

## The General Theory of Marketing Ethics: Implications for Pharmaceutical Practices

Aseel Bin Sawad<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Clinical Pharmacy, Umm Al-Qura University, Makkah, Saudi Arabia.

\*E-mail ✉ aseel\_post@hotmail.com

Received: 16 May 2021; Revised: 12 September 2021; Accepted: 20 September 2021

### ABSTRACT

Sales managers are in charge of upholding moral principles when promoting the company's goods to consumers. To reduce the unethical behavior of sales agents, the sales managers of the pharmaceutical industry must enhance training. The widespread corruption in the pharmaceutical sector highlights the urgent need for marketing ethics in employee training and job performance. To influence the ethical views of the salespeople from the marketing and customer service they do, we need to properly identify and meet their training needs. The scenario in which an individual encounters an ethically complex problem is addressed by the general theory of marketing ethics. According to this notion, the moral judgment of the individual is influenced by their business environment, which includes the organization, culture, industry, and personal influences. For upcoming qualitative multiple case studies, we suggested using the general theory of marketing ethics as a conceptual framework to examine the tactics used by certain pharmaceutical industry sales managers to enhance marketing training and reduce the behavior of unethical sales representatives. The proposed prospective study may affect social change and business practices.

**Keywords:** Pharmaceutical, Teleological, Deontological, Utilitarian

**How to Cite This Article:** Bin Sawad A. The General Theory of Marketing Ethics: Implications for Pharmaceutical Practices. *Interdiscip Res Med Sci Spec.* 2021;1(2):8-14.

### Introduction

The scenario in which an individual encounters an ethically complex problem is addressed by the general theory of marketing ethics. The procedure begins when there is an ethical dilemma in a case [1]. If no ethical issue was found, then the model's components are irrelevant. Research and knowledge creation in ethical marketing and decision-making processes have been influenced by the general theory of marketing ethics [2].

The field of business ethics and the marketing framework are influenced by the theory's contribution to marketing ethics. The normative framework of ethical marketing is based on philosophy [3]. Barnett developed study scales, principles, and decision models using the features of the normative framework [3]. Furthermore, managerial procedures, organizational culture, and an ethical decision-making process are all explained by the descriptive models that have been constructed.

Historically, in the past, academics have explored most of the problems related to social and consumer protection elements. Barnett employed marketing ethics in actions that benefited or safeguarded stakeholders during that time, and he addressed consumer protection aspects from a social and societal standpoint [3]. The theory of marketing ethics addresses all aspects of business ethics, including moral duties, standards, and the capacity for moral behavior on an individual basis [1]. According to Hunt and Vitell [1], ethical behavior is driven by an individual businessperson who exhibits positive moral behavior. Enhancing ethical corporate practices is part of the normative approach to marketing ethics [4]. According to Hunt [5], a normative approach suggests the kinds of marketing practices that a society should have or what marketing people or organizations should do. Normative marketers are so focused on "what can be." According to some academics, ethical behavior could be enhanced by a normative approach to marketing ethics [6]. As a result, the normative framework emphasizes moral theories like teleology, deontology, and justice. Hunt added that a proportionality framework that considers the goals and

means as well as universal moral obligations is part of the normative approach. Additionally, the strategy promotes a social justice framework that emphasizes each person's autonomy in determining their course in life and how they are treated by others [2]. Therefore, the normative framework is used by marketers to ensure that certain moral maxims and essential concepts are accepted. When making ethical decisions, marketers refer to these factors as a guide. The normative framework is mostly founded on personal values that have been influenced by friends, family, and the community.

#### *Teleological and deontological norms*

The traditions of teleological and deontological theoretical ethical decisions are combined in the general theory of marketing ethics [1]. According to this theory, a person's perception of an ethical decision is influenced by the business environment, including the organization, culture, industry, and personal influences. One can determine if a particular behavior is morally right by using deontological theory. Additionally, the researchers stated that it is possible to determine whether or not the action demonstrates respect for the rights of others [1]. A set of predetermined deontological rules is used to compare behaviors in this procedure [7]. These standards stand for individual conduct or principles. Using teleology standards, the individual then assesses potential courses of action to determine which one offers the greatest advantages.

Teleology evaluation is characterized by Hunt and Vitell [1] as an analysis of potential outcomes, the value of the stakeholder, and the desirability of outcomes. For instance, the individual may choose to proceed with the choice if the unfavorable outcomes of the action are uncertain or if the likelihood of positive outcomes is greater than that of negative outcomes [1, 8]. This can be attributed to the teleological approach's emphasis on attaining the greatest good for the largest number of individuals. Marketers use teleological rules to decide who stands to gain and who could lose, as well as whether the positive outweighs the negative. The way a person approaches an action also has a significant impact on how they behave in real life. Situational constraints are viewed as an opportunity by marketing leaders [1]. Let's say the individual isn't given the chance to participate in a specific activity. Then, regardless of the aim or moral judgment, the person will not be able to carry out the endeavor [9]. Individual behavior, then, is the outcome of the real consequences. These repercussions become a part of the individual's own experience, which they might then use to address such ethical dilemmas in the future. Critics claim that the broad theory of marketing ethics is overly descriptive, even while it emphasizes normative rules [10]. To improve comprehension of normative variables, the theory should be descriptive [1]. Although the theory cannot be used to anticipate outcomes, marketing professionals utilize it to comprehend the mental processes linked to personal ethical viewpoints [10].

The moral decision-making components of ethical decision-making competitions in organizations were outlined in Hunt and Vitell's [1] framework. Hunt and Vitell [1] acknowledged the benefits of employing teleological evaluation for stakeholders. Because of its rigorous normative foundation in moral philosophy, the general theory of marketing ethics significantly changed the ethics landscape. A person's decision-making process when faced with ethical dilemmas is mostly aided by the general theory of marketing ethics [11]. According to the examination of teleology and deontology, people can make ethical decisions because they have a variety of perceived options. Behavior and intentions are the results of the evaluation procedure. An individual understands that moral judgment, action, and purpose are not always consistent based on that concept.

As sales representatives carry out their duties, the sales managers give them ethical concerns. However, because of illicit dealings and relationships with doctors, hospitals, or clinics, their tactics frequently turn unethical [12-14]. To ascertain the steps and tactics employed by sales managers in resolving the issues raised by their sales personnel, an empirical study is therefore essential. The broad idea of marketing ethics is put forth in this article as a suitable framework for investigating tactics that involve enhancing marketing education in the direction of ethical marketing. By employing these tactics, salespeople in the pharmaceutical sector may behave less unethically [15, 16].

#### **Materials and Methods**

The general theory of marketing ethics is proposed as a conceptual framework for future research in the pharmaceutical industry. A qualitative research method should be appropriate because it will delve deeper into the sales managers' perspectives and opinions and derive the research participants' responses. A case study research design should be used to determine the development of sales managers' strategies to reduce unethical

sales representative behavior. The research should be approved by an ethics committee before starting to recruit research participants.

A purposeful sampling method should be used to identify sales managers from different pharmaceutical companies who have successfully used marketing training strategies to reduce unethical sales representative behavior. According to Boddy [17], the target number of samples depends on the acceptable sample size for qualitative research. The number of participants will depend on reaching data saturation. The data should be collected through a phone interview to make it easy for participants and interviewees. The triangulation method should be used to reach data saturation. The triangulation method is defined as data collection from multiple sources (e.g. interviews, the internet, material provided by participants). According to Yin [18], qualitative researchers reach data saturation when no new themes develop from the data analysis.

Organizing the collected data should be done using a program like NVivo® 12. Data can be analyzed using Yin's [18] logical and sequential process (i.e. compiling, disassembling, reassembling, interpreting, and concluding data analysis). After transcribing the data and completing the analysis, member checking should be used. Then, the emerging themes from the results should be correlated with the literature and the proposed conceptual framework.

## **Results and Discussion**

In the subsequent parts, the rationale for the proposal of the general theory of marketing ethics as the conceptual framework, the importance of further research, its contribution to business practice, and its implications for social change are demonstrated.

### *Appropriateness of the proposed conceptual framework*

A subcategory of business ethics known as "marketing ethics" is concerned with moral situations that are relevant to marketing. According to Keig and Ferrell [19], the broad theory of marketing ethics, the requirements, and stakeholders have a significant impact on what constitutes acceptable behavioral norms in marketing procedures and activities. This method places a strong emphasis on the application of ethical principles to marketing organizations, choices, and behaviors. According to research, the theory of marketing ethics covers a wide range of topics, including consumer ethics, channel constraints, and product issues; ethics in corporate decision-making; and marketing aspects like product, place, price, promotion, global marketing, marketing studies, regulations, religion, and ethical codes [19, 20]. Corruption in the pharmaceutical sector and other firms suggests that marketing ethics are urgently needed for both training and job performance. Additionally, to affect salespeople's ethical perspectives of marketing and the service functions they do, it is necessary to appropriately identify and meet their training needs.

Teleological and deontological ethical perspectives are the two dimensions from which Gbadamosi [21] identified marketing ethics. Furthermore, according to Gbadamosi [21], deontological ethics can establish what is right and wrong by consulting a set of predetermined ideals or an independent ethical code. An organization's code of ethics or ethical values might provide insight into this marketing ethics strategy. Therefore, when managing transactions, obtaining medication, and promoting and selling items, sales agents can rely on and adhere to the ethical code of conduct or its values. Teleological ethics, on the other hand, derives moral obligation or duty from anything good or appropriate as a necessary and feasible goal [21]. This method suggests that regardless of the results, individuals, organizations, and organizations have a moral obligation to pursue what is desired. This represents the current demands for ethical guidelines in the pharmaceutical sector. Medical representatives should strive to carry out their responsibilities in an ethical manner to win over stakeholders and foster confidence. To get the intended result (greater profits and higher stakeholder satisfaction), pharmaceutical businesses should also think about coordinating their marketing, sales, and other operations with moral principles.

### *Significance of the future study*

Sales managers are in charge of upholding moral principles when promoting the company's goods to consumers. To lessen the unethical behavior of sales agents, pharmaceutical industry sales managers must enhance training. The results of this study could be useful to various pharmaceutical company sales managers who want to curtail their sales representatives' unethical behavior.

### *Contribution to business practice*

One of the main causes of financial fraud and corruption in the pharmaceutical industry is unethical behavior by pharmaceutical salespeople [22]. Since ethics is a key factor in deciding how well a business entity performs, managers in the pharmaceutical industry must deal with unethical behavior [23]. The findings of this suggested study could be used by pharmaceutical sales managers to create marketing training plans that lessen sales representatives' unethical behavior, thereby enhancing organizational performance. Addressing unethical behavior among doctors, chemists, and pharmaceutical salespeople, according to Patwardhan [24], improved the connections and interactions among these professionals [24].

#### *Implications for social change*

Wei and Delbaere [25] claim that because some patients believe that pharmaceutical company representatives utilize doctors as persuasive agents to promote their recommended brands, patients have grown wary of the medications that their doctors recommend. Physicians, their patients, and staff of pharmaceutical corporations may all benefit from the findings of this planned study. Resolving unethical behavior in the sector could improve patient-physician relationships and boost patient confidence in the pharmaceutical sector. Improved patient satisfaction and higher-quality healthcare may be significantly impacted by positive relationships and trust between medical staff and their patients [26-29]. Pharmaceutical firms can make a big difference in society by contributing to academic healthcare research and nonprofit organizations, which will benefit citizens in the future.

#### *Discussion*

In marketing training for sales professionals, the requirement for ethical behavior training and innovative organizational structures is crucial. As a conceptual framework for upcoming qualitative multiple case studies, we used the general theory of marketing ethics to examine tactics employed by several pharmaceutical sector sales managers to enhance marketing training and lessen unethical sales representative behavior.

According to Hunt and Vitell [1], ethical choices influence individual behavior by influencing intention variables, which is in line with the general theory of marketing ethics and general theories of consumer behavior. In their model of the general theory of marketing ethics, Hunt and Vitell suggested that marketers who use both intentions and ethical decisions are better at analyzing behavior when ethical considerations are central rather than incidental [1].

Additionally, while teleology value influences intentions independently, the study confirmed that ethical judgments might occasionally diverge [4]. Guilt arises when marketers act and intend in ways that are contrary to the moral choice [1]. Cognitive dissonance is the state of having two contradictory ideas [30]. Cognitive dissonance can be resolved by individuals in a variety of ways, such as (a) altering one of the dissonant thoughts, (b) altering behavior related to the inconsistency, (c) adding a new thought that helps explain the inconsistency, or (d) trivializing the inconsistency [31]. People are motivated to resolve inconsistencies by the negative effects of cognitive dissonance [31].

Gürçay and Baron [32] claim that people forecast and debate the outcomes of actions using the practical system. Gürçay and Baron [32] claim that when people respond to personal problems, they employ the deontological approach to concentrate on an emotional urge. Other academics investigated how marketing managers addressed ethical marketing issues using the general idea of marketing ethics [33]. After discovering that integrating utilitarian and deontological evaluations aids in identifying the ethical judgments used to resolve difficulties, researchers have generally endorsed Hunt and Vitell's paradigm [33, 34]. Individuals determine their ethical attitude to action based on practical (intentional) or deontological (judgemental) criteria [35].

The qualitative research method is what we suggested. Bansal *et al.* [36] state that qualitative researchers gather information and identify themes in the responses of research participants. According to Yin [18], qualitative research focuses on a range of viewpoints, claims, arguments, ideologies, and lenses that offer fresh insights into the phenomenon. Cecez-Kecmanovic *et al.* [37] and Windsong [38] assert that qualitative research encourages respondents to critically engage to explore the phenomenon in greater detail.

According to the research goal, questions, data-gathering procedure, and desired outcomes, research designs have distinct users [18]. The most significant and fascinating information is obtained by case study researchers by delving further into the scenario, condition, position, and status of their cases [39]. For this upcoming study, we suggested using a multiple case study as the research approach. A case study's objective is to ascertain the changes taking place in a person, group of individuals, institution, community, or organization, according to Yin [18] and Baker [40]. The validity and credibility of the case study approach are contested, according to Moriarty *et al.* [41]. Nonetheless, the case study research design continues to be a useful technique for carrying out various types of

research. Even though there might not be many participants in a case study, the cases can yield a wealth of information that helps researchers address the research objectives.

For this next investigation, we suggested using the intentional sampling method. Utilizing the intended sampling strategy aids in making the most of few resources and exceptional rich-information cases, claim Duan *et al.* [42]. According to Ames *et al.* [43], when a lot of data is available, researchers employ deliberate sampling to refine the inclusion criteria.

To achieve data saturation, triangulation is useful [44, 45]. Thus, the triangulation approach is suggested for this upcoming research. Triangulation is used by qualitative researchers to improve the study's and its conclusions' accuracy [46].

## Conclusion

Future studies might examine tactics employed by some pharmaceutical industry sales managers to enhance marketing training and lessen unethical sales representative behavior using the broad idea of marketing ethics as a conceptual framework. Both business practices and social change may be impacted by the suggested future study.

**Acknowledgments:** None

**Conflict of Interest:** None

**Financial Support:** None

**Ethics Statement:** None

## References

1. Hunt SD, Vitell S. A general theory of marketing ethics. *J Macromarketing*. 1986;6(1):5-16. doi:10.1177/027614678600600103
2. Gresham LG, Ferrel, OC. A contingency framework for understanding ethical decision-making in marketing. *J Mark*. 1985;49(19):15-21. doi:10.1177/002224298504900308
3. Barnett T. Dimensions of moral intensity and ethical decision making: an empirical study. *J Appl Soc Psychol*. 2001;31(5):1038-57. doi:10.1111/j.1559-1816.2001.tb02661.x
4. Adams JS, Tashchian A, Shore TH. Codes of ethics as signals for ethical behavior. *J Bus Ethics*. 2001;29(3):199-211. doi:10.1023/A:1026576421399
5. Hunt S. Commentary on an empirical investigation of a general theory of marketing ethics. *J Acad Mark Sci*. 1990;18(2):173-7. doi:10.1177/009207039001800208
6. Sims RL, Keon TL. Determinants of ethical decision making: the relationship of the perceived organizational environment. *J Bus Ethics*. 1999;19(4):393-401. doi:10.1023/A:1005834129122
7. Bass K, Barnett T, Brown G. Individual difference variables, ethical judgments, and ethical behavioral intentions. *Bus Ethics Q*. 1999;9(2):183-205. doi:10.2307/3857471
8. Butterfield KD, Trevin LK, Weaver GR. Moral awareness in business organizations: influences of issue-related and social context factors. *Hum Relat*. 2000;53(7):981-1018. doi:10.1177/0018726700537004
9. Waters JA, Bird F. The moral dimension of organizational culture. *J Bus Ethics*. 1987;6(1):15-22. doi:10.1007/BF00382944
10. Barnett T, Bass K, Brown G, Hebert FJ. Ethical ideology and the ethical judgments of marketing professionals. *J Bus Ethics*. 1998;17(7):715-23. doi:10.1023/A:1005736404300
11. Borkowski SC, Ugras YJ. Business students and ethics: a meta-analysis. *J Bus Ethics*. 1998;17(11):1117-27. doi:10.1023/A:1005748725174
12. Ameer I, Halinen A. Moving beyond ethical decision-making: a practice-based view to study unethical sales behavior. *J Pers Sell Sales Manag*. 2019;39(2):103-22. doi:10.1080/08853134.2018.1544077
13. Badrinarayanan V, Ramachandran I, Madhavaram S. Mirroring the boss: ethical leadership, emulation intentions, and salesperson performance. *J Bus Ethics*. 2019;159(3):897-912. doi:10.1007/s10551-018-3842-



14. Sasirekha V. Ethically practiced unethical strategies in pharma industry-whom to be blamed. *Int J Res-Granthaalayah*. 2018;6(2):32-45. doi:10.5281/zenodo.1186096
15. Sergeevna SM, Efimovna LE. Improving training of pharmaceutical specialists for consultation in pharmacy organizations using interactive forms of education. *Pharmacophore*. 2020;11(2):7-14.
16. Soboleva MS, Loskutova EE, Kosova IV, Amelina IV. Problems and the prospects of pharmaceutical consultation in the drugstores. *Arch Pharm Pract*. 2020;11(2):154-9.
17. Boddy CR. Sample size for qualitative research. *Qual Mark Res An Int J*. 2016;19(4):426-32. doi:10.1108/QMR-06-2016-0053
18. Yin R. Case study research and applications: design and methods (6th ed.). SAGE Publications; 2018.
19. Keig D, Ferrell OC. The marketing ethics course: current state and future directions. In *Thriving in a New World Economy 2016* (pp. 248-250). Springer, Cham. doi:10.1007/978-3-319-24148-7\_75
20. Murphy PE. Research in marketing ethics: continuing and emerging themes. *Rech Appl Mark (English Edition)*. 2017;32(3):84-9. doi:10.1177%2F2051570717701414
21. Gbadamosi A. Contemporary issues in marketing: principles and practice. Sage; 2019.
22. Villalba L. Pharmaceutical companies and medical practitioners or “the beast and the beauty”? *Clin Dermatol*. 2019;37(1):16-20. doi:10.1016/j.clindermatol.2018.09.005
23. Ghani AH, Shaari H. Issues and problems in ethical practices amongst takaful agents. *Int Rev Manag Mark*. 2016;6(4S):21-6. Available from: <https://www.econjournals.com/index.php/irmm/index>
24. Patwardhan AR. Physicians-pharmaceutical sales representatives interactions and conflict of interest: challenges and solutions. *Inquiry*. 2016;53(3):0046958016667597. doi:10.1177/0046958016667597
25. Wei ML, Delbaere M. Do consumers perceive their doctors as influenced by pharmaceutical marketing communications? A persuasion knowledge perspective. *Int J Pharm Healthc Mark*. 2015;9(4):330-48. doi:10.1108/IJPHM-06-2014-0033
26. Allen D, Braithwaite J, Sandall J, Waring J. Towards a sociology of healthcare safety and quality. *Sociol Health Illn*. 2016;38(2):181-97. doi:10.1111/1467-9566.12390
27. Birkhäuser J, Gaab J, Kossowsky J, Hasler S, Krummenacher P, Werner C, et al. Trust in the health care professional and health outcome: a meta-analysis. *PloS one*. 2017;12(2):e0170988. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0170988
28. Brown PR, Calnan MW. Chains of (dis) trust: exploring the underpinnings of knowledge-sharing and quality care across mental health services. *Sociol Health Illn*. 2016;38(2):286-305. doi:10.1111/1467-9566.12369
29. Hanse JJ, Harlin U, Jarebrant C, Ulin K, Winkel J. The impact of servant leadership dimensions on leader-member exchange among health care professionals. *J Nurs Manag*. 2016;24(2):228-34. doi:10.1111/jonm.12304
30. Hinojosa AS, Gardner WL, Walker HJ, Coglisier C, Gullifor D. A review of cognitive dissonance theory in management research: opportunities for further development. *J Manag*. 2017;43(1):170-99. doi:10.1177/0149206316668236
31. McGrath A. Dealing with dissonance: a review of cognitive dissonance reduction. *Soc Personal Psychol Compass*. 2017;11(12):e12362. doi:10.1111/spc3.12362
32. Gürçay B, Baron J. Challenges for the sequential two-system model of moral judgment. *Think Reason*. 2017;23(1):49-80. doi:10.1080/13546783.2016.1216011
33. Mayo MA, Marks LJ. An empirical investigation of a general theory of marketing ethics. *J Acad Mark Sci*. 1990;18(2):163-71. doi:10.1007/BF02726432
34. Jurković R, Jurković S, Jambrešić M. Ethical decision making in business-overview of some antecedents of individual ethical judgment. *Int J Digit Technol Econ*. 2018;3(1):11-22. Available from: <https://hrcak.srce.hr/ijdte>
35. Gawronski B, Beer JS. What makes moral dilemma judgments “utilitarian” or “deontological”? *Soc Neurosci*. 2017;12(6):626-32. doi:10.1080/17470919.2016.1248787
36. Bansal P, Smith WK, Vaara E. New ways of seeing through qualitative research. *Acad Manag J*. 2018;61(4):1189-95. doi:10.5465/amj.2018.4004
37. Cecez-Kecmanovic D, Davison RM, Fernandez W, Finnegan P, Pan SL, Sarker S. Advancing qualitative IS research methodologies: expanding horizons and seeking new paths. *J Assoc Inf Syst*. 2020;21(1):246-63. doi:10.17705/1jais.00599

38. Windsong EA. Incorporating intersectionality into research design: an example using qualitative interviews. *Int J Soc Res Methodol*. 2018;21(2):135-47. doi:10.1080/13645579.2016.1268361
39. Zhu Y. Unraveling the mysteries of case study research: a guide for business and management students. *Asia Pac Bus Rev*. 2018;24(3):389. doi:10.1080/13602381.2017.1395242
40. Baker MJ. Case theory in business and management: reinventing case study research. *J Custom Behav*. 2018;17(4):335-40. doi:10.1362/147539218X15445233217841
41. Moriarty D, Núñez De Villavicencio P, Black LA, Bustos M, Cai H, Mehlenbacher B, et al. Durable research, portable findings: rhetorical methods in case study research. *Tech Commun Quart*. 2019;28(2):124-36. doi:10.1080/10572252.2019.1588376
42. Duan N, Bhaumik DK, Palinkas LA, Hoagwood K. Optimal design and purposeful sampling: complementary methodologies for implementation research. *Adm Policy Ment Health Ment Health Serv Res*. 2015;42(5):524-32. doi:10.1007/s10488-014-0596
43. Ames H, Glenton C, Lewin S. Purposive sampling in a qualitative evidence synthesis: a worked example from a synthesis on parental perceptions of vaccination communication. *BMC Med Res Methodol*. 2019;19(1):26-35. doi:10.1186/s12874-019-0665-4
44. Turner SF, Cardinal LB, Burton RM. Research design for mixed methods: a triangulation-based framework and roadmap. *Organ Res Methods*. 2017;20(2):243-67. doi:10.1177/1094428115610808
45. Varpio L, Ajjawi R, Monrouxe LV, O'Brien BC, Rees CE. Shedding the cobra effect: problematising thematic emergence, triangulation, saturation and member checking. *Med Educ*. 2017;51(1):40-50. doi:10.1111/medu.13124
46. Shoaib S, Mujtaba BG. Use it or lose it: prudently using case study as a research and educational strategy. *Am J Educ Learn*. 2016;1(2):83-93. doi:10.20448/804.1.2.83.93