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Salesperson Lone Wolf Tendency and Ethical Behaviors

## **Lone Wolf Tendency and Ethical Behaviors in Sales: Examining the Roles of Perceived Supervisor Support and Salesperson Self-Efficacy**

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## **Abstract**

Lone wolf salespeople prefer to work independently, prioritize their own interests, and are prone to focus on outcomes rather than on processes. While conventional wisdom would suggest that salesperson lone wolf tendency and ethical behaviors are negatively related, this relationship has hitherto not been examined in the academic literature—nor have any factors that may impact this important linkage. To address this gap, we draw from both ethical decision-making theory and social cognitive theory to propose a novel conceptual framework and study hypotheses. We empirically tested our ideas using a survey-based dataset consisting of 135 business-to-business salespeople. Specifically, the relationship between salesperson lone wolf tendency and ethical behaviors is examined as well as two social cognitive aspects (i.e., perceived supervisor support and salesperson self-efficacy) that potentially act as important boundary conditions that distinctively alter the salesperson lone wolf tendency-ethical behaviors negative relationship. Results reveal that, whereas higher levels of perceived supervisor support weaken the negative relationship between salesperson lone wolf tendency and ethical behaviors, higher levels of salesperson self-efficacy strengthen the salesperson lone wolf tendency-ethical behaviors negative relationship. Implications of our research for scholars and managers are also discussed.

**Keywords:** Salesperson lone wolf tendency; Ethical behaviors; Perceived supervisor support; Self-efficacy; Ethical decision-making theory; Social cognitive theory

# **Lone Wolf Tendency and Ethical Behaviors in Sales: Examining the Roles of Perceived Supervisor Support and Salesperson Self-Efficacy**

## **1. Introduction**

There is no doubt that the sales profession has gone through and continues to undergo a few notable changes. For instance, some significant trends impacting the sales profession include: (1) digital transformations persistently spreading throughout the selling process (Guenzi & Habel, 2020) and (2) customer markets perpetually increasing in complexity (Schmitz & Ganesan, 2014). In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in new challenges for salespeople as both their customers and firms have had to redefine buying and selling processes (Hartmann & Lussier, 2020; Rangarajan, Sharma, Lyngdoh, & Paesbrugge, 2021). These notable changes, among others, are bringing to light a need for modern salespeople to further coordinate activities and resources with not only external stakeholders (e.g., customers, vendors) but also a broad set of internal stakeholders (e.g., fellow salespeople, coworkers in other divisions or departments). While some salespeople may intrinsically be well-prepared for these modern-day realities, others may inadvertently experience adverse consequences due to their usual preferred working style. More specifically, salespeople with higher levels of *lone wolf tendency*—defined as a style “in which one prefers to work alone when making decisions and setting/accomplishing priorities and goals” (Dixon et al., 2003, p. 205)—may be confronted with additional challenges because of their inclination towards working in solitude.

With the noted changes to the sales profession, as well as the rapid rise of virtual selling (Blum, 2020), and the normalization of employees working from home (Bages-Amat, Harrison, Spillecke, & Stanley, 2020), we anticipate that the salience and impact of lone wolf tendency in sales will be particularly noteworthy in contemporary selling. Although the notion of lone wolf tendency in sales is not necessarily new and has been widely recognized in the practitioner

literature (Dixon & Adamson, 2011), it has, surprisingly, received limited scholarly attention in the academic literature (Dixon, Gassenheimer, & Barr, 2003; Locander, Weinberg, Mulki, & Locander, 2015; Locander, Zmich, & Locander, 2021; Mulki, Jaramillo, & Marshall, 2007). On the one hand, existing research emphasizes that lone wolves focus mainly on job-related personal goals instead of those of the firm (Mulki et al., 2007), as they tend to be driven, energetic, task-oriented, determined, productive, and dedicated to selling (Blau & Boal, 1987; Dixon et al., 2003; Hochheiser, 1987). On the other hand, such research also indicates that lone wolves are not team players, do not collaborate well with colleagues or comply to firm norms and policies, view colleagues as incapable and ineffective, and are not as committed to the firm. Hence, lone wolves are more motivated to do things their own way, create conflict with and disregard colleagues, express negativity towards others, show disapproval towards team-oriented activities, and tend to only associate with those who serve their interests (Blau & Boal, 1987; Ingram, Lee, & Lucas, 1991; Mulki et al., 2007).

Given the possibly frail internal relationships that lone wolves have with their coworkers, ongoing influx of change, and the constant pressure that salespeople face in general, there may be an increased temptation for lone wolf salespeople to behave less ethically. That is, lone wolf salespeople, unlike their counterparts, are conceivably likely to engage in more violations of *ethical behaviors*—described as activities regarded as being morally acceptable to the larger group (Jones, 1991). In sales settings, as recently noted by Lussier, Hartmann, and Bolander (2021), examples of such violations of ethical behaviors include being dishonest, manipulative, and other aberrant behaviors such as lying to hide mistakes, making false promises, stating unfounded claims about product features or benefits, and hiding promotions from customers. A recent practical example of unethical behaviors is the AT&T scandal where sales representatives,

unknowingly to a customer, enrolled users in DirecTV Now packages and then did not cancel these new signups before a customer was hit with unapproved recurring charges (Sandler, 2020). For lone wolves who pride themselves on their ability to stand outside of typical social conventions and who like to not rely on others (Clark, 2020), it may therefore be enticing to “sell at all costs” in order avoid possible rejection, failure, and isolation stemming from modern expectations and needs for salespeople to coordinate and work closely with internal constituents (Chaker, Nowlin, Walker, & Anaza, 2021; Lussier & Hartmann, 2017). In other words, to reach their goals, lone wolf salespeople may not always adhere to high ethical standards.

Against this backdrop, the primary objective of this study is to examine the impact of salesperson lone wolf tendency on ethical behaviors, which may be an important precursor to other more distal job-related outcomes (e.g., see Lussier et al. (2021a) who establish a link between salesperson ethical behaviors and performance). In addition, our investigation seeks to identify factors that might shape the impact of salesperson lone wolf tendency on ethical behaviors. We surmise that salespeople higher in lone wolf tendency place more emphasis on their own professional and personal goals over the interests of others. Furthermore, their preference for working alone and in solitude, may result in them further neglecting ethical standards and principles. That is, the inclination to engage in fewer ethical behaviors might especially be the case for salespeople with higher lone wolf tendency as they are, by definition, more likely to be disposed to work “away” from the purview of their supervisor and colleagues. As such, they may perceive *a lesser likelihood of being caught and surprised by others*.

To explore these ideas and guide our theorizing, we leverage ethical decision-making (EDM) theory (Schwartz, 2016) to explain and predict the influence of salesperson lone wolf tendency on ethical behaviors. While a negative relationship is expected for this linkage, we

anticipate that the effect of salesperson lone wolf tendency will further depend on whether factors internal and external to the salesperson reinforces or weakens this relationship. To identify relevant and important boundary conditions on this previously unexplored linkage, we turn to social cognitive theory (SCT), which underlines the significant interaction between behavior, environmental, and cognitive factors to explain various outcomes (Bandura, 1986, 1991). Under this premise, while salesperson lone wolf tendency may be viewed as a behavioral factor, environmental factors are those external to an individual whereas cognitive factors are internal to an individual.

Towards that end, we identify *perceived supervisor support*—described as the extent to which salespeople perceive their supervisors as valuing their contributions to the job and caring about their well-being (Eisenberger, Stinglhamber, Vandenberghe, Sucharski, & Rhoades, 2002) and *salesperson self-efficacy*—described as a salesperson’s confidence in his or her ability to execute the necessary actions to perform successfully in their sales job when faced with challenges (Sujan, Weitz, & Kumar, 1994)—as critical environmental (external) and cognitive (internal) factors that alter the negative relationship between salesperson lone wolf tendency and ethical behaviors. These specific factors are of practical relevance since a manager has a great degree of control over the amount of support they provide to salespeople, and managers can recognize salespeople with different levels of self-efficacy and supervise accordingly.

In addition, both perceived supervisor support and self-efficacy have been shown to be highly relevant in the sales domain. Notably, though, while self-efficacy is an important cognitive factor and functions as an important determinant of human self-regulation (Bandura, 1991; Wood & Bandura, 1989), it has also been shown to have a downside (Lussier & Hall, 2018; Mullins, Ahearne, Lam, Hall, & Boichuk, 2014). Hence, while we consider perceived

supervisor support to be a possible mitigator of salesperson lone wolf tendency, we take the opposite stance with salesperson self-efficacy and assume that it may intensify the negative relationship between salesperson lone wolf tendency and ethical behaviors.

Our research offers at least two unique contributions to the literature. First, we expand on the literature on salesperson ethical behaviors by establishing support for a direct relationship between salesperson lone wolf tendency and ethical behaviors—bringing together two unique research streams. In doing so, we enrich theory pertaining to why lone wolf tendency may diminish ethical behaviors in a business-to-business (B2B) sales context. Second, using a combination of EDM and SCT theories, we contribute to the sales ethics literature by identifying and exploring new boundary conditions (i.e., perceived supervisor support and salesperson self-efficacy) that distinctly shape the link between salesperson lone wolf tendency and ethical behaviors.

## **2. Literature review and theoretical background**

### **2.1 Lone wolf tendencies in sales**

There is scant literature on lone wolf tendency in sales settings (Dixon et al., 2003; Locander et al., 2015; Mulki et al., 2007), and, to the best of our knowledge, even more of a lack of research when it comes to lone wolf tendency and sales ethics (see Briggs, Jaramillo, & Weeks, 2012 for a notable exception). Notwithstanding, there are a few interesting insights and takeaways from the existing literature. One common consensus among researchers is that salesperson lone wolf tendency largely involves a behavioral preference for an individual to work alone over working with others. Given that a salesperson's job involves regularly interacting with customers and an expectation to develop and maintain customer relationships (Palmatier, Dant, & Grewal, 2007), there is an implicit assumption that the lone wolf tendency

not to work with others chiefly refers to others being internal colleagues and coworkers (and not customers). For example, a study by Mulki et al. (2007) shows that salesperson lone wolf tendency negatively impacts performance due to an inferior ability to develop effective internal relationships by being less courteous and helpful as well as lone wolves exhibiting lower levels of sportsmanship in the workplace.

Another insight from the literature is that there are arguably both positive and negative attributes associated with salesperson lone wolf tendency. From a positive perspective, lone wolves are intrinsically motivated, determined, and have high energy as well as an extreme self-drive that fuels their career success (Blau & Boal, 1987; Locander et al., 2015). They also strongly identify with their jobs as well as being creative and dedicated to the task of selling (Dixon et al., 2003; Mulki et al., 2007). Meanwhile, from a negative perspective, lone wolves are self-oriented and largely focused on their own goals rather than those of their team or organization (Griffeth, Gaertner, & Sager, 1999; Ingram et al., 1991). They are less interested in organizational goals, objectives, and structure, unwilling to sacrifice for the greater good of their teams, and insensitive to the problems and needs of their coworkers (Mulki et al., 2007). In addition, salespeople with high lone wolf tendency are not in favor of collective (team) processes, obtaining ideas from others, and believe that others are less capable and effective (than themselves) to get the job done (Blau & Boal, 1987; Ingram et al., 1991; Mulki et al., 2007). In sum, as expressed by Dixon et al. (2003), lone wolves are not bad employees, they simply prefer working alone, away from the purview of others, and devote all their efforts towards selling tasks.

In terms of the consequences, research has shown that there is a negative relationship between salesperson lone wolf tendency and affective trust, cognitive trust, and team orientation

(Dixon et al., 2003). Salesperson lone wolf tendency has also been negatively linked to different aspects of performance, including behavioral (Briggs, Jaramillo, & Weeks, 2012) and contextual performance (Mulki et al., 2007). Conversely, there is literature that highlights positive work outcomes associated with lone wolf tendency, such as task performance and innovativeness (Griffeth et al., 1999; Ingram et al., 1991). For example, a study of both medical devices and real estate salespeople shows that salesperson lone wolf tendency indirectly impacts job involvement via concern for mistakes (Locander et al., 2015). Despite these findings, it seems that most scholars tend to have a much more negative perception of salesperson lone wolf tendency.

In general, the topic of lone wolf tendency in sales has largely remained dormant and research has yet to examine important behavioral outcomes of salesperson lone wolf tendency. Research has also been silent when it comes to important boundary conditions that shape the effects of salesperson lone wolf tendency. This is especially the case when considering the likelihood that salespeople with high levels of lone wolf tendency may be willing to “sell at all costs” to meet their goals, even if that means engaging in fewer ethical behaviors.

## **2.2 Salesperson ethical decision-making and ethical decision-making theory**

Salespeople operate in an environment that is rife with unique ethical dilemmas (Friend, Jaramillo, & Johnson, 2020; Itani & Chaker, 2021). As has been noted, “salespeople are different from other members of the organization and face different challenges both within and outside the organization which could result in a different mindset when it comes to ethical behaviors” (Bush et al., 2017, p. 550). Hence, given the underlying criticality of ethics in sales settings, scholars have primarily focused on developing and evaluating ethical decision-making frameworks aimed at explaining how salespeople make decisions under different situations and conditions (Agnihotri & Krush, 2015). Specifically, these decision-making frameworks focus on and

identify various individual and organizational level factors that influence how individuals in organizations make ethical decisions and engage in ethical behaviors (Craft, 2013; Lehnert, Park, & Singh, 2015; O'Fallon & Butterfield, 2005).

Early research on salesperson ethical dilemmas and how they impact ethical decision-making was conducted by Ferrell and Gresham (1985). In their study, the authors include and examine the interplay between salesperson variables (i.e., cultural background, moral philosophy), the impact of other employees who worked with salespeople (i.e., management, peers), and ethical climate (i.e., professional codes, level of rewards) (Ferrell & Gresham, 1985). This work was in stark contrast to other ethical studies at that time (Chonko & Hunt, 1985), which mainly focused on pointing out what actions are ethical by salespeople, without delving into factors/situations that could affect ethical decision-making. Building on the notion that ethical standards constantly evolve and can vary across situations and organizations, further research in the sales domain started to rely on different theories—across disciplines—to better explain and understand the ethical decision-making processes used by salespeople.

Towards that end, other sales ethics research uses a contextual approach to understand ethical decision-making by salespeople by drawing on literature from organizational structure, salesperson personality, and ethical climate, and combining them into one comprehensive model (Verbeke, Ouwerkerk, & Peelen, 1996). In a study involving 252 salespeople (Ross & Robertson, 2003), the authors demonstrate that salesperson level variables (i.e., Machiavellism and self-monitoring) directly impact and also combine with certain situational factors to shape salesperson ethical judgments. In a similar vein, research stresses the key role management control strategies play in influencing the ethical decisions that salespeople make (Ingram, LaForge, & Schwepker, 2007). Furthermore, the ethical decision-making process is employed to

look at how salespeople rationalize unethical sales behaviors when faced with role stress on the job by utilizing neutralization techniques (Mallin & Munoz, 2013).

Considering the different approaches (e.g., descriptive vs. normative) in the literature to understanding salesperson ethical decision-making, and the lack of consistent empirical findings, there was a need in the literature for an overarching theory (Schwartz, 2016). Accordingly, building on previous research (O'Fallon & Butterfield, 2005; Tenbrunsel & Smith-Crowe, 2008), Schwartz (2016) put forth an integrated EDM theory that focuses on factors that shape decisions made by individuals when confronted with ethically ambiguous situations that could affect the outcomes of the ethical decision-making process. According to EDM theory, individuals facing such situations begin by recognizing an ethical issue, forming a judgment on the issue, determining their behavioral intent, and engaging in (un)ethical behaviors. The theory also identifies and underscores how individual characteristics (e.g., demographics, personality) and situational moderators (e.g., work characteristics, effects of supervisors) can shape the ethical decision-making process.

More recently, EDM theory has been used to advance work on ethics in the sales domain. For example, recent research (Good & Schepker, 2022; Schepker & Good, 2021) utilizes EDM theory in combination with two other theories to stress the importance of political skill development among B2B salespeople in impacting their workplace deviance behaviors. In another study involving salespeople, EDM theory has also been used to explain how the level of alignment between a salesperson's ethical values and those of their organization's impacts the ethical intent of salespeople, where the key role examined in this process is the trust salespeople have in their supervisor (Schepker, 2019).

Current literature suggests that given the unique role played by salespeople and the ever-

evolving nature of the sales profession, more research should focus on exploring how different contextual situations are likely to impact salesperson decisions and behaviors (Lam & van der Borgh, 2021). Our study responds to this call by further illuminating how salespeople may make decisions when faced with different situations. More specifically, we explore and focus on how salesperson lone wolf tendency will have an impact on ethical behaviors and what factors may shape this potentially damaging relationship.

### **2.3 Social cognitive theory**

We expect the effect of salesperson lone wolf tendency on ethical behaviors will depend on whether internal and external factors endorse or validate a salesperson's actions. Accordingly, to identify potentially relevant and important boundary conditions, we turn to SCT for guidance. According to SCT, there is a significant interaction between (1) behavior, (2) environmental, and (3) cognitive factors that explain various individual outcomes when it comes to describing psychosocial functioning (Bandura, 1986, 1991). SCT suggests that environmental resources play an important role in shaping human behaviors and achieving self-regulation in a social context (Bandura, 1991; Wood & Bandura, 1989). In sum, SCT highlights that behaviors can be explained by relationships among aspects within the person and those external to the person (Bandura, 1986, 1991).

Hence, as research indicates (Domino, Wingreen, & Blanton, 2015), SCT "adopts an interactionist perspective to moral phenomena" (p. 2) and, as researchers denote, is consistent with early work by (Lewin, 1936) that posits that behavior consists of both an individual's personal characteristics and that individual's particular environment. As such, we adopt SCT to identify and explore the influence of salesperson lone wolf tendency (behavioral factor), perceived supervisor support (environmental factor), and salesperson self-efficacy (cognitive

factor) on salesperson ethical behaviors. Salesperson lone wolf tendency is connected to one's actions in social settings; salespeople that display higher lone wolf tendencies are less likely to engage with their colleagues (Dixon et al., 2003), act in ways consistent with their own personal goals over those of the firm (Mulki et al., 2007), and voice disapproval towards team-oriented activities (Ingram et al., 1991).

Our incorporation of perceived supervisor support and salesperson self-efficacy as relevant moderators is based on SCT (Bandura, 1991). Under this premise, salesperson lone wolf tendency may be viewed as a behavioral factor, while perceived supervisor support, which is a form of social support essential for B2B salespeople success (Lussier, Hartmann, & Bolander, 2021a; Lussier, Philp, Hartmann, & Wieland, 2021b), may be considered as an environmental factor that directs behaviors through the development and application of competencies, values, and interests (Wood & Bandura, 1989). As for salesperson self-efficacy, it may be regarded as a cognitive factor that is central to SCT as it serves as an important determinant of human self-regulation (Bandura, 1991; Wood & Bandura, 1989). In addition, both perceived supervisor support and self-efficacy have been shown to be relevant in the sales domain. Extensive research documents wide-ranging benefits of supervisor support and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1991; Eisenberger et al., 2002; Wood & Bandura, 1989), which we build upon to identify why and how perceived supervisor support and salesperson self-efficacy may become more important for ethical behaviors as salesperson lone wolf tendency increases.

### **3. Framework and hypotheses**

Figure 1 depicts our proposed conceptual framework. In the following sections, we first elaborate on the proposed negative relationship between salesperson lone wolf tendency and ethical behaviors. Next, we expand on the anticipated mitigating role of perceived supervisor

support on the negative effect of salesperson lone wolf tendency on ethical behaviors. Finally, we expound on the predicted exacerbating role of salesperson self-efficacy on the negative effect of salesperson lone wolf tendency on ethical behaviors.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

### **3.1 Salesperson lone wolf tendency and ethical behaviors**

As noted earlier, salesperson lone wolf tendency consists of an individual's: (1) increased preference to work alone in setting goals and making decisions, (2) perceptions of others as being less effective, (3) disregard for team procedures, and (4) ignoring of ideas from others (Blau & Boal, 1987; Ingram et al., 1991; Mulki et al., 2007). We propose that salespeople with higher lone wolf tendency will engage in less ethical behaviors for at least three reasons.

First, salespeople often do not reach their sales goals (Briggs et al., 2012; Mulki et al., 2007), and not meeting these goals may entice salespeople to act unethically (Serviere-Munoz & Mallin, 2013), as individuals are proficient at neglecting unethical behaviors when a tangible reward is at stake (Wedell-Wedellsborg, 2019). This may be especially true for salespeople with a higher lone wolf tendency because they are less inclined to perform citizenship behaviors, comply with work environment expectations, conform to firm policies, while placing their personal goals first (Mulki et al., 2007; Shaw, Duffy, & Stark, 2000). Lone wolves tend to follow their "own instincts instead of the rules" and "execute tasks their way or not at all" (Dixon & Adamson, 2011). Furthermore, as salespeople are prone to committing ethical breaches and mistakes (Chaker, Beeler, & Delpechitre, 2021), and because lone wolves tend to generally disregard rules/policies and disengage in good citizenship behaviors, we argue that lone wolf salespeople are more likely to engage in fewer ethical behaviors.

Second, aspects of the sales job may amplify the propensity for salespeople with stronger

lone wolf tendencies to act less ethically. Consider that the distal, boundary-spanning, nature of the sales job often results in salespeople operating without much direct oversight and supervision from their supervisors (Ameer & Halinen, 2019; Bush, Bush, Oakley, & Cicala, 2017). By definition, this may be even more the case for salespeople with lone wolf tendency, or the individual predisposition to work alone (Dixon et al., 2003). Such lack of direct oversight may foster fewer ethical behaviors because of a perception and thought that *the likelihood of being caught by others is lower*. That is, lone wolves may embrace an “out-of-sight, out-of-mind” mindset that makes it more tempting to engage in less ethical behaviors. Similarly, the literature in psychology on unethical behaviors suggests that humans are mentally skillful at downplaying unethical behaviors when they are aware that others are not observing and when they perceive a lower risk of getting caught (Wedell-Wedellsborg, 2019).

Third, aspects of the modern selling environment may increase the likelihood of salespeople with stronger lone wolf tendencies to engage in fewer ethical behaviors. In light of highly complex and ambiguous social environments (Hartmann, Wieland, & Vargo, 2018; Schmitz & Ganesan, 2014), firms have increasingly adapted their sales models such that salespeople need to cooperate closely with coworkers throughout the firm in order to better support customers and expand their business portfolios (Mullins, Menguc, & Panagopoulos, 2019; Schmitz, 2013). Salespeople that prefer to work alone may be particularly susceptible to performing less ethically in modern selling environments as they will have less access to sharing with or receiving relevant insights from others. In these situations, some examples of unethical behaviors that salespeople with more lone wolf tendencies may succumb to include: (1) not relaying important information to others, (2) acting on information known to be incomplete or inaccurate instead of seeking clarity through interaction, (3) working around colleagues (the

team) and/or internal procedures, and (4) even claiming to others that they have accomplished tasks that require coordinating with colleagues (when in reality they have not actually done so). Hence, salespeople with stronger lone wolf tendency may find it more difficult to operate in modern work environments and obtain less accrued benefits from the coordination with others in the firm (Schmitz, 2013). This may foster unethical behaviors as unethical shortcuts often lead to short-term rewards (Gino, Schweitzer, Mead, & Ariely, 2011). Therefore, we posit:

**H<sub>1</sub>.** There is a negative relationship between salesperson lone wolf tendency and ethical behaviors.

### **3.2 The moderating role of perceived supervisor support**

Perceived supervisor support, which is particularly relevant in B2B selling because of its observed positive impact on salespeople (Lussier et al., 2021a; Lussier et al., 2021b), is an environmental factor that may shape the impact of salesperson lone wolf tendency as the supervisor is within a salesperson's immediate work setting. Social factors, such as perceived supervisor support, are also an important aspect of SCT because supervisors can determine the extent of an employee's personal development and behaviors in the way they socially promote competencies, values, and interests (Wood & Bandura, 1989). Moreover, social support can be a way of increasing the confidence an individual possesses about the capabilities needed to effectively attain their goals (Bandura, 1991). Accordingly, we anticipate perceived supervisor support will attenuate the negative effect of salesperson lone wolf tendency on ethical behaviors.

We view perceived supervisor support as an external resource available to salespeople that may aid salespeople's ethical behaviors and weaken the negative relationship between salesperson lone wolf tendency and ethical behaviors. This is mainly because perceived supervisor support can be influenced directly by a sales supervisor (unlike organizational support) to better help B2B salespeople (Lussier et al., 2021a; Lussier et al., 2021b). As we detail

below, research shows that social support, such as supervisor support, is fundamental to achieving wide-ranging outcomes (e.g., work-related goals), reducing job-related demands, and fostering personal development (Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2009).

Higher levels of supervisor support aids salespeople by providing structure, guidance, emotional support, and accountability (Kemp, Borders, & Ricks, 2013; Lussier et al., 2021a; Lussier et al., 2021b). These benefits may be particularly advantageous for encouraging ethical behaviors in salespeople with higher lone wolf tendency since such salespeople are more likely to operate away from the direct purview of other coworkers. As a result of being distant, they are less able to rely on support from peers, apply organizational norms, and observe what ethical behaviors for support are deemed appropriate in their environment. A supportive supervisor can also be of particular advantage to salespeople with higher lone wolf tendency as they seek to balance the numerous and taxing activities that are part of the sales job (Dixon et al., 2003; Ingram et al., 1991), while ensuring a trade-off between achieving their sales goals and their well-being (Habel, Alavi, & Linsenmayer, 2021). Specifically, supervisor support offers salespeople with job-related assistance and supervisor guidance when it comes to the prioritization of tasks and attainment of acceptable behaviors, which leads salespeople to behave more ethically (Lussier et al., 2021a).

In addition, perceived supervisor support could promote a more productive working environment through employee recognition, dedicated feedback, and positive reinforcement from one's manager (Kemp et al., 2013). When it comes to salespeople with higher lone wolf tendency, perceived supervisor support may promote more ethical behaviors as being integral to the attainment of personal goals and further encourage these salespeople to vent to supervisors as well as seek their advice, which may incentivize ethical behaviors. Moreover, perceived

supervisor support can serve a dual purpose—strengthen employees’ motivation to reach their personal goals while striving towards achieving the goals of the firm (Eisenberger et al., 2002)—which may inhibit lone wolf salespeople from engaging in unethical behaviors. Lastly, greater levels of perceived supervisor support may deter salespeople from acting unethically by leaving salespeople with the impression that such behaviors are more likely to be caught (Lussier et al., 2021a). This may increasingly be the case for salespeople manifesting higher lone wolf tendency, since such salespeople are more likely to operate on their own and with little oversight from others. Hence, we expect salespeople with lone wolf tendency to be more likely to engage in ethical behaviors when higher levels of perceived supervisor support are present. That is, we predict:

**H<sub>2</sub>.** The negative relationship between salesperson lone wolf tendency and ethical behaviors is weakened when perceived supervisor support is high.

### **3.3 The moderating role of salesperson self-efficacy**

Self-efficacy refers to an individual’s self-confidence in their abilities to mobilize motivational and cognitive resources, and determination of the actions required to achieve situational demands (Dixon & Schertzer, 2005; Wood & Bandura, 1989). Although previous sales research offers evidence for a positive relationship between salesperson self-efficacy and outcome performance (Ahearne, Mathieu, & Rapp, 2005; Brown, Jones, & Leigh, 2005; Fu, Richards, Hughes, & Jones, 2010; Sujun et al., 1994), other sales-related work (Lussier & Hall, 2018; Mullins et al., 2014) points to a downside influence of salesperson self-efficacy. Although salesperson self-efficacy is essential in responding to complicated and intense customer demands (Schmitz & Ganesan, 2014), self-efficacious salespeople are more focused on themselves, instead of cooperating with others (Gist & Mitchell, 1992; Lussier & Hall, 2018), and view themselves positively in order to uphold their perceptions of a higher status (Mullins et al., 2019;

Wood & Bandura, 1989).

Accordingly, taking the perspective that salesperson self-efficacy—a cognitive factor and important determinant of self-regulation (Bandura, 1991; Wood & Bandura, 1989)—may be harmful for a lone wolf salesperson, it may be regarded as a catalyst; increasing the chance of salespeople with higher levels of lone wolf tendency to engage in fewer ethical behaviors. We thus anticipate that salesperson self-efficacy will strengthen the negative association between salesperson lone wolf tendency and ethical behaviors. This is largely because salespeople with higher levels of self-efficacy are focused on themselves and want to maintain their own perceived status (Lussier & Hall, 2018), even if doing so means cheating, taking shortcuts, or finding other ways “around the system.” As lone wolves are known for being highly motivated by meeting their own personal goals, we argue that the interaction of salesperson lone wolf tendency and salesperson self-efficacy is likely to further result in fewer ethical behaviors. Our rationale for this interaction effect is based on the following two reasons.

First, as previously indicated, lone wolves with more self-efficacy are self-focused and want to maintain their perceived status. To preserve their perceived status in a positive light, lone wolves with higher self-efficacy are more likely to act unethically, including behaviors such as cheating, acting dishonestly, and violating other ethical norms that may result in short-term incentives or instant satisfaction (Wang, Wang, Chen, & Li, 2017) in order to keep their self-focused goals at the forefront (Lussier & Hall, 2018; Mullins et al., 2014). Although lone wolf salespeople are intrinsically motivated (Blau & Boal, 1987; Locander et al., 2015) and dedicated to the task of selling (Dixon et al., 2003; Mulki et al., 2007), when combined with self-efficacy, they may ignore some general objectives to focus on specific tasks (Schmitz & Ganesan, 2014), mainly because focusing on certain tasks may put them in a better position and help maintain

their image in a positive light. As such, lone wolves that are highly self-efficacious will be even more self-oriented and focused on their own goals (Griffeth et al., 1999; Ingram et al., 1991), even if it might mean to cheat or cut corners. Along these lines, sales ethics research has shown a similar phenomenon for highly determined salespeople (Lussier et al., 2021a).

Second, not all salespeople prefer to cooperate and collaborate closely with their colleagues (Dixon et al., 2003; Lussier & Hall, 2018). Salespeople higher in lone wolf tendency may find it more difficult to function in the modern selling environments (where collaborating with others is vital) as they prefer to work independently from their colleagues and teams. Moreover, lone wolves with higher self-efficacy are less likely to listen to others' feedback to learn ways to improve in their jobs (Gist & Mitchell, 1992). Hence, having a preference to work "alone" among highly self-efficacious salespeople may lead them to exhibit unethical behaviors (e.g., taking shortcuts) to meet their goals regardless of any costs (Gino et al., 2011). This is mainly because "cutting corners" may be a simple solution for not having to put in the required effort and to achieve self-focused goals and maintain perceived status.

Therefore, lone wolf salespeople with higher self-efficacy will engage in unethical behaviors due to their intense self-focus and tendency to ignore negative feedback (Gist & Mitchell, 1992). These salespeople are able to sell with higher confidence levels (Sujan et al., 1994) as they are more willing to exert the necessary effort needed for managing their personal job-related challenges (Mulki, Lassk, & Jaramillo, 2008). Consequently, they may not always make the best decisions, are less collaborative, and may accomplish personal goals by engaging in fewer ethical behaviors. We thus hypothesize:

**H<sub>3</sub>.** The negative relationship between salesperson lone wolf tendency and ethical behaviors is strengthened when salesperson self-efficacy is high.

#### **4. Methodology**

#### **4.1 Sample and data collection**

To test our hypotheses, we used a sample of B2B salespeople. Like prior research (Lussier & Hartmann, 2017; Mullins et al., 2014), we performed preliminary interviews prior to data collection to inform our proposed conceptual model, inclusion of relevant constructs, and choice of measurement items. These interviews were conducted with a total of six sales professionals including one Vice President of sales, two sales supervisors, two salespeople, and one sales force analyst. Then, consistent with other B2B sales research (Lussier, Grégoire, & Vachon, 2017), feedback regarding the survey was obtained from a couple of university sales students taking advanced sales courses, two sales scholars, and four professional salespeople. Our survey was therefore finalized after incorporating these recommendations and making minor revisions to some of the measurement scale items.

Consistent with extant sales research (Badrinarayanan, Ramachandran, & Madhavaram, 2019; Bush et al., 2017; Schwepker & Good, 2011), the survey data was collected via collaboration with a well-recognized market research firm. The sample profile was restricted to B2B salespeople working in North American-based firms. The market research firm distributed access to the survey link to a total of 1454 qualified respondents via email. Each respondent was offered an incentive of approximately \$30. Altogether, a total of 143 respondents completed the survey. Some respondents ( $n = 8$ ) did not provide responses that exhibited variability or answer all the survey items and were therefore dropped. In the end, 135 respondents (response rate of 9.3%) were used for data analysis.

In their current companies, respondents average approximately 7.12 years of sales experience. The average respondent age is approximately 44.4 years. The respondents represent the following industries: Healthcare (e.g., pharmaceutical, biotech, medical, and dental) (4.44%),

Industrial, Manufacturing, and Packaging (13.33%), Finance, Banking, and Insurance (29.63%), Food and Beverage (20.00%), Technology (12.59%), and Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation<sup>1</sup> (20.00%) industries.

#### **4.2 Steps to mitigate and assess common method variance**

To account for the potential of common method variance (CMV), we followed many of Podsakoff et al.'s (2003) recommendations. First, we developed the measurement items and overall survey instrument to be very concise. Second, following CMV established practices (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003), we separated out the presentation of the proposed constructs in the survey, especially those that we believed to be causally related. Third, we promised respondents that responses would be kept confidential and anonymous. Fourth, minor changes to the survey were made prior to administration to reduce comprehension problems. Fifth, two of our three hypotheses focus on moderating effects, and prior research establishes moderating effects are not artifacts of CMV (Siemsen, Roth, & Oliveira, 2010). Sixth, we collected a marker variable theoretically unrelated to the constructs of interest (Lindell & Whitney, 2001) to assess the correlation of this marker variable with the constructs of interest, correlations among the variables of interest after “partialling out” any effects due to the marker variable, and examine the results of the path models after including the marker variable.

For this statistical remedy to assess CMV, self-oriented perfection (Hewitt & Flett, 1991)—measured using three items ( $\alpha = .77$ )—served as the marker variable. The marker variable was not correlated to any of the constructs of interest (see Table 2). It also did not meaningfully alter the correlations among the variables of interest after the effects were partialled out nor were there any significant changes in the path model results. Therefore, CMV

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<sup>1</sup> The B2B salespeople in our sample representing the Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation industries are responsible for selling advertisement to business customers in these different industries.

does not appear to be a particular threat to the results of our study.

### **4.3 Measures**

The measures employed in the current study are all well established in the sales literature and were adopted as is. The measures were used to assess the following latent constructs: (1) salesperson lone wolf tendency (Dixon et al., 2003; Mulki et al., 2007), (2) perceived supervisor support (DeConinck & Johnson, 2009; Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, & Sowa, 1986), (3) salesperson self-efficacy (Kidwell, Hardesty, Murtha, & Sheng, 2011; Sujan et al., 1994), and (4) ethical behaviors (Liden, Wayne, Zhao, & Henderson, 2008; Schwepker & Schultz, 2015). All measures utilized a 7-point Likert scale (1 = totally disagree; 7 = totally agree). The measurement items, outer loadings, and relevant references are listed in Table 1. Our analysis also included the following control variables: industry, firm tenure, and gender. Prior research empirically or theoretically (Briggs et al., 2012; Dixon et al., 2003; Ingram et al., 1991; Mulki et al., 2007) links industry, firm tenure, and gender to salesperson lone wolf tendency as well as one or more of the variables in our model. The inclusion of these control variables helps to reduce the potential for endogeneity to bias our results.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

### **4.4 Analytical approach**

The hypotheses were tested using partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) in SmartPLS version 3.2.7 (Ringle, Wende, & Becker, 2015). PLS-SEM (unlike covariance based SEM) is a variance-based approach to structural equation modeling, is not limited by identification issues, and is thus appropriate for assessing complex models (e.g., those with multiple moderators) with small samples (Hair, Hult, Ringle, Sarstedt, & Thiele, 2017). Furthermore, consistent with the aims of our research, PLS-SEM looks to maximize the variance

explained in the endogenous variables (i.e., ethical behaviors). For such reasons, PLS-SEM has been used in other sales research (Lussier et al., 2021a; Sridhar & Lyngdoh, 2019).

The hypotheses were estimated in a hierarchical fashion. We began by first estimating a model that includes salesperson lone wolf tendency, perceived supervisor support, salesperson self-efficacy, ethical behaviors, and the control variables, and the proposed linkages between each of these variables. Notably, we included a path from salesperson lone wolf tendency to each moderator, given the potential for salesperson lone wolf tendency to impact each. Next, given the potential for salesperson lone wolf tendency and perceived supervisor support to influence ethical behaviors, we estimated the model once again, after incorporating the constructs perceived supervisor support and salesperson self-efficacy, their direct effects on ethical behaviors. Then, we reran the model after including the interaction terms salesperson lone wolf tendency by perceived supervisor support and salesperson lone wolf tendency by salesperson self-efficacy. To create the interaction terms, we used orthogonalization with standardized product terms (Henseler & Chin, 2010). Orthogonalization involves using residual centering and produces interaction terms that are uncorrelated with first-order terms. Given the directional nature of the hypotheses, they were assessed using one-tailed tests. The model was specified on 5,000 bias-corrected and accelerated bootstrap estimates with no sign changes. Of the potential industries (i.e., Pharmaceutical, Biotech, Medical, and Dental), the model was specified with the Healthcare industry serving as the reference category.

## **5. Results**

### **5.1 Measurement validation**

We evaluated the measures for evidence of indicator reliability, internal consistency, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. The initial measurement model revealed a number of cross-loadings with respect to one perceived supervisor support item and one salesperson self-

efficacy item; both of these problematic items were therefore removed. We then re-estimated the measurement model. Composite reliability, Cronbach's alpha reliability, and average variance extracted (AVE) estimates surpassed commonly accepted thresholds. Furthermore, all outer loadings were significant, surpassing the desirable .70 threshold (minimum = .73), and exceeding all cross-loadings. Moreover, regarding HTMT, the highest value (.54) falls well under the .90 threshold (Hair, Hult, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2017) and square root of the AVE for each construct exceeds the correlation with any other construct (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Table 2 displays construct correlations as well as descriptive statistics for the study measures.

[Insert Table 2 about here]

## 5.2 Hypotheses tests

H<sub>1</sub> proposed that salesperson lone wolf tendency is negatively associated with ethical behaviors. The standardized path estimates are shown in the column labelled Model 1 of Table 3. Salesperson lone wolf tendency is negatively associated with ethical behaviors ( $b = -.19$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Hence, H<sub>1</sub> is supported.

[Insert Table 3 about here]

H<sub>2</sub> proposed that perceived supervisor support weakens the negative association between salesperson lone wolf tendency and ethical behaviors, while H<sub>3</sub> posited that salesperson self-efficacy strengthens the negative relationship between salesperson lone wolf tendency and ethical behaviors. The results of H<sub>2</sub> and H<sub>3</sub> are also shown in Table 3 (see the column labelled Model 2). Consistent with our expectations, the interaction term of salesperson lone wolf tendency and perceived supervisor support is significant and in the expected direction ( $b = .32$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Hence, H<sub>2</sub> is supported. Figure 2 displays the association between salesperson lone wolf tendency and ethical behaviors at low (i.e., one standard deviation below the mean) and high

(i.e., one standard deviation above the mean) levels of perceived supervisor support. The plot in Figure 2 shows that higher levels of perceived supervisor support attenuate the negative influence of salesperson lone wolf tendency on ethical behaviors. When salesperson lone wolf tendency is low, there appears to be no difference in ethical behaviors between salespeople reporting low and high levels of perceived supervisor support. Yet, when salesperson lone wolf tendency is high, there is a notable difference in ethical behaviors between salespeople reporting low and high levels of perceived supervisor support.

[Insert Figure 2 about here]

The interaction term between salesperson lone wolf tendency and salesperson self-efficacy is significant ( $b = -.29, p < .01$ ), lending support to H<sub>3</sub>. Figure 3 illustrates the association between salesperson lone wolf tendency and ethical behaviors at low (i.e., one standard deviation) and high (i.e., one standard deviation above the mean) levels of salesperson self-efficacy. The plot in Figure 3 indicates that as salesperson lone wolf tendency increases, higher levels of salesperson self-efficacy become less effective at buffering the negative impact of salesperson lone wolf tendency on ethical behaviors. Interestingly, when salesperson lone wolf tendency is low, higher levels of salesperson self-efficacy appear to result in higher levels of ethical behaviors. However, when salesperson lone wolf tendency is high, higher levels of salesperson self-efficacy appear to result in lower levels of ethical behaviors. Although not formally hypothesized, we also explored the potential for a three-way interaction between salesperson lone wolf tendency, perceived supervisor support, and salesperson self-efficacy<sup>2</sup>. The analysis of this three-way interaction effect was found not to be statistically significant.

[Insert Figure 3 about here]

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<sup>2</sup> We thank an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.

### **5.3 Post-hoc interviews with professional salespeople and sales managers**

To shed additional and richer insights into our quantitative results, we conducted qualitative interviews with professional salespeople and sales managers. The aim of these interviews was to further explore the relationships in our conceptual model by gaining first-hand perspectives from and deeper vision into the mental models of those with direct and practical experience (Zeithaml et al., 2020). As part of a different project and broader inquiry, interview questions specifically asking about the core variable in our model (i.e., salesperson lone wolf tendency, ethical behaviors, perceived supervisor support, and salesperson self-efficacy) were included. As such, these interview questions were aimed at testing our hypotheses and designed to be confirmatory rather than exploratory (Vogt, Gardner, & Haeffele, 2012). The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. We present the findings of these interviews below.

We used purposeful sampling to deliberately include participants with varying backgrounds and experiences (Patton, 2015). Collectively, our participant panel consists of a total of 11 salespeople ( $n = 5$ ) and sales managers ( $n = 6$ ). The participants had an average age of 38.36 years, 12.14 years of experience, and 14.59 years of overall work experience. There were eight males and three females, and they had industry experience in Advertising, Hospitality, Retail, Consumer Packaged Goods, Telecommunications, Consulting, Pharmaceuticals, and Technology.

While there were mixed feelings about the likeability of lone wolf salespeople, several of the participants felt that lone wolves were valuable to a selling organization. Yet, it was generally understood that a lone wolf salesperson is one that will, in the words of a Managing Partner in the Advertising industry, “*go against the grain and who doesn’t really necessarily conform to the processes, policies, and procedures that management prefers.*” Part of the reason

for this is that lone wolf salespeople take pride in their individualistic work style and “*want to prove at the end that they did it*” without the help and guidance from others. Considering this self-proclaimed challenge and desired reputation, participants described how lone wolf salespeople might become aggressive in their approach and, at times, go rogue in their pursuit of attaining and sustaining a certain level of success to save face. As a result, the need to win at all costs and engage in less ethical behaviors become much more tempting as lone wolf salespeople become fixated on what only benefits them and their personal goals, as “*ethics are a smaller part of the equation.*” Participants also noted that it did not help that lone wolf salespeople lack team spirit and are uninterested in collaborating with and learning from their coworkers. By shutting themselves off from their coworkers, lone wolves limit their access to learning opportunities (e.g., sharing tips, receiving feedback) and new resources. In essence, lone wolves, unlike their counterparts, are less likely to engage in ethical behaviors because they are inadvertently putting themselves in a more “*dangerous*” position as they may become “*victims of their own circumstances.*” To illustrate, consider the following excerpt from a less experienced Sales Representative in the Consumer-Packaged Goods industry:

“First of all, when you’re a lone wolf, nobody sees what you’re doing. So, you don’t have the peer pressure, and nobody sees what you’re doing, including your colleagues... you don’t have the judgment of others. So, you can do what you think is good. Second of all, as I said before, you’re more in danger, burden the whole weights, or you might be more stressed out when things don’t go your way. And, since you might be more stressed than you might adopt more unethical behaviors. And since they’re so focused, they depend on themselves, they might work even harder, put some more hours and to get things done by themselves since they don’t have some help. So, more hours, get exhausted, when you’re exhausted, you might be less ethical.”

One thing that was clear from the interviews is that lone wolves are not inherently unethical or that they necessarily have ill-intentions to engage in less ethical behaviors. Rather, it is the idea that their modus operandi provides “*no barriers*”, a lack of an internal safety net (e.g.,

“no one is going to take the time on checking”) and makes them more prone to having to navigate ethical dilemmas on their own and without guidance from others. Interestingly, as some participants noted, lone wolf salespeople may not always even realize that they are engaging in unethical behaviors. In the words of a Senior Account Manager in our sample, for some lone wolves, “it’s not that they’re being consciously unethical, it’s just unethical behaviors. It’s like breaking the law without knowing the law exists.” As indicated by participants, it might take some time for others in the organization to uncover a lone wolf’s unethical behaviors, but that it might start with a minor transgression (e.g., negligible shortcut) that snowballs into more intense unethical behaviors over time.

Participants were also asked about salesperson lone wolf tendency and ethical behaviors demonstrated by highly self-efficacious salespeople. In response, many participants underscored how lone wolf salespeople naturally radiate with confidence. As a Managing Partner emphasized, lone wolves are “comfortable and confident that they’re going to get things done the way they need to get done to put the number on the board” and “hopefully do it in an ethical manner with integrity.” Lone wolf salespeople who are extra confident in their skills and abilities prefer to be left alone and to do their jobs under their own volition. That is, as participants elaborated, lone wolves with high self-efficacy have an amplified and extremely determined mindset (i.e., confidence that comes with being a lone wolf times a belief in one’s own ability) and a higher level of “mental agility” that further drives them to prove themselves and refine their own techniques and strategies. Due to this exaggerated confidence and potentially destructive mindset, these types of salespeople are likely to, although not always intentional, as the Managing Partner continued to explain, “go against the grain to irritate or agitate” with the thinking, “I’m going to figure out what I need to do in the context of my day, my eight hours, my

*five hours, whatever I need to do in order to make this work.*” As part of this, these salespeople may desire to push their own interests over those of others as they are, as a Sales Engineer in our sample stated, *“not waiting for anyone to take their hands and to show them the way.”* This embellished sense of confidence in their selling ability and self-interested focus may further encourage lone wolf salespeople to do whatever they believe it takes to prove themselves and their abilities, as they do not always believe in or are confident in the approaches and ideas of others. Consider the following illustrative quote (in response to lone wolf salespeople with high self-efficacy):

“I’d say people with a lot of self-efficacy ... they will tend to be a little bit more unethical because they have so much belief and the way that they do their work and how they approach customers or whatever. They might not be open to what other people...have to say about the way they work.”

When participants were asked, “do you think lone wolves that receive high levels of supervisor support are more or less likely to engage in unethical selling behaviors? Why?” there was an unequivocal consensus that supervisors play an important role (e.g., *“if the lone wolf thing is a problem, then I think the managers need to be involved quite a bit”*) in potentially curtailing the negative effect of salesperson lone wolf tendency on ethical behaviors. That is, to minimize unethical behaviors, participants stressed how supervisors can support lone wolves in a variety of ways, including actively making themselves available, regularly observing the salesperson (e.g., role-plays, *“mock sales calls”*), offering constructive feedback, and advice on how to better attain their personal goals. Essentially, supervisor support is critical when it comes to showing lone wolf salespeople that supervisors understand their unique circumstances and provide them with confirmation and validation in what they are currently doing. As part of this, supervisors can provide lone wolf salespeople with *“guidance if they don’t know what ethical behavior is,” “more guidance in their decisions,”* and assist in navigating any *“gray zones”* at

work. In this way, the supervisor conveys to lone wolf salespeople a way to understand the ambiguous situations and ethical challenges that might arise and communicates their availability to help. Stated differently, supervisors can really aid lone wolf salespeople when they “*have some unethical thoughts*” and provide clarity into the question, “*what should I do?*” Notably, participants admitted that, in the end, lone wolf salespeople do not like being controlled or closely supervised, but that it was important to provide them with support in a manner that did not seem like it was micromanagement while also keeping lone wolf salespeople calibrated and “*on track.*” Consider the following passages from a Sales/Marketing Director and a Customer Service Specialist, respectively, that further emphasize the importance of supervisor support for lone wolf salespeople when it comes to ethical behaviors:

“I feel like if they feel that this communication bridge is good for them. And it's not just a supervisor trying to breathe in his neck and trying to see what he's doing, because that's obviously not something that they like. If there is a lone wolf, if they feel like this is just for the good of the company and that this presence is there for them, not just for the company. I feel like this could really help with their ethical behavior. If this is well done, because you know too much kind of surveillance, like the micromanagement could be really heavy for some people.”

“I think that if the lone wolf receives a lot of a manager's support, I think they won't act unethically. So, they'll be more ethical if they have more support... usually a manager will give you a good frame of work and the baseline that you need to respect in order to reach your goals. So, while the frame of work might not be what the lone wolf intended to do working... I mean the baseline and the moral principles that you get from the manager can lead them to be more ethical in the way that they're working.”

## **6. Discussion**

### **6.1 Theoretical implications**

The primary goal of our research was to investigate the impact of salesperson lone wolf tendency on ethical behaviors. Motivating our examination of salesperson lone wolf tendency is the current and constantly evolving B2B selling process (Hartmann & Lussier, 2020; Lussier & Hartmann, 2017; Rangarajan et al., 2021) and the impact this has on certain work-related

activities of contemporary salespeople. Using data collected from 135 B2B salespeople, we examined the relationship between salesperson lone wolf tendency and ethical behaviors, as well as potentially relevant moderators of this hitherto unexplored relationship.

The findings from our quantitative study lend support for a negative relationship between salesperson lone wolf tendency and ethical behaviors. Extant literature on lone wolf tendency among salespeople has been rather limited and particularly focused on performance outcomes or on the well-being of salespeople (Dixon et al., 2003; Locander et al., 2015; Mulki et al., 2007). Departing from past research, our study is the first that considers the impact of salesperson lone wolf tendency on meaningful job-related actions, particularly ethical behaviors. By focusing exclusively on ethical behaviors as the key dependent variable in our model, we add to the rather limited research on lone wolf tendency in sales, which to date, has not factored in the impact of how salesperson lone wolf tendency might lead to fewer ethical behaviors, which could prove to be consequential when it comes to jeopardizing customer relationships and disrupting the functioning of a sales team. While our study does not directly link the consequences of ethical behaviors on such outcomes, future research should certainly consider these and other potentially harmful downstream consequences of salesperson lone wolf tendency.

After establishing the negative relationship that exists between salesperson lone wolf tendency and ethical behavior, our research identifies two meaningful boundary conditions. In keeping in line with current research that combines multiple theoretical lenses to examine topics in sales ethics (Good & Schepker, 2022; Schepker & Good, 2021), we use EDM theory and SCT, to ascertain perceived supervisory support and salesperson self-efficacy as two factors that moderate the salesperson lone wolf tendency and ethical behaviors relationship. Specifically, we hypothesized and found support for one possible way to mitigate the harmful effect of

salesperson lone wolf tendency on ethical behaviors is by providing supervisor support. On the other hand, we posited and found support for a more counterintuitive effect related to salesperson self-efficacy. That is, our study indicates that salesperson self-efficacy strengthens the negative relationship between salesperson lone wolf tendency and ethical behaviors. By advancing and exploring these two theoretically grounded and highly relevant moderating variables, we contribute to the literature on lone wolf in sales, which to date has not considered factors that may mitigate or enhance the negative consequences of salesperson lone wolf tendency.

Our research also contributes to the burgeoning stream of literature on EDM theory (Schwartz, 2016), which suggests that when faced with different ethical situations, individuals take stock of the situation based on their own skills and capabilities, and decide to engage in (un)ethical behaviors. By focusing on salesperson lone wolf tendency, we identify a rather unique perspective on how certain individuals react to situations involving high levels of complexity that places a lot of demands on them. While the emphasis of our research is on salesperson lone wolf tendency, future work on EDM theory might expand to consider other professions (i.e., outside of sales) where employees may be likely to exhibit lone wolf tendencies, such as customer service personnel, technical support personnel, and the large number of employees who work from home or in a hybrid work setting due to the lasting effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **6.2 Managerial implications**

One of the key findings from our study is the negative impact of salesperson lone wolf tendency on ethical behaviors. Research demonstrates that unethical behaviors deployed by salespeople—especially towards their customers—can harm customer relationships (Lagace, Dahlstrom, & Gassenheimer, 1991), which can have adverse consequences for the firm (Evans,

McFarland, Dietz, & Jaramillo, 2012; Palmatier, Dant, Grewal, & Evans, 2006). In complex sales situations, unethical behaviors by lone wolf salespeople may also indirectly affect customer outcomes and adversely impact the coordination of lone wolf salespeople with colleagues. Thus, care should be taken to scrutinize the activities of lone wolf salespeople more carefully relative to other colleagues, at least with respect to ethical behaviors. To identify possible unethical behaviors, managers should therefore be active on the lookout for salesperson lone wolf tendencies by assessing the extent to which members on their teams are openly working alone and in solitude. When this is the case, to possibly minimize the temptations to engage in fewer ethical behaviors, managers can strive to involve lone wolf salespeople in various team-based activities. Managers can also set and have periodic coaching sessions with lone wolf salespeople. Such interactions and the relationships that might be forged with others in the organization may deter lone wolves from performing less ethical behaviors by showcasing the benefits of reaching out to others and providing a venue to discuss ethical dilemmas that may arise.

Another important insight from our study for managers is that perceived supervisor support reduces the negative impact of salesperson lone wolf tendency on ethical behaviors. This points to the necessity of having to more closely manage and offer support to salespeople with higher lone wolf tendency. To help with this endeavor, we suggest that supervisors set in place clear processes which explicitly state what constitutes acceptable behaviors and practices both in the workplace, especially when it comes to engaging with customers. To create awareness, managers can also use anonymized sales scenarios highlighting ethical dilemmas to illustrate the importance of ethical behaviors. Sales managers should also make an extra effort to make themselves available to the lone wolf salespeople on their teams, especially so these salespeople can approach them when they find themselves in tricky ethical situations. Sales managers should

also be cognizant and careful to not inadvertently reward or ignore lone wolf behaviors that might lead to fewer ethical behaviors, even if lone wolf salespeople are producing positive results. In such instances, sales managers should sit down with lone wolf salespeople and explain why certain individualistic and unethical actions are not acceptable and consequently not rewarded.

Lastly, our study warns managers against the assumption that a higher level of salesperson self-efficacy is always beneficial. While the positive effects of salesperson self-efficacy are well documented in the literature, our research sheds further light into the darker side of self-efficacy, especially when it is coupled with salesperson lone wolf tendency. To address the potential challenge of having a salesperson with both high lone wolf tendency and self-efficacy, managers are advised to continuously coach these salespeople and to make sure that the content of their coaching efforts are more to educate about and encourage ethical sales practices rather than a focus on more general performance related guidance that might be required for salespeople with lower levels of self-efficacy. Sales managers are also advised to monitor for unethical behaviors more closely in salespeople who exhibit lone wolf tendency and self-efficacy.

### **6.3 Limitations and future research**

Our study does have some limitations, which also present opportunities for future research. First, reliance on self-reported measures to assess the constructs and relationships of interests raise concerns regarding common method bias. While common method variance did not appear to be problematic in our study, future research should seek to capture (un)ethical behaviors using objective and/or alternative sources (e.g., number of customer complaints with unethical components, number of supervisor warnings for unethical behaviors received, surveying of

customer to assess salesperson unethical behaviors). Second, there is also an opportunity to improve the quality of the established measures used. Future research, for example, could capture a broader span of ethical behaviors, perceived supervisor support, salesperson lone wolf tendency, and salesperson self-efficacy.

Third, the nature of the data also results in the findings being suspect to endogeneity biases (i.e., omitted variables, simultaneity, and/or measurement error). To assess whether endogeneity biases the findings, we estimate numerous models with Gaussian Copulas as recommended when partial least squares is used as the analytical approach (Hult et al., 2018). The Anderson-Darling test (Becker, Proksch, & Ringle, 2021), which has been recently recommended for assessing the assumption that the predictor variables are not normally distributed, is significant for perceived supervisor support ( $p < .001$ ), salesperson self-efficacy ( $p < .001$ ), and salesperson lone wolf tendency ( $p < .05$ ). In none of the analyses is one or more of the Gaussian Copula terms significant, providing evidence that endogeneity bias is not a substantive concern. To further increase the ability to rule out any effects attributable to CMV or endogeneity bias, there is an opportunity for future research to examine the relationships utilizing longitudinal designs incorporating multi-source data. As noted in marketing research (Zaefarian, Kadile, Henneberg, & Leischnig, 2017), the lagged endogenous regressor technique which separates variables that are predicting versus being predicted can be particularly helpful to addressing issues due to reverse causality.

Our research also motivates future research that examines other outcomes of salesperson lone wolf tendency. Since the literature (as well as the current study) tends to emphasize negative consequences associated with salesperson lone wolf tendency, there is an ample opportunity for scholars to explore more of the “light side.” Researchers could also examine the consequences of

having lone wolves more pointedly on sales teams and how this impacts fellow salespeople and other coworkers. Other fruitful avenues for future research include investigating different theoretical mechanisms that might explain the ways in which salesperson lone wolf tendency impacts ethical behaviors. Based on our line of argumentation, additional research might explore the mediating effects of (1) personal goals vs. organizational goals, (2) perceived stress and isolation, and (3) perceptions of a lack of oversight. Additionally, due to the speculative nature of our theoretical reasoning, future research should consider further examining salesperson lone wolf tendency and potential mediators as well as crafting research propositions—novel statements specifying relationships between concepts—to advance marketing theory and practice (Ulaga, Kleinaltenkamp, Kashyap, & Eggert, 2021).<sup>3</sup> Such consideration should include whether salespeople with higher levels of lone wolf tendency: (1) are more inclined to prioritize their own personal goals at the expense of others, which may lessen ethical behaviors; (2) experience greater stress and isolation which may result in them being less resilient and thus, in turn, lessen ethical behaviors, and (3) perceive there to be less oversight of their role and, as a result, perceive the probability of being caught enacting less ethical behaviors to be lower thereby lessening actual ethical behaviors. To explore these ideas, future research can use scenario-based experiments to tease out the processes in which salesperson lone wolf tendency might lead to ethical behaviors. In sum, we believe that the under-researched topic of lone wolves in sales is extremely exciting with much yet to be discovered.

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<sup>3</sup> We thank an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.

**Table 1.** Scale items and factor loadings

<b>Constructs, items, and source</b>	<b>Factor loading</b>
<b>Salesperson Lone Wolf Tendency</b> (Dixon et al. 2003; Mulki et al. 2017)	
Given a choice, I would rather work alone than work with others.	.90
At work, I prefer solitude over social interaction with work colleagues.	.83
I am more successful when I work by myself than with others.	.89
Working with others is a hassle.	.84
<b>Ethical Behaviors</b> (Liden et al., 2008; Schwepker & Schultz, 2015)	
I hold high ethical standards.	.81
I am always honest.	.85
I would not compromise ethical principles in order to achieve success.	.73
I value honesty more than profits.	.88
<b>Perceived Supervisor Support</b> (DeConinck & Johnson, 2009; Eisenberger et al., 1986)	
My sales manager takes great pride in my accomplishments.	.75
My sales manager really cares about my well-being.	.95
My sales manager really considers my goals and values.	.93
My sales manager is willing to help me if I need it.	.73
<b>Salesperson Self-Efficacy</b> (Kidwell et al. 2011; Sujan et al. 1994)	
I know the right thing to do in selling situations.	.72
Overall, I am confident in my ability to perform well at my job.	.92
I feel I am very capable at the task of selling.	.94
I am confident in my selling ability.	.83

**Table 2.** Descriptive statistics and construct correlations

Construct	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Salesperson Lone Wolf Tendency	1						
2. Perceived Supervisor Support	-.17**	1					
3. Salesperson Self-Efficacy	-.02	.25***	1				
4. Ethical Behaviors	-.23***	.35***	.10	1			
5. Firm Tenure	.02	.04	.03	.10	1		
6. Gender <sup>a</sup>	-.03	-.05	-.11	-.05	-.38***	1	
7. Self-Oriented Perfection	.15	.11	.10	.11	-.04	.17	1
Mean	4.38	5.44	6.05	6.11	7.12	.55	5.51
Standard deviation	1.62	1.53	.83	.88	6.92	.50	1.20
Cronbach's alpha	.89	.88	.89	.84	NA	NA	.77
Composite reliability	.92	.92	.92	.89	NA	NA	.83
Average variance extracted (AVE)	75.1%	80.1%	73.4%	67.1%	NA	NA	64.3%

**Notes:** <sup>a</sup>Dichotomous variable; 0 = men, 1 = women; point-biserial correlation coefficients reported

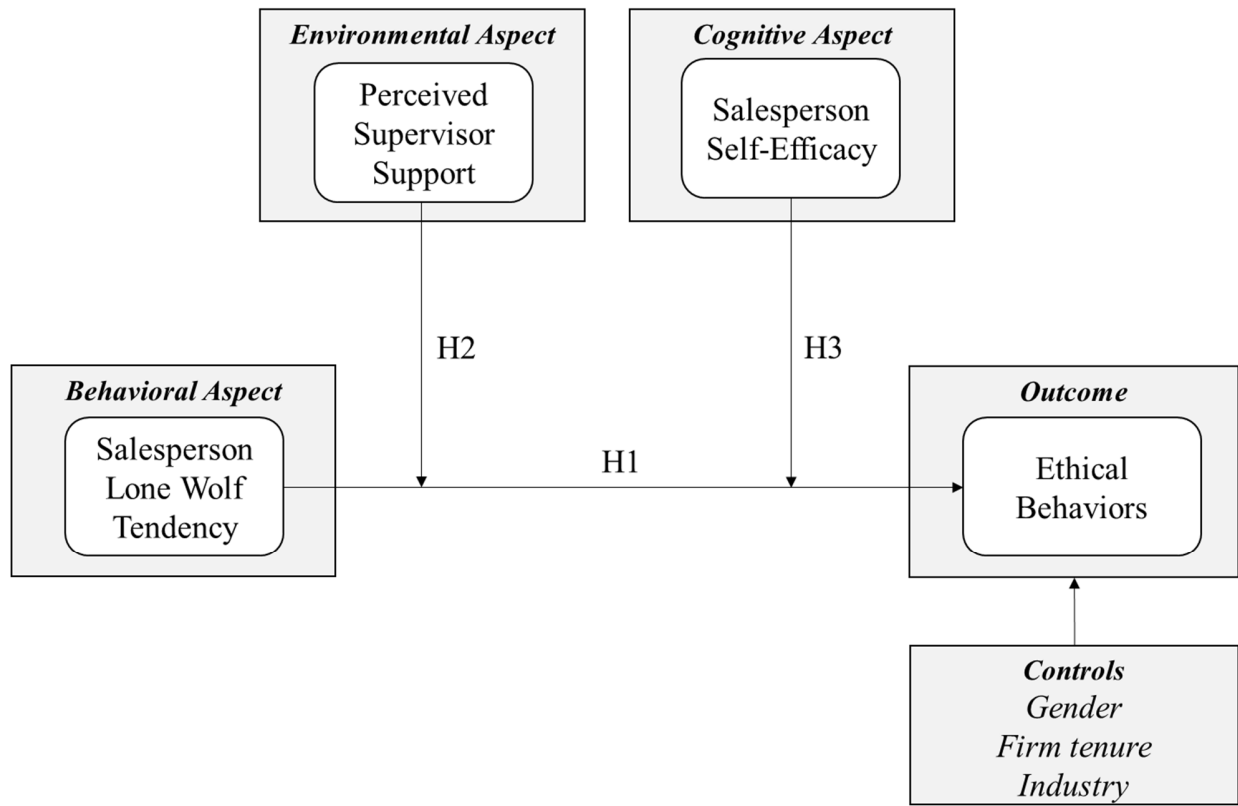
\*p<.10; \*\*p<.05; \*\*\*p<.01

**Table 3.** Standard path estimates

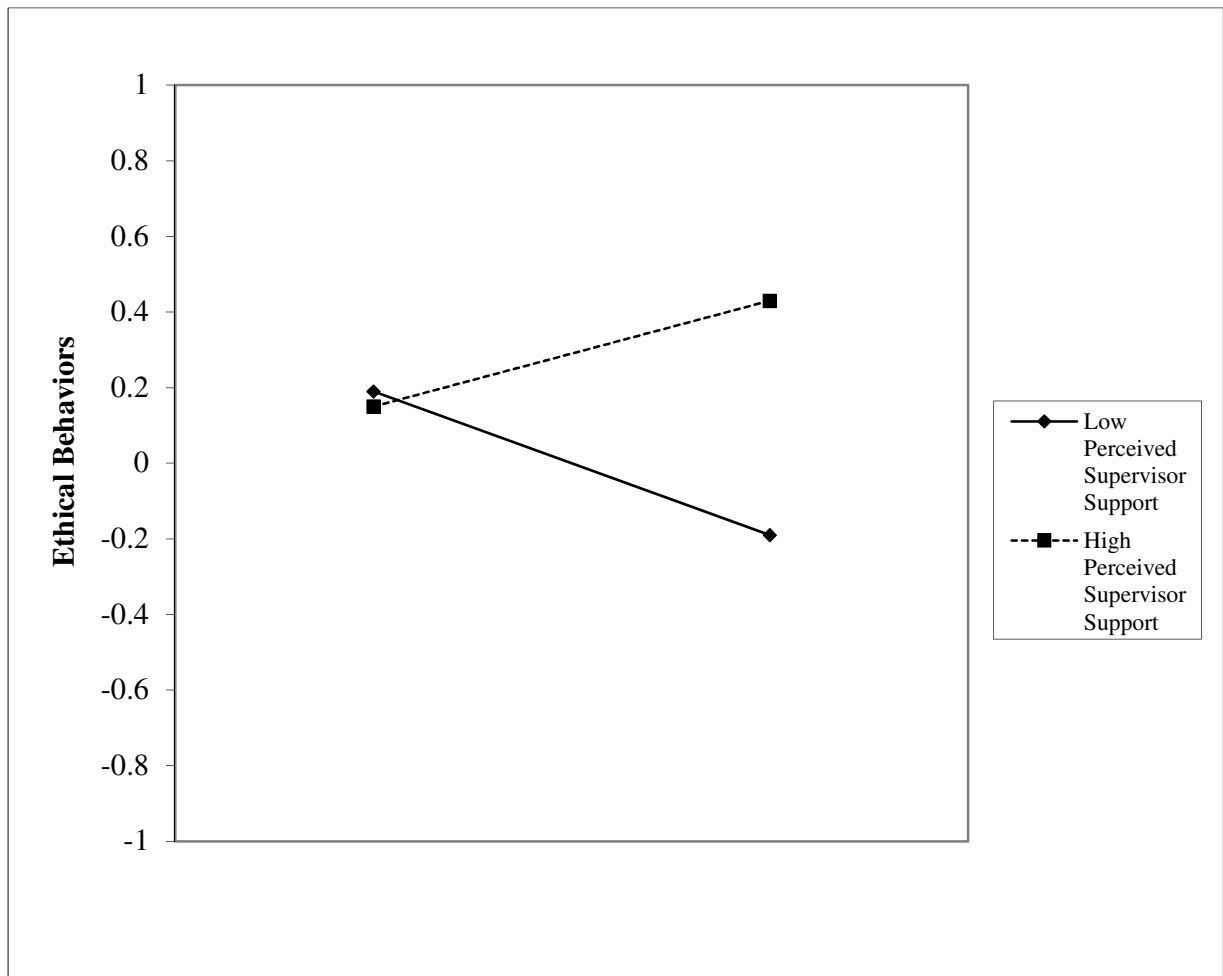
Relationships	Model 1	Model 2
Salesperson Lone Wolf Tendency -> Ethical Behaviors	-.19***	-.19***
Perceived Supervisor Support -> Ethical Behaviors	.34***	.29***
Salesperson Self-efficacy -> Ethical Behaviors	.02	.10
Salesperson Lone Wolf Tendency -> Perceived Supervisor Support		-.19**
Salesperson Lone Wolf Tendency -> Salesperson Self-Efficacy		-.05
Salesperson Lone Wolf Tendency x Perceived Supervisor Support		.33**
Salesperson Lone Wolf Tendency x Salesperson Self-Efficacy		-.29***
<i>Covariates</i>		
Industry: Industrial, Manufacturing, and Packaging -> Ethical Behaviors	-.00	-.07
Industry: Finance, Banking, and Insurance -> Ethical Behaviors	-.16	-.23
Industry: Food and Beverages -> Ethical Behaviors	.13	.09
Industry: Technology -> Ethical Behaviors	-.01	-.01
Industry: Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation -> Ethical Behaviors	.05	-.04
Firm Tenure -> Ethical Behaviors	.05	-.01
Gender -> Ethical Behaviors	-.01	-.04
R <sup>2</sup>	.24	.35
Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	.18	.28
SRMR	.06	.06

\*p<.10; \*\*p<.05; \*\*\*p<.01

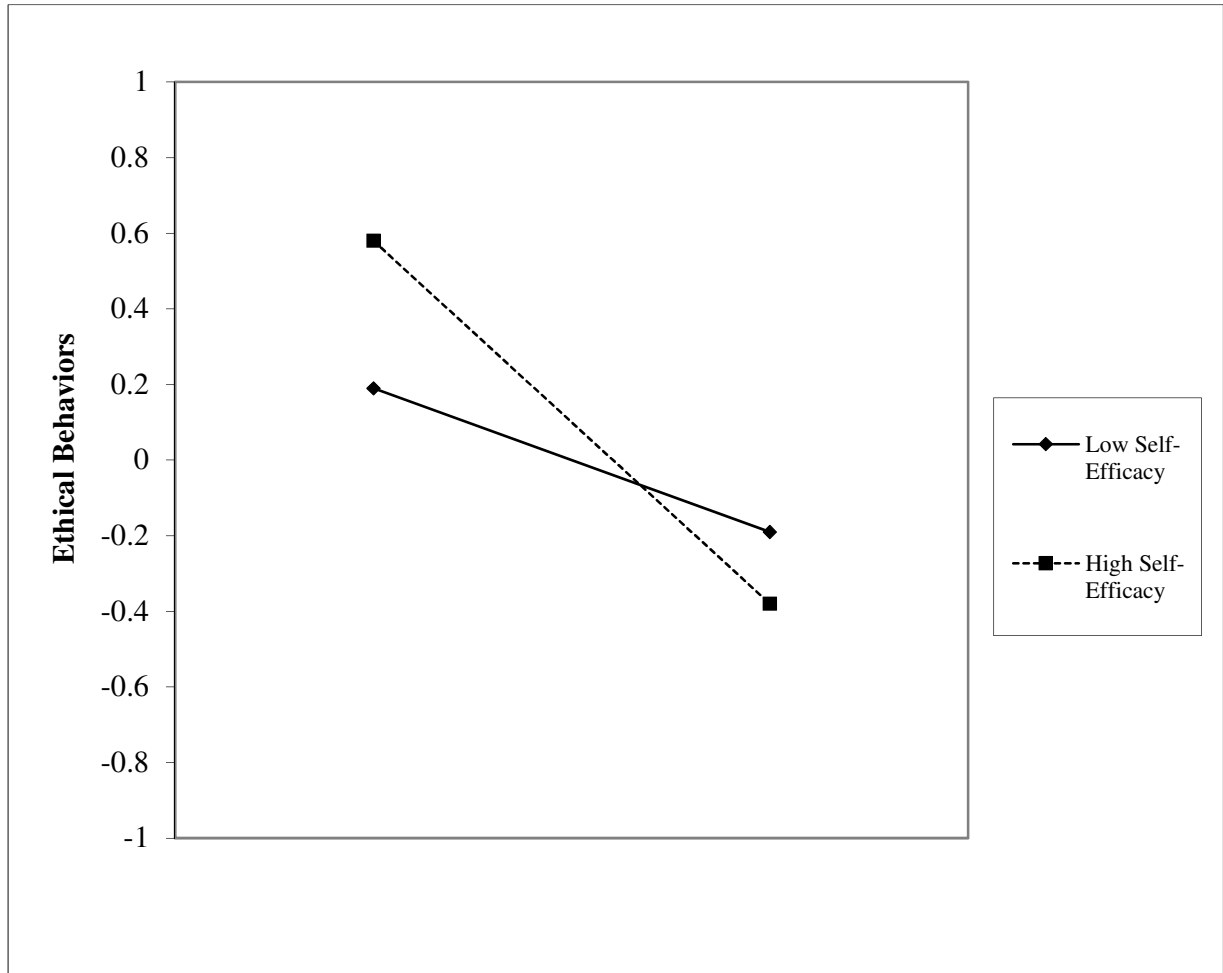
**Figure 1.** Conceptual framework



**Figure 2.** Interaction between salesperson lone wolf tendency and perceived supervisor support



**Figure 3.** Interaction between salesperson lone wolf tendency and salesperson self-efficacy



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