

# Ethical Perceptions of Social Marketing Campaigns in the Middle East: An Empirical Study of Demographics Differences

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Cite as:

Harajli Dunia, Naccache Hiba (2020), Ethical Perceptions of Social Marketing Campaigns in the Middle East: An Empirical Study of Demographics Differences. *Proceedings of the European Marketing Academy*, 49th, (64238)

Paper from the 49th Annual EMAC Conference, Budapest, May 26-29, 2020.



## **Ethical Perceptions of Social Marketing Campaigns in the Middle East: An Empirical Study of Demographics Differences**

**Abstract** - Researchers on ethics emphasize a difference between student's ethical perceptions. This paper examines the socio-demographic factors influencing ethical perceptions of social marketing campaigns. It examines the ethical perceptions of 550 business/social science students who watched two videos and answered a 16-item questionnaire. Researchers conducted a statistical analysis on the internal content/external validity and reliability which reveal high validity and reliability of the questionnaire. The results show that there is a significant difference in ethical perceptions based on the demographic factors. Social marketing campaigns are found to influence students who are religious, of social science majors, female, relatively older and in a public university. Therefore, social marketing campaigns should be constructed according to Middle Eastern demographics and business students should be directed more towards ethics.

**Keywords:** *social marketing campaigns, ethical perception, higher education*

**Track:** *Advertising and Marketing Communication*

## **1. Introduction**

The number of Middle Eastern consumers exposed to social marketing campaigns is increasing. Given this fact, it is of importance to examine social marketing in a non-Western context. Social Marketing has been used as a term since the 1970s. It is when Kotler and Zaltman (1971) defined it as “the design, implementation, and control of programs calculated to influence the acceptability of social ideas and involving considerations of product planning, pricing, communication, distribution and, market research” (p.5). The ultimate purpose of social marketing is “social good,” defined as the “reduction of ill-being and the increase of well-being” (Carvalho and Mazzon, 2015: 170). It is to apply marketing principles to find solutions to societal problems rather than economic maximization or sales (Gordon, 2011). It is a type of social intervention that helps in the understanding and implementation of ethical and effective social programs (French and Gordon, 2015). Social marketing has been used to help influence many behavior domains including “drug, alcohol, and cigarette use, overeating, responsible debt use, healthy eating, health screening recommendations, family planning, littering, and gambling” (Pirouz, 2017: 256). As in commercial marketing, ethics in social marketing is an area of concern but of a different kind (Brenkert, 2002). Although social marketing is about influencing positive behavior change, it has been open to many ethical critiques. Social marketing campaigns are subject to skepticism surrounding the possibility of real behavior change when consumers are not convinced of the message. Perceiving the campaign as ethical or unethical will no doubt influence consumer behavior. One common ethical dilemma is the use of appeals such as fear or shock to bring about behavior change (Hastings et al., 2004). In general, consumer’s “ethical perception of marketing practices when no commercial objective is at stake is under-researched” (Charry et al., 2014: 243-244). It is expected that the ethical perspectives of consumers differ from commercial from that of social marketing. It is enticing to think that campaigning for social well-being is always viewed as something ethical, but this is naïve, for as in commercial contexts, “social marketing campaigns that are perceived as unethical are less easily accepted” (Charry et al., 2014: 245). The purpose of this paper is to shed light on the socio-demographic factors influencing ethical perceptions of social marketing campaigns. In specific, it will investigate the influence of religious belief, education major, gender, and age on student’s ethical perceptions of social marketing campaigns. This paper follows a theoretical framework built on Dr. Brenkert’s work on the ethical challenges of social marketing. The structure of the paper is as follows. First, we touch on theories used in social marketing and arrive at Brenkert’s work on ethical challenges. Next, we present a literature review on the demographic factors and present our hypotheses. Then we examine the methodology and results followed by a discussion and conclusion.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

There are many theories trying to provide a framework for social marketing. Examples include social persuasion theories (i.e. elaboration-likelihood model), theories of behavior change and theories explaining the process of behavior change (van Esch et al., 2015). There has been a cry that social marketing research has explicitly limited theory, and if mentioned, barely applied to its fullest. There is a call for theory to be embedded in social marketing research and there are many, often with conflicting views (David and Rundle-Thiele, 2018). Downstream social marketing, which focuses on the individual to understand how behavior can be influenced to achieve desired change, dominates social marketing practices. Mainly the use of the theory of planned behavior (TPB), consistent with this view, is the one most widely used. It states that an individual's intention to perform a specific behavior is the central factor determining the behavior itself (David and Rundle-Thiele, 2018). Hence, if an individual perceives something as ethical or unethical, soon it will become the real force behind an action, the steering gear behind behavior change. Deciding what is ethical or not in social marketing is not simple since the trade-off between consumer and community good has ethical implications (Jones and Van Putten, 2008). Social marketing cannot be approached or handled as marketing in commercial contexts. Social marketers use moral/value considerations to evoke behavior change only when they see it works at solving a social problem. They focus; on “social problems with moral dimensions that must be addressed” (Brenkert, 2002: 20) and therefore cannot be handled as commercial contexts.

### *2.1 Ethical challenges of social marketing*

Social marketing was born from the need to address social issues using the logic of commercial marketing. However, the ethical challenges did not rise to attention until 2 decades ago. Brenkert (2002) argues that moral problems faced by both commercial and social marketers are similar, and that specifically, “there are several problems that social marketers face” (Brenkert, 2002: 14).

First, social marketing is focused on societal welfare and not market exchange. So the ultimate end it promotes is social but who determines those ends? Second, although social marketers address the problems using behavior change theories, they may not be aware of the underlying roots of the social problems they attack or the underlying structural features or background. And third, an ethical challenge for social marketers is when, by using marketing techniques, they do not give the people they wish to help, a voice or a way that gives them their participatory right (Brenkert, 2002).

## **3. A Literature Review: Socio-demographic Factors**

### *3.1 Religion and ethical perceptions*

Religion has been known to be a major driver of ethics and religiosity is defined as the degree of commitment to the rules that members of a specific religion believe have been set by God (Cornwell et al., 2005). Religion influences ethical behavior by the “existence of religious role identities and the role expectations they involve. Each kind of religious role expectation can influence one or more of the stages in the ethical awareness-judgment- intention-behavior process” (Weaver and

Agle, 2002: 85). In making ethical judgements, intrinsically motivated people use their religious beliefs as a guiding framework in making ethical judgments (Weaver and Angle, 2002) with “compelling” evidence that religiosity has a direct impact on ethical judgments (Walker and Smither, 2012).

Consumers with high intrinsic religiosity are more likely to refuse unethical behavior (Schneider, Krieger, and Bayraktar, 2011); and students from universities who were “very religious” score higher on the ethicality scores than those who were “somewhat religious” or “not religious” (Peterson, Albaum, Merunka, Munuera, and Smith, 2010: 582).

### *3.2 Education majors and ethical perceptions*

Recent studies show that the higher the education level, or the more diverse the experience, the less the engagement in unethical behaviors (Ermasova, Wagner, and Nguyen, 2017). Other studies found no relation with the level of education, but discovered that ethical standards of business students are lower than the non-business educated peers. Business schools seem to have made their graduates more mercenary than ethical since they had more tolerance towards unethical behavior (Meritt, 1991).

### *3.3 Gender and ethical perceptions*

Gender is an important factor in the subject of ethical perceptions. Many studies have concluded that women are less tolerant than men “when evaluating potentially questionable practices” (Charry, De Pelsmacker, and Pecheux, 2014: 252; Wilborn, Brymer, and Schmidgall, 2007). Men and women perceive and respond differently to advertising and to areas with ethical concerns since they process information differently. Females respond to negative emotional appeals more than males (Noble, Pomeroy, and Johnson, 2014) and are said to have higher empathetic emotions (Moore, 2004). When faced with ethical judgments, females are more receptive and emotionally expressive which makes them better at spotting any wrongdoing (Ermasova et al., 2017). However, the varying perceptions between gender declines with age or experience (Franke et al., 1997).

### *3.4 Age and ethical perceptions*

Age and education are significantly correlated to ethical behavior (Ergeneli and Arikan, 2002). Millennials sympathize with ethical issues and boycott products that violate norms because they feel they can change the world (Bucic, Harris, Arli, 2012). Young adults are in general more health conscious and want to have a healthier lifestyle (Giles and Brennan, 2015). A significant difference was found in the greater ethical perceptions among junior employees than more senior personnel (Franke, Crown, and Spake, 1997: 928). Older consumers with more experience have more tolerance than younger consumers to campaigns using threats and thus may be more tolerant of less ethical practices to achieve the goal. However, other studies have shown that the experience that comes with age makes seniors more ethical in their perceptions with ethical awareness highly related to maturity (Wilford and Wakunuma, 2014).

### *3.5 Public/private universities and ethical perceptions*

The literature is scant when it comes to specifying the ethical perceptions of students with respect to social marketing campaigns in different universities. However, it is found that student's ethical perceptions of what is more ethical is higher with students attending a private university rather than a public university (Burns, D.J., Fawcett, J.K, and Lanasa, J., 1994).

The specific hypotheses of this study are:

H<sub>1</sub>: There is a difference in the ethical perception of students with religious beliefs and those without religious beliefs with respect to social marketing campaigns.

H<sub>2</sub>: There is a difference in the ethical perception of students majoring in business and those majoring in social sciences in perceiving ethics in social marketing campaigns; moreover business majors differ among each other.

H<sub>3</sub>: Females differ from males in perceiving ethics in social marketing campaigns.

H<sub>4</sub>: Students from different age groups differ in perceiving ethics in social marketing campaigns.

H<sub>5</sub>: Students from public universities differ from others in private universities in perceiving ethics in social marketing campaigns.

#### **4. Methodology**

A questionnaire was constructed in a way to examine the perceptions of social marketing campaigns. The method consisted of action research, beginning with a pilot study to insure validity and reliability of the survey, watching a video, completing the questionnaire after modification. A video of two social campaigns was addressed to 600 students in three different universities in Lebanon, Kuwait and UAE (ME region) before completing a questionnaire composed of demographic questions concerning their age, gender, major, and religious belief; and 12 items regarding their perception about ethics in social marketing campaigns. The 12 items in which 6 are positive and 6 are negative items, consisted of five Likert scale items (strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree and strongly disagree) and higher scores were accepted as more towards unethical perception. A factor analysis was conducted to check the construct validity then a comparison between the means of these factors was used to insure its validity, and finally the content validity was investigated by Lawshe's method (1975). A panelist of three experts worked on checking the overall and external validity of the questionnaire. The results indicate a high construct validity for the questionnaire and the factors extracted revealed a high correlation between items. The researchers used SPSS 25 to analyze the items in the survey and their relationship with the demographics. An ANOVA test was conducted in addition to the frequencies of the responses and a correlation analysis was conducted to check any significance using spearman correlation at 0.05 level of significance. Moreover, these relationships were investigated using the non-parametric test Chi-square and the independent sample t-test.

The results of each hypothesis is as follows:

H<sub>1</sub>: Students with religious beliefs differ from students with non-religious beliefs in perceiving ethics in social marketing campaigns.

Results show higher mean scores as a higher disagreement on ethics that social marketing campaigns describe. The items in the questionnaire were perceived as social marketing campaigns containing ethical behavior. The mean scores of people with religious beliefs is higher for positive items than students with no religious beliefs and vice versa for the negative items. Spearman correlation analysis revealed a high significance difference between students with religious beliefs and students with no religious beliefs for five items in the questionnaire in which two of them are negative items. This shows a positive attitude towards social marketing campaigns from students with religious beliefs.

H<sub>2</sub>: Students majoring business differ from students majoring social science in perceiving ethics in social marketing campaigns, moreover business majors differ among each other.

A regression analysis was conducted on the effect of major on the mean scores of items in the questionnaire and the results showed a significant impact ( $p\text{-value} < 0.05$ ). An independent sample t-test revealed a favor for social sciences toward perceiving ethics in social marketing campaigns. Moreover, the researchers conducted an ANOVA test followed by Sheffe PostHoc test to distinguish between the different business majors in the sample used. The results appeared as the students perceiving ethics in social marketing campaigns the least were students majoring finance while students majoring in marketing revealed the highest mean score among other business majors such as international business and management.

H<sub>3</sub>: Females differ from males in perceiving ethics in social marketing campaigns.

The comparison of mean scores revealed a higher mean score for males compared to females in perceiving ethics in social marketing campaigns. The higher the mean, the more towards unethical perceptions. The independent sample t-test comparing the males and females revealed a significant difference in the ethical perception. The higher mean scores in positive items are considered as higher agreement on ethics in social marketing campaigns.

H<sub>4</sub>: Students with different age differ in perceiving ethics in social marketing campaigns.

Conducting a regression analysis on the mean scores, a significance appears with Pearson correlation, which reveal a significance effect of the age on the mean scores of the questionnaire,  $p\text{-value} < 0.05$  but the correlation coefficient is weak (Pearson  $r = 0.147$ ). After the regression, an ANOVA test with Sheffe Post hoc test was conducted to investigate the age group that has the highest effect. The highest mean appears in the group of age 17-19, noting that the significance appeared only in three negative items. Therefore, the highest mean revealed a high perception of no ethics in the social marketing campaigns. The lowest means appeared in the older students (23+). The researchers combined the demographic

with the questions to have deeper complex view of the effect. The percentages of values reflect the tests done above. Females, social sciences and age above 20 with religious beliefs, perceive more towards ethics in social marketing campaigns compared to males, business majors, younger students and those having less religious beliefs. These results are consistent across ME region.

H<sub>5</sub>: Students from public universities differ from students from private universities in perceiving ethics in social marketing campaigns. The independent sample t-test comparing the public and private universities revealed a significant difference in the ethical perception. It appears that students in public universities perceive social marketing campaigns as being more ethical than students in private universities. The higher mean scores in positive items are considered as higher agreement on ethics in social marketing campaigns.

## **5. Discussion**

The main goal of social marketing campaigns is positive behavior change. The findings are as follows:

- Students with religious beliefs perceive social marketing campaigns as more ethical than students with no religious beliefs, and this could be the result of the religious education in their social environment. This is supported in the literature which considers religion a precursor to ethical behavior. Religion raises the ethical standards of “religious consumers,” making them sensitive to any unethical presentation or situation (Cornwell et al., 2005; Weaver and Agle, 2002; Walker and Smither, 2012; Schneider, Krieger, and Bayraktar, 2011; Marta, Singhapakdi, Rallapalli, and Joseph, 2000; Fantazy and Al Athmay, 2014; Alleyne and Persaud, 2012)
- Students majoring in a business education perceive social marketing campaigns as less ethical than students majoring in social sciences. Moreover, students majoring in finance view them as even less ethical than marketing, management and international business students. It is also supported by studies that found business students less ethical than their peers in other disciplines (Meritt, 1991; Roca, 2008; Rutherford, Cavazos, Parks-Leduc, and White. 2012). The literature also affirms that accounting students are less ethical than managements/economics majors (Alleyne and Persaud, 2012).
- Males consider social marketing campaigns as benefiting pure marketing orientations in quite a higher level when compared to female students. This difference between females and males affects the ethical perception of social marketing campaigns with females more likely to find a campaign ethical as is supported by the literature (Ergeneli and Arikan, 2002; Alleyne and Persaud, 2012; Devonish, Alleyne, Cadogan-McClean, and Greenidge, 2009). Women, being more emotionally empathetic share more emotional support for the social marketing cause, and more sensitivity to issues of ethical nature than men (Moosmayer and Fuljahn, 2010; Tay and Ozanne, 2002; Smith and Stutts, 2003; Callan and Gallois, 1986; Noble, Pomeroy, and Johnson, 2014; Sidani, Zbib, Rawwas, and Moussawer, 2009);

however, with more experience the difference between genders declines (Franke, Crown, and Spake, 1997).

- There is a significant difference in the ethical perception of social marketing campaigns between the three groups of ages at universities. The younger students perceive social marketing campaigns as less ethical than older students. This is supported by the literature that finds a correlation between age and ethical behavior, and the more the conflicting ethical views, the younger the consumer (Ergeneli and Arikan, 2002; Franke, Crown, and Spake, 1997).
- Students from public universities perceive social marketing campaigns as more ethical than students in private universities although the significance appeared only in four items. This is not supported in the literature which finds “more ethical” ethical perceptions among private university students than those attending public universities (Burns, Fawcett, and Lanasa, 1994). This may be explained by a difference in cultural contexts. In the Middle East, public universities are usually the less prestigious and more affordable option for students from lower income families who may not question the ethicality of the campaigns as much.

## **6. Conclusion:**

This research paper explores the literature and reveals that social marketing is facing ethical challenges not encountered by commercial marketing with regard to its purpose, the reasons it gives to achieve its purpose, and the effect it may have on its own targets. Critiques of social marketing include social marketing campaigns as an unethical form of persuasion tool used by elites and in trying to do social good, harm other individuals. Such accusations do not go unnoticed; For example, a reconsideration of the use of fear appeals in social marketing campaigns is taking place (Gordon, Russell-Bennett, and Lefebvre, 2016). The purpose of this study is to examine the demographic differences in student’s ethical perceptions of social marketing campaigns. Such research is necessary for providing practical recommendations that will help future campaigns reach their target, especially in the Middle East region. Understanding consumer perceptions especially through an ethical gaze is substantial to understanding and reviewing the means of communicating a social message. This paper shows that a ‘social marketing campaign impact’ can be differentiated by the ethical perceptions of consumers. Higher ethical perceptions are detected in students who are religious, of social science majors, female, relatively older and in a public university. And lower ethical perceptions are detected in students less religious, of business majors, male, relatively younger and in private universities.

Future studies can investigate the reasons behind the ethical perceptions and how various demographics can help reach and influence the target audience with the intended social change. It can also broaden the scope of social marketing by delving into recent complex theoretical advances in

consumer behavior. Understanding emotions, dual process cognitions and social norms makes us understand the consumer on a much deeper level (Carvalho and Mazzon, 2015).

There are several limitations to this research. First, it focuses primarily on the socio- demographic factors of religious beliefs, university majors, gender and age where the research mainly answered “who” the consumers are. Other social/cultural values, psychographic and personal factors are of importance when studying ethical perceptions because they answer the “why” questions; thus they should be fully examined in order to understand the underlying mechanism at play especially when consumer’s relevance to ethics in business varies according to context and “personal relevance” (Charry, De Pelsmacker, and Pecheux, 2014). A second limitation is the focus on just Middle Eastern students, somehow ignoring older or more experienced Middle Eastern stakeholders.

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