

RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN ETHICAL BELIEFS AND SHAME, GUILT, LAW, RELIGION AND TRADITIONS

Gülçimen YURTSEVER(*)

ABSTRACT

This study has investigated the relationships between consumer ethics and the feeling of guilt and the feeling of shame. In addition, the relationships between consumer ethics and the willingness of the consumers to accepting religion, law and traditions have also been investigated. The data has been obtained from the responses of 159 students in Turkey to the questionnaire. The results revealed that there were positive relationships between the willingness to accept religious rules and the consumer ethics. In addition, the results have shown that there was no relationship between copyright and the feeling of guilt, the feeling of shame, the willingness to accept law and the willingness to accept traditions.

Key Words: Consumer Ethics, Feeling of Guilt, Feeling of Shame.

1. Introduction

The technology developed in the 20 th. century has provided us with an abundance of goods that has never been achieved before. For example, products such as new types of computers, software, medicines, cosmetics etc. have been introduced into the market. However these products are often imitated before companies have a change to cover the cost of research for new types of goods. Imitation products can easily find a consumer in the market, since they are cheaper and are easily obtained. Additionally, shoplifting increases as larger markets are opened. On the other hand, consumers have "double standards" when making ethical judgments. They expect businesses to have higher standards than they themselves are often willing to follow (Vitell et al. 1991). Low consumer ethics have become an important concern for today's marketers. But a very limited number of investigations have been done relating to factors causing low consumer ethics.

Some studies have investigated the relationship between consumer ethics and demographic factors such as age, education and gender (e.g., Munch and Vitell, 1992; Rallapalli et. al., 1994) and ethical beliefs of different culture have also been compared (e.g. Rawwas et al., 1994; Chan et al., 1998). Other studies have focused on specific kinds of fraudulent behavior, such as shoplifting and retail fraud (Cole 1989; Cox et. al., 1990; Kallis et al., 1986).

The present study has investigated the relationships between the ethical

(*) Yrd.Doç.Dr., Karadeniz Tek.Ün.,İ.İ.B.F., TRABZON.

beliefs of consumers and the feeling of shame and guilt. In addition, the relationships between the ethical belief of the consumers and the willingness to accept law, tradition and religion have been explored. The results of this study may serve to better understanding factors that affect the ethical beliefs of consumers and may provide a basis for future consumer education and research.

2. Relationship Between Consumer Ethics And Shame, Guilt And A Willing Acceptance of Norms

A society controls the ethical behavior of individuals in different ways. Sometimes, the society may cause the individual to feel ashamed by labeling some behavior unethical. Or the society may leave the responsibility of disobeying rules imposed by itself on the conscience of the individual instead of blaming him or her directly. In other words, shame and guilt are different reactions to norm violations depending on the cultural orientation. The resources that direct the cultural orientation are religion, traditions and law. Legal systems form the explicit and legitimate sources for conduct, religion and traditional norms which are prominent sources of normative social influence in most societies, although these three norms may not be effect behavior of individuals by the same degree (Bierbrauer, 1992; Hamilton & Sanders, 1988; Sampson, 1987). *Feeling of guilt*

Guilt has been used to refer to " a feeling of self reproach from believing that one has done a wrong " (Webster's new world dictionary 2 nd edition). Feelings of guilt result from violating personal responsibility. Guilt generally is defined as a feeling of negative self-regard associated with the real or a imagined commission of an act without any need for an audience (Johnson et. al., 1987). It is especially claimed that the feeling of guilt is a more common behavior in the individualistic communities. Since individuals in the individualistic culture are expected to developed their own standards for conduct as they are less influenced by tight social control (Triandis et. al. 1985).

On the other hand, the feeling of guilt may be a patent force socializing force in collectivistic society which believes in monotheistic religions (De Vos, 1985). Since, in monotheistic religions, God is the highest form of authority, who censors transgressions from normative standards by producing guilt feelings (Lebra, 1973). The influence of society over the individual here is that it guides the individual on what is right or wrong. It does not judge him. The individual abstains from immoral behavior because of the feeling of guilt, not because of the fear that somebody may see or hear him or her.

Based upon the preceding explanations, the first hypothesis set forth in this study is:

H1: There are positive relationships between the ethical beliefs of consumers and feelings of guilt.

Feeling of Shame

One of the factors effecting the behavior of the individuals is shame. Shame

generally results from the existence of a real or imagine audience for one's wrongdoing (Johnson et. al., 1987). The main reason for feeling shame is a reaction to criticism from others and a fear of rejection and the withdrawn of love (Glenn & Glenn, 1982). The individuals of a collectivistic culture may feel more shamed than the members of the individualist society. The reason for high feelings of shame in the collectivistic societies is that the society controls the rules imposed on itself more strictly (Kandel and Lazear, 1992. Such a situation may bring about a double ethical standard. The individual may behave more ethically in such situations when there is the existence of a real or imagined audience for their. The individual may not obey the ethical rules in such situations when there does not exist any possibility for him to be seen or heard. Collectivism refers to the inclination to be more concerned about the consequences of one's behavior. In other words, one may have a high tendency to behave according to group norms. Therefore, one may observe stricter ethical standards in a real or imagine audience. However, if there is no possibility of an audience they may relax these ethical standards because the risk of losing face is much lower. If there is the possibility of being seen or heard, it is expected that individuals will feel shame.

Based upon the preceding explanations the second hypothesis set forth in this study is:

H2. There are positive relationships between feelings of shame and "actively benefiting from an "illegal activity", "passively benefiting at the expense of others" and " no harm/ no foul".

Willingness to accept religious

Personal religious may be an apt starting point for finding differences in moral judgments.

Religion is " a belief in God accompanied by a commitment to follow principles believed to be set forth by God" (McDaniel ve Burnett, 1990, p. 103). Religion plays an integrative role in societies as a whole and the individuals within them by producing norms which reduce conflict and also by imposing sanctions against anti social conduct. For the believer, there is little room for rejection of dispensation. Acceptance on the basis of divine origin is a condition for membership and participation in the assembly of believers (De George, 1986). The ethical standards of the individual who accepts religious norms does not change in front of a real or imagery audience. Since God is the highest form of authority, who censors transgression from principles by producing guilt feeling. (Lebra, 1973). The individuals should find his moral behavior through his own mind according to the basic principles claimed by a religion. For example, it is not written in any of the religious books that one must not copy a computer program. However, all religions

state that the individual must not take advantage for him without justification. The individual must understand by this reasoning that there is an unjustified benefit in reality if he owns the computer program by copying it. In summary, an individual with religious beliefs is expected to abstain from immoral behavior whether or not an imagery audience exists.

Based upon the preceding explanations the third hypothesis set forth in this study is:

H3: There are positive relationships between a willingness to accept religion and the ethical beliefs of consumer ethics.

Willingness to accept law

One of the factors influencing the ethical beliefs of an individual is his willingness to accept legal rules. The law establishes rules that must be obeyed (Halbert, 1990). The competent authority punishes the one who ignores the laws. The laws may be established by the traditions of the country. In this case, both society and the law control the behavior of the individual. The legal rules are sometimes imposed because of a new technological progress, or they may be transferred from another country. In this case, the factors effecting the ethical beliefs of the individual are limited by the law. Behaving according to the law may also cause double ethical standard. The individual may ignore the rules in a case that is difficult to prove by law or in a case where there is no possibility of him or her being seen or heard.

The third hypothesis of this study is based on the explanations given above in the following:

H4: There are positive relationships between a willingness to accept law and "actively benefitting from illegal activity" and "actively benefitting from questionable action".

Willingness to accept tradition

Finally, one of the factors effecting the ethical beliefs of the individual is tradition. These norms have come into existence by the influence of political, economic, religion and natural factors over the history of a community. The traditions of countries may be different even when they have similar religions and legal rules. If the society controls itself strictly, the individual may feel it mandatory to obey these rules. Collectivist societies control the rules imposed on themselves more strictly than individualist societies. For example, Turkey is in the group of the countries that have a collectivist culture (Hofstede, 1980). Therefore, it is expected in Turkey that one should obey traditions much more than in individualist countries. In any case, following the ethical rules for the sake of obeying the traditions may only effect observable behavior. As explained above, an individual may have double standards. The ethical standards of an individual may be lower in cases where there exists possibility for others to see or hear him or her, and the

ethical standards may be lower when he or she is alone.

Based upon the preceding explanation the fifth hypothesis set forth in this study is:

H5: There are positive relationships between willingness to accept tradition and "actively benefiting from illegal activity" and " passively benefiting at the expense of others" and " no harm/ no foul".

3. Method

Sample

Self-administered questionnaires were hand delivered to 165 graduated students of one of the universities in Ankara, Turkey. The university in Ankara was selected as the most appropriate source of subjects. Given Ankara 's centrality, it attracts more students from different parts of Turkey than other city. 159 questionnaires were returned.

Measures

The ethical beliefs of consumers were measured using consumer ethics scales developed by Munch and Vitell (1989). The original scale consists of 20 items regarding consumer situations having potentially ethical implications. Five items that Munch and Vitell (1989) had in their study were not included in the present study. The reason was that these types of practice were either non-existent or very seldom seen in Turkey (see Table I). So "the consumer ethics scale" used for this included 15 items. Respondents were asked to chose from "strongly believe that a statement is wrong" to " strongly believe that a statement is not wrong " using a 5-point scale.

Principal components factor analysis with varimax rotation was performed to identify the underlying decision rules used by the respondents. It yielded a four-factor solution with eigenvalues greater than 1.0. One of the questions did not load any of the four factors. The results appear in Table I. The factor structures produced were consistent with previous studies (Rawwas et al., 1994; Vitell et al., 1991; Munch and Vitell 1992), the original factor labels were retained. Consumer ethics consists of four factors. The first factor, labeled " actively benefiting from an illegal activity" comprised four questions. All actions of described in the factor are related to illegal cases. The second factor, labeled "passively benefiting at the expense of others" comprised four questions. The unethical situation in the second factor represents benefits from the seller's mistakes. The third factor, labeled " actively benefiting from a questionable action" consisted of three questions. All of the acts described in this factor represent cases of copyright violations. The fourth was labeled as "no harm/no foul". All of the acts described in this factor are legal and do not cause great harm to the seller. Coefficient alpha was computed as a

measure for internal consistency for each of the four factors. All coefficient alphas were above 0.55.

Shame, guilt and willingness to accept norms were measured using Bierbrauer's (1992) questionnaires. Responses were stemming different sources of legitimacy (states laws, religion and tradition). For the guilt responses the following three questions were asked: "Imagine someone committed an act contrary to state laws (religious rules and customs respectively). His peers are not aware of this. Should he feel guilty anyway?" Respondents were asked to choose from definitely yes (=1) to definitely no (=5) using a 5- point scale.

For the shame responses three questions were asked in the following form: Someone did not follow the state laws (religious rules and traditions, respectively). Should he feel guilty anyway? Respondents were asked to choose from definitely yes (=1) to definitely no (= 5).

For the willingness to accept norms respondents were asked three questions in the following form:" Should people follow religious norms (state laws and tradition, respectively)?"

Respondents were asked to choose from never (=1) to always (=5) using a point scale.

Table II: Factor analysis of consumer ethics scale

Dimension name and items Cronbach's	Factor	
	loading	alpha
<i>A. Actively benefitting from an illegal activity</i>		0.915
1. Changing price-tags on merchandise in a store.	0.750	
2. Giving misleading price information to a clerk for unpriced item.	0.740	
3. Drinking a can of soda in a supermarket without paying for it.	0.680	
4. Reporting a lost item as "stolen" to an insurance company in order to collect the money	0.710	
<i>B. Passively benefitting at the expense of others</i>		0.710
1. Lying about a child's age to get a lower price.	0.714	
2. Getting too much change and not saying anything.	0.625	
3. Not saying anything when the waitress miscalculates the bill in your favor.	0.685	
<i>C. Actively benefitting from questionable action</i>		0.807
1. Taping a movie off the television.	0.734	
2. Recording a CD instead of buying it	0.655	
3. Buying a counterfeit CD instead of the real thing.	0.645	
<i>D. No harm/ No foul</i>		0.610
1. Tasting grapes in a supermarket and not buying any	0.612	
2. Spending over an hour trying on different dresses and not purchasing any.	0.613	

3. Returning merchandise after trying it and not liking it. 0.653
Questions with an insignificant factor loading (less than 0.5)
 Taking an ashtray or other! souvenir from a hotel or restaurant.
-

IV. Findings

The first hypothesis of this study was that there were positive relationships between feelings of guilt and the ethical beliefs of consumers. The results showed that there were significantly positive relationships between the feeling of guilt and "actively benefiting from illegal activity", "passively benefiting at the expense of others" and "no harm/no foul". However, the results showed that there was no relationship between the feeling of guilt and "actively benefitting from questionable actions". This factor does not support the claimed hypothesis (See Table I). As it was claimed in the second hypothesis, the results showed that there were significantly positive relationships between feeling of shame and "actively benefitting from an illegal activity", "passively benefiting at the expense of another" and "no harm/ no foul" (See Table II).

Table II
 Correlation of consumer ethics dimensions and shame and guilt

Dimension	Shame*	Guilt
1. Actively benefiting from illegal activity	0.786*	0.622*
2. Passively benefiting at the expense of others	0.207*	0.849*
3. Actively benefiting from questionable action	0.105	0.148
4. No harm/ no foul	0.221*	0.330*

**p*= statistically significant 0.05 alpha level

The third hypothesis of this study was that there was a positive relationship between willingness to accept religion and the ethical beliefs of consumers. As hypothesized, the results in Table III indicated that there was a significant positive relationship between a willingness to accept religion and consumer ethics.

The fourth hypothesis of this study was there were positive relationships between a willingness to accept law and "actively benefiting from an illegal activity" and "actively benefitting questionable action". The results have partly supported the claimed hypothesis. The result in Table III showed that there was a significant positive relationship between actively benefiting from an illegal activity and a willingness to accept law. But, the results revealed that there was no

relationship between a willingness to accept law and "actively benefiting from questionable action".

The fifth hypothesis of this study was that there were significantly positive relationships between a willingness to accept tradition and "actively benefiting from illegal actively", "passively benefiting at the expense others" and "no harm / no harm". The results supported the claimed hypothesis (See Table III).

Table III
Correlation of consumer ethics dimensions and willingness to acceptance of norms

Dimension	State law	Religion	Tradition
1. Actively benefiting from illegal actively.	0.220*	0.333*	0.740*
2. Passively benefiting at the expense of others.	0.162	0.539*	0.240*
3. Actively benefiting from questionable action	0.101	0.370*	0.091
4. No harm/ no foul	0.172	0.380*	0.250*

p = statistically significant 0.05 alpha level.

5. Conclusions

The first important result obtained from this study is that there was no relationship between the feeling of shame, the feeling of guilt, the willingness to accept law and the willingness to accept tradition and "actively benefiting from a questionable action". The items explained in this section are related to ignoring copyrights. In Turkey, these kinds of events are not accepted as unethical behavior (Yurtsever, 1998). Delivering copy of a computer program to a friend is indeed accepted as helping one another. Although ignoring copyright is an illegal activity in Turkish law, both the difficulties of pursuing it and insufficiency in the penalties in the law may cause the law to be ineffective in respect of securing copyrights. Legal behavior may be controlled by external sanctions and by the internalization of norms and values. The law functions best when it becomes part of the individuals conscience (Pospisil, 1971). It is necessary that Turkish consumers be educated on the subject of copyright in terms of a moral perspective. The fact that this is an unjustifiable benefit must particularly be realized by the society.

The second important result obtained from the study was that the correlation coefficient between feelings of shame and "actively benefiting from illegal activity" was higher than the one between feelings of guilt and "actively

benefiting from illegal activity". The reason may be that judging unethical behavior of an individual by both laws and society may produce a greater feeling shame than a feeling guilty.

The correlation coefficient between feelings of guilt and "passively benefiting at the expense of other" and "no harm/ no foul" was higher than the one between the feeling of shame and these factors. The reason may be that "the less the blameworthiness of being, the greater its perceived deservedness and greater the guilt from transgressing against it" (Harvey and et. al. 1998, p.770). The educators should bear in mind that both the feeling of shame and the feeling of guilt affect the socialize process of individuals but not in the same aspect. For example, one can not be sure that he has compensated the harms given to the others only by feeling guilty. In addition, the effect of feeling guilt over the individual may not hold for a long time (Gore and Harvey, 1995). If the individual loses his status in front of the public the other side may believe that the harm is balanced (Harvey, et al. 1997). On the other hand, a person feels shame when others can observe his or her action. Without observability, only guilt can be an effective form of pressure. Another important result obtained result from this study was that there were significantly positive relationships between a willingness to accept religion and four factors that "the consumer ethics" indicates that the religion plays an important role on the ethical beliefs of consumers. The fact that the sanctions of the religion against immoral behavior are different for example the ones against the law and traditions may be effective on the ethical belief of the individual. For example, ignoring legal rules is punishable in this world. But in many religions reward or retribution apply both to this and next world. This fact may be an important factor in changing the individual's mind and deterring him from immoral behavior. This result indicates that religion is an important factor for the education of consumer ethics and for understanding the behavior of consumer ethics.

The results obtained from this study may not be applicable to another country, because the reactions of the individuals living in the society to legal, religion and traditional rules may be different. Feelings of shame or guilt of an individual living in a different culture against an unethical behavior may also be different.

ÖZET

Bu çalışmada etiksel inanç ile suçluluk, hukuk, gelenek din arasındaki ilişki araştırıldı. Veriler, 159 öğrencinin ankete verdikleri cevaplardan elde edilmiştir. Sonuçlar , din ile etik arasında positif ilişki olduğunu gösterdi. Ayrıca, sonuçlar telif hakkı ile suçluluk duygusu, hukuk, ve gelenekler arasında bir ilişki olmadığını gösterdi.

REFERENCES

- BIERBRAUER, G. (1992). "Reactions to violation of normative standards: A cross-cultural analysis of shame and guilt", *International Journal of Psychology* 27 (2), 181-193.
- CHAN, A., SIMON, W., and LEUNG, P (1998); " Ethical Beliefs of Chinese Consumers in Hong Kong", *Journal of Business Ethics* 17, 1163- 170.
- COLE, C., (1989); "Deterrence and Consumer Fraud", *Journal of Retailing* 65 (Spring), 17,1163-1170.
- COX, D., COX, A. D., and MISTS, G. P., (1990); "When Consumer Behavior Goes Bad: An Investigation of Adolescent Shoplifting", *Journal of Consumer Research*, 17 (September), 149-159.
- DE GEORGE, R.T., (1986); "Theological Ethics and Business Ethics ", *Journal of Business Ethics* 5, 421-432.
- DE VOS, G., (1985); "Dimensions of the Self in Japanese Culture. In A J. Marsella, G. DeVos & F. L. K. Hsu (Eds.), *Culture and Self: Asian and Western Perspectives*. New York. Tavistock.
- GLENN, E. S., and GLENN, C.G., (1982); "*Man and Mankind: Conflict and Communication Between Cultures*", Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- GORE, E., and HARVEY, O.J., (1995); "A Factor Analysis of a Scale of Shame and Guilt: Dimensions of Conscience Questionnaire. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 19, 769- 771.
- HAMILTON, V. L., and SANDERS, J., (1988); "Punishment and the Individual in the United States and Japan", *Law and Society Review*, 22, 301-328.
- HALBERT, T., and INGULLI, E., (1986); "*Law and Ethics in the Business Environment*", St. Paul, New York: West Publishing Company.
- HARVEY, O.J., GORE, E.J., FRANK, H., and BATRES, A. R. (1997); "Relationship of Shame and Guilt to Gender and Parenting Practices", *Personality and Individual Differences*, 23(1), 135-146.
- HOFSTEDE, G., (1980); "*Culture's Consequences: International Differences in Work - Related Values*", Beverly Hills: Sage.
- JOHNSON, R. C., DANKO, G. P., HUANG, Y., PARK, J. Y., JOHNSON, S. B., and NAGOSHI, C. T., (1987); Guilt, Shame and Adjustment in Three Cultures. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 8, 357-364.

- KALLIS, M. J., KRENTIER, K. A., and VANIER, D. J., (1986); "The Value of User Image in Quelling Aberrant Consumer Behavior", *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science* 14, 29-35. Kandel, E., and Lazear, E. (1992). "Peer pressure and Partnership", *Journal of Political Economy*, 100 (4), 801-817.
- LEBRA, T. S., (1973); The Social Mechanism of Guilt and Shame: The Japanese case. *Anthropological Quarterly*, 44, 241-255.
- MCDANIEL, S., and BURNETT, J. J., (1990); "Consumer Religiosity and Retail Store Evaluative Criteria" *Journal of Academy of Marketing Science* 18(2), 101-112.
- MUNCY, J.A., and VITELL, S. J., (1992); "Consumer Ethics: An Investigation of Ethical Beliefs of the Final Consumer", *Journal of Business Research* 24, 297-311.
- POSPISIL, L., (1971); *Anthropology of Law. A Comparative Theory*. New York: Harper & Row.
- RALLAPALLI, K. C., VITELL, S. J., WIEBE, F.A., and BARNES, J.H., (1994); "Consumer Ethical Beliefs and Personality Traits: An Exploratory Analysis " *Journal of Business Ethics* 13, 487-495.
- RAWWAS, M., VITELL, S. J., and AL- KHATIB, J. A., (1994); "Consumer Ethics: The Possible Effects of Terrorism and Civil Unrest on the Ethical Values of Consumers", *Journal of Business Ethics* 13, 223-231.
- SAMPSON, E. E., (1985); "The Decentralization of Identity", *American Psychologist*, 40, 1203-1211.
- TRIANDIS, H.C., LEUNG, K., VILLEAREL, M. J., and CLACK, F. L., (1985); Allocentric Versus Idioncentric Tendencies: Convergent and Discrimination Validation. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 19, 395-415.
- VITELL, S. J., LUMPKIN, J. R., and RAWWAS, M. Y. A., (1991); "Consumer Ethics: An Investigation of Ethical Beliefs of Elderly Consumer", *Journal of Business Ethics* 10, 365- 375.
- VITELL, S. J., and MUNCY, J., (1992); "Consumer Ethics: An Empirical Investigation of Factors Influencing Ethical Judgments of the Final Consumer", *Journal of Business Ethics* 11, 585-597.
- YURTSEVER, G. (1998). "The Ethical Beliefs of Turkish Consumers" *Dokuz Eylül Üniversitesi İktisadi ve İdari Bilimler Fakültesi Dergisi* 13 (II).