Ethical Perception from Students' Perspective: Understanding Instructors' Effect on Students' Ethical Sensitivity in Personal Selling

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Today business ethics is one of the most popular area subject for research and discussion. Press reflects a widespread interest in business ethics and academicians are reporting more concern for ethical standards in every business function today than in the past. Among those functions, sales and marketing are the most frequent targets for criticism. Ferrell and Gresham (1985) explained this situation due to their "boundary spanning role" for the organization. The interest in improving ethics can be seen across all business functions, because all are vulnerable to charges of unethical practice. However, the promotional component of marketing, particularly the sales function, is especially vulnerable to accusations of unethical practice.

This is a descriptive study which examined the attitudes and ethical perceptions and sensitivity of 270 university students regarding the ethics and acceptability of various sales practices. This study is conducted on students who took Marketing Management course at two major business schools in Turkey by using Kellaris and Dabholkar's Personal Selling Ethics Scale (PSE), an instrument designed to measure the sensitivity of students in personal selling to sales-related ethical issues. This scenario-based study explores whether sales practices were thought to be ethical or not, and whether or not such behaviors would be acceptable. The purpose of this study is to measure the instructor's effect on students' ethical sensitivity. Students' academic background was also examined to understand whether it has an effect on attitudes and ethical perception.

INTRODUCTION

Public interest in business ethics have shown a great increase in today's business life. Unethical practices have popped in every industry, affecting both customers, employers, employees, and competitors. Many of the university departments have responded to this public concern by adding courses in professional ethics to their curricula to create sensitivity among future practitioners.

Salespeople usually face a trade-off between sales quotas and customer satisfaction. This situation can create an ethical tension on the salespeople. It seems particularly important for organizations to encourage ethical behavior among sales professionals because of their boundary spanning roles (Wotruba, 1990).

The widespread concern about ethical practices in marketing and especially in sales, there would seem to be a need for more research on the ethical sensitivities of students and the effect of the instructor on changing ethical perception. This study investigates instructor's effect on students' ethical judgment and sensitivity to controversial sales practices. The study reports how 270 students from the three departments of two major Universities in Turkey evaluated 20 ethical problems, commonly encountered in personal selling. Scenarios from Dabholkar and Kellaris' PSE Scale (Dabholkar, Kellaris, 1992) were used to manipulate the nature of sales practice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Dubinsky et al. (1980) investigated salespeople's ethical attitudes toward twelve common sales situations. Dubinsky and Ingram (1984) examined selected correlates of salespeople's ethical conflict. Dubinsky et al. (1985) examined differences in ethical perceptions between product and service salespeople in industrial setting.

Kellaris and Dabholkar (1989) developed and validated a scale for measuring ethical sensitivity to personal selling situations and later tested it on students (Dabholkar and Kellaris, 1992).

Shannon and Berl (1997) examined the attitudes and perceptions of business students. They attempt to determine students' perceptions of the level of discussion of ethics and ethical issues in their marketing classes at both accredited and non-accredited business schools. Stevenson and Bodkin (1998) examined the perceptions of university students in the United States and Australia regarding the ethics and acceptability of various sales practices by using a scenario-based approach. Donoho et. Al. (2001) tried to evaluate student ethical decision-making processes using Mayo and Mark's approach to test whether the core relationships of their model of marketing ethics hold across four cultures for the future managers. Brinkmann (2002) presented findings from a qualitative study among Norwegian business students about the difference between before and after effect of business ethics course by examining the essays written about moral dilemma cases. Gegez and Arzova (2002) investigated the perceptions of Turkish Business Students on accounting and marketing ethics. Bodkin and Stevenson (2007) examined junior level undergraduate business administration student's ethical value judgments by using scenario based studies (Modified PSE Scale) for a marketing course.

There are many justifications for seeking knowledge about students' ethical evaluation of sales practices. Many students may begin their career at sales related works upon graduation. Understanding more about how students make ethical evaluations and how their instructors affect their sensitivity, may also influence education policy making and course design as well as the teaching of ethics.

METHODOLOGY

Sampling

Since the purpose of this study is to measure the effect of instructor and how it can change the ethical perception of students, three sample groups were chosen from two major Universities located in Istanbul. Those groups were undergraduate students from the same age range (mean age 21.9). Group 1 is majored in Public Administration; Group 2 is majored in Business Administration. Both Group 1 and Group 2 were chosen from the same University (University 1). Group 3 was also majored in Business Administration but from another University (University 2).

TABLE 1
SUMMARY OF SAMPLE GROUP

Instructor	University	Group	Major	Group Size	Gender	
					Male	Female
Instructor 1	University 1	Group 1	Public Administration	86	44	42
		Group 2	Business Administration	84	53	31
Instructor 2	University 2	Group 3	Business Administration	100	62	38
Total				**270**	**159**	**111**

Total group size was 270 students, 59 % male, and 41 % female. The average respondent had 1.6 years of working experience.

Research Design

Marketing Management course was the only common point between the groups. Marketing Management Course was offered to both groups with the same curriculum, with same credits, and same course material. The only difference was the instructor. Instructor 1 has given Marketing Management Course to University 1 groups (Group 1 and Group 2), and Instructor 2 has given Marketing Management Course to University 2 group (Group 3). Instructors have not informed about the research, since it can distort the results.

At the end of the semester, students were asked to fill a self-administered questionnaire, which was developed by Dabholkar and Kellaris. This scale, which was known as the PSE (Personal Selling Ethics) Scale, is a psychometric instrument to measure ethical sensitivity by using scenarios. Twenty brief scenarios presented ethical situations commonly encountered in sales. PSE was chosen in this research, because it is considered that, it reflects the daily application of personal ethics.

The instructors of each class told students that their class was selected to participate in an "opinion survey" concerning different practices in personal selling. Students were asked to put themselves into the role of the salesperson in an ethically controversial sales situation and asked to rate each scenario on a 5 point ethical-unethical scale (1=Unethical; 5=Ethical). Students were told that their participation is strictly voluntary, and that all responses would be completely anonymous. No incentives were offered.

PSE Scale has two dimensions. The first dimension (monetary) concerned whether or not **money** was involved in a direct way (i.e., stealing, bribing and causing competitors to incur unnecessary expenses). Non-monetary issues include such things as lying or misleading, conflicts of interest, and exploiting someone else's psychological weaknesses. The second dimension concerned the **party** to which the potential action was directed, or affected by each practice. The situations were directed a customer, a competitor, or an employer (Kellaris, Dabholkar, 1989). The scenarios developed by Kellaris and Dabholkar (1989) does not purport to be an exhaustive taxonomy of ethical situations, however it is believed to be broadly representative of major ethical issues commonly encountered in personal selling.

Hypotheses Generation

These scenarios were directed to three groups of students as defined above. The major objective was to determine whether the instructor can affect the ethical perception of the students regardless of the curriculum, credit hours, and the materials used in the Marketing Management Course. Since all the variables are equal in the research design, it was observed that Instructor 2 was more focused on ethics research and shared his findings at the class.

Hypothesis 1: Instructor Effect

H_0: Conducting the Marketing Management Course more ethically focused by the instructor does not create a significant difference

H_1: Conducting the Marketing Management Course more ethically focused by the instructor, creates a significant difference.

Hypothesis 2: Background Effect

H_0: There is no statistically significant difference between the backgrounds of the students (i.e. business administration background and public administration background) on perception of personal selling ethics.

H_1: There are statistically significant differences between the backgrounds of the students (i.e. business administration background and public administration background) on perception of personal selling ethics.

Limitations

Some limitations of the study need to be noted. First, since the purpose of this study is to measure the effect of the instructor on students' perception regarding personal selling ethics dilemma, the twenty scenarios may not purport to be an exhaustive classification of ethical situations. Second, respondents do not have enough job experience (mean working experience 1.6 years). This might affect respondents' perception of the real life situations. Third, this study includes only three sample groups from two major universities. The results of this study could not reflect all students' perceptions in Turkey.

Data Analysis

Reliability analysis was by using Cronbach's Alpha test statistics. The pattern of responses across items was consistent enough to produce a high reliability coefficient (Cronabch's alpha= .796). The threshold value for Cronbach's Alpha is accepted as 0.70 in common (Nunnally, 1978). Descriptive results are summarized in Table 2.

One-way ANOVA procedure was used to test the hypothesis that the means of three groups are not significantly different. One-way ANOVA allows researcher test the differences between the means of ordinal or ratio level dependent variables for multiple groups. The results presented in Table 3 show that there is a significant difference for the scenarios 1, 2, 3, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 13, 14, 15, 16, 19 and 20 (we assume the level of significance as 0.05).

Once we have determined that differences exist among the means, post hoc range tests and pairwise multiple comparisons can determine which means differ. Before performing these tests, however, we should check whether or not the group variances are equal. Table 4 shows the results of Levene's test which can be used to verify that assumption. Levene's test is used to test if *k* samples have equal variances. Equal variance across samples is called homogeneity of variance. Some statistical tests, for example the analysis of variance, assume that variances are equal across groups or samples (Levene, 1960). Levene statistic rejects the null hypothesis that the group variances are equal for the scenarios 2,3,8,13,16 and 19. Hence, Dunnett T3 test was used which is robust to this violation.

Dunnett's test is a t-statistic which is used when the researcher wishes to compare each treatment group mean with the mean of the control group, and for this purpose has better power than alternative tests (Cardinal, Aitken, 2005). Since Levene statistic does not reject the null hypothesis that the group variances are equal for the scenarios 1,7,10, 11, 14, 15 and 20 we use Bonferroni test. The Bonferroni correction is a multiple-comparison correction used when several dependent or independent statistical tests are being performed simultaneously. Table 4 and 5 show these results which prove that Group 3 significantly differs from the other two for the Scenarios 1, 8, 10, 11, 13,14 and 15. Group 1 differs from the other two for only one scenario (Scenario 2).

TABLE 2
SUMMARY STATISTICS FOR PSE ITEMS

PSE Item	Issue Description	Mean[1]	Std. Dev.	Rank[2]
1	Offer monetary bribe to buyer	2,57	1,296	**7**
2	Steal from competitor at a trade show	1,83	1,142	**1**
3	Inflate expense report	2,46	1,159	**4**
4	Sneak vacations on company time	3,03	1,194	**14**
5	Misallocation of company time	2,71	1,029	**9**
6	Conflict of interest-selling company's clients	2,73	1,240	**10**
7	Us of psychological tricks to close sale	3,24	1,272	**17**
8	Force take-home samples on reluctant buyer	3,60	1,040	**20**
9	Spying on competition	3,46	1,323	**18**
10	Indirect material bribe to buyer	2,54	1,116	**5**
11	Lavish entertaining	2,54	1,193	**6**
12	Cheating on sales contest	2,79	1,205	**12**
13	False promises used to close sale	2,04	1,100	**2**
14	Cheating on bidding process	3,46	1,133	**19**
15	Phone sabotage	2,24	1,248	**3**
16	Fear exploitation used to close sale	3,21	1,099	**16**
17	Resume inflation	3,21	1,145	**15**
18	Frequent flier abuse	2,94	1,134	**13**
19	Quit on short notice	2,76	1,193	**11**
20	Information leaks about one customer to another	2,70	1,061	**8**

[1] Based on five-point ethical scales (1= Unethical; 5= Ethical)
[2] Based on magnitude of item means (1= Most unethical; 20= Least unethical)

TABLE 3
ANOVA PROCEDURE FOR TESTING THE MEANS OF THREE GROUPS

ANOVA

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
sc1	Between Groups	34,985	2	17,492	11,195	,000
	Within Groups	417,178	267	1,562		
	Total	452,163	269			
sc2	Between Groups	39,770	2	19,885	17,069	,000
	Within Groups	311,049	267	1,165		
	Total	350,819	269			
sc3	Between Groups	8,935	2	4,467	3,387	,035
	Within Groups	352,195	267	1,319		
	Total	361,130	269			
sc4	Between Groups	6,524	2	3,262	2,309	,101
	Within Groups	377,239	267	1,413		
	Total	383,763	269			
sc5	Between Groups	3,956	2	1,978	1,879	,155
	Within Groups	281,084	267	1,053		
	Total	285,041	269			
sc6	Between Groups	1,041	2	,520	,337	,714
	Within Groups	412,678	267	1,546		
	Total	413,719	269			
sc7	Between Groups	16,376	2	8,188	5,218	,006
	Within Groups	418,975	267	1,569		
	Total	435,352	269			
sc8	Between Groups	15,737	2	7,868	7,632	,001
	Within Groups	275,260	267	1,031		
	Total	290,996	269			
sc9	Between Groups	11,361	2	5,680	3,300	,038
	Within Groups	459,606	267	1,721		
	Total	470,967	269			
sc10	Between Groups	18,422	2	9,211	7,767	,001
	Within Groups	316,629	267	1,186		
	Total	335,052	269			
sc11	Between Groups	13,084	2	6,542	4,722	,010
	Within Groups	369,883	267	1,385		
	Total	382,967	269			
sc12	Between Groups	6,835	2	3,417	2,379	,095
	Within Groups	383,550	267	1,437		
	Total	390,385	269			
sc13	Between Groups	60,084	2	30,042	30,207	,000
	Within Groups	265,545	267	,995		
	Total	325,630	269			
sc14	Between Groups	25,866	2	12,933	10,816	,000
	Within Groups	319,264	267	1,196		
	Total	345,130	269			
sc15	Between Groups	36,166	2	18,083	12,617	,000
	Within Groups	382,664	267	1,433		
	Total	418,830	269			
sc16	Between Groups	7,877	2	3,938	3,316	,038
	Within Groups	317,090	267	1,188		
	Total	324,967	269			
sc17	Between Groups	,550	2	,275	,209	,812
	Within Groups	351,836	267	1,318		
	Total	352,385	269			
sc18	Between Groups	,953	2	,476	,368	,692
	Within Groups	345,214	267	1,293		
	Total	346,167	269			
sc19	Between Groups	15,483	2	7,742	5,627	,004
	Within Groups	367,346	267	1,376		
	Total	382,830	269			
sc20	Between Groups	6,617	2	3,308	2,983	,052
	Within Groups	296,083	267	1,109		
	Total	302,700	269			

TABLE 4
TEST OF HOMOGENEITY OF VARIANCES

Test of Homogeneity of Variances

	Levene Statistic	df1	df2	Sig.
sc1	,640	2	267	,528
sc2	30,363	2	267	,000
sc3	3,770	2	267	,024
sc7	2,430	2	267	,090
sc8	3,001	2	267	,051
sc9	,315	2	267	,730
sc10	,079	2	267	,924
sc11	2,706	2	267	,069
sc13	3,780	2	267	,024
sc14	,960	2	267	,384
sc15	1,805	2	267	,167
sc16	3,035	2	267	,050
sc19	3,937	2	267	,021
sc20	1,011	2	267	,365

Since Levene statistic does not reject the null hypothesis that the group variances are equal for the scenarios 1,7,10, 11, 14, 15 and 20 we use Bonferroni test. Table 5 and 6 show these results which prove that the Group 3 significantly differs from the other two for the scenarios 1, 8, 10, 11, 13,14 and 15. Group 1 differs from the other two for only one scenario (Scenario 2).

CONCLUSION

The study found that instructor has a significant effect on students' perception of ethical issues in controversial marketing practices.

This study also concludes that, adding courses in business ethics to curricula in the hope of sensitizing students to ethical issues before they become practitioners. It may also prove that, adding business ethics courses to corporate training programs of salespeople may provide a sensitivity to ethically troublesome sales practices.

Some limitations of the study should also be recognized. The generality of the study is limited by the size and nature of the sample. Another limitation is that the study does not attempt to determine the link between ethical judgment and actual behavior.

This study focuses on the instructor effect and how it can change the perception of marketing students on ethically controversial selling practices. This may prove that, since conducting the marketing course ethically sensitive by the instructor regardless of the curriculum may change the perception of the students', and then adding a course in Business Ethics might create a higher sensitivity for the students.

The study has some implications for the future research. For example, while this study only focused on instructor effect, future studies could investigate the effect of Business Ethics course on students' perception. Furthermore, researchers could also focus on the factors that may influence the ethical judgments of the future's practitioners.

TABLE 5
DUNNETT'S T3 TESTS

Multiple Comparisons

Dunnett T3

Dependent Variable	(I) Groups	(J) Groups	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
sc2	Group 2	Group 1	,543*	,133	,000	,22	,87
		Group 3	-,383	,182	,107	-,82	,06
	Group 1	Group 2	-,543*	,133	,000	-,87	-,22
		Group 3	-,926*	,149	,000	-1,29	-,57
	Group 3	Group 2	,383	,182	,107	-,06	,82
		Group 1	,926*	,149	,000	,57	1,29
sc3	Group 2	Group 1	,255	,165	,326	-,14	,65
		Group 3	-,184	,177	,656	-,61	,24
	Group 1	Group 2	-,255	,165	,326	-,65	,14
		Group 3	-,439*	,167	,028	-,84	-,04
	Group 3	Group 2	,184	,177	,656	-,24	,61
		Group 1	,439*	,167	,028	,04	,84
sc8	Group 2	Group 1	-,205	,148	,420	-,56	,15
		Group 3	,367	,153	,051	,00	,73
	Group 1	Group 2	,205	,148	,420	-,15	,56
		Group 3	,572*	,150	,001	,21	,93
	Group 3	Group 2	-,367	,153	,051	-,73	,00
		Group 1	-,572*	,150	,001	-,93	-,21
sc13	Group 2	Group 1	,098	,145	,873	-,25	,45
		Group 3	-,924*	,157	,000	-1,30	-,55
	Group 1	Group 2	-,098	,145	,873	-,45	,25
		Group 3	-1,022*	,141	,000	-1,36	-,68
	Group 3	Group 2	,924*	,157	,000	,55	1,30
		Group 1	1,022*	,141	,000	,68	1,36
sc16	Group 2	Group 1	,348	,170	,121	-,06	,76
		Group 3	,384	,167	,065	-,02	,79
	Group 1	Group 2	-,348	,170	,121	-,76	,06
		Group 3	,036	,154	,993	-,33	,41
	Group 3	Group 2	-,384	,167	,065	-,79	,02
		Group 1	-,036	,154	,993	-,41	,33
sc19	Group 2	Group 1	,238	,184	,485	-,21	,68
		Group 3	-,336	,173	,153	-,75	,08
	Group 1	Group 2	-,238	,184	,485	-,68	,21
		Group 3	-,573*	,171	,003	-,99	-,16
	Group 3	Group 2	,336	,173	,153	-,08	,75
		Group 1	,573*	,171	,003	,16	,99

*. The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

TABLE 6
BONFERRONI TESTS

Multiple Comparisons

Bonferroni

Dependent Variable	(I) Groups	(J) Groups	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
sc1	Group 2	Group 1	,184	,192	1,000	-,28	,65
		Group 3	-,637*	,185	,002	-1,08	-,19
	Group 1	Group 2	-,184	,192	1,000	-,65	,28
		Group 3	-,821*	,184	,000	-1,26	-,38
	Group 3	Group 2	,637*	,185	,002	,19	1,08
		Group 1	,821*	,184	,000	,38	1,26
sc7	Group 2	Group 1	,618*	,192	,004	,15	1,08
		Group 3	,361	,185	,157	-,09	,81
	Group 1	Group 2	-,618*	,192	,004	-1,08	-,15
		Group 3	-,257	,184	,495	-,70	,19
	Group 3	Group 2	-,361	,185	,157	-,81	,09
		Group 1	,257	,184	,495	-,19	,70
sc10	Group 2	Group 1	-,168	,167	,944	-,57	,23
		Group 3	-,608*	,161	,001	-1,00	-,22
	Group 1	Group 2	,168	,167	,944	-,23	,57
		Group 3	-,440*	,160	,019	-,83	-,05
	Group 3	Group 2	,608*	,161	,001	,22	1,00
		Group 1	,440*	,160	,019	,05	,83
sc11	Group 2	Group 1	,056	,181	1,000	-,38	,49
		Group 3	-,425*	,174	,046	-,84	-,01
	Group 1	Group 2	-,056	,181	1,000	-,49	,38
		Group 3	-,481*	,173	,017	-,90	-,06
	Group 3	Group 2	,425*	,174	,046	,01	,84
		Group 1	,481*	,173	,017	,06	,90
sc14	Group 2	Group 1	-,042	,168	1,000	-,45	,36
		Group 3	,619*	,162	,000	,23	1,01
	Group 1	Group 2	,042	,168	1,000	-,36	,45
		Group 3	,661*	,161	,000	,27	1,05
	Group 3	Group 2	-,619*	,162	,000	-1,01	-,23
		Group 1	-,661*	,161	,000	-1,05	-,27
sc15	Group 2	Group 1	,388	,184	,107	-,05	,83
		Group 3	-,491*	,177	,018	-,92	-,06
	Group 1	Group 2	-,388	,184	,107	-,83	,05
		Group 3	-,879*	,176	,000	-1,30	-,46
	Group 3	Group 2	,491*	,177	,018	,06	,92
		Group 1	,879*	,176	,000	,46	1,30
sc20	Group 2	Group 1	-,186	,162	,751	-,58	,20
		Group 3	-,380*	,156	,046	-,76	,00
	Group 1	Group 2	,186	,162	,751	-,20	,58
		Group 3	-,194	,155	,635	-,57	,18
	Group 3	Group 2	,380*	,156	,046	,00	,76
		Group 1	,194	,155	,635	-,18	,57

*. The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

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