Conversations of Ethics Between Consumers: a Hermeneutic Study

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ABSTRACT
There has been a growing body of research on consumer ethics. This body of research includes theoretical work, model and scale development and empirical testing. This literature, however, has been almost exclusively positivistic and quantitative. Through a hermeneutic analysis of actual, naturally-occurring consumer discussions, this present research explains the dynamics of how consumers explain their ethical views, the role of emotions—anger, frustration and humor—in this discussion, and the implications for further research.

INTRODUCTION

“Relatively few studies have examined ethical issues in the marketplace from the perspective of consumer ethics, but consumers are a major participant in the business process and not considering them in ethics research can result in an incomplete understanding of that process. An improved understanding of why some consumers engage in unethical behavior could be helpful in ultimately curtailing many questionable practices.” (Vitell 2003, p. 33)

Consumer ethics is an important, and yet only moderately researched area of marketing. In fact, the list of active consumer ethics researchers is short. Despite this, the past fifteen years has seen a growth of research. As such, a respectable level of understanding is developing through theoretical and empirical efforts.

Empirical studies, however, have been almost exclusively positivistic in nature and quantitative in structure. While this positivistic/quantitative research has provided important insight into the development and use of consumer ethics, it relies largely on questionnaires—and therefore on a consumer’s memory and interpretation.

This paper examines an actual conversation between 62 people about an ethical consumption issue: whether it is acceptable to receive, convert and view satellite service without paying. The conversation was naturally-occurring (on the internet), and not influenced by the researcher. Using hermeneutic methods, the conversation is analyzed, and new insight into consumer ethics is revealed. This method is particularly interesting because of its ability to deal with the multiple participants in the ethically conversation.

LITERATURE REVIEW
As several articles note, research on consumer ethics grew largely out of business ethics research, and has grown significantly over the past two decades (c.f. Bagozzi 1995; Swaiden, Vitell, Rose, and Gilbert 2006; Vitell 2003). This research has largely focused on developing and extending consumer ethics scales including a large body of cross international and multi-national studies.

While there are three theoretical models on marketing ethics (Terrell and Gresham 1985; Hunt and Vitell 1986; Hunt and Vitell 1993; Trevino 1986), the Hunt-Vitell (H-V) model is the most adaptable to consumer ethics and dominates the subsequent literature.

The H-V model suggests that individuals consider the ethics of possible options given a specific problem or opportunity. These options are then subject to deontological or teleological evaluation. Deontological evaluation is based on an individuals beliefs—evaluating right from wrong. Teleological evaluations are based on an estimation of the possible good and bad occurring from the option, as a function of the likelihood of the good and bad outcomes occurring (Beauchamp and Bowie 1988). The model acknowledges that both deontological and teleological processing are likely to occur (Hunt and Vitell 1986; Hunt and Vitell 1993).

International studies have examined consumers in the Arab nations (Al-Khatib, Dobie, and Vitell 1995; Al-Khatib, Vitell, and Rawwas 1997; Al-Khatib, Robertson, Al-Habib, and Vitell 2002; Rawwas 2001; Rawwas, Vitell, and Al-Khatib 1994), Asia (Chan, Wong, & Jueng 1998; Rawwas 2001; Singhapakdi, Rawwas, Marta, and Ahmed 1999; Thong and Yap 1998), Europe (Polonsky, Brito, Pinto, and Higgs-Kleyn 2001; Rawwas 1996; Rawwas 2001; Rawwas, Patzer and Vitell 1998) and Australia (Rawwas 2001; Rawwas, Patzer, and Vitell 1998).

Methodological Dominance
While the growing understanding of consumer ethics is clearly important, the dominance of positivistic/quantitative analysis is worth noting. Analyzing published articles examined in Vitell’s (2003) synthesis article, for example, highlights the limited diversity in research methods in published consumer ethics research. All used questionnaires to collect data, and data analysis was limited to ANOVA, MANOVA, MANCOVA, regression analysis, conjoint analysis, factor analysis, discriminant analysis and correlation analysis. While this is not a problem, it does leave the door open for a different research perspective.

Taking a phenomenological perspective on the subject allows several issues from past research to be explored, including Vitell’s (2003) call for deeper understanding of the interaction of individuals and the complexities of the deontological and teleological processes. Phenomenological methods are particularly useful in points of interaction between individuals. While previous research has examined internal processing of ethical decisions, an examination of externalized ethical reasoning can provide further insight.

This is consistent with Demuijnck’s (2009) call for additional hermeneutic research in ethics. It is also consistent with the consumer ethics research of Shoham et al (2008) in which they combine traditional quantitative survey data with the qualitative analysis of individual ethical views.

METHODOLOGY
While hermeneutics was established as a framework for analyzing the Bible, at a more basic level, hermeneutics is based on the core belief that understanding exists within language. In fact, many of the leading hermeneutic scholars use the analogy of translation in describing the role of hermeneutic analysis. (c.f. Arnold and Fischer 1994; Gadamer 1975; Grondin 1994; Grondin 1995; Descombes 1991; Bleicher 1980).

Grondin (1995) concurs: “hermeneutics strives to understand what is said by going back to its motivation, or its context.” (Grondin 1995, p. ix)

Data Collection
This study began with a simple research question: What can the language of consumer conversations and their interaction about the ethics involved in a consumption decision add to our understanding of the consumer ethics?

To answer this question, the internet newsgroups were used. Newsgroups, also called discussion groups or the usenet, are forums where individuals can post questions and comments. Later, other individuals can read the comments and add to the conversation thread. There are thousands of newsgroups covering every conceivable topic.
One of the key benefits of using the newsgroups as a source of data is the fact that Google provides searchable access to a database of billions of messages dating back to 1981. Further, it is possible to follow a conversation with great detail—this includes the speaker’s online identity, the order and structure of discussion, and delays in the discussion. The use of the internet as a source of ethics research data is supported by Chatzidakis and Mitussio (2007).

For this research project, a single conversation was used that began with the basic question: is it worthwhile stealing satellite service? Yet the exact wording of the question was broad enough to spark immediate discussion. This is a naturally occurring question and conversation. The text was not influenced by the researcher—instead it was found after the conversation was complete.

QUESTION:
Subject: Stealing Cable or DSS Service-Is It Worth It?

I’ve been reading posts here about stealing DSS and/or cable TV service, dead H cards, etc. Is this really all worth the trouble? I have digital cable from Time Warner, and with all the extra channels, premium channels, etc., I’m subscribing too, it’s added about $30 a month when compared to their standard offerings. $30 is slightly more than what I earn per hour from my employment. But when looking at all the effort people put in to steal service, having to buy equipment that may no longer function as the cable/DSS providers change standards, etc., is all of this worth it? And besides, if everyone decided to steal cable/DSS service, then there soon would be no service left to steal, as all these companies would end up going out of business. For me, it’s just far, far easier for me to work one hour of overtime per month if my budget was tight, to pay my cable bill, than spending a huge amount of effort each month to steal, lets say, $30-$50 of television programming each month. And it can probably be far cheaper too, if one has to keep replacing equipment needed to steal service, as the DSS/cable companies keep catching up with the people stealing service.

Anyway, I’m not saying anything here against people discussing obtaining descramblers, etc., because that’s their right and I do find those posts interesting, but I wanted to add my 2 cents worth here. Any other comments?

The complete conversation included 165 comments from 62 individuals. The discussion became interesting because the original question was posted in four newsgroups: alt.cable-tv, alt.dss, alt.dss.hack and misc.consumers. While alt.cable-tv and alt.dss are discussion forums for general TV viewership and misc.consumers is a discussion group for do-it-yourselfers, alt.dss.hack is a discussion group specifically for individuals to share ideas on how to steal cable service.

Beginning with this user-generated question/comment is consistent with Steenhout and vanKenhow’s (2006) call for consumer ethics research that incorporates unethical behavior and behavioral intentions.

Coding was completed using the software program NVIVO.

Findings

The research found support for Hunt & Vitell’s general theory of marketing ethics and previous understanding of deontological and teleological justifications. The unitizing and analyzing stages indicated that deontological and teleological justifications were separate, and rarely over-lapped. So a typical individual used deontological or teleological justifications. Some people, however, were able to use both deontological and teleological justifications.

Past research, however, has been unable to take this analysis a step further and look at the interaction of individuals and their deontological or teleological views. This data set allowed for analysis of teleological (in favor of receiving free satellite service) versus deontological (opposed to receiving free satellite service) discussions, and teleological (in favor of receiving free satellite service) versus deontological (opposed to receiving free satellite service) discussions.

Teleological (Pro) vs. Teleological (Con)

Discussing conversations between individuals who disagreed and yet came from the same ideological bent tended to be fairly civil. The discussions were fair. They focused on a cost/benefit analysis, with arguments generally being rational. Typically, issues raised in these discussions focused on monetary issues, quality of service, quality of programming, corporate profits and service sustainability.

These conversations tended to also be fairly polite. While individuals stated their views, there was a common language and common effort to explain their reasoning.

PRO: IT IS OK TO ‘STEAL’

The reason I did it is because of the myriad local channels from all over. You can’t just ‘subscribe’ to those. I’m not out to ‘steal’ anything, in fact I subscribe to the service. But they don’t have a local channel package like you can get with the ‘card’. It’s nice after having missed something earlier to be able to catch it on the west coast feed later. Plus you get all the pre game shows for NFL games at the local level.

This is consistent with the findings of Miyazaki (2009), that the imbalance of power between individuals and corporations shifts the ethical landscape.

CON: IT IS NOT OK TO ‘STEAL’

If no one pays for the service, what is the incentive for the provider to provide it? If you are stealing it, you are leeching off the honest people who pay for it.

Teleological (Pro) vs. Deontological (Con)

The conversations became more interesting, however, when individuals with differing ideological stances interacted. Consider, for example, the following conversation excerpt:

PRO (TELELOGICAL)
“It is worth stealing cable or satellite given the costs of paying for it, the impact on cable and satellite companies, and the likelihood of being caught.”

CON (DEONTOLOGICAL)
“Stealing is wrong.”

These two statements are, in fact, incompatible. Neither party will convince the other that he is right. Instead, the comments are likely to be ignored or discounted. As such, this sub-conversation and others like it quickly died off.

Consider an additional sub-conversation between individuals from differing ideological perspectives. One of the points of discussion is the fact that many Canadians purchase US satellite dishes, and pay firms in Canada for the converter cards to get ‘free’ access to the US satellite signal. This gray market purchase was not addressed by Canadian law at the time of the discussion.
ARGUMENT AGAINST (DEONTOLOGICAL):
Stealing is as wrong in Canada as it is anywhere else.

ARGUMENT FOR (TELEOLOGICAL):
As far as I know, the Canadian government doesn’t consider it stealing. Why do you?

While both individuals use the word ‘stealing’, they do not place the same meaning in the word. For the deontological thinker, stealing occurs when a service is received without paying the service provider. For the teleological thinker, stealing occurs only when the government says it occurs.

Attempts to justify a particular position, using deontological or teleological reasons did not, in the short-term, seem to bring the two sides closer together. Instead, people who were in favor of receiving satellite service without paying became entrenched, and resorted to insults and swearing.

Consider, for example, the following three comment styles, each are by different individuals and each ends a different sub-conversation. Each are representative of a common point of conflict.

One individual was frustrated by moral arguments against stealing satellite service, and did not seem to appreciate the cross-posting nature of the conversation:

“How do you manage to stay away from church long enough to follow a hackers NG [newsgroup]?”

Another included a slight jab while attempting to continue the conversation. This individual highlights one of the common arguments in favor of receiving satellite service without payment—the signals are in the air, so they are public, just like radio signals.

“Hey Genius, please explain to me how I am stealing something that come freely to my yard?”

A final style of comment elicited by frustration is one in which there is no content, no attempt to explain the frustration, and no hesitation. Instead, each of the following examples represent a failed conversation.

“Hey s—head.”

“This is a perfect example of stinky bull s—, you come here talking about morality, and calling everyone that says anything different a s—? what a sarcasm!”

“Now I understand why the society is REALLY f—ed. People who think that have the knowledge of the “perfect” truth or the “perfect morality” just stick to a point don’t matter if is totally f—ed they just talk shit for ever.”

“I bet that you would just say the same if you go back 100 years and call immoral if a Afro-American use the same bathroom that the white people. Your just FULL OF S—.”

Together these four comment styles demonstrate some of the frustration in dealing with the differing ideology. The first is frustrated more by the venue of the comments than the actual comments. These comments seem to be saying “you can have your views, but don’t invade my space with them”. Time and place seem to matter.

The second is frustrated because his message is not getting through. It is not that he wants to insult someone, but that he does not understand why someone else does not understand. This is a frequent reaction.

The third and fourth comments are representative of utter frustration with the flow of conversation. That frustration turns to anger, and the anger manifests itself in insult and swearing. Communication has ended. Emotion has taken its place.

Individuals who rely on deontological reasons for opposing the free receipt of satellite service are equally open to emotional outbursts. Consider, for example, the following three comments made by individuals who had previously made deontological reasons to avoid receiving free satellite service:

“You’re so full of s— here. You don’t need hackers for technology advancement. Think about it dipshit, this technology was available to the government long before DTV came around.”

“You are obviously very ignorant and I have seen this argument before.”

“Please forgive me. Here’s how it is. If you steal, my opinion of you is s—. Does that help you comprehend? You’re a f—ing idiot.”

Frustration, therefore, is not dependent on deontology or teleology, but rather on the conflict between the two. The arguments between the two perspectives are incompatible, and therefore lead to frustration and anger.

DISCUSSION

To understand the implications of these findings, it is worthwhile returning to the Hunt & Vitell marketing ethics model.

Of special interest are two issues. First, there is no link between the teleological and deontological processes. Second, the model is static—it evaluates the processing of one individual.

Processing: Deontological and Teleological

While the conversation tended to highlight the exchange between deontological and teleological positions on a specific question, the conversation seemed to parallel the internal processing that an individual would experience. Hunt & Vitell acknowledge that an individual can use either or both ideologies. They ignore, however, the interplay between the two.

The conflict that exists between individuals in the conversation may be indicative of the internal conflict that is played out in the mind of an individual facing an ethical dilemma. If individuals are capable of using both ideologies in the Hunt & Vitell model, then they also may experience conflict between the two.

As such, the Hunt & Vitell Model may be strengthened by adding a link between the teleological and deontological processes. As such, future research could focus on the interplay and conflict between deontological and teleological processing. Specific research questions could center on how conflicting or supporting processing influences an individual’s commitment to an ethical decision and the desire to communicate that ethical decision.

Consumer Ethics: A Static or Dynamic Process

One of the key issues of the Hunt & Vitell model is the fact that it is a static model—individuals move through the process on their own. Instead, as evidenced by the conversation, ethical stances are often communicated and justified to others. As such, the Hunt & Vitell model is expanded to include multiple participants (Figure 3).

While individual processing is important, the ability to explain or justify a particular stance is likely equally important. Individuals do not live in silos, so their ethical stands must stand up to contrary views, and can influence the ethical standards of others.
FIGURE 1
The Hunt-Vitell Model

FIGURE 2
An Augmented Hunt-Vitell Model

FIGURE 3
A Multi-Participant Hunt-Vitell Model
As such, additional insight into this interaction would be beneficial. This is, realistically, a call for more observational research. In addition, the influence of others’ ethical views on an individual’s ethical stance bear additional research. This would link consumer ethics research with consumer research in the areas of decision making and word-of-mouth. As such, a wide variety of research methods

These findings have important implications for businesses and government. They imply that messages promoting or discouraging a particular behaviour may not only be unsuccessful with specific individuals, but also may spark anger or frustration. This is particularly interesting for social marketing. The findings also suggest that multiple messages and message styles may be necessary to reach teleological and deontological thinkers (on a specific issue).

While individual processing is important, the ability to explain or justify a particular stance is likely equally important. Individuals do not live in silos, so their ethical stands must stand up to contrary views, and can influence the ethical standards of others. Therefore, the presence of ethical standards is important, but so is the strength of those standards.

As such, additional insight into this interaction would be beneficial. This is, realistically, a call for more observational research. In addition, the influence of others’ ethical views on an individual’s ethical stance bear additional research. This would link consumer ethics research with consumer research in the areas of decision making and word-of-mouth.

Additional research could also focus on developing a better understanding of the movement from unemotional conversation to emotional conversation. This would include a focus on anger and frustration as a reaction to conflicting arguments, as well as a study of humor as a defence against that conflict.

REFERENCES