

The Influence of Unethical Marketing Practices on Consumers' Buying Behaviours among Malaysian Tertiary Students

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ABSTRACT

An unethical brand of marketing is a type of marketing strategy that distorts or exaggerates the truth of products offer, closely followed by using unrealistic, altered images or unverified claims to confuse and mislead potential consumers. Nowadays, it has become an integral component of online shopping for most consumers as many companies adopted unprincipled and dishonourable practices in an effort to maintain a profitable relationship with their targeted consumers. The purpose of this study is to determine the influence of unethical marketing practices on consumers' buying behaviours among tertiary students from a local university located in north of Malaysia. Four independent variables on consumers' buying behaviours were tested, namely, False Advertisement, Bait Advertisement, Spamming, and Psychoactive Advertisement. A total of 317 questionnaires were collected from the target group, employing a quantitative method of collecting data. Data were analysed using SPSS (version 22). Based on Pearson's correlation analysis, showed that there was a moderately positive relationship between consumers' buying behaviours and all of the unethical marketing practices named above. The outcomes revealed a positive and moderate relationship between Consumers' Buying Behaviours and False Advertisement ($r=0.458$); Bait Advertisement ($r=0.514$); Spamming (0.564); and Psychoactive Advertisement ($r=0.606$). Next, based on the multiple regression analysis, the accepted hypotheses included significant influences of False Advertisement ($\beta=0.203$, $t=4.038$, $p=0.000$), Spamming ($\beta=0.256$, $t=4.768$, $p=0.000$) and Psychoactive Advertisement ($\beta=0.413$, $t=0.413$, $p=0.000$) on Consumers' Buying Behaviours. Nevertheless, the only hypothesis rejected in this study was Bait Advertisement ($\beta=0.117$, $t=2.251$, $p=0.025$) which showed no significant influence on Consumers' Buying Behaviours among the students in this university.

Keywords: Consumer's Buying Behaviour, False Advertisement, Bait Advertisement, Spamming, Psychoactive Advertisement.

1. INTRODUCTION

Unethical business practices are prevalent among businesses where the intention to remain ethical is challenged by cultural influence as well as economic constraints (Skinner, 2019). An example of such unethical business practice is marketing where it can be seen as a double-sided blade. On one hand, it is an integral part of making a newly launched product known to consumers, but on the other, the glamorous appearance is shunned for advocating materialism, being intrusively aggressive, and for practicing unethical marketing strategies (Kashif et al., 2018).

In another research performed on the marketing strategies, it was found that many companies adopted unprincipled and dishonourable practices in an effort to maintain a profitable relationship with their targeted patients (consumers) despite international bodies, such as the

World Health Organisation (WHO), coming up with guidelines and code of ethics for these healthcare administrators (Malik, Junaid & Sharif, 2020). In addition, a study by Bedi (2019) is of the opinion that recklessly serving up to consumer preference is a type of unethical marketing practice as well in addition to distorted commercial, merchandising products that carry potential bodily harm and selling it as a threat to the consumers' population.

To achieve a high customer satisfaction level, marketers should centre their activities around alleviating society's mental and health well-being through upholding truth in being ethically and socially responsible in their promotional practices and avoid at all costs any strategies that aim to conceive or put consumer's lives at stake (Ayuba, 2019). To further acknowledge the uncontrolled scenario of unethical practices in marketing promotional activities, Huq, Nekmahmud, and Aktar (2016) have found that although firms agree to run their marketing practices ethically, they are instead practicing the opposite, committing frauds and failing to maintain regularity in abiding by ethical marketing routines. Morals that define them, such as honesty and integrity, had instead been interchanged by the presentation of deceptive information, manipulation of consumer's subconscious, and disrespecting consumers by not providing credible information. Hayder (2017) shared that deceptive advertising has the highest impact on university student's buying behaviours. Deceptive advertising has been referred to as advertisements that publish misleading or fraudulent information through mass media, for example, television, radio, signboards, and several others.

University students represent an important component of shoppers among the Malaysian consumer segments (Munindy et al., 2014). According to previous studies, internet usage and online shopping, are the two most widely used purchasing mediums in the universities, in the students' age group of 18-30 years old, even though they do not have sufficient cash for shopping, but these students realised the importance of using internet and has great intention towards online shopping (Edmunds et al., 2010). In the developed countries, individual intention and behaviour of online shopping are widely studied, but there is a lack in the number of studies conducted in developing countries, like Malaysia, where online shopping is getting popular among university students (Farah et al., 2018).

In addition, past authors (Marziah Mokhtar et al., 2020) stated data showing that people who shopped at online stores were basically younger than those of traditional stores. More so, young people dominate the online population despite the growing number of the older generations becoming more online literate than before. Young people, who mostly own smartphones, the internet, and social media accounts such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, generally, are independent enough to make their own shopping decisions. Notwithstanding their sources of income and allowances, they are inclined to buy items or search for any products from online stores.

In understanding this group, especially their consumers' buying behaviours, is important for marketers to develop strategies to target them. This study, therefore, intends to examine whether several factors of unethical marketing practices, such as False Advertising, Spamming, Bait Advertising, and Psychoactive Advertising determine Consumers' Buying Behaviours of Malaysian university students. This study focuses on these four (4) factors and tries to understand the influence these four variables have on the consumers' buying behaviours of Malaysian students.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Consumers' Buying Behaviours

According to Ramya and Ali (2016), consumers' buying behaviours point towards the buying behaviours of the ultimate consumers. Among the factors influencing said consumers' behaviours

include social, cultural, economic, and personal factors. Examples are social class, family, income, lifestyle, personality, belief, and attitude as well as government policy. A buyer behaviour model was also designed, named the Buyer's Black Box, showcasing the order in which various stimuli meddles with buyer's decision-making processing-better. Sarver (1983) shared the Theory of Reasoned Action, stating that consumer's behaviour depends on their intention to create a particular outcome. They only act in their best interest which will influence their decision-making process. For every action taken by a consumer, they expect a specific outcome. The theory also suggests that consumers hold a belief and from it, form behaviour that will influence their attitude in performing the behaviour.

Among the factors listed by the research includes motivation, culture, subculture, and many more. In terms of motivation, consumers require the driving force for them to take action. Therefore, it has to be adequately pressing in order to suffice consumer's biogenic and psychogenic needs. In sub-culture, specifically social class, it is shown that people in the upper class spends to maintain their status in society while the middle-class is more cautious and more considerate through collecting information and making comparisons before spending. The lower class, on the other hand, spends on impulse.

Nabi et al. (2020) shared the findings that unverified claims made by sellers have a negative impact on consumer's buying behaviour. From the point of view of The Islamic's Code of Ethics for running a business, sufficient proof has been gathered around the lack of ethical operational and marketing practices in which businesses jeopardise their ethical identity through not abiding by the Principles of Shari'ah instead of performing truthful yet effective endorsement when doing international business (Riaz, 2016). A similar study by Agag and El-Masry (2016) discovered that consumer's intention to purchase online is highly affected by consumer's attitudes such as trust. Perceived risk will influence their intention to purchase online. It is found that visual communications as a marketing strategy are vital for sector's wellness to manipulate consumers who are heading for a self-pampering wellness session in tourist hotel spa outlets. They are more prone to engage in such services when visual attractions portraying interiors of a spa as well as radiant and spry looking bodies are provided by marketers to effectively arouse customer's desire to sign up for a course with them (Wang et al., 2020). In addition to that, a study in fuel providing services located in Nigeria had reported that many such companies have been adopting unethical marketing practices where customers are tricked into cooperating with their marketing gimmick which in turn increases customer's discontent with their services (Ewah, 2018).

Additionally, the ethical marketing practices made for social causes positively impact consumer's buying behaviour. However, in this study, several unethical marketing practices will be determined to look at their influences on consumers' buying behaviour among students in the tertiary public university.

Based on the following review in the next sections, four hypotheses in this research were developed as follows: -

- H₁: There is a significant influence of False Advertisement on Consumer's Buying Behaviour
- H₂: There is a significant influence of Bait Advertisement on Consumer's Buying Behaviour
- H₃: There is a significant influence of Spamming on Consumer's Buying Behaviour
- H₄: There is a significant influence of Psychological Advertisement on Consumer's Buying Behaviour.

2.2 Unethical Marketing Practices

Business ethics describes the different ways a person in a business setting can choose to respond towards ethical dilemmas they face, depending on their moral inclinations influenced by what they feel in general is the acceptable way to act in a decision-making process (Trobez et al., 2017).

According to Michaelidou and Micevski (2018), among the identified unethical business practices include distorting or refusing to provide information. It was discovered that in economically developing countries, ethical marketing practices are placed secondary to financial securities as the prime consideration when conducting business (Marta &Singhapakdi, 2005). The reason behind these unethical behaviours in marketing stems from various sources as dictated by (DeTienne et al., 2019). It is said that rivalry will instigate unethical behaviour among businesses. Not only that, the inability to reason with, others using universal principles, is another motivation to behave immorally. There is also the moral action gap where one knows what is wrong but yet still chooses to do the wrong thing. Gasper et al. (2015) opined that business owners will not tend to relapse on these immoral behaviours if they had rationally reflected on their dishonest past.

2.2.1 False Advertisement

False advertisement is defined as one that is misleading towards consumers, directing them to make wrong decisions during purchases. It is considered unlawful when businesses post false advertisements under the Consumer Protection Act 1999 (Act). In order for justice to be served, consumers have to prove misrepresentation on the seller's part to represent their intentional cheating behaviour. Apart from the said Act, consumers may also report such misbehaviours to the Advertising Standards Authority whose work is to obstruct false advertising. Puffing, another term for false advertising, plays the role of exaggerating characteristics of a product offer. Puffing is legal when done based on one's opinion. However, if puffing is applied to facts, it contributes to misleading promotion, and is thus considered illegal. Krishnan, Rajoo and Vergis (2009) affirms that manufacturer of products is held liable if they are found to have applied misleading representation regarding goods or services rendered under Section 10(1) of the Act. Next, is misleading or deceptive conduct under Section 9 of the Act, where it is illegal for one to deceive consumers about the characteristics, nature, suitability, or quantity of the goods or services. Misleading price indications given to the price of a good or services offered is also illegal under Section 12(1) of the same Act. Rhodes and Wilson (2018) are of the opinion that firms deliberately implement false advertising because they are aware that consumers rely on businesses to provide information about the characteristics of goods or services offered. Despite possible legal sanctions, firms continue exaggerating descriptions of various products, ranging from inedible products such as cars to edible ones such as cereals.

2.2.2 Bait Advertisement

Zboja, Clark and Haytko (2015) had set out to research the circumstances that influence consumer's perception towards varying degrees of sales pressure and the resulting effect it has on consumer's final buying decision. Among the few factors investigated include time pressure, buyer's assumption towards seller's knowledge, and buyer's self-confidence towards their own knowledge of persuasion. The results showed that buyer's perception of time pressure works well in combination with sales pressure. However, the remaining factors negatively impacted pressure from sellers. Misleading advertising report (2010) details bait advertising as a misguiding sales technique popular among unscrupulous businesses. Bait advertising happens when a product is advertised at a much lower price, an act carried out by the seller, with the motive to entice consumers to purchase their products with hidden intentions to further convince them into buying more expensive products by criticizing the initial product being not as good.

2.2.3 Spamming

Wijayanto and Takdir (2014) elucidated in their report that the advancement of internet has provided attackers unethical means of spreading spam messages, a popular cybercrime in this age. They defined spam messages as unrelated and improper mails sent to a vast number of

audiences through the internet. The thriving of cybercrime develops into a huge concern to society, especially in the bustling web traffic, where illegal activities are concealed under large information transaction happenings. The reason spamming is more popular through email than phone calls is due to its pervasive omnipresence in every individual's life around the world. Spam mails are usually adorned with quality content aimed to persuade consumers behind the deceptive veil of criminal acts.

2.2.4 Psychoactive Advertisement

Psychoactive advertisement, in the opinion of Zinkhan (2011), is unethical as sellers often do not warn consumers when deploying this technique, despite consumers viewing it as acceptable if the threats claimed in the psychoactive advertisement could eradicate the danger posed. Psychoactive advertising is seen as dangerous because it may summon consumer's extreme emotions causing them to self-harm. Hyman and Tansey (1990) shared in their research entitled "The Ethics of Psychoactive Ads" that psychoactive advertisements are commercials aimed to arouse audience's strong emotions to achieve specific results, such as stirring anger, sorrow, concern, or disturbing them. Widely used in public service broadcasting, it is effective in making viewers identify hostility or lowered self-esteem. However, not all emotional-stirring advertisements can be grouped as psychoactive advertisements.

3. METHODOLOGY

The target population for this study involved students of a local university located in the North of Malaysia. A convenient sampling technique was used for this research. The sample size involved a total of 317 students out of the estimation of more than 1,800 students as the whole population. Questionnaires were distributed to the targeted respondents by using the Google Form application. Once the targeted 317 responses were received, the data collected were analysed. The demographic of respondents was collected based on 5 questions such as age, gender, level of education, experience towards shopping online, and advertisement encountered during online shopping. The age group was classified into six categories, namely below 18 years old, 18 to 20, 21 to 23, 24 to 26, 27 to 29, and above 29 years old. Level of education categories were diploma/foundation studies, bachelor's degree, and master's degree. Respondents also have to answer either a "Yes" or "No" to the questions on whether they have experienced any shopping online and whether they have encountered advertisements during online shopping.

The relationships between one dependent variable and four independent variables were analysed using SPSS software (version 26). Each of the independent variables as well as the dependent variable was allocated 4 questions in order to analyse their relationships. Each of these questions provides choices for respondents to answer based on the Likert scale, ranging from 1 ('Strongly Disagree') to 5 ('Strongly Agree'). For the Consumer's Buying Behaviours, the items were adapted from Maysonnave and Delorme (2013), Abeywickrama and Vasickova (2014), and Kamran and Siddiqui (2019). Items for False Advertisement were adapted from Maysonnave and Delorme (2013), those of Bait Advertisement had items adapted from Nwaorgu (2016), on Spamming were adapted from Raad et al. (2010) and Abeywickrama and Vasickova (2014), and lastly, the items for Psychoactive Advertisement were adapted from Kamran and Siddiqui (2019).

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Out of the 317 questionnaires collected, 308 responses were accepted but 9 responses had to be rejected because they neither had experienced any shopping online nor online advertisements;

while the remaining 308 had experienced the two items mentioned. Thus, the responses from this group of 9 respondents were deemed invalid and as such were subsequently excluded from further data analyses.

The results show that majority of the respondents are aged between 21 to 23 years old (86.0%), followed by those of 18 to 20 years old (7.5%), 24 to 26 years old (3.6%), and lastly, the 27 to 29 years old age group (1.9%). The second least respondents are aged below 18 years (0.7%) and only 1 respondent over 29 years old (0.3%). The majority of the respondents are Females (68.2%), while Males make up the remaining 31.8%. In addition to that, the descriptive statistic of the level of education shows that the majority of respondents are pursuing Bachelor’s degrees (91.9%), followed by Diploma/Foundation studies (5.8%). The least percentage of respondents are pursuing Master’s degrees (2.3%).

Table 1: Reliability Analysis (n=308)

Variables	Cronbach’s Alpha
Consumer’s Buying Behaviour	0.719
False Advertisement	0.782
Bait Advertisement	0.753
Spamming	0.849
Psychoactive Advertisement	0.891

Based on Table 1, the value of Cronbach’s Alpha, for all variables, falls in the acceptable range of between 0.7 to 0.8. Consumer’s Buying Behaviour reached a Cronbach’s Alpha value of 0.719, False Advertisement attained a score of 0.782; Bait Advertisement with a score of 0.753; Spamming recorded a score of 0.849; while Psychoactive Advertisement reached a score of 0.891, showing the highest Cronbach’s Alpha value among all of the variables under study.

Table 2. Pearson’s Correlation Analysis

	Consumer’s Buying Behaviour	False Advertisement	Bait Advertisement	Spamming	Psychoactive Advertisement
Consumer’s Buying Behaviour	-				
False Advertisement	0.458**	-			
Bait Advertisement	0.514**	0.182**	-		
Spamming	0.564**	0.639**	0.370**	-	
Psychoactive Advertisement	0.606**	0.170**	0.643**	0.326**	-

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). (N=308)

Table 2 presented the correlation analyses between all variables for 308 participants in this study. As formulated by Schober, Boer, and Schwarte (2018), any correlation coefficients (denoted by “r” value) of between 0.40 - 0.69 are considered to have a Moderate correlation between variables. False Advertisement had a result indicating a Moderate correlation with Consumer’s Buying Behaviour (r=0.458, p<0.01), so too was Bait Advertisement (r=0.514, p<0.01), Spamming (r=0.564, p<0.01), and lastly, the highest “r” reading was from Psychoactive Advertisement (r=0.606, p<0.01) also showing a Moderate correlation with Consumer’s Buying Behaviour. Therefore, the consensus is that all the four independent variables have Moderate correlations to the dependent variable (Consumer’s Buying Behaviour) as presented in this study.

Table 3. Multiple Regression Analysis Results

Variables	Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	Beta		
False Advertisement	0.203	4.038	0.000
Bait Advertisement	0.117	2.251	0.025
Spamming	0.256	4.768	0.000
Psychoactive Advertisement	0.413	0.413	0.000

*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 3 presented the results of multiple regression analysis done on the four independent variables. The analysis was done with a significance level of 0.10 while the confidence interval was determined at 95%. False Advertisement or H₁ ($\beta=0.203$, $t=4.038$, $p=0.000$) was found to have a significant influence on Consumer's Buying Behaviour. Bait Advertisement or H₂ ($\beta=0.117$, $t=2.251$, $p=0.025$) was not significant in predicting Consumer's Buying Behaviour because the p-value was more than 0.0001. Spamming or H₃ had a result of ($\beta=0.256$, $t=4.768$, $p=0.000$) showing a significant influence on Consumer's Buying Behaviour. Lastly, Psychoactive Advertisement or H₄ presented a result ($\beta=0.413$, $t=0.413$, $p=0.000$) indicating a significant influence on Consumer's Buying Behaviour.

Therefore, the three hypotheses in this research study (H₁, H₃, H₄) were accepted, while one hypothesis (H₂), was rejected.

5.0 CONCLUSIONS

Four independent variables were studied in this research, namely False Advertisement, Bait Advertisement, Spamming, and Psychoactive Advertisement. Those four variables were tested against one dependent variable, being Consumer's Buying Behaviour. Based on the multiple regression analysis, the H₂ hypothesis, involving Bait Advertisement (showing results of $\beta=0.117$, $t=2.251$, $p=0.025$) had to be rejected because the p-value exceeded the threshold value of 0.0001, indicating that there was no significant relationship towards Consumer's Buying Behaviour. The remaining three hypotheses, involving False Advertisement (H₁), Spamming (H₃), and Psychoactive Advertisement (H₄) were accepted because the significance values were below the threshold level ($p<0.0001$).

Therefore, these research outcomes also disclosed and uncovered vital information on how future marketers and product offerers can avoid the usage of these unethical marketing practices in their business strategies to encourage the desire of consumers towards increasing their buying behaviour. The model of Consumers' Buying Behaviour based on the results of this study can be presented in Figure 1.

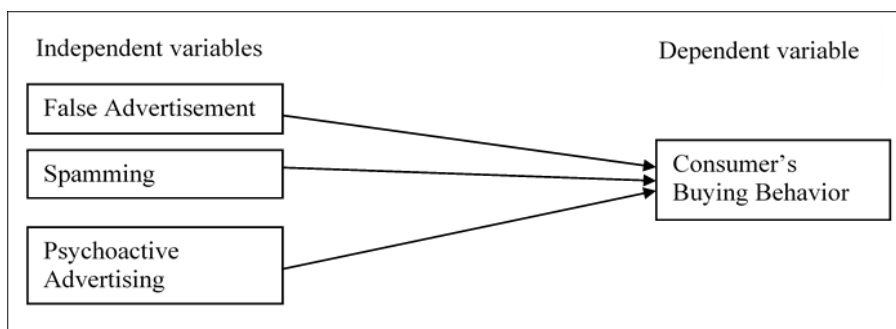


Figure 1 Consumer's Buying Behaviour Model

As indicated in Table 3, the result showed a significant influence of all the three independent variables (False Advertisement, Spamming, and Psychoactive Advertisement) on the dependent variable (Consumer's Buying Behaviour) based on the multiple regression results in this study. The only exception was for Bait Advertisement which had an insignificant influence on Consumer's Buying Behaviour ($\beta=0.117$, $t=2.251$, $p=0.025$). Besides, it was also found that the Psychoactive Advertisement recorded the strongest influence on Consumer's Buying Behaviour ($\beta=0.413$, $t=4.413$, $p=0.000$), followed by variables such as Spamming ($\beta=0.256$, $t=4.768$, $p=0.000$), and False Advertisement ($\beta=0.203$, $t=4.038$, $p=0.000$).

With this information, sellers of products and services can take note that psychoactive advertisement is influential towards consumer's buying behaviour thus they have to show more sincerity in their advertisement and marketing practices in order to ensure that consumers feel comfortable, thus encouraging purchase behaviour. The result of the study is in line with that conducted by Wijetunga (2017) who indicated when consumers identify online deception or other marketing initiatives that are misleading, it will impact their trust towards a brand, thus affecting their intention during purchase. Therefore, websites providing goods and services are encouraged to avoid practicing deceptions, but instead to showcase ethicality in their business (Limbu, Wolf & Lunsford, 2011). The result also concurs with Nwaorgu (2016), that consumers are the ultimate factor in the effectiveness of bait advertisement because they have the choice to either take the bait and pick another item or to ignore it. Finally, the results of this study synchronize with a study by Redmiles, Chachra & Waismeyer (2018), where the latter found little chances for active users to click on spam advertisements and even suggested methods to reduce demand for information sent through spam.

The local universities located north of Malaysia. Thus, the demographic coverage may not be sufficient to represent the views of more diversified university students from other universities to widely represent consumers in this study. As such, students from different universities located in the same demography at different locations may have different views pertaining to the questionnaires put forward as the environment that they are in is different and may affect their buying behaviours. Not only that, the majority of the respondents in this study were students pursuing bachelor's degrees in the subject university under study. Therefore, the results of this study are not accurate to represent the larger majority of students pursuing other degrees or even to represent all students pursuing different studies in the university. The second limitation refers to the short time period taken between distributing and collecting the questionnaires, of approximately one month. This is considered a research study limitation as pursuant to the Theory of Reasoned Action, consumer's psychological construct changes over time, thus, impacting their buying behaviour. Therefore, given sufficient time, more respondents from a wider demographic should be targeted too, reaping a different average result. Not only that, a qualitative study can be carried out in order to further understand and narrow the factors that have effects on consumer's buying behaviour.

According to Vallerand et al. (1992) whose journal wrote about the Theory of Reasoned Action, it is learned that behaviour is determined by either attitudinal or normative factors. An individual's knowledge is also influential towards human behaviour. Therefore, future research can investigate the level of knowledge consumers have towards recognizing deceptive marketing practices and their effects on their buying behaviours. Researchers can find out whether a higher level of knowledge towards understanding deceptive marketing practices and a higher level of knowledge on consumer protection acts will change consumer's buying behaviour. Not only that, but researchers have the opportunities to explore more factors that affect consumer's buying behaviour, apart from the four variables studied in this thesis. Examples of such factors are

unsubstantiated claims, where certain products claim to give certain results upon using or consuming it, but clinical, scientific, or official studies have yet to be proven otherwise.

Unethical marketing practices are rampant and increasing in tandem with the rise in the use of digital shopping. More and more businesses are also joining the virtual platform wagon to sell their products, thus there are higher chances of them adopting unethical marketing practices such as those mentioned and proven above. However, it is unfair to consumers to become the victims of sellers' deception in order to maximise profits. As the thesis has shown, false advertisement, spamming and psychoactive advertisements will affect consumer's buying behaviour such that they will be discouraged to initiate purchases, with the exception of bait advertisement. More researches need to be initiated on this topic, such as that suggested above, which is to further unearth more unethical and deceptive marketing practices currently being used so that sellers know to avoid these unfair tactics and, in all fairness, consumers know how to be alert. In this way, businesses can be conducted more ethically and higher customer satisfaction can be achieved, thereby boosting credibility and trust between both sides, develops brand loyalty, and increases customer retention as well as loyalty.

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