

IMPACT OF ETHICAL ATTRIBUTES OF SERVICES ON CONSUMER PREFERENCE

Nai-Yu Liu, Wen-Yeh Huang

College of Management, Yuan Ze University,

No.11, Ln. 66, Jiangong 2nd Rd., East Dist., Hsinchu City 300, Taiwan (R.O.C.)

*Corresponding Author: david.naiyu@gmail.com

*Phone: 0911396816

ABSTRACT

It is generally believed that consumers will respond to ethical products with attributes that reflect moral principles such as fair trade more favorably. However, Luchs, Naylor, Irwin, and Raghunathan(2010) find that whether or not consumers prefer sustainable products is determined by benefits they seek from various product categories. Findings of their research suggest that sustainability can be a liability when marketing certain products since it has potential negative effects on consumer perceptions when strength-related attributes are valued. However, Luchs et al. (2010) only investigate this issue with physical products. Whether or not similar interpretations will be found in services remains unknown. This current study extends the idea proposed by Luchs et al. (2010) to the service industry. Specifically, this study intends to investigate whether or not consumers view more ethical service providers as less capable of providing effective and satisfying services than less ethical ones.

Keywords: sustainability, ethical services, green marketing, corporate social responsibility

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research Background and Motivation

The importance of marketing products ethically has generated extensive attention from both practitioners and scholars. Luchs, Naylor, Irwin, and Raghunathan[17] state that many companies take initiatives to respond to consumer expectations toward products that promote ethical principles. It is generally believed that consumers will respond to ethical products with attributes that reflect moral principles more favorably. The attributes are related to various kinds of social and environmental issue such as fair trade and humane treatment. However, these companies also discover that consumer buying behavior is not always consistent with their pronounced positive attitude toward ethical products. Data shows that

ethical products have relatively low market share compared to products without ethical attributes [26, P.15]. Luchs et al. find that whether or not consumers prefer sustainable products is determined by benefits they seek from various product categories. For instance, consumers who seek gentleness-related attributes such as safety, health, and mildness prefer products with ethical attributes because they associate ethicality with gentleness. On the other hand, the associations between ethicality and gentleness makes consumers who seek strength-related attributes prefer products with less ethicality. Findings of this research suggest that sustainability can be a liability when marketing certain products since it has potential negative effects on consumer perceptions when strength-related attributes are valued. However, Luchs et al. only investigate this issue with physical products. Whether or not similar interpretations will be found in services remains unknown.

According to World Bank [28], the era of the service economy is evidently on the rise. As income continues to grow, people tend to demand more services. Compared to agricultural and manufacturing industries, the service sector consumes fewer natural resources but more human capital, which might put less pressure on the environment and may be considered as more environmentally sustainable. The growth of the service economy might not harm the environment as much as other industries if service providers concentrate on sustainable development of their businesses. However, global economic development is largely dependent on the performance of service industry. Its productivity occupies more than 60% GDP of global economy, and has exceeded over 70% in developed countries. The importance of the services sector in the world is likely to increase. Thus, how consumers perceive sustainable services deserves more attention and is worth further investigation.

1.2 Research Objective

This current study extends the idea proposed by Luchs et al. to the service industry. Specifically, this study intends to investigate whether or not consumers view more ethical service providers as less capable of providing effective and satisfying services than less ethical ones. It is also the goal of this research to find out if consumers seek different benefits when purchasing various services. In addition to the above-mentioned ideas, this current research also attempts to investigate the role of personal values in consumer perceptions towards ethical services because previous studies suggest that values influence consumer buying behavior and preference [20] [27]. Hence, this research believes that consumer personal value is likely to influence their preferences towards sustainable services. It is proposed that consumer personal values will have an impact on the types of benefits sought in buying a service and further moderate the relationship between ethicality of a service and perceptions towards the service. It is assumed that when consumers care about values closely related to ethicality or caring for others, they will be more favorable towards services with

attributes of sustainability. On the other hand, when consumers care less about those values, the ethical attribute might actually diminish their favorable perceptions towards a service. Specifically, following rationale presented in Luchs et al., this current study assumes that consumers will perceive ethical service providers as less capable of providing effective service than less ethical ones.

In short, this study intends to achieve the following research objectives. First, it attempts to understand the impact of ethical attributes of services on consumer preferences and perceptions. Second, it aims to investigate if consumer personal values influence what benefits they seek from purchases of different services, as well as their impact on consumer buying decisions in the services context.

1.3 Expected Contribution

Findings of this current research are expected to help service providers understand the pros and cons of attaching ethical attributes to their services. If results show similar pattern as findings of the study conducted by Luchs et al., service providers need to be cautious when promoting sustainability as an attribute because consumers might associate high levels of ethicality with ineffective performance. However, this also presents challenges for service providers when they want to take more responsibility on sustainable development of their business. Whether or not and to what extent service providers should communicate the ethicality of their services will be an important issue worthy of discussion. Moreover, findings regarding influences of consumer personal values on the relationship between how they perceive ethical services and their preferences of those services can provide insights into the interaction between what consumers value and their behavioral intention. This might bring out questions regarding mismatches between what people claim to care about and how they actually behave.

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Potential Negative Effect of Ethicality on Product Preference

The modern philosophy of marketing has increasingly placed importance on the concept of corporate social responsibility, (CSR) which refers to the responsibility of enterprise for the impacts on society [4]. In order to meet the responsibility, enterprises should integrate social, environmental, ethical and human rights concerns into the business operations and core strategy [4]. Some enterprises view and understand CSR as the possible approach which may drive consumers' purchase decisions compared to traditional methods like manipulating price, quality and service of enterprise [25]. From 2010 survey of annual Goodpurpose study conducted by Edelman in U.S., it seems that consumers expect more from enterprise

nowadays. In the study, there were 86% of respondents agreed that “business needs to place at least equal weight on society's interests” as it does on its own interests[6]. Also, 63% of respondents said that they “expect brands to donate a portion of their profits to support a good cause[5].” Moreover, one study suggests that there are 30% of the U.S. adults population, which is about 70 million consumers are “new consumers” who constantly looking to align their actions with their ideals. The new consumers not only purchase products, but also look at the companies behind the products and they believe it is important to purchase from companies acting ethicality and responsibly [2].

In order to respond to the change of consumers, more and more companies devote significant resources to demonstrate their commitments toward ethical and socially responsible behavior [25]. For these companies, they can be classified into three different types of ethical business, business that donate parts of the profits to charity, business that apply and maintain ethical principles in every single business activity, and business that provide or produce ethical products and service [23]. For the third type of ethical business, Luchs et al. use the term “sustainable” to refer to products with positive ethical attributes, the attributes that reflect moral principles, which are related to various kinds of societal and environmental issues such as fair trade and humane treatment. For instance, Jack Aronowitz, an American Doctor invented a patch which can monitor blood sugar and levels so that the patients can reduce the painful daily needle stick test [23].

It seems quite nature that the products with positive ethical attribute would have more market share since they meet the consumers’ expectations, but Luchs et al. indicate that the truth is there is a gap between consumers’ attitude and behavior. Although 40% of consumers claim that they are willing to buy “green products,” only 4% actually do so. There is even a survey tells that CSR can lower purchase intension when products are high quality. However, on the other hand, they find that the market share of sustainable products is not always weak. They have relatively strong market share in categories such as personal care product. As a result, Luchs et al. suggest there is a new factor that also influence consumers’ preference toward sustainable products, which is the types of benefit consumers value in a given product category.

Luchs et al. try to figure out consumers’ perception toward products with ethical attributes. They first indicate that there is a 2001 nationwide survey of 1037 U.S. households, and consumers claimed that they associate a socially conscious company with attributes such as “safe,” “friendly,” and “protective” [9]. Luchs et al also do a survey on 23 MBA respondents, and get a result that almost half of the respondents think the ethical products “might be safer, healthier, and gentler than other products [17, p.19].” Statements like “ethical products are better for you, and “more gentle on a person’s body” are repeatedly shown in the

survey. Therefore, they propose that consumers associate ethicality with gentleness-related attributes, and further explain that “gentleness” refers to the cluster of attributes that provide consumers related benefits.

In order to strengthen the credibility of their findings, Luchs et al. claim that their findings are consistent with previous researches and literatures of organizational behavior and human relations. They point out that ethical leaders and managers have the characteristics of being compassion and caring [16], and compassion not only includes the ability of noticing pain, but also involves the ability to feel the pain [14]. As a result, Luchs et al. argue that ethicality is associated with being gentle, and a lack of ethicality is conversely associated with strength.

In fact, to further illustrate the idea of conflict between ethicality and strength, Luchs et al. propose that it also appears in some sociocultural messages and common expressions such as “nice guys finish last” and “to make an omelet, you have to break some eggs.” According to them, these sayings represent that the lack of morality is positively related to strength and success. In addition to common expressions and sayings, they also indicate that in the book *Why It's Hard to Be Good*, “rugged individualist” who is strong and tough, such as gangster and cowboy is one of the most enduring icons in North American culture [8]. They suggest that this can be also interpreted as an evidence of the existence of a conflict between ethicality and strength in sociocultural notions.

Furthermore, since people's behavior is influenced strongly by social perceptions and messages [18], Luchs et al. suggest that people would use prior experiences and knowledge which are derived from society to judge sustainable product. In other words, when people are judging the products, there is a positive association between ethicality and gentleness and negative association between ethicality and strength, which is transferred and derived from the domain of social judgments to the domain of product judgments.

Based on the previous inference, Luchs et al. purpose the first hypothesis that “consumers associate higher ethicality with gentleness-related attributes and lower ethicality with strength-related attributes [17, p.21].” Moreover, they propose that this kind of association influence consumer preference of sustainable products, which is depend on the benefit sought from consumers. Thus, the second hypothesis is “the effect of sustainability on product preferences is moderated by the type of benefit sought in the product category [17, p.22].”

Luchs et al. do an Implicit Association Test to test the first hypothesis. In the test, they show four categories of words and phrases to their respondents which are associated with ethical company, self-interest company, gentle products and strong products. And the respondents have to put these words under some category labels such as “Ethical Company or Strong Product” and “Self-Interested Company or Gentle Product.” The result of the test shows

that participants respond quicker when they classified words and phrases into the hypothesis-consistent categories. More specifically, the respondents put the words associated with ethical company and gentle products under the category label of “Ethical Company or Gentle Product” quicker than putting the words into hypothesis-inconsistent categories, which is “Self-interested company or Gentle Product.” As a result, Luchs et al. argue that the participants do implicitly associate higher ethicality with gentleness-related product attributes and lower ethicality with strength-related product attributes. The first hypothesis is being confirmed.

They later test on the second hypothesis in study 2. In the study, there is a pretest which asks the participants to rate the important characteristics (attributes of strong and gentle from implicit association test) to car shampoo and baby shampoo, and the result shows that gentle is more important than strong for baby shampoo, and strong is more important than gentle in car shampoo for participants. Hence, Luchs et al. use baby shampoo as a representative product in gentle product and car shampoo as a representative of a strong product. Afterwards, Luchs et al. show two different descriptions in each product to their participants. One describe brand A as a more ethical product rating by fake ethical organization, and the other describe brand B as a normal product which has no rating record. The respondents have to report their preference for both brands on a nine-point ranking scale. And in order to prevent the possibility that participants might present themselves as more ethical ones, half of the respondents have to rate for average consumer. The result of study 2 shows that participants have relatively higher preference for sustainable baby shampoo brand than car shampoo, which indicates that sustainability is more like an advantage when gentleness-related are valued more than strong-related attributes.

Strength-related value is further tested to strengthen the evidence of hypothesis 2 in study 3. They first ask the participants to rate the important characteristics to laundry detergent, and further use laundry detergent as the object to represent product with strength-related value because participants rate stronger factor more than gentle factor. The participants are asked to report their preference of two different brands of detergent on seven-point scale. One is sustainable claim detergent, and the other one has no claim about sustainability. Like study 2, half of the respondents are requested to rate for average person. And the result shows that participants have strong preference of less sustainable detergent. Hence, Luchs et al. indicate that the benefits of sustainability can be a disadvantage when strength is more valued than gentleness because the consumers have greater preference toward less sustainable brand.

As for study 4, the purpose is to find out if the marketers can overcome the implicit negative associations between ethicality and product strength. And the result shows that the sustainability liability would be weaker if the consumers are reassured that the sustainable

product is strong. Study 5 is an observational field study. They put two different hand sanitizers on the table near the entrance of business school, the green sanitizer contains ecofriendly image while the white sanitizer looks normal, and there is a researcher observe how the participants use the hand sanitizers during 11 hours. The result shows that a significant proportion of participants choose to use regular one when the researcher is not visible, while a significant proportion of participants choose to use the green one when the researcher is nearby. Therefore, this study shows that first, sustainability is a disadvantage for product which strength is especially valued. Second, people tend not to reveal this preference when they know that their behavior is being observed.

The research of Luchs et al. demonstrates that first, consumers associate ethicality with gentleness-related attributes, and lower ethicality with strength-related attributes. Second, sustainability can be “both marketing asset and liability.” It is actually determined by the types of benefits customers value in a given product category. That is, the type of the benefits sought from consumers has moderating effect on the relationship between sustainability and consumers’ preference. Specifically, sustainability can be marketing asset in the classifications in which gentleness is especially valued by the consumers, while it can also be a liability in categories in which strength is especially valued. Finally, consumers’ negative expectation toward sustainable products can be abated as long as the marketers stress the explicit information that the functions of sustainable products are as strong as regular ones.

2.2 The Relationship between Service and Ethicality

As mentioned before, Luchs et al. claim that “sustainable” is frequently used in industry that they prefer to use sustainable to refer to products with positive ethical attributes. Since the term sustainability is a central concept of this research, it needs to be further illustrated. Hopwood, Mellor and O’Brien [11] suggest that in broad sense, the development of sustainability is an attempt to considerate environmental and socio-economic issues with growing concerns. Therefore, in broad sense, we can say that any service which has combined environmental and socio-economic issues with its growth can be viewed as service with sustainability or ethicality. In fact, Hopwood et al further come up a classification of sustainable approaches into three groups, status quo oriented, reform oriented and transformation oriented. Hopwood et al. argue that these three groups are able to cover all approaches to sustainability. Therefore, we believe by illustrating the definition and the approaches of each group and providing the service examples may help to explain the relationship between service and ethicality.

Status quo oriented group refers to those who try to use relatively soft, or passive approach to maintain the current circumstances of lifestyle and ensure that is not disrupted by

environmental disaster or social crisis. Supporters of this group do see the need of change, but see no need to do fundamental change. Moreover, they believe that business is the driver towards sustainability. For this group of people, the approaches of increasing information, changing values, improving management techniques and operating new technology are the best methods to achieve sustainable development. For instance, Hopwood et al, view the World Bank as one of the organization in status quo oriented group because it believes traditional elements of strategy to advance growth can help to stable macroeconomic and reform a more friendly market environment, which make it an essence for reducing poverty.

As for reform oriented group, those who take reform approaches believe the essence of problem is the lack of information and knowledge. Fundamental change is not necessary for them. They believe the key is to reform the government because it plays a key role to advocate the idea of sustainability that it can help to push the pressure on business. The supporters of this group also focus on technology, good science and information. Basically, they believe technology can bring benefit to protect environment. In fact, Hopwood et al point out that this group is dominated by mainstream NGO experts and academics. Also, mainstream environmental groups are largely in this group such as Friends of the Earth. They work with business and government and promote solutions which create sustainability.

The third group transformation oriented group seeks for transform societies into profound sustainability. Reform is not enough for them. Therefore, they take more radical approaches to social development compared to other two groups. According to Hopwood et al, the “transformationists include those who focus either primarily on the environment or the socio-economic, and those who synthesize both [11, p.45].”

2.3 The Relationship between Values and Consumer Preference

The concept that values make much difference on human attitude and behavior has been widely accepted [20]. In fact, there are numerous studies investigating the evidences that values influence subsequent behavior, such as the relationship between values and participation in civil rights activities, and the relationship between values and cheating on examinations.

Before further going to the detail of the relationship between values and consumers' preference, the definition of value should be clarified first. Hitlin and Piliavin[13] tries to use both negative and positive approach, telling what values are not and what values are to provide a comprehensive meaning of value. They indicate that values are often conflated with attitudes, traits, norms and needs, but values are actually different from these four concepts. First of all, values are ideal concepts while attitudes focus more to social objects. Moreover, values are more abstract and durable than attitudes. Second, traits are enduring characteristics

which could be both negative and positive while values are enduring goals which are considered primarily positive. Third, norms, unlike values, contain the sense of “ought” that people feel pushed when they are acting under normative pressure. Also, compared to norms, values are typically measured as an individual-level construct though both of the values and norms are group level phenomenon. Forth, compared to values, needs influence people’s behaviors in different ways that needs imply biological influences. However, on the other hand, values imply the feature of social life. To sum up, values are different from the concepts of attitudes, traits, norms and needs.

Hitlin and Piliavin suggest that Kluckhohn’s[15]definition of values is the most influential one. According to Kluckhohn, “a value is a conception, explicit or implicit, distinctive of an individual or characteristic of a group, of the desirable, which influence the selection from available modes, means, and ends of action [15, p.395].” In addition to Kluckhohn’s definition, Hitlin and Piliavin also mention Rokeach’s definition of values as “a common definition”. Rokeach[21] defines a value as an “enduring perspective or prospective belief that a specific end state of existence or specific mode of conduct is preferred to an opposite end state or mode of conduct [21, p.15].” In fact, Hitlin and Piliavin further compare the definition of Kluckhohn and Rokeach, saying that “Rokeach sees values as give meanings to actions while Kluckhohn emphasizes action [13, p.362].” However, both of the definitions are related to human actions. Schwartz [24] actually summarizes literatures and gets five features of the definition of values. “A value is a (1) belief (2) pertaining to desirable end states or modes of conduct, that (3) transcends specific situations, (4) guides selection or evaluation of behavior, people, and events, and (5) is ordered importance relative to other values to form a system of value priorities (20).” To sum up, the relation between values and behavior is shown in above definitions.

2.4Rokeach Value Survey

The Rokeach Value Scale (RVS) is a scale which can measure two kinds of individual’s values, the terminal values and instrumental values. Rokeach[21] uses Gorsuch[10] point of view, “any value which is not the ultimate value could be considered an instrumental value” to explain the relationship between terminal values and instrumental values and the reason why there are two types of values in RVS. He also indicates that instrumental values and terminal values are separate yet functionally interconnected system because “all the values concerning modes of behavior are instrumental to the attainment of all the values concerning end-states [21, p.12].” He further defines terminal values as “individual’s desirable end-state of existence” while instrumental values as “individual’s desirable mode of conduct [21, p.7].”

Rokeach initially develop hundreds of both sets of values by literature review, Rokeach’s own

judgment, and interviews with students and non-students. Then Rokeach retain the last 18 items through his further judgment and empirical analysis after several years of research [3]. For the set of terminal values, it is composed of 18 terminal values or desired end of existence. On the other hand, the set of instrumental value is also composed of 18 instrumental values, or preferable modes of behavior [3]. In RVS, the respondents are expected to list the order of importance to 18 terminal and 18 instrumental values, number 1 refers to most important value and number 18 refers to the least important. Then the result will show the respondents' priorities of values. According to Rokeach [21], RVS is an all-purpose instrument for research on human values which is reliable, valid but simple that it is easy to understand by people aging from 11 to 90.

In fact, Rokeach also uses RVS to do numerous researches by himself. For instance, he finds that the ranking differences of salvation show behavioral differences of going to church and the attitudes toward religion. For the adults who go to church every week, the ranking of salvation is the third while is fifteenth for the adults who never attend church. Also, the value of world of beauty can help to distinguish artists from other profession groups that artists rank world of beauty much higher than other professional groups. He also finds that the value of imaginative, intellectual and logical can help to predict whether one will become a professor since academicians rank much higher on these three values than other adults.

TABLE 1. The Rokeach Value Surveys

Instrumental Values	Terminal Values
Ambitious	A comfortable life
Broad-minded	An exciting life
Capable	A sense of accomplishment
Cheerful	A world at peace
Clean	A world of beauty
Courageous	Equality
Forgiving	Family security
Helpful	Freedom
Honest	Happiness
Imaginative	Inner harmony
Independent	Mature love
Intellectual	National security
Logical	Pleasure
Loving	Salvation
Obedient	Self-respect
Polite	Social recognition

Responsible	True friendship
Self-controlled	Wisdom

2.5 The Impact of Values on Types of Benefits Sought from Consumer

Personal values are generally considered as major influence on human behavior, and RVS is an instrument which is widely used to measure person's value system. However, Howard [12] further supplements that values actually play the roles of "choice criteria" for consumers with terminal values leading choice among product classes and instrumental values leading choices among brands. Boote[1] later examined the model of Howard by investigating the purchase behavior of household appliances from 124 housewives, and he finds that terminal values are indeed related to the choice of product class while instrumental values are related to brand choice. Pitts and Arch [19] later examine whether consumers with different value structures use different criteria when selecting product. They divide the respondents into four groups, the first group ranks salvation, family security, and self-respect as most important terminal values and honest, loving and responsible the most important instrumental values. The second group ranks salvation, family security, happiness and freedom the most important terminal, and their important instrumental values are the same with first group. The third group is the only group that does not rank salvation as most important value. Salvation is the twelfth value and a sense of accomplishment is the third for them. Also, ambitious, capable, independent and intellectual are important instrumental values for the third group. As for fourth group, the value of wisdom is more important compared to other groups, and being courageous is the third terminal values. For the fourth group, the instrumental value of independence is relatively important and loving is relatively unimportant. Pitts and Arch further investigate if each group has different choices of criteria in selecting automobiles, underarm deodorants and travel attractions. For automobiles, style is less important in choosing automobile for people rank higher on a sense of accomplishment in first group. In second group, price is more important for those who rank higher on a world at peace. The third group considers luxury as important choice attributes. Style is also related positively to the terminal value of social recognition. For travel attraction, they find that in first group, the higher the ranking if intellectual, the more important is the educational attribute of the attraction. In second group, the more important the wisdom value, the more important are for educational and for the family choice criteria. Furthermore, for underarm deodorants, the positive relationship between the desire for a comfortable life and odor prevention is found in the third group. In fourth group, those who evaluate beauty as important value also tend to evaluate easy to use and nonirritating as important criteria.

Moreover, in the research of Erdem, A. Ben and Secil[7], they indicate the findings that there was a connection between personal values and desired consumer benefits, and the effect of

choice of values on what the respondents wanted most in life. In fact, they find that people who rank high importance to terminal values of comfortable life, exciting life, pleasure and social recognition care more about store status such as the class of clients, physical attractiveness of store, reputation for fashion and brands of the stores.

In short, several studies have demonstrated that “terminal values are used to determine the particular benefits desired by a customer, and are fundamental for generating criteria for choosing among product classes [12].”

2.6. Research Structure

This research extends the research of Luchs et al.[17] to service industry. Based on the research of Luchs et al. the relationship between ethical attributes and consumers’ preference is moderated by the types of benefit sought from consumers. However, as mentioned before, perceived values of individual will influence the types of benefit sought from consumer. The

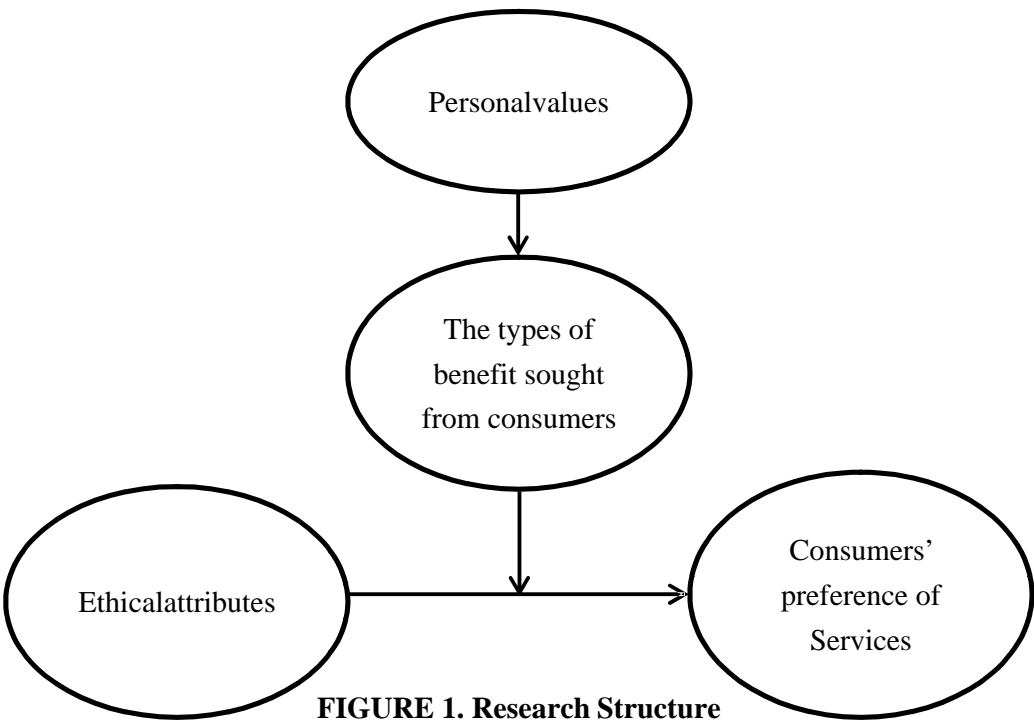


FIGURE 1. Research Structure

following picture is the structure of this research.

CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY

In order to examine research questions, experimental design will be employed to test proposed hypotheses. In the experiment, we will first conduct an association test, which will

ask the respondents to list attributes on which ethical service might be assumed to have better performance than less ethical service (ethical services are...). This helps to identify possible benefits that consumers are looking for when purchasing ethical services. The second step is Implicit Association Test. We will ask our respondents to match the words we get from association test with the descriptions of ethical companies and less ethical companies. The purpose of Implicit Association Test is to prove that our respondents do associate the attributes they listed in association test with ethicality. Afterwards, we will find two services with and without the attributes, and show our respondents the same descriptions in Implicit Association Test. They will need to rate how important each of the characteristic is to them when buying those two services. Then we will design two brands for both services, one will be described as more ethical and sustainable than the other. Half of our respondents have to show their preference for the two brands in both services on a nine-point rating scale, while the other half should rate for average people. We will also distribute Rokeach Values Scale to measure our respondents' personal values, and see if personal values are related to their service preference. A series of experimental procedures will then be carried out, and data will be collected. Statistical analyses will be conducted to analyze collected data.

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