

The Effect of Ingratiation and Inspirational Appeals on Customer Trust

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate how interpersonal influence tactics employed by salespeople, specifically inspirational appeals and ingratiation, impact customer trust. A quantitative approach was employed by distributing questionnaires to 202 customers in Indonesia who had interacted with salespeople to obtain product information or recommendations. Multiple linear regression analysis was conducted to assess the impact of each tactic on customer trust. The results show that inspirational appeal has a negative and significant effect on customer trust, indicating that emotionally driven or value-oriented messages delivered by salespeople can reduce customer trust, possibly because they are misaligned with customer expectations or needs. In contrast, ingratiation has a negative but not statistically significant effect on customer trust, suggesting that compliments, flattery, or excessive and insincere attempts to win customers' favor are insufficient to influence their level of trust. These findings suggest that interpersonal influence tactics must be matched to customer characteristics, and not all approaches are equally effective in building trust.

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1. Introduction

Customer trust is a fundamental component in establishing and sustaining long-term relationships between buyers and sellers, particularly in contexts where continuous interpersonal interaction is essential. Trust serves as a mechanism that reduces perceived uncertainty, enhances a sense of security, and facilitates decision-making processes in commercial exchanges. In industries that rely heavily on direct selling interactions, such as retail, banking, automotive, and insurance, trust becomes even more crucial because customers often evaluate not only the product but also the credibility, integrity, and relational behavior of the salesperson involved. According to Social Identity Theory, individuals shape their social identity through interactions, shared norms, and perceived membership in certain groups, which subsequently influence the formation of trust in relational contexts (Burke, 2006). When customers perceive alignment between their own values and the communication style or behavior of a salesperson, they are more likely to develop trust and feel comfortable proceeding with a purchase decision.

Salespeople often employ interpersonal influence tactics to shape customer perceptions and create positive interactional climates. One commonly used tactic is *ingratiation*, which aims to enhance the salesperson's interpersonal attractiveness through behaviors such as offering praise, showing friendliness, or expressing compliments (Jones, 1964). These behaviors are expected to reduce psychological distance and foster favorable impressions that may positively influence the customer's evaluation of the salesperson. Another tactic, *inspirational appeals*, involves persuasive efforts to evoke emotions, highlight shared values, and stimulate aspirations as a means of generating psychological engagement and relational closeness (McFarland et al., 2006). Through these emotionally oriented messages, salespeople aim to establish connections that extend beyond transactional communication and resonate on a deeper, motivational level.

Previous research has emphasized the significance of emotional and relational communication strategies in shaping customer trust, suggesting that persuasion efforts grounded in empathy, value alignment, and interpersonal warmth can have a meaningful impact on customer evaluations (Dang et al., 2019). However, much of the literature on *ingratiation* and *inspirational appeals* has primarily examined organizational or internal workplace dynamics, leaving a gap in understanding how these tactics function within salesperson-customer interactions. Moreover, cultural differences may further moderate how customers interpret such tactics, as behaviors perceived as sincere in one cultural context may be viewed as excessive or manipulative in another. These variations underscore the need for empirical research into how *ingratiation* and *inspirational appeals* impact trust within the Indonesian market, where interpersonal sensitivity and relational harmony frequently influence customer judgments.

Based on this background, this study aims to provide a more comprehensive and in depth understanding of how interpersonal influence operates within direct selling interactions by examining the extent to which *ingratiation* and *inspirational appeals* employed by salespeople shape, strengthen, or potentially undermine customer trust in doing so, this study seeks not only to clarify the specific mechanisms through which these interpersonal tactics affect customers cognitive and emotional evaluations, but also to offer broader insights into the relational dynamics and communication strategies that underpin effective salesperson-customer relationships within industries where direct interpersonal engagement plays a central role in shaping purchase decisions.

2. Theory and Hypotheses Development

2.1. Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory posits that individuals derive a significant part of their self-concept from their membership in social groups and from the social categories with which they identify (Dang et al., 2019). First developed by Henri Tajfel in the early 1970s, the theory emerged from an effort to understand how people cognitively categorize themselves and others, and how such categorizations influence prejudice, intergroup relations, and social behavior. Burke (2006) further elaborates that social identity represents the way individuals perceive and interpret themselves within broader

social contexts, shaped through continuous interaction with others, the roles they assume, and the norms embedded in their social environments.

In marketing and consumer company relationships, the relevance of social identity is increasingly recognized, as customers often evaluate businesses, brands, and frontline employees not only on functional value but also on how well they align with customers' values, beliefs, and social affiliations. When a company or salesperson is perceived as acknowledging and validating a customer's social identity, such as shared values, community belonging, or personal aspirations, this recognition fosters emotional closeness, perceived understanding, and a heightened sense of being valued. These relational dynamics collectively form a psychological foundation that supports the development of customer trust.

In the context of this study, Social Identity Theory serves as an appropriate and robust theoretical lens for explaining how salesperson communication tactics such as ingratiation and inspirational appeals can influence customer trust. When these interpersonal strategies successfully resonate with customers' identity-based expectations, they create a deeper relational bond grounded in shared meanings and emotional congruence. Consequently, customers are more likely to trust, feel comfortable with, and maintain long-term relationships with the company or salesperson. Therefore, the theory explains why interpersonal influence efforts that acknowledge customers' identities are fundamental to cultivating trust and loyalty in the Indonesian marketplace.

2.2. Customer Trust

Customer trust refers to the belief that a company, product, or salesperson is dependable, honest, and capable of delivering consistent value over time. This trust is built through accumulated customer experiences across multiple transactions and interactions, particularly when perceived product quality and service performance consistently meet or exceed expectations (Costaible et al., 2002). In marketing literature, trust is widely acknowledged as a foundational element of customer loyalty and relationship maintenance. Loyal customers tend to exhibit behaviors that signal a strong relational commitment, including increasing their purchasing frequency, recommending the company to others, and prioritizing the brand over its competitors (Zeithaml, Berry, & Parasuraman, 1996).

Murphy et al. (2007) assert that trust is a pivotal mechanism enabling the transformation of transactional exchanges into stable, long-term relational partnerships. Trust reduces perceived risk, enhances cooperation, and facilitates open communication between customers and companies. Sorayanti Utami (2015) further emphasizes that once trust is established, the process of maintaining interpersonal and business relationships becomes more efficient and mutually reinforcing.

Emotional strategies such as creating relational closeness, expressing empathy, and delivering inspiring messages have been shown to influence the formation of trust. Dang et al. (2019) found that interpersonal influence tactics, including ingratiation and inspirational appeals, can stimulate positive emotional responses such as enthusiasm, pleasure, and a sense of personal connection toward the salesperson. These emotional responses serve as pathways through which trust is established and maintained. Thus, in this study, customer trust is conceptualized not merely as a cognitive evaluation of reliability but as an affective outcome shaped by interpersonal communication patterns.

2.3. Ingratiation

Ingratiation is identified as one of the most common self-presentation strategies used to enhance likability and interpersonal attractiveness. This tactic involves offering flattery, praise, expressions of admiration, or other socially pleasant behaviors intended to create a favorable image in the target individual's eyes (Seiter, 2007). McFarland et al. (2006) define ingratiation as "the use of behaviors designed to increase one's interpersonal appeal," emphasizing that the core objective of this tactic is to gain social approval, minimize resistance, and strengthen interpersonal bonds.

In the context of sales interactions, ingratiation plays a strategic role in shaping customer perceptions. Plouffe et al. (2016) explain that ingratiation typically involves actions such as personalized compliments, expressions of friendliness, and gestures of relational warmth aimed at

reducing the psychological distance between the salesperson and the customer. These efforts can enhance the customer's perception of the salesperson's goodwill and increase emotional comfort during the interaction.

The modern business environment, characterized by information overload and complex product choices, intensifies the need for salesperson persuasion skills, adaptive behavior, and relational diplomacy (Campbell & Davis, 2006; Hultman et al., 2018). In such contexts, ingratiation becomes an essential tactic for signaling competence and trustworthiness to customers who may initially possess incomplete or uncertain product knowledge (Leach et al., 2020). Moreover, ingratiation can reflect a salesperson's commitment to relational norms and mutual understanding, which contributes to a sense of security in purchasing decisions (Arli et al., 2018). Previous research has shown that flirting behavior can positively influence customer evaluations. For example, Yan, Lu, and Xu (2023) found that verbal expressions of friendliness, amusement, and social similarity significantly increased customer purchase intentions and trust. Overall, this perspective highlights flirting as a meaningful interpersonal strategy in sales interactions.

2.4. Inspirational Appeals

Inspirational appeals represent a persuasive communication strategy that seeks to trigger customer values, ideals, and aspirations, thereby eliciting enthusiasm and emotional involvement in the sales process (Alavi et al., 2018). Salespeople employing this tactic attempt to elevate the customer's mindset by highlighting the aspirational or value-driven meaning of a product or service. Such messages often incorporate motivational language intended to foster excitement, hope, or a sense of personal relevance (Bosworth & Zoldan, 2012; Yukl & Tracey, 1992).

McFarland et al. (2006) define inspirational appeals as requests or proposals that generate enthusiasm by appealing to the target's values, ideals, and aspirations, thereby adding emotional depth to the sales message and enhancing the perceived value of the product. The role of emotions in customer decision-making has been well documented. Babin & Attaway (2000) note that emotional states shape how customers perceive products, evaluate salesperson interactions, and derive satisfaction from consumption experiences.

In this study, inspirational appeals are considered particularly salient because they enable salespeople to evoke positive emotional responses, such as enthusiasm, joy, and a sense of relational closeness toward the salesperson. When customers' psychological needs, such as the desire to feel inspired or personally valued, are met, they are more likely to identify with the salesperson and perceive the relationship as meaningful (McFarland et al., 2006).

Empirical research also supports the link between inspirational appeals and trust formation. Dang et al. (2019) demonstrate that inspirational communication has a positive impact on long-term relational outcomes, particularly in B2B contexts, where emotional alignment fosters deeper relationships and commitment. Similarly, Hartmann et al. (2020) report that inspirational appeals strengthen purchasing agents' trust in salespeople by reinforcing shared identity and value congruence. These findings collectively illustrate the pivotal role of inspirational appeals in shaping trust-based business relationships.

2.5. Ingratiation and Customer Trust

In salesperson customer interactions, ingratiation reflects deliberate efforts to enhance interpersonal appeal through compliments, expressions of emotional attentiveness, and other socially pleasant behaviors (Cialdini, 2001; Plouffe et al., 2016). These behaviors are designed to create a positive first impression and reinforce psychological comfort during the interaction, thereby facilitating customer openness and reducing perceived relational risk. Plouffe et al. (2016) emphasize that effective ingratiation strengthens perceptions of the salesperson's benevolence, relational commitment, and sincerity, which are core foundations of trust. Barone and Roy (2010) similarly argue that genuine interpersonal interactions foster stronger relational bonds that encourage the development of trust-based relationships.

Integrating these perspectives with Social Identity Theory, ingratiation may influence customer trust by aligning interpersonal behavior with customers' social identity expectations. When

customers perceive congruence between their internal identity and the relational cues displayed by the salesperson, they are more likely to interpret ingratiation as authentic, thus reinforcing trust (Burke, 2006; Dang et al., 2019).

Previous research has empirically demonstrated the influence of ingratiation on consumer behavior. Yan, Lu, and Xu (2023) show that ingratiation conveyed through playful, friendly, and socially warm self-descriptions significantly enhances customer trust and purchase intentions. Such evidence supports the premise that ingratiation, when executed appropriately, contributes positively to trust formation. Correspondingly, the preceding arguments suggest:

Hypothesis 1: Ingratiation has a positive effect on customer trust

2.6. Inspirational Appeals and Customer Trust

Inspirational appeals have been widely recognized as one of the most effective influence tactics in salesperson-customer relationships, as they evoke positive emotions and strengthen customers' emotional attachment to the provider (Alavi et al., 2018; McFarland et al., 2006). By highlighting personal values, aspirations, and meaningful goals, salespeople can inspire customers, enhance product relevance, and elevate perceived relational closeness (Bosworth & Zoldan, 2012).

The effectiveness of inspirational appeals can also be explained through Social Identity Theory, which posits that individuals construct their identities based on group affiliations and shared values (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). When inspirational messages resonate with customers' self-concepts or organizational values, they activate psychological processes of social alignment and value congruence. This perceived alignment strengthens trust, reduces uncertainty, and fosters a more profound sense of interpersonal understanding (Burke, 2006).

Customer trust reduces perceived risk and enhances confidence in purchase decisions (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Rousseau et al., 1998). Emotional and aspirational communication has been empirically shown to bolster trust. Hartmann et al. (2020) found that inspirational appeals significantly increased purchasing agents' trust in salespeople by reinforcing relational closeness and shared identity. These findings reinforce the theoretical proposition that inspirational messages function as relational mechanisms for building trust in business settings. Correspondingly, the preceding arguments suggest:

Hypothesis 2: Inspirational appeals have a positive effect on customer trust

3. Method

This research data consists of quantitative primary data collected from individuals in Indonesia who made purchases due to the influence of a salesperson, with a focus on industries with high direct sales activity, namely retail, banking, automotive, and property. Respondents were recruited through online consumer communities, social media, and relevant industry channels, and were informed about the study's purpose, data confidentiality, and the voluntary nature of their participation. The final sample comprised participants who met the criteria and provided comprehensive data on salesperson influence, including engaging and inspiring appeal, as well as customer trust. Additionally, demographic information, including salesperson age and gender, customer age and gender, income level, product industry, and previous purchasing experience, was collected, as shown in Table 1.

3.1. Measure

All constructs were measured using validated scales from established literature. All items used a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, and all scales demonstrated acceptable reliability ($\alpha > 0.70$).

Ingratiation was measured using a 5-item scale adapted from McFarland (2006). Customers indicated the extent to which they perceived the salesperson as flattering, friendly, or driven by compliments during the sales interaction. Responses were given on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). An example item is: "The salesperson went out of his way

to be friendly or compliment me to make me feel comfortable." The Cronbach's alpha value for this scale was $\alpha = 0.702$.

Inspirational Appeals were assessed using a 5-item scale developed initially by McFarland (2006). Salespeople rated how often they used inspirational, enthusiastic, or motivational tactics to encourage customers to consider the product. A sample item includes: "I try to generate enthusiasm in customers about the products I offer." These items are rated using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). The Cronbach's alpha value for this scale is $\alpha = 0.656$.

Customer Trust was measured using a 4-item scale adapted from Guenzi, P., & Georges, L. (2010). Customers indicate how much they trust salespeople based on their perceptions of honesty, integrity, and reliability. Responses are given on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). A sample item includes: "I believe that salespeople have honest intentions when recommending a product." The reliability of this scale is $\alpha = 0.468$.

To evaluate sample adequacy, we conducted the Kaiser-Meyer Olkin (KMO) test and Bartlett's sphericity test. The KMO value was 0.770, exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.60. Bartlett's sphericity test showed significant results ($\chi^2(120) = 723.099$, $p < 0.001$), which confirmed that the data were suitable for factor analysis.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Correlation

	Berarti	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Usia Penjualan	1.94	.246	1											
Jenis Kelamin														
Penjualan	.68	.466	-.005	1										
Pendapatan														
Penjualan	2.48	.888	.119	-.268**	1									
Industri Penjualan	2.91	1.112	.52	.08	-.07	1								
Usia Pelanggan	1.94	.284	-.06	-.042	.01	-.034	1							
Jenis Kelamin														
Pelanggan	.77	.424	.094	.204**	-.06	-.013	-.042	1						
Penghasilan														
Pelanggan	2.04	.908	-.055	-.076	.02	-.01	.280**	-.028	1					
Apakah Pelanggan														
Pernah Melakukan	1.02	.14	-.108	-.056	.83	.011	.32	.258**	.33	1				
Pembelian														
Industri Pelanggan	2.91	1.112	.052	.08	-.07	1.000**	-.034	-.013	-100.011	1				
Rasa tidak														
menyenangkan	3.85937	.487104	.184**	.064	134	.57	-.107	-.116	.46.046.06	1				
Daya Tarik														
Inspirasional	3.65416667	.90116518	.158*	.072	.161*	-.002	-.107	-.045	-.55 -.06	-2.149	1			
Kepercayaan														
Pelanggan	3.148	.70182533	.081	.97	-.08	.082	-.108	.109	-.03.09	-.91.410**	1			

*P<0,05, **P<0,01

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics and intercorrelations between variables. The mean values indicate that both salespeople's practices of Ingratiation ($M = 3.85937$, $SD = 0.487104$) and Inspirational Appeal ($M = 3.65416667$, $SD = 0.90116518$) were at a high level, while their levels of Customer Trust ($M = 3.148$, $SD = 0.70182533$) were at a moderate level.

Correlation analysis revealed that Ingratiation (MEAN_IN) had a negative and insignificant relationship with Customer Trust (MEAN_KP) ($r = -0.09$), indicating that ingratiating behavior has no significant effect on increasing customer trust. Conversely, Inspirational Appeal (MEAN_IA) had a negative and significant relationship with Customer Trust (MEAN_KP) ($r = -0.410**$), indicating that the use of emotional or inspirational tactics significantly decreases customer trust.

Overall, these findings suggest that both interpersonal influence tactics proved ineffective and even counterproductive in building customer trust, implying that other factors play a greater role in the trust-building process.

3.2. Data Analysis

To investigate the impact of ingratiation and inspirational appeals on customer trust, this study employed multiple linear regression analysis. This technique was chosen because it allows for the evaluation of the contribution of each independent variable (X1 and X2) in explaining the variation in the dependent variable (Y). The estimated regression model is formulated as follows:

$$Y = \alpha + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + e$$

Prior to regression, all variables were mean-centered to reduce multicollinearity, and relevant control variables were entered into the initial model. Insignificant variables were excluded to more accurately test the effect of ingratiation and inspirational appeals on customer trust.

4. Result and Discussion

Based on Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Burke, 2006), this study examines how salespeople use interpersonal influence tactics, ingratiation and inspirational appeals, to influence customer trust. Customers evaluate salespeople's behavior not only based on message content but also on how it aligns with their values and identities. Hence, the effectiveness of these two tactics is highly dependent on perceived authenticity.

The regression model showed that Inspirational Appeal (IA_scale) had a significant effect on Customer Trust (KP_scale) ($B = 0.316$, $\beta = 0.405$, $t = 6.172$, $p < .001$). Conversely, Ingratiation (IN_scale) was found to have no significant effect ($B = -0.045$, $\beta = -0.031$, $t = -0.470$, $p = .639$) on Customer Trust. The strong effect of Inspirational Appeal ($\beta = 0.405$) indicates that messages that evoke emotion and value (despite their modest negative correlation), when controlled for in the multiple regression model, are a highly effective strategy for increasing customer trust.

This indicates that, in a professional context, the use of structured inspirational appeals may be perceived by customers as a signal of credible and trustworthy competence. Meanwhile, the failure of Ingratiation suggests that customers may perceive praise or flattery tactics as inauthentic and therefore not contributing to the trust-building process, in line with findings highlighting the need for competency-based influence strategies in professional relationships.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that inspirational appeal has a significant impact on customer trust, whereas ingratiation has no significant effect. Specifically, inspirational appeal was shown to explain variation in customer trust, while ingratiation did not. These findings suggest that customer trust is strongly influenced by communication strategies that address values and vision. At the same time, flattery tactics are ineffective, suggesting that trust may be more driven by other factors such as salesperson competence, clarity of information, and the overall service experience.

These findings align with Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Burke, 2006), which emphasizes that customers evaluate sales interactions based on how behaviors and messages align with their identities, values, and expectations. Practically, salespeople need to prioritize delivering value-oriented and authentic messages to build customer trust effectively. This requires salespeople to adjust their interpersonal strategies to ensure more authentic and effective communication in building trust, rather than relying on ingratiation tactics that risk being perceived as insincere.

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