Examination of the Consumer Ethics of Students at The University of Mississippi

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EXAMINATION OF THE CONSUMER ETHICS OF STUDENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MISSISSIPPI

by
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A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in fulfillment of the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

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ABSTRACT

STEPHEN COLE WILKERSON: Examination of the Consumer Ethics of Students at the University of Mississippi

Consumer Ethics involves the way in which a person perceives a moral dilemma that he is placed in, and the reaction he takes as a result of this situation. In this study, a random sample of one hundred fifty-seven students in the College of Liberal Arts and the School of Business were surveyed using the Consumer Ethics Scale devised by Dr. Scott Vitell and Dr. James Muncy. The Moral Identity Scale devised by Dr. Americus Reed and Dr. Karl Aquino was also used to see if any difference existed in the way in which different majors perceive themselves, or want others to perceive them. The results provided no significant evidence that there was a difference, using a 0.05 significance level. There were singular items, however, where Liberal Arts majors were likely to view questionable actions as slightly more ethical than business majors. This seems to show that Business majors are more likely to think of a situation in terms of if they were on the other side of the situation, and therefore, are more likely to view certain acts as less ethical.
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INTRODUCTION

Background

Pressley and Blevins (1984) conducted research to determine if the ethical beliefs of students enrolled in Business School should differ from those of students studying the Liberal Arts. That is to say, are Business students more likely to engage in activities that could be termed less ethical or less correct in their role as consumers, due the constant strain they feel from the competitiveness of the business market. The transition between work-life and home-life could become blurred by the stress, and they could make decisions based on business tactics rather than moral principles. To determine if a difference truly existed, the authors decided to poll a sample of students using statements such as "winning is everything," "money is most important," and even "selling one’s soul to the company." To gauge the differences in opinion, the authors used a scale ranging from Always the Case to Never the Case, and asked students to indicate whether they felt the statement accurately described characteristics of people who were ascending through career
advancements in most of the 500 biggest business
corporations in America.

The study found that no major difference in opinion
existed between majors or departments, but the authors
offered a disclaimer to prevent inaccuracy in
interpretation. They stated, "Subjects were not (authors' italics) asked whether or not one should engage in a particular practice... [They] were asked whether they believed that those who advance engage in such practices," (p.5). The study was targeted to gauge students' opinions of the traits held by others, rather than characteristics they personally held. To clarify, there might not be a correlation between believing that those who advance in America's top companies possess certain traits, and possessing those traits oneself. Just because one believes that others are likely to be unethical, does not mean that he will is an unethical person.

The study did find that nearly three-quarters of respondents felt that a "winning is everything" mentality played a role in advancement. After reviewing the data collected, the authors theorized that the opinions of the students were apparently independent of the ethics teachings they were exposed to as a result of their schooling.
In recent years, additional studies have been undertaken concerning ethics, though much of it has been targeted at the business aspect, rather than the customer. Vitell (2001) highlighted ethics research of the post-1990 period, and offered suggestions for future studies. Among models that have been devised to measure the ethics of an individual, only the Hunt-Vitell (1993) has been universally applicable. The model suggests that, "the individual decision-maker's perception of an ethical problem... is followed by the perception of various alternatives that might be used to resolve the problem," (p.35). This implies that an individual views multiple alternatives to handle a situation, and chooses the one that he feels is most acceptable.

Vitell (2001) also points to two methods of moral evaluation to arrive at an ethical conclusion. First, the deontological method "focuses on the specific actions or behaviors of the consumer," (p. 34). This involves evaluation of "inherent (author's italics) rightness versus wrongness," (p. 34). among the available alternatives. The deontological perspective encompasses comparing each alternative with a personal set of values to determine which agrees most with those values.
Next, the teleological perspective involves "assessment of how much good versus bad will result from a decision... [with a decision] being considered most ethical if the consequences bring a greater balance of good over bad than any other alternative," (p. 34). This method emphasizes group interests, desirability, and importance of stakeholders in the decision making process. The author points out that both methods are involved in most ethical decision making processes.

THE CONSUMER ETHICS SCALE

Perhaps the most useful tool in determining the ethical beliefs of an individual consumer was created by Vitell and Muncy (1992). Vitell (2001) defines the four aspects of the Consumer ethics scale as (1) actively benefiting from illegal activities, or returning damaged goods when the damage was your own fault (2) passively benefiting, like not saying anything when the waiter or waitress miscalculates a bill in your favor (3) actively benefiting from questionable (deceptive) practices, such as returning merchandise to a store by claiming that it was a gift when it was not and (4) no harm/ no foul activities, such as 'Burning' a CD rather than buying it.

Vitell and Muncy (1992) found by surveying nearly 600 heads of households that passively benefiting was seen as
being more ethical than actively benefiting in the eyes of most consumers. Also, passively benefiting was seen as less ethical than actively benefiting from deceptive practices. The author suggests that “wrongness” could be more closely related with illegality than with the question of active versus passive benefiting. The study also found that activities such as the copying of computer software without permission were seen as “no harm/ no foul.”

A strong correlation was found between the number of issues and a person’s attitude toward the business world. That is to say, most consumers who viewed business negatively were less apt to view practices as unethical. Likewise, the study found that consumer ethics tends to possess an inverse relation to age, with teens and young adults being “less ethical” than older generations. Vitell (2001) points out that the Muncy-Vitell scale can be a valid tool in virtually every culture in determining active or passive benefiting or whether an activity is seen as illegal.

Vitell (2001) also suggested linking the Muncy-Vitell scale with a behavioral scale such as the one proposed in Reed and Aquino (2002). In a study on Moral Identity, Reed and Aquino stated that, “moral identity is defined... as a self-conception organized around a set of moral traits.
[It] is trait specific and based on recent social-cognition-oriented definitions of the self, and may also be amenable to a distinct mental image of what a moral person is likely to think, feel, and do," (p.1424). In this definition, the authors show that a person’s moral identity has very distinct ties to his or her behavior, that it plays a role in how they are likely to act in a given situation. The impact of moral identity on behavior could play a major role in the decisions one makes in ethical dilemmas, which is why this topic is so intriguing. They also found that “moral standards are important predictors of Moral behavior,” (p. 1425). This is to say, the moral standards of a person could influence the ethical views of that person. For instance, if a person feels that certain positive traits are valuable, then that person would, in theory, be a person who attempts to act in an ethical manner. The authors proposed that, “moral identity can be a basis for social identification that people use to construct their self-definitions,” (p. 1426). They use this to further show the importance of a person’s self-perception to the activities he participates in.

Not only is one’s self-perception important, but the intensity of the perception could cause an even greater link between one’s moral identity and ethical behavior.
Reed and Aquino (2002) point out that a person's moral identity could be associated with his beliefs, behaviors, and attitudes, particularly when the identity bears a high degree of self-importance.

With this in mind, I plan to incorporate Reed's Moral Identity Measure into my study to determine if the moral standards of a person really do influence his ethical beliefs. To accomplish this goal, I plan to use a survey to gather information concerning the Business and Liberal Arts populations at the University of Mississippi. It incorporates thirteen dimensions used to quantify a person's moral identity, established by Americus Reed, II and Karl Aquino. Next, the Muncy-Vitell Consumer Ethics Scale will be applied. In the end, I plan to compare the scores from each component for Business and Liberal Arts students, then to compare those who have a high moral identity against those who have a low moral identity. In other words, I will compare Liberal Arts vs. Business students on the two components, and then low moral identity vs. high moral identity, to find if differences exist among the sample groups.

Since this study will be the first to compare college students primarily on the basis of discipline, it will essentially be comprised of primary research. Though
Pressley and Blevins (1984) found no significant difference between different majors in their study, I believe that a difference will exist in this experiment. The current trends in the business world show a decline in the ethical standards of those in power, such as the Enron debacle. Today's students may feel that in order to rise through the ranks of a successful business, ethical practices would need to take a backseat to positive results, and this should correlate to lower scores on the Muncy-Vitell model of Consumer Ethics.

**ADDITION OF NEW ITEMS**

New items have been added to the Consumer Ethics Scale to take into account the Green Movement, and others have been added to relate to the college population. In the past, the Consumer Ethics scale has been used to gauge the ethics of an adult population, and, since I will only be surveying college students, I feel that some questions relating to college atmosphere are appropriate. The Green Movement, or the increased sense of environmental awareness in today's business culture, has brought on new legislation dealing with pollution, protecting the environment, and preserving our natural resources. The new items concerning the Green Movement will attempt to gauge the opinion of students about certain actions that coincide with "Going
Green," or proactively trying to follow the principles that the Green Movement has been built upon. A major part of this movement involves recycling, or buying products made of recycled materials. This topic was included in previous editions of the Consumer Ethics Scale, so no modifications were made due to recycling trends. The downloading section was also left alone, since the questions in that section are sufficient for a student population.

The "Doing Good" section of the Consumer Ethics Scale has been modified to include items about the Green Movement mentioned earlier. For instance, the invention of the hybrid vehicle has introduced the world to a way to combat the increased emission of green house gases by combining the conventional engine with technology to make the automobile fully electric under certain conditions. Though they are more expensive, they help to protect the environment, and serve as an outlet for many people to contribute to the Green Movement.

Organic food is another hot topic in today's environmental movement. This food is prepared using methods that are less taxing to the land, air, and surrounding water bodies. Organic food uses no synthetic products, such as pesticides and insecticides, which makes it less likely to affect the various indigenous wildlife
and environment. With these benefits come a higher cost of the product, which some people are willing to pay, since their main concern is environmental protection.

Likewise, there is a growing trend to buy foods from local markets, rather than supermarkets, to preserve the local economy and promote farming by local merchants. This is thought to be less taxing on surrounding land, since most local farmers do not use the expansive chemicals that many commercial farms do.

Other items have been added to relate more closely to the student population the survey will be dealing with. For instance, the issue of buying books for school is a large expense for many students, and certain practices concerning this could be seen as questionable behavior. Local bookstores depend on revenue from students to continue operations, and many have built a loyal following from their efforts to provide books at the lowest cost to students. Shopping around to find the best price with no intention of buying, or using the internet to purchase books could potentially cause these businesses to either have to reduce prices so far that they could not profit, or even cause them to close due to lack of revenue.

Also, the buying and selling tickets for college sporting events can certainly present an opportunity for
unethical behavior. Students can purchase tickets at a reduced rate, and even though certain precautions have been taken to deter students from reselling their tickets to others, which can result in a decent profit, students can still find a way to profit from selling the tickets they purchase.

The final question added to this section involves an issue that every student faces yearly. Financial aid is one of the biggest issues facing college students today, since the price of obtaining a quality education has been on a steady incline in recent years. The temptation to alter or withhold certain information in completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) could be the difference in receiving a great deal of financial aid and receiving hardly any at all. This temptation could cause some students to feel pressured enough by the potential financial burden to withhold information to gain a more favorable allotment of financial aid.

My first hypothesis, H1, is that Business majors will score lower on the Muncy-Vitell Consumer Ethics Scale. Conversely, while they might not want to act in such an ethical manner, Business majors will likely want others to perceive them as ethical, since they will be in constant contact with shareholders of the organization. This should
lead to a higher score on the Moral Identity scale of Aquino and Reed. Thus, my second hypothesis, H2, is that Business majors will score higher on the Moral Identity Measure.

Finally, for H3, hypothesis three, I feel that those who identify positively with Reed’s Moral Identity Measure will be more likely to view a questionable situation as “unethical” than those who identify negatively, which will constitute hypothesis three.
METHODS

A random sample of one hundred fifty-seven students was taken using a three part survey. Part one, measuring moral identity, contained a list of the following characteristics: Caring, Compassionate, Fair, Friendly, Generous, Helpful, Hardworking, Honest, and Kind.

The students were asked to answer thirteen questions regarding how they felt about the group of characteristics.

Part two contained thirty items presented by the Muncy-Vitell Consumer Ethics Scale, and six new items devised to relate specifically to the demographics of this sample. These new items comprise the Green Movement and college related items mentioned before. Student responses were rated according to a 5 point Likert scale mentioned earlier, and then averaged across the scales of Downloading, Recycling, Actively Benefiting, Passively Benefiting, Questionable Activities, and No Harm/ No Foul.

Part three of the survey only contained two demographic questions. The first question asked the student to list his classification as a Senior, Junior, or Sophomore. The second asked for the student’s major, with
choices for Business, or Liberal Arts. An "other" classification was used to classify those outside of the selected populations. This category was just used to compare the students across different majors and classes. A copy of the survey is presented in Appendix A.
DATA ANALYSIS

Upon compiling the data collected in a spreadsheet, many testing methods were used to determine the findings. First, blank cells in the spreadsheet, representing unanswered questions, were filled using the mode answer for each question. No more than two or three surveys were blank for any one question. When every cell was filled, the mean for each class of participants was calculated for each question. Also, scales were formed using the Consumer Ethics Scale and Moral Identity Measure dimensions as a guide. The scales were then compared between majors for mean differences and variance. T-tests were used to determine significance of difference in the responses, using a 0.05 level of significance as a baseline for assuming a significant difference exists between classes.

Reliability, a measure that must be high in order for results to be valid, was calculated using Cronbach’s coefficient Alpha. As a rule of thumb, an alpha at the 0.7 level coincides with a reliable item. Grouping questions into categories was done with the method used in previous
ventures with the Consumer Ethics Scale. The reliability of each category follows:

- Downloading - 0.528
- Recycling - 0.813
- Doing Good - 0.719
- Actively Benefitting - 0.777
- Passively Benefitting - 0.840
- Questionable Actions - 0.747
- No Harm/No Foul - 0.660

**Figure 1.** Reliability of Scaled Categories of Consumer Ethics Model using Cronbach's Coefficient Alpha.
RESULTS

After analyzing the data, we found the following:

Using a significance level of 0.05, little to no difference existed between the standing (i.e., senior, junior) on the scaled items. When comparing the Business majors against the Liberal Arts majors, the level of significance of difference for each category follows:

- Downloading - 0.151
- Recycling - 0.861
- Doing Good - 0.999
- Actively Benefiting - 0.602
- Passively Benefiting - 0.099
- Questionable Activities - 0.282
- No Harm/No Foul - 0.461
- Internalization - 0.074
- Symbolization - 0.238

Reviewing these findings, I was not able to find support for any of the hypotheses made in the INTRODUCTION section. My first hypothesis, that Business majors would be less likely to view an action as unethical, is not supported since there is no significant difference between the different majors. Next, Business majors and Liberal Arts majors did not differ on Moral Identity scores, so my hypothesis that Business students would have lower scores on the Moral Identity Measure is also unsupported. Third,
since there was no difference in the scores on the Moral Identity Measure, my third hypothesis, those scoring higher on Moral Identity will also score higher on the Consumer Ethics Model, cannot be supported.

This is to say that none of my hypotheses concerning the comparison of students from the School of Business and College of Liberal Arts were supported in this study. This could be contributable to many factors, such as the fact that students from only one university were polled. The societal influence of the area could have invalidated the data, since all the students have been subjected to the same culture during their time at Ole Miss. A comparison of schools from two different areas of the state, or possibly two different regions, could warrant different results, but that too might be influenced by the pressure of the surrounding social environment. As for now, though, the hypotheses that Business majors and Liberal Arts majors differ in the way they view ethical situations has been unsupported.
DISCUSSION

After it was determined that no significant difference existed between the different classes, and in an attempt to better understand the results, more analysis was undertaken to see if differences existed on individual questions. The following findings were uncovered as a part of this analysis: There is a significant difference at the 0.05 on certain individual items, and this brings about some interesting findings.

These findings bring about a point not considered earlier in the research. Perhaps, when put in situations regarding business practices, Business majors are more likely to empathize with the person on the receiving end of the action, and are therefore more likely to feel that the action is wrong. Many instances occurred in which the Liberal Arts majors felt that actions were not as wrong as what Business majors felt.

For example, when asked about buying counterfeit goods instead of buying the original manufacturers' brands, Business students responded that they felt the action was somewhat wrong at a mean of 2.50, while Liberal Arts
students felt more neutral about the subject, answering at a mean of 2.56. The level of significance was 0.053.

![Mean Response to Question B2](image)

**Figure 2:** Student mean responses to question B2, "Buying Counterfeit Goods as Opposed to the Original Manufacturer’s Brand." (Higher score indicates a feeling that action is less wrong).

When asked about observing a shoplifter and ignoring it, students from the School of Business answered at a mean of 1.86, meaning they felt strongly that it was wrong to ignore such an action, while those from the College of Liberal Arts answered at a mean of 2.22, meaning they only felt that it was only somewhat wrong. This equates to a significant difference of 0.052.
When asked about whether they felt that trying on clothing for over an hour with no intention of buying, Liberal Arts students answered at a mean of 4.49, which implies they felt that the action was not wrong. Business students were less inclined to see the action as permissible, as they answered at 3.99. This correlates to a 0.09 level of significance.
Mean Response to Question B30

![Bar chart showing mean responses to Question B30 for Business Majors and Liberal Arts Majors.](chart.png)

**Figure 4:** Student mean responses to question B30, "Spending Over an Hour Trying on Clothing and not Buying any." (Higher score indicates a feeling that action is less wrong).

Also, Business majors were found to be more neutral when asked about the treatment of employees. When asked about not purchasing from companies who you don’t believe treat their employees fairly, the Business major mean score was 3.88, compared to 4.24 for Liberal Arts majors. This shows that Business students are less inclined to make purchases based on how a company’s employees are treated, at a level of significance of 0.084.
Figure 5: Student mean responses to question B10, "Not purchasing products from companies that you believe don’t treat their employees fairly." (Higher score indicates a feeling that action is less wrong).

Evidence also shows that Liberal Arts majors are more likely to withhold or misconstrue information to benefit themselves in certain situations. When asked if lying about a child's age to get a lower price, Liberal Arts majors were almost neutral. When asked the same question, business majors felt that lying about a child's age to get a better price was somewhat wrong.
Figure 6: Student mean responses to question B2, "Lying About a Child’s Age to Get a Lower Price" (Higher score indicates a feeling that action is less wrong).

Finally, a difference exists in the way in which the different majors want others to perceive them. A very strong significance, 0.024, exists between the majors when asked if hobbies and activities undertaken during one’s spare time clearly identify one as having the characteristics listed in the Moral Identity Measure. Business majors answered at a mean of 3.66, coinciding with a feeling that the item somewhat describes them. Liberal Arts, on the other hand answered at a mean of 3.24, meaning they felt more neutral about the subject.
Mean Response to Question A10

![Bar chart showing mean responses to Question A10 for Business Majors and Liberal Arts Majors.]

**Figure 7:** Student mean responses to question A10, "The things I do in my spare time clearly identify me as having these characteristics." (Higher score indicates a feeling that action is less wrong)

As predicted before, Business majors should be more likely to want others to perceive them as being ethical, and this item, part of the Symbolization scale of the Moral Identity measure, asks about the hobbies of the subject.

This shows that Business majors are more likely to openly participate in activities that identify them with characteristics of the Moral Identity Measure, which gives them a more positive appearance. This, in turn, could lead to enhanced trust in the person, and could lead to better business opportunities, profits, etc.
In closing, the research conducted shows that there is no evidence to support a difference in the Consumer Ethics of students at the University of Mississippi. While differences do occur on some of the individual questions, no real difference is present on the summated scales of the Moral Identity Measure or the Consumer Ethics Model. This is to say that Business majors and Liberal Arts majors at Ole Miss overall show roughly the same pattern of ethics, as shown by the study.
References


