Ingratiation in job applications: impact on selection decisions

Arup Varma

*Institute of Human Resources and Industrial Relations,
Loyola University Chicago, Chicago, Illinois, USA*

Soo Min Toh

*Joseph L. Rotman School of Management,
University of Toronto at Mississauga, Mississauga, Canada, and*

Shaun Pichler

*School of Labor and Industrial Relations, Michigan State University,
East Lansing, Michigan, USA*

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of present study is to examine the influence of impression management (IM) tactics (e.g. ingratiation) applied in job application letters on perceived qualifications and hiring recommendations. The study aims to build on recent research done in the interview context, by studying IM specifically in the written form pertaining to a job application.

Design/methodology/approach – Data were gathered from 94 respondents asked to evaluate the job application letters of applicants for a mentoring program. IM was manipulated through the cover letter, such that, each subject received five cover letters, four of which engaged in ingratiation and one that had no ingratiation. Participants were required to evaluate the applicants' qualifications and make selection decisions.

Findings – The results of the study were consistent with those of the interview context. More specifically, ingratiation led to significantly higher ratings of applicants, and self-focused tactics were more effective than other-focused tactics.

Research limitations/implications – The findings of this research conveyed that most of the IM tactics significantly improve recruiters' evaluations of the applicants. Still, future research needs to further investigate this relationship in order to understand the specific nature of the IM tactics and develop a deeper understanding of the underlying processes that cause IM tactics to have an impact on recruiters' judgments.

Practical implications – The present study highlights the need for greater understanding of how IM tactics may influence the decisions of employers who rely on written applications, or a combination of job application letters and interviews. Therefore, employers need to be aware of the use of IM in written applications and emphasize the importance of interviews in the selection process.

Originality/value – Existing research has been concerned with how IM tactics influence interview outcomes and has overlooked how these same IM tactics may be used in job application letters to influence selection decisions. This study addresses this gap by focusing on the job application letter as a means of conveying and managing impressions by candidates.

Keywords Job applications, Selection

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

One of the most important objectives of an applicant is to convince the decision-maker (e.g. the interviewer) that he or she is the best candidate for the position (Kacmar *et al.*, 1992). In this connection, research has found that individuals often use impression

management (IM) tactics, such as ingratiation, in an attempt to improve the target's perceptions and evaluations of themselves (Kipnis *et al.*, 1980; Tedeschi and Melburg, 1984; Wortman and Linsenmeier, 1977). The use of these tactics may be either intentional, unintentional, or both, and such tactics may be resorted to for any number of reasons. For example, the ingratiator may wish to be liked by the target because he/she believes that the liking would be instrumental in achieving other more valued goals (Dienesch and Liden, 1986; Kipnis *et al.*, 1980; Wayne and Ferris, 1990; Wortman and Linsenmeier, 1977), or the ingratiator may wish to appear competent to the target in order to be deemed as most qualified or employable (Kacmar *et al.*, 1992). As a result, ingratiation by interviewees may jeopardize the validity of selection tools (Anderson, 1992) because they may result in the selection of a candidate who could be less competent but a better impression manager. Thus, research has been concerned by the frequency of the use of IM tactics such as ingratiation and the conditions that influence the choice of tactics used (e.g. Delery and Kacmar, 1998)

Much less attention has been awarded to how effective these tactics are in achieving the job applicant's desired outcomes (Kacmar and Carlson, 1999). Only recently has research focused on the specific effects of their use on evaluation of the impression manager, especially in the interview setting (e.g., Kacmar *et al.*, 1992; Stevens and Kristof, 1995). Furthermore, virtually no studies have examined IM tactics, such as ingratiation, in a written form pertaining to a job application, even though several studies have used scenarios or "paper people" to mimic "live" applicants (e.g., Kacmar and Carlson, 1999). In this connection, one study examined how typewritten applications significantly improved perceptions of employability for the applicant compared to handwritten applications (Jarrett and Loewenthal, 1991). Another study applied a written stimulus to manipulate IM in a performance appraisal setting (Wood and Mitchell, 1981). Hence, in addition to a lack of studies examining the impact of use of IM tactics on evaluations, there is also a paucity of work specific to written IM. Thus, the present research is guided by the following key research questions:

(1) Do written IM tactics (specifically, the four types of ingratiation) influence selection decisions (hiring recommendation, overall qualification evaluation).

(2) How effective are each of these ingratiatory tactics relative to each other in influencing selection decisions?

Before we examine these research questions further, we turn to the literature on IM tactics and discuss the range of tactics identified by research, as well as their effects on various outcomes.

Impression management tactics
Research has identified a range of IM tactics and has found several ways to classify these tactics. The simplest distinction views IM tactics as either verbal or non-verbal (Schneider, 1981). Impression management can come in verbal statements and nonverbal behaviors, or bodily movements and positions, such as eye contact, facial expressions, and posture. One of the most extensive studied sets of IM behaviors is ingratiation tactics (Stevens and Kristof, 1995). Jones and Wortman (1973) proposed that there are four major ingratiation tactics, and that each one reflects certain unique behaviors. Kumar and Beyerlein (1991) further tested these four tactics and their research confirmed that these four tactics are unique, involving different sets of behaviors. The four tactics are:

(1) self-enhancement – whereby the subordinate engages in behavior/conversation aimed at improving his/her image in the mind of the supervisor;

(2) other-enhancement – here the subordinate attempts to praise the achievements/qualities of the supervisor;

(3) opinion conformity – here the subordinate attempts to ingratiate himself to the supervisor by agreeing with the supervisor's opinions; and finally,

(4) rendering favors – whereby the subordinate tries to ingratiate himself or herself to the supervisor by rendering favors over and above the call of work-related duty.

These tactics may be categorized based on the focus of the ingratiatory behaviors: self-focused or other-focused. Self-enhancement or self-promotion is an example of self-focused ingratiation, whereas the latter ingratiation tactics represent other-focused ingratiation.

Currently, there is little in the literature that examines how these four ingratiation tactics may be applied in written communications with recruiters or how they might influence perceptions and evaluations of candidates. This is an important, though neglected, issue because selection decisions are also often made without the traditional face-to-face interviews. This may occur when it is too costly for applicants or employers to meet face-to-face. For example, foreign students applying for doctoral studies often do not go through face-to-face interviews and decisions on the applicants are made solely based on the written application materials provided by the applicant. The most basic application materials include the job application letter or cover letter stating the applicant's intent and the applicant's resume. In the application letter, applicants may ingratiate themselves to the recruiters by again, using any of the four, or combinations of the four above-mentioned tactics. The recruiters, in turn, because of lack of a face-to-face interview with the candidates, have to rely heavily on what is written to gather as much information as possible about the candidate's competence, likeability, fit, and employability.

Hence, the next section examines the literature that has dealt with the effects of ingratiation tactics on interview outcomes and based on this literature, we put forth several hypotheses about the impact of written ingratiation tactics exhibited in job application letters on selection outcomes.

Ingratiation in job applications

We now turn our attention to understanding the impact of various ingratiation tactics used in job application letters on selection outcomes. We consider four types of ingratiation tactics:

(1) self enhancement;

(2) other enhancement;

(3) opinion conformity; and

(4) rendering favors.

We propose that these four IM tactics are related to the applicant's selection outcomes.

Research finds that in general, ingratiation tactics used during interviews can favorably influence the interviewer's subjective impressions of the applicant through greater perceived applicant similarity and attraction, and perceived motivation and

competence (Dipboye, 1992; Gilmore and Ferris, 1989; Pandey and Singh, 1987; Rynes and Gerhart, 1990). These often translate into tangible outcomes for the impression manager, such as fewer application rejections (Kacmar *et al.*, 1992), higher number of invitations for site visits (Stevens and Kristof, 1995), and increased perceptions of fit by the interviewer (Kristof-Brown *et al.*, 2002). Even though these tactics may sometimes backfire if the applicant appears overly manipulative or dishonest (Fletcher, 1989), overwhelming evidence points towards the benefits of engaging in ingratiation during selection interviews as well as other organizational situations that entails some aspect of evaluation. Thus, consistent with these findings, we propose that applicants, who ingratiate in their job application letters, are more likely to enjoy better selection outcomes than applicants who do not.

H1a. Applicants who engage in ingratiation tactics in their job application letters will be perceived as more qualified than applicants who did not engage in any of these tactics.

H1b. Applicants who engage in ingratiation tactics in their job application letters will have a greater likelihood of getting selected than applicants who did not engage in any of these tactics.

In terms of the relative impact of ingratiation on the target's perception of the individual, research finds that individuals who employed self-focused ingratiatory tactics tend to receive more favorable performance ratings than when applicants used other-focused tactics, such as other enhancement, opinion conformity, or rendering favors (Dipboye and Wiley, 1977; Kacmar *et al.*, 1992; Tullar, 1989). Self-focused tactics have been found to be more effective because in the employment interview context, there exists contextual expectations that reward and accept self-promotional behaviors to portray the individual as attractive in the eyes of the interviewer and that failure to behave consistent with these expectations may result in the applicant being overlooked (Kacmar *et al.*, 1992). Furthermore, self-enhancement may increase the perceived level of competence as well as self-confidence of the individual, whereas other-enhancement may indicate weakness and indecisiveness (Tedeschi and Melburg, 1984). We expect these relationships to hold in written job applications. Hence, consistent with previous research, we propose that applicants using self-focused ingratiatory tactics, such as self-enhancement, in their job application letters will be evaluated more favorably than those using more other-focused tactics.

H2a. Applicants who engaged in self-enhancement will be perceived as more qualified than applicants who engaged in other-focused ingratiatory tactics.

H2b. Applicants who engaged in self-enhancement have a greater likelihood of getting selected than applicants who engaged in other-focused ingratiation.

Finally, our study is also interested in the relative effectiveness of other-focused tactics. Pandey and Singh (1987) found that other enhancement increased the target's experienced positive affect and favorable evaluation of the ingratiator. Opinion conformity, on the other hand, has been found to be not useful when the conformist was dependent upon the opinion stater, such as the interviewer in an employment selection context (Kacmar *et al.*, 1992). In addition, opinion conformity and favor rendering may be non-transparent, i.e. normative or expected, and therefore may tend to be ineffective ingratiatory tactics. As such, we also propose:

H3a. Job applicants who engaged in other enhancement will be perceived as more qualified than applicants who engaged in opinion conformity and rendering favors.

H3b. Job applicants who engaged in other enhancement have a greater likelihood of getting selected than applicants who engaged in opinion conformity and rendering favors.

Methodology

Sample

Ninety-four graduate students enrolled in human resources courses at a Midwestern university volunteered to participate in this study, in response to a request by the authors. The mean age of subjects was 29; 69 percent ($n = 65$) were female and 89 percent ($n = 85$) were white; 95 percent ($n = 90$) of the participants were employed full-time and had an average of 7.2 years of work experience. Subjects were employed in management cadre jobs in leading mid-sized and large organizations in the Chicagoland area.

Subjects took part in this study during normally scheduled class periods, and one of the authors administered each session. Initial tests revealed no significant differences between respondents, based on their gender, ethnicity, and employment status, so all responses were aggregated for analysis purposes.

Procedure

The participants were told that the research study was concerned with examining the feasibility of establishing a mentoring program for new students in the program. They were further informed that the mentoring program would select promising students based on their resumes and letters and attach them as mentees with students who are already enrolled in the program. They were also told that one of the authors had placed an advertisement in the student newspaper and invited applications. They were asked to assume the role of mentor for purposes of this exercise, and to evaluate the letters from the applicants based on the information packets provided to them, as well as their own judgment. Lastly, they were informed that their participation was voluntary and their responses were anonymous and would be aggregated for purposes of analysis.

Each subject was given an introductory letter from the investigators and a consent sheet. After subjects had read the introduction and signed the consent sheets, they were given a packet containing detailed information on the mentoring program. Once they had read this information and the investigators answered any questions, participants were provided five sets of personal information sheets and cover letters. Each set had a questionnaire attached to it. Subjects were asked to read each letter and personal information sheet individually and note their ratings and recommendations on the accompanying questionnaire. After they had completed all five sets, subjects were asked to fill out a personal information sheet containing questions on demographics. Subjects were then thanked and debriefed.

Ingratiation was manipulated through the cover letter (see the Appendix for contents of the cover letter in each condition). Thus, all subjects received five types of letters: four that engaged in ingratiation and one that had no ingratiation. The four types of ingratiation manipulated were: self enhancement, other enhancement, opinion conformity, and rendering favors. Post-hoc manipulation checks were conducted to

ensure that the subjects in our study captured the different manipulations. A total of 13 graduate students in human resources classes (distinct from those who had taken part in our study) were recruited for this purpose. The subjects were asked to read each of the cover letters and write a short paragraph "about what the writer of the letter is like."[1] All 13 participants wrote some description of the individual for the four ingratiation conditions. The comments varied from one-liners like "this individual is really stuck up" to a whole paragraph with six or seven sentences. However, all thirteen failed to write any substantial comments for the non-ingratiation condition, mostly writing something like "can't say much about this individual."

After they had completed their statements, one of the authors read all the statements and found that the statements in each condition mirrored the four categories of ingratiation. For further independent verification, four new graduate students taking classes in human resources were each given the statements for one of the ingratiation conditions, and asked to "name each category", based on the comments they had read. These four individuals suggested "self-praise", "praising the professor", "agreeable", and "too helpful." Given the design of our study, and the four ingratiatory tactics we were interested in studying, we believe the suggested labels capture the essence of the different types of ingratiation. Thus, we would like to argue that the manipulation was successful.

Experimental design
The experimental design was as a repeated measures design, with five within-subjects factors (four types of ingratiation plus no ingratiation).

Measures
We measured two dependent variables:

(1) Overall qualification: a one-item measure of overall qualifications on a five-point scale was included asking the participants to evaluate the applicant's overall qualifications. The question read "Based on the applicant's materials (i.e. resume *and* cover letter), please rate the applicant's overall qualifications." The scale provided was $1 =$ poor; $2 =$ below average; $3 =$ average; $4 =$ above average; $5 =$ outstanding.

(2) Selection recommendation: a single five-point measure was used to evaluate the participant's recommendations as to whether or not the applicant should be selected for the program. The question read "Based on the applicant's materials (i.e. resume *and* cover letter), please give us your recommendation on whether this candidate should be selected for the mentoring program." The accompanying scale was as follows: $1 =$ definitely do not select; $2 =$ do not select; $3 =$ maybe select; $4 =$ select; $5 =$ definitely select.

Results
The mean for overall qualification was 3.11 (s.d. 0.63), while the mean for selection recommendation was 3.01 (SD 0.62). The correlation between these two variables was 0.75 ($p < 0.01$). To analyze our data, we used a mixed model analysis of variance (ANOVA). We found that ingratiation types were in general, significantly different in terms of the rater's perceived overall qualification of the candidates ($F = 3357.68$; $p < 0.001$). In addition, the test of within-subjects contrasts reveals that the means of the different ingratiation types followed a linear trend ($F = 132.78$, $p < 0.001$) with

applicants displaying self-enhancement receiving the highest rating and applicants who displayed no ingratiation receiving the lowest rating. Posthoc pairwise comparisons using the Bonferroni adjustment for multiple comparisons of the overall qualification scores for the different types of ingratiation revealed that subjects rated applicants who exhibited ingratiation higher in terms of overall qualification than applicants who did not ingratiate. Hence, *H1a* is supported.

As in the case of overall qualifications ratings, we find that the ingratiation effect on hiring intentions was significant (multivariate $F (4, 80) = 32.60$, $p < 0.0005$, partial Eta squared $= 0.62$). In addition, because the Mauchley Test of Sphericity was violated, we also used the Huynh-Feldt correction, the main effect ingratiation was significant ($F (3.67, 304.20) = 39.50$, $p < 0.0005$, partial Eta squared $= 0.32$). The results from the multivariate test and the Huynh-Feldt correction are consistent with each other. Posthoc comparisons revealed that all forms of ingratiation, except rendering favors, received significantly higher hiring recommendations than no ingratiation. Thus, *H1b* is partially supported.

H2a and *H2b* state that applicants who engaged in self-enhancement tactics would receive more positive outcomes than applicants who engaged in other-focused tactics. As Table I indicates, both hypotheses are supported ($p < 0.05$). Self-enhancement tactics received significantly higher ratings of overall qualifications ($m = 3.74$) and selection recommendations ($m = 3.74$) than other enhancement ($m = 3.20$; $m = 3.11$), opinion conformity ($m = 3.18$; $m = 3.10$), and rendering favors ($m = 2.79$; $m = 2.42$). Finally, *H3a* and *H3b* state that applicants who engaged in other-enhancement would receive more positive outcomes than applicants who engaged in both opinion conformity and rendering favors. Table I reveals partial support for both hypotheses. Applicants who demonstrated other enhancement received higher overall qualification evaluations and selection recommendations than applicants who engaged in opinion conformity and rendering favors ($p < 0.05$). However, the difference in scores between applicants who used other enhancement and applicants who used opinion conformity was not significant.

Discussion

The present study finds substantial support for many of our hypotheses, implying that, consistent with existing literature, ingratiatory tactics have an influence on selection outcomes even when conveyed through writing in job application letters. Furthermore, the relationships found in our study reflect the relationships found in

Ingratiation	Self-enhancement		Other-enhancement		Opinion conformity		Rendering favors		No ingratiation	
	n	SD	n	SD	n	SD	n	SD	n	SD
Dependent variables										
Overall qualification	3.74[a]	0.07	3.20[b]	0.08	3.18[b]	0.07	2.79[c]	0.08	2.65[c]	0.09
Hiring recommendation	3.74[d]	0.08	3.11[e]	0.09	3.10[e]	0.09	2.42[f]	0.10	2.70[f]	0.09

Notes: Means with similar superscripts indicate non-significant differences ($p < 0.05$)

Table I.
Means for the two dependent variables by ingratiation type

studies specific to the interview setting. We found that the use of most of the ingratiatory tactics significantly improved recruiters' evaluations of the applicants. One exception was favor-rendering. In fact, recruiters rated applicants who used favor rendering lower in terms of overall qualifications than applicants who did not use ingratiation in their letters, however, the difference between the two ratings were non-significant. Indeed, these findings are not inconsistent with meta-analytic research on evaluations of various ingratiation tactics.

Also consistent with existing research pertaining to the interview scenario, our analyses show that self-focused tactics are more effective than other-focused tactics at improving selection outcomes. Thus, to the extent that applicants use self-promoting or enhancing statements in their applications letters, their chances of getting selected are better than if they used other-focused statements. Finally, we find that other enhancement is the most useful tactic compared to opinion conformity and rendering favors, although the ratings received for using other enhancement and opinion conformity statements in the application letters were not significantly different from each other.

Our study contributes to existing selection literature as it addresses an important gap left by researchers. Existing research has been concerned with how IM tactics, such as ingratiation, influence interview outcomes, but has overlooked how these same tactics may be used in job application letters and in turn, influence selection decisions. We address this gap by focusing on the job application letter as a means of conveying and managing impressions by candidates. In our study, we find that written ingratiation tactics have a significant impact on evaluations of individuals and that these effects were consistent with those found in face-to-face ingratiation settings such as during the employment interview. Thus, we highlight the importance of the need for greater understanding of how these tactics may influence the decisions of employers who rely on written applications, or a combination of job application letters and interviews.

Next, our study contributes to the existing literature by examining the effects of the four major ingratiation tactics simultaneously and compares their relative effectiveness on selection outcomes with each other. We found that most previous studies have tended to examine a subset of these, e.g. different forms of self-focused tactics (Delery and Kacmar, 1998), and have not conducted any direct empirical tests on their relative effects (Kacmar *et al.*, 1992).

In addition, our findings have significant implications for practitioners. An important part of the selection process is the pre-screening often conducted by human resource departments, where they eliminate (or shortlist) candidates based on the resume and/or cover letter. Since the cover letter plays an important role in the selection process, HR executives and others involved in the selection process should pay close attention to the content of these letters for potential bias. As our findings demonstrate, when two (or more) applicants have similar qualifications, other information (i.e. the cover letter) may have significant decisive effect. As Dipboye (1992) has noted, paper credentials are an important part of interviewers' decision-making.

A related issue also deserves some attention. Given the rapid changes in technology, and organizations' increasing reliance on technology based communications (i.e. e-mails), it is quite likely that some individuals may use the written word to ingratiate themselves to others. This would be especially relevant in environments where an

organization is structured around virtual teams, and where the team leader(s) may not have the opportunity to meet face-to-face with team members on a regular basis.

Our findings also raise questions about the validity of resumes. If ingratiation through the cover letter can cause decision makers to favor those who engage in ingratiation, perhaps the resume plays only a limited role in helping decision makers discriminate between applicants. While the resume is one in a series of predictors, the critical role of the resume cannot be denied, as it is often used as the primary basis to screen candidates in or out of the selection process. As our findings suggest, when candidates' resumes offer nothing distinctive, it is other parts of the selection process (e.g., paper credentials, the interview) that may help discriminate between various applicants.

Lastly, in our study, we manipulated ingratiatory tactics "in writing." As such, some concerns may be raised about the validity of these findings, since selectors (i.e. the participants in our study) did not have the opportunity to interact with the applicants, as they would have in real life. The design of our study did not allow for this – and we hope that future research will combine ingratiation via cover letters with other parts of the selection process to get a better understanding of the impact of ingratiatory behaviors. In addition, we used the within-subjects design, where each participant saw resumes and cover letters from all five conditions (i.e. the four ingratiation conditions, and one no ingratiation condition). Future research on this subject should employ the between-subjects design to study the impact of ingratiation in cover letters.

Future research also needs to undertake further investigation to understand the specific nature of the various ingratiatory tactics, and develop a deeper understanding of the underlying processes that cause ingratiatory tactics to have an impact on decision makers' judgment processes. The question that is left unanswered, both in the employment interview context and the job application letter, is the intermediate processes or outcomes that lead to more favorable evaluations of the applicants. The state of the literature could also benefit from future investigations into how these tactics used singly or in concert may influence selection outcomes, and also how ingratiation by applicants in both the job application letter and in the interview may predict such outcomes.

Note

1. We would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this analysis.

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Appendix. Ingratiation manipulation in cover letters (text in italics common to all conditions; text in bold unique to each ingratiation condition)

Dear Professor:

This letter is in response to the posting for a mentoring program for Business/HRM majors. I would like to be selected for the mentoring program so I may learn more about the major and potential opportunities from someone already in the field.

1. Self enhancement condition

As a Dean's list student with a GPA of 4.0, I have been involved in various research projects and papers, where conducting good literature reviews was critical. In several group projects, my team members have found me to be a reliable and valuable contributor, and I have often been asked to take the lead in these projects. Further, I am often called upon by my professors to help with research projects, and have also assisted one faculty member with developing a new course.

2. Other enhancement condition

While conducting research for some of my class projects, I have been fortunate to come across some of your articles in various journals. I have found your research to be enlightening as well as highly relevant to the current HR scenario. I have also written two papers for a class where your publications were the primary source(s) of information. I believe that an opportunity to work with you will prove to be a major source of knowledge to me as I seek a degree in business.

3. Opinion conformity condition

I attended a symposium last semester where you spoke about the importance of Human Resources in a business environment. I found myself totally agreeing with your views. Your discussion concerning the lack of post-hire training for new employees was very inspiring, and I found myself becoming even more interested in the field of HR. Also, I really agreed with you when you quoted Jack Welch as saying that "HR is too important to be left to HR folks alone."

4. Rendering favors condition

I am currently taking classes on a part-time basis and have a lot of free time on my hands. I have always enjoyed conducting literary research and personally know the librarians. I can easily obtain library materials and librarian assistance for your research. If the need arises, I can also help you with grading assignments, etc. Further, I am always free on the weekends and evenings, so I can meet hours that suit your schedule. I am also mechanically inclined, so if you need minor repairs on office equipment such as the printer or copier, I can perform them.

5. No ingratiation condition

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I would appreciate an opportunity to meet with you to discuss this further. I look forward to hearing from you. I have enclosed my Resume for your perusal. Please let me know if you need further information.

Figure A1.

Corresponding author
Arup Varma can be contacted at: avarma@luc.edu