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# The Risky Side of Inspirational Appeals in Personal Selling:

# When Do Customers Infer Ulterior Salesperson Motives?

## Abstract

In personal selling, the inspirational appeal (IA) is a widely promoted tactic that aims at stimulating customers' values and ideals, thereby evoking emotions and arousing their enthusiasm for a product. However, whether IAs in fact improve or undermine salespeople's success in sales talks remains controversial. Therefore, the present study examines consequences and key contingencies of IAs in customer–salesperson interactions in a retailing context, using multi-source data from several retailing industries for three quantitative studies, comprising a total sample of 590 customer and 174 salesperson responses. Drawing on the Multiple Inferences Model (MIM), the authors show that an IA is likely to drive the customer's inference that the salesperson holds ulterior motives. IAs seem to be particularly detrimental for salespeople with a lack of customer orientation. Beyond expanding research on influence tactics and the ambivalent role of IAs in retailing interactions, these findings can guide practitioners about when to refrain from using an IA.

*Keywords:* inspirational appeals, personal selling, customer emotions, influence tactics

In an increasingly dynamic marketplace, the salesperson as a boundary spanner serves as a crucial interface with the customer, representing the product and the company (Evans et al. 2012; Rapp, Agnihotri, and Forbes 2008). To convince customers of the value of their products and to motivate them to make a purchase, salespeople frequently deploy influence tactics (e.g., Frazier and Summers 1984; Payan and McFarland 2005). One frequently promoted influence tactic is the use of inspirational appeals (IAs), which are defined as "[…] request[s] or proposal[s] that arouse enthusiasm by appealing to [a target's] values, ideals, and aspirations" (Yukl and Tracey 1992, 526). By using IAs, salespeople aim to stimulate the customer's values and ideals, thereby evoking excitement and arousing the customer's enthusiasm for a product (Bosworth and Zoldan 2012; Leboff 2007; Yukl and Tracey 1992). More specifically, IAs augment a product by attaching "emotional relevance" to it (McFarland, Challagalla, and Shervani 2006, 107) in order to spark a customer's excitement and elicit a positive emotional response to the product.

While IAs have frequently been examined in an advertising context (e.g., Ray and Batra 1983), studies on their effect in interpersonal interactions between salespeople and customers in personal selling are scarce. Gaining a more precise understanding of the role of IA in selling interactions is conceptually important for two reasons: First, customers' emotions represent a major driver of their purchase decision and evaluation of the selling interaction in retailing industries (e.g., Babin and Attaway 2000). Second, it remains unclear whether IAs exhibit positive or negative effects on customer purchase intentions in the retailing context. Previous research on IAs and emotional selling approaches (e.g., Hennig-Thurau et al. 2006; Plouffe, Bolander, and Cote 2014; McFarland, Challagalla, and Shervani 2006) suggests that IAs may entail ambivalent effects: While an IA may arouse a customer's enthusiasm for a product, it may also drive the customer away because it might be interpreted as a signal that the salesperson harbors ulterior motives (e.g., Brown 1990; Plouffe, Bolander, and Cote 2014; Grant 2013). Despite this potential ambivalence, to date, salespeople have little guidance on whether and how they should employ IAs with a given customer. This is a major gap from both a practical and an academic viewpoint. From a practical viewpoint, salespeople run the risk of using IAs to their own disadvantage. From an academic viewpoint, the effects and contingencies of IAs are not sufficiently understood. Specifically, previous research on IAs in personal selling (e.g., McFarland, Challagalla, and Shervani 2006; Plouffe, Bolander, and Cote 2014) has not yet linked them to customers' purchase intentions while accounting for salesperson-related moderators.

This research void constitutes our point of departure: Our goal is to analyze the effects and contingencies of IAs on customers' purchase intentions. To this end, we initially conducted an exploratory study (Study 1) to gain insight into the main effect of IAs on customers' purchase intention in a cross-industry retailing context (139 customer survey responses nested in 72 salespeople). To assess the relative importance of IAs and increase the rigor of our analysis by isolating effects of IAs, we included the other established salesperson influence tactics beyond IAs as controls in the model estimation (McFarland, Challagalla, and Shervani 2006).

Interestingly, in contrast to conventional practical wisdom, our first study reveals an average *negative* effect of IAs on customers' purchase intention. Therefore, in Studies 2 and 3, we aimed to uncover the mechanisms through which IAs operate more thoroughly. To accomplish this, we deduced hypotheses from the Multiple Inferences Model (MIM; Reeder et al. 2002; Reeder 2009). The MIM helps to understand how individuals interpret an interaction partner's ambiguous behavioral cues (such as IAs) to make inferences about the underlying motives of this behavior. In these interactions, individuals take into account situational constraints to evaluate the interaction partner’s motives (Gawronski 2009). Applying this logic of the MIM, we argue that the effectiveness of IA should particularly depend on whether salespeople behave in a customer-oriented manner.

To test these predictions, we conducted two additional studies. Study 2 comprises an experimental scenario setting in a jewelry retailing context with 166 subjects. Analyzing this data set, our findings indeed show that IAs may trigger customer inferences of ulterior salesperson motives, which translate into reduced purchase intentions.

To replicate and extend our findings from Study 2, in Study 3 we gathered a data set comprising 333 customer–salesperson interactions nested in 102 salespeople in an automotive retailing context. Analyzing this data set through a multilevel path model, we find that IAs may trigger customer inferences of ulterior salesperson motives. Furthermore, results show that the effectiveness of IAs is contingent on the level of salespeople’s customer orientation. Our conceptual framework, which provides an overview over our three studies, is presented in Figure 1.

Our research contributes to marketing and sales research as well as to managerial practice in several ways. Our results hold implications for researchers, since we uncover the effects and psychological mechanisms of IAs with respect to customer purchase intentions in a retailing context. While there are theoretical arguments supportive of both a negative and a positive effect of IAs, we empirically show that their negative effects are likely to prevail because IAs tend to arouse customers’ inference of salespeople’s ulterior motives.

Additionally, our findings provide precise guidance to salespeople when to refrain from IAs. Generally speaking, salespeople should be cautious in applying IAs because this influence tactic may easily engender customers’ inference of ulterior motives. To avoid such negative effects, salespeople are recommended to link the IA with a display of customer-oriented behavior.

--------------------------- Insert Figure 1 about here ---------------------------

## Literature review

In the following, we provide a brief overview of academic literature on IAs within the domains of advertising and personal selling (see also Figure 2). Surprisingly, empirical research on IAs within the academic personal selling literature is scarce. In managerial literature, however, IAs are frequently recommended as effective selling tactics (e.g., Ziglar 1984; Bosworth and Zoldan 2012; Leboff 2007).

--------------------------- Insert Figure 2 about here ---------------------------

### *IAs in advertising research*

The role of IAs has been widely discussed within advertising research, embedded in the even broader discussion of emotional pleas in advertisement (e.g., Ray and Batra 1983; Holbrook and O'Shaughnessy 1984; Srull 1984; Friestad and Thorson 1986; Mitchell 1986; Machleit and Wilson 1988; Taute, McQuitty, and Sautter 2011). Until the 1980s, advertising research focused only on "decision-oriented models of information processing while neglecting the emotional side of consumer behavior" (Holbrook and O'Shaughnessy 1984, 45). Initiating the empirical debate around eliciting (positive) customer emotions through advertising, studies found IAs to positively impact advertisement recall (Friestad and Thorson 1986) and judgment (Machleit and Wilson 1988), raising customer empathy as well as positively affecting behavioral intentions (Taute, McQuitty, and Sautter 2011).

**IAs in personal selling**

Although the notion of IAs within a pure personal selling environment was initially raised almost 40 years ago by Capon (1975), it took until 2006, through the work of McFarland and colleagues, for the IA to be systematically incorporated into an empirical investigation in a business-to-business setting. They found that IAs have a positive impact on manifest influence, that is, the extent to which a salesperson affects a customer’s purchase decision, only under the condition that the customer is highly interaction-oriented, that is, he or she is interested in building positive interpersonal relationships rather than in the actual content of the transaction. Moreover, McFarland and colleagues showed that IAs have a negative effect on manifest influence if the buyer has a low interaction orientation (McFarland, Challagalla, and Shervani 2006). Interaction orientation refers to the extent to which people are “interested in forming friendships and fostering interpersonal relationships” (McFarland, Challagalla, and Shervani 2006, 107). Moreover, Plouffe, Bolander, and Cote (2014) found that IAs are only effective if the salesperson makes use of an overall enthusiastic selling style.

While prior research provided significant advances to the understanding of IAs in selling interactions, it remains largely unclear whether and to what extent IAs not only affect manifest influence but also customers’ purchase intentions, especially in a retailing context. Furthermore, raising the question of contingencies, it is reasonable to assume that further relevant factors beyond a customer’s interaction orientation and a salesperson’s enthusiasm determine the effectiveness of IAs. More specifically, moderators regarding the role of the salesperson within the customer interaction have not been examined to date. Our paper strives to provide first insights into these research voids.

## Study 1: Exploring the main effect of IAs

As mentioned previously, the role of IAs in personal selling has not been sufficiently clarified. Therefore, Study 1 exhibits two primary goals. First, we seek to examine the direct effect of IAs on customer purchase intentions (as compared to manifest influence as an intermediate construct). Second, we analyze the effect of IAs on purchase intentions in the retailing context, for which insights into the effectiveness of IAs are scarce. Prior studies have tended to focus on IAs in B2B contexts (McFarland, Challagalla, and Shervani 2006). Yet, particularly in the retailing context as compared to industrial selling, IAs may represent the dominant selling tactic owing to the high relevance of customers' emotions in this context (e.g., Darden and Babin 1994).

Our initial study to analyze the effect of IAs on customers' purchase intention adopts an exploratory approach and we refrain from formulating a specific hypothesis on the main effect of IAs. Notably, arguments may be conceived that support both positive and negative effects of IAs on a customer's purchase intention. Specifically, a key question pertains to whether customers internalize the positive messages conveyed through IAs or whether they infer ulterior motives from them. In the following, we elaborate on these two possibilities.

First, previous research has stressed the importance of emotional selling techniques—such as displaying positive emotions to the customer (e.g., Pugh 2001) and "infecting" the customer with positive emotions via emotional contagion or having an enthusiastic selling style (Plouffe, Bolander, and Cote 2014)—as being potentially useful in gaining customer compliance. In this respect, it has been argued that customers "catch" the positive affect of the salesperson (Pugh 2001, 1018) consciously or unconsciously, incorporating this positivity into their own affective state (Barsade 2002; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2006), eventually yielding higher ratings of perceived service quality (e.g., Pugh 2001; Rafaeli and Sutton 1989; Tsai and Huang 2002).

Second, however, there is growing evidence that salespeople's expression of positive affect might not be sufficient to yield positive customer outcomes or might even be detrimental. For instance, Hennig-Thurau and colleagues (2006) do not find a direct effect of an employee's extent of smiling on a change in the customer's positive affect. Additionally, McFarland and colleagues (2006) find a negative effect of IAs on a salesperson's manifest influence for customers with low interaction orientation, that is, with a low interest in the salesperson as a person with whom to socialize. Furthermore, Plouffe, Bolander, and Cote (2014, 152) raise concerns that a selling approach via positive affect (enthusiasm) might raise customer mistrust if "the salesperson cannot effectively "pull off" these tactics". Specifically, salespeople expressing their sales pitch in an "overly excited and confident" manner (Grant 2013, 1025) might elicit customer mistrust because customers interpret this behavior as an influence attempt (Campbell and Kirmani 2000).

In summary, arguments for a both beneficial and a detrimental effect of IAs on customer purchase intentions may be construed. To resolve this conceptual ambiguity, in the present study, we explored the relationship between IAs and customers' purchase intention in retail field settings.

## Data collection and sample

We conducted a field study to make a first advancement into exploring the impact of IAs on customers' purchase intentions. For this endeavor, we observed and analyzed real selling interactions between salespeople and their customers in various retail industries. Therefore, we gained permission from several retail stores in proximity of our university to survey customers directly after their selling encounters. To this end, our research team approached customers after their interactions with salespeople and asked them to fill in a questionnaire in a secluded area of each store. In detail, the different industries of our study comprise jewelry (37.9%), electronics (15.7%), furniture (10.7%), fashion (5.7%), and other (30.0%). Our final sample includes 139 customers (50.7% female, average age of 41.7 years; see Table 1).

### Measures

*Independent variables*. We used three items to measure IAs adapted from McFarland, Challagalla, and Shervani (2006). We slightly modified the items to adjust them to the retailing context (see Appendix 1).

--------------------------- Insert Table 1 about here ---------------------------

*Dependent variable.* Customers' purchase intention was captured by asking customers to rate the likelihood that they would buy the focal product from their selling encounter at the respective store. This approach to measuring selling success has been established by prior research (e.g., Dodds, Monroe, and Grewal 1991; Shao, Baker, and Wagner 2004; Bian and Forsythe 2012; Alavi, Wieseke, and Guba 2016). Importantly, this study comprised purchasing as well as non-purchasing customers. To capture those instances with one measure, purchasing customers were instructed to indicate their purchase intentions as very high (=7, "totally agree"). All measures are provided in Appendix 1.

*Controls.* We controlled for several potentially intervening variables. First, in line with previous research on influence tactics in personal selling (McFarland, Challagalla, and Shervani 2006), we included the influence tactics *information exchange*, *ingratiation*, *recommendations*, *threats*, and *promises* in order to isolate the incremental effects of our study's focal influence tactic, namely, IAs. Controlling for the influence of alternative influence tactics beyond IAs is important to partial out effects of IAs. If the influence of alternative influence tactics is not accounted for, effects of IAs might be confounded with the influence of those alternative tactics and hence erroneous conclusions might be drawn. For instance, omitting the level of salespeople's ingratiation, which similar to IAs represents an influence tactic functioning through customer emotions, from the model estimation may interfere with the effects of IAs on customers' perceptions of the salesperson. Therefore, in line with prior research on influence tactics, we account in the model estimation for several potentially intervening influence tactics beyond the focal influence tactic IAs (Plouffe, Bolander, and Cote 2014; McFarland, Challagalla, and Shervani 2006). Second, we controlled for the customer's age, gender and expertise. Third, we included the salesperson's *expertise* with respect to product knowledge as a control variable.

*Measurement validity and reliability.* To assess the reliability and convergent validity of our measurements, we inspected Cronbach's alpha and conducted a confirmatory factor analysis, employing the respective standard procedures (Diamantopoulos and Winklhofer 2001). All Cronbach's alpha values of the scales exceeded the recommended threshold of .70 (Nunnally 1978; for detailed values, please refer to Table 2). Moreover, the results of the confirmatory factor analysis show that our scales fulfill the recommended values for the composite reliability and average variance extracted (Bagozzi and Yi 1988; Fornell and Larcker 1981). We furthermore found that the squared correlations between the latent constructs are smaller than the average variance extracted from each construct, which implies discriminant validity of the scales (Fornell and Larcker 1981). Taken together, these results indicate that our measurement scales possess convergent and discriminant validity as well as adequate reliability.

*IA validation.* To provide a validation of the IA measurement, we relied on the research team's observations of IAs in the interactions. We prepared the research team in the stores to track salespeople's deployment of an IA. Whenever observers had the chance to remain in adequate proximity to the selling encounter and were able to clearly yet unobtrusively listen to the conversation, they independently rated the salesperson's IAs using the same items as those used by the customer. Of the 139 customer interactions surveyed for this study, we were able to collect 59 matched IA observer ratings. The within-group interrater agreement (rwg) of this measure between customer and observer responses is .94, which indicates a high match of both rater perceptions (James, Demaree, and Wolf 1984). This result supports the validity of our IA measurement.

--------------------------- Insert Table 2 about here ---------------------------

### Model specification

Study 1 comprises 139 customer–salesperson interactions, which are nested in 72 salespeople. Because several customers are matched to a single salesperson, the observations in the data set are not independent from each other, which is a basic assumption of the ordinary least squares estimator. When this assumption is violated, the regression coefficients may be biased (Hox 2010). Hence, to account for the nested data structure, we employed a multilevel approach that allows the simultaneous processing of data from multiple levels. In particular, we estimated a two-level model. We used the software package MPlus version 7 (Muthén and Muthén 2012) and a full information maximum likelihood estimator.

To assess whether a multilevel approach was required, we inspected intraclass correlation coefficients (ICCs), which indicate the proportion of variance of a variable that resides between the groups (Raudenbush and Bryk 2002). The ICC is a measure of the maximum amount of variance in a level 1 variable that can potentially be explained by a level 2 predictor variable. Simulation studies show that a multilevel approach is warranted when ICCs exceed .05 to .15

(Hox 2010). In our study, the ICCs exceed the recommended threshold and are comparable to similar studies in sales management (e.g., Hughes and Ahearne 2010; $ICC_{\text{purchase intention}} = .05$, $ICC_{IA} = .07$). Thus, we resorted to a multilevel estimator (Hox 2010). In our model, all variables are provided by the customer and thus reside at level 1.

## Results and discussion

We estimated a regression model accounting for the salesperson level, to explore the effects of IAs on customers' purchase intention (see Table 3). We specified a model in which we regressed customers' purchase intention on IAs, and all control variables. Results reveal a negative, significant effect of IAs on purchase intention ($\beta = -.20$, $p < .05$).

--------------------------- Insert Table 3 about here ---------------------------

Results of this study yielded an overall negative effect of IAs on customers' purchase intention. This is a noteworthy finding, since the managerial literature frequently recommends emotional selling tactics (e.g., Ziglar 1984; Bosworth and Zoldan 2012; Leboff 2007). In addition, as described above, the academic discussion on whether to sell via positive emotions has been controversial. With respect to negative outcomes, academics have suggested that IAs potentially drive customers' inference of salespeople's ulterior motives (e.g., Grant 2013; Plouffe, Bolander, and Cote 2014), rendering the effectiveness of IAs contingent on additional factors pertaining to the salesperson (e.g., Hennig-Thurau et al. 2006, Plouffe, Bolander, and Cote 2014) or the customer (e.g., McFarland, Challagalla, Shervani 2006). Building on this notion, our findings from this exploratory study spark the question of which specific psychological mechanisms lead to the detrimental effect of IAs on purchase intention and whether this negative effect persists regardless of contextual factors pertaining to the customer or the salesperson. These questions are addressed in the following section.

## The effect of IAs on customers' purchase intention

### Theoretical background: The Multiple Inference Model

For the purpose of our following analysis of psychological mechanisms and the contingency factors of IAs, we refer to the Multiple Inference Model (MIM; Reeder et al. 2002; Reeder 2009), a theoretical framework that is rooted within attribution theory. That is, the MIM aims to explain how people make sense of other people's behavior (Reeder 2009; Gawronski 2009). Specifically, when an individual observes a potentially ambiguous behavior of another person, he or she makes inferences about the underlying motives for this behavior. For this interpretation process, the individual considers both the observed behavior at hand and further information provided by the context (situational cues) (Brown 1990). Whenever opposing possible motives (such as altruism vs. egoism) might underlie a specific behavior of another person, the individual draws on characteristics of the situation to infer probabilities for the different motives potentially driving the actor's behavior. Eventually, individuals reconcile competing alternatives into one coherent evaluation (Reeder et al. 2002; Reeder 2009; Verlegh et al. 2013).

As previous literature has argued, IAs might have a negative effect on customers' purchase intention because customers may infer that a salesperson has ulterior motives for using IAs (Brown 1990; Grant 2013; Plouffe, Bolander, and Cote 2014). In the following, we analyze this notion within the MIM framework. In particular, we argue that the inference of ulterior motives driven by IAs may be affected by additional situational cues, specifically customer perceptions of a salesperson's customer orientation.

### Hypotheses on the causal chain linking IAs to purchase intention

As depicted in Figure 1, we suggest that IAs affect purchase intention via customers' inference of ulterior motives. We refer to salesperson ulterior motives as the "extent to which the motives underlying an influence agent’s (e.g., marketer’s) behavior involve the intent to persuade” (Campbell and Kirmani 2000, 70). The inference of ulterior motives has been discussed in persuasion research (e.g., Brown 1990; Campbell and Kirmani 2000; DeCarlo 2005; DeCarlo, Laczniak, and Leigh 2013) and constitutes an established construct within this research domain. Accordingly, in our first hypothesis, we propose that IAs increase a customer’s inference of ulterior motives. We derive this proposition from the MIM (Reeder et al. 2002; Reeder 2009) and from previous research discussed above (Grant 2013; Plouffe, Bolander, and Cote 2014). We elaborate on our rationale in the following.

When confronted with IAs, customers face ambiguity regarding the salesperson’s motives. IAs are presented with enthusiasm and emotional appeal with respect to the product, and hence, the salesperson’s message content is apparently positive in nature. However, IAs might constitute an influence attempt (Friestad and Wright 1994) and thus be driven by an ulterior motive of the salesperson. This ambiguity in perception is likely to trigger a reasoning process on the customer’s part regarding the salesperson’s actual motives (Reeder et al. 2002; Reeder 2009; Friestad and Wright 1994). From the customer’s perspective, the salesperson might be either genuinely enthusiastic about the product and therefore appeal to the customer at an emotional level or might be selfishly motivated, inappropriately praising the product through an IA only to close the deal. To reconcile these two competing perceptions, the customer makes use of additional situational information that is instrumental in forming a coherent impression about the salesperson’s behavior (Reeder 2009).

Since the customer is aware of the situation as pertaining to a selling context and that he or she is engaged in a selling interaction (and not a social encounter with a friend, for instance), the most sensible motive for the salesperson’s usage of an IA may be ulterior (Sharma 1990;

Campbell and Kirmani 2000). In other words, “in interpreting a salesperson’s behavior, the motive of influencing the customer in order to make a sale or a commission is likely to be more accessible than other motives, for example, building relationships or making customers feel good” (Campbell and Kirmani 2000, 71).

This notion is also in line with the discounting principle (Kelley 1973), which states that intrinsic attributions of a behavior are discounted if extrinsic causes are accessible. As Folkes (1988, 553) states: “When a product endorser has external reasons to account for favorable comments about a product, recipients of the communication often believe the product is less worthy than when endorsement involves minimal or no external incentives”. Thus, an IA might undermine the positive content concerning the product by fostering customers’ inference that the salesperson holds ulterior motives. Hence, we put forth the following:

$H_1$: IAs have a positive impact on the inference of ulterior motives.

Previous research has shown that a lack of trust in the salesperson results in less favorable attitudes toward the salesperson (Crosby, Evans, and Cowles 1990), the salesperson’s company (Schurr and Ozanne 1985), the products the salesperson tries to sell (Sharma 1990), and, finally, toward buying and future interactions with the company (Crosby, Evans, and Cowles 1990; Kennedy, Ferrell, and LeClair 2001; Swan, Bowers, and Richardson 1999). Similarly, it was argued that customers’ inference of salespersons’ ulterior motives may undermine the salespersons’ selling success (Brown 1990; Friestad and Wright 1994; Campbell and Kirmani 2000; DeCarlo 2005). Thus, we propose the following:

$H_{2a}$: The inference of ulterior motives has a negative effect on purchase intention.

Prior research has established that manifest influence may play a key role when examining the consequences of influence tactics (McFarland, Challagalla, and Shervani 2006).

We propose that the negative effect of inference of ulterior motives on customers' purchase intention results from their lowered willingness to base their decision on the salesperson (i.e., lowered manifest influence). This argument rests on the notion that whenever customers assume that the salesperson holds ulterior motives, they will not view the salesperson as helpful for achieving their individual purchasing goals (Swan, Bowers, and Richardson 1999; Payan and McFarland 2005). In this case, message acceptance is lowered and customers will no longer seek from the salesperson the required information they need to form their purchase decision. Hence, we hypothesize the following:

> $H_{2b}$: The inference of ulterior motives has a negative effect on purchase intention via the salesperson's manifest influence.

### Hypotheses on the contingent effects of IAs on the inference of ulterior motives

In the following, we hypothesize a moderating effect that determines to what extent IAs impact customers' inference of ulterior motives. Specifically, these moderating effects build on the notion of the MIM that individuals consider situational cues about an observed person's motives to resolve the uncertainty regarding the motives of a behavior. We argue a customer's perception of a salesperson's customer orientation constitutes particularly relevant and diagnostic inputs to customers' interpretation of whether the salesperson holds ulterior motives by deploying an IA. Specifically, we propose that IAs do *not* elicit the customer's inference of ulterior motives if the customer perceives cues in the selling interaction indicating high levels of customer orientation.

Customer orientation refers to salespeople's practice of identifying and satisfying customer needs aimed at increasing (long-term) customer satisfaction (Saxe and Weitz 1982). Customer-oriented behavior sharply contrasts with selling approaches that sacrifice customer interests in favor of realizing short-term sales goals. Unlike such rather self-serving selling approaches, customer orientation reflects the salesperson's concern for others as opposed to concern for self (Saxe and Weitz 1982).

A customer-oriented salesperson is likely to demonstrate his or her concern for the customer through words and actions. For instance, a customer-oriented salesperson might act in a caring way, asking questions in order to offer the product that suits the customer best (Saxe and Weitz 1982; Wieseke, Alavi, and Habel 2014). Building on MIM, customers may perceive customer-oriented behavior as a diagnostic, informative cue which customers may use to understand salespeople's motives. Thus, when salespeople use IAs and simultaneously act in a customer-oriented way, a customer may be less likely to resolve his or her uncertainty about the reasons for the salesperson's behavior in a way that suggests ulterior motives. Therefore, we put forth the following:

> $H_3$: Customer orientation negatively moderates the impact of IAs on the inference of ulterior motives.

## Study 2: Understanding the detrimental effects of IAs

The key goal of Study 2 is to develop a more profound understanding of the negative effects of IAs on customers' purchase intentions. To this end, we intend to explore psychological mechanisms underlying the negative effects in this study. Thus, using an experimental design, we test our predictions derived from MIM that IAs evoke customers' inference of ulterior motives, which limits salespeople's manifest influence and thus reduces purchase intention ($H_1$, $H_{2a}$, $H_{2b}$).

### Data collection and sample

We conducted an online scenario experiment using two scenarios in a jewelry retailing context. One scenario described a selling situation in which the salesperson uses IAs to sell a wristwatch, while the other scenario described a salesperson making minimal use of IAs (both scenario descriptions are provided in Appendix 2). Participants were recruited through the online panel provider Amazon Mturk for a nominal monetary incentive. We randomly assigned participants to the two experimental conditions. We asked participants to carefully read the scenario description and to imagine it from the customer's perspective. After reading the scenario, we asked the participants to complete a questionnaire. In total, we collected a sample of 166 respondents, of which 66.9 % were male. The average age was 30.67 years (see Table 1 for descriptive statistics).

To verify the successful manipulation of IAs through the scenario texts, we had participants rate IAs on a scale using the three items from Study 1. In the "high IA" condition, participants indicated the use of IAs to be significantly more pronounced than in the "low IA" condition ($M_{low} = 4.06$; $M_{high} = 5.08$; $t = 3.78$, $p < .01$).

**Measures**

*Measurement sources.* As indicated above, IAs were manipulated through the scenarios we provided to our study's participants. It was thus operationalized using a dummy variable indicating the respective treatment condition (e.g., Bagozzi 1977). To measure the outcome variables, namely, inference of ulterior motives ($\alpha = .85$; CR = .85; AVE = .59), manifest influence of the salesperson ($\alpha = .93$; CR = .94; AVE = .71), and purchase intention, we adapted established scales from prior literature (Kohli and Zaltman 1988; McFarland, Challagalla, and Shervani 2006; Dodds, Monroe, and Grewal 1991). All scales are provided in detail in Appendix 1. As control variables, we included customers' age and gender.

*Measurement validity and reliability.* We inspected Cronbach's alpha and the results from a confirmatory factor analysis (average variance extracted, composite reliability, and the Fornell-Larcker criterion) to ensure adequate reliability and convergent and discriminant validity of the measures. Results of these analyses indicate that the employed measures conform to the criteria recommended by existing research. Please refer to the measurement table in Appendix 1 for the factor loadings.

### Model specification and results

*Model specification.* To verify our hypotheses in this study, we employed a structural path model and estimated it using the software Mplus 7.0 (Muthén and Muthén 2012). We specified the path model depicted in Figure 1 for Study 2. Prior to formally testing the hypotheses, we replicated that IAs exhibit a negative effect on customers' purchase intention to demonstrate consistency to Study 1 ($\beta = -.15$, $p < .05$). With regard to our hypotheses, results show that IAs exhibit a significant positive effect on the inference of ulterior motives ($\beta = .21$, $p < .01$), providing support for $H_1$ (please refer to Table 4 for the full results, Model 5). As expected, the inference of ulterior motives reduces salespeople's manifest influence ($\beta = -.15$, $p < .05$), and manifest influence in turn exhibits a positive effect on the customer's purchase intention ($\beta = .64$, $p < .01$). Consequently, the indirect effect of the inference of ulterior motives on purchase intention via manifest influence is negative and significant ($\beta_{indirect} = -.10$, $p < .05$), providing support for $H_{2b}$. To assess $H_{2a}$, we estimated an additional model (Model 3) in which we specified a direct effect of inference of ulterior motives on purchase intention. Confirming $H_{2a}$ we find that inference of ulterior motives significantly reduces customers' purchase intention ($\beta = -.17$, $p < .05$).

*Robustness check.* To provide support for our proposed mediation chain from IAs over inference of ulterior motives and manifest influence to customers' purchase intention, we estimated a model with an alternative specification. More precisely, we change the order of the mediators inference of ulterior motives and manifest influence and inspected corresponding model fit indices. Results of this model estimation corroborate our initially proposed chain of mediation because the alternative model exhibits considerably weaker model fit indices (fit indices original model: CFI/TLI = 1.00, SRMR = .015, RMSEA = .00; fit indices alternative model: CFI/TLI = .94/.36, SRMR = .04, RMSEA = .19).

---------------------------- Insert Table 4 about here ----------------------------

### Discussion

In line with the exploratory Study 1, in Study 2, we found that, on average, IAs exhibit negative effects on customers' purchase intentions. We offer a more detailed account of this finding by showing that IAs may induce customer inferences of ulterior motives, which reduces salespeople's manifest influence. Our findings also suggest that manifest influence—which prior research on influence tactics has focused on (e.g., McFarland, Challagalla, and Shervani 2006; Kohli and Zaltman 1988)—is only an intermediary outcome of IAs: It is affected by customers' inferences about salespeople's use of IAs and itself affects customers' behavioral intentions.

## Study 3: Consolidating the contingent effects of IAs with research on influence tactics

In Study 2, we examined the effects of IAs on the customer's inference of ulterior motives, which decreases the salesperson's manifest influence and thus the customer's purchase intention. Building on Study 2, our key goal in Study 3 is to replicate and extend our results in a field setting. Hence, in Study 3, we refrained from a laboratory setting that might be afflicted with limited realism and low external validity. Instead, to enhance the external validity of our findings, we conducted a field study in an automobile retail setting. Importantly, we also aimed to test the moderating effect of customers' perceptions of salespeople's customer orientation (see $H_3$).

## Data collection and sample

Similar to our approach in Study 1, we initiated cooperations with local car dealerships and surveyed salespeople's customer orientation in these dealerships using paper-and-pencil questionnaires. Subsequently, our research team of 15 student assistants surveyed customers after interacting with these salespeople, personally administering the respective questionnaires to customers in a secluded area of each dealership. In total, our data set contains 333 salesperson–customer interactions matched to 102 salespeople. Table 1 depicts details on the sample composition. To provide an incentive for customers to participate in our study, we donated 5 € to a local charity organization for each participant.

## Measures

*Measurement sources.* We used scales established in the marketing literature with minor adjustments to reflect the study's context (please refer to Appendix 1 for the sources and the operationalizations of the constructs and to Table 5 for descriptive statistics). IAs are captured by customer ratings, while salespersons' customer orientation is indicated by the salesperson. Finally, we measured the outcome variables (inference of ulterior motives and purchase intention) on the customer level. As in Study 1, this study comprised purchasing as well as non-purchasing customers. To capture those instances with on measure, purchasing customers were instructed to indicate their purchase intentions as very high (=7, "totally agree").

*Controls.* As explained in Study 1, in line with previous research on influence tactics in personal selling (McFarland, Challagalla, and Shervani 2006), we included the influence tactics information exchange, ingratiation, recommendations, threats, and promises as control variables.

Accounting for the potentially intervening influence of those alternative influence tactics is important to isolate effects of IAs. Furthermore, we controlled for the customer's age, gender, and expertise.

*Measurement validity and reliability.* Analogous to Study 2, we assessed the reliability and convergent validity of our measurements by examining Cronbach's alpha, and we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (Diamantopoulos and Winklhofer 2001). All Cronbach's alpha values of the scales exceeded the recommended threshold of .70, except for customer orientation, which falls slightly below this number (Nunnally 1978; for detailed values, please refer to Table 5). In addition, as was evident from the results of the confirmatory factor analysis, our scales lie within the recommended values for composite reliability and average variance extracted (Bagozzi and Yi 1988; Fornell and Larcker 1981). The Fornell-Larcker criterion was met by all variables as well, indicating acceptable discriminant validity of the scales (Fornell and Larcker 1981). Our measurement scales exhibit convergent and discriminant validity as well as acceptable reliability.

*IA validation.* Similar to our approach in Study 1, we checked customers' ratings of salespeople's deployment of IAs against the rating from our research team. Therefore, the team observed the sales conversations unobtrusively from the distance and they independently rated the salesperson's IAs using the same items as those used by the customer. Based on 66 observer ratings of IAs, the within-group interrater agreement (rwg) of this measure between customer and observer responses is .88, which indicates a high match of both rater perceptions (James, Demaree, and Wolf 1984). This result supports the validity of our IA measurement in this particular context.

--------------------------- Insert Table 5 about here ---------------------------

## Model specification and sensitivity analysis

In Study 3, as in Study 1, several customers are matched to a single salesperson. Thus, the observations in the data set are not independent from each other ($ICC_{\text{Inference of Ulterior Motives}} = .10$; $ICC_{\text{Purchase Intention}} = .15$), which required us to explore the data using a multilevel estimator (Hox 2010). In our model, the variables provided by the customer reside at level 1, while customer orientation is placed at level 2.

We centered all predictor variables on their grand mean before the model estimation to reduce potential multicollinearity and facilitate the interpretation of the interaction effects (Hofmann and Gavin 1998). Since customer orientation is conceptualized as level 2 variable, we integrated a cross-level interaction in order to analyze the hypothesized moderation effect.

## Results

We estimated two path models to test our hypotheses (see Table 6). First, we specified a model with main effects and control variables only (Model 1). Second, to explore the moderating effect of the salesperson’s customer orientation, we added the interaction effect of IA and customer orientation (Model 2). In the following, we concentrate on the results of Model 2.

*Main effects.* Prior to formally testing the hypotheses, we replicated that IAs exhibit a negative effect on customers’ purchase intention to demonstrate consistency to Studies 1 and 2 (b = -.15, $p < .10$). Regarding the main effects in our conceptual framework, we find that inference of ulterior motives is significantly driven by the usage of IAs, supporting $H_1$ (b = .13, $p < .01$). Additionally, the inference of ulterior motives has a significant negative effect on the customer’s purchase intention (b = -.26, $p < .05$), confirming $H_{2a}$.

*Customer orientation of the salesperson.* We hypothesized a negative interaction effect of IAs with salespeople’s customer orientation ($H_3$). The interaction coefficient for customer orientation (b = -.15, $p < .01$) is significantly negative, which supports $H_3$. The interaction plot is depicted in Figure 3. A simple slope analysis further corroborates $H_3$: while the effect of IAs on inference of ulterior motives is not significant for high customer orientation (b = .03, ns; customer orientation at one standard deviation above the mean), IAs strongly increase customers' inferences of ulterior motives for low customer orientation (b = .22, p < .01; customer orientation at one standard deviation below the mean).

--------------------------- Insert Table 6 about here ---------------------------

--------------------------- Insert Figure 3 about here ---------------------------

## Discussion

Fully in line with Study 2, we found that, on average, IAs exhibit negative effects on purchase intentions as they evoke inferences of ulterior motives. In addition, this detrimental effect is contingent on salespeople's customer orientation. In line with the MIM, a salesperson's customer orientation may resolve customers' perceived ambiguity about salespeople's motives. Ultimately, Study 3 enhances the external validity of our findings, as it replicates the findings from Studies 1 and 2 in a field setting.

# General discussion

## Research issues

Results of our studies highlight that IAs on average exhibit harmful effects on customers' purchase intentions. This detrimental effect is particularly pronounced if salespeople's customer orientation is low and attenuated if salespeople act highly customer-oriented. With this core finding our paper makes a significant contribution to sales research because it resolves the lack of clarity regarding whether IAs in fact exhibit beneficial or harmful effects on customers. While works pertaining to the "service with a smile" research stream (e.g., Hennig-Thurau et al. 2006) suggest a positive effect of IAs, literature on stereotypes and suspicion against salespeople (e.g., DeCarlo 2005) rather point to a detrimental effect of IAs in selling encounters. Resolving these opposing viewpoints, our results uncover rather harmful effects of IAs and hence indicate that the salesperson suspicion literature is more pertinent to the examination of IAs.

More specifically, our findings provide implications for three research streams: (1) influence tactics, (2) buyer–seller interactions in retailing, and (3) the MIM. First, regarding the influence tactics literature, our study provides insight into the outcomes and contingencies of IAs in personal selling. This contribution is essential, as, to date, there is only limited academic evidence on IAs in this context (e.g., Capon 1975; McFarland, Challagalla, and Shervani 2006; Plouffe, Bolander, and Cote 2014). Our studies provide insight into this research void and indicate that a contingency approach accounting for customers' perceptions of salesperson behavior is not optional but is obligatory to extract meaningful insights into IAs. Further research should build on our work in order to identify additional moderators (e.g., the cultural context, demographic and socioeconomic variables).

Second, with regard to buyer–seller interactions in retailing (e.g., Alavi et al. 2017; Pugh 2001; Barsade 2002; Rafaeli and Sutton 1989; Tsai and Huang 2002; Grant 2013; Plouffe, Bolander, and Cote 2014; Wieseke, Alavi, and Habel 2014), our study shows that IAs are likely to exhibit a detrimental effect on customer's purchase intentions. Arguments in the academic literature do not yet depict a clear picture concerning the outcomes of IAs. While some researchers have supported a positive view of IAs, others have advocated a negative view.

Our findings on the potentially harmful effects of IAs need to be interpreted in light of today's customers who are highly informed with respect to influence attempts (Holmes et al. 2017). Customers' heightened levels of persuasion knowledge may cast doubts about the effectiveness of influence tactics that are prone to elicit ambivalent motive attributions. In this respect, our findings are in line with Capon (1975), who proposed a supremacy of informative over emotional persuasion attempts: as illustrated by our results, IAs may easily induce customers' inference of salespeople's ulterior motives if not accompanied by appropriate signals. Conversely, our data indicates tentative support for beneficial effects of information exchange (a control variable) because information exchange correlates positively with customers' purchase intentions across all our studies. While consequences of information exchange have not been central to our study, we regard it as a worthwhile endeavor for future research to compare the relative effectiveness of information-based vs. emotion-based salesperson communication strategies in personal selling.

Furthermore, our study revealed that explicitly displaying customer-oriented behaviors to customers might be a key driver of a less detrimental interpretation of IAs with respect to the inference of ulterior salesperson motives. Beyond customer orientation, the salesperson might provide additional signals that indicate his or her well-meaning intentions toward the customer, such as the signal that an option is costly to the salesperson and hence credible (Moorthy and Srinivasan 1995), such as the provision of a money back guarantee if the customer is unsatisfied with the purchase. Previous research has also shown that perceived salesperson motives toward the customer might depend on their commission (Straughan and Lynn 2002). Consequently, exploring the interactive effects of IAs and salespeople's compensation scheme may represent an interesting avenue for future research.

Third, our study contributes to literature on the MIM (Reeder et al. 2002; Reeder 2009; Gawronski 2009; Verlegh et al. 2013) by showing that it provides a solid theoretical fundament in explaining the versatile effects of IAs on customer outcomes. By deploying the MIM as a theoretical basis, we were able to provide evidence of both mediators and moderators of the psychological mechanisms underlying the influence process through IAs. Moreover, our findings are in line with previous works rooted in attribution theory (Kelley 1973; Folkes 1988) concerning the discounting principle. Specifically, salespeople's honest motives that might be associated with the use of IAs might be discounted by customers if self-serving motives of salespeople such as "making a quick sale" are salient in customers' minds.

## Managerial implications

Findings of our study provide actionable implications to salespeople and sales managers. As discussed previously, IAs are a prevalent and widely promoted tactic among practitioners. However, our study shows that salespeople are at risk of using this influence tactic to their own disadvantage when combined with the wrong behaviors. As our analysis showed, IAs do not drive the inference of ulterior motives if the customer perceives the salesperson to be highly customer-oriented. Thus, an important implication is that whenever salespeople choose to use an IA, they should combine it with a display of cues indicating a salesperson's customer orientation. For instance, it might be helpful to show interest in the customer's needs by listening to the customer (Ramsey and Sohi 1997) and to offer products that suit the customer's needs (Saxe and Weitz 1982).

Moreover, our findings provide direct implications for sales managers seeking to optimize their sales force's communication with customers. We envision at least three measures for sales managers to safeguard salespeople from unintended effects of IAs: training, adjustment of selling scripts, and monitoring. First, a basic measure for sales managers to counter harmful effects of IAs is to implement salesperson trainings which need to achieve two goals: (1) sensitize salespeople to the suspicion-arousing effects of IAs if inappropriately applied. The importance of this sensitization cannot be emphasized enough, seeing the ubiquitous use of IAs in sales practice. (2) Such sales trainings need to establish and unequivocally convey that salespeople's IAs should necessarily be accompanied by displays of customer-oriented behavior. Hereby, salespeople should rehearse customer-oriented behaviors such as listening, inquiring needs, and problem solving and specifically, train these behaviors' combined application with IAs. Role playing exercises where salespeople assume either the role of a customer and salesperson in turn may be particularly viable to make the application and consequences of the right versus wrong application of IAs palpable.

Second, seeing the potential harmful effects of IAs in selling encounters, we recommend managers to establish informative communication as a basic starting point of salespeople's selling scripts with customers. In other words, sales managers should set more information-based selling strategies such as information exchange as the standard mode of salespeople's communication with customers. On the basis of this standard, salespeople may adaptively employ IAs with interaction-oriented customers (see McFarland, Challagalla, and Shervani 2006) and accompanied by clear displays of customer orientation.

Third, we recommend sales managers to proactively monitor and manage salespeople's use of IAs in selling encounter. To this end, sales managers should participate in selected salespeople's selling encounters (at least occasionally) to track salespeople's use of IAs. This measure endows sales managers with the insights to what extent their salespeople rely on IAs and whether they apply it appropriately. Participating in their salespeople's encounters enables sales managers to effectively direct their use of IAs and prevent detrimental consequences.

## Limitations and future research

Our studies have several limitations that need to be acknowledged while providing avenues for further research. First, our studies may be subject to a possible common method bias because several variables were retrieved from the same source (Podsakoff et al. 2003). To rule out that common method variance unduly affected our results, we took several countermeasures, e.g., reassuring our respondents that their data would be treated strictly confidential and that there were no right or wrong answers. Furthermore, problems resulting from common method biases tend to decrease within moderation analyses (Chang, van Witteloostuijn, and Eden 2010). In this respect, to enhance the rigor of the analysis of IAs and create new avenues for research, future works should employ dyadic customer-salesperson interaction data. In particular, measuring and comparing IAs from salespeople's as well as customers' perspective might constitute a worthwhile endeavor since prior sales research established that there may be considerable discrepancies between a salesperson's intended strategy and the strategy perceived by customers (Alavi, Wieseke, and Guba 2016; Mullins et al. 2014)

Second, it has to be taken into account that all of the studies were conducted within a European retail environment, which might be different from other markets with regard to cultural features. IAs might work differently in other countries with differing degrees of uncertainty avoidance, masculinity, or collectivism (Hofstede 1984). It would therefore be beneficial to replicate and thereby enhance the generalizability of our findings in other cultural contexts. Moreover, building on recent works in sales research (e.g., Hohenberg and Homburg 2016; Homburg et al. 2017), exploring the impact of cultural factors on the effectiveness of IAs might generate results which significantly expand knowledge on customers' reactions to salesperson influence tactics. For instance, IAs might exhibit particularly harmful effects in cultures where individuals possess a relatively high tendency to avoid uncertainty. In such circumstances, the perceived motive ambiguity potentially induced by IAs may prove especially detrimental to selling success. In other words, we suggest that a cultural lens on contingent effects of IAs may inform future sales research on meaningful general psychological mechanism underlying the IA–selling success relationship. In this respect, it is worth mentioning that the relationship between IAs and customer inferences of ulterior selling motives may additionally be affected by customer characteristics. For instance, extant research clarified that individuals differ regarding their need for affect which might shape their reactions to IAs (Maio and Esses 2001). However, further customer contingencies may be conceivable, or instance, regarding customers' information processing or decision making style (Habel et al. 2016). More precisely, the effectiveness of IAs might depend on whether customers tend to process information and decide more heuristically (i.e., quickly with a minimum of information) or systematically (i.e., deliberately with a broad information base).

Third, in Study 3 the direct effect of IAs on customers' purchase intention is sensitive to the inclusion of alternative influence tactics as control variables. This might point to a potential interplay between IAs and alternative salesperson influence tactics (Plouffe, Bolander, and Cote 2014; Frazier and Summers 1984). Consequently, a worthwhile endeavor for future research may be to explore how effects of IAs on customers' purchase intentions and inferences of ulterior motives depend on the use of alternative influence tactics. For instance, results of Study 3 show that IAs do not trigger customers' inferences of ulterior motives if salespeople act in customers' best interest. In line with this reasoning, combining IAs with ingratiation might enhance the effectiveness of IAs for selling success because, similar to customer orientation, ingratiation indicates well-meaning intentions towards the customer. Conversely, attempting to apply IAs and threats simultaneously might prove highly detrimental for the instrumentality of IAs.

Eventually, this paper’s starting point focused on the notion that emotions may constitute a powerful influence on customer behavior in general, and customers’ purchase decisions in particular. While this work concentrated on investigating potential drawbacks for salespeople related to appealing to customers’ emotions, future research might shift the focus to harnessing the potential of IAs. That is, we regard it as a viable and highly interesting topic for future research to explore specific communication factors or strategies to leverage the potential of IAs. For this purpose, we envision three specific avenues to progress: (1) the effectiveness of IAs may depend on which emotions, ideals, or values in detail are targeted. For instance, different effects of IAs may emerge depending on whether a salesperson appeals to customers’ need for achievement as compared to customers’ need to belong (Schwartz 1994). (2) Since the effect of IAs may hinge on whether customers perceive the appeal as honest and authentic, salespeople might improve IAs’ effectiveness by giving evidence that the appeal is authentic. Such a “proof of conviction” might be if the salesperson himself or herself uses the product and can illustrate narratively the product experience. (3) Ultimately, whether IAs improve or harm selling outcomes may depend on the salespeople’s specific delivery of the appeal. Based on the notion, that there may be an optimum for the intensity with which salespeople should approach customers (Grant 2013), it may be a worthwhile endeavor for future research to explore the possibility of curvilinear relationships between IAs and selling outcomes.

# TABLE 1 – Studies 1, 2, and 3: Sample Description

**Study 1**

| Industry | % |
|---|---|
| Jewelry | 37.9 |
| Furniture | 10.7 |
| Electronics | 15.7 |
| Fashion | 5.7 |
| Other | 30.0 |
| **Gender** | **Customers %** |
| Male | 49.3 |
| Female | 50.7 |
| **Further demographics** | **Average years** |
| Age | 41.7 |

**Study 2**

| Gender | Customers % |
|---|---|
| Male | 66.9 |
| Female | 33.1 |
| **Further demographics** | **Average years** |
| Age | 30.67 |

**Study 3**

| Gender | Customers % | Salespeople % |
|---|---|---|
| Male | 64.0 | 86.0 |
| Female | 36.0 | 14.0 |
| **Further demographics** | **Average years** | **Average years** |
| Age | 43.1 | 36.0 |
| Years of job experience | — | 12.4 |

# TABLE 2 – Study 1: Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

| Variable | V1 | V2 | V3 | V4 | V5 | V6 | V7 | V8 | V9 | V10 | V11 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| V1: Inspirational Appeals | | | | | | | | | | | |
| V2: Information Exchange | .48** | | | | | | | | | | |
| V3: Purchase Intention | .05 | .20* | | | | | | | | | |
| V4: Ingratiation | .54** | .19* | .03 | | | | | | | | |
| V5: Recommendations | .45** | .47** | .02 | .23** | | | | | | | |
| V6: Threats | .37** | .11 | .01 | .33** | .22** | | | | | | |
| V7: Promises | .60** | .35** | .15 | .43** | .52** | .39** | | | | | |
| V8: Customer Age | -.14 | .05 | -.02 | -.10 | -.09 | .07 | -.19* | | | | |
| V9: Customer Gender | .11 | .06 | -.01 | .06 | -.04 | -.01 | .19* | -.15 | | | |
| V10: Salesperson Expertise | .35** | .49** | .28** | .18* | .26** | -.05 | .23** | -.14 | -.04 | | |
| V11: Customer Expertise | .13 | .09 | .05 | .22** | .03 | .08 | .05 | .03 | .29** | .03 | |
| **M** | 4.09 | 5.59 | 5.84 | 2.86 | 4.69 | 1.89 | 3.66 | 41.68 | .49 | 6.00 | 3.32 |
| **SD** | 1.49 | 1.17 | 1.60 | 1.59 | 1.61 | 1.39 | 1.85 | 14.85 | .50 | 1.01 | 1.61 |
| **α** | .83 | .78 | —[a] | —[b] | .93 | —[b] | .86 | —[a] | —[c] | .87 | .93 |
| **AVE** | .61 | .59 | —[a] | —[b] | .81 | —[b] | .68 | —[a] | —[c] | .69 | .79 |
| **CR** | .83 | .81 | —[a] | —[b] | .93 | —[b] | .86 | —[a] | —[c] | .87 | .94 |

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$ (two-tailed)

Note: M = mean, SD = Standard Deviation, α = Cronbach's alpha, AVE = average variance extracted, CR = composite reliability

[a] Single-item variable

[b] Two-item variable

[c] Dummy variable

## TABLE 3 – Study 1: Estimated Path Coefficients

| **Estimated Effect** | | **Standardized Estimated Coefficients** |
|---|---|---|
| **Focal Effect** | | |
| **Inspirational Appeals** | **→ Purchase Intention** | -.20** |
| **Control Variables: Remaining Influence Tactics** | | |
| Ingratiation | → Purchase Intention | n.s. |
| Recommendations | → Purchase Intention | -.17* |
| Threats | → Purchase Intention | n.s. |
| Promises | → Purchase Intention | .17* |
| Information Exchange | → Purchase Intention | n.s. |
| **Control Variables: Other** | | |
| Customer Age | → Purchase Intention | n.s. |
| Customer Gender | → Purchase Intention | n.s. |
| Salesperson Expertise | → Purchase Intention | .23*** |
| Customer Expertise | → Purchase Intention | n.s. |
| Industry Dummies | → Purchase Intention | *included* |
| $R^2$ Purchase Intention | | .42*** |

n.s. *p* > .10, * *p* < .10, ** *p* < .05, *** *p* < .01 (two-tailed); Notes: We report standardized coefficients.

# TABLE 4 – Study 2: Estimated Path Coefficients

| Path | | | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 3 | Model 4 | Model 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | Direct Effect Model | Direct Effect Model, with Controls | Direct Effect Model, Purchase Intention on Ulterior Motives | Full Model, no Controls | Full Model, with Controls |
| **Main Effects** | | | | | | | |
| Inspirational Appeals | → Inference of Ulterior Motives | $H_1$: + | — | — | .21** | .21** | .21** |
| Inference of Ulterior Motives | → Purchase Intention | $H_{2a}$: - | — | — | -.17* | n.s. | n.s. |
| Inference of Ulterior Motives | → Manifest Influence | $H_{2b}$: -[a] | — | — | — | -.16* | -.15* |
| Manifest Influence | → Purchase Intention | | — | — | — | .65** | .64* |
| **Controlled Effects** | | | | | | | |
| Inspirational Appeals | → Purchase Intention | | -.15* | -.15* | n.s. | n.s. | n.s. |
| Customer Age | → Inference of Ulterior Motives | | — | — | — | — | n.s. |
| Customer Gender | → Inference of Ulterior Motives | | — | — | — | — | n.s. |
| Customer Age | → Manifest Influence | | — | — | — | — | n.s. |
| Customer Gender | → Manifest Influence | | — | — | — | — | n.s. |
| Customer Age | → Purchase Intention | | — | -.18* | — | — | -.11* |
| Customer Gender | → Purchase Intention | | — | n.s. | — | — | n.s. |
| **Model Fit** | | | | | | | |
| $R^2_{\text{Purchase Intention}}$ | | | n.s. | .06* | .05* | .45** | .46** |

n.s. $p > .05$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$ (two-tailed); Notes: We report standardized coefficients. [a] Indirect effect hypothesized.

# TABLE 5 – Study 3: Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

| Variable | V1 | V2 | V3 | V4 | V5 | V6 | V7 | V8 | V9 | V10 | V11 | V12 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| V1: Inspirational Appeals | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| V2: Inference of Ulterior Motives | .05 | | | | | | | | | | | |
| V3: Purchase Intention | .19** | -.21** | | | | | | | | | | |
| V4: Customer Orientation | .05 | .01 | .00 | | | | | | | | | |
| V5: Information Exchange | .45** | -.25** | .42** | .05 | | | | | | | | |
| V6: Ingratiation | .56** | -13* | .26** | .06 | .40** | | | | | | | |
| V7: Recommendations | .55** | -.11* | .38** | .08 | .53** | .44** | | | | | | |
| V8: Threats | .20** | .26** | -.10 | .03 | .08 | .06 | .17** | | | | | |
| V9: Promises | .59** | .05 | .22** | .08 | .34** | .45** | .50** | .19** | | | | |
| V10: Customer Age | .04 | -.19** | .12* | .14* | .18** | .06 | .12* | -.12* | -.03 | | | |
| V11: Customer Gender | -.11 | .11* | -.12* | .02 | -.08 | -.05 | -.04 | .07 | -.08 | .08 | | |
| V12: Customer Expertise | .04 | .04 | .09 | | .03 | .01 | .01 | .02 | .01 | .11* | .30** | |
| **M** | 3.79 | 1.60 | 5.42 | 6.34 | 5.15 | 3.42 | 4.47 | 1.41 | 3.60 | 43.05 | .64 | 3.91 |
| **SD** | 1.60 | .88 | 1.71 | .65 | 1.47 | 1.58 | 1.77 | 1.05 | 1.79 | 14.30 | .48 | 1.62 |
| **α** | .82 | .74 | —[a] | .69 | .76 | —[b] | .94 | —[b] | .84 | —[a] | —[c] | .90 |
| **AVE** | .62 | .50 | —[a] | .51 | .54 | —[b] | .85 | —[b] | .64 | —[a] | —[c] | .70 |
| **CR** | .82 | .83 | —[a] | .78 | .78 | —[b] | .94 | —[b] | .84 | —[a] | —[c] | .90 |

* *p* < .05, ** *p* < .01 (two-tailed)

Note: M = mean, SD = Standard Deviation, α = Cronbach's alpha, AVE = average variance extracted, CR = composite reliability

[a] Single-item variable

[b] Two-item variable

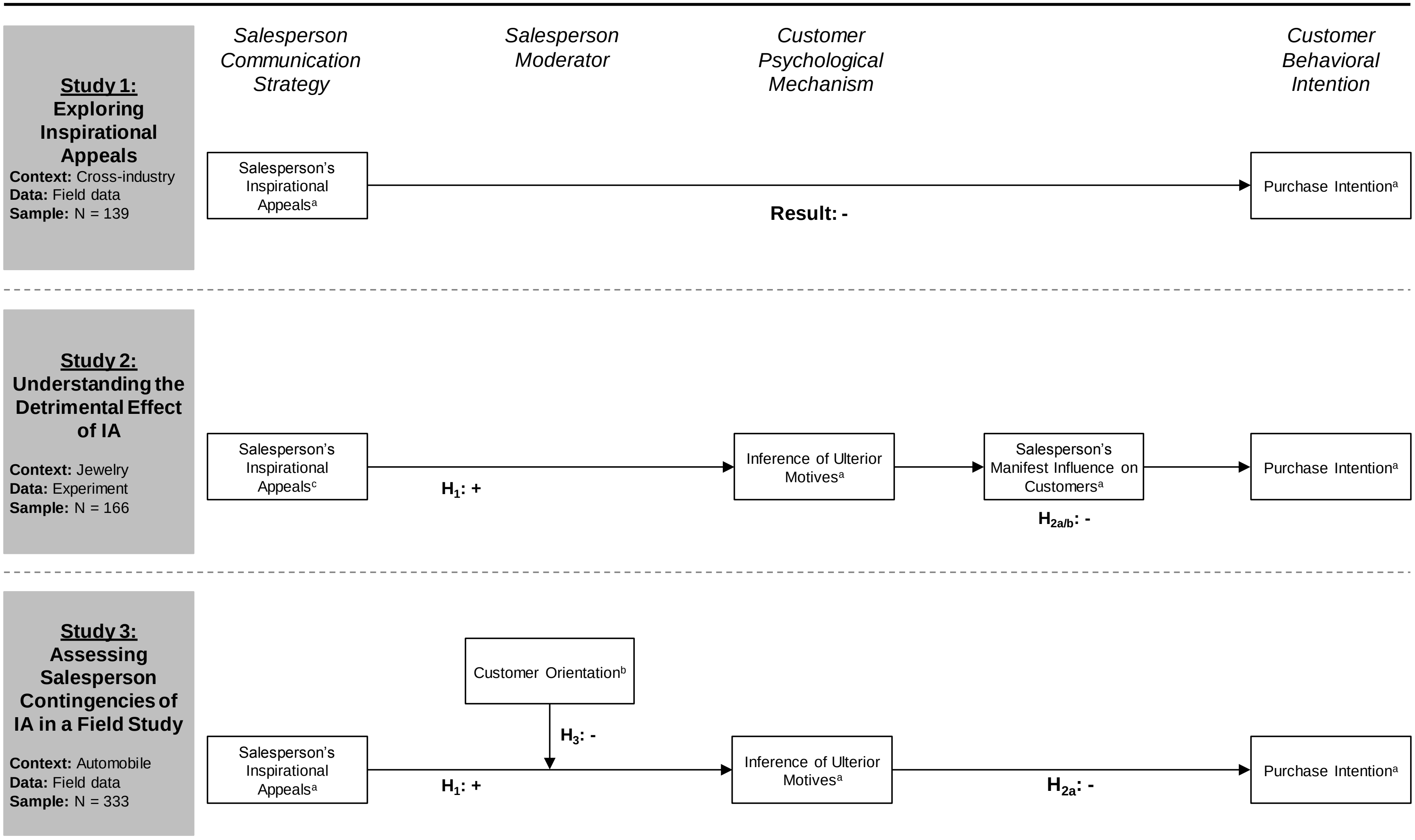
[c] Dummy variable

# TABLE 6 – Study 3: Estimated Path Coefficients

| Path | | | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 3 | Hypothesis Confirmed? |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | Direct Effect Model | Main Effects Model | Full Model | |
| **Main Effects** | | | | | | |
| Inspirational Appeals | → Inference of Ulterior Motives | $H_1$:+ | — | .12*** | .13*** | Yes |
| Inference of Ulterior Motives | → Purchase Intention | $H_{2a}$: - | — | -.26** | -.26** | Yes |
| Customer Orientation | → Inference of Ulterior Motives | | — | | n.s. | |
| **Moderating Effects** | | | | | | |
| Inspirational Appeals × Customer Orientation | → Inference of Ulterior Motives | $H_3$: - | — | — | -.15*** | Yes |
| **Control Variables: Remaining Influence Tactics** | | | | | | |
| Information Exchange | → Inference of Ulterior Motives | | — | -.16*** | -.16*** | |
| Ingratiation | → Inference of Ulterior Motives | | — | -.07** | -.07** | |
| Recommendations | → Inference of Ulterior Motives | | — | -.05* | -.05* | |
| Threats | → Inference of Ulterior Motives | | — | .18*** | .19*** | |
| Promises | → Inference of Ulterior Motives | | — | n.s. | n.s. | |
| Inspirational Appeals | → Purchase Intention | | -.15* | n.s. | n.s. | |
| Information Exchange | → Purchase Intention | | .34*** | .43*** | .43*** | |
| Ingratiation | → Purchase Intention | | .10* | — | — | |
| Recommendations | → Purchase Intention | | .25*** | — | — | |
| Threats | → Purchase Intention | | -.21** | — | — | |
| Promises | → Purchase Intention | | n.s. | — | — | |
| **Control Variables: Other** | | | | | | |
| Customer Age | → Inference of Ulterior Motives | | — | -.01** | -.01** | |
| Customer Gender | → Inference of Ulterior Motives | | — | .19** | n.s. | |
| Customer Expertise | → Inference of Ulterior Motives | | — | n.s. | n.s. | |
| Customer Age | → Purchase Intention | | n.s. | — | — | |
| Customer Gender | → Purchase Intention | | -.43** | — | — | |
| Customer Expertise | → Purchase Intention | | .12** | — | — | |
| **Model Fit** | | | | | | |
| Log-likelihood | | | — | -938.59 | -933.97 | |
| Δ Degrees of Freedom | | | — | — | 1 | |
| -2*Log-likelihood change (compared to Model 1) | | | — | — | 9.24*** | |

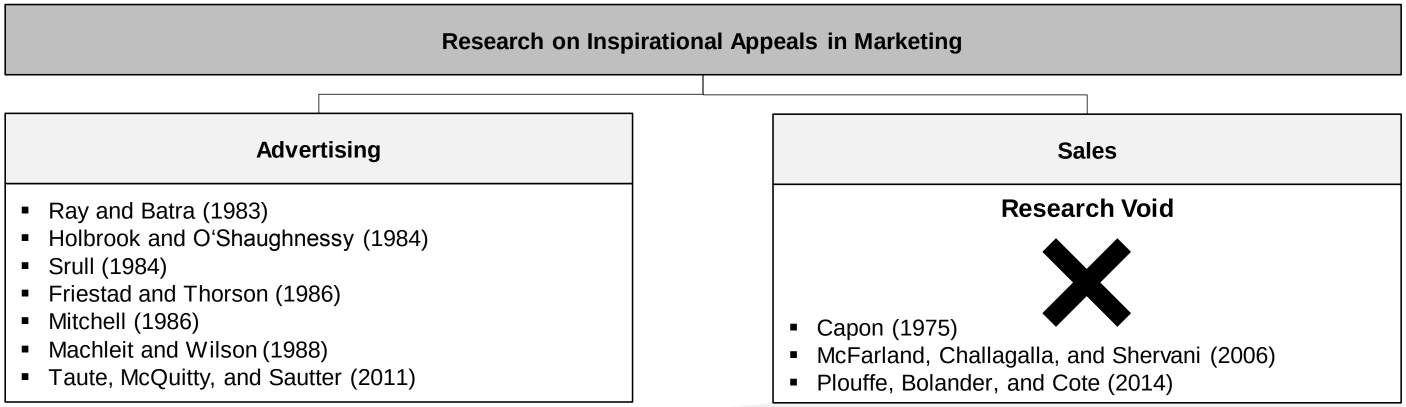
n.s. *p* > .10, * *p* < .10, ** *p* < .05, *** *p* < .01 (two-tailed); Notes: We report unstandardized coefficients, as the model estimations comprise cross-level interactions.

FIGURE 1 – Conceptual Framework / Study Overview


Salesperson Communication Strategy
Salesperson Moderator
Customer Psychological Mechanism
Customer Behavioral Intention
Study 1: Exploring Inspirational Appeals
Context: Cross-industry
Data: Field data
Sample: N = 139
Salesperson's Inspirational Appeals^a
Purchase Intention^a
Result: -
Study 2: Understanding the Detrimental Effect of IA
Context: Jewelry
Data: Experiment
Sample: N = 166
Salesperson's Inspirational Appeals^c
H1: +
Inference of Ulterior Motives^a
Salesperson's Manifest Influence on Customers^a
H2a/b: -
Purchase Intention^a
Study 3: Assessing Salesperson Contingencies of IA in a Field Study
Context: Automobile
Data: Field data
Sample: N = 333
Customer Orientation^b
H3: -
Salesperson's Inspirational Appeals^a
H1: +
Inference of Ulterior Motives^a
H2a: -
Purchase Intention^a

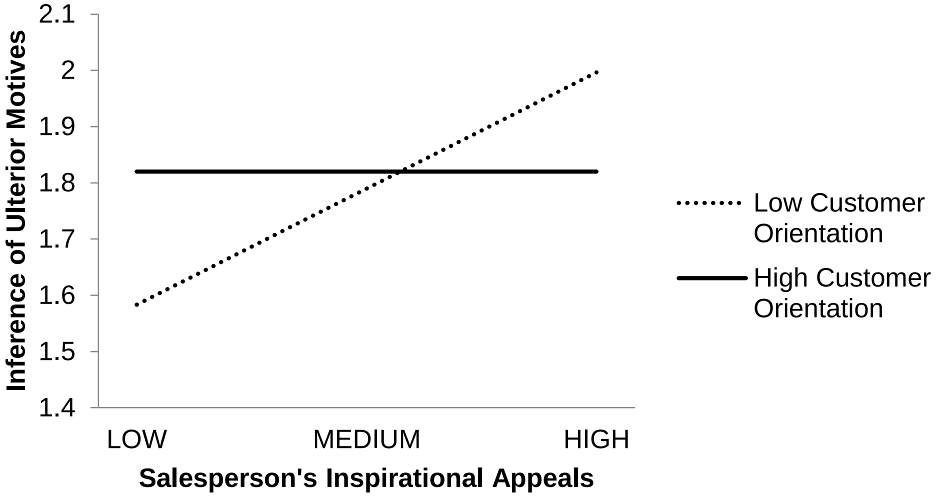
[a] customer data, [b] salesperson data, [c] manipulated

## FIGURE 2 – Literature Overview


Research on Inspirational Appeals in Marketing
Advertising
Ray and Batra (1983)
Holbrook and O'Shaughnessy (1984)
Srull (1984)
Friestad and Thorson (1986)
Mitchell (1986)
Machleit and Wilson (1988)
Taute, McQuitty, and Sautter (2011)
Sales
Research Void
Capon (1975)
McFarland, Challagalla, and Shervani (2006)
Plouffe, Bolander, and Cote (2014)

| Reference | Actual Purchase Variables Included? | Moderators Included? | Salesperson *and* Customer Factors Included? | Multiple Industries Studied? | Sample Size | Key Findings on IAs |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Capon (1975) | ✓ | ✓ | ✗ | ✗ | n = 44 | IAs foster the compliance of the customer, but are nonetheless inferior to cognitive persuasion attempts |
| McFarland, Challagalla, and Shervani (2006) | ✗ | ✓ | ✗ | ✗ | n = 193 | IAs are successful in enhancing manifest influence only under the condition of an interaction-oriented customer |
| Plouffe, Bolander, and Cote (2014) | ✓ | ✓ | ✗ | ✓ | n = 301 | IAs are successful in enhancing performance if salespeople have an “enthusiastic” selling style |
| Our Study | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | n = 638 | IAs decrease customers’ purchase intention, especially if customer orientation is low |

## FIGURE 3 – Interaction Plot for Study 3



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# Appendix 1: Measurements

| Main Constructs | Definition | Item Loadings | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Study 1 | Study 2 | Study 3 |
| *Inspirational Appeals* (IAs; based on McFarland, Challagalla, and Shervani 2006)[4]<br>The salesperson … | "[…] a request or proposal that arouses enthusiasm by appealing to a target's values, ideals, and aspirations" (Yukl and Tracey 1992, 526). | | — | |
| 1. … tried to get me excited about the product.[1,3] | | .786 | | .842 |
| 2. … described the advantages of the product with enthusiasm and conviction.[1,3] | | .855 | | .858 |
| 3. … frequently appealed to my emotions during the sales pitch.[1,3] | | .716 | | .639 |
| *Information Exchange* (based on McFarland, Challagalla, and Shervani 2006)[4]<br>The salesperson … | "Information exchange involves the communication of information, including asking questions, without making any specific recommendations […]" (McFarland, Challagalla, and Shervani 2006, 105). | | — | |
| 1. … tried to convince me via information about the product.[1,3] | | .543 | | .693 |
| 2. … explained the different features of the product to me.[1,3] | | .926 | | .822 |
| 3. … ensured that I received all product information materials relevant to my purchasing decision.[1,3] | | .790 | | .673 |
| *Inference of Ulterior Motives* (in accordance with DeCarlo 2005)[4] | The customer's conclusion that the salesperson holds ulterior motives toward him/her (DeCarlo 2005). | — | | |
| 1. The salesperson has ulterior motives.[2,3] | | | .810 | .550 |
| 2. The salesperson wanted to close the deal regardless of my individual needs.[2,3] | | | .800 | .605 |
| 3, The salesperson tried to sell more than I needed. [2,3] | | | .711 | .731 |
| 4. The salesperson was more interested in his/her own opinion than in mine.[3] | | | | .764 |
| 5. The salesperson's behavior seemed insincere.[2,3] | | | .740 | .838 |
| *Manifest Influence* (based on McFarland, Challagalla, and Shervani 2006)[5] | The customer's "changes in purchase decision-related opinions and behaviors" (Kohli and Zaltman 1988, 198) resulting from the salesperson's involvement in the decision making process. | — | | — |
| 1. How much weight did you give to the salesperson's opinion before making the purchase decision?[2] | | | .842 | |
| 2. How much impact did the salesperson have on your purchase decision?[2] | | | .880 | |
| 3. To what extent did the salesperson's involvement influence your choice?[2] | | | .846 | |
| 4. How much weight did you give the salesperson's statements in making your decision?[2] | | | .875 | |
| 5. To what extent did you go along with the salesperson's suggestions?[2] | | | .780 | |
| 6. To what extent did the salesperson influence the criteria used for making your purchase decision?[2] | | | .819 | |
| *Purchase Intention* (based on Dodds, Monroe, and Grewal 1991)[4]<br>1. It is very likely that I will purchase this product at this store.[1,2,3] | Customers' rating of the likelihood that they will buy the focal product at this store. | — | — | — |
| **Moderator Variables** | | | | |
| *Customer Orientation* (based on Thomas, Soutar, and Ryan 2001)[4] | "[T]he practice of the marketing concept at the level of the individual salesperson and customer" (Saxe and Weitz 1982, 343) | — | — | |
| 1. I try to figure out what a customer's needs are.[3] | | | | .479 |
| 2. I have the customer's best interest in mind.[3] | | | | .321 |
| 3. I offer the products that is best suited to the customer's needs.[3] | | | | .949 |
| 4. I try to find out what kind of product or solution would be most helpful to a customer.[3] | | | | .890 |
| **Control Variables** | | | | |
| *Ingratiation* (based on McFarland, Challagalla, and Shervani 2006)[4]<br>The salesperson …<br>1. ... sympathized with me about the added problems that the purchase caused.[3]<br>2. … complimented and praised me.[1,3]<br>3. … discussed shared interests and hobbies prior to discussing sales issues.[1] | "[…] praising a customer for his or her achievements (other enhancement) and expressing attitude similarity" (McFarland, Challagalla, and Shervani 2006, 105). | — | — | — |
| *Recommendations* (based on McFarland, Challagalla, and Shervani 2006)[4]<br>The salesperson … | "[…] arguments used to convince a customer that products or services purchased from the salesperson would be beneficial to the [customer]" (McFarland, Challagalla, and Shervani 2006, 105). | | — | |
| 1. … made it clear that I would benefit by following his or her recommendations.[1,3] | | .903 | | .876 |
| 2. … provided a clear picture of the positive impact a recommended course of action would have.[1,3] | | .909 | | .946 |
| 3. … made it explicit, when making a suggestion, that it was intended for my own good.[1,3] | | .886 | | .939 |
| *Threats* (own scale)[4]<br>The salesperson…<br>1. … indicated that it would be detrimental for me if I did not buy the product at this store.[1,3]<br>2. … described disadvantages I would experience if I did not buy the product at this store. [1,3] | "[…] implied or stated negative sanctions that the salesperson asserts will be applied to the [customer] if the [customer] does not comply with the seller's request" (McFarland, Challagalla, and Shervani 2006, 105). | — | — | — |
| *Promises* (based on McFarland, Challagalla, and Shervani 2006)[4]<br>The salesperson… | "[…] pledges of future rewards for the buyer's firm" (McFarland, Challagalla, and Shervani 2006, 105). | | — | |
| 1. … described advantages I would experience if I bought the product at this store.[3] | | .836 | | .804 |
| 2. … offered an additional benefit to me for buying the product at this store.[3] | | .852 | | .752 |
| 3. … indicated that the purchase would be beneficial to me in the long run.[3] | | .780 | | .845 |

|  |  |  |  |  |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Price Orientation* (own scale)[4]<br>When buying a product in this category, price is a very important factor in my decision making process.[3] | Reflects the importance of price in the hierarchy of customer needs (e.g., Homburg, Wieseke, and Bornemann 2009). | — | — | — |
| *Salesperson Expertise* (own scale)[4]<br>The salesperson … | The salesperson's "perceived level of knowledge that is relevant to the buyer-seller-exchange relationship" (Belonax, Newell, and Plank 2007, 429; Sharma 1990). |  |  |  |
| 1. … knew what he or she was talking about when describing the product to me.[1] |  | .701 | — | — |
| 2. … was an excellent source for precise information about the product.[1] |  | .901 |  |  |
| 3. … was well-informed about the product.[1] |  | .780 |  |  |
| *Customer Expertise* (Wagner, Klein, and Keith 2001)[4] |  |  |  |  |
| 1. I know enough about x [product type] to consider myself an expert.[1,3] | Customers' subjectively perceived knowledge about a product category | .83 | — | .85 |
| 2. I know very well which attributes are important when buying x.[1,3] |  | .88 |  | .78 |
| 3. If a friend bought x, I am a reliable source of information.[1,3] |  | .93 |  | .93 |
| 4. I think, I possess more knowledge about x than the average shopper.[1,3] |  | .91 |  | .79 |

[1] used in Study 1, [2] used in Study 2, [3] used in Study 3, [4] measured on a seven-point scale: "totally disagree" to "totally agree", [5] measured on a seven-point scale: "very little" to "very much", [6] semantic differential with a seven-point scale

## Appendix 2: Manipulated Scenarios for Study 2

### High Inspirational Appeals

Please imagine the following scenario. Bob is a salesperson at a jewelry store. You meet Bob when shopping for a new wristwatch. While talking to Bob, you identify a wristwatch that you like. Bob explains: “The armband of this piece of art is made of comforting leather. It naturally embraces the skin and makes it a true pleasure to wear. The material of the watch’s face is magnificent. So, you see, the watch will guarantee that you feel glamorous at all times.”

### Low Inspirational Appeals

Please imagine the following scenario. Bob is a salesperson at a jewelry store. You meet Bob when shopping for a new wristwatch. While talking to Bob, you identify a wristwatch that you like. Bob explains: “The armband of this watch is made of natural leather. This makes the armband very durable and comfortable to wear. The material of the watch’s face is mineral crystal. So, you see, the watch is fully scratch-proof and will always look as if freshly polished.”