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Marketers' Perception about Marketing Ethics: Evidence from Malaysia

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Abstract: This paper presents the results of a study that investigates the role of religiosity and perceived ethical values of marketers on marketing ethics, using the measure developed by Forsyth (1980). One dimension of the study is relativism and idealism affecting the importance of ethics moderated by religion. The study showed that people having high idealism have high ethics but having high relativism does not show that there is a decrease in ethics even both idealism and relativism were moderated by one's strength of a religion. Overall, the study was found significant to as it and provides an understanding of marketing ethics in different cultures and company's practices

Keywords: *Marketing, Ethics, Idealism, Relativism, Religiosity*

1. Introduction

In recent years, research dealing with business and marketing ethics, in particular, has been quite extensive, especially in the context of marketing ethics research that addressed managerial ethics in various marketing situations (Rao and Singhapakdi, 1997). Marketing ethics have gained the attention of many scholars and executives in the public and private sectors in recent years. This is due to many unethical practices reported in the local and international media. Large international organizations like Enron and Arthur Anderson have created chaos in the business scene with their unethical practices reported in the media (Rashid and Ibrahim, 2008). Even in Malaysia, in the year 2004, top managers in key institutions like the National Pilgrimage Broad were not spared with breach of trust in investment decisions. Such incidents showed the extent and prevalence of unethical practices in Malaysia and worldwide (Rashid and Ibrahim, 2008).

With globalization, the world of marketing is changing very rapidly because of the change in consumer demands. Every organization or business that exists today is trying its best to fulfil these demands. Same kinds of products are being manufactured by different organizations. Organizations are finding new ways to gain competitive advantages over their rivals as well as maximizing their profits. The business world has become more competitive than ever before, and many managers find it necessary to adopt sound marketing practices to be able to survive in the prevailing environments (Gupta and Sulaiman, 1996). Due to globalization, organizations are covering larger geographical areas and marketing of different products in different countries. Increasing numbers of marketing firms are expecting more of their profits to be derived from international sales (Topol and Sherman, 1994). To some extent, the international marketing growth is fore-ordained in today's world, given the ever-increasing globalization of economies.

But moving into other markets does not guarantee larger profits; it may in fact guarantee more headaches for marketing managers because different cultures employ different methods of communication (Singhapakdi *et al.*, 1999). Organizations have to market their products or services according to laws and ethics of the particular country in which they are marketing, e.g. marketing alcoholic products in Islamic countries is strictly prohibited, and marketing beef products in certain parts of India is also prohibited. Divergent religious values can also create ethical issues in international business (Ferrell, Fraedrich and Ferrell, 2000). Each country has one supreme religion and culture. Their laws are made according to their religious practices and restrictions. These laws define the people's perceptions about any act. Hunt and Vitell (1986) suggested that religiousness has influence on individual's perception of ethics. They believed that religiousness could affect ethical decision-making in three ways, namely the cultural environment, the personal characteristics, and finally the religion, which is often a dominant basis for individual's deontological religiousness (Rashid and Ibrahim, 2008).

Every country has its own religious practices and citizens' perceptions and judgements are moderated or directed by their religion. Religion affects their ethical beliefs as to distinguish what is right and wrong, what is ethical or unethical for them as well as for their society. Unlike homogeneous societies, countries with multi-diverse ethnic groups have different religious beliefs and practices. Hence, individuals from different ethnic groups have their own religion, which reflect their moral values. Take Malaysia as an example where different ethnic groups, namely Malays, Chinese and Indians practise different religions. Thus, a particular act or decision which might be deemed ethical in the eyes of one ethnic group can be seen as unethical in the eyes of other ethnic groups. Hence, the purpose of this study is to determine to what extent are marketing ethics of marketers of different ethnic groups influenced by their different moral values and religious beliefs. In the ethics context, the involvement level can be determined by the relevance of the situation to the individual's dispositional ethical beliefs (Robin *et al*, 1996). A number of studies have found that idealism and relativism have strong determinants of ethical judgments and behaviours in business (Forsyth, 1980). According to Singhapakdi *et al*. (1999) and Marta, *et al* (2001), studies have also indicated a connection between idealism/relativism and moral intensity. Based on previous research, this study will fill the gap of utilization of idealism and relativism as the constructs to measure the ethical judgments and behaviours of marketers in Malaysia. In our best knowledge this study is first of its kind in Malaysia.

2. Literature Review

Ethics: The term *ethics* has many nuances, which could be defined as an inquiry into the nature and grounds of morality where the term morality is taken to mean moral judgements, standards and rule of conduct (Richter and Buttery, 2002). The American Heritage Dictionary made some definitions of ethics: "a study of the general nature of morals or specific moral choices; moral philosophy; and the rules or standards governing conducting members of a profession". Ethics, also represent a set of rules which can express right and wrong conduct to help individuals fact and belief, decide how issues are defined, and decide what moral principles apply to the situation. Moral principles refer to the impartial general rules of behaviour that are of great importance to a society and along with the values they represent, are fundamental to ethics (Richter and Buttery, 2002).

Reasons to study business ethics is to help organizations in decision to do right or wrong, and also to decide what they should do. Another reason for studying ethics is to help us decide the type of person we should be. Are there reasons to be generous? Yet another reason to study ethics is to help us decide what type of society we ought to live in. The field of ethics has usually focused on individual and the choices that are made by people. However, most marketing managers work within the context of an organization. Therefore, the corporate culture in which they operate can shape, enforce, and at times override the individual ethical dispositions that managers have about a particular situation. Even if individual values are relatively fixed, numerous case studies have clearly shown that the ethics of managers can be overridden by organizational pressures for increased profit, performance, or prestige (Murphy and Laczniak, 1993). Organizations that perceived as ethical often have a strong and loyal customer base as well as strong employee base, because of trust and mutual dependence in the relationship (Ferrell, *et al*. 2000). Customers tend to prefer buying from high-integrity companies, especially if the price is comparable to that of competitors. When employees perceive their organization as having as ethical climate, they are more likely to be committed to and satisfied with their work.

Role of Religion: Religion plays as *integrative* role on societies as a whole and on the individuals within them (Huffman, 1988). As Martinson *et al*. (1982) pointed out, those with religious affiliations (in contrast to their non-religious counterparts) ought to be imbued with a repertoire of attitudes and behaviours facilitating social integration – for example, more complete knowledge of conduct norms. Results of a national survey in the USA indicated that the level of religious commitment is a stronger determinant of values than almost any other form of predictor. It is therefore appropriate to examine the connection between the attitudes of individuals, their religious characteristics, and their values (Kennedy and Lawton, 1993). Wines and Napier (1992) have addressed the issue of religion and value systems. They stated that "there may be a nexus between religious values and management values", the role of religious orientation and moral philosophy that may affect business practice (Kennedy and Lawton, 1993). According to Asma (1992), the Malays (the ethnic group with the largest majority in Malaysia) have strong beliefs in the concept of Supreme Being- Allah the Almighty. The majority of Chinese (the second largest ethnic group in Malaysia) are of Buddhist-Taoist faith, and a small group are Christians by faith. Indians (the third largest ethnic group in Malaysia) are predominantly Hindus, but a small proportion of

them are Muslims and Christians by faith (Rashid and Ibrahim, 2008). For this study, a questionnaire measuring religious faith of respondents regardless of the types of religion they are associated with is used.

Santa Clara Strength of Religious Faith's type of questionnaire (1997) is used to measure the religious faith of individuals. Presently, most scales attempting to study religious faith are generally long and only applicable to Christian groups, and do not directly measure the strength of one's religious faith. The Santa Clara Strength of Religious Faith (SCSORF) is a 10-item scale designed to measure strength of religious faith regardless of religious denomination or affiliation (Plante and Boccaccini, 1997a; 1997b; Plante, Yancey, Sherman, Guertin and Pardini, 1999). The SCSORF was negatively correlated with God's control, which indicated that those who scored high in religious faith do not think of God as an absolute arbiter of life's events.

Theoretical Framework of Research

The independent variables in this study are relativism and idealism. The dependent variable is marketing ethics. The relationship between relativism and idealism is moderated by religious faith, which is added as a moderator. Figure 1 shows the theoretical framework of the research. The theoretical model was adapted from the previous study by Rao and Singhapakdi (1997), Singhapakdi *et al.* (1999) and Cornwell *et al.* (2005).

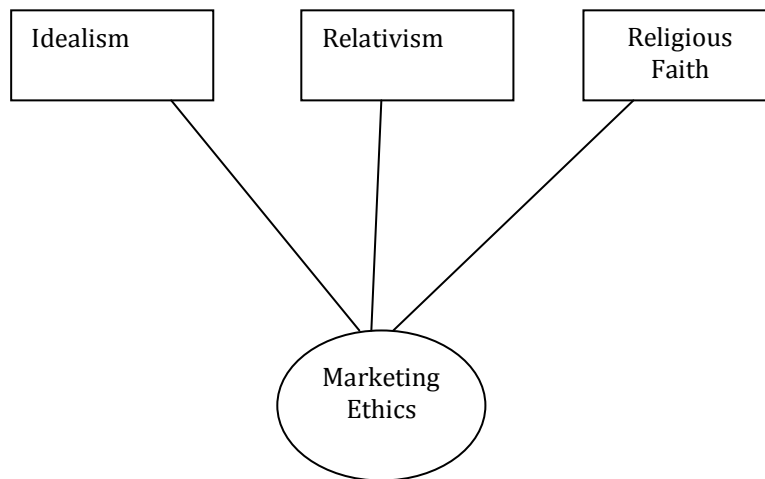


Figure 1- The theoretical model was adapted from the previous study by Rao and Singhapakdi (1997), Singhapakdi *et al.* (1999) and Cornwell *et al.* (2005).

Hypotheses

As Forsyth (1980) had clarified, relativism and idealism are not opposite concepts; rather they are independent concepts of belief. In other words, idealism focuses on “unselfish” concern for others, whereas relativism focuses on the best alternatives. Idealism has been found to positively influence and relativism has been found to negatively influence the degree of deontological norms and ethical judgement, perceived importance of ethics and social responsibility (Singhapakdi *et al.*, 1996; Etheredge, 1999), and ethical judgement and behavioural intention (Singhapakdi, *et al.*, 1996, 1999). Relativistic individuals by contrast to idealistic individuals reject the idea of moral universality and have weaker ethical beliefs (Rawwas *et al.*, 1994, 1995, 1998). From the findings of these studies, the study can hypothesize that idealism and relativism influence marketers’ ethical beliefs in contrasting ways. Hence it is hypothesized that:

- H1: Marketers who score high in idealism will score high in marketing ethics.
- H2: Marketers who score high in relativism will score low in marketing ethics.
- H3: The relationship between marketers’ values and their marketing ethics is moderated by their religious faith.
- H4: There is no difference in the marketing ethics of marketers of different ethnicity.

3. Research Methodology

This study is to certify a proposed theoretical model and certain hypothesis. Therefore, quantitative research design was selected for descriptive data analyses and hypotheses testing. This type of investigation is a correlation study attempting to explain the relationship between dependent variable (marketing ethics) by independent variables (relativism, idealism) and the effect of present moderator (religious faith). A survey instrument of self-administered questionnaire was designed to collect primary data for this study. In this study, there are 2 independent variables, one dependent variable and one moderator. The 2 independent variables are relativism and idealism and the dependent variable is marketing ethics. The moderating variable is religious faith which is thought to moderate the relationship between dependent and independent variables.

Eight dimensions were used to measure marketing ethics, which was adapted from previous researchers' questionnaires, namely *importance of ethics, small prints, price differentiation, giving bribes, speaking ill of competitors, hidden strings, disparagement and breaking code of conducts*. Primary data was collected in Penang, Malaysia via self administered questionnaires in which respondents were selected through a convenient sampling method. A total 300 questionnaire were sent to different sales people and marketers in banks, finance and insurance companies. 152 questionnaires were completed with a response rate of 50.6%, but only 136 questionnaires were useable, representing a return rate of 45.3%.

The first section of the questionnaire measured religious faith using the "Santa Clara Strength of Religious Faith" measurement, which contained 10 questions on a 4-point scale, from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 4 = Strongly Agree. The second section consisted of 8 questions on a 5-point scale, from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree, measuring 8 distinct variables of marketing ethics, specifically small prints, price differentiation, giving bribes, speaking ill of competitors, hidden strings, disparagement and breaking codes of ethics. The last section collected data on the demographic profiles of respondents.

Profile of Respondents: Among 136 individuals, 80 (58.8%) are males and females are 56 (41.2%). In terms of ethnicity, Malays were 42 (26.5%), Chinese, 90 (56.25%) and Indians 28 (17.5%). Detailed demographic profile of the respondents is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents n=136

Variables	Categories	Frequency (%)
Sex	Male	80 (58.8)
	Female	56 (41.2)
Age	Below 21 yrs	12 (8.8)
	22 to 26 yrs	76 (55.9)
	27 to 31 yrs	30 (22.1)
	32 to 36 yrs	18 (13.2)
Ethnicity	Malays	42 (26.5)
	Chinese	90 (56.25)
	Indians	28 (17.5)
	Others	0 (0)
Education	Certification / Diploma	2 (1.5)
	Bachelor's Degree	86 (63.2)
	Master's Degree	48 (35.3)
	PhD	0 (0)
Job	Marketing Manager	28 (20.6)
	Assistant Manager	36 (26.5)
	Sales Representative	66 (48.5)
	Trainee	6 (4.4)
Marital Status	Single	88 (64.7)
	Married	42 (35.3)
Years of Experience	Below 5 yrs	120 (88.2)
	6 to 10 yrs	16 (11.8)
	Below RM 1000	10 (7.4)
Income	RM 1001 to 2000	46 (33.8)
	RM 2001 to 3000	64 (47.1)
	RM 3001 to 4000	16 (11.8)

Goodness of Measure: For each section of the questionnaire, reliability test was conducted. The reliability test indicated the extent of the measures without bias and thus offers a consistent measurement across time and across the various items in the instrument (Sekaran, 2000). Cronbach's alpha was the reliability coefficient that indicated how well the items in the set are positively correlated to one another. Sekaran (2000) suggested that if the Cronbach's alpha was nearest to 1, it was better because it meant that the internal consistency reliability of factors is high. If Cronbach's alpha is less than 0.6 it was considered poor. Cronbach's Alpha for Religiosity was 0.91, for Idealism .85, for Relativism 0.87 and for Marketing Ethics 0.88 was obtained. The Cronbach's alpha of each section was above 0.6 showing good internal consistency of the questionnaire. Therefore, the questionnaire was considered reliable.

Testing of Hypotheses: Hierarchical Regression test was performed to determine the relationship between independent and dependent variables. Hypotheses 1, 2, 3 were tested by running Hierarchical Regression test while hypothesis 5 was tested by running ANOVA and Post hoc test to find out if there are any differences in the marketing ethics of marketers in terms of their ethnicities.

4. Results

Testing Hypothesis 1: Hypothesis 1 (H1) states that Marketers' who score high in idealism will score high in marketing ethics. Table 2 shows the results of Hierarchical Regression test. From the table, it is clear that there is a strong relationship between Idealism and Marketing Ethics. Individuals who score high in marketing ethics possess high Idealism. The beta value is $\beta = .44$ which is significant at $p = .001$ level. Hence Idealism and Marketing Ethics are positively related to each other. So, it can be concluded that any person who is highly idealistic should have high marketing ethics. Hence, H1 is accepted.

Testing Hypothesis 2: Hypothesis 2 (H2) proposed that marketers who score high in relativism will score low in marketing ethics. The beta value of Relativism and Marketing Ethics is $\beta = -.24$ at $p = 0.05$ level, which indicates that there is a significant negative relationship between the Relativism and Marketing Ethics. Hence, if any individual scores high in relativism will score low in marketing ethics. Hence, H2 is supported.

Table 2: Regression Output

Model	Coefficients ^a				T	Sig.
	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients			
	B	Std. Error	Beta			
1 (Constant)	28.424	9.538			2.980	.004
Idealism	.444	.125	.446		3.565	.001
Relativism	-.247	.100	.270		-2.475	.016
2 (Constant)	21.434	9.964			2.151	.035
Idealism	.230	.163	.231		1.417	.162
Relativism	-.207	.100	-.226		-2.074	.042
Religious Faith	.282	.141	.330		1.990	.051
3 (Constant)	64.355	43.932			1.465	.148
Idealism	-.615	.601	-.618		-1.024	.310
Relativism	-.311	.681	-.340		-.457	.649
Religious Faith	-.962	1.114	-1.128		-.863	.392
Idealism*Religious Faith	.024	.016	1.807		1.466	.148
Relativism* Religious Faith	.002	.002	.081		.144	.886

a. Dependent Variable: Marketing Ethics

* $p \leq 0.05$

Testing Hypothesis 3: Hypothesis 3 (H3) proposes that the relationship between marketers' values and their marketing ethics is moderated by their religious faith. To verify H3 hierarchical regression was performed on the data. The beta values of all the variables for marketers' values and their ethics (Table 2) were not significant at $p = 0.05$ level. H3 is not supported.

Testing Hypothesis 4: Hypothesis 4 (H4) proposed that there is no difference in the marketing ethics of marketers of different ethnicity. To verify hypothesis 4, a one-way ANOVA test was conducted. *Post hoc* test was also used to compare the 3 ethnicities (Table 3). *Post hoc* test was used to compare three or more group means. The results showed that there was no significant difference in the marketing ethics of the three different ethnicities ($F = .21, p = .80$). *Post hoc* test also indicated that there was no significant difference in the marketing ethics of the different ethnicities, as shown in Table 4.

Table 3: ANOVA Test for Marketing Ethics

	Sum of squares	Df	F	sig
Between Groups	21.425	2	.214	.808
Within Groups	3248.045	65		
Total	3269.471	67		

Table 4: Post Hoc Test

	Malays	Chinese	Indians
Malays	-	-	-
Chinese	.953	-	-
Indians	.793	.931	-

Table 5: Summary of Results

Hypotheses	Status
H1 Marketers who score high in idealism will score high in marketing ethics.	Supported
H2 Marketers who score high in relativism will score low in marketing ethics.	Supported
H3 The relationship between marketers' values and their marketing ethics is moderated by their religious faith.	Not Supported
H4 There is no difference in the marketing ethics of marketers of different ethnicity	Not Supported

5. Conclusion and Discussion of Findings

The main objective of this research was to examine the variance of Idealism, Relativism moderated by Religion on marketing ethics. The results of this study showed that Idealism has a positive relation while Relativism was found to have a negative relation with marketing ethics, as reported by the previous researchers (e.g. Vitell *et al.*, 1993; Singhapakdi *et al.*, 1999). Individuals who score high in Idealism are more idealistic, and possess high marketing ethics. They consider certain behaviours to be inherently right, and the determination of rightness focuses on the individual actor, not society. Thus these perspectives are sometimes referred to as ethics of respect for persons, which is a deontological perspective. To determine whether the behaviour is ethical, deontologist looks for conformity to moral principles. For example, if a manufacturing worker becomes ill or dies as a result of conditions in the workplace, deontologist might say that the methods of production must be corrected, no matter what the cost, even if it means bankrupting the company and thus causing all workers to lose their jobs. As mentioned earlier, the results found that Relativism had a negative relationship with marketing ethics, which states that individuals who score high in Relativism scored low in marketing ethics. Relativism denies that people can make rational or objective ethical judgements. There is no right or wrong, moral or immoral, except in terms of a particular culture of society.

In addition, although the E-Procurement Quality scale has been used in eastern countries before, it is possible that idealism and relativism are western ideologies that are suboptimal in identifying the ethical positions of eastern religions. Cornwell *et al.* (2005) suggested new scale development effort to support understanding of the relationship between religion and ethics. According to Forsyth's (1980) definition of relativism particularly, multi-site scale development is required. The rejection of universal morals needs to be viewed in conjunction with multiple worlds' religion, taking into consideration which moral framework or religion is being rejected (Cornwell *et al.*, 2005). This is attributed to the study findings, which showed Marketing Ethics and Religion had a significant positive correlation at $p=0.05$ level, but religion did not act as a moderator of the relationship between marketers' values and their marketing

ethics. It also establishes that there is no significant difference in the marketing ethics of marketers and sales people of different ethnicities. Hence, Malays, Chinese and Indians marketers did not have any significant differences in their marketing ethics. The results are also consistent with the findings of Waller *et al.* (2005) and Gibbs *et al.* (2007), who stated that the people living in multi cultural groups tend to be more moderate or liberal so as to “maintain social and cultural harmony between the various groups.

Religion is found to have no significant effect when acting as a moderator. One of the reasons could be that most of the respondents in this study are between the ages 22 to 26, single and belong to less than five years of work experience. Hence, these young people are most likely to be more interested in making money and achieving their targets in life rather than being more religious. Had the majority of the respondents been from the older age group, the results might have been different or religious faith might have been significant as a moderator.

Limitations

The confinement of the sample to only one geographical location in Malaysia might have affected the results. It is very likely that if other cities in Malaysia had been included, different results could have been obtained.

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