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Marketing ethics in the wholesale and retail sector: empirical evidence from Ethiopia (a qualitative inquiry)

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ABSTRACT

Research on the subject of marketing ethics has already been a neglected area. There is a lack of research in the field, especially from the developing world. Thus, this study explored the marketing ethics practice and perceptions of marketing practitioners in the wholesale and retail sector in a developing world context. A qualitative method was employed involving 35 interviews (based on the concept of saturation) with respondents (marketing practitioners) drawn from the wholesale and retail sector of the country. To analyze the qualitative data and ensure credibility, the authors applied qualitative data coding and analysis techniques and guidelines provided by qualitative researchers. The result of this data-driven analysis (grounded theory design with a narrative presentation) revealed unnerving ethical problems in the studied sector; such as hoarding, price fixing, exploiting customers' weaknesses/ignorance, consumer 'look'/appearance-based pricing, exaggeration in promoting products, selling fake products as original, bewildering consumers not to try products from other stores/restricting buyers autonomy, tainting, and tax evasion. The study provides strong evidence revealing ethical dilemmas in the study setting. The findings will contribute to the knowledge and understanding of the subject of marketing ethics (dilemmas) in a developing country context, where there is a dearth of such a study.

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1. Introduction

Academics and industry professionals continue to recognize marketing ethics as a critical worldwide concern (Ferrell & Ferrell, 2021; Kennedy & Kapitan, 2022). Since ethical marketing is a developing field, marketers need to embrace it and push it forward since doing so will serve their long-term, enlightened self-interest (Carroll & Shabana, 2010). Brinkman (2002, p. 159) noted that marketing ethics 'examines systematically marketing and marketing morality, related to unsafe products, deceptive pricing, deceptive advertising or bribery, discrimination in distribution and exploitation of consumer weakness'. It is normally described as the subset of business ethics and deals with norms/principles behind the function and regulation of marketing (Paul, 2019). These ethical norms could be applied to each element of the marketing mix-product, price, distribution, promotion, or other broader marketing dimensions (Alshurideh et al., 2016).

The core idea is that although marketers deal with a variety of ethical dilemmas in the workplace (Mothersbaugh et al., 2020), marketing is still the most unethical business function (Good & Schwepker, 2022; Sawad & Andrews, 2022). This prevalence of unethical marketing practices negatively impacts both businesses and their stakeholders, these realities gave rise to the field of marketing known as marketing ethics, which is currently the subject of recent studies in the field (Yoo & Donthu, 2002). According to Laczniak and Murphy (2019), modern marketers will face disgraceful repercussions if they disregard marketing ethics.

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Besides, regarding the state of research on marketing ethics, it is still in its infancy and is incredibly rare in developing nations (Elifneh, 2017). This suggests a regional deficiency in the body of knowledge regarding business and/or marketing ethics, which contributes to our incomplete understanding of the field on a global scale (Armstrong & Sweeney, 1994; Bearden & Netemeyer, 1999; Visser, 2008). To close this gap, more research on marketing ethics from various industries and contexts is thought to be highly interesting (Bairrada et al., 2023; Kavali et al., 2001; Möllers et al., 2022). In light of this disparity, the study examined marketing ethics in Ethiopia's wholesale and retail sector, which is widely regarded as one of the productive industries contributing significantly to the national economy (African Development Bank Group Report, 2015; GTP II 2015/16–2019/2020, 2016; World Bank, 2018). It is a sector faced with serious ethical dilemmas (Agag et al., 2016; Dubinsky & Levy, 1985). In addition, it is worth noting that despite the growth and popularity of online and mobile commerce in wholesale and retail sectors and other industries of other contexts/countries (Andronie et al., 2021; Faulds et al., 2018; Groß, 2015; Krizanova et al., 2019), 'Ethiopia has a cash-intensive economy, in which almost all market transactions are conducted in cash. Cash is a "king" in the country's economy' (Gobena & Kebede, 2021, p. 645).

The globalization of business and the removal of trade barriers have brought attention to the significance of marketing ethics. As a result, ethics and ethical practices are now hot topics in both academic and professional circles (Javalgi & Russel, 2015). However, despite the growing importance of the field of marketing ethics, till now relatively little published work in the marketing field addresses the issue of marketing ethics even in the global context (Carrigan et al., 2005; Kamila & Jasrotia, 2023; Tsalikis & Fritzsche, 2013). Additionally, according to Hunt and Vitell (1986), research on the issue of marketing ethics has already been a neglected area and there is a lack of systematic research in the field of marketing ethics. Worse, we still know just too little about the practice of marketing ethics among marketing practitioners from the least developed countries as empirical studies on marketing and business ethics particularly from the developing world have largely remained scant making the area still as relevant to explore and study (Armstrong & Sweeney, 1994; Jamali & Karam, 2018; Jamali & Mirshak, 2007). These ideas substantiate that there is a dearth of empirical studies (empirical gap) on marketing ethics predominantly from the developing world. Hence, in addition to its empirical contribution, this study will also be vital to extend the subject of marketing ethics to uncharted (unexplored) territories such as the least developed part of the world. Thus, this study, which is one of a kind in Ethiopia, explored the marketing ethics practice and perceptions of marketing practitioners in the wholesale and retail sector of the country based on empirical investigation. The wholesale and retail sector is regarded as highly susceptible to ethical dilemmas. According to Dubinsky and Levy (1985) and Sarma (2007), this sector is characterized by ethical concerns and it poses certain critical issues as marketing practitioners of the sector often face ethical dilemmas due to the fact that their environment is favorable for the development of ethical problems because of the diversity of tasks they perform.

Therefore, by empirically investigating the marketing ethics of marketing practitioners in this sector, the study contributes to narrow empirical and theoretical gaps pertaining to the field of marketing ethics from the developing world by examining the marketing ethics of marketing practitioners in this sector. Towards this end, the central research question of this paper is – What are the ethical problems that marketing practitioners in Ethiopia's wholesale and retail sector face? It also explored whether the sector has ethical standards and codes alongside whether the marketing practitioners think that ethical beliefs are important. Of the several service sectors, the wholesale and retail sector is regarded as one of the least studied sectors despite vulnerabilities to ethical dilemmas that marketing practitioners are faced with (Karami et al., 2014; Román & Cuestas, 2008). Thus, the fact that the wholesale and retail sector is considered vital for Ethiopia (World Bank, 2018), but the sector in general is filled with ethical dilemmas (Pandey et al., 2019; Sharma, 2015) alongside being one of the least studied sectors in the context of the developing world explains the motivation of this study.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows; the next section presents the literature review; which will be followed by the methodology section. Next, the results section will demonstrate the findings of the study by presenting the major ethical problems in the study context together with outlining whether the sector has ethical standards and codes and whether the marketing practitioners think that ethical beliefs are important. Finally, the last section provides discussions and conclusions. The study, in general, will have both theoretical and empirical contributions. Its theoretical contribution is byway of extending marketing ethics literature to less explored territories while empirically it uses an original/novel dataset in its empirically anchored methodology which in itself could be a treasured contribution.

2. Literature review

2.1. Overview – marketing ethics and the motivation for the study

Ethical decision-making of marketers is a subject that is attracting increasing research attention, both in response to public criticism of marketing activities and from a realization within the discipline that there are ethical issues involved in marketing conduct (Klein, 1999). The American Marketing Association (AMA) emphasizes the importance of marketing ethics in today's marketing practices. According to the AMA, marketing ethics refers to the accepted and upheld standards of behavior that marketers should adhere to (AMA 2020). Additionally, Alshurideh et al. (2016) describe marketing ethics as a growing concern within the business world and as a subset of business ethics. It involves the exploration of moral dilemmas confronted by marketing managers. However, Nill and Schibrowsky (2007) maintained that the high visibility of marketing activities and managers' efforts to administer their firms' relationships with its stakeholders continue to keep ethics among the most challenging issues for marketing managers and academics alike.

As reiterated earlier, marketing is an integral part of business (Krizanova et al., 2019). And marketing ethics is normally considered as a sub-specialization of business ethics (Brinkman, 2002). So given this reality, let alone the sub-specialization (marketing ethics), even the broader field – business ethics itself is one of the least explored subjects, especially, in the developing world (Blowfield & Frynas, 2005; Frynas, 2006). Of the several service sectors, the wholesale and retail sector is regarded as one of the least studied sectors despite vulnerabilities to ethical dilemmas that marketing practitioners are faced with (Karami et al., 2014; Román & Cuestas, 2008). Thus, as stated in the preceding section, the wholesale and retail sector is considered vital for Ethiopia (World Bank, 2018). However, the sector, in general, is filled with ethical conundrums (Pandey et al., 2019; Sharma, 2015) alongside being one of the least studied sectors in the context of the developing world explains the motivation of this study.

2.2. Dimensions of marketing ethics

Early empirical studies dealing with marketing ethics suffered from a lack of theoretical foundations due to its contemporary nature (Murphy, 2002). But lately, ethical codes of conduct issued by the American Marketing Association (AMA) together with the subsequent effort from other scholars in the field (e.g. Vitell et al., 1993) contributed to the development of a marketing ethics framework to assess the marketing ethics of marketing managers and salespeople. The AMA identified broad dimensions of marketing ethics or norms as honesty, responsibility, fairness, respect, transparency, and citizenship/corporate social responsibility (AMA, Statement of Ethics, n.d.). Nonetheless, Vitell, Rallapalli, and Singhapakdi introduced a comprehensive and well-championed framework to examine the marketing ethics (moral standards) of marketing practitioners (see Vitell et al., 1993; Yoo & Donthu, 2002). This framework, which is also known as the marketing ethics assessment tool, has five dimensions/marketing norms – (1) price and distribution norms, (2) information and contract norms, (3) product and promotion norms, (4) obligation and disclosure norms, and (5) general honesty and integrity norms.

Among others, the price and distribution norms entail that all extra-cost added features should be identified; and it opposes manipulation of the availability of products, use of coercion, price fixing, and predatory pricing (see, Rallapalli et al., 2000; Vitell et al., 1993). In other words, price and distribution norms dictate the principles of fair pricing and equitable distribution strategies, emphasizing transparency and non-discrimination to maintain consumer trust and satisfaction (Naveed & Murtaza, 2023; Ramaiah & Singh, 2023).

Information and contract norms entail risk associated with the use of the product should be disclosed; outside clients and suppliers should be treated fairly; and the practice and promotion of a professional code of ethics must be actively supported (Vitell et al., 1993; Warner, 2008; Yoo & Donthu, 2002). The notion is that marketers must uphold information and contract norms, ensuring the accuracy, completeness, and transparency of information provided to consumers, as well as the fairness and enforceability of contractual agreements (Marcatajo, 2023; Straetmans, 2021; Widijowati, 2023).

Product and promotion norms emphasize product safety; and promote avoiding deceptive communication about products, misleading advertising and sales promotions, and misleading sales tactics/manipulations (Klein, 1999; Ndubisi et al., 2014; Vitell et al., 1993). Thus, product and promotion norms emphasize the ethical marketing of products and services, advocating against deceptive advertising practices and prioritizing consumer well-being over profit (Chukwuma & Ngwoke, 2022; Georgescu & Bodislav, 2024).

In addition, marketers are bound by broader obligations and expectations regarding disclosure and integrity (Kandpal et al., 2024). Obligation and disclosure norms underscore marketers' responsibilities towards society and stakeholders, emphasizing corporate social responsibility and transparent communication of risks and affiliations (Laczniak & Shultz, 2021; Laczniak & Murphy, 2019).

Furthermore, general honesty and integrity norms serve as the foundation of ethical marketing conduct, highlighting the significance of trust, credibility, and ethical virtues such as honesty, fairness, and integrity (Bayo & Red-Well, 2021; Cheung & To, 2021). Adhering to these norms and upholding marketing ethics not only fosters trust among consumers and satisfaction among stakeholders but also plays a crucial role in promoting sustainable business practices and ensuring long-term success in the marketplace (Naveed & Murtaza, 2023; Shahzad et al., 2023).

In other words, the crux of marketing ethics is that necessary moral standards need to be applied to marketing/business decisions, and marketers/businesses have more than an economic responsibility, as they have a wider responsibility for impacts on society and the environment (Ho, 2013; Laczniak & Murphy, 2019; Sjåfjell, 2011). In view of this, this study explored the marketing ethics practice and perceptions of marketing practitioners in the wholesale and retail sector of the country based on empirical investigation. Apart from being one of the controversial sectors in terms of ethical issues, the wholesale and retail sector is one of the crucial service sectors in Ethiopia to modernize and develop (GTP II 2015/16–2019/2020, 2016). Thus, as indicated in the preceding sections, the objective of the study is to examine the marketing ethics of marketing practitioners in the wholesale and retail sector of the country. This will further help close the empirical and theoretical gaps related to marketing ethics from underdeveloped regions of the world. Besides, as marketing ethics is changing as the world of marketing practice changes (Ferrell & Ferrell, 2021), it is always intriguing to explore and monitor emerging issues and developments related to marketing ethics and other susceptible fields from different contexts (Horizon 2020, 2020, 2016).

More so, there is a burgeoning interest in marketing/business ethics in developing countries (Jamali & Karam, 2018; Schlegelmilch & Öberseder, 2010). However, thus far there has not been sufficient and substantial systematic research about it from the developing world (Hunt & Vitell; 1986; Utting, 2003), i.e. though the field of marketing/business ethics establishes itself more globally, the question still arises as to its nature and concerns in the developing world (Nguyen et al., 2018). Most investigated countries in international marketing/business ethics have been in high economically developed countries; as a result, there has been much less marketing ethics research in the underdeveloped world (Al-Khatib et al., 2005; Egri & Ralston, 2008; Singhapakdi et al., 1999). Thus, this research investigated the marketing ethics of marketing practitioners in the wholesale and retail sector of Ethiopia. The findings of this research will contribute to the knowledge and understanding of the subject of marketing ethics in a developing country context, where there is a dearth of such a study (Bird, 2009; Burnaz et al., 2009).

Thus, this study will have a contribution to both theory and practice. Its theoretical contribution will be extending studies on marketing ethics to less charted territories. Not much is known about this subject from this part of the world (Blowfield & Frynas, 2005; Jamali & Karam, 2018; Nguyen et al., 2018). Moreover, due to the ethical dilemmas that marketing professionals in the sector are faced with, the wholesale and retail sector is regarded as one of the controversial industries (Byrd et al., 2016; Takala & Uusitalo, 1995; Whysall, 2000). Besides, this study will be an input to inform policy makers and concerned stakeholders in the study setting, where, at present, there is no robust guideline for ethical marketing practices. This is particularly imperative given the notion that the stern supposition of voluntarism as the sine qua non of ethical marketing practice has diminished and the importance of inducting a pertinent policy by governments is becoming imperative (Knudsen et al., 2015; McBarnet, 2007; Vogel, 2006).

2.3. Marketing ethical problems

Marketing ethical problems refer to dilemmas faced by businesses or marketers when their actions or strategies raise moral concerns, often involving conflicts between maximizing profits and adhering to ethical principles (Dyck & Manchanda, 2021; Ferrell & Ferrell, 2021). Marketing ethical problems exhibit significant variation across different contexts and sectors, reflecting the diverse cultural, economic, and regulatory landscapes in which businesses operate (Böhm et al., 2022; Tursunova & Qizi, 2023). For example, in developed economies with robust consumer protection laws, ethical issues such as deceptive advertising or misleading product claims may be more prevalent (Richardson-Greenfield & La Ferle, 2021; Yıldırım et al., 2021). Conversely, in emerging markets where regulatory oversight is less stringent, challenges related to bribery, corruption, and compliance with international standards may take precedence (Anand et al., 2023). Moreover, the nature of the industry itself can influence the ethical dilemmas faced by businesses (Ciupka, 2023). For instance, sectors like healthcare and pharmaceuticals grapple with issues such as patient privacy, data security, and access to affordable treatments (Hall et al., 2024), while industries like technology and social media confront concerns related to user privacy, data misuse, and algorithmic bias (Nasim et al., 2022). In the wholesale and retail sectors, specific concerns arise, including pricing transparency, fair competition, and supply chain ethics (Chen et al., 2022). These sectors face pressures related to fair treatment of suppliers, proper labeling of products, and ensuring consumer trust through truthful marketing practices (Liu, 2022). While some previous studies have delved into marketing ethics, the primary issues they have unearthed may not perfectly resonate with our Ethiopian context, especially within the wholesale and retail sector. The following section provides a detailed empirical review of marketing ethics.

2.4. Empirical reviews

This section demonstrates empirical reviews on marketing ethics by referring to empirical findings from previous studies. Accordingly, Andrews et al. (2022) conducted extensive research, identifying deceptive advertising, pricing strategies, and product safety as primary concerns within the marketing domain. Similarly, De Oliveira et al. (2023) and Lin (2023) emphasized the pivotal role of environmental sustainability and social responsibility in shaping ethical decision-making processes for businesses. Expanding on these findings, Priyanka et al. (2024), Raji et al. (2024), and Strycharz and Segijn (2024) highlighted emerging challenges in the digital era, including privacy concerns, data security breaches, and the ethical implications of consumer manipulation in online marketing practices. Moreover, research by Martin et al. (2024) shed light on the ethical dilemmas surrounding corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives, emphasizing the importance of genuine commitment versus mere green washing tactics. Additionally, studies by Chong and Patwa (2023) and Shabbir et al. (2019) delved into the ethical dimensions of advertising and sales practices, emphasizing the ethical responsibilities of marketers in maintaining transparency and integrity in their communications with consumers.

Exploring the realm of marketing ethics reveals a tapestry of common ethical dilemmas identified by researchers across the globe. Hoarding emerges as a prevalent issue, spotlighted by scholars like Anaza and Nowlin (2017), Hansman et al. (2020), Li et al. (2023), and Sheu and Kuo (2020), each unveiling its nuances in various countries. The problem of price fixation also looms large, with studies by Brander and Ross (2006), Clark and Houde (2013), Jones (2010), and Kim et al. (2023) shedding light on its existence across different contexts. Delving deeper, engaging in contraband activities like smuggling surfaces as another ethical quagmire, as evidenced by Fougère (2000), Kleemans (2007), Michalkó et al. (2022), and Schneider (2000). Tax evasion, a persistent concern, has garnered attention from researchers such as Ahmed (2012), Fedotov and Nevzorova (2020), Kristianto et al. (2021), and Mocanu et al. (2021). Exaggerated promotion emerges as a contentious issue, according to findings by Ailawadi (2001), Beck (2014), Ekinci et al. (2024), and Hitsch et al. (2021), unveiling its ethical implications in diverse settings. Additionally, ethical dilemmas like those identified by Akomea-Frimpong and Andoh (2020), Richard (2023), Yi et al. (2022), and Zhou et al. (2022) underscore the complexity of ethical decision-making in marketing. The unethical practice of selling expired products, as highlighted by Akkas et al. (2018), Akkaş and Sahoo (2020), and Tat et al. (2020), resonates as a common ethical quandary. Finally, tainting emerges as a widespread dilemma, as indicated by research from Collins (1993), Maloni and Brown (2006), Tan et al. (2018), Thumala et al. (2011), and Xiu and Klein (2010).

Despite the extensive global research on marketing ethical problems, only a handful of studies in developing countries have delved deeply into this complex terrain. Notably, Abiodun and Oyeniyi (2011) and Ononogbo et al. (2016) conducted groundbreaking investigations in Nigeria, uncovering a multitude of ethical dilemmas and unethical practices. Abiodun and Oyeniyi (2011) identified a range of ethical challenges including price fixing, immorality, forced labor, discrimination in employment, economic espionage, piracy and counterfeiting, and corruption and bribery. On the other hand, Ononogbo et al. (2016) shed light on prevalent unethical practices such as padding expense accounts, seeking reimbursement for questionable or non-existent business expenses, taking business property or materials for personal use, soliciting or offering kickbacks, and engaging in price fixing.

In conclusion, it is evident that there is a notable lack of research, particularly in developing countries, where the wholesale and retail sector is often neglected. While extensive research on marketing ethics has been conducted in developed or wealthy nations, there remains a scarcity of studies in developing countries (Al Halbusi et al., 2022). Moreover, the emphasis in research conducted in developed countries often lies on various sectors, neglecting the nuanced challenges faced by specific industries such as wholesale and retail (Sharma & Sharma, 2014). By delving deeper into the ethical intricacies of the wholesale and retail sector in Ethiopia, our study aims to fill this gap, providing invaluable insights into the unique ethical challenges faced by businesses operating in this domain.

2.5. Marketing code of conduct/standard

Ethical codes of conduct consist of principles and guidelines regulating individual and organizational conduct (Kelly et al., 2021; Nguyen & Crossan, 2022; Ugoani, 2023). They serve as moral guides, guaranteeing ethical behavior and decision-making in various contexts, ensuring compliance with legal requirements, and upholding moral standards (Fatemi et al., 2020; López Jiménez et al., 2021; Zhang & Fukami, 2024). However, ethical codes of conduct exhibit variances across sectors and countries, reflecting unique cultural, economic, and regulatory landscapes (Adeleye et al., 2020; Böhm et al., 2022). These discrepancies are evident in the diverse priorities and expectations of stakeholders within different industries and regions (Emeka-Okoli et al., 2024). Moreover, ethical standards upheld in one country may not fully align with those in another due to variations in cultural norms and legal systems (Ermasova, 2021). In developing countries, lacking explicit market protocols and facing socio-economic challenges, ethical frameworks often operate within informal structures shaped by communal values, trust-based relationships, and traditional practices (Singhania & Saini, 2023). In these contexts, ethical conduct is often influenced by informal codes embedded in societal norms rather than formalized regulations (McKinney et al., 2010).

3. Methodology

3.1. Methods

A qualitative method is utilized in this study based on interview data (See Appendix for interview guide). This approach warrants exploring contemporary issues such as marketing ethics, which is a recent phenomenon in the study context (Elifneh, 2020; Yin, 2003). Besides, in addition to the contemporary nature of the study, a qualitative inquiry in marketing research is becoming popular (Gummesson, 2005). As noted earlier, the major premise of this qualitative study is that business/marketing ethics practices and dilemmas might vary from context to context, and studies on the subject in the developing world are interesting because the ethical dilemmas in developing countries could be different from that in the developed world (Elifneh, 2020; Jamali & Karam, 2018). In view of this, employing grounded theory design was found to be appropriate to avoid importing preconceived ideas and imposing them on this study (Charmaz, 2006). Accordingly, grounded theory also involves delaying literature review, and 'the reasoning behind this abstinence from existing literature, essentially related to the desire to allow categories to emerge naturally from the empirical data during analysis, uninhibited by extant theoretical frameworks and associated hypotheses' (Dunne, 2011, p. 114). Then, the review of literature follows the emergent-grounded theory; and doing so is important not only for academic honesty but in order to demonstrate how the study builds on and contributes to extant knowledge within the field (Dunne, 2011; Stern, 2007).

The qualitative instrument utilized was interviews with few direct interview questions, that are mostly expected to focus on exploring ethical problems faced by marketing practitioners, the status of ethical standards in their respective sectors and/or other sectors that they are familiar with, and the availability of ethical codes of conduct in their respective organizations (see Kavali et al., 2001; Sarma, 2007). More specifically, Kavali et al. (2001, p. 92) asserted that 'several authors conducting qualitative research on marketing ethics have based their interviews on one to five topics'. of course, this was further accompanied by certain probes. Accordingly, the interview schedule (Appendix) is adopted from the commonly asked questions in qualitative studies exploring marketing ethics from other prominent researchers in the field (e.g. Kavali et al., 2001; Sarma, 2007). As stated by the developers, to mitigate bias in response to the interview guide, (i.e. enhance validity), the questions in the interview guide are stated in a way to 'desensitize' the issue because of the obvious sensitivity of the subject of ethics itself. This desensitization is very likely to convince marketing practitioners that the aim of this study is not to isolate marketing and criticize it as unethical.

3.2. Participants

The participants in this study were marketing practitioners (marketing managers, salespeople/retail personnel, and retail/wholesale owner-managers) from the retail and wholesale sector in Addis Ababa. 35 interviews were conducted with respondents drawn from pharmacies and drug stores, convenience stores/shops and super markets, building materials stores, gas stations, hair salons, cosmetics shops, mobile phone and accessories centers, car spare part stores, garment and shoe stores, and electronics shops. Such retail and wholesale establishments have always been considered as the backbone of any country's economy (Arora, 2015). And apparently, the size of respondents for qualitative study depended on 'the concept of 'saturation', which is the point at which no new information is observed in the data (Guest et al., 2006, p. 1). Willingness to participate in the study and some knowledge of the subject of the study were the main criteria to identify the participants/interviewees. Against this criteria, it was managed to conduct 35 interviews with respondents with a similar age range, 35–45; and 32 respondents were men and 3 were women. The data showed no major difference in results when examined in terms of age and gender dimensions. Besides, ethical approval from the Institutional Review Board Committee of the College of Business and Economics of Addis Ababa University was obtained for the study. Additionally, verbal consent was obtained from all participants after informing them that their responses would solely be used for academic research and that their personal information would remain confidential.

3.3. Analysis approach

Most researches in the field of marketing ethics apply a descriptive approach (Fukukawa, 2003; Javalgi & Russel, 2015). As such, the qualitative analysis applied inductive, data-driven narrative presentations of the themes that emerged from the data. This data-driven (themes grounded in the data) analysis is understood as an approach for detecting, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It involves analytic practices, such as sorting and sifting through the data set to find comparable words and/or links, which has been described as a practice shared by other qualitative research approaches (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Then, the themes are presented in a narrative form – a narrative presentation of results, which is often described as a rich and diverse enterprise as several typologies of narrative analysis exist (Georgakopoulou, 2006; Riessman, 2005). This is also in line with Braun and Clarke (2006) view point that narrative analysis can also be applied in every qualitative design study, in which narratives are grouped into a similar thematic category based on the data-driven results, which will eventually contribute to demonstrating empirical findings of contemporary issues (e.g. Marketing ethics dilemmas) in diverse contexts such as from a developing country context and theory development.

The data were coded manually. Coding data manually by writing notes on the interview texts being analyzed is a common approach in qualitative studies (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Saldaña, 2013). Such manual coding

Table 1. Coding to identify unethical practices in the studied sector.

Interviewer question	Participant's response	Coding
Would you please describe the most difficult ethical or moral problems that come up in the everyday work of marketing professionals in their capacity as business people?	There are numerous ethical concerns in the sector. To begin with, hoarding is a very serious concern ….	Hoarding
	They are many and concerning, for example, we are faced with 'price fixing' issues,	Price fixing
	We have plenty of them ranging from tainting to that of tax evasion	Tainting, tax evasion

and analysis technique is widely used in the domain of qualitative research (Bogdan & Bilken, 1982; Maher et al., 2018) and it is still considered valuable (Engle, 2015; Laing, 2019; Parameswaran et al., 2020*)*. In other words, it is maintained that manual coding is essential in qualitative analysis, offering depth and flexibility unmatched by automated tools (Khan & Razzaque, 2023; Kuckartz, 2014; Syed & Nelson, 2015). It allows researchers to identify subtle patterns and themes overlooked by software (Nelson et al., 2021), making it the most widely used technique in thematic analysis (Neuendorf, 2018; Williams & Moser, 2019). Manual coding enables intimate engagement with data, fostering nuanced insights (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018).

Accordingly, the researchers read the interview transcripts very carefully and immersed themselves in them to get familiar with the data to identify respondent's expressions that particularly explain unethical marketing practices. In other words, the data were coded manually by reading the hard copies of transcripts using highlighters. Butterfield et al. (2009, p. 273) assert, that 'the minimum participation rate needed to form a viable category is whether 25% of participants identified incidents that fit into a particular category'. In doing so, the theoretical saturation signified iteration between data, concepts, and themes ended (Cassell & Symon, 2004). Further, in applying this analysis procedure, it is usually necessary to present instances of the story line (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). This is also in line with Braun and Clarke (2006) viewpoint that it is important to exhibit how the analysis is done. And doing so enhances 'the objectivity of coding processes' (Hannah & Lautsch, 2010, p. 17). The following are particular examples of what the researchers did in the coding to identify unethical practices in the studied sector (see Table 1).

4. Results

The present study attempted to redress the lack of empirical evidence by way of addressing the following objectives:

- Identify ethical problems that marketing practitioners in the retail and wholesale sector face.
- Identify types of ethical standards and codes are available in the sector.
- Examine whether marketing practitioners think that ethical beliefs at different levels are important. And why or why not?

Before presenting the results of the study, it is important to note that even though the empirical study gathered interview data from several retail and wholesale (sub) sectors (pharmacies, convenience stores, etc.), no attempt was made to undertake (sub) sector-specific data analysis. This is because such an approach would be futile as the respondents – in a move to stimulate honest responses – were asked to express their views in terms of the marketing profession in general, and not their particular (sub) sectors. And almost all respondents shared ethical dilemmas/problems that they dealt with in the past, or that are noticeable in other firms and (sub) sectors as well. It is only the segments of the interviews dealing with corporate policy instruments addressed by the respondents' organizations. Such an analytical approach is commonly used in marketing ethics studies, involving controversial issues to encourage participation and honesty on the part of respondents (e.g. Kavali et al., 2001).

4.1. Ethical problems

Unearthing the ethical problems in the wholesale and retail sector of the study's context was the focus of the first research question of the study: 'what are the ethical problems that marketing practitioners (wholesale and retail personnel, owners of wholesale/retail businesses) in the sector face? Thus, in order to explore the most common ethical problems in the sector, respondents were asked the following question as provided in the interview guide: 'in all professions (e.g. law, medicine, education, accounting, marketing, etc.), managers are exposed to at least some situations that pose a moral or ethical problem. Would you please describe the most difficult ethical or moral problems that come up in the everyday work of marketing professionals in their capacity as business people?

Accordingly, 11 major themes/categories of ethical problems emerged as critical in this empirical study. Two of them are emergent – (1) intentionally bewildering consumers not to try products from other stores (trapping); (2) 'Look' or appearance based pricing. And the rest nine are similar to priori themes – (3) hoarding, (4) price fixing, (5) engaging in contraband activities/smuggling; (6) Tax evasion; (7) exploiting customers weaknesses/ignorance; (8) exaggerated promotion; (9) selling fake products as original; (10) selling expired products; and (11) tainting. As stated earlier) the formation of these categories/themes is as per the guideline that 'the minimum participation rate needed to form a viable category is whether 25% of participants identified incidents that fit into a particular category'. Butterfield et al. (2009, p. 273). The findings related to each of the identified themes (ethical problems) are explained below.

4.2. Intentionally bewildering consumers (trapping)

Intentionally bewildering consumers ('trapping') is a striking finding as an emerging ethical dilemma. This ethical problem of bewildering consumers happens mostly in busy retail streets that host several shops/stores arranged in a line, one next to another such as in Mercato (the largest open market in Africa), Haya-Hulet, Piassa, Cathedral, and Urael areas in Addis Ababa, among others. The issue is widely seen among stores that sell household electronics equipment such as televisions, heaters, lumps, refrigerators, washing machines, and stoves. The main goal of this 'bewildering/confusing/trapping' practice is to make the customer lose trust and doubt the next store and even the very same product that the customer talked about in price and quality in a given store. Just a moment before one leaves the given store to compare price and quality by looking around other stores, the seemingly 'abandoned' store/shop owner tells the outgoing buyer in a cynical and disappointing way that he/she may end up in the wrong product. This is mainly to discourage and trap the customer from comparing prices of the very same product by visiting other stores. Electronic store personnel stated the following:

> *It is common to bewilder/confuse buyers. What sellers want is just to trap the buyer. We do not need him to go anywhere else. I also do it, and all the salespersons around here do it. The seller in a particular shop just expects the potential buyer to buy it from me without comparing prices and other features in other stores; otherwise, we leave the potential buyer with a dilemma the moment he leaves my store with a simple, but confusing derogatory remark about products in other stores.*

4.3. Consumer 'look' or appearance based pricing

The study identified this as an emergent, intriguing ethical dilemma. And how this works is very concerning. The ethical problem related to 'look' or 'appearance' based pricing is that a particular seller keeps the price of a given product higher or lower based on the appearance of the customer, i.e. if the customer 'looks' like wealthy/rich, the seller charges him/her a higher price. For example, one respondent stated the following:

> *We tend to charge clients based on their appearance. If I have the feeling that the buyer is rich or looks rich, it is common to charge him a high price. So, the price depends on my impression of the spending/paying power of the buyer judged by his appearance (Retailer in a Pharmacy/drug store)*

4.4. Hoarding

All respondents identified hoarding as the most widely practiced ethical problem in the sector. The findings show that hiding commodities (hoarding) for future sale by speculating a price hike or by deliberately causing a shortage of commodities is a common practice in the wholesale and retail sector. Findings indicate that by hoarding products wholesalers and retailers intentionally trigger scarcity of the needed commodities. And immediately the price of those badly needed commodities (cooking oil, sugar, etc.) gets higher and the traders begin to sell them for the new, higher price. The findings show that as long as the commodities/products are durable, the traders choose to sell them later than sooner as hoarding makes them more valuable. They are also using this technique as a 'strategy' to generate higher profit. A marketing manager in a wholesale facility stated the following:

> *We do hoarding, and everybody does hoarding, and it is even considered as a wise business strategy, and nobody among us considers it as a wrong doing. If I do not do it, others will still do it, and I cannot manage to compete and survive without doing things in the same way as many others are doing it.*

A retail employee in a gas station also added the following:

> *We are discussing the obvious. It is our product and we decide when to sell it and when no to. As you know the government examines fuel prices on a monthly basis and adjusts them, in most cases with higher prices. The price never went down. So, two weeks or a week before the end of each month we keep our product and wait for a few days to sell it for a higher price.*

4.5. Price fixing

Another serious ethical concern that the study identified is price fixing. This happens even in an organized and explicit manner. Findings show that retailers/wholesalers that are operating in the same business street or commercial buildings, discuss and agree to set selling prices. And any shop owner (retailer or wholesaler) that tries to sell similar products at a lower price will be threatened by powerful individuals (who themselves are retailers/wholesalers) that monitor the implementation of the agreed-upon price. The researcher also observed an incident involving a retailer from a building materials store threatening another retailer of similar products for trying to sell the items for a lower price. The researcher over heard one of the 'powerful individuals' intimidating/threatening a particular store keeper:

> *I told you to sell everything for the price we fixed, why are you spoiling our business by quoting prices lower? You are going to have trouble with us, if you do not abide by it.*

The researcher probed further with the 'intimidated' retailer/store keeper, and he answered that:

> *Sorry, I have to just abide by and sell it for the higher price fixed by him/them. Otherwise, as you can see he may insult me and threaten me. They constantly come and check* (Building/Construction Materials store)

Besides, the study also found out that those who are in charge of monitoring the 'price fixing' have two motives. The first one is they want to sell their materials for a higher price than it should actually be as determined by competition, and secondly, they threaten others who keep prices lower because those who are committed to the 'fixed price' fear that they would lose customers to other sellers that tend to sell for a lower, competitive price. Findings revel that whenever the 'price fixing' scheme is in place, those wholesalers/retailers that are regarded as 'powerful' coordinate and monitor its implementation.

4.6. Engaging in contraband activities/smuggling

This category involves engaging in illegal trading activities: contraband/smuggling. Findings show that, particularly, those wholesalers and retailers of electronics, mobile phones, and automobile spare parts smuggle products from border areas. The motive for this is to evade tax and to be able to sell the products for lower prices compared with the prices offered by competitors. Retailers from electronics stores and mobile phone shops stated that:

> *Most of us in this line of business (electronics), engage in smuggling. Some even go far away to the border of Somalia and Kenya, to smuggle the electronics equipment that you see in the stores. And it is widely done in this area (Retailer at electronics stores)*

> *All the shops that you see here smuggle mobile phones from abroad. This is the reason why the prices of original mobile phones are relatively lower here. Otherwise, prices are pretty much higher in stores that brought the phones through the established legal importing channel (Retailer at a Mobile Phone shop)*

4.7. Tax evasion

This category involves unethical practices that are particularly used to evade tax. The findings of the study showed that tax evasion is mainly done by avoiding issuing invoices so that the wholesalers and retailers doing this will manage to report limited annual profits and this will result in low tax jurisdiction. Besides, it is even found out that it is very common for wholesalers and retailers to hint buyers to take products without an invoice, and as encouragement, the wholesalers/retailers offer them a bit of a discount. This ethical problem was mentioned by the majority of the respondents. According to one marketing manager in a very large garments wholesaling facility in the suburb of Addis Ababa, retailers just buy enormous amounts (full of trucks) of garments (T-shirts, pants, and underwear) from them and the owner of the wholesale facility does not issue any invoice for transactions involving millions of Ethiopian Birr (Ethiopian currency). She added that the retailers too will later sell it to customers without issuing invoices.

4.8. Exploiting customers weaknesses/ignorance

The other ethical problem that the study discovered was exploiting consumers' weaknesses/ignorance. This occurs by misrepresentation of product attributes such as quality, reliability, and price of the product. In this case, when a given retailer or seller recognizes that the customer is oblivious about the features of the specific product that he/she wants to buy, the retailer may present the product as original. And not only that, the retailer/seller will persuade the customer to buy the product usually at a higher price than it should be but the product has inferior quality and less durability. A retailer in an automobile spare parts store stated the following:

> *Customers, who cannot identify the difference between the original and counterfeit parts, or those who are first-time buyers or those who lack a certain understanding of product features are like an easy prey for spare part dealers. They just sell and fit in the wrong (inferior and sometimes worn-out) product to the customer.*

4.9. Exaggerated promotion

This category involves over stating the quality and dependability of products, and the majority of respondents mentioned this as a critical issue. This can even be done by altering the origin of the product and exaggerating the value of the product. Findings show that wholesalers and retailers tend to disseminate wrong and exaggerated information about products. Respondents mentioned instances such as 'it is the best product ever and imported from Turkey' or 'the product is from Taiwan' or 'it is from Vietnam', while in actuality 'everything is from China, and with poor quality'. A wholesaler stated the following:

> *No product leaves wholesale facilities with the label – 'made in China'. But, almost 95% percent of importers import the products that you see in the market from China. We instead claim as if the products are from origins that are popular here such as Turkey or Vietnam.*

A retailer in a garment/clothing and shoe store stated that

> *We always say it is Turskish Shoes or Veitnamise dress or a Taiwan Jacket. We do not say it is from China; as a matter of fact, it is all from China. Of course, some clients challenge us by reading the label that says it is from China. But, we say it is a Chinese company based in Turkey or Vietnam or Taiwan.*

4.10. Selling fake products as original

This is keenly indicated by respondents from spare part sellers for cars. Starting from lubricants and oils to internal spare parts of cars and vehicles, most items are sold out as original products mainly from Japan, while in reality most of the spare parts are manufactured outside of Japan.

4.11. Selling expired products

Selling expired products or faking their expiry dates is another critical ethical concern that the study discovered. Findings indicate that expired products and products whose safety is not confirmed are sold out in several stores and even in big, popular supermarkets. Respondents referred especially to canned items (canned food items) for illustration. They have also shared a story of a famous supermarket in town that was caught selling expired products by falsifying the actual expiry date of such items and seemingly extending the expiry date of items by stamping new expiry dates. A marketing manager in a supermarket stated the following

> *There are clandestine facilities in the town, especially around Merkato (the largest open market in Africa) that specialize in stamping new expiry dates by erasing previous ones. What they do is stamp new expiry dates on various canned products that have already expired. And there are several wholesale and retail stores that collaborate in this.*

4.12. Tainting

Tainting or mixing edible products with harmful items and chemicals was also found to be a serious ethical problem. Findings show that there are widespread tainting activities in the wholesale and retail sector with instances involving mixing food items such as berbere (Ethiopian spicy pepper) with clay or other; injera (Ethiopian pancake) with lime; butter with bananas, honey with sugar, and edible oil with grease like liquid materials. A retailer in a convenience store shared the following:

> *These days, what customers say, jokingly, is give me a spice (Berbere) with less clay or give me Injera with less lime. Otherwise, the problem is very concerning. You cannot find items of this sort, which are not mixed with something.*

4.12.1. Availability of ethical standards and codes

Ethical standards or codes of conduct are statements of the required behaviors and responsibilities of an organization or association that contribute to the welfare of its stakeholders. They usually focus on ethical or socially responsible issues and are an example of the self-regulation of a company or an industry (Benn & Bolton, 2011). Speaking of the issue of whether ethical standards and codes of conduct are available in the studied sector, the result of the present empirical study was so daunting. Most respondents openly shared that they are either totally unaware of the importance of ethical standards, or expressed that there exists no ethical codes or standards in their respective companies, nor they are aware whether such forms of codes/standards are available in the sectoral/industrial level. Worse, several respondents even rejected the idea of having ethical codes while the reality on the ground is that not many sellers in the sector are ethically obliged and the thrust for profit is a priority. Findings show that that in the studies sector money does really come before ethics and people. This discovery is particularly unnerving. This is because, in a context like this study was conducted, earlier studies asserted that enforcing strict ethical guidelines in developing countries is challenging (Vives, 2008). And this is attributed to the fact that many areas of ethical behavior are simply beyond the ability of the law to control, and hence there is a need to rely on managers' ethical decision-making to achieve ethical objectives (Hess, 2006). But, this did not happen; for the most part, the marketing practitioners in the studied sector are not ethically obliged. Hopes were high that businesses could still rely on codes of conduct to ensure responsible corporate behavior even in contexts where there are no laws (Rahim, 2013). Contrary to such expectations, findings of this study revealed that the very notion of having codes of conduct by companies (wholesalers & retailers) is very much downplayed, and this is a worrisome finding.

4.12.2. Do marketing practitioners think that ethical beliefs at different levels are important? And why or why not?

With respect to the issue of whether marketing practitioners think that ethical beliefs are important; no encouraging result emerged. Most respondents stated that unless there is a level ground compelling businesses to adhere to ethical standards, it is difficult to behave in an ethical way in the face of fierce competition in the market place.

5. Discussions and conclusions

5.1. Discussions

This study, which mainly focused on exploring marketing ethics dilemmas in the wholesale and retail sector in a developing country context (Ethiopia), uncovered eleven alarming ethical dilemmas. Two of them are emerging. The first one is intentionally bewildering consumers (trapping), and the second is consumer 'Look' or appearance based pricing. Intentionally bewildering consumers (trapping) happens when the retailer/seller uses certain vivid defamatory words and expressions that put a customer in utter doubt and confusion leading to losing trust in other stores. Whereas, consumer 'Look' or appearance based pricing unfolds as a seller keeps adjusting the prices of a product (making it higher or lower) based on how wealthy or poor one looks as a consumer. The other ethical dilemmas that this study discovered are similar to priori themes – hoarding; price fixing; engaging in contraband activities/smuggling; tax evasion; exploiting customers weaknesses/ignorance; exaggerated promotion; selling fake products as original; selling expired products; and tainting. The findings confirm that ethical problems are serious issues in the study context. This also corresponds to assertions of earlier studies from different contexts that ethical problems in retail and wholesale sectors as well as several other industries continue to occur and remain critical (Limbu & Huhmann, 2022; Sonia, 2011; Sheetal et al., 2023).

In addition, some of the ethical problems that this study unearthed are similar to ethical problems that other researchers discovered in different contexts. For instance, hoarding was identified by Hansman et al. (2020), Li et al. (2023), and Sheu and Kuo (2020). Price fixing was reported by Abiodun and Oyeniyi (2011) and Ononogbo et al. (2016). Contraband activities/smuggling were noted by Fougère (2000), Kleemans (2007), and Michalkó et al. (2022). Kristianto et al. (2021) and Mocanu et al. (2021) noted tax evasion. Ailawadi (2001), Beck (2014), and Ekinci et al. (2024) exhibited exaggerated promotion. Similarly, selling fake products as original was informed by Abiodun & Oyeniyi (2011). Akkas et al. (2018), Akkaş and Sahoo (2020), and Tat et al. (2020) exhibited selling expired products as an ethical problems. Further, tainting was documented by Collins (1993), Maloni and Brown (2006), and Tan et al. (2018). Groß and Vriens (2019) noted tendencies to exploit customers' weaknesses/ignorance by way of misrepresenting the value and quality of products.

Yet, some of the ethical problems that this study identified (e.g. tainting, tax evasion, and deliberately bewildering consumers) are beyond ethical dilemmas and represent acts of crime. This shows that there are diverse and sometimes organized crime-like forms of ethical dilemmas in the study context that deserve the attention of law-enforcing entities and advocates of ethical behavior to control and rectify unethical practices and spread the knowledge and importance of implementing ethical practice/behavior in the study context. Further, as per the findings of this study, almost all the notable pillars/elements of marketing ethics (Vitell et al., 1993) were obliterated in the wholesale and retail sector. The findings of the study revealed that norms related to price, distribution, information disclosure, product and promotion, and general honesty and integrity are seriously annihilated.

Moreover, speaking of the availability of ethical standards or codes of conduct scholars (e.g. Bantekas, 2004; Garriga & Melé, 2004; Sun et al., 2011) uphold that modern-day managers and marketers should be morally bound and engage in ethical decision making. However, this empirical study found out that in the study context being ethically obliged is not seriously thought of, and even there is an utter tendency to undermine the importance of having ethical standards and codes. Thus, the study concludes that a serious effort is needed to enhance awareness about ethical decision-making in the study's context. Similarly, based on the notion that having ethical values/codes provides a better bastion for ethical decision-making (Crook, 2005; Maon et al., 2010; Vives, 2008); the study explored whether the marketing practitioners in the studied sector think that ethical beliefs at different levels are important? Nonetheless, the result of this empirical study found out that in this study setting that takes unethical practice as a business strategy itself, expecting businesses to behave in the most ethical way possible is so naïve. And, the study concludes that there must be a level ground in terms of strict regulations demanding marketers/businesses to adhere to ethical standards. This is, of course, in line with McBarnet's (2007, p. 27) recommendation that policies and laws could provide a level ground and 'would apply to and be enforceable against all business, not just those companies which voluntarily choose or are pressed by brand vulnerability to adopt it. It would be fairer, making a level playing field for business, it would have legitimacy, based on and providing due process of law, and most importantly it would be more effective'. So, given this, the present study concludes that while reluctance to ethical practice and applying unethical practice as a business strategy for higher profitability is very evident in the study context, concerned regulatory bodies and stakeholders should craft and reinforce the law requiring ethical practices. Vogel (2006) argued that laws are important as laws (government regulations) could have a greater influence and effectiveness in ethical practices than other options such as business self-regulation pressures from NGOs and market pressures.

6. Conclusions

As discussed in the preceding sections, this study examined and exhibited marketing ethics dilemmas in the wholesale and retail sector in a developing country context. As stated in the preceding section, all together, the study unveiled eleven ethical dilemmas; from which two are emerging (intentionally bewildering consumers and the other is consumer 'Look' or appearance based pricing). And the rest nine are similar to priori themes (hoarding; price fixing; engaging in contraband activities/smuggling; tax evasion; exploiting customers weaknesses/ignorance; exaggerated promotion; selling fake products as original; selling expired products; and tainting). Apart from exhibiting this evidence, this study also has theoretical and empirical contributions as well as managerial implications.

6.1. Theoretical and empirical contribution

The study has theoretical and empirical/contextual contributions. Theoretically, the study introduces two perspectives as market ethical dilemmas – bewildering consumers (trapping); and consumer 'Look' or appearance based pricing. These ethical dilemmas are different from ethical dilemmas discussed in previous literature. Besides, its empirical contribution is that it provided empirical evidence pertaining to marketing ethics from less charted territories; and this helps to extend the subject of marketing ethics to less charted territories. Hence, this empirical study could be a contribution to fill the knowledge gap on marketing ethics from this part of the globe.

6.2. Managerial and practical implications

The findings of this study provide useful inputs for managers/practitioners, policymakers, and other relevant stakeholders regarding the nature, status, and types of marketing ethics (dilemmas) in the study setting. The findings of this study provide useful insight for marketing managers and practitioners of the sector to re-think the way they do business, as the identified ethical problems are distressing. Besides, policy makers will take up useful inputs from this study to design certain remedies to redress the alarming ethical issues in the studied sector. All told, a concerted effort is needed from various stakeholders to enhance awareness about ethical marketing and/or decision-making in the study's context.

6.3. Limitations of the study and future research perspectives

Like any research endeavor, this study has limitations that can serve as opportunities for further investigation. Firstly, it is important to note that wholesaling and retailing involve multiple stakeholders beyond marketing practitioners and store owners, including customers, employees, government, local communities, and suppliers, among others. Therefore, future studies may benefit from incorporating the perspectives of all relevant stakeholders. Furthermore, to develop a comprehensive framework that illustrates ethical issues on a national scale, it would be valuable for future research to explore ethical concerns in various sectors across the country.

Consent to participate

Verbal informed consent for participation in the study has been obtained. Due care was taken to avoid plagiarism for ethical reasons. The respondent's information was handled confidentially.

Consent for publication

The authors transfer the copyright of this article to the journal to process it on behalf of the author.

Authors' contributions

'YAE', involved in the conception and design, and, Analysis and interpretation of the data, 'TAW', is involved in the drafting and revision, and editing, data analysis and final revision, 'YAA', is involved in analysis, reviewing and final cross-checking. The authors agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved.

Disclosure of interest

The authors declare that there are no relevant financial or non-financial competing interests to report.

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Data availability statement

The authors agree to make data and materials supporting the results or analyses presented in their paper available upon reasonable request.

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Appendix. Interview guide

1. In all professions (e.g. law, medicine, education, accounting, marketing, etc.), managers are exposed to at least some situations that pose a moral or ethical problem. Would you please describe the most difficult ethical or moral problems that come up in the everyday work of marketing professionals in their capacity as business people?
2. Do you think ethical beliefs at different levels are important? And why or why not?
3. What criteria do you use for making the right decisions?
4. Do you have formulated codes? Standardized ethical practices?
5. What control methods are used to make (ethical) decisions within the organization? (Adopted from Kavali et al., 2001; Sarma, 2007)