

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Fostering creative selling through ethics. An emotion-based approach

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**Abstract**

Research on salesperson creativity remains as one of the most under-researched topics in the sales literature despite the evidence that encouraging creativity in the sales domain is a source of competitive advantage. This paper aims to fill this research gap by exploring the influence of perceived ethical climate on salesperson creative performance, paying special attention to the role that emotions play in this process. Data provided by 176 supervisor–salesperson dyads confirm that the trust/responsibility dimension of an ethical climate is positively related to salesperson creative selling by increasing salespeople's organizational pride. Similarly, the perception of unethical selling practices negatively affects salesperson organizational pride, reducing the expression of creative behaviors. Moreover, the negative effect of unethical selling practices on creative performance is stronger (more negative) when salespeople's identification with an organization increases. Managerial implications and future research directions are also addressed.

**KEYWORDS**

creativity, emotions, ethical climate, organizational identification, salesperson

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Creative selling is essential in a competitive environment and is crucial for enhancing organizational performance (Coelho et al., 2011; Wang & Netemeyer, 2004). Creativity provides insights into gaining a competitive advantage; it is particularly beneficial for successful relationship management (Groza et al., 2016). For example, while creativity helps to identify customers' needs (Coelho et al., 2011), customers also expect salespeople to provide them with creative insights into sales interactions (Blocker et al., 2012; Coelho et al., 2011). All this reinforces the positive relationship between creativity and customer satisfaction (Strutton et al., 2009) and consolidates the significant role of creative selling in building strong, long-term relationships with customers (Bradford et al., 2010; Pullins

et al., 2012). It is therefore unsurprising that salesperson creativity is often identified as a key driver of sales performance and is even more significant than establishing trusting customer relationships (Lassk & Shepherd, 2013; Lussier et al., 2017). Hence, it is important to examine in depth the factors that determine creativity in sales, especially taking into consideration that creativity is considered an under-researched area in the sales domain (Evans et al., 2012).

In an increasingly complex, globalized, and interconnected business environment, both employees and companies are constantly confronted with diverse ethical dilemmas (Hannah et al., 2011). An ethical climate (EC) is defined as “the prevailing perceptions of typical organizational practices and procedures that have ethical content” (Victor & Cullen, 1988, p. 101). An EC provides information about the practices and behaviors that are considered acceptable in an

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organization, and it is found to be critical for the success of sales organizations (Itani et al., 2019; Jaramillo et al., 2006). This has been confirmed by theoretical and meta-analytic reviews that support the positive influence of EC on important work outcomes such as work attitudes (organizational commitment, job satisfaction, person–organization fit, supervisory trust, among others); psychological states; ethical/unethical behaviors; and performance outcomes, such as sales performance, customer satisfaction, organizational citizenship behavior, or financial performance (Martin & Cullen, 2006; Newman et al., 2017; Simha & Cullen, 2012). However, despite the extensive research that examines the relationship between EC and work behaviors as well as the recognition that the perceived moral atmosphere within an organization exerts a significant influence on employees' individual decisions and behaviors, there is a lack of studies focusing on how ethical climate affects employee creativity. This circumstance is compounded by the mixed results in previous works addressing the connection between ethics and creativity. For example, it has been noted that leaders' ethical behaviors can lead to subordinates showing a high level of compliance to rules, which discourages them from divergent thinking and makes them more reluctant to generate and express new ideas (Wang & Cheng, 2010). On the contrary, other studies (i.e., Saini & Martin, 2009) suggest that benevolent climates are positively related to risk-taking propensity, which has been identified as a precondition for creativity (Dewett, 2006).

Building on the emotion appraisal theory (Lazarus, 1991) and the broaden-and-build theory (BBT) of positive emotions (Fredrickson, 2001), this study proposes that an ethical climate based on trust and responsibility enhances salesperson creativity by increasing the self-conscious emotion of pride, thus triggering a positive emotion-based response. This study focuses on pride because, like joy, it is one of the most frequently and intensely experienced emotions at work (Verbeke et al., 2004). Similarly, perceiving an unethical climate in terms of aggressive selling practices might reduce salesperson creativity by means of a negative emotion-based response.

One tenet of appraisal theory establishes that a subjective evaluation of the relationship between an individual and their environment consequently causes emotions, so an event that is objectively the same can trigger different emotions with different intensities in each individual (Ellsworth & Scherer, 2003; Lazarus, 1991). An important aspect in this appraisal process that influences an emotion's intensity and nature is an action's compatibility with an individual's internal standards; i.e., the extent to which a perceived action exceeds or falls short of a subject's internal moral code. According to this approach, if the internal standards are exceeded, an individual will show a positive emotional response in the form of pride (Ellsworth & Scherer, 2003, p. 581). An organizational ethical climate characterized by employees' authentic commitment to high moral standards in their treatment of others, including customers, can therefore be expected to elicit a sense of pride from an employee.

Furthermore, according to Lazarus (1991), positive emotions such as pride always cause a behavioral response which has to do with the interest in maintaining the positive emotional experience.

This idea is linked to Fredrickson's (1998, 2001) approach, which is expressed in his broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions. According to this theory, some positive emotions, including pride, can broaden a person's thought-action repertoire in interpersonal settings.

Following this approach, this paper proposes that organizational pride, as a positive emotion, exerts a broadening effect on an individual's collection of thoughts and actions. Taking into consideration that creativity focuses on idea generation (Anderson et al., 2014) and that a wider breadth of attention is positively related to creativity—particularly when it involves highly complex tasks (Kasof, 1995)—it is expected that organizational pride, derived from a perception of organizational ethical climate, will positively influence salesperson creativity.

The idea that positive emotions can broaden salespeople's thinking, making them more creative and thus improving their performance, can be found in recent sales research such as that of Lin et al. (2016) and Lussier et al. (2017). On the other hand, Fredrickson's (2001) theory of positive emotions that considers that individuals differ in their ability to evaluate and regulate their emotions, with differences in their capacity to process emotional information, constitutes an adequate framework in the marketing and sales literature (i.e., Kidwell et al., 2007).

In addition, as shown in Figure 1, this study examines the moderating effect of salesperson organizational identification (OI) on the indirect effect of EC on salesperson creativity. OI has been conceptualized as the “perception of oneness with or belongingness to an organization” (Ashforth & Mael, 1989, p. 34), and has been found to be positively and significantly correlated with key attitudinal and behavioral work outcomes (Lee et al., 2015).

According to social identity theory, OI not only refers to the knowledge a person has of their belonging to an organization but also to the emotional connection that links them to that organization (Ashforth et al., 2008). As Harquail (1998) pointed out, “individual general emotions as well as their self-specific emotions are implicated by their identification with an organization” (p. 224). In this sense, it has been suggested that identification with a group is related to the feeling of pride toward it (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). As an individual's identification with a group increases, the group's practices and values become more evident to the individual (Tajfel, 1969). Mael and Ashforth (1992) pointed out that individuals who strongly identified with their organization are more sensitive than others to the practices and social norms that prevail in it. Following this approach, this study proposes that OI acts as a moderating variable in the relationship between perceived ethical climate and creativity, which increases employees' vulnerability to positive or negative EC perceptions and amplifies the positive or negative EC effect on their feelings of pride toward an organization.

This research makes several important contributions to the marketing and sales literature. *First*, it appears that this is the first study to consider creativity as a consequence of the perception of an organization's ethical climate. In taking this approach, this work helps to answer recent research calls to explain how work

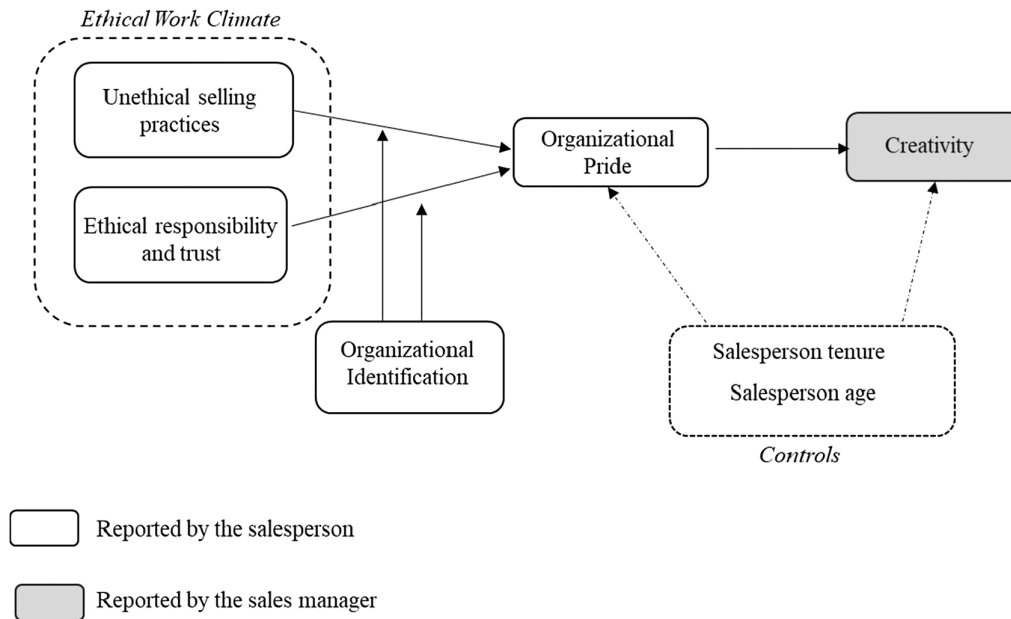


FIGURE 1 Proposed model.

climate can facilitate or inhibit innovation at an organizational level (Anderson et al., 2014) by broadening the knowledge about the effects of EC in a sales setting (Evans et al., 2012; Itani et al., 2019; Simha & Cullen, 2012). Moreover, this study expands the theoretical understanding of creativity in a sales context where it is described as “extremely important”; and according to Evans et al. (2012), it represents one of the five important but under-researched areas. *Second*, the present work highlights the effects of EC on salespeople's positive emotions (i.e., pride) and answers recent research calls to explore the facets of positive psychology in the sales management domain (Chawla et al., 2020). This research emphasizes the conditions under which this influence occurs by considering the role of individual identification with an organization as a moderating variable. *Finally*, this study expands the knowledge about the consequences of organizational pride in a sales context, and it provides insight into the influence of positive emotions on creativity. In this respect, the results so far are mixed. While some studies have reported a positive relationship between positive emotional states and creativity (e.g., Amabile et al., 2005), other studies have shown the greatest level of creativity when both negative and positive emotional states were high (e.g., George & Zhou, 2007). This work consequently aims to shed light on this relationship in the specific context of personal selling.

## 2 | THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### 2.1 | Ethical climate, pride, and creative selling

Creative selling is defined as “the generation of novel and useful ideas or solutions in a selling context” (Lussier et al., 2017, p. 171). Both novelty and usefulness are two essential aspects

of employee creativity, which is considered the first step for innovation in an organizational context (Zhou & George, 2001). In line with previous research (e.g., Zhou & George, 2001), this study focuses on creativity at the individual employee level. Individual creativity has been related to job performance and organizational effectiveness, and it contributes significantly to the development of an organization's competitive advantage (Amabile et al., 1996; Shalley & Gilson, 2004). Previous research has also highlighted creativity as a key success variable, linking creativity in the sales domain to important work and organizational outcomes such as adaptive selling, job satisfaction, sales performance, and sales organization effectiveness (Lassk & Shepherd, 2013; Martinaityte & Sacramento, 2013; Wang & Miao, 2015; Wang & Netemeyer, 2004). Regarding the drivers of individual creativity, research supports the notion that employee generation of new and useful ideas can be enhanced or reduced because of the organizational context (Anderson et al., 2014; Oldham & Cummings, 1996). For example, there is evidence that an organizational climate that supports innovation and encourages personal initiative promotes the development of creative behaviors (Baer & Frese, 2003; Jung et al., 2008).

Within an organizational context, an ethical climate refers to the “perception of what constitutes right behavior” (Martin & Cullen, 2006, p. 177). By describing the overall fairness with which people are treated, a perceived ethical climate serves as a guide for employee decisions and behaviors by setting the norms for acceptable and unacceptable behaviors (Babin et al., 2000; DeConinck, 2011; Victor & Cullen, 1988). In the last few years, the influence of EC on ethical decision making and on important attitudinal and behavioral work outcomes has been extensively documented (for a review, Friend et al., 2020; Martin & Cullen, 2006; Newman et al., 2017; Simha & Cullen, 2012).

In order to explore the relationship between EC and salesperson creativity, this research relies on Babin et al.'s (2000) conceptualization of EC, which has proved to be adequate for boundary-spanning positions. This study focuses on two EC dimensions: trust/responsibility and unethical selling practices. The trust/responsibility dimension of EC refers to how employees are held accountable for their actions as well as their degree of commitment with high moral standards. This dimension of an ethical climate has been positively related to significant work outcomes in the sales and marketing domain as sales performance (Jaramillo et al., 2015), role stress (DeConinck, 2010), and pay satisfaction (DeConinck, 2010). Regarding the unethical selling practices dimension for boundary-spanning employees, the perception of how customers are treated is an important EC component (Babin et al., 2000). This particular dimension was defined by Babin et al. (2000) as "the extent to which employees are compelled to adopt aggressive sales practices and prioritizes firm goals over customer goals" (p.351); the selling practices EC dimension has been found to decrease salesperson performance (i.e., Jaramillo et al., 2015) while being negatively related to work attitudes such as job satisfaction and commitment (Babin et al., 2000).

According to the emotion appraisal theory (Lazarus, 1991), the cognitive appraisal of a situation unleashes emotional reactions. Emotions are then considered an appraisal process outcome, which is immediate and automatic. Building on this theoretical framework, the proposed model is based on the sequence perception-emotion-behavior. This study specifically posits that the appraisal or perception of a situation (i.e., perceived EC) leads salespeople to experience positive emotions (i.e., organizational pride) and these emotional responses bring about work behaviors (i.e., creativity).

Organizational pride is a positive self-conscious emotion that employees may experience as a result of an organization's behavior or achievements (Gouthier & Rhein, 2011). According to Helm (2013), collective pride refers to the pleasure derived from belonging to an organization. In these regards there is evidence that people feel proud of organizations that demonstrate a high degree of honesty and morality (Ellemers et al., 2011, 2013). For example, Roccas et al. (2008) confirmed that group-based pride evolves from the virtuousness of a group, while Ng et al. (2019) proved in their multi-study research that perceived CSR was positively associated with employee pride in an organization.

As Babin et al. (2000) pointed out, organizational ethical climate refers to the fairness with which people are treated within an organization. From a theoretical approach of the emotions appraisal theory, this is particularly significant because there is evidence that perceived injustice can both provoke and increase the intensity of different emotions, as shown by Mikula et al. (1998). In this sense, it is expected that an ethical climate in which aggressive unethical practices are encouraged when dealing with others (specifically when forcing customers to buy products they do not need) will negatively affect an individual's sense of organizational pride.

Consequently, this study expects that a salesperson's perception of an ethical climate based on trust and responsibility will trigger a positive emotion in terms of organizational pride. In contrast, the perception of

a permissive organization in terms of aggressive and unethical selling practices that target customers will reduce the level of pride experienced by a salesperson. Thus the following hypotheses state:

**Hypothesis 1** *The trust/responsibility dimension of ethical climate is positively related to salesperson organizational pride.*

**Hypothesis 2** : *Unethical selling practices as a dimension of ethical climate is negatively related to salesperson organizational pride.*

One factor that leads individuals to engage in creative behavior is motivation, which evolves from emotions besides other aspects like skills and abilities for creative action (i.e., Ford, 1996). This motivational role of emotions has been found to be especially important in positive emotions. As Unsworth and Clegg (2010) noted "when individuals have positive emotions about their work, then they would embark on the creative process" (p. 78).

The broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions (Fredrickson, 2001) helps to explain this process and suggests that, in a given situation, positive emotions broaden an individual's array of thoughts and actions that come to mind. In the words of Fredrickson (2008, p. 2), "positive emotions momentarily broaden people's attention and thinking, enabling them to draw on higher-level connections and a wider-than-usual range of percepts or ideas." In the specific case of self-conscious emotions, Verbeke et al. (2004) demonstrated that pride possesses broadening characteristics, for example, performance-related motivations. These broadening effects encourage both creativity in thinking (Isen et al., 1987) and optimism (Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005), which have been found to be positively related to employee creativity (Rego et al., 2012). Thus, this study expects the positive emotion of pride to be positively related to a salesperson's novel and useful ideas. Based on the above discussion, the following hypothesis states:

**Hypothesis 3** *Salesperson organizational pride is positively related to salesperson creativity.*

Taking into consideration the sequence perception-emotion-behavior described above, this study expects that the perception of an EC based on trust and responsibility will lead salespeople to experience greater organizational pride, which will subsequently increase their likelihood of being creative in the sales workplace. On the other hand, an EC characterized by promoting aggressive and unethical sales practices will lessen a salesperson's sense of pride, thus reducing their creativity. The following mediating hypotheses are therefore proposed:

**Hypothesis 4** *The trust/responsibility dimension of ethical climate is positively related to salesperson creativity by increasing salesperson organizational pride.*

**Hypothesis 5** : *Unethical selling practices as a dimension of ethical climate is negatively related to salesperson creativity by reducing salesperson organizational pride.*

## 2.2 | The moderating effect of organizational identification

According to social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978), people imagine themselves in various situations, not as independent individuals but as belonging to organizations. In fact group membership provides individuals with normative guidelines that help them define who they are and how they should behave (Ellemers et al., 2013). The construct of organizational identification (OI) emerges from social identity theory as the experience of oneness with the organization (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Recent meta-analytic reviews (i.e., Lee et al., 2015) confirm that organizational identification is positively related to many desirable outcomes in terms of workplace attitudes and behaviors.

One reason why people identify with organizations is that this identification contributes to the fulfillment of individual needs such as safety or uncertainty reduction (Pratt, 1998). Consequently, individuals with a high level of organizational identification perceive organizational actions as important. Given that individuals experience emotions to a greater extent when they perceive events to be important to their own needs (Lazarus, 1991), researchers have suggested that high organizational identifiers are more likely to experience emotions than low identifiers (Conroy et al., 2017). This approach was confirmed by Chi et al. (2015) who found that highly identified employees experienced greater shame when an organization made mistakes or performed bad actions. Similarly, when Tyler and Blader (2003) developed their group engagement model, they highlighted risks associated with strong group identification, making members more vulnerable—especially to negative organizational information.

In line with this approach, this study expects high identifiers to experience greater emotion (organizational pride) derived from an ethical climate based on trust and responsibility, which implies further development of creative selling. On the other hand, in the case of a negative ethical climate in terms of aggressive and unethical selling practices, this study expects the impact on pride to be stronger (more negative) as identification with an organization increases, which also influences creativity more negatively. Based on this discussion, the following hypotheses are stated:

**Hypothesis 6a** *Salesperson identification with an organization increases the positive indirect effect of the trust/responsibility dimension of ethical climate on creativity.*

**Hypothesis 6b** *Salesperson identification with an organization increases the negative indirect effect of the unethical selling practices dimension of ethical climate on creativity.*

## 3 | METHODOLOGY

### 3.1 | Context

The selection of the sample was based on two fundamental criteria: (1) the selected companies had to have either implemented a CSR strategy or conducted a CSR activity, and (2) the company had to

employ salespeople. However, there is no database of all the companies that conduct CSR. To overcome this issue, it was necessary to consult the available data provided by certain associations and entities. This data showed companies that were either socially responsible or that were ranked highly for their CSR involvement.

Overall, 227 Spanish companies met the eligibility criteria and were subsequently contacted by the study researchers; however only 96 of them participated in the survey. These firms were from ten activity sectors, including financial service (51.14%), insurance, (23.86%), food and beverage (11.93%), automotive (5.68%), pharmaceutical (3.41%), retail (1.14%), electrical (0.57%), cleaning (0.57%), consultancy (0.57%), wholesale trade of motor vehicle parts and accessories (0.57%)."

Although the data were mostly collected in a business-to-consumer (B2C) context, we believe that our findings can be extended to other sales situations. It has been suggested that it would be useful to examine professional retail salespeople's sales interactions because they are similar to other salespeople (Williams & Spiro, 1985). In fact, as Holmes et al. (2017) noted, since current consumers are substantially well informed, the negotiating context of B2C sales is very similar to that of business-to-business (B2B) sales. The literature indicates that isolating pure B2B or pure B2C research in business is difficult (Dant & Brown, 2008) and that the difference between retail and B2B salespeople is not large (Sharma et al., 2007).

### 3.2 | Procedures

Firstly, the researchers telephoned and/or emailed all the eligible companies' sales managers or, if applicable, those who were responsible for their companies' corporate social responsibility. Secondly, the study's objectives were explained in detail to those in charge of each company that agreed to participate in the survey. Thirdly, each company's contact person distributed the questionnaires among the supervisor–salesperson pairs, informed the respondents that their participation was voluntary and that the collected information would be kept confidential. This was done to try to improve the respondents' frankness and to reduce their apprehension about assessment. These attributes were also referred to in the questionnaire, and data were obtained from all the participants.

The respondents had the option of completing the survey in person or online. Most completed the personal survey (68.18%), and a smaller percentage of the respondents (31.82%) opted to complete the online survey due to time and convenience reasons.

### 3.3 | Sample

A total of 246 matched supervisor–subordinate surveys were returned to the researchers. After discarding 70 surveys with missing data, 176 dyadic responses were coded for analysis. The sample was composed of a total of 105 supervisors and 176 salespeople, this means a ratio of almost 1:1. Of the salespeople, 55.1% were female and 44.9% were male. The mean age of the salespeople

TABLE 1 Means, standard deviations, and correlations

Variable	Mean	S.D.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. EC Trust/responsibility	5.51	1.03	(0.81)						
2. EC Unethical selling	4.46	1.57	-0.24**	(0.80)					
3. Organizational pride	5.84	1.18	0.52**	-0.23**	(0.93)				
4. OI	5.45	1.18	0.48**	-0.15*	0.77**	(0.86)			
5. Creativity	4.98	1.29	0.06	-0.07	0.16*	0.11	(0.97)		
6. Salesperson age	41.13	8.73	-0.03	0.01	0.03	0.14	-0.29**	-	
7. Salesperson tenure	9.98	8.8	-0.09	0.20**	-0.04	0.03	-0.13	0.54**	-

Note: Alphas appear diagonally.

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

was 41 years. Moreover, the average age of the female salespeople was 39.5 years, while the average age of the male salespeople was 43.1 years. The sample of supervisors included 32.4% females (with an average age of 40.5 years) and 67.6% males (with an average age of 44.3 years). The mean age of the supervisors was 43 years.

### 3.4 | Measures

The constructs were assessed using seven-point Likert scales (1 = totally disagree; 7 = totally agree) adapted from previous research. Except for salesperson creativity, which was measured with information provided by the supervisor, the remaining variables were measured with information from the salesperson.

*Salesperson creativity* was measured using the 13-items scale developed by Zhou and George (2001). Cronbach alpha and composite reliability were both 0.97. The sample items were: "Comes up with new and practical ideas to improve performance," "Suggests new ways to achieve goals or objectives" and "Searches out new technologies, processes, techniques, and/or product ideas."

*Organizational pride* was measured using 3-items adapted from Helm's (2013) measure of collective pride emotion. Cronbach alpha and composite reliability were both 0.93. The sample items were: "I am proud to be part of my company" and "I am proud when others associate me with my company."

*Ethical climate* was measured using the Babin et al. (2000) scale. The trust/responsibility dimension was measured using the 3-items scale and the unethical selling practices dimension was assessed using the 3-items scale. Cronbach alpha was, respectively, 0.81 and 0.80. The sample items for the trust dimension included: "All employees here are held accountable for their actions" and "Employees here are truly committed to high moral standards in their treatment of others." The sample items for the unethical selling practices dimension were: "Customers here are sometimes encouraged to buy something they might not truly need" and "Employees here are highly encouraged to 'up-sell' customers." Composite reliability was 0.6 for both dimensions.

Finally, *organizational identification* was measured using the 5-items scale adapted from DeConinck et al. (2013) based on the

Mael and Ashforth's (1992) scale. The sample items included: "When someone criticizes my company, it feels like a personal insult" and "When I talk about this company, I usually say 'we' rather than 'they'." Cronbach alpha for this scale was 0.86 and composite reliability was 0.92. In line with prior research in this area (e.g., Groza et al., 2016), the salespeople's age and organizational tenure were introduced in the analysis as control variables.

## 4 | RESULTS

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, and correlations of all the variables. A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was used to assess the latent variables' properties (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). The proposed model showed an acceptable fit to the data ( $\chi^2 = 484.36$ ;  $df = 303$ ;  $p < .01$ ;  $\chi^2/df = 1.59$ ; RMSEA = 0.05; TLI = 0.95; CFI = 0.96; IFI = 0.96). All factor loadings were substantial (factor loadings were greater than 0.65 in all cases) and significant and support the scales' convergent validity (see Table 2). This study followed the Voorhees et al. (2016) recommendation and used the heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) method combined with the average variance extracted-shared variance (AVE-SV) comparison (Fornell & Larcker, 1981) to assess discriminant validity when using multi-item measures in marketing. The results shown in Table 3 indicate that the values of AVE were higher than the squared interconstruct correlations, confirming the discriminant validity of the constructs; the HTMT ratio method was also used. The results show that the estimates of the constructs were less than 0.90 (Henseler et al., 2015). Thus, discriminant validity was also assumed. In addition, we used variance inflation factor (VIF), defined as  $VIF = 1/(1-R^2)$ , to test for multicollinearity. The variance inflation factors ranged from 1.08 to 2.40, providing evidence that there was not a problem related to multicollinearity (Hair et al., 2010).

Once the scales' convergent validity and the discriminant validity between the constructs were confirmed, a mediation analysis and a conditional process (i.e., moderated mediation) analysis, using Hayes' (2018) PROCESS macro (models 4 and 7) to test the proposed hypotheses, were conducted (results are given in Tables 4 and 5). The salespeople's age and organizational tenure were included as control variables, and the models for both EC dimensions were run.

TABLE 2 Measurement of study constructs

Constructs and items	Loadings	$\alpha$	C.R.	AVE
<i>Ethical responsibility and trust</i>				
All employees here are held accountable for their actions	0.74	0.81	0.81	0.60
Employees here act first to further their customers' interest	0.83			
Employees here are truly committed to high moral standards in their treatment of other	0.75			
<i>Unethical selling practices</i>				
Employees here are encouraged highly to "up-sell" customers	0.68	0.80	0.81	0.60
Employees here are required to be very aggressive in making "suggested sales" or selling "add-ons"	0.92			
Customers here are sometimes encouraged to buy something they might not truly need	0.70			
<i>Organizational identification</i>				
When someone criticizes your company, it feels like a personal insult	0.83	0.86	0.92	0.70
I am very interested in what others think about my company	0.76			
When I talk about this company, I usually say "we" rather than "they"	0.85			
This company's successes are my successes	0.84			
When someone praises this company, it feels like a personal compliment	0.91			
<i>Organizational pride</i>				
I feel proud to work for my company	0.92	0.93	0.93	0.83
I feel proud to contribute to my company's success	0.87			
I feel proud to tell others for which company I am working	0.93			
<i>Creativity</i>				
Suggests new ways to achieve goals or objectives	0.87	0.97	0.97	0.72
Comes up with new and practical ideas to improve performance	0.87			
Searches out new technologies, processes, techniques, and/or product ideas	0.85			
Suggests new ways to increase quality	0.83			
Is a good source of creative ideas	0.86			
Is not afraid to take risks	0.68			
Promotes and champions ideas to others	0.69			
Exhibits creativity on the job when given the opportunity to	0.88			
<i>Develops adequate plans and schedules for the implementation of new ideas</i>				
Often has new and innovative ideas	0.92			
Comes up with creative solutions to problems	0.91			
Often has a fresh approach to problems	0.89			
Suggests new ways of performing work tasks	0.91			

The analysis' results using Ordinary Least Squares show that the trust/responsibility dimension of ethical climate is positively related to salespeople's organizational pride ( $\beta = 0.60$ ;  $SE = 0.07$ ;  $p < .001$ ), thus confirming hypothesis 1. The unethical selling practices dimension of ethical climate is negatively related to salesperson organizational pride ( $\beta = -0.17$ ;  $SE = 0.06$ ;  $p < .01$ ), thus providing support for hypothesis 2. As predicted, organizational pride is positively related to salesperson creativity when considering the ethical trust/responsibility dimension as the model's independent variable and when running the model with the unethical selling practices dimension ( $\beta_{(EC_{trust})} = 0.21$ ;  $SE = 0.09$ ;  $p < .05$ ;  $\beta_{(EC_{selling})} = 0.18$ ;  $SE = 0.08$ ;  $p < .05$ ), thus confirming hypothesis 3.

Regarding the mediating effects, the indirect effect of the unethical selling practices dimension of ethical climate on creativity

through organizational pride is found to be negative and can be discarded as null, taking into consideration that the bootstrap 95% confidence intervals do not include zero (Effect =  $-0.03$ ; BootSE =  $0.02$ ; BootLLCI =  $-0.08$ ; BootULCI =  $-0.003$ ). Similarly, as predicted, the indirect effect of the trust/responsibility dimension of ethical climate on salesperson creativity is positive and can be discarded as null (Effect =  $0.13$ ; BootSE =  $0.06$ ; BootLLCI =  $0.03$ ; BootULCI =  $0.25$ ). Thus, hypotheses 4 and 5 are supported. The results also show that organizational identification moderates the relationship between unethical selling practices and salesperson organizational pride, as evidenced by the statistically significant coefficient of the interaction between unethical selling practices and organizational identification ( $\beta = -0.06$ ;  $SE = 0.03$ ;  $p < .05$ ). As identification with an organization increases, the negative ethical climate effect on pride is stronger (more negative).

Table 6 includes both the indirect conditional effects of unethical selling practices on salesperson creativity for several values of OI and the bootstrap confidence intervals for these effects. Given that the confidence intervals were negative and did not include zero for the 50th, 75th, and 90th percentiles in the organizational identification scale, hypothesis 6a was supported. As predicted, when organizational identification increases, the negative effect of a salesperson's perception of unethical selling practices on creativity also increases. The interaction is also plotted in Figure 2. As expected, the relationship between the unethical selling dimension of ethical

climate and organizational pride is more negative for individuals who are high in OI than for individuals who are low in OI.

As given in Table 5 and contrary to expectations, the relationship between the trust/responsibility dimension of ethical climate and pride is not contingent on salesperson organizational identification, as evidenced by the non-statistically significant coefficient for the interaction between EC trust/responsibility and organizational identification ( $\beta = -0.04$ ;  $SE = 0.04$ ;  $p = .32$ ).

## 5 | DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

### 5.1 | Theoretical contributions

Although, from a practitioner's point of view, the sales literature stresses the need to develop creative, innovative and problem-oriented sales practices (Wang & Netemeyer, 2004), conceptual or empirical literature on salesperson creativity is so far very scarce (Pullins et al., 2012). Moreover, and specifically, research on understanding why employees engage in creativity is still in its infancy (Ahmad et al., 2022). Our study contributes to partially fill this research gap by examining the underlying mechanism that encourages salespeople to be creative at the workplace, which is found to be particularly important for organizational success (Ahmad et al., 2022; Miao & Cao, 2019).

Thus, this research significantly advances the literature on sales management in three important ways. First, it appears that this is the first study to explore how and when ethical climate shapes salesperson creativity. In this respect, recent systematic reviews (i.e., Newman et al., 2017) have noted that "many studies have failed to integrate theory to explain how ethical climates shape work outcomes and when ethical climates are more likely to influence such

TABLE 3 Test for discriminant validity

	EC trust	EC selling	Pride	OI	Creativity
<i>Fornell &amp; larker criteria<sup>a</sup></i>					
EC Trust	<b>0.60</b>				
EC Selling	0.05	<b>0.60</b>			
Pride	0.27	0.05	<b>0.83</b>		
OI	0.23	0.02	0.59	<b>0.70</b>	
Creativity	0.00	0.00	0.02	0.01	<b>0.72</b>
<i>HTMT criteria<sup>b</sup></i>					
EC Trust	-				
EC Selling	0.29	-			
Pride	0.59	0.25	-		
OI	0.58	0.24	0.87	-	
Creativity	0.07	0.08	0.16	0.11	-

<sup>a</sup>AVE is shown in the diagonal (bold values) and squared interconstruct correlations below the diagonal.

<sup>b</sup>HTMT discriminate at HTMT<0.9.

TABLE 4 Model coefficients for the mediation analysis

	Consequences						
	M(pride)			Y(creativity)			
Antecedents	Coeff.	SE	<i>p</i>	Coeff.	SE	<i>p</i>	
Constant	2.16	0.57	<.001	5.97	0.72	<.001	
EC trust/responsibility	0.60	0.07	<.001	-0.06	0.11	.60	
Organizational pride	-	-	-	0.21	0.09	<.05	
Salesperson age	0.01	0.01	.32	-0.05	0.01	<.001	
Salesperson tenure	-0.01	0.01	.32	0.01	0.01	.54	
	$R^2 = 0.27, F(3,172) = 21.76, p < .001$			$R^2 = 0.12, F(4,171) = 5.57, p < .001$			
	M(Pride)			Y(Creativity)			
Antecedents	Coeff.	SE	<i>p</i>	Coeff.	SE	<i>p</i>	
Constant	6.35	0.53	<.001	6.04	0.76	<.001	
EC unethical selling	-0.17	0.06	<.01	-0.04	0.06	.57	
Organizational pride	-	-	-	0.18	0.08	.03	
Salesperson age	0.01	0.01	.56	-0.05	0.01	<.001	
Salesperson tenure	-0.00	0.01	.79	0.01	0.01	.45	
	$R^2 = 0.05, F(3,172) = 3.36, p = .02$			$R^2 = 0.12, F(4,171) = 5.59, p < .001$			



TABLE 5 Model coefficients for the conditional process analysis

	Consequences					
	M(pride)			Y(creativity)		
Antecedents	Coeff.	SE	p	Coeff.	SE	p
Constant	6.10	0.28	<.001	5.66	0.69	<.001
EC trust/responsibility	0.21	0.06	<.001	-0.05	0.10	.59
Organizational identification	0.68	0.05	<.001	-	-	-
Organizational pride	-	-	-	0.21	0.09	<.05
EC trust/responsibility x Organizational identification	-0.04	0.04	.32	-	-	-
Salesperson age	-0.004	0.007	.53	-0.04	0.01	<.001
Salesperson tenure	-0.003	0.007	.63	0.007	0.01	.54
	$R^2 = 0.63, F(5,170) = 58.50, p < .001$			$R^2 = 0.11, F(4,171) = 5.57, p < .001$		
	M(Pride)			Y(Creativity)		
Antecedents	Coeff.	SE	p	Coeff.	SE	p
Constant	6.22	0.28	<.001	5.87	0.65	<.001
EC unethical selling	-0.09	0.03	<.05	-0.03	0.06	.56
Organizational identification	0.81	0.05	<.001	-	-	-
Organizational pride	-	-	-	0.17	0.08	<.05
EC unethical selling x Organizational identification	-0.06	0.03	<.05	-	-	-
Salesperson age	-0.01	0.007	.23	-0.04	0.01	<.001
Salesperson tenure	-0.001	0.007	.86	-0.001	0.01	.45
	$R^2 = 0.62, F(5,170) = 56.75, p < .001$			$R^2 = 0.11, F(4,171) = 5.58, p < .001$		

TABLE 6 Conditional indirect effects of unethical selling practices on creativity through organizational pride at values of organizational identification

Identification <sup>a</sup>	Indirect effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
3.80	0.00	0.02	-0.03	0.039
5.00	-0.01	0.01	-0.04	0.004
5.80	-0.02	0.01	-0.05	-0.003
6.20	-0.02	0.01	-0.05	-0.004
6.80	-0.03	0.01	-0.07	-0.006

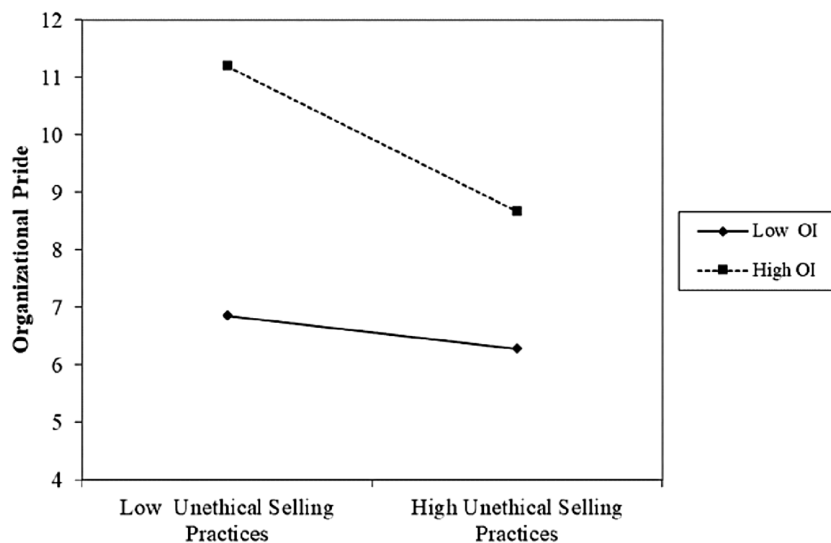
Bold values: Significant indirect effects.

<sup>a</sup>Values are for the 10th, 25th, 50th, 75th, and 90th percentiles.

outcomes" (Newman et al., 2017, p. 496). By testing a moderated mediation model to assess the link between perceived EC and salesperson creativity, this study mitigates the limitations within the existing EC literature. Moreover, in coherence with recent studies which confirm that creating an environment of trust is essential to facilitate creativity (Royston & Reiter-Palmon, 2022), the study findings confirm that an ethical climate based on respect and trust is positively related to salespeople's creative behaviors. This is in line with previous findings on the positive although complex relationship between ethical/responsible leadership and employee creativity (Castro-González et al., 2019; Feng et al., 2018).

However, an organizational climate that encourages aggressive and unethical selling practices leads to salespeople experiencing less organizational pride and, consequently, being less eager to demonstrate creative behaviors. These findings shed light on the existing literature debate regarding the relationship between creativity and ethics. In fact, recent studies (i.e., Storme et al., 2020) have reported a weak positive correlation between creativity and unethicality while emphasizing the need to examine the underlying processes between creativity and ethics.

Second, this study enhances the knowledge about the role of positive emotions in the workplace, especially in the sales domain. As Friend et al. (2016) identified, the effects of positive psychological variables "are largely absent from the sales literature" (p. 2) despite the relevant and potential applications of a positive approach to sales. Moreover, this study confirms that a positive ethical climate increases salespeople's organizational pride, which has important implications since pride "gives employees many psychological rewards, thereby strengthening the psychological bond between employees and employers" (Ng et al., 2019, p. 122). In this sense, recent studies confirm that organizational pride significantly impacts employees task performance and organizational citizenship behaviors (Sturm et al., 2022). The study findings are also consistent with previous research in proving that positive emotions derive from the experience of fair treatment and from seeing how other people are also treated fairly (De Cremer & Van Hiel, 2006; Edwards & Kudret, 2017).



**FIGURE 2** Interactive effects of unethical selling practices and OI on organizational pride.

This study also adds to the literature by demonstrating that organizational pride is an important driver of salesperson creativity. This result adds to previous studies, which highlight the role of positive emotional states on improving creativity in an organizational context (i.e., Gouthier & Rhein, 2011) and a sales context (i.e., Lyngdoh et al., 2018; Rego et al., 2012). Moreover, by focusing on the broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 2001), the study agrees with Lyngdon et al.'s (2018) suggestion about the advantage of this theoretical approach to comprehend how salespeople develop their creativity and how useful it is when examining the influence of various positive emotions on broadening salespeople's skills and abilities.

Finally, this study supports the moderating role of organizational identification regarding the influence of ethical climate on creativity. In line with previous studies on negative emotions (i.e., Chi et al., 2015), this study concludes that salespeople who identify more strongly with their organization are the most susceptible to unethical selling practices influencing their individual work behaviors. These findings are consistent with previous studies (i.e., Brockner et al., 1992) which stressed the idea of the vulnerability of an individual who is significantly linked to an organization because they may be psychologically affected in a negative way if the organization also acts reprehensibly. That same idea was suggested by Evans and Davis (2014) who indicated that identification with an organization amplifies the reaction of employees to workplace deviance. In addition, Huang and Lin (2019) tested this moderating influence of OI and confirmed that employees with a lower perception of belonging to an organization were also more insensitive toward workplace incivility. Similarly, in a scenario where an organization acts unfairly, it was found that employees with the strongest ties to an organization were the most disconcerted and showed the most negative reactions (Brockner et al., 1992).

These results contrast with the mainstream research in the literature that highlights the positive role of organizational identification in the work domain (Riketta, 2005). However, these results align with recent research, which confirms that the influence of

organizational identification on employee behavior, particularly among salespeople, is not always positive (Lyngdon et al., 2018). In line with Conroy et al.'s (2017) extensive review on the detrimental outcomes of organizational identification, this study's findings support for the existence of a dark side of psychological attachment to an organization. In fact, although some studies suggest that a highly identified individual will be more willing to support unethical behaviors (i.e., Dukerich Janet et al., 1998), this study's results provide evidence that the opposite happens. The overlap between an employee's identity and an organization's identity triggers salespeople's emotional response to unethical selling practices. Taking into consideration the results of the technique for probing the interaction effect, when identification is low, the relationship between negative ethical climate and organizational pride is not significant. These results are coherent with the notion that when a psychological connection between a company and an employee is damaged, the employee is indifferent to the organization's misfortune (Zhao et al., 2019).

Contrary to expectations, organizational identification does not moderate the relationship between positive ethical climate and organizational pride, which indicates that the influence of an ethical climate based on trust and responsibility on creativity is not conditioned by a salesperson's identification with an organization. These results are consistent with the notion that highly identified individuals are more influenced by negative than positive organizational events; they are more likely to experience negative emotions to a greater extent than positive emotions (Conroy et al., 2017).

## 5.2 | Managerial implications

This study's findings also have important managerial implications. The highly competitive and turbulent sales environment can elicit unethical selling practices, which affect almost 40% of salespeople, according to recent reports (Lyngdoh et al., 2018). The notable importance

of business ethics has been identified as one of the emerging dimensions of the recent transformation of personal selling (Cuevas, 2018). In fact, having high ethical and integrity standards are future sales competency requirements. In addition, sales positions require a considerable amount of salesperson creativity. In a marketplace where change is constant, creativity emerges as a key factor leading to sales performance (Evans et al., 2012; Groza et al., 2016; Lassk & Shepherd, 2013; Ratchford, 2020). Moreover, innovation takes place only in the presence of creativity (Kremer et al., 2019). Consequently, creativity should be fostered in the sales force and this study provides some cues to achieve this objective. The study findings reveal that creativity stems from a salesperson's perception of an ethical climate, and that the influence mechanism is of an emotional nature. In this sense, the role of leaders in staging contexts that trigger creativity is widely assumed in the organizational literature (e.g., Kremer et al., 2019). Moreover, ethical leadership has been confirmed as a "proximal ethical climate predictor" (Gong & Wang, 2022, p. 383). Thus, in order to foster creativity among their employees, sales organizations would benefit from either recruiting ethical leaders or training them on "communicating the importance of ethics, rewording and supporting employees who behave ethically, and serving as ethical role models" (Mayer et al., 2010, p. 13).

Moreover, sales managers can implement specific training and mentoring programs to help salespeople understand what ethical behaviors they should be engaging in and what constitutes a fair treatment of customers (Albizu et al., 2019; Apraiz & De Antonio, 2020; Hyatt & Prawitt, 2001). Managers' efforts to create an EC should focus especially on less experienced salespeople, as recent meta-analytic studies conclude that less experienced boundary spanners show a weaker relationship between EC and work outcomes (Friend et al., 2020). By doing so, they will help to enhance not only their employees' creativity but also their sense of corporate pride. Taking into consideration that organizational pride is an important determinant of employee turnover intentions (e.g., Kraemer & Gouthier, 2014), these findings shed light on the advantages of establishing a strong EC, particularly for sales organizations that suffer from an annual turnover rate of 20%, raising up to 34% by including salespeople voluntary and involuntary turnover (Bridge Group Report, 2015).

### 5.3 | Limitations and future research directions

Despite its contributions, this study is not without limitations; for example, the data are cross-sectional, thus the findings should be interpreted cautiously. Moreover, the surveys conducted did not take into account the gender nonbinary option, which constitutes a limitation of our study and an aspect to be considered in future research. In addition, the model was tested in Spanish firms; therefore, future replications in different cultural contexts will increase the external validity of these findings. In this regard, a recent meta-analysis (i.e., Friend et al., 2020) concluded that country-level individualism increases the effects of ethical climate on important work outcomes.

The present study has also focused on EC at a meso-level (i.e., the organization where a salesperson works); however, recent research has noted that salespeople, due to the specific characteristics of their positions as boundary spanners, may be more influenced by industry-level ethical codes than by their own organization's ethical standards (Kadic-Maglajlic et al., 2019). Future research could thus examine the effects of EC on creativity and the underlying processes at a macro-level, that is, the impact of industry-wide ethical norms could be considered.

Besides overcoming these limitations, the study findings open additional avenues for future research. It would be interesting to consider other self-conscious emotions, such as shame or guilt, as well as other positive emotions, such as joy, within an organizational context (Baas, 2019). It has indeed been noted that joy may be positively related to creativity. Studying the underlying process could also benefit from combining quantitative research with experimental design studies (Ratchford, 2020). In addition, regarding ethical climate, recent studies have suggested the existence of sales-specific subcultures (Ferrell et al., 2019). It would be interesting to analyze the relationship between these sales subcultures and sales creativity and also consider an emotional approach. Future studies could examine how creativity is used to pursue unethical goals, that is, malevolent creativity (Cropley et al., 2008). In this regard, research has suggested that malevolent creativity can be elicited by contexts perceived as unethical (Clark & James, 1999).

## 6 | CONCLUSIONS

Creativity is an essential element of selling, which is particularly relevant in highly competitive and uncertain environments (Jiménez-Jiménez & Sanz-Valle, 2011). For boundary spanners such as salespeople, creativity expands problem-solving behaviors and increases objective performance (Agnihotri et al., 2014). Drawing on the emotion appraisal theory (Lazarus, 1991) and the broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions (Fredrickson, 2001), this study provides evidence that ethics is a significant driver of creativity. The study results support predictions that an ethical climate based on trust and responsibility has a positive influence on salesperson creativity, which confirms the role of organizational pride in explaining *how* this effect occurs. Moreover, the findings also support the negative relationship between an organizational climate that promotes unethical selling practices and salesperson creativity via a reduced sense of organizational pride. Interestingly the findings provide evidence that the indirect relationship between unethical selling practices and salesperson creativity is contingent on salesperson organizational identification, which sheds light on when this effect occurs.

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### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors have declared no conflicts of interest for this article.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

## ETHICS STATEMENT

Data collection procedure was developed with rigor and integrity. The companies were assured that the data obtained would be processed in an aggregated and anonymous form and would be used only for academic purposes. The contact person in each company, in charge of distributing the questionnaires among the supervisor-salesperson pairs, informed the respondents that their participation was voluntary and anonymous. These attributes were also referred to in the questionnaire itself.

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