do not disparage marketers' ideas, there is no guarantee they will implement marketing's proposed strategies in the field.

When we roll out a strategy, the normal expectation is that the field will take it up and put their efforts behind it...but again, I am talking about normal and our sales-marketing relationship is anything but normal...it feels like salespeople are looking to poke holes into everything we propose...nothing is good...it is either impractical, irrelevant, too hard to implement, or something else...there is always an excuse...and those few times when they do not push back, there is no guarantee that they will follow the strategy...we have many instances where we assumed we were all set to implement the strategy only to realize later that we were banking on empty promises from our salespeople.

[[12MKTG; Marketing Specialist; Food and Beverage]]

In many companies, marketers came up with initial strategic ideas and were responsible for championing those ideas so that the sales force would buy-in to the strategic initiatives and partner in its implementation (Malshe & Sohi, 2009b). When marketers experienced salespeople's unsupportiveness, they began viewing their strategy development work as an *exercise in futility*. Specifically, lacking salespeople's commitment to support the proposed initiatives, marketers felt that strategy development activity is simply a ritualistic endeavor with no real-life implication. Since no one in the sales organization was excited to be onboard the strategic process, marketers felt that the interactions with salespeople were a wasted effort. Ara's (18MKTG) quote below brings forth this point.

Many on my team feel disconnected from the field and they have a good reason to feel that way...they wonder whether they should spend any time detailing the strategy to the field...they feel this is going to be a wasted effort since much of what they will tell them [sales force] is not going to see the light of the day...so, they tell me that sales force engagement has a very low ROI.

[[18MKTG; Marketing Director; Electronics]]

Lack of SMI collaboration also made marketers feel as if they were *rudderless* in the vast market. Specifically, when they did not have salespeople on their side, marketers felt as if they were navigating the strong and ever-changing market currents with no compass to aid them. They could go on for a while, but it would not be long before they might be swept away by market developments that they had not envisioned. Connie (28MKTG) espouses this point.

No matter how strong we are in gathering the VoC [Voice of the Customer] directly, there is no denying that even today, salespeople bring in the best market intelligence. So, when we reach out to the field and receive no support, you feel directionless...you are putting in efforts but there is no way for you to know whether your ideas will work unless they are supported on the ground.

[[28MKTG; Marketing Specialist, Engineering]]

As marketers dealt with the lack of sales force collaboration over a longer term, they developed a *learned skepticism* - that is, they began to assume that their sales counterparts were not going to be onboard with many of their ideas, and therefore planned their activities in such a way that they would require minimal salespeople input or support to succeed. Amy (42MKTG) indicates that since her team only received lip-service from the sales organization, she has learned to discount any promises made by sales personnel when it comes to strategic activities.

Marketing and sales being on one team...it is a mirage in our company...all we get is lip service from sales...we are never certain that

they [sales] are sincere in what they promise to us...I do not say this openly but I have told my marketing managers to be vigilant about what happens in the field and how it aligns with what they planned...we never assume anything when it comes to sales force.  
[[42MKTG; Marketing Controller, Food and Beverage]]

Not only did Amy plan her activities differently, but she and her team also altered their expectations of developed strategies as explained below.

After a few experiences, I assume that our sales teams are not going to be 100% onboard with any of our plans...we just take that as one of the variables into our strategy equations...and adjust our expectations accordingly.  
[[42MKTG; Marketing Controller, Food and Beverage]]

Hence, we propose the following:

P4: The scarcer the SMI collaboration,

- (a) the stronger is the marketers' perception of strategy making as an exercise in futility.
- (b) the stronger is the marketers' perception of being directionless during strategy making.
- (c) the greater is the marketers' skepticism toward salespeople.

### 3.3. Overt conflict

The third interface dysfunction that emerged from our analysis was overt conflict, which refers to the open expression of dislike and exhibition of antagonistic behavior between sales and marketing (Dawes & Massey, 2005). Our findings show instances of sales and marketing personnel (a) openly resisting and undermining their counterparts' efforts, (b) influencing their departmental colleagues to undermine their counterpart's initiatives, and/or (c) lobbying the senior leadership to deflate their counterpart function's initiatives.

Salespeople's perceptions of SMI conflict were solidified when they witnessed marketing openly challenging and criticizing sales ideas at company-wide discussion forums. Instances such as marketers actively lobbying the senior leadership against salespeople's ideas, which many times would lead to the leadership pulling their support from said initiative further reinforced SMI conflict in their minds. Nolan (37SLS) shared his experience below.

My team realized that the corporate leadership's enthusiasm toward the new strategic approach we [sales force] suggested was waning... it first started with marketing raising serious doubts about our approach openly in the meetings...so, I will be in meetings with general manager of our business and I will hear my marketing counterpart openly criticizing our thought process...then after a few months, I got an e-mail from our leadership that they were pulling back money from the sales initiative. They told us it was budget crunch but I learned later through my sources at corporate that marketing actively lobbied against our ideas.

[[37SLS; Vice President- Sales, Industrial Goods]]

Salespeople mentioned that when they encountered marketing's hostile acts that undermined their efforts, they got a sense of *strategic submissiveness*. Specifically, they felt that marketing was using their proximity with the organizational leadership to force the sales organization into submission. In the quote below, Pablo (15SLS) describes how marketing exploited their contact with senior management to subvert the sales team's agenda.

Our leaders listen a lot to marketing...so, no matter what we say, marketing has almost the final say in what we do. And they [marketing] certainly exploit that by ensuring that their agenda gets priority over ours. In the process, we don't get to develop our objectives...

they are developed for us by marketing and we are asked to work and achieve those objectives.

[[15SLS; Sales Executive; Machine Tools]]

Salespeople inferred broad generalizations about marketers' motives when experiencing overt SMI conflict. Specifically, they questioned marketers' priorities when they perceived that marketers were using their position to undermine sales organization. In the quote below, Stephan (29SLS), a sales coordinator, highlights how marketing was so driven to establish their *superiority* that they were willing to steamroll over the sales function, even if that meant prioritizing programs that would relegate the sales organization to the backseat.

VoC [Voice of the Customer] is the latest marketing fad in this company. They have done a good job of maintaining a high visibility for this initiative for a long time now...and every strategic win is now attributed to the voice of the customer...and they make sure our leaders hear about it...so, in effect, marketing is telling everyone how they are bringing in strategic wins...I sometimes laugh...but as a salesperson, I hear the voice of the customer all the time...and if they [marketing] cared, we would gladly relay that voice...but I know they won't because they are out to show how superior they are and how they do not need us.

[[29SLS; Sales Coordinator; Industrial Goods]]

Salespeople responded to long-term SMI conflict by engaging in *self-interest protecting behaviors*. Specifically, when in a conflicted relationship with marketing, they became defensive and looked to protect their own interests above those of their customers and the organization. Matthew (9SLS) ascribed the survival instinct provoked in him in the form of his hyper-vigilant and somewhat paranoid behavior as a necessary response to protect his self-interest in the face of marketing's hostility.

When we see that there is no one looking out for our interests...we have to make sure that we do that for ourselves...so, every strategy/communication coming my way, I am going to ask myself, what is in it for me? I know my customers are important...but when I sense that marketing is pushing their own agenda, I am going to put my interests first, and make sure nothing comes in the way of my sales numbers...strategy is a secondary thought at that point. For the lack of better words, survival becomes a priority when I find myself in hostile situations when someone is pushing their own agenda...I feel like I am on guard all the time. I become very vigilant and examine what my blind spots are and how marketing can exploit them. I am also more rigid when it comes to anything that comes from marketing...my first reaction is 'I have nothing to do with them.'

[[9SLS; Sales Representative; Manufacturing]]

The preceding discussion helps us propose:

P5: The presence of SMI conflict

- (a) enhances salespeople's perception of being strategically submissive to marketers in their firms.
- (b) enhances salespeople's perception of being hierarchically inferior to marketers in their firms.
- (c) increases salespeople's use of self-interest protecting behaviors.

For marketers, overt SMI conflict was brought home by salespeople's acts such as (a) deliberately not promoting promising new products, (b) actively telling their customers that they are bringing the product to them on marketing's instruction and they don't believe in the product, or (c) exhibiting active defiance against marketers' proposals and trying to undermine them. Loretta (24MKTG) encountered this dysfunction when her team was trying to test-market a new product. Her quote brings forth how she came to know about the defiance of a sales team through the grapevine and how frustrating the experience was for her.

It is one thing to ignore what marketing tells you...but when you actively resist marketing initiatives, I think you take it to the next level...it is open defiance...it is a way of telling us that they don't care....we have had that happen recently...we introduced a new line in the Northeast last December as a test market...the field had not been excited about the launch but we felt they would come around...however, I was frustrated when I heard through the grapevine what the Northeast team was doing...they were derailing the introduction...they would not promote it purposely, they would tell the customer that they were bringing this product to them since marketing thinks this is a good idea...not them. Who does that?

[[24MKTG; Senior Marketing Manager, Technology Services]]

When instances, such as the one shared by Loretta above occurred, those marketing personnel, whose products or strategies were negatively impacted felt as if they were *singled out and intentionally targeted* by salespeople, who were taking out their frustrations by using their product and/or strategies as a sacrificial lamb. It made the psychosocial distinction between sales and marketing very salient to her (Dewsnap & Jobber, 2002) and she felt as if it was a fight between one (themselves) versus many (entire sales organization). Below, Alicia (2MKTG) describes this notion of salespeople being out to get her. She felt that salespeople overtly undermined her strategies as they purposefully wished to target her in a negative manner.

When you see that someone [sales] is actively working to undo all that you have put into the strategy...it makes you feel like you are being targeted and they are out to get you...it is an antithesis of teamwork.

[[2MKTG; Marketing Specialist; Medical Equipment]]

SMI hostility created a vicious environment and took an emotional toll on the people involved. In our analysis, we encountered marketers, who had been in hostile waters, expressing a sense of *hopelessness about the future*. Specifically, the SMI conflict made them feel as if they would never be able to make progress in building bridges with their counterpart function (Malshe, 2011), which they knew were instrumental in having a productive working relationship with them. Zack's (34MKTG) quote below brings forth the sense of hopelessness.

The big chasm between sales and marketing becomes real to me when I see that we are working at cross-purposes...the feeling of animosity becomes very real in such situations...The infighting is draining...it gives me no hope about our future...feels like we are never going to bridge this gap and things are always going to be this way no matter what...sometimes less hostile and sometimes more...but hostile nonetheless.

[[34MKTG; Senior Marketing Manager; Consumer Products]]

Marketers responded to overt undermining of their efforts and the related hostility by salespeople by engaging in sub-optimal organizational behaviors. Specifically, they engaged in *inefficient effort reallocation* in response to long-term hostility. Scott's (32MKTG) quote below brings home this issue. He anticipates sales resistance of his ideas and spends a disproportionate amount of time building proactive defense mechanisms to salvage his strategies from the sales force's undermining efforts - something he deeply laments and does not want to spend time on.

A prolonged hostility between the two functions is counterproductive...that is no secret. It is a drain on resources...and if I know that they [salespeople] are actively going to organize against my initiatives, then I spend a lot of time predicting the worst case scenarios...which is not what I should be doing. I should be thinking about focusing on how strategies would succeed...not how to prevent them from being crushed by our own salespeople.

[[32MKTG; Marketing Manager, Consumer Products]]

Thus, we propose:

P6: The presence of SMI conflict

- (a) enhances marketers' perception of being intentionally targeted by salespeople.
- (b) reduces marketers' hopefulness about the future working relationship with salespeople.
- (c) increases marketers' inefficient resource allocation.

### 3.4. Dysfunction progression

As previously noted, scholars have suggested that poor communication quality and lack of bidirectionality in communication can engender dysfunctional conflict (Massey & Dawes, 2007), and interface conflict can have a strong negative impact on collaboration between sales and marketing in business to business firms (Le Meunier-FitzHugh et al., 2011). In contrast to the extant insights, our analysis indicates that interface dysfunctions do not follow a specific pattern. On the contrary, the timing and/or sequence of the dysfunction's occurrence may follow a bidirectional and/or a circular pattern. For example, lack of collaboration, over time, may demotivate interface personnel to stay in touch with one another and engender communication paucity, which could enhance the possibility of overt conflict. Further, when communication paucity exists, SMI personnel are unable to keep each other abreast of their market activities and the rationale behind their decisions. Lacking complete information, parties likely evaluate their counterparts' initiative at face value, derive their own interpretations regarding their counterpart's underlying motives; and if such interpretations are negative, they may work to undermine it even when, in reality, it would be beneficial for them to support that initiative.

Sandy's (6MKTG) quote below brings forth this dynamic. When marketers in her company decided to take a price increase, salespeople perceived it negatively and hence made every effort to thwart the price hike. However, in reality, previously-conducted marketing research had indicated that most of their buyers were insensitive to up to a 15% increase in price. As such, the price increase would actually *benefit* the sales force as their commissions were based on sales revenue. However, given the communication paucity between the two functions, the market insights that supported marketing's pricing decision were never heard by the sales organization, which went on to actively offer price *discounts* to undo the negative impact they believed the price would have on their customers. As Sandy notes, it was an unfortunate series of events that were rooted in lack of communication, which led to a failed strategic initiative and impacted the division's bottom line.

We [sales and marketing] rarely talk...I know it is not ideal but we do our own thing and sales force does their own thing...and we rarely exchange notes. So, when we decided to take a modest 8% price hike on [product], sales force was up in arms. They felt like we were trying to make their lives miserable and that they would not be able to sell at a premium price...so, what do they do...they take our price to market and start discounting the product heavily to our major customers...effectively nullifying the price increase...no one bothered to ask us why we were increasing the price...we had substantial research to support our decision...in retrospect, on our part, we did not make any efforts to reach out to the field and explain why we were taking a price hike...so, you see, it is a series of unfortunate events that could have been avoided if we interacted regularly with our field force and shared with them what we knew.

[[6MKTG; District Marketing Manager, Technology Services]]

Our analysis suggested that a dysfunction progression where communication breakdown would be the outcome of a long-standing pattern of lack of SMI collaboration was also plausible. In such cases, having experienced the unsupportiveness over time, one of the functions may view it to be futile to engage the other party in any strategic and tactical conversation, which would eventually lead to communication breakdown. Similarly, previous experiences of conflict may

demotivate sales or marketing personnel to engage with their counterparts in planning any future initiatives. In effect, lack of collaboration or conflict would cause SMI communication to become scarce over time. Nathan (8MKTG) shared his experience below. As he notes, marketers' repeated experiences wherein sales personnel failed to support marketing's initiatives led them to stop involving salespeople in conversations about their future strategies. Over time, it led to complete communication breakdown.

When I started with this company, I soon realized how bad it was [the relationship between sales and marketing]. I witnessed a number of times how our initiatives, even new product launches, were not supported by the sales organization. So, over time, we in marketing began to believe that there was no point involving salespeople in any of our strategic discussions...and now it has come to a point where we hardly keep them in the loop. What is the point?

[[8MKTG; Senior Marketing Manager; Manufacturing]]

The preceding discussion leads us to propose:

P7: SMI dysfunction progression exhibits bidirectional circularity.

4. Discussion

In this paper, we show how sales and marketing personnel in B2B firms who encounter the same SMI dysfunction walk away with dissimilar dysfunction experiences - that is, we explicate (a) the different instances that make the same SMI dysfunction salient to sales and marketing personnel, (b) the varied manner in which they interpret the dysfunction, and (c) the dissimilar strategies they adopt to address the dysfunctions. We further show that sales and marketing personnel view the interface dysfunctions as following a bidirectional and/or a circular pattern, as opposed to a sequential pattern that has been documented in the literature.

Fig. 1 depicts our findings pictorially. Additionally, Tables 3a, 3b and 3c offer exemplars from within our data that help illustrate how two individual informants and a pair of sales–marketing counterparts experienced communication paucity, lack of collaboration, and interface conflict.

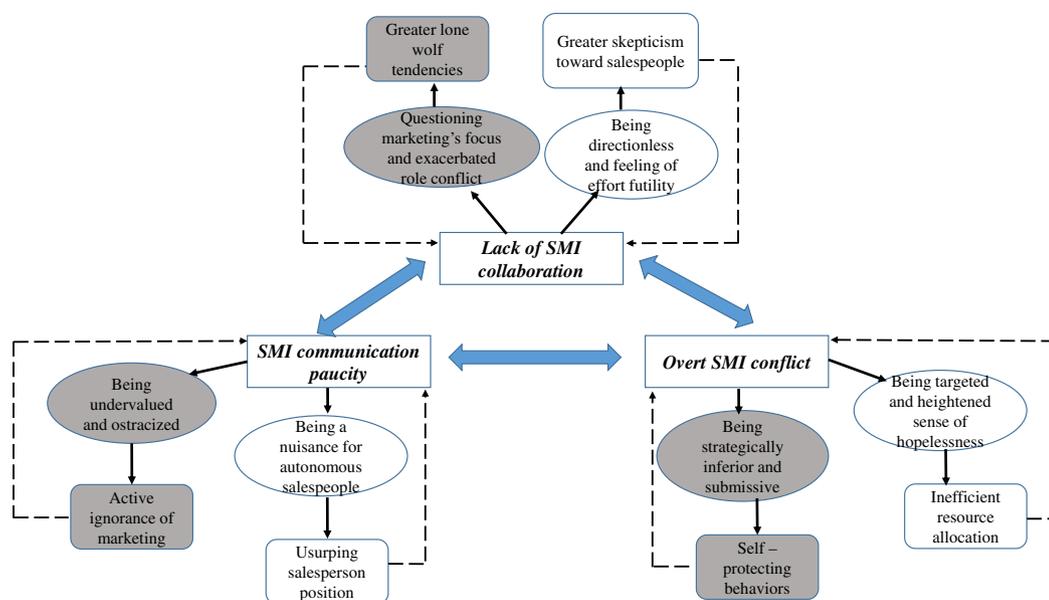
4.1. Theoretical contribution

As noted earlier, the extant SMI literature lacks theoretical frameworks that would explain sales and marketing personnel's individual-level experience of SMI dysfunction. However, the interface personnel's dysfunction experience – that is, the sensing–interpreting–responding activities they engage in after they have encountered each of the dysfunction – can be understood through the notion of sensemaking (Weick, 1995).

Sensemaking is an ongoing interpretative processes using which individuals assign meaning to events, circumstances, situations, and experiences – especially those that are unfamiliar, and equivocal (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). Scholars examining sensemaking have identified seven key properties of this phenomenon: Sensemaking is (a) grounded in identity construction, (b) retrospective, (c) social, (d) ongoing, (e) focused on and by extracted cues, (f) driven by plausibility rather than accuracy, and (g) enactive of sensible environments (Weick, 1995). While a number of contextual variables may influence individual's interpretive process of an external stimulus, scholars note that the individual's mental frames play a dominant role in determining how they make sense of it (Weick & Roberts, 1993).

Sensemaking as a construct has been widely examined in prior marketing literature. For example, scholars have studied the role of sensemaking in diverse areas such as a firm's adaptive strategic marketing response (Lundgren-Henriksson & Kock, 2016; Neill, McKee, & Rose, 2007), market and network development (Abrahamsen, Henneberg, & Naudé, 2012a,b; Halinen, Törnroos, & Elo, 2013; Rosa & Spanjol, 2005), development of sales capability (Krush, Agnihotri, Trainor, & Nowlin, 2013), business–customer interactions and inter-organizational relationships (Wang, Kayande, & Jap, 2010), innovativeness, as well as cooperation (Lundgren-Henriksson & Kock, 2016) to name a few. Across these plethora of studies, scholars have shown that when trying to make sense of a new situations, people (managers) are more likely to draw upon their past experiences including earlier patterns of actions, as well as similar events in the past, in order to act upon and interact with the situation (Weick et al., 2005).

In sum, sensemaking is concerned with the recognizing (sensing) of a specific stimulus, which is followed by meaning production



The shaded areas denote salespeople's and the non-shaded area denotes marketers' dysfunction experience.

Fig. 1. SMI dysfunction experiences. The shaded areas denote salespeople's and the non-shaded area denotes marketers' dysfunction experience.

**Table 3a**  
How a sales representative experienced communication paucity.

Informant 11SLS (Lynn), Female, 43, Sales Executive, Food and Beverage Industry	
Perceptual triggers	-Over the past twenty-four months, there have been two major strategy course-corrections in one of their major product portfolios; Lynn came to know about both those course-corrections through an e-mail from marketing; the e-mail told them what they needed to do; no feedback from sales was sought prior to any course-correction, or even after the course-corrections were implemented.
Situational interpretation	-Lynn had some specific insights on new channel penetration strategies that would have helped the second course-correction; since no one from marketing asked for her input, she sent an internal memo to the marketing manager handling the portfolio; Lynn not only did not hear back from the marketing manager, but her ideas also did not make it into the course-correction; this experience made her feel extremely undervalued.
Existential interpretation	-Lynn was disappointed but not deterred. She made repeated attempts in the subsequent months to reach out to the marketing manager but her ideas fell on deaf ears in that she did not receive even an acknowledgement from marketing that they received her input and/or they would (not) take it into account in their subsequent decisions. This experience made her feel as if she was being given a cold shoulder and no one in marketing really wanted to pay any attention to what she had to say.
Response	-Experiences narrated above have made Lynn apathetic toward marketing; over time, she has stopped not only offering them ideas/suggestions/feedback but also paying any attention to the suggestions they make; she says she acts like a business manager of her own territory and implements her own ideas.

(interpreting) and a specific response (responding) on the part of the individual (Johnson, Sohi, & Grewal, 2004). Given the close proximity between how our informants explicate their dysfunction experience

**Table 3b**  
How a marketing manager experienced lack of collaboration.

Informant 4MKTG (Kristina), Female, 30, Marketing Manager, Electronics	
Perceptual triggers	In the fall of 2014, Kristina was planning to work with the Midwest sales team (nine salespeople and one district manager) to launch a new marketing campaign for mid-sized companies. It took her three months to convince the team to work with her. Even after securing their agreement for joint campaign development, no one on the sales team showed any interest in the joint work. Given the urgency in the market, when she developed the campaign on her own and presented it to the sales team, the team reception was lukewarm. After a couple of weeks, she received an internal memo from the district manager outlining six specific reasons why the campaign would not work in their market. The memo offered no suggestion about how the campaign could be improved.
Situational interpretation	Kristina was proactive in seeking sales input before developing her campaign since she knew that seeking sales input would make her campaign stronger. However, the series of events described above made her feel that the entire campaign development effort, which lasted about six months, was an exercise in futility - no sales personnel contributed ideas to the campaign, and when the campaign was developed and presented, it was shot down. To her, it was a complete waste of six months' worth of work.
Existential interpretation	Given the salespeople's apathy to offer upfront input into the strategy process, and their subsequent criticism of any plans Kristina had developed, she was left feeling rudderless; she had no way of knowing what strategy she could build that would excite salespeople.
Response	Even today (spring 2016), Kristina continues to struggle to get salespeople to work along with her. Over the past couple of years, she has become less enthusiastic about seeking salespeople input. While developing any strategy, she presupposes that salespeople are not going to jump on to her ideas and adjusts her expectations accordingly.

**Table 3c**  
How a mid-level sales-marketing dyad experienced overt conflict.

	Informant 33SLS (Sarah, F, 30, Regional Sales Manager)	Informant 34MKTG (Jimmy, M, 38, Sr. Marketing manager)
Perceptual triggers	In May 2014, Sarah had planned to launch a new campaign for a regional retail chain. A few members on Jimmy's team, who did not like Sarah's ideas, lobbied with the company CMO to thwart Sarah's efforts. They also brought the issue up during their regional sales meeting and criticized her actions in front of her team. Sarah felt that they did not invest time in assessing the merits of the campaign and that their criticism was baseless.	A few months later, Jimmy experienced a significant push back from Sarah's team members while launching a new communication plan for two key accounts in her market. Many of the salespeople refused to take the new communication to the customers.
Situational interpretation	Sarah viewed marketing's actions as them using their proximity to the senior leadership to purposefully subvert her agenda.	It was frustrating for Jimmy since the initiative was finalized six months earlier. Jimmy felt as if Sarah's team was targeting him and 'paying him back' for what happened in May 2014.
Existential interpretation	There were many conversations within Sarah's team about what they experienced. The overwhelming feeling was that marketers' motivations were misplaced and they did not care about customers. These instances eroded the trust between her team and marketing significantly.	Jimmy recalls a time between late 2014 and the third quarter of 2015 (approximately three quarters) when many of his team's ideas failed to make any impact in Sarah's markets. He felt hopeless about whether he could get Sarah's team onboard with any of their new initiatives.
Response	Sarah's team quietly devised and implemented a campaign similar to the one that was quashed by marketing on a smaller scale; they did it since they believed that only the approach they proposed would help them achieve their sales goals.	Jimmy's marketing team members called on select customers in Sarah's region bypassing some of the salespeople; marketing's actions made many salespeople irate, and exacerbated the ongoing conflict.

as well as the core components of sensemaking, we utilize the sensemaking framework to contextualize our findings and bring forth five specific advancements to SMI literature, which we discuss below.

Extant SMI literature has documented how sales and marketing personnel share a dysfunctional relationship characterized by sub-optimal communication, collaboration and overt conflict, among others (Malshe & Biemans, 2014; Rouzies et al., 2005). Further, despite the existence of numerous scholarly insights that elucidate how this interface may be harmonized, in reality, it continues to be problematic. Against this backdrop, the first contribution of our paper is that study findings elucidate how the same dysfunction may trigger vastly different sensemaking processes in sales and marketing personnel's minds wherein they sense and interpret the same stimulus (dysfunction encounter) differently, leading them to resort to activities that may, at times, be counter-productive to resolving the dysfunction. We thus bring to light how the otherwise non-apparent differential sensemaking processes of SMI dysfunctions may lead sales and marketing personnel to get caught in a vicious cycle of activities that may further fester the dysfunction, instead of resolving it. These underlying dissimilar sensemaking mechanisms may also explain why companies often struggle with SMI dysfunctions even after they institute functional-level measures such as joint marketing and sales customer interaction, job rotation, or structured meetings, to harmonize this interface (Guenzi & Troilo, 2006; Johnson & Boeing, 2016; Malshe & Sohi, 2009a; Paliwoda et al., 2007; Rouzies et al.,

2005; Smith et al., 2006) as these macro-level measures likely do not address the differential sensemaking mechanisms activated at individual levels. Viewed together, our findings point to an enhanced need to identify individual-level nuances of various SMI dysfunction experiences since such an understanding will help us target the dysfunction experience in a holistic manner and keep the SMI harmonious.

Salespeople interpret communication paucity to mean that marketers do not value them as important organizational members, which makes them feel like outsiders in their own organization. Our findings thus suggest that the meaning construction on salespeople's part arising from SMI communication paucity may underlie their feeling that they are "second-class citizens" in the organization (Matthyssens & Johnston, 2006). Marketers, on the other hand interpret communication paucity as a result of salespeople's autonomy overkill – a notion consistent with marketers' perspective on salespeople as "egocentric operators more concerned with their commission check than achieving the goals of the organization" (Malshe, 2009) that they have likely developed drawing upon their past experiences with sales personnel (Weick, 1995). In response, marketers, forced to strategize in a vacuum, respond by resorting to usurping salespeople's position and interfacing directly with customers rather than engaging salespeople in the process. When viewed collectively, our findings bring forth how divergent sensemaking of the SMI communication paucity by sales and marketing personnel may trigger a series of attributions and meaning constructions about one another (Weick, 1995), which, if not managed in a timely manner, may jeopardize firms' strategy making ability and its subsequent marketplace performance (e.g. Malshe & Sohi, 2009a).

Despite our extant knowledge about how to improve SMI collaboration (e.g. Le Meunier-FitzHugh et al., 2011) as well its effect on outcomes such as increased performance and enhanced strategy-making in the SMI (e.g. Malshe & Sohi, 2009a); we are devoid of insights germane to the focal phenomenon of collaboration as experienced by salespeople and marketers. Our findings suggest that when sales personnel encounter lack of collaboration, their interpretive processes lead them to not only question marketers' commitment to customer-orientation (Slater & Narver, 1994) but also make them feel conflicted about their own role – that is, lack of collaboration makes the "incongruity or incompatibility of expectations associated with the role" (Miles & Perreault, 1976, p. 22) more evident to salespeople. Salespeople therefore respond by exhibiting learned lone-wolfism, retreating to themselves and not seeking marketing support, even when in dire need – a potentially questionable organizational citizenship behavior that can negatively impact performance (Mulki et al., 2007). Viewed together, our findings shed greater light on how salespeople's sensemaking of the lack of SMI collaboration may underlie a sequence of unwarranted events that may eventually weaken marketers' spirited participation in strategic activities – namely, salespeople exhibiting lone-wolf tendencies in response to the perceived lack of SMI collaboration may make it difficult for marketers to get salespeople's buy-in of their proposed strategies (Malshe & Sohi, 2009b); and marketers' failure to get salespeople onboard their strategies may further enhance the probability that disheartened marketers would view strategy development as an exercise in futility (Sabnis, Chatterjee, Grewal, & Lilien, 2013; Smith et al., 2006).

Sales-marketing conflict is one of the oft-discussed SMI variables that has received attention in both the scholarly and managerial literatures (e.g. Kotler et al., 2006; Le Meunier-FitzHugh et al., 2011; Montgomery & Webster, 1997). Specifically, scholars have shown that communication paucity, lack of communication bidirectionality, as well as the lack of cognition- and affect-based trust may underlie dysfunctional conflict (Dawes & Massey, 2005; Massey & Dawes, 2007). When study findings are juxtaposed with this extant knowledge, we understand that the differential sensemaking of SMI conflict has the potential to make salespeople feel strategically submissive and engender negative schema of marketers, and motivate both sales and marketing personnel to engage in defensive, self-interest protecting behaviors.

Collectively, such perceptions and responses may significantly erode the cognition and affect-based trust within the SMI (Dawes & Massey, 2005) and impair interface communication.

Last, empirical evidence from the existing SMI literature would have us believe that SMI communication paucity precedes the lack of collaboration within the SMI, and/or the lack of SMI collaboration leads to overt conflict between sales and marketing (Le Meunier-FitzHugh et al., 2011; Massey & Dawes, 2007). Contrary to extant knowledge, our analysis indicates that these dysfunctions share a much more intricate relationship in that the timing of the dysfunction occurrence may follow a bidirectional and/or a circular pattern. That is, the lack of SMI collaboration, over time, may demotivate sales and marketing personnel to communicate with one another, and communication paucity may create fertile ground for conflict.

#### 4.2. Managerial implications

From a managerial standpoint, our findings enable B2B marketing and sales practitioners to understand that SMI dysfunctions may be sensed, interpreted and responded to by sales and marketing personnel in dissimilar ways. Therefore, when dealing with any SMI dysfunction, organizational leaders must take into consideration marketers' and salespeople's holistic dysfunction experience. Consequently, instead of adopting broad-brushed strategies that seek to address dysfunctions at a functional-level, companies will be better off adopting customized approaches that address the dysfunction experience of interface personnel individually.

Managers should recognize that preventing the SMI dysfunctions from occurring may be easier than mending them since the varied dysfunction experiences may trigger responses from sales and marketing personnel that may exacerbate the inherent dysfunctions. To this end, managers may work to create a culture of openness between sales and marketing personnel and develop opportunities such as going on joint customer calls, or taking up job rotation assignments that allow sales and marketing personnel to 'step into each other's shoes' and view the world through their counterparts' eyes. These activities may help engender a sense of empathy within SMI that will sensitize sales and marketing personnel about how their counterparts perceive, interpret, and react to an SMI dysfunction.

Our findings indicate that SMI dysfunctions do not occur in isolation, but can co-exist. For example, a marketing manager and a team of sales personnel may struggle to collaborate on formulation and delivery of value proposition for a key account that comes up for renewal, while the sales and marketing organization as a whole is struggling with overt conflict on topics such as remuneration. Managers in such situations must ensure that the co-existing SMI conflict and collaboration challenges need not affect each other. In particular, while dealing with a key account, sales and marketing personnel must be able to jointly process how the larger SMI conflict may likely affect their joint work on the key account. Subsequently, they must be able to come up with specific action plan to successfully able to stay clear of the broader SMI conflict and focus on enhancing collaboration pertaining to retaining that key account. If the collaborative efforts of the key account management team are successful, managers may promote such an example of teamwork throughout the SMI to showcase how if the various sales-marketing teams focus on the challenges on hand, they can succeed in working well together, even in the face of macro-level SMI challenges.

Although related, the dysfunctions and their manifestations do not have to occur in a linear fashion. For example, communication paucity does not have to precede lack of collaboration and finally overt conflict. On one hand, it can be comforting to managers to know that one dysfunction does not have to be followed by the next. On the other hand, though, this can result in some managers playing down the dysfunction, perhaps waiting for it to resolve by itself. Circular relationship among SMI dysfunctions means that managers are better off addressing

dysfunctions at the earliest stage before it triggers a vicious and unpredictable cycle.

Last, SMI dysfunctions can occur at different levels in an organization. Given that the relationship dynamic between sales and marketing leadership is likely to set the tone for the interactions between rank and file, it may be prudent for the company leadership to develop a keen eye for spotting the dysfunctions at the top-levels within sales and marketing hierarchy, appreciate what the experience may mean for each functional leader, and then take appropriate measures in resolution. In a similar vein, the top and middle managers may play a proactive role in identifying and diffusing SMI dysfunctions at middle and bottom levels respectively.

#### 4.3. Limitations and future research

We used a qualitative approach in this study collecting data from sales and marketing dyads in B2B companies. While qualitative research allows for the acquisition and analysis of rich data from participants in-situ (Johnson, 2015), it may be limited in its ability to develop generalizable insights applicable to broader populations. Future researchers could quantitatively assess SMI dysfunctions across B2B organizations. These examinations may focus on ascertaining and comparing the nature of sensemaking processes sales and marketing personnel engage in when confronted with scarce communication, lack of collaboration, and presence of conflict. Scholars may also examine how the differential behaviors exhibited by sales and marketing personnel (e.g., salespeople's use of lone-wolf tendencies or self-interest protecting behaviors, or marketers' skepticism toward salespeople or usurping salespeople's position) when confronted with these dysfunction affect the strategic and tactical activities they engage in on a day-to-day basis.

Future research could build nonlinear models to capture dysfunction progression and the embedded circularity within. The nonlinearity could conceivably take the form of an increasing or decreasing incremental effects curve (Johnson, 2014). An increasing incremental effects curve whereby as intensity of dysfunction increases, detrimental effects also rise at an increasing rate could manifest in the SMI. At high levels of dysfunction, salespeople and marketers may reach a breaking point where effects of the dysfunction are intensified. Alternatively, a decreasing incremental effects curve whereby the negative effects of dysfunction taper off as dysfunction increases (i.e. salespeople and marketers become inoculated) could also occur.

It is plausible that dysfunction experience may fluctuate substantially over time. As such, it would be illuminating to examine SMI dysfunction in a longitudinal manner. Researchers could then answer such exciting research questions as: Does the *level* of SMI dysfunction or the *change* in level of SMI dysfunction best predict performance? Is SMI dysfunction better understood as a cause or a result of poor performance? Are there temporal relationships between the SMI dysfunctions germane to communication, collaboration, and conflict?

Last, researchers could examine dysfunctions using quasi-experimental methods. In a B2B organization experiencing an SMI dysfunction, researchers could obtain initial perceptions of the dysfunction from both sides of the marketing and sales dyad. They then could administer a treatment and examine its efficacy on the dysfunction. For example, researchers could treat communication paucity by administering a retreat with facilitated dialog sharing between marketing and sales and take short and long-term post-treatment measures to assess its utility.

## 5. Conclusion

Our multi-firm qualitative study using a discovery-oriented, theories-in-use approach finds that marketers' and salespeople's perceptions and interpretations in terms of the situational and existential meanings of the pervasive SMI dysfunctions - communication paucity,

lack of collaboration, and interface conflict - are markedly different. As a result, sales and marketing personnel respond to the same dysfunction differently, and many times, their responses contribute to the dysfunction intensifying. Understanding the differential perception-evaluation-response by sales and marketing personnel to SMI dysfunctions has implications for academics and practitioners alike in conceptualizing and addressing dysfunction in the SMI.

## Appendix A. Semi-structured interview questions

1. What is your job function in the organization?
2. What is your counterpart's [either sales or marketing depending on the informant] role/job function?
3. Does your job require you to work with your counterpart function? Please elaborate on the nature of your and your counterpart's interactions.
4. What specific challenges do you encounter when working with your counterpart?
5. For each of the specific challenges noted by the informant:
  - a. How does [the challenge] affect your work?
  - b. How do you deal with [the challenge]?
  - c. How do you try to work through [the challenge]?

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