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The Professional Identity of Marketers and Ethical-Decision Making: A Conceptual Framework

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Abstract

The professional identity of marketers has been generally ignored and poorly conceptualised and operationalised in the marketing ethics literature. This has limited our understanding of the ethical behaviour of marketers by not accounting for the influence of professional identity on professional values. This paper proffers a theoretical framework that is designed to extend our current knowledge of the influences on ethical behaviour. This is done by accounting for the direct and indirect influence of socialisation on professional values.

Background

Sound measures of professionalism and the status of the marketing profession are needed for ethics research. Defining what constitutes 'a professional' ranges on a continuum from legal registration to belief by individuals that they have a social identity as part of an occupational group ascribing to certain shared values, standards, and behaviour. Such shared professional values and norms are derived particularly from socialisation. First, research is needed to establish the criteria used and the extent to which marketers and others define and consider 'marketing' to be 'a profession'. One factor is that marketing roles vary in their need for professional recognition. A clearer conceptualisation of the profession and sounder measures of professionalism are needed to cover these varying roles. Second, research is needed to establish the extent to which marketers in these varying roles identify with their profession and the antecedents to this identification. Thirdly, research is needed to establish the influence of professional recognition on the professional values of marketers. Gaining such knowledge should lead to a better understanding of ethical decision-making. Unlike other professional occupations, there have been no investigations of the professional identity of marketers, and so a conceptual framework within which to conduct such research is needed and presented in the current paper as Figure 1.

![Figure 1: The influence of professional identity on professional values](image-url)
Professional Socialisation

Despite the importance of socialisation in ethical decision-making highlighted in seminal works (Hunt and Vitell, 1986; Trevino, 1986), there have been few empirical investigations of professional socialisation in the marketing ethics. Studies have found that professional socialisation reflects the social learning of norms and behaviour relevant to organisations and professions and can be distinguished empirically from organisational socialisation in marketing contexts (McClaren, Adam, and Vocino, 2010; Sparks and Hunt, 1998). Moreover, studies suggest that the integration of new members into organisations is effective where industry and professional norms are taken into account (e.g., Van Maanen, 1976). Others suggest that organisational and professional socialisation are interdependent constructs and inculcate employees with values and expected behaviours originating from both organisational and professional contexts (e.g., McClaren, Adam, and Vocino, 2010; McGuire et al., 2008).

Although organisational socialisation in marketing ethics research is usually grounded in Van Maanen and Schein’s (1979) conceptualisation there is a wide disparity concerning the conceptualisation and operationalisation of ‘professional’ and ‘professional socialisation’. For example, Suddaby et al. (2009) characterised ‘professional’ as the strength of identification and involvement in a profession, and measured this as a commitment to reflect the extent of care, dedication, and pride that individuals expressed in being a member of their profession. On the other hand, the Professional Opinion Scale used by Abbott (1988), focuses on the assimilation of values as the primary and often sole dimension of professional socialisation (Barretti, 2004).

Because professional socialisation is a cumulative and career-long process it is likely to be influenced more by current employment conditions than by early career socialisation, with more recent organisational experiences tending to be more influential (Lui, Ngo, and Tsang, 2003). Current employment characteristics, such as job level and professional tenure, have a greater impact on professionalism compared to early socialisation. Having a professional degree or holding membership of a professional organisation appears not to affect levels of professionalism (Lui, Ngo, and Tsang, 2003).

Professional Socialisation and Professional Values of Marketers

Early research supports the influence of socialisation on professional values although there are conflicting findings about the degree to which organisational socialisation influences professional socialisation and disagreement about the level and type of conflict that arises between organisational and professional values (Bartol, 1979; Fox and Vonk, 1973; Glaser, 1964; Greene, 1978; Hall, 1968; Kerr, Von Glinow, and Schrieshem, 1977; Miller and Wagner, 1971; Scott, 1965; Snizek, 1972; Wilensky, 1964).

More recent research shows that “[S]ocialization also has a direct effect on internalization, as suggested by the argument that one may internalize an organisation’s culture without necessarily identifying with the organisation, and vice versa” (Ashforth and Mael, 1989: , p. 27 original italics). The proposition that organisational socialisation and, to a lesser extent, professional socialisation influences professional values is supported conceptually and empirically by many marketing ethics studies (see Loe, Ferrell, and Mansfield, 2000; McClaren, 2000; O’Fallon and Butterfield, 2005). Decision-making frameworks assume
socialisation as foundations (Hunt and Vitell, 1992; Jones, 1991; Trevino, 1986). Ferrell and Gresham (1985) found that differential association with peers and opportunity were better predictors of behaviour than the belief system of an individual. The likelihood of marketers complying with group pressure without internalising group norms has been supported by earlier studies that report inconsistencies between the values and behaviour of managers (Newstrom and Ruch, 1975). Marketers are socialised to general and marketing-related norms when they are shown to make ethical decisions (Hunt and Vasquez-Parraga, 1993; Rallapalli, Vitell, and Szeinbach, 2000; Singhapakdi and Vitell, 1993; Vitell, Rallapalli, and Singhapakdi, 1993). Members, compared to non-members of professional associations, vary in their reliance on norms when making ethical judgments (Rallapalli, Vitell, and Barnes, 1998).

Proposition 1: The professional socialisation of marketers (PS) influences their professional values (PV).

Professional Socialisation and Professional Identity
There are two main points of departure between the theoretical propositions we are putting forward and earlier studies. Firstly, those studies suggest that marketing ethics research does not theoretically and empirically account for the influence of professional socialisation on professional identity nor the influence of professional identification on professional values. Secondly, studies investigating professional values inadequately conceptualise and operationalise professional socialisation. This influence is described as Propositions 2 and 3.

According to social identity theory, individuals classify, define, and identify themselves into social categories, such as professions (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Mael and Ashforth, 1992). Professional identity is the extent to which individuals define themselves in terms of the work they do and the typical characteristics they ascribe to others who do the same work (Mael and Ashforth, 1992; Van Maanen and Barley, 1984) and is defined as “the relatively stable and enduring constellation of attributes, beliefs, values, motives, and experiences in terms of which people define themselves in a professional role” (Ibarra, 1999: , pp. 764-765, citing Schein 1978). Professional identification includes idiosyncratic characteristics such bodily attributes, abilities, and psychological traits and a social identity encompassing salient group classifications (Ashforth and Mael, 1989) and is defined as a “psychological attachment that occurs when members adopt the defining characteristics of the organisation as defining characteristics of themselves” (Dutton, Dukerich, and Harquail, 1994: , p 242). This occurs where the profession is one of the membership groups with which an individual identifies (Bamber and Iyer, 2002). Although the norms and values in professional identity may conflict with those inherent in an organisational identity, professional identification may contribute to an individual’s work and professional values, and are congruent if their beliefs about their profession are self-referential or self-defining (Pratt, 1998).

Proposition 2: The professional socialisation (PS) of marketers influences their professional identity (PI) positively.

Professionalism is positively associated with professional identification (Lui, Ngo, and Tsang, 2003). Professionals, in particular, may sometimes view themselves as professionals first and organisation members second. On the other hand, they may see the profession and organisation as equally self-defining (Johnson et al., 2006). Identification with the organisation may be less likely for professionals when the organisation is not integrally
linked to their profession (Johnson et al., 2006). Professional identification is influenced in different ways and to varying degrees by professional socialisation (Bamber and Iyer, 2002; Johnson et al., 2006). Professionals may work in organisations whose mission and values are or are not consistent with the mission and values of their profession. Organisations may differ in the extent to which the professional content of the work is central to the mission of the organisation, and can vary in the proportion of professional and non-professional employees within the organisation. They may even vary in the extent to which the goals of the organisation are consistent with those of the professionals (Wallace, 1995). There is a two-way interaction between organisational identification and professional identification because the values of one group may conflict with another group (Freidson, 1999; Hekman et al., 2009a; Hekman et al., 2009b; Hoff, 1999). The detrimental treatment of employees by a group may ultimately decrease their identification with that group (Hekman et al., 2009a; Hekman et al., 2009b; Tyler and Blader, 2003). Professional training and experience do not necessarily "cause" group members to identify co-workers as "professionals" (Golden, Dukerich, and Fabian, 2000). Professional identification is predicted by professional image and job autonomy (Bamber and Iyer, 2002).

Consistent with findings from studies of other occupations (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Mael, 1988), it is argued herein that marketers, as a professional group, have values and practices: (i) that are distinct from other groups and which provides them with a unique identity, (ii) that have clear and impermeable boundaries within the professional group, (iii) where the group's prestige and membership effects self-esteem, and (iv) that this perceived professional group prestige is related positively to professional identification. In line with Ashforth and Mael’s views (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Mael, 1988) we reason that interpersonal interaction, similarity, liking, shared goals or threat, and a common history are other factors associated with marketing practitioners’ group formation.

Like Ashforth and Mael (1989), we argue that professional group identification is distinguishable from internalisation, where the latter is concerned with the incorporation of values and attitudes as guiding principles. “[I]dentification refers to self in terms of social categories (I am) whereas internalization refer to the incorporation of values, attitudes, and so forth within the set as guiding principles (I believe)” (Ashforth and Mael, 1989: pp. 21-22). Importantly, although individuals may see themselves as members of a professional group, they do not necessarily accept the values and attitudes of that group (Ashforth and Mael 1989). Consistent with Ashforth and Mael (1989) we propose that professional identification is a specific form of organisational identification and that marketers’ professional identity is derived from socialisation into the marketing profession.

Professional Identity and Professional Values

Supporting the point of departure expressed in the present paper, it is reasoned that professional identity can be distinguished from professional commitment and professional values. This is an extension of the views of Ashforth and Mael (1989) who found organisational identity can be distinguished from organisational commitment because identification is organisation-specific unlike internalisation and commitment which may not be, and because the goals and values of an organisation may be similar in other organisations (Ashforth and Mael, 1989). Organisational commitment is defined as “the relative strength of an individual's identification with and involvement in a particular organisation” (Mowday, Steers, and Porter, 1979, p. 226), a formulation which includes “internalization, behavioural
intentions, and affect, but not identification as presently defined” (Ashforth and Mael, 1989: , p. 23, italics in original). Importantly, previous studies measuring the professional values of marketers may be measuring internalization, behavioural intentions, and affect rather than identification.

In line with social identity theory, we maintain that “Internalization also may engender internalization of, and adherence to, group values and norms and homogeneity in attitudes and behaviour ... and it increases the perceived similarity with other group members and the likelihood of conforming to group norms” (Ashforth and Mael, 1989: , p. 26). Social identification reinforces the antecedents of the group, including its distinctiveness, its values, its practices, its prestige, the salience and competition with out-groups, and other traditional factors associated with group formation. “Social identification enables the individual to conceive of, and feel loyal to, an organisation or corporate culture” (Ashforth and Mael, 1989: , p. 26).

It is argued here that research measuring the influence of professional values on ethical behaviour is actually measuring the influence of organisational commitment on ethical behaviour because such research does not distinguish between the similarity of a marketer’s organisational values (work norms) and their professional norms.

Proposition 3: The professional identity (PI) of marketers influences their professional values (PV) positively.

Ethical Behaviour

The importance and influence of individual, professional, and organisational norms and values on ethical decision-making is well-established in the marketing ethics literature (Loe, Ferrell, and Mansfield, 2000; McClaren, 2000; O’Fallon and Butterfield, 2005). However, recently McClaren et al. (2010) empirically established that organisational and professional and socialisation are separate, but related constructs both influencing the work-related norms of marketers that affect ethical perceptions. It is suggested in the present study that the influence of professional socialisation on professional identity should be compared to its influence on professional values and incorporated into our understanding of the determinants of decision-making. Specifically, the following proposition is put forward:

Proposition 4: The professional values of marketers (PV) influence their ethical behaviour (EB) positively.

Summary remarks

The preceding conceptual framework, propositions, and discussion provides a research agenda that will contribute to a greater understanding of the role of socialisation and identification in ethical-decision making in marketing. Such research may lead to identifying the actions managers can take to improve the ethical standards and ethical behaviour of individuals, organisations, and professional associations. Professional socialisation and identification are part of broader areas, such as corporate responsibility, professional education and accreditation, and professional and industry regulation.


Mael, F. 1988. Organizational identification: Construct redefinition and a field application with organizational alumni. Wayne State University, Detroit.


