

“Trust Me”: The Surprising Role of Vocal Characteristics in Trust Formation

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Trust plays a pivotal role in organizational life, yet its formation under conditions of limited interaction remains poorly understood. This study investigates how vocal characteristics influence initial trust formation when individuals must make rapid judgments based on vocal characteristics of pitch, variability, and perceived integrity. In a laboratory simulation, participants evaluated recruiters based solely on voice messages, then made trust decisions with financial implications. Vocal pitch significantly influenced perceived ability, and interpersonal liking predicted all three trustworthiness dimensions, underscoring the importance of vocal cues in early organizational encounters. Implications for virtual teams, hiring and leadership communication are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Trust is a foundational element of organizational functioning, influencing cooperation, decision-making, and performance across a wide range of contexts. In the context of large corporate acquisitions or mergers, a collapse of trust between the two organizations can derail the deal before it closes or prevent success of the newly combined organization. Despite its centrality, the mechanisms by which trust forms, particularly in the earliest stages of interpersonal interaction, remain underexplored. This study addresses that gap by examining how vocal and affective cues shape trust formation when individuals must make rapid judgments with limited information.

Scholars across disciplines have long recognized trust as a lubricant of social and economic exchange (Arrow, 1974; Christov-Moore, Bolis, Kaplan, Schilbach, & Iacoboni, 2023; Fichman, 2003). In organizational settings, trust has been linked to individual outcomes such as job performance and satisfaction (Dirks & Ferrin, 2001), as well as higher-level effects including reduced contracting costs and enhanced team performance (Dirks, 2000; Zaheer, McEvily, & Perrone, 1998). Yet much of this research focuses on trust as a longitudinal construct, developing over time through repeated interactions. Less attention has been paid to the initial moments of trust formation: those critical junctures where individuals must decide whether to trust based on minimal cues.

This study builds on the concept of “swift trust” (Jarvenpaa, Knoll & Leidner, 1998), which posits that trust can emerge rapidly in temporary or virtual teams. It also draws from McAllister’s (1995) distinction between cognition-based and affect-based trust, and Mayer, Davis & Schoorman’s (1995) integrative model, which identifies ability, benevolence, and integrity as key components of perceived trustworthiness.

By integrating these frameworks, the present research explores how vocal characteristics (specifically pitch, variability, and rate) serve as antecedents to trustworthiness assessments and trust decisions.

Vocal cues are a rich yet underutilized source of information in organizational research. Prior studies have shown that pitch and speech rate influence perceptions of competence, warmth, and credibility (Brown, Strong, & Rencher, 1973; Scherer, London, & Wolf, 1973). Previous studies demonstrate multiple listener attributions of personality based largely on vocal traits (Skuk, Jacob, Wientzek, Ward, & Schweinberger, 2025), including stereotypically gender-linked traits (Banse & Scherer, 1996).

In addition to vocal cues, affective impressions (particularly interpersonal liking) may play a critical role in trust formation. Liking has been shown to influence evaluations of competence and integrity (Nicholson, Compeau, & Sethi, 2001; Younan & Martire, 2021) and may serve as a heuristic in the absence of detailed information. However, the precise relationship between liking and trust remains somewhat hazy. While some models suggest that affective impressions mediate trustworthiness assessments, others propose a direct link between liking and trust decisions. And people seem to instinctively know this; in some cases, professionals intentionally lower their vocal frequency to influence credibility when giving professional advice (Sorokowski et al., 2019). Somewhat disturbingly, these initial trust judgements often persist (Pinheiro, 2025), even in the face of mounting evidence to the contrary (Torre, White, & Knight, 2023), making initial trust judgements even more consequential.

To investigate these dynamics, the present study employs a laboratory simulation in which MBA students evaluate recruiters based solely on voice messages. Participants must decide whether to accept a job offer with financial risk, thereby operationalizing trust as a behavioral choice. Structural equation modeling is used to test hypothesized relationships between vocal cues, affective impressions, trustworthiness assessments, and trust decisions.

This research contributes to the literature in three key ways. First, it extends existing trust models by examining the formation of trust in initial encounters, rather than over time. Second, it integrates vocal trait research with organizational trust theory, offering a novel perspective on how paralinguistic cues influence trustworthiness assessments. Third, it clarifies the role of affective impressions in trust formation, providing empirical evidence for their influence on perceived ability, benevolence, and integrity.

In an era of remote work, virtual teams, and rapid decision-making, understanding how trust forms under conditions of limited interaction is more important than ever. By illuminating the subtle cues that shape early trust judgments, this study offers practical insights for leaders, recruiters, and team members navigating high-stakes organizational environments.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Trust Formation in Organizational Contexts

Trust is a central construct in organizational research, influencing individual performance, team dynamics, and interorganizational relationships (Dirks & Ferrin, 2001; Zaheer et al., 1998). Despite its prominence, trust remains conceptually fragmented, with definitions varying across disciplines and contexts, and no unified framework has gained consensus. A common thread across these perspectives is the notion of risk. Trust inherently involves vulnerability and the willingness to accept uncertainty in exchange for potential benefit (Kee & Knox, 1970; Mishra, 1996). This risk-based view underpins most models of trust formation, including Mayer et al.'s (1995) integrative framework, which defines trust as the willingness to be vulnerable based on positive expectations of another's behavior.

Mayer et al.'s (1995) Integrative Trust Model

Mayer et al. (1995) propose that trustworthiness is assessed through three dimensions: ability, benevolence, and integrity. Ability refers to the trustee's competence in a specific domain; benevolence reflects the trustee's concern for the trustor's welfare; and integrity denotes adherence to principles acceptable to the trustor. These assessments inform the decision to trust, which in turn influences risk-taking behavior.

While this model offers a comprehensive structure, it leaves the antecedents of trustworthiness assessments largely unexplored. Mayer et al. (1995) acknowledge that factors such as reinforcement history and context may shape perceptions, but empirical work on these precursors remains limited. Moreover, the model minimizes the role of affective factors, treating them as secondary to cognitive evaluations.

Affective Trust and Interpersonal Liking

McAllister (1995) challenges the purely calculative view of trust by distinguishing between cognition-based and affect-based trust. Cognition-based trust arises from rational assessments of reliability and competence, while affect-based trust stems from emotional bonds and interpersonal closeness. McAllister's findings suggest that affect-based trust may mediate the relationship between cognitive evaluations and trust outcomes, though his model has drawn some criticism for construct overlap and measurement ambiguity.

Interpersonal liking has been proposed as a key affective antecedent of trust. Defined as a global affective attachment or preference for another individual (Nicholson et al., 2001), liking influences evaluations of competence, integrity, and benevolence. Studies have shown that liked individuals receive more favorable assessments and are more likely to be trusted, even in the absence of objective evidence (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977; Regan, Strauss, & Fazio, 1974), and emotion plays a surprisingly large role in trust formation (Lee, Dirks, & Campagna, 2023).

Vocal Cues as Nonverbal Antecedents

Nonverbal cues, particularly vocal characteristics, offer a rich source of information in low-interaction contexts. Human speech conveys meaning through content, visual signals, and paralinguistic features such as pitch, rate, and variability. These vocal traits are relatively stable and difficult to manipulate, making them reliable indicators of underlying traits (DeGroot & Motowidlo, 1999).

Research has linked vocal pitch to perceptions of competence and dominance (Scherer et al., 1973), while pitch variability is associated with dynamism and benevolence (Brown et al., 1973; Scherer, 1979). Speech rate has been correlated with assessments of intelligence and assertiveness, though findings are mixed (Buller, LePoire, Aune, & Eloy, 1992; Williams, 1970). These cues influence listener impressions and may serve as proxies for trustworthiness in the absence of substantive interaction.

Despite these findings, vocal cues have rarely been integrated into trust research. Mayer et al.'s (1995) model, for example, does not account for how vocal traits might influence perceptions of ability, benevolence, or integrity. This omission is notable given the increasing prevalence of virtual communication, where voice may be the primary channel for interpersonal evaluation.

Integrating Vocal and Affective Antecedents

The present study bridges these gaps by examining how vocal cues and interpersonal liking influence trustworthiness assessments and trust decisions. It hypothesizes that vocal traits predict listener evaluations of ability, benevolence, and integrity, and that liking mediates these relationships. Additionally, it explores whether liking directly influences trust, offering a potential non-calculative path to trust formation.

This integrated approach responds to calls for more nuanced models of trust that account for both cognitive and affective processes (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002; Doney, Cannon, & Mullen, 1998). By situating vocal cues within the trust formation process, the study expands the scope of antecedents considered and provides empirical grounding for affective influences in organizational decision-making.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a controlled laboratory experiment to examine how vocal cues and affective impressions influence trust formation in initial encounters. The design allowed for precise manipulation of vocal traits and measurement of trust-related constructs under conditions of limited interaction. Participants

engaged in a workplace simulation requiring a trust decision based solely on a brief voice message from a recruiter.

Participants

The sample consisted of 133 MBA students from five U.S. universities. This population was selected for its relevance to the study context (evaluating employment opportunities) and its familiarity with organizational decision-making. Participants were recruited voluntarily and incentivized with the opportunity to win prizes. The use of graduate students is consistent with prior research on swift trust and initial impression formation (Jarvenpaa et al., 1998).

Procedure

Participants completed a 15-minute computer-guided simulation in which they played the role of an entry-level employee. During the simulation, each participant received a voice message from a recruiter offering a temporary job opportunity. The message was delivered via audio only, with no visual cues, simulating a low-information interaction.

Participants then made a trust decision: whether to accept the offer and risk losing their current day’s pay (\$100) for the chance to earn \$200 (See Figure 1). This decision operationalized trust as a behavioral choice under risk. Following the decision, participants completed a survey assessing their perceptions of the recruiter’s ability, benevolence, integrity, and likeability.

**FIGURE 1
SIMULATION PAYOFF OUTCOMES**

	Job:	
	occurs	does not
Accept	\$200	-0-
Decline	\$100	\$100

Note: Subjects face a decision involving four potential outcomes. Acceptance of a valid job offer leads to daily income of \$200, while acceptance of a job which fails to materialize leads to no income. Declining the job offer produces income of \$100 in either case.

Vocal Stimuli

Voice samples were recorded by a trained male actor and digitally manipulated to vary across three vocal dimensions (See Table 1):

TABLE 1
SELECTION CRITERIA FOR HIGH AND LOW VOCAL CONDITIONS

Characteristic	High Condition	Low Condition
Fundamental Frequency	130–140 Hz	100–110 Hz
Frequency Variation	35–45 Hz	15–25 Hz
Speech Rate (syllables/minute)	300-325	200-225

These manipulations produced eight distinct voice conditions (See Table 2). All samples fell within the range of normal conversational speech to avoid unnatural effects. Objective measurements were obtained using computerized voice analysis software, ensuring consistency and reliability across conditions.

TABLE 2
MEASURED VALUES FOR EXPERIMENTAL VOICE CLIPS

Clip	Fr (Hz)	Variation (Hz)	Rate (Syl/Min)
A Fast	105	15.3	304
A Slow	97	19.9	222
B Fast	112	35.1	304
B Slow	110	38.4	225
C Fast	128	25.2	304
C Slow	125	24.8	215
D Fast	141	35.1	311
D Slow	140	39	222

Note: Some values slightly exceed target ranges due to actor and software limitations.

MEASURES

Trust

Trust was measured both behaviorally (accept/reject decision) and continuously (self-reported likelihood to trust on a 10-point scale). This dual approach allowed for robust analysis and comparison of trust outcomes.

Trustworthiness

Perceived ability, benevolence, and integrity were assessed using validated multi-item scales from Mayer and Davis (1999). Each construct was measured with five to six items on a 5-point Likert scale (See Table 3). Sample items include:

- Ability: “I feel very confident about the recruiter’s skills.”
- Benevolence: “The recruiter is very concerned about my welfare.”
- Integrity: “Sound principles seem to guide the recruiter’s behavior.”

Likeability

Interpersonal liking was measured using a 3-item scale adapted from Nicholson et al. (2001), with items such as “I would enjoy being around the recruiter.” Responses were recorded on a 7-point Likert scale (See Table 3).

TABLE 3
RELIABILITY OF MEASUREMENT SCALES

Construct	Source	Previous α	Present α
Ability	Mayer & Davis (1999)	0.86	0.85
Benevolence	Mayer & Davis (1999)	0.88	0.87
Integrity	Mayer & Davis (1999)	0.85	0.76
Likeability	Nicholson et al. (2001)	0.9	0.89

Control Variables

Propensity to trust was assessed using an 8-item scale (Schoorman, Mayer, & Davis, 1996), though it was excluded from the final analysis due to lack of significant correlation with trust outcomes. Basic demographic data (age, gender, work experience) were also collected.

Data Analysis

Structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to test the hypothesized relationships among vocal cues, likeability, trustworthiness assessments, and trust decisions. LISREL 8.54 was employed for model estimation. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) validated the measurement model, and reliability was assessed using Cronbach’s alpha and composite reliability indices.

Model fit was evaluated using multiple indices:

- Comparative Fit Index (CFI): .99
- Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA): .035
- Chi-square (χ^2): 250.04, $df = 215$, $p = .051$

These values indicate excellent model fit. Alternative models were tested to assess the impact of correlated measurement errors and problematic items, with the base model ultimately being retained for final analysis.

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics and Reliability

Preliminary analysis confirmed strong internal consistency for all multi-item scales: Ability ($\alpha = .85$), Benevolence ($\alpha = .87$), Integrity ($\alpha = .76$), and Likeability ($\alpha = .89$).

Confirmatory factor analysis validated the measurement model, with all items loading cleanly onto their respective constructs except one integrity item, which was retained for initial analysis. Composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE) met acceptable thresholds for most constructs.

Model Fit

Structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to test the hypothesized relationships. The base model demonstrated excellent fit: CFI = .99, RMSEA = .035, χ^2 : 250.04, ($df = 215$, $p = .051$).

Two alternative models were tested but did not improve fit, so the base model was retained (See Figure 2).

FIGURE 2
RESULTS OF LISREL ANALYSIS (N=133)

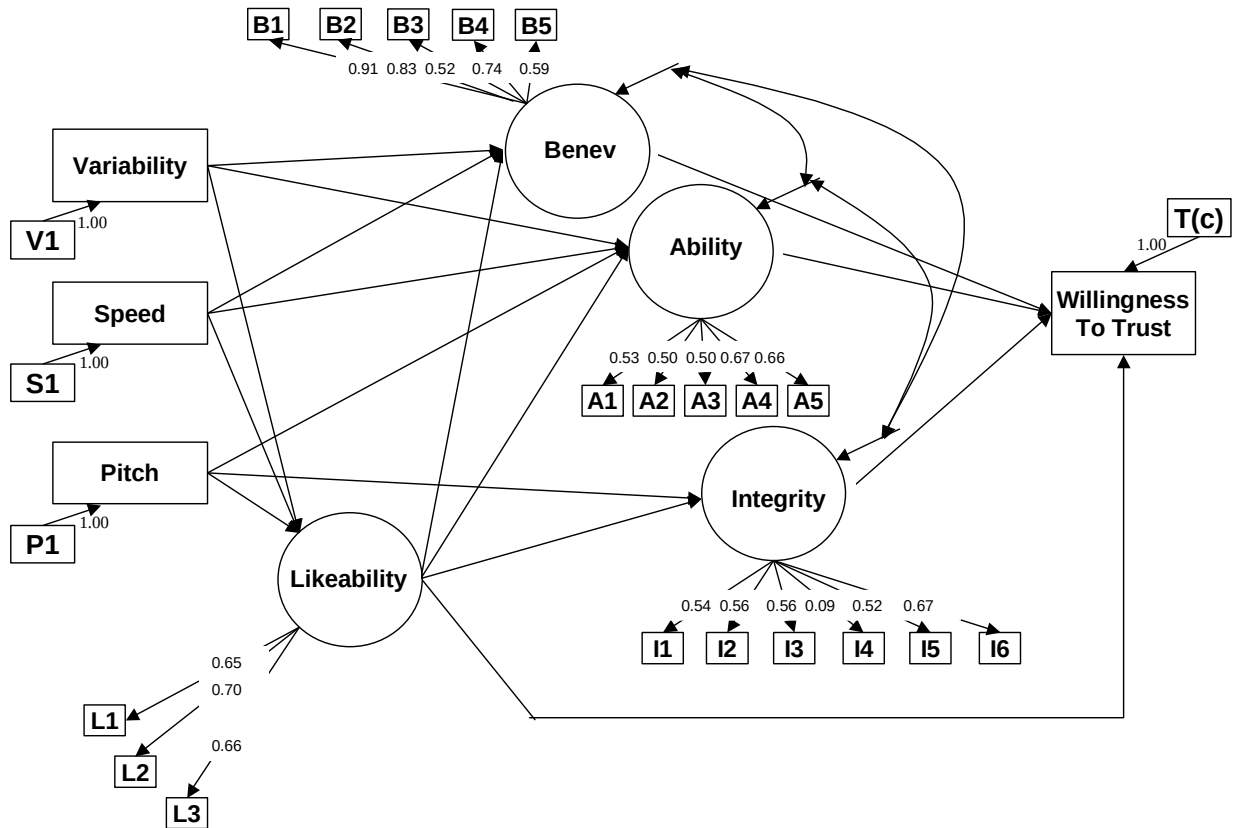


TABLE 4
STANDARDIZED PATH COEFFICIENTS

Path	β	p-value	Supported
Pitch → Ability	-.22	< .01	Yes
Integrity → Trust	0.64	< .01	Yes
Likeability → Ability	0.44	< .001	Yes
Likeability → Benevolence	0.61	< .001	Yes
Likeability → Integrity	0.74	< .001	Yes
Likeability → Trust	-.06	n.s.	No
Ability → Trust	0	n.s.	No
Benevolence → Trust	-.11	n.s.	No

Supported Hypotheses

Of the hypotheses tested, five received empirical support (See Table 4):

- H6: Higher vocal pitch was negatively associated with perceived ability ($\beta = -.22, p < .01$).
- H9: Integrity significantly predicted willingness to trust ($\beta = .64, p < .01$).
- H14–H16: Likeability significantly predicted all three trustworthiness dimensions:
 - ability ($\beta = .44, p < .001$)
 - benevolence ($\beta = .61, p < .001$)
 - integrity ($\beta = .74, p < .001$).

These findings suggest that affective impressions, particularly interpersonal liking, play a substantial role in shaping trustworthiness assessments.

Non-Supported Hypotheses

Other hypothesized relationships were not statistically significant:

- Pitch variability did not predict benevolence (H1), ability (H2), or likeability (H11).
- Speech rate did not significantly predict ability (H3), benevolence (H4), or likeability (H12), though the link to likeability approached significance ($\beta = .15, p = .051$).
- Vocal pitch did not significantly predict integrity (H5) or likeability (H13).
- Trustworthiness dimensions of ability (H7) and benevolence (H8) did not significantly predict trust (See Table 4).
- Likeability did not directly predict trust (H10) (See Table 4), suggesting its influence is mediated through trustworthiness assessments.

Summary of Key Findings

Vocal pitch influences perceived ability, supporting the role of paralinguistic cues in trait attribution. Likeability is a strong predictor of perceived trustworthiness but does not directly lead to trust decisions. Integrity remains the most robust predictor of trust in initial encounters. The hypothesized non-calculative path from vocal cues to trust via likeability was not supported, though partial mediation effects were observed. These results highlight the complexity of the trust formation process and support the role of affective impressions in cognitive evaluations, which in turn influence trust behavior.

DISCUSSION

This study explored how vocal cues and affective impressions influence trust formation under conditions of limited interaction. By integrating Mayer et al.'s (1995) trust model with McAllister's (1995) affect-based framework, the research examined whether paralinguistic features and interpersonal liking serve as antecedents to trustworthiness assessments and trust decisions.

The findings affirm that vocal pitch significantly influences perceived ability, suggesting that listeners use vocal cues as proxies for competence in low-information contexts. This supports prior research linking pitch to perceptions of dominance and capability (Brown et al., 1973; Scherer et al., 1973). However, other vocal traits (pitch variability and speech rate) did not significantly predict trustworthiness dimensions, indicating that their influence may be more context-dependent or subtle than previously assumed.

Interpersonal liking emerged as a powerful predictor of perceived ability, benevolence, and integrity. These results reinforce the notion that affective impressions shape cognitive evaluations, consistent with social identity theory and attribution research (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977; Regan, Strauss, & Fazio, 1974). However, liking did not directly predict trust, suggesting that while it informs trustworthiness assessments, it does not substitute for them in the trust decision process.

Contrary to expectations, perceived ability and benevolence did not significantly predict trust, while integrity did. This finding aligns with Mayer et al.'s (1995) assertion that integrity may be especially salient in early trust formation, when individuals lack sufficient information to evaluate competence or goodwill.

It also suggests that trust decisions in initial encounters may hinge more on perceived moral alignment than on technical capability or empathy.

Contributions to Theory

1. **Initial Trust Formation:** The study provides empirical evidence that trust can form rapidly, even in the absence of prior interaction, supporting the concept of “swift trust” (Jarvenpaa et al., 1998).
2. **Affective-Cognitive Integration:** The study demonstrates that affective impressions, particularly liking, influence cognitive trustworthiness assessments, offering a nuanced view of how emotion and reason interact in trust formation.
3. **Vocal Cues as Antecedents:** The study introduces vocal pitch as a meaningful antecedent to perceived ability, expanding the scope of trust research to include paralinguistic signals.
4. **Integrity as a Trust Driver:** The study highlights the primacy of integrity in early trust decisions, suggesting that moral congruence may outweigh other factors when information is scarce.

Practical Implications

In today’s increasingly virtual and fast-paced work environment, individuals often make trust decisions based on extremely limited data. This study suggests that vocal characteristics and affective impressions play a fundamental role in shaping these judgments. For leaders, recruiters, and team members, awareness of how voice and interpersonal warmth influence perceptions can inform communication strategies and improve trust-building efforts.

Organizations may benefit from training programs that enhance vocal delivery and emotional intelligence, particularly in roles requiring remote interaction. Additionally, selection processes that rely heavily on phone or video interviews should consider the impact of vocal traits on candidate evaluations.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations warrant consideration. First, the use of a single voice actor and scripted messages may limit generalizability. Future studies could incorporate multiple speakers and spontaneous speech to increase confidence in the findings.

Second, the study focused on initial trust; additional research is needed to examine how vocal and affective cues influence trust over time.

Third, while liking was a strong predictor of trustworthiness, its lack of direct influence on trust raises questions about its role in different contexts. Future research could explore alternative affective constructs or examine whether liking becomes more influential in sustained relationships.

Finally, the study’s reliance on student participants, while appropriate for the simulation context, may limit applicability to broader organizational populations. Replication with working professionals could strengthen external validity.

CONCLUSION

Trust formation in organizational settings involves a complex interplay of cognitive evaluations, affective impressions, and contextual cues, and trust itself remains a fundamental aspect of decision-making in numerous organizational contexts. This study demonstrates that vocal pitch and interpersonal liking significantly shape perceptions of trustworthiness, and that integrity plays a central role in trust decisions made under uncertainty. By illuminating the subtle mechanisms of early trust formation, the research offers useful insights for theory, practice, and future exploration in organizational behavior.

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