

## **Organizational Drivers of Customer-Oriented Selling**

**Abstract:** Customer oriented selling (COS) is one of the most important concepts in the sales literature. However, research on organizational drivers of COS is scarce. We develop and test, on a sample of 326 managers, a model of organizational drivers of COS and also analyze their impact on salespeople's selling orientation (SO). Finally, we evaluate the impact of COS and SO on superior value creation for the customer. Most of the hypotheses in our study had never been tested. We incorporate drivers representing different facets of the organizational environment, i.e. a firm's culture, strategy, structure and managerial processes.

**Keywords:** customer oriented selling; organizational environment; empirical study; selling orientation.

**Track:** Sales Management and Personal selling

## **Organizational Drivers of Customer-Oriented Selling**

Despite the many studies on Customer-Oriented Selling (COS), some relevant knowledge gaps still have to be filled. First, Saxe and Weitz (1982) pointed out that COS is a learned behaviour that can be influenced by environmental factors, but the vast majority of published articles focused on individual-level antecedents of COS, like personal characteristics (gender, age, etc.), personality traits and job satisfaction. Schwenker (2003) noted that only 7 empirical studies investigated organizational drivers of COS. Hence, the first goal of our study is to design and test a model incorporating potential organizational drivers of COS. Second, the impact of COS on performance is still unclear. In fact, two recent meta-analyses came to different conclusions. Jaramillo *et al.* (2007) concluded that COS is an important predictor of salesperson job performance and found that the use of subjective or objective performance measures does not significantly affect such a relationship. In contrast, Franke and Park (2006) found that COS increases only self-reported performance, whereas the relationship with manager-rated and objective measures of performance is not significant. Therefore, a second goal of our study is to test the relationship between COS and superior customer value creation using managers as key informants. A third limitation in the extant literature is that the SOCO scale (Saxe and Weitz, 1982) incorporates two sub-scales, i.e. selling orientation and customer orientation, but unfortunately, as pointed out by Jaramillo *et al.* (2007, p. 307), “an insufficient number of studies are available that utilized the SO and CO separately”.

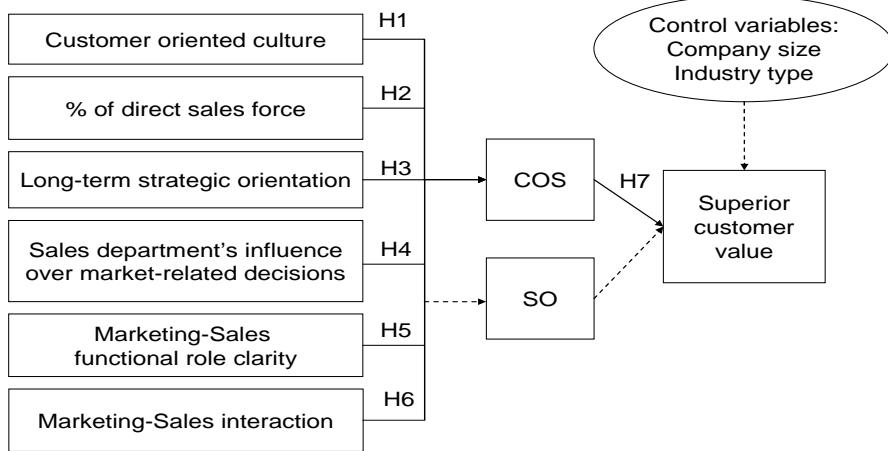
Importantly, although customer and selling orientation have been typically interpreted as distinct constructs, rather than as polar opposites in the same continuum (e.g. Thomas, Soutar and Ryan, 2001; Brown *et al.*, 2002; Harris, Mowen and Brown, 2005), the few studies which analyzed both constructs developed and tested opposite hypotheses in terms of the sign of the relationship between each sub-dimension of SOCO and selected antecedents and consequences (Goff *et al.*, 1997; Boles *et al.*, 2001; Wachner, Plouffe and Grégoire, 2008). Hence, a third goal of our study is to develop a set of hypotheses only on antecedents and consequences of COS, but empirically test the same relationships on salespeople SO to shed more light on the link between the two dimensions of the SOCO scale. A fourth goal of our study is to contribute to expanding knowledge on SOCO, its antecedents and consequences outside the US, since very few studies have been run outside the US, and Herche, Swenson and Verbeke (1996) raised concern about the possibility of using the SOCO scale in other countries. This paper is organized as follows. First, we will introduce our conceptual model and develop the hypotheses to be tested. We will then describe our research method. After discussing the results of our analysis, we will point out the contributions of our study. Finally, we will provide guidelines for future research.

### **CONCEPTUAL MODEL AND HYPOTHESES**

The few studies which investigated organizational drivers of COS mainly focused on soft variables like corporate culture (e.g. Siguaw, Brown and Widing, 1994) and climate (e.g. Kelley, 1992; Schwenker and Good, 2004). Figure 1 shows our model.

We incorporated variables which refer to different facets of the organizational environment, i.e. a firm's culture, strategy, structure and managerial processes. In fact, corporate customer orientation belongs to company culture, long-term orientation is a facet of the company's strategy, the sales force type, the sales department's influence over market-related decisions and the functional role clarity are aspects of the firm's organization structure and the use of integration mechanisms between Marketing and Sales departments is a manifestation of managerial processes (Dewsnap and Jobber, 2000; Leenders and Wierenga, 2002). We now introduce the organizational factors and develop hypotheses concerning their impact on COS.

**Figure 1: Conceptual model**



(Dotted lines show tested relationships for which no specific hypothesis was developed)

A company's customer-oriented culture shapes organizational members' behaviours by developing and disseminating shared values and behavioural norms that put customers' interest first. Some studies found that a customer-oriented culture positively affects salespeople's COS (e.g. Flaherty, Dahlstrom and Skinner, 1999; Cross *et al.*, 2007). Customer-oriented companies may hire customer-oriented people, reward customer-oriented behaviours and focus sales training on customer orientation at the level of both the supervisors and the salespeople. Based on social learning theory, some researchers have argued that companies with a strong customer orientation typically have customer-oriented leaders who can act as role models to inspire salespeople's customer-oriented behaviours (Stock and Hoyer, 2002). Hence:

*H1: A company's customer-oriented culture is positively related to salespeople's COS*  
 Dishman (1996) and Schwenker (2003) conceptually argued that a direct sales force should show a higher degree of customer orientation, whereas selling orientation may be preferred by independent sales representatives, since they are mainly paid on straight commission.

Widmier (2002) found that the percentage of annual compensation resulting from sales volume incentives like commissions was significantly and negatively related to salespeople's customer orientation. Literature on sales force control systems suggests that using a direct sales force allows for greater control of salespeople, which facilitates their customer orientation and the implementation of value-creating relational strategies (e.g. Cravens *et al.*, 1993). Anderson and Oliver (1987) postulated that a behaviour-based sales control system should foster COS, because salespeople will be allowed to develop specific skills without being forced to sacrifice long-term for immediate results. Hence:

*H2: The use of a direct sales force is positively related to salespeople's COS.*  
 The Sales unit is often primarily focused on tactical, short-term objectives and activities (e.g. Homburg and Jensen, 2007; Strahle, Spiro and Acito, 1996). Therefore, salespeople usually need to be stimulated to adopt COS, which typically implies taking a long-term perspective in customer management (Saxe and Weitz, 1982). Because a customer-oriented salesperson would defer short-term returns for long-term ones, salespeople will more probably engage in COS when their company's strategy focuses on the long term (Langerak, 2001, p. 231).

Williams and Weiner (1990) report a positive association between relationship selling strategy and COS. Hence:

*H3: The adoption of a long-term strategic orientation is positively related to salespeople's COS.*

Following Krohmer, Homburg and Workman (2002), we define functional influence as the degree of decision-making power of a functional unit over market-related decisions. A high level of the Sales department's influence over market-related decisions should increase salespeople's job autonomy and empowerment, which have been found to be positively associated with COS (e.g. Martin and Bush, 2006). In fact, empowerment increases salespeople's initiative, flexibility, creative thinking and authority (Thomas and Velthouse, 1990; Bowen and Lawler, 1992), which foster their willingness and ability to solve customer problems, provide solutions and adapt to changing customer needs. Therefore, we hypothesize:

*H4: The Sales department's influence over market-related decisions is positively related to salespeople's COS.*

Since Marketing and Sales perform interrelated tasks, which may lead to overlapping activities, confusion and uncertainty about who is required to do what, when the definition of roles, goals and responsibilities of the two units is not clear-cut, salespeople will experience role ambiguity. Cespedes (1993) argued that a lack of functional clarity leads to dysfunctional conflict between the two functions, and, in turn, to inefficiency and limited effectiveness of decision making. Matthysse and Johnston (2006) reported that a lack of clarity about Marketing and Sales responsibilities and roles reduces decisional efficiency by fostering late execution or repetition of certain activities. A poor definition of the goals, roles and responsibilities of the two functions leads to inconsistencies between marketing strategies, sales management processes and sales force activities (Evans and Schlacter, 1985; Colletti and Chonko, 1997). As a consequence, a company's ability to be customer-oriented will suffer. We argue that a lack of clarity about Marketing and Sales departments' roles and responsibilities will also increase salespeople's uncertainty about their role and tasks, which in turn will decrease salespeople's ability and willingness to engage in COS. Therefore, role clarity is needed to stimulate COS. Hence:

*H5: Marketing and Sales functional role clarity is positively related to salespeople's COS*  
There are often inconsistencies between marketing strategies, sales management processes and sales force activities (e.g. Viswanathan and Olson, 1992; Slater and Olson, 2000; Cross *et al.*, 2001). Dewsnap and Jobber (2002) advocate that, when members of the two functions meet regularly, exchange information and develop a mutual understanding, the chance to achieve the objectives set for market-related decisions is increased. Therefore, good interaction mechanisms between Marketing and Sales departments will increase formal and informal communication processes and information flows (Kahn and Mentzer, 1998; Dewsnap and Jobber, 2000). As a result, the possibility and willingness of salespeople to engage in COS should increase, since they will possess more information of better quality which can be used to develop customized solutions. Hence:

*H6: The use of interaction mechanisms between Marketing and Sales units is positively related to COS.*

Based on the conceptualization of COS, we argue that the creation of superior value for the customer is the best performance variable one can use to evaluate COS's consequences. A large body of evidence links customer orientation to similar outcomes, like customer satisfaction (e.g. Humphreys and Williams, 1996; Goff *et al.*, 1997), customer trust (e.g. Langerak, 2001) and the customer's perceived quality of the buyer-seller relationship (e.g. Beverland, 2001). Hence:

*H7: Salespeople's COS is positively related to superior customer value.*

## METHOD AND RESULTS

The questionnaire was administered in person to 870 managers attending different courses for Marketing and/or Sales Executives at a major business school over a nine-month time period.

The sampling of managers attending executive education has been proved to be a valid and controllable approach (e.g. Coviello *et al.*, 2002). The data collection resulted in 326 usable questionnaires, for a response rate of 37.5%. To measure the constructs in our conceptual model, we used multi-item scales drawn or adapted from previous studies (see the Appendix). Table A in the Appendix reports the measures' properties, correlations and descriptive statistics. Cronbach's alpha exceeds the recommended threshold of .70 in each case, suggesting reliability. An exploratory factor analysis (EFA) generated seven factors with an eigenvalue greater than 1, completely overlapping with the theorized constructs, which explained 65% of the total variance. We then performed a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), using AMOS 7.0. The CFA model included 30 observed variables loading on 7 latent factors identifying the study's multi-item constructs, plus a common method factor, loading on all items and uncorrelated with the other latent variables; all error covariances were constrained to zero. Fit statistics for this model are:  $\chi^2/df = 513/354 = 1.45$ ; GFI = .91; CFI = .96; TLI = .95; RMSEA = .04. Each item had a significant factor loading on its theorized latent construct ( $t \geq 6.59$ ). Since we rely on single informants, we took several remedies against the risk of common method bias (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003): we protected respondent anonymity, reduced item ambiguity by using well-established scales and by pre-testing the questionnaire and used different scale formats (1–7; 0%–100% etc.) and scale anchors (e.g. "never–always"; "much worse–much better"). In addition to this (see Table 1), trait variance is greater than both method variance and error variance for all the scales in our model, demonstrating that common method variance is not a major concern in our study (Carson, 2007). All scales show an acceptable reliability ( $CR \geq .76$ ). We used two different approaches for testing discriminant validity. First, using a series of  $\chi^2$  difference tests, we checked that the correlations between each possible pair of latent constructs were significantly different from 1 ( $p < .05$ ) (Bagozzi, Yi and Phillips, 1991). Second, we applied the criterion suggested by Fornell and Larcker (1981) that the AVE of a construct should exceed its highest squared correlation with any other construct. The highest squared correlation in our data (.28) was between customer-oriented culture and superior customer value. Fornell and Larcker's criterion is met in all cases as all constructs' AVE exceeds that value (see Appendix). Thus, both the approaches suggested discriminant validity. We then used multiple regression analysis and controlled for firm size and for industry type. Results are reported in Table 1: all Hypotheses are supported, and our findings also show a direct impact of customer-oriented culture on superior customer value.

## DISCUSSION

The findings of our study provide many usable managerial implications that are practical and workable in sales organizations. Our study provides many contributions to the extant knowledge on salespeople's customer orientation–selling orientation. First, most of the relationships tested in our model had never been analyzed. Our findings suggest that some organizational variables foster COS without necessarily affecting SO, which could be an important goal for companies managing a diversified portfolio of markets, products and customers requiring the two approaches to co-exist to some degree. In contrast, some organizational factors (i.e. customer-oriented culture, long-term strategic orientation and the use of a direct sales force) can be used not only to stimulate COS, but also to discourage SO. This may be particularly important in the current era of relationship marketing. Our findings also suggest that the use of a direct sales force diminishes salespeople's SO. This contradicts the conceptual arguments proposed by some scholars (e.g. Anderson and Onyemah, 2006), who argued that that independent sales reps may be more customer-oriented than employee salespeople. Finally, our findings suggest that in companies with a strong customer-oriented culture salespeople are less selling-oriented, and that the influence of the company's

customer-oriented culture on customer value creation is both direct and indirect (i.e. through COS). Taken together, our findings suggest that salespeople's COS and SO are different constructs which can probably co-exist in the same organizations and are not necessarily characterized by opposite relationships with antecedents and consequences. We empirically demonstrate that salespeople's COS is positively related to superior customer value but SO is not negatively related to it, which suggests that the widespread bad reputation of SO may not be justified (e.g. Boles *et al.*, 2001; Goff *et al.*, 1997). Our study also provides the first validation outside the US of the ten-item scale of SOC.

**Table 1: Results of Regression Analysis**

Dependent Variable→	Salespeople's customer orientation	Salespeople's selling orientation	Superior customer value
<b>Control Variables</b>			
Firm size	-.08 (-1.32)	-.10* (-1.81)	.05 (.75)
Food/Beverages	-.11 (-1.21)	-.09 (-1.05)	-.10 (-1.50)
Banking/Insurance	.05 (.75)	.07 (1.17)	-.21*** (-2.97)
Chemical/Pharma/Medical	.05 (.54)	.07 (.85)	-.07 (-.75)
Retailing	-.11 (-1.40)	-.12* (-1.66)	-.06 (-.73)
Electronics/TLC/ICT	-.12 (-1.23)	-.07 (-.85)	-.10 (-1.09)
Construction/Industrial	-.00 (-.03)	.03 (.36)	-.11 (-1.36)
<b>Organizational Factors</b>			
Customer oriented culture		.24*** (4.15)	-.14** (-2.33)
% of direct sales force		.12** (2.29)	-.26*** (-4.77)
Long-term strategic orientation		.17*** (3.22)	-.13** (-2.34)
Sales department's influence over market-related decisions		.18*** (3.60)	-.06 (-1.07)
Functional role clarity		.10* (2.75)	-.00 (-.08)
Marketing-Sales interaction		.18*** (3.35)	-.03 (-.52)
<b>Salespeople's orientations</b>			
Customer orientation			.11** (2.02)
Selling orientation			.02 (.45)
R <sup>2</sup>	.05	.29	.03
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.03	.26	.01
F-Value	2.44**	9.86***	1.49
R <sup>2</sup> Change		.24	.13
F-Change		17.61***	8.18***
N	322	322	326
			326
			325

Notes: i) We report standardized betas with t-values in parentheses; ii) Differences in Sample size are due to outliers deletion.

\*p<.10; \*\*p<.05; \*\*\*p<.01 (Two-tailed test)

## LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Since our research design is cross-sectional, any attempt to generalize the research findings and to theorize causal relationships must be undertaken with caution. Longitudinal studies should be welcome. Also, other potential organizational drivers of COS should be investigated (e.g. recruiting, training and decentralization). We suggest adopting contingency models to investigate under which conditions specific organizational factors better foster COS. Relevant moderators could be the personal characteristics of salespeople and supervisors, and environmental variables (e.g. market turbulence). For example, given a specific configuration of the organizational factors, which characteristics of the supervisor (e.g. leadership style) best fit to stimulate COS? We also invite researchers to better investigate the relationship between SO and its antecedents and consequences. Finally, future studies might employ multiple informants (i.e. buyer–seller dyads).

**Table A: Measures Correlations, Descriptive Statistics, and Variance Decomposition**

<b>Correlations</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
1 Salespeople's customer orientation	1.00															
2 Salespeople's selling orientation	-.38	1.00														
3 Customer oriented culture	.34	-.21	1.00													
4 % of direct sales force	.10	-.25	.13	1.00												
5 Long-term strategic orientation	.25	-.21	.38	.01	1.00											
Sales department's influence over																
6 market-related decisions	.10	-.02	-.17	-.08	.02	1.00										
7 Functional role clarity	.23	-.09	.34	.10	.10	-.12	1.00									
8 Marketing-Sales interaction	.30	-.09	.26	.07	.06	-.12	.25	1.00								
9 Superior customer value	.26	-.11	.53	.01	.29	.00	.17	.12	1.00							
10 Firm size	-.11	.02	.05	.21	-.01	-.12	.13	-.11	.00	1.00						
11 Food/Beverages	-.09	.00	-.01	.04	.10	.02	.04	-.17	.05	.06	1.00					
12 Banking/Insurance	.08	-.15	-.04	.01	.05	-.03	.07	-.03	-.09	.07	-.12	1.00				
13 Chemical/Pharma/Medical	.14	.03	-.03	-.08	-.09	.00	-.03	.22	-.07	-.26	-.25	-.13	1.00			
14 Electronics/TLC/ICT	-.11	.01	.02	.17	-.01	-.09	.00	-.16	.02	.28	-.25	-.13	-.27	1.00		
15 Retailing	-.07	.02	.06	-.13	.04	.08	.04	.02	.02	-.06	-.18	-.09	-.20	-.19	1.00	
16 Construction/Industrial	.05	-.03	-.04	-.11	.00	.05	-.07	.05	.05	-.04	-.18	-.09	-.20	-.19	-.14	1.00
<b>Descriptive Statistics</b>																
M	4.80	3.63	4.61	58.78	3.97	39.54	4.78	3.87	4.74	5.39	.19	.06	.21	.21	.12	.13
SD	1.01	1.11	1.08	38.45	1.39	14.95	1.46	1.26	1.08	1.94	.39	.23	.41	.41	.33	.33
Skewness	-.60	.03	-.48	-.31	-.14	.36	-.50	-.11	-.39	.33	1.61	3.79	1.40	1.44	2.31	2.27
Kurtosis	.41	-.45	-.17	-1.49	-.56	.04	-.33	-.33	-.09	.07	.60	12.43	-.05	.08	3.36	3.16
<b>Variance Decomposition (%)</b>																
Trait	.64	.77	.59	N.A.	.81	N.A.	.88	.73	.62	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.
Method	.23	.08	.23	N.A.	.04	N.A.	.00	.06	.21	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.
Error	.13	.15	.18	N.A.	.15	N.A.	.12	.21	.17	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.

N = 326

N.A. = not applicable

## Appendix

**Table B: Measures**

**Salespeople's customer orientation (Thomas, Soutar and Ryan, 2001); Alpha = .86; AVE=.50; CR =.83**

*Salespeople in your SBU/Company (1=strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree):*

1. Try to figure out what a customer's needs are	.52 (9.29)
2. Have to have the customer's best interests in mind	.44 (7.76)
3. Try to bring a customer with a problem together with a product/service that helps him/her solve that problem.	.60 (11.09)
4. Offer the product/service that is best suited to the customer's problem.	.82 (16.64)
5. Try to find out what kind of product/service would be most helpful to a customer.	.83 (17.01)

**Salespeople's selling orientation (Thomas, Soutar and Ryan, 2001); Alpha = .84; AVE=.50; CR =.83**

*Salespeople in your SBU/Company (1=strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree):*

1. Try to sell as much as they can rather than satisfy a customer.	.63 (11.87)
2. Stretch the truth in describing the product/service to a customer.	.65 (12.12)
3. Try to sell a customer all they can convince him/her to buy, even if they think it is more than a wise customer would buy.	.76 (14.92)
4. Paint too rosy a picture of the products/services to make them sound as good as possible.	.76 (14.65)
5. Decide what products/services to offer on the basis of what they can convince customers to buy, not on the basis of what will satisfy them in the long run.	.64 (12.03)

**Customer oriented culture (Deshpandé, Farley, and Webster, 1993); Alpha = .80; AVE =.40; CR =.76**

*In your SBU/Company (1=strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree):*

1. You have routine or regular measures of customer service	.51 (8.24)
2. Your product and service development is based on good market and customer information	.72 (12.35)
3. You have a good sense of how our customers value our products and services	.71 (12.12)
4. You are more customers focused than our competitors	.51 (7.85)
5. You believe your business exists primarily to serve customers	.43 (6.59)

**Long-term strategic orientation (Guenzi and Troilo, 2007); Alpha = .85; AVE =.64; CR=.84**

*In your SBU/Company (1=strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree):*

1. Long-term objectives are more important than short-term ones	.82 (16.19)
2. Long-term results are more important than short-term ones	.81 (16.13)
3. Long-term decisions are more important than short-term ones	.73 (14.20)

**Functional role clarity (new items based on Singh, 1993); Alpha = .88; AVE =.72; CR=.88**

*In your SBU/Company (1=strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree):*

1. Roles of Sales and Marketing departments are clearly defined	.82 (17.18)
2. Goals of Sales and Marketing departments are clearly defined	.88 (19.09)
3. Responsibilities of sales and marketing departments are clearly defined	.83 (17.65)

**Marketing-Sales interaction (adapted from Kahn and Mentzer, 1998); Alpha = .79; AVE=.41; CR =.77**

*In your SBU/Company, (1= never; 7= quite frequently):*

1. Marketing and Sales departments have formal meetings	.63 (11.20)
2. Marketing personnel attend Sales meetings	.63 (11.19)
3. Salespeople attend Marketing meetings	.58 (10.10)
4. Marketing and Sales personnel jointly attend formal training programs	.66 (11.59)
5. Marketing and sales workers jointly attend formal team-building initiatives	.64 (11.38)
6. Interdepartmental teams make customer calls*	

**Superior customer value (Guenzi and Troilo, 2007); Alpha = .80; AVE =.49; CR =.78**

*In the last 2 years, relative to your competitors, how has your SBU/company performed with respect to (1= much worse; 7=much better):*

1. Responsiveness to customers' needs	.50 (6.82)
2. Ability to develop creative solutions to customers' needs	.52 (7.33)
3. Speed of action in the market	.71 (11.16)
4. Innovation	.73(11.20)

## Notes

- i) For each item we report the standardized factor loading with t-value in parenthesis;
- ii) AVE and CR are attenuated for common method variance.
- iii) For each scale, the variance explained by the trait (T), method (M), and error (E) were computed as follows:  $T = (\sum \lambda_T)^2$ , where  $\lambda_T$  represent trait factor loadings;  $M = (\sum \lambda_M)^2$ , where  $\lambda_M$  represent method factor loadings; and  $E = \sum \theta_e$  where  $\theta_e$  represent error variances. The percentage of variance explained by each component (T,M,E) is computed as the ratio between that component's variance and the sum of the three. Using the same notations, attenuated composite reliability is computed as  $T/(T+E)$ ; and attenuated average variance extracted is computed as  $\lambda^2_T / (\lambda^2_T + E)$ .

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