

## THE ETHICAL BELIEFS OF TURKISH CONSUMERS

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### ABSTRACT

*With the increasing international trade, there is a growing need to increase our understanding of consumer ethics from different countries. As there is no general theory of consumer ethics, countries being studied independently will only be a contribution for international markets. So far, no study has examined the ethical beliefs of Turkish consumers.*

*This study investigated the relationships between Machiavellianism, ethical ideology, and the ethical beliefs of Turkish consumers. Results from this study have revealed that Turkish consumers are sensitive about ethical issues. In addition, the results have shown that Turkish consumers are represented by a variety of ethical ideologies.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years the marketing ethics come to the forefront because marketing is the function of business charged with communicating and openly satisfying customers. Thus, marketing is closest to the public view and, consequently is subject to considerable societal analysis and scrutiny. Pricing, advertising, marketing research, unsafe products and international marketing are all the subject of frequent ethical controversy (Murphy and Laczniak, 1981). In the last decade, the marketing ethics literature has exploded in both volume and importance. Murphy and Pridgen (1987) refer to over 150 articles dealing with this topic. While consumers have been surveyed regarding their perceptions of ethical business and marketing practices, research has been minimal with regard to their ethical beliefs and ideologies (Vitell *et al.*, 1991). In addition, no studies have examined the ethical beliefs of Turkish consumers despite the facts Turkey has a big market. The purpose of this research is to examine the ethical ideologies of Turkish consumers as well as their ethical beliefs regarding various consumer practices.

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## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Despite the increasing importance of consumers ethics, a few studies have examined consumer ethics. The area most commonly investigated has been shoplifting ( e.g., Cox et al., 1990; Cole, 1989 and Mochis and Powell, 1989). Other studies have examined the apparent "double standard" that exist between what consumers perceive as acceptable consumers behavior and what consumers believe are acceptable business practices. Davis (1979)and DePaulo (1986) investigated the double standards that consumers rate the ethical practices of business versus their own personal ethics. They found that more consumers were persisting on their rights as consumers than to accept their corresponding obligation.

More recently, regarding the issue of consumers ethics, few studies have investigated the degree of Machiavellianism, preferred ethical ideology and ethical belief of consumer ethics. Muncy and Vitell (1989) found that American consumers were generally sensitive to the ethical issues of consumer practices. Vitell *et al.* (1991) studied the ethical perception of elderly consumers. They found that elderly consumers, while generally being more ethical than younger consumers, were diverse in their ethical beliefs. Rawwas (1996) studied the ethical beliefs of Austrian consumers. He found that Austrian consumers generally rejected moral rules, judged the ethics of a behavior by the consequence and outcomes of the situation. In addition, He also found that Austrian consumers were more Machiavellian than American consumer. In a cross- cultural study, Rawwas et al. (1994) found that Egyptian consumers were more Machiavellian and less idealistic and more relativistic than American consumers. According to authors, the reason behind this was that Egyptian consumers face unemployment, low wages, inflation and shortages of goods and services. To construct to this study, Machiavellianism, the preferred ethical ideology and ethical belief of consumers were explained in the following.

Machiavellianism describes an individual that has an immoral reputation for dealing with other to accomplish his/her own objectives, and for manipulating others for his/her own purpose (Christie and Geis 1970, p.1). Hunt and Chonko (1984 ) noted that Machiavellianism (egoism) is an immoral way of manipulating others to accomplish one's objectives. Egoism may be acceptable behavior. However, when others' interests interfere with ours, egoism is not desirable social behavior. Therefore, Machiavellianism is an important factor to examine the ethical belief of consumers ethics.

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The preferred ethical ideology was developed by Forsty (1980) who divides people into four different ethical types. "Situationists" who refuse moral rules if their actions produce the best results given the situationists. "Absolutists" are those who believe that their actions are moral only if they yield positive results through conformity moral norm. "Subjectivists" refuse moral rules and behave according to their moral values which are based on their feelings. Finally, "exceptionists" prefer their actions through conformity to moral rules but that exceptions are permissible. Thus, the preferred ethical ideology determines to what extend one's ethical beliefs are rigid or flexible.

Finally the consumers ethics scale was developed by Muncy and Vitell (1989) and used by Vitell et al. (1991), Rawwas et al. (1994) and Rawwas (1996). The "consumers ethics" scale consists of four sections. The first section of "consumers ethics" scale was "actively benefitting from illegal activity" (for e.g., giving misleading price information to a clerk for an unpaid item). The second was "passively benefiting at the expense of other" (for e.g., lying about a child's age to get a lower price). The third section was "actively benefitting from a questionable but not necessarily an illegal action" (for e.g., Breaking a bottle of salad dressing in a supermarket and doing nothing about it). The last one was "no harm/ no foul" (for e.g., using computer software or games you did not buy). Clearly, this classification is an appropriate construct to determine what type of behavior is perceived by consumers as unethical or ethical.

## **3. ON METHODOLOGY**

### **3.1. Research objectives**

Based upon the preceding literature review, the objectives of this study were:

- 1-To determine to what extent Turkish consumers are Machiavellian,
- 2-To determine the preferred ethical ideologies of Turkish consumers,
- 3- To examine the ethical belief of Turkish consumers concerning various questionable consumer practices,
- 4- To examine the relationships between Machiavellianism, preferred ethical ideology and ethical beliefs of Turkish consumers.

### **3.2. Sample**

Managers of various supermarket and department stores in Ankara took on the task of handing questionnaires to consumers who were shopping in their stores. 500 questionnaires in self-addressed envelopes were handed out. Of the 500

questionnaires delivered, 190 responses were returned for a response rate of 38% with 181 being usable for the purposes of this study. Table I provides demographic characteristic of respondents.

### **3.3. Measures**

Machiavellianism was measured using the MACH IV scale developed by Christie and Geis (1970). This scale consists of 10 items worded in Machiavellian direction and 10 items worded in the opposite direction. The questionnaires were very slightly adapted. Respondents were asked to indicate, on five-point Likert type-scale, the extent to which they approved or disapproved. Cronbach's coefficient alpha of 0.652 was obtained for this scale. This compares to one of 0.76 obtained by Hunt and Chonko (1984) in a study of marketing practitioners and one of 0.62 reported by Vitell et al. (1991) in a study of ethical beliefs of elderly consumers. To compare the previous studies (Vitell et al., 1991 Hunt and Chonko, 1984; Christie and Geis 1970) 40 points were added to all scores so that a score of 100 would represent the neutral point.

TABLE I: Demographic characteristics of Turkish respondents

1. Age	
20-29	72.0%
30-39	17.0%
40-49	7.9%
50 and above	3.1%
2. Gender	
Male	44.2%
Female	55.8%
3. Job	
Public sector	37.9%
Private sector	29.1%
House wives	16.0%
Students	17.0%
4. Marital status	
Married	61.7%
Not married	38.3%
5. Education	
High Schools or less	40.9%
Some University	27.1%
University degree	31.0%
Graduate degree	1.0 %

The preferred ethical ideology of consumers was measured using the Ethic Position Questionnaires (EPQ) developed by Forsyth (1980). The EPQ was used

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by Vitell et al., (1991); Rawwas et al., (1994) and Rawwas, (1996). The EPQ was very slightly adapted. The EPQ consists of two scales which are idealism and relativism. Idealism is the acceptance of moral principles and relativism is the rejection of moral principles. Each scale consists of 10 items. Respondents were asked to indicate their agreement or disagreement with each item using a five-point Likert format. Cronbach's coefficient alpha for the idealism scale was 0.692 and for the relativism scale it was 0.756. This compares to one of 0.849 for idealism and 0.830 for the relativism scale obtained by Vitell *et al.* (1991) in study of ethical beliefs of elderly consumers. By combining the mean score of one's response to idealism and relativism scales one's ethical ideology was determined. If respondents had high scores on both scales, they are considered "situationists". If respondents had high on the idealism scale but low on relativism, they are "absolutists". Respondents low on idealism but high on relativism are "subjectivists" and those low on both scales are "exceptionists".

The ethical beliefs of consumer were measured using the "consumers ethics" scale developed by Muncy and Vitell (1989). The "consumer ethics" scale consists of 15 consumer items. Some of the items that Muncy and Vitell (1989) and Vitell *et al.* (1991) had in their study were not included in the present study. The reason was this type of practice is either non-existent or very seldom seen in Turkey (See table II). To obtain necessary information, respondents were asked to indicate whether they perceived these actions as being unethical or not ethical on a five-point scale

TABLE II

Reliability of Measures

Construct	Alpha
<b>Section I</b>	
A. Actively benefiting from illegal activity	
1. Changing price-tags on merchandise in a store	0.917
2. Giving misleading price information to a clerk for unpriced item.	
3. Drinking a can of soda in a supermarket without paying for it	
B. Passively benefiting at the expense of others	0.654
1. Lying about a child's age to get a lower price	

2. Getting too much change and not saying anything	
3. Not saying anything when the waitress miscalculates the bill in your favor.	
C. Actively benefitting from questionable action	0.807
1. Not telling the truth when negotiation the price of new automobile	
2. Breaking a bottle of salad dressing in a supermarket and doing nothing about it	
D. No harm/ no foul	0.582
1.Taping a movie off the television	

Table II. Continued

2. Using computer software games you did not buy	
3. Recording an album instead of buying it	
4. Tasting grapes in a supermarket and not buying any	
5. Taking an ashtray or other "souvenir" from a hotel or restaurant	
6. Returning merchandise after trying it not liking it	
7. Spending over an hour trying on different dresses and not purchasing any	
Section II	
A. Machiavellianism	0.652
B. Idealism	0.692
C. Relativism	0.756

#### 4. FINDINGS

The first objective of this study was to determine to what extent Turkish consumers were Machiavellian. The mean score for the sample was 82. If this result was compared with the similar previous researches, Turkish consumers were less Machiavellian than Americans were. For example, the mean score for the same scale was 90.9 in Vitell et al., (1991) that worked on elderly American consumers, 85.7 in Hunt and Chonko (1984) that worked on American marketing professionals and 84.5 in Christie and Geis (1970) that studied on American adult population.

The second objective of this study was to determine the preferred ethical ideologies of Turkish consumers. The EPQ developed by Forsty (1980) was used for this objective. The mean score was 44.3 on the idealism scale and 23 on the

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relativism scale. Vitell *et al.*, (1991) found that the mean score was 40.4 on the idealism scale and 26. on the relativism scale. Finding in the present study showed that American Consumers were more relativistic and less idealistic than Turkish consumers.

In terms of respondents ethical ideologies, the largest group (32.2 %) was "absolutist", the second group (28%) was "situationists", the third group (19.2%) was "exceptionist"and the last group was (18.6) was "subjectivists". If we compare this result with the study of Vitell *et al.*, (1991), they found that 30.8% of the sample was "absolutists", 28.7% was "situationists", 20.6 % was "subjectivists" and 19.8 % was "exceptionists".

The third objective of this study was to determine ethical beliefs of Turkish consumers concerning various questionable consumer practices (Section I in Table II provides information regarding "consumer ethics scale" and its reliability of measures). The "consumer ethics" scale developed by Munch and Vitell (1989) was used for this objective. The first dimension of consumer ethics scale was described as "actively benefitting from an illegal activity". Turkish consumers believed that these activities were unethical. The mean score for three items was 1.33. The mean score for the same items in the study of Munch and Vitell (1989) was 1.42 showing that American consumers have a tendency to accept these types of behavior more than Turkish consumers. The second section of consumers ethics scale was "passively benefitting at the expense of others." The mean score for these three items was 2.00. The mean score in the study Munch and Vitell (1989) was 1.98, indicating that Turkish consumers have a tendency to accept these types of behavior more than American consumers. The third section of consumer ethics scale was "actively benefitting from a questionable action". The mean score for these items was 2.28. The mean score for the same scale was 2.16 in the study of Munch and Vitell (1989) indicating that American consumers tend to be somewhat less accepting of these types of behavior than Turkish consumers do. The last section of consumers ethics scale was "harm / no foul. These were the least unethical practices as perceived by Turkish consumers with a mean of 2.86. The mean score in the study of Munch and Vitell (1989) was 3.38. American consumers view these types of behavior as some what more acceptable than do Turkish consumers.

The last objective of this study was to examine the relationships between Machiavellianism, preferred ethical ideology and ethical belief for Turkish consumers. Multivariate analysis of covariance was used with the four dimension consumer ethics scale as a dependent variable with Machiavellianism as covariate.

In addition, gender was included as an independent variable in the analysis to see if there might be any difference in ethical belief of female and male consumer. The results in Table III and Table IV show that one's ethical beliefs was a significant overall determinant of consumers ethical beliefs. Univariate test also shows that there was a significant relationship between the EPQ and "actively benefitting from an illegal activity", "passively benefitting" and "actively benefitting from questionable actions". Gender was insignificant in determining beliefs for these consumer practices. Finally Machiavellianism was a significant covariate for each category of consumer beliefs.

TABLE III  
Result of Mancova Analysis - Independent Variables

Source	T-test
I. Multivariate tests	
Ethical ideology	2.06*
Gender	ns
Interaction	ns
II.Univariate tests	
A. Dependent variable -Actively benefitting from illegal activity	4.20*
Ethical ideology	ns
Gender	ns
B. Dependent variable- Passively benefitting	1.90*
Ethical ideology	ns
Gender	ns
Interaction	ns
C. Dependent variable- Actively benefitting from questionable action	3.01*
Ethical ideology	ns
Gender	ns
Interaction	ns
D. Dependent variable- No harm / no foul	ns
Ethical ideology	ns
Gender	ns
Interaction	ns

\* $p=0.01$

TABLE IV  
Result of Mancova Analysis -Covariates

Source	T	test
I. Univariate test		

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A. Dependent variable- Actively benefiting from illegal activity Machiavellianism	2.78*
B. Dependent variable- Passively benefiting Machiavellianism	3.97**
C. Dependent variable - Actively benefiting from questionable activity Machiavellianism	4.78**
D. Dependent variable- No harm/no foul Machiavellianism	3.21**

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\*\* $p=0.01$

\*  $p=0.05$

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## 5. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

One major finding was that Turkish consumers accept Machiavellianism (egoism) less than do American consumers. This study also revealed that American consumers were less idealistic and more relativistic than were Turkish consumers. This may be explained by the fact that American consumers are more individualists than Turkish consumers. Therefore American consumers tend to be more concerned about their self-interest than Turkish consumers do.

The second major finding was that 32.2% of the sample was "absolutists" who strictly conform to moral absolutes and norms. 21.2% of the sample was "exceptionist" who believe in conformity to moral rules, but they believe that under certain extraordinary circumstances exceptions are permissible. 28% of the sample was "situationists" or those who reject moral rules, judge the ethics of a situation by the consequences and outcomes of this situation. 18.6 of the sample was "subjectivists" or those who have questionable ethics. They not only reject moral rules but also their ethical judgments on personal feelings. The result of this study indicated that Turkish consumers are represented by a variety of ethical ideologies. It should not be seen as a homogeneous group. This may be explained by the fact that Turkey has been influenced by different cultures which are Islamic, Asian and Western cultures.

The fourth finding of this study was that "actively benefitting from illegal activities" were perceived as unethical by most consumers. "No harm/ no foul practices were viewed by Turkish consumers as the least unethical practices. One's beliefs concerning the ethicalness of the various consumer practices examined was a function of one's ethical ideology, the extent of one's Machiavellianism. The

finding also showed that Turkish women and male consumers did not differ in terms of their ethical beliefs.

Despite economic problems like high inflation and low wages, majority of respondents favored appreciation of sound ethical principles to consumer practices. Nevertheless, findings of this study may not be for the other countries. It is recommended that further research in this field should be carried out in other countries that have different levels of economic development which may find a relationship between economic development and consumers ethics.

### **ÖZET**

Uluslararası ticaretin artmasıyla birlikte, ülkelerin müşteri ahlakını anlamak giderek artan bir ihtiyaç haline gelmiştir. Bütün ülkeler için geçerli bir müşteri ahlaki olmadığı için her ülkenin müşteri ahlakının ayrıca incelenmesi gereklidir. Simdiye kadar Türk müşterisinin ahlaki inancı incelenmemiştir. Çalışma bu boşluğu gidermeye çalışmıştır.

Bu çalışmada Machiavellianism, ahlaki ideologi ve Türk müşterilerini ahlaki inançları arasındaki ilişkiler araştırılmıştır. Sonuçlar; Türk müşterisinin çoğunluğunun ahlaki problemlere karşı duyarlı olduğunu ve homejen bir grup olmadığını göstermiştir.

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