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The General Theory of Marketing Ethics: Conceptual Framework for a Future Study in the Pharmaceutical Industry

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ABSTRACT

Sales managers have the responsibility of maintaining ethical standards while marketing the products of the company to buyers. Therefore, sales managers in the pharmaceutical industry must improve training to reduce the unethical behavior of sales representatives. Corruption across the pharmaceutical industry indicates an urgent need for marketing ethics in training and performance of duties. Also, appropriate identification and fulfillment of training needs for sales representatives are required to influence their ethical perceptions of marketing and service functions that they perform. The general theory of marketing ethics addresses the situation where a person confronts a problem that contains ethical content. Based on this theory, the business environment such as culture, the organization, personal influences, and the industry influence the ethical decision of a person. We proposed the general theory of marketing ethics as a conceptual framework for future qualitative multiple case studies to explore strategies of some sales managers in the pharmaceutical industry used to improve marketing training to reduce unethical sales representative behavior. The proposed prospective study may contribute to business practice and may have an impact on social change.

Key words: *Pharmaceutical, Teleological, Deontological, Utilitarian*

INTRODUCTION

The general theory of marketing ethics addresses the situation where a person confronts a problem that contains ethical content. The existence of an ethical issue in a case initiates the process [1]. The model elements do not apply if no ethical problem was identified. The general theory of marketing ethics has helped in shaping research and knowledge development in ethical marketing and decision-making procedures [2].

The theory contribution to marketing ethics has the influence on the field of business ethics and marketing framework. Ethical marketing consists of a normative framework which derived from philosophy [3]. Barnett utilized the normative framework elements to formulate decision models, principles, and research scales [3]. Additionally, the developed descriptive models help to explain organizational culture, managerial practices, and an ethical decision-making process.

Historically, scholars primarily reviewed issues relating to social and consumers protection aspects. During those times, Barnett addressed consumer protection features based on the social and societal perspective and applied marketing ethics in decisions that profited or protected stakeholders [3]. The theory of marketing ethics focused on addressing comprehensive business ethics (e.g. moral obligations, standards, and individual capability for good behavior) [1]. Based on Hunt and Vitell's perspective, an individual businessperson with positive moral behavior drives ethical behavior [4]. The normative approach to marketing ethics involves procedures for improving ethical business procedures. Hunt (1990) defined a normative approach as recommending what marketing individuals or organizations ought to do or types of marketing procedures a society ought to have [5]. Thus, normative marketers

emphasized, “what can be.” Other researchers indicated that a normative approach to marketing ethics could improve ethical behavior [6]. Therefore, the normative framework focuses on moral philosophies such as justice, deontology, and teleology principles. Hunt further affirmed that the normative approach entails universal moral responsibilities and a proportionality framework concerned with the intents and means. The approach also supports a social justice context that highlights every individual’s freedom to choose their destiny and be treated by others [2]. Hence, the marketers using the normative framework for acceptance of set core principles and moral maxims. Marketers use these elements as a guide during the ethical decision-making procedure. The normative framework is mainly based on individual values that family, friends, and the community shaped.

Teleological and deontological norms

The general theory of marketing ethics combines the traditions of teleological and deontological theoretical ethical decisions [1]. Based on this theory, the business environment such as culture, the organization, personal influences, and the industry impact how a person perceives an ethical decision. By applying deontological theory, a person can examine whether the action taken during a situation is ethical. The researchers also indicated that a determination could be made whether the action shows respect for other people's rights or no [1]. This process entails comparing behaviors using a set of prearranged deontological norms [7]. These norms represent personal behavior or values. The person then evaluates alternative actions using teleology norms; this helps to identify the activity that provides the most benefits.

Hunt and Vitell (1986) defined teleology evaluation as an examination of possible consequences, the desirability of consequences, and the value of the stakeholder [1, 8]. For example, if the undesirable results of an action are doubtful or if the desirability of affirmative results is higher than negative results, the person might decide to pursue the decision. This is because the teleological approach emphasizes achieving the greatest good for the most significant number of people. Using teleological norms, the marketers determine which participant benefits from the decision, the people who might suffer damage, and the good offsets the bad. An individual’s approach to the action also plays a vital role in determining the person’s actual behavior.

Marketing leaders consider situational restraints as an opportunity [1]. Suppose the person does not have an opportunity to become involved in a particular action. In that case, the individual will be incapable of executing the effort despite the intention or ethical judgment [9]. Hence, individual behavior results from the actual consequences. These consequences become part of the unique personal experience, and an individual can rely on this experience later to deal with other ethical problems. Despite the general theory of marketing ethics emphasizing normative norms, critics state that the theory is too descriptive [10]. However, the theory should be descriptive to increase the understanding of normative factors [1]. The theory is not predictive; however, marketing experts use the theory to understand cognitive processes associated with individual ethical perspectives [10].

Hunt and Vitell (1986) described in their theory the moral decision-making aspects involved in ethical decision contests in organizations [1]. Hunt and Vitell recognized stakeholders’ value in using teleological evaluation [1]. The general theory of marketing ethics profoundly transformed the ethics landscape through its strict normative background of moral philosophy. The general theory of marketing ethics contributes mainly to an individual’s decision-making process during situations that involve ethical issues [11]. Based on teleology and deontology evaluation, individuals can have various perceived alternatives, and hence individuals are capable of deciding ethical actions. The evaluation process leads to behavior and intentions. Based on that concept, an individual recognizes that ethical judgment, behavior, and intention are not always consistent.

The sales managers provide ethical considerations to sales representatives when performing their practice. Still, their strategies tend to become unethical due to illegal transactions and relations with the physicians, hospitals, or clinics [12-14]. Therefore, it is imperative to conduct empirical research to determine the actions and strategies used by sales managers in addressing the concerns shown by their sales representatives. This article aims to propose the general theory of marketing ethics as an appropriate lens through which to explore strategies to include improving marketing training toward ethical marketing. Using these strategies may reduce the unethical behavior of sales representatives in the pharmaceutical industry [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 had successfully used marketing training strategies to reduce unethical sales representative behavior. According to Boddy (2016), the target number of samples depends on the acceptable sample size for qualitative research [17]. 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, internet, material provided by participants). According to Yin (2018), qualitative researchers reach data saturation when no new themes develop from the data analysis [18].

Organizing the collected data should be done using a program like NVivo® 12. Data can be analyzed using Yin's (2018) logical and sequential process (i.e. compiling, disassembling, reassembling, interpreting, and concluding data analysis) [18]. 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

The following sections show the justification for proposing the general theory of marketing ethics as the conceptual framework, the significance of the future study, contribution to business practice, and implications for social change.

Appropriateness of the proposed conceptual framework

Marketing ethics is a subset of business ethics that focuses on ethical circumstances of significance to marketing. In the general theory of marketing ethics, Keig and Ferrell (2016) indicated that the stakeholders and prerequisites strongly influence what comprises tolerable behavioral standards in marketing processes and activities [19]. The emphasis of this approach is concerned with how ethical principles apply to marketing institutions, decisions, and mannerisms. Research indicates that the theory of marketing ethics has a broad scope ranging from ethics in corporate decision-making, marketing aspects such as product, place, price, promotion, global marketing, marketing studies, regulatory, religion, ethical codes [19] and consumer ethics, channel constraints, and product issues [20]. Corruption across the pharmaceutical industry and businesses indicates an urgent need for marketing ethics in training and performing duties. Also, appropriate identification and fulfillment of training needs for sales representatives are required to influence their ethical perceptions of marketing and service functions they serve.

Gbadamosi (2019) indicated marketing ethics from two dimensions: teleological and deontological ethical approaches [21]. Gbadamosi (2019) further mentioned that deontological ethics can determine what is right and wrong through referring to some autonomous ethical code or a set of predetermined values [21]. This marketing ethics approach can be gained from an organization's code of ethics or its ethical values. Thus, It is possible for sales representatives to rely on and comply with the ethical code of conduct or its values in handling transactions, procuring medication, and selling and marketing products. In contrast, teleological ethics obtain moral obligation or duty from desirable or suitable as a necessary achievable end [21]. This approach indicates that people, groups, and institutions have a moral responsibility to achieve what is desirable no matter the outcomes. In the pharmaceutical industry, this symbolizes the current needs concerning ethical codes. Medical representatives should aim to fulfill their duties ethically to achieve stakeholder loyalty and build trust and confidence. Pharmaceutical companies should also consider aligning their activities (marketing, sales, etc.) with ethical underpinnings to achieve the desired effect (more revenues and increased stakeholder satisfaction).

Significance of the future study

Sales managers have the responsibility of maintaining ethical standards while marketing the company's products to buyers. Therefore, sales managers in the pharmaceutical industry must improve training to reduce the unethical behavior of sales representatives. Findings of this research may be of value to different sales managers at pharmaceutical companies wishing to reduce the unethical behavior of sales representatives.

Contribution to business practice

Unethical behavior among pharmaceutical sales representatives is one of the leading causes of pharmaceutical industry corruption and financial fraud [22]. Managers in the pharmaceutical industry must address unethical behavior because ethics plays a crucial role in determining the performance of any business entity [23]. Pharmaceutical sales managers may use the results of this proposed study to develop effective marketing training strategies to reduce unethical behavior of sales representatives, which in turn may improve organizational performance. According to Patwardhan (2016), addressing unethical behavior among physicians, pharmacists, and pharmaceutical sales representatives increased transparency in the relationships and interactions among these professionals [24].

Implications for social change

According to Wei and Delbaere (2015), patients have become skeptical about the drugs that their physicians prescribe because some think that representatives of pharmaceutical companies use the physicians as agents of persuasion to market their prescribed brands [25]. The results of this proposed study may be beneficial to employees of the pharmaceutical companies, physicians, and the patients they serve. Addressing unethical behavior in the industry may enhance doctor-patient relationships and increase patient trust in the pharmaceutical industry. Good relations and trust between health care professionals and their patients may play a significant role in enhancing the quality of health care and improving patient satisfaction [26-29]. Pharmaceutical companies can be significant for a positive social change by supporting nonprofit organizations and academic health care research through donations that bring future benefits to citizens.

Discussion

The need for new models of organization and training on ethical behavior is relevant in marketing training for sales representatives. We proposed the general theory of marketing ethics as a conceptual framework for future qualitative multiple case studies to explore strategies some sales managers in the pharmaceutical industry used to improve marketing training to reduce unethical sales representative behavior. The general theory of marketing ethics is consistent with general consumer behavior theories; Hunt and Vitell (1986) suggested that ethical decisions impact individual behavior by intervening intention variables [1]. Hunt and Vitell recommended in the model of the general theory of marketing ethics that marketeers using both intentions and ethical decisions are better analysts of behavior in a situation where ethical aspects are essential rather than peripheral [1].

The researchers also affirmed that ethical decisions sometimes differ because teleology valuation also affects intentions independently [4]. When marketers develop intention and behavior inconsistent with the ethical decision, feelings of guilt exist [1]. Having two inconsistent thoughts is called cognitive dissonance [30]. Individuals can resolve cognitive dissonance through different methods to restore consistency (a) changing one of the thoughts that caused dissonance, (b) changing behavior that related to inconsistency, (c) adding a new thought that helps rationalize the inconsistency, or (d) trivialize the inconsistency [31]. Negative consequences of cognitive dissonance motivate individuals to resolve inconsistency [31].

According to Gürçay and Baron (2017), individuals use the practical system to predict and discuss the consequences of action [32]. According to Gürçay and Baron, individuals use the deontological approach to focus on an emotional impulse when responding to personal issues [32]. Other researchers used the general theory of marketing ethics and explored how marketing managers handled ethical marketing problems [33]. Generally, researchers have supported Hunt and Vitell's (1986) model after determining that combining utilitarian and deontological assessments helps to determine the ethical judgments used to resolve dilemmas [33, 34]. Individuals rely on practical (intentional) or deontological (judgmental) factors in forming their ethical response to action [35].

We proposed using the qualitative research method. According to Bansal *et al.* (2018), qualitative researchers collect data and derive themes from the research participants' responses [36]. Yin (2018) mentioned that qualitative research dwells on various lenses, ideologies, perspectives, statements, and arguments that bring new approaches to the phenomenon [18]. According to Cecez-Kecmanovic *et al.* (2020) and Windsong (2018), qualitative research promotes critical engagement to the respondents to delve deeper into the phenomenon [37, 38].

Research designs have specific users based on the research purpose, questions, data collection process, and target results [18]. Case study researchers delve deeper into their cases' situation, condition, position, and status to obtain the most important and exciting information [39]. We proposed a multiple case study as a research design

for this future study. According to Baker (2018) and Yin (2018), the goal of a case study is to determine the development occurring in an individual, group of people, institution, community, or organization [18, 40]. According to Moriarty *et al.* (2019), the case study design is debated for credibility and validity [41]. However, case study research design remains an effective method used in conducting different kinds of research. Researchers using a case study design may not include many participants, but they can provide extensive information to answer the research questions through its cases.

We proposed using the purposeful sampling method for this future study. According to Duan *et al.* (2015), using the intended sampling method helps leverage limited resources and exceptional rich-information cases [42]. Ames *et al.* (2019) indicated that researchers use purposeful sampling to narrow down the inclusion criteria when a large amount of data is available [43].

Triangulation is helpful to reach data saturation [44, 45]. So, the triangulation method is proposed for this future study. Qualitative researchers use triangulation to increase the accuracy of the study and its findings [46].

CONCLUSION

The general theory of marketing ethics is an appropriate conceptual framework for future research to explore strategies some sales managers in the pharmaceutical industry used to improve marketing training to reduce unethical sales representative behavior. The proposed future research may contribute to business practice and may have an impact on social change.

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