

Interpersonal Communication of Vaporista with Consumers in Building Consumer Trust at AMW Vapestore Samarinda

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KEYWORDS

ABSTRACT

Interpersonal communication; vaporista; consumer trust; social penetration theory; customer service; vape retail In an increasingly competitive vape retail industry, consumer trust is a determining factor in customer loyalty. The role of vaporistas (frontliner staff) as the spearhead of interaction with consumers is considered crucial in building relationships that go beyond just buying and selling transactions. The purpose of this study is to analyze the role of interpersonal communication between vaporistas (vape store frontliner staff) and consumers in building trust in AMW Vapestore Samarinda. The research method used is qualitative descriptive with the approach of Social Penetration Theory from Altman and Taylor (1973). Data was collected through in-depth observations and interviews with vaporists and regular consumers, then analyzed through Miles and Huberman's interactive models), the research explores five stages of relationship development: orientation, exploratory affective, affective, stable, and depenetration. Through in-depth interviews with vaporistas and regular customers who visited at least five times, findings reveal that trust building begins with simple conversations during the orientation stage, progresses through gradual self-disclosure and emotional expression, and culminates in stable relationships characterized by mutual openness and predictability. Vaporistas demonstrate customer service excellence by actively providing product information, showing empathy, and maintaining supportive attitudes. The study confirms that interpersonal communication significantly influences consumer trust, with successful relationships reaching the stable stage where personal connections transcend transactional interactions. However, conflicts can lead to relationship deterioration. The research contributes to understanding frontline communication strategies in the vape retail industry and provides practical implications for employee training and customer relationship management.

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INTRODUCTION

Indonesia, with a population of approximately 281 million people, ranks fourth globally in population size (Kedaton, 2024). Of this population, 70 million are active tobacco users, placing Indonesia eighth worldwide in tobacco consumption (Kesehatan, 2024; Salsabilla, 2024). Alarmingly, 7.4% of these users are children aged 10–18 years. Tobacco, containing the addictive substance nicotine, has been present in Indonesia since the 16th century. With technological advancement, tobacco consumption has evolved from traditional rolled cigarettes to electronic cigarettes (e-cigarettes) or vaporizers, which use tobacco essence extracts (Afrianto, 2021).

Vaporizers, commonly known as vapes, entered Indonesia in 2010. These electronic cigarettes have become popular alternatives to conventional cigarettes, as studies suggest vapes cause lower blood pressure increases compared to traditional cigarettes (Mulyadi et al., 2023; Untario, 2017). According to Professor Agus Dwi Susanto, Chairman of the Indonesian Lung

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Doctors Association (PDPI), vape usage in Indonesia has increased dramatically from 0.3% in 2011 to 10.9% in 2018, reaching 25% by March 2023 (Sagita, 2024).

Beyond being a cigarette alternative, vaping has emerged as a lifestyle trend among young Indonesians (Hutapea & Fasya, 2021). This growing demand has intensified competition among vape retailers, who employ various promotional strategies including social media marketing and interpersonal communication between consumers and frontline staff (vaporistas). As frontliners, vaporistas must possess not only product knowledge but also excellent communication skills to enhance customer satisfaction. Effective communication is crucial because consumer satisfaction depends on multiple aspects, including product education and relationship-building through information exchange (Alhasani & Muslim, 2022; Setu et al., 2023; Utaminingtyas et al., 2023).

Communication is defined as the process of message delivery from sender (communicator) to receiver (communicant), potentially involving emotional and cognitive aspects (Fatimayin, 2018). For vaporistas, communication plays a vital role not merely in serving customers but in creating friendly relationships. Specifically, interpersonal communication requires attention to openness, empathy, supportiveness, positivity, and equality (Kakarla, 2025). Interpersonal communication can enhance relationships between communicators and communicants by creating openness through mutual message exchange and feedback (Nurdin, 2020).

Previous research has examined similar phenomena regarding interpersonal communication's impact on brands. Firmansyah and Wongso (2023) found that interpersonal communication significantly affects consumer satisfaction and loyalty at Putra Harapan Baru Store in Pekanbaru. Sari and Rohmah (2024) demonstrated that interpersonal communication serves as a bridge between customer service at Lotte Mart and consumers in building good service relationships. Rakhmaniar (2023) concluded that interpersonal communication has a significant positive influence on maintaining customer loyalty in retail industries.

Preliminary observations at AMW Vapestore Samarinda revealed that vaporistas sometimes conduct transactions without attempting to build consumer trust, partly due to the absence of standard operating procedures (SOPs) (Schmidt & Pierce, 2016). Consumers tend to return to specific vaporistas, suggesting relationship preferences. Additionally, AMW Vapestore's recruitment process does not specifically require communication skills, focusing only on vape knowledge and work intention.

This research investigates interpersonal communication between vaporistas and consumers in building trust at AMW Vapestore Samarinda through the lens of Social Penetration Theory. The study aims to identify communication stages and their impact on trust development. AMW Vapestore was selected as it operates 13 branches in Samarinda, compared to competitors like EJ33 Vape (4 branches), Dinoy Vapestore (4 branches), Ayuhaa Vapestore (2 branches), RJB Vapestore (2 branches), and Gamasi Vapestore (4 branches), making it the largest vape retail chain in the city.

Research Objectives: This research aims to identify and analyze the interpersonal communication process between vaporistas and consumers in building trust at AMW Vapestore Samarinda. This research is expected to provide benefits both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, the results of the research can enrich the treasures of communication science, especially in the application of Social Penetration Theory in the context of vape retail in Indonesia. In addition, this research can be a reference for the development of similar research in the future. Practically, the findings of the research can be an input for AMW Vapestore and similar business actors in developing service standards, communication training for vaporistas, as well as strategies to build long-term relationships with consumers to increase customer trust and loyalty.

METHOD

This qualitative descriptive research employed Social Penetration Theory by Irwin Altman and Dalmas Taylor (1973) as the analytical framework. The study focused on five relationship development stages: orientation, exploratory affective, affective, stable, and depenetration (Nurdin, 2020). The research was conducted at AMW Vapestore Samarinda, Indonesia, between January and February 2025.

The research examined how communication interactions between vaporistas and consumers generate trust through five stages of Social Penetration Theory: orientation stage (initial simple conversations), exploratory affective stage (gradual self-expression), affective stage (personal disclosure and argumentation), stable stage (mutual openness and behavioral prediction), and dependentation stage (conflict emergence and potential relationship termination).

Data Sources. Primary data were collected through direct observation and in-depth interviews with purposively selected informants. Secondary data comprised documents related to AMW Vapestore operations. The purposive sampling method ensured participants met specific, detailed criteria relevant to research objectives.

Vaporista criteria: (a) minimum six months of employment; (b) no branch transfers during employment; (c) willingness to participate.

Consumer criteria: (a) male or female; (b) purchased coils and installation services; (c) minimum five visits; (d) consistently visited the same vaporista; (e) willingness to participate.

Initial participant screening employed Google Forms distributed through vaporistas to identify eligible informants. While no fixed participant number was required, three to ten informants are recommended for adequate qualitative explanation.

Data Collection. In-depth interviews explored interpersonal communication processes in trust building, focusing on the five stages of Social Penetration Theory. Observations supplemented interview data to capture naturally occurring phenomena.

Data Analysis. Data analysis followed the interactive model by Miles and Huberman, emphasizing data collection, presentation, and conclusion drawing. Raw data underwent editing and organization before analysis. Data were grouped according to research needs, forming the basis for evidence-based conclusions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Overview of AMW Vapestore Samarinda

History: AMW Vapestore was established on May 18, 2022, by Andriyan Marco Wen, a young Samarinda entrepreneur who also owns a coffee shop on Jalan Juanda. As an active vape user, he identified a business opportunity in the vaping industry and partnered with a fellow vape shop owner to launch AMW Vapestore. The first store opened on Jalan Siradj Salman, Samarinda. The business has since expanded to 14 locations.

Vision: To become a quality vape product provider with competitive prices, meeting vapers' needs and promoting vape industry development in East Kalimantan.

Mission: (a) Provide quality, beneficial vape products at competitive prices; (b) Offer solutions and education for smokers transitioning to vaping; (c) Become Samarinda's largest and most complete vape retail store; (d) Benefit novice vapers, especially those switching from conventional cigarettes.

Orientation Stage

The orientation stage marks relationship initiation through simple, brief conversations (Littlejohn in Nurdin, 2020). This stage serves as the gateway for deeper relationship development between vaporistas and consumers.

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Informant LR (vaporista) explained: "At first, I usually ask what they want, salt nicotine or freebase. If they choose freebase, I ask again whether they prefer creamy or fruity, or if they're unsure, I ask if they want cooling sensation or not. This serving method is better because it shows more effort for them." This demonstrates vaporistas' initiative in identifying consumer needs and willingness to provide appropriate information.

Informant D (consumer) reported: "Communication has been good so far. I learn a lot about vape because I'm often given recommendations for various liquids, devices, or coils. Basically, I get lots of vape information whenever I visit." This indicates effective information exchange during initial interactions.

Informant D continued: "I once received poor service from a vaporista at another store. They barely communicated, and when I was confused about which liquid to buy, they gave no recommendations, leaving me standing there for a while." This highlights communication's importance in relationship building, as simple conversations about products open pathways for connection.

Informant AR (vaporista) stated: "We have to ask customers questions and share product information. That's how we build relationships. Of course, price matters, but for customers, it's usually the last consideration." This shows vaporistas initiate relationships by understanding consumer needs and providing additional information.

Informant AR added: "First, I make sure customers get what they want. When they want strawberry cheesecake, I ask what kind of strawberry cheesecake flavor they're looking for." This demonstrates vaporistas' efforts to thoroughly understand consumer needs through active communication.

Informant GF (consumer) confirmed: "They're knowledgeable, so I'm more satisfied when given more information, especially when they describe liquid flavors clearly and ensure I understand their explanations." This emphasizes information provision's role in relationship building.

The findings align with Littlejohn's concept that relationships begin with simple conversations (Littlejohn in Nurdin, 2020) and Littlejohn and Foss's (2014) description of interpersonal dyadic communication having a friendly, informal nature that provides comfort to both parties. The orientation stage demonstrates openness as a key communication characteristic, where openness means willingness to fully receive and respond to information in interpersonal relationships.

Active communication from both parties creates a lively, developing relationship. Consumers' openness allows them to absorb vaporistas' information effectively, consistent with Effendy's (2011) assertion that communication participants must understand and comprehend delivered messages for communication to occur and create communicative relationships.

Exploratory Affective Stage

Although this stage often does not occur or is skipped (Littlejohn in Nurdin, 2020), the research found evidence of its occurrence. In this stage, individuals gradually reveal their identities and freely express themselves regarding conversation topics.

Informant LR explained: "When customers bargain unreasonably, I usually respond jokingly while still explaining I can't reduce the price that much. I explain the cost price and profit margin." This demonstrates expression of self through humor while maintaining professional boundaries.

Informant AR noted: "We adjust to customers because they come from various ages—young people, college students, working adults, and older men. We must adjust our language so our message gets through." This shows self-disclosure adaptation based on conversation partners' characteristics.

Informant AR continued: "Sometimes they're stubborn, usually about price or liquid flavor issues. We have to control our emotions better. Then I re-explain to customers." This reveals

mutual expression during interactions, with vaporistas managing emotional responses professionally.

Informant LR added: "Effort toward customers is very important because I want them to return due to satisfaction with my previous service. Without effort, customers rarely want to talk much—they just shop and leave without deeper interaction." This emphasizes that relationship building requires initiative beyond transactions.

From the consumer perspective, Informant D stated: "I visit vape stores because the vaporista is good and I know them. It adds to my friendship network. Even if other stores are fancier, I prefer visiting a friend's place." This indicates consumers' need for vaporistas who enable broad, free conversations allowing self-expression.

Informant D added: "Usually I also hang out while chatting with the vaporista. I prefer visiting a friend's store because besides being able to talk a lot, I can help make the store lively." This shows consumers actively participate in relationship building through extended interactions.

Informant GF emphasized: "I pay close attention to the vaporista's attitude toward me because comfort in speaking and reciprocal response are important to me." This highlights how vaporistas' demonstrated attitudes and expressions influence consumers' relationship decisions.

These findings confirm Wiryanto's (2005) concept of openness, involving willingness to reveal potentially hidden self-identity. The exploratory affective stage demonstrates equality in interpersonal communication, where equal treatment occurs without considering differences (Wiryanto, 2005).

Affective Stage

In the affective stage, relationships deepen significantly. Participants become increasingly open, share personal matters, provide criticisms, and may engage in intimate touches (Littlejohn in Nurdin, 2020).

Informant LR described: "I ask if they want sweet or throat-hit coil installation. If they choose sweet, after installation, I have them try it and ask their opinion." This shows vaporistas stimulate consumer participation in argumentation and feedback.

Informant LR continued: "I always ask if they're satisfied and inform them I'll adjust settings repeatedly until they're satisfied, as long as they haven't left the store." This demonstrates how criticism and argumentation strengthen relationships through mutual care.

Informant D reported: "For conversations, I'm comfortable with them because, as I mentioned, I often hang out at the store. Changing cotton doesn't even take 10 minutes, so we usually talk more." This indicates comfort level enables self-expression and criticism.

Informant D added: "When I'm comfortable talking with someone, it becomes easier. Like being friends—I can complain or ask anything more easily." This proves relationship development reached the affective stage with mutual free expression.

Informant AR shared: "Some who've become friends often share and confide in us. Some customers ask me about everything through private chat." This shows the affective stage provides greater space for continuous communication beyond business hours.

Informant AR continued: "Sometimes they say, 'You're right, bro, but my method is different because I found something that works differently for me." This demonstrates free opinion exchange without significant barriers.

Informant GF stated: "When I visit, we chat about various things, not just vape—we share other stories while hanging out." This confirms meetings become meaningful through mutual storytelling and expression.

Informant GF added: "Every time I plan to visit, I always contact them first to confirm they're working or not." This indicates desire to meet only with vaporistas having established relationships, enabling free thought and expression.

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These findings align with Effendy's (2011) requirement for mutual understanding in interpersonal communication and Wiryanto's (2005) description of supportiveness, involving openness to support successful communication through professional attitudes and situational adjustment.

Stable Stage

The stable stage represents the relationship peak where openness deepens, allowing participants to know personal matters and predict emotional reactions (Littlejohn in Nurdin, 2020). Openness plays a crucial role in sustaining established relationships.

Informant D described interactions: "I often visit the store. We follow each other on Instagram. If there's trouble, I directly ask them. Also for cotton and coil changes, while hanging out or playing games together." This demonstrates mutual openness through knowing each other personally.

Informant D continued: "Not just asking about vape—we talk about many things. We play games together and sometimes hang out outside, sharing personal stories." This shows conversations transcend basic topics to include personal disclosures fostering mutual trust.

Informant GF noted: "As I mentioned about our interactions, it's definitely more than just customer visits and departures. It's become a place for exchanging stories now." This indicates mutual storytelling about feelings and experiences, showing broad openness enabling self-expression through support and advice.

Informant GF added: "So far, I'd say we're friends, though not intensely daily since there's quite an age gap—like my younger sibling relationship." This illustrates how interaction intensity creates sibling-like bonds with advice exchange fostering mutual development.

Informant LR emphasized: "Most importantly, giving attention to customers is crucial—showing lots of care like providing solutions when devices have problems, or whatever they ask, trying to be informative and attentive." This demonstrates attention and informativeness reflect broader openness compared to previous stages.

Informant LR continued: "When they want to visit the store, they private message me first asking if I'm working. If I say yes, they come directly. But if I'm not working, they don't come because I'm not there." This shows consumers seek specific vaporistas due to comfortable interactions and openness.

Informant LR added: "We often chat when they're coming. Maybe other things like when new products arrive, I inform them so I can keep items for them. Outside work hours, I usually hang out with them or play games together." This reveals interaction frequency through both direct and online communication via chat applications and gaming.

Informant AR explained: "They have my phone number and often ask questions via WhatsApp like what I should do or how to handle things. Various questions, but generally the treatment is the same—no one is differentiated or given special treatment." This demonstrates information exchange breadth with equal treatment regardless of relationship depth.

Informant AR continued: "We've become friends, often sharing and sometimes they confide in us. Some customers ask me about everything through private chat. We've become friends who often talk and even hang out together." This shows deep relationship closeness through frequent storytelling and mutual need for listening to each other's stories.

Informant AR added: "We often hang out together, so their store visit frequency is definitely higher—sometimes just to drop by and say hi, then chat, and maybe leave or stay in the store." This indicates consumers don't just wait for free time outside the store but frequently visit during vaporistas' working hours for conversations, sometimes accompanying them until closing time.

These findings confirm Littlejohn and Foss's (2014) concept that interpersonal communication has no dominance, creating equal positions enabling mutual persuasion. This

creates safe environments for storytelling, aligning with Wiryanto's (2005) equality factor—accepting others openly regardless of situation.

The stable stage demonstrates social environment factor, where behavior and communication methods influence environmental comfort, creating attraction for active participation. This stage also fulfills Enjang's (2019) interpersonal communication function of meeting social and psychological needs.

Dependential Stage

The dependential occurs when relationships leave stability, marked by friction triggering relationship deterioration and potential termination (Littlejohn in Nurdin, 2020). Emerging conflicts have tendencies toward relationship damage.

Informant LR described: "When customers bargain unreasonably, I respond jokingly while still explaining I can't reduce the price that much. I explain the cost and profit margin." This shows minor disagreements about transactional matters like pricing, handled through humor to maintain comfortable atmosphere.

Informant LR continued: "For coil installation, I ask about complaints and what happened, because sometimes coil problems occur due to their usage. So I explain to them so they understand too." This demonstrates minor conflicts about device maintenance understanding, addressed through education providing appropriate information.

Informant LR added: "Of course we must be patient, although sometimes my face can't hide annoyance, but I still try to be patient." This shows efforts to maintain consumer feelings and smooth interactions to preserve relationships.

However, major conflicts occurred. Informant LR recalled: "I once had a conflict at a different store location when someone tried to steal from the store. But at my current store, it's been safe so far." This represents significant damage causing lost trust when consumers attempted theft.

Informant LR detailed: "I was extremely angry with that person, almost fought because I felt I'd been good to them and trusted them, but they were disrespectful. They got angry back, refused to admit it, and refused when I suggested checking CCTV." This demonstrates closed attitude through uncontrolled emotions, disappointment from betrayed trust and good treatment, and dishonesty causing strong dislike.

Informant AR experienced similar issues: "Like dealing with stubborn customers who insist despite being told, not that we mean to lecture, but because we work at vape stores daily, we sometimes have more knowledge." This shows minor conflicts from opinion differences about product usage.

Informant AR continued: "Conflicts definitely happen when we disagree on things with different perspectives. Most commonly they talk about girlfriend problems—we definitely have different views, causing small conflicts. Serious conflicts leading to distance do exist, caused by disagreement on quite complicated matters." This indicates relationship distancing results from situations causing discomfort.

Informant AR elaborated: "Like when discussing certain topics I'm uncomfortable with and don't want to discuss, but the customer keeps wanting to talk about it, so I start keeping distance. Some relationships have broken with customers. Haven't communicated for several months now." This reveals relationship termination occurred with gradually closed attitudes, minimizing or completely stopping interactions over extended periods.

From the consumer perspective, findings differed. Informant D stated: "So far, no conflicts have been serious enough. I'm not easily offended and don't easily cut people off. So everything's been fine." This shows relaxed attitudes prevent excessive concern about minor friction.

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Informant GF reported: "So far, I haven't had conflicts making me and the vaporista stop being friends or stop visiting the store. The relationship has been good." This indicates some relationships consistently remain positive without experiencing distance or termination.

These findings contrast with Wiryanto's (2005) empathy concept, where empathy requires understanding others' experiences, motivations, feelings, attitudes, and hopes to view situations from similar perspectives. Conflicts reveal failures in openness components: self-disclosure and open responses to conversation topics (Wiryanto, 2005).

Physical condition factors affect communication quality, as Lunandi (1994) notes that physical and emotional instability influences message delivery and processing. Additionally, physical environment rules and norms must be followed (Lunandi, 1994), though consumer violations created conflicts.

The disappearance of positive feelings contradicts Wiryanto's (2005) concept of positivity, involving active participation and positive attitudes like smiles and compliments. Similarly, equality intended for equal positions became opportunities for consumers to cause harm or jeopardize vaporistas' careers.

CONCLUSION

This research demonstrates that interpersonal communication between vaporistas and consumers at AMW Vapestore Samarinda successfully builds trust through five stages of Social Penetration Theory. Relationship development begins with the orientation stage—simple conversations about product needs—progresses through the exploratory affective stage gradual self-disclosure and expression—advances to the affective stage—personal sharing and argumentation—and culminates in the stable stage—mutual openness and behavioral predictability. Trust strengthens progressively through each stage, with stable relationships transcending transactional interactions into friendship. Vaporistas effectively apply customer service principles through active information sharing, empathy, and supportive attitudes. However, unresolved conflicts or significant breaches can trigger the dependeration stage, potentially leading to relationship termination. The study confirms that interpersonal communication significantly influences consumer trust building, with relationship success dependent on mutual openness, equality, empathy, supportiveness, and positive attitudes. These findings provide practical implications for AMW Vapestore and similar vape retailers to develop standard operating procedures emphasizing communication skills, implement comprehensive training programs for frontline staff, and establish conflict resolution mechanisms. Future research should explore quantitative measurement of communication effectiveness, comparative studies across different retail contexts, and longitudinal examination of relationship sustainability. The integration of communication skills in recruitment criteria and continuous professional development will enhance service quality and consumer loyalty in the competitive vape retail industry.

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