

## **The Ethicality of Using Fear for Social Advertising**

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### **Abstract**

While a substantial body of literature has examined the effect of fear appeals in advertising, few, if any, studies have looked into the ethicality of using such threatening messages, particularly for socially desirable outcomes. In this paper, a review of the different theories of ethics leads to the development of an empirical study where the effects of using both physically and socially threatening messages to encourage juveniles to develop anti-smoking behavioural intentions were tested. Using the data collected from a convenience sample of about 250 undergraduates from the University of Adelaide, the results show that fear appeals may indeed be perceived as unethical, even when used for socially desirable purposes. Moreover, social threats were perceived as more unethical and generated less fear than physical threat, suggesting that their use may be counter productive with this type of population. Finally, ethicality did not appear to relate necessarily to change in behavioural intentions.

*Keywords: Fear appeal, Ethics, Anti-smoking advertisements*

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### **1. Introduction**

Advertisements using threatening messages generally vividly display the consequence of not conforming to the sponsor's recommendations (Spence and Moinpour, 1972; LaTour, Snipes and Bliss, 1996). Many studies posit that these threatening messages will lead to a desired behavioural change (e.g. Leventhal, Singer and Jones, 1965; Dabbs and Leventhal, 1966; Rippetoe and Rogers, 1987; Quinn, Meenaghan and Brannick, 1992; Brouwers and Sorrentino, 1993; Bagozzi and Moore, 1994; Bennett, 1996; LaTour et al., 1996; LaTour and Rotfeld, 1997). Despite the extensive use of threatening messages in advertising, however, the marketing literature has paid very little attention to the ethicality of such persuasive devices (Duke, Pickett, Carlson and Grove, 1993). To date very few, if any, research studies have investigated the ethicality of fear appeals when used for socially beneficial causes. The empirical study reported in this paper aims to fill this void.

The use of fear appeals raises several ethical issues. First, the use of threatening messages can create unnecessary anxiety among audience members (Spence et al., 1972; Duke et al., 1993; LaTour et al., 1996). This

issue reflects a large variety of personally subjective, and culturally based values and attitudes, making it somewhat difficult to define (Boddeyn and Kunz, 1991). Second, many critics consider the use of fear appeals unethical if the advertised solution does not eliminate the threat (Spence et al., 1972; Boddeyn et al., 1991; Quinn et al., 1992; Treise, Weigold, Conna and Garrison, 1994; LaTour et al., 1996; Shiv, Edell and Payne, 1997). Furthermore, critics argue that the use of threatening messages shows a lack of societal responsibility from advertisers as advertisements contribute to the development of social norms (Duke et al., 1993; LaTour et al., 1996). According to Spence and Moinpour (1972), advertising establishes and perpetuates the existence of social norms by reinforcing current social values and by hastening the speed of emerging social changes. Hence, advertising using fear may cause the emergence of previously unknown problems such as fear of the social rejection portrayed in some advertisements for deodorants. Supporters of fear appeals, on the other hand, argue that advertising is not the cause of these social norms but that it merely reflects the attitudes society already holds (Duke et al., 1993). Therefore, society's norms in relation to body odours

would condition, and justify, the portrayal of social rejection as a legitimate consequence of not using deodorants.

This study examines whether, and to what extent, these issues are perceived by consumers and in particular, whether different people perceive alternative types of threat differently. More specifically, the two main types of threats used in advertising, namely physical and social, are examined in this paper in relation to their acceptance by consumers, when used in the context of a socially desirable campaign against smoking. The paper begins with a review of the literature regarding the controversial issue of ethics and advertisers' use of threat. It then defines five hypotheses that will guide the empirical examination of this issue, before detailing the method adopted for collecting pertinent data. The results of our tests, comparing the ethicality of different advertisements and their potential effect on behavioural intentions, are then described and discussed in detail. The paper concludes with a discussion of the limitations of the study and the provision of directions for future research.

## **2. Ethical Theories of Moral Philosophy**

Whilst there is no simple explanation of why a particular advertisement is considered unethical, an examination of the ethical theories of moral philosophy is a good starting point. The numerous ethical theories in moral philosophy can be broadly grouped as teleology, deontology and relativism (Reidenbach and Robin, 1990; Boddewyn et al., 1991; Duke et al., 1993; Gould, 1994; LaTour et al., 1994; Snipes et al., 1999).

Teleological philosophies determine the moral worth of behaviour by its consequences. The moral weight of one's action is judged by the degree to which the result is the best result for all affected parties. The two most commonly discussed teleological theories are egoism and utilitarianism. The theory of egoism implies that individuals should focus solely on the consequences to themselves when making an ethical evaluation. If an evaluation considers all of society, then the theory is called utilitarianism (Reidenbach et al. 1990). Based on this approach to ethics, the 'end justifies the means', be it at the level of the individual or at that of society itself. A teleological examination of fear appeals used in anti-smoking messages, therefore, would suggest that they should pass the test of ethicality if they can be proved effective. If the fear is effective in stopping an individual from smoking, this individual will have benefited (by avoiding the health consequences of smoking) and so

will society (by saving the health costs associated with the treatment of this individual), and this should supersede any other ethical concern one may have against the use of fear appeals.

Deontological philosophies offer a contrasting view of moral reasoning. Deontology emphasises the importance of methods and intentions, ultimately judging individual acts by the nature of the act itself (Reidenbach et al., 1990; Boddewyn et al., 1991; Duke et al., 1993; Gould, 1994; LaTour et al., 1994; Snipes et al., 1999). This theory suggests that individuals have a duty to satisfy the legitimate needs of others. The use of fear appeals in advertising would be less likely to be considered ethical when using a deontological perspective. If the act of inspiring fear and anxiety is deemed harmful by its very nature and if the intrusive character of such messages makes it unacceptable by certain standards of common decency and respect for others, then fear appeals should not be used, regardless of their potential effectiveness in stopping some consumers from smoking.

The final category in this group of ethical theories is 'relativism'. The theory of relativism states that all normative beliefs are a function of a culture or individual and hence, no universal ethical rules exist that apply to everyone. Therefore, the values and behaviour of people in one culture would not necessarily govern the conduct of people in another (Reidenbach et al., 1990). According to this view, the use of fear appeals may be ethical in Western societies where familiarity with advertising would 'protect' smokers from the tacit aggression of the message but may not be in developing countries where the advertising message may be accepted less critically and therefore, cause greater amount of anxiety to smokers.

Of course, consumers are unlikely to refer to such conceptual frameworks when exposed to advertising messages. Indeed, Reidenbach and Robin (1988) found that individuals did not use clearly defined ethical theories in their evaluation of marketing activities. Hence, researchers should resist viewing teleology, deontology and relativism as mutually exclusive philosophies and, rather, should assume individuals use a variety of principles derived from these theoretical frameworks when making ethical assessments. Indeed, research should aim to identify whether these different approaches constitute so many dimensions of ethicality. This may be particularly useful when the object of the message is to foster a socially desirable behaviour such as quitting smoking.

### **3. Hypotheses**

La Tour and his colleagues (1996) found that advertisements using threatening messages are more likely to be perceived as ethical when fear is relevant to the advertised product. Furthermore, there are some cases in which fear appeals are advisable for both the advertiser and the consumer, such as those used for socially beneficial causes (e.g. alerting people to the dangers of smoking) (Treise et al., 1994). In these cases, the advertiser's interests are congruent with public interest; therefore, if a utilitarian view of moral philosophy is taken, these advertisements should not be considered unethical, regardless of whether the threat is physical or social. Hence, our first two hypotheses state:

*H1: Physically threatening advertisements will not be viewed as unethical when used for a socially beneficial cause such as quitting smoking.*

*H2: Socially threatening advertisements will not be viewed as unethical when used for a socially beneficial cause such as quitting smoking.*

Snipes et al. (1999) suggested that the use of extremely threatening messages may not be perceived as unethical if consumers feel that the recommended coping response (i.e. to quit smoking) will effectively eliminate the posed threat, be it social isolation or physical harm. This notion has received further empirical support (e.g. Spence et al., 1972; Quinn et al., 1992; LaTour et al., 1996); hence our third hypothesis examines the link between ethicality and the provision of a suitable coping response and states that:

*H3: Fear appeals will be considered more unethical if the recommended coping response is perceived as unable to eliminate the posed threat effectively.*

This study also examined the differences in fear generated between those advertisements perceived as the least ethical and those perceived as the most ethical. Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly from a marketing perspective, we examined whether the perceived ethicality of an advertisement influences behavioural intentions. Hence, our fourth and fifth hypotheses can be stated as:

*H4: The advertisements perceived as most unethical will not generate a significantly different degree of fear than those advertisements perceived as least unethical.*

*H5: The advertisements perceived as most unethical will not generate significantly different behavioural intentions than those advertisements perceived as least unethical.*

Finally, although results from previous cross-cultural studies of consumer ethics have been somewhat ambiguous, three recent empirical studies have suggested that differing cultures' perceptions of ethicality vary in strength (Small, 1992; Davis, Johnson and Ohmer, 1998; Rawwas, Patzer and Vitell, 1998). Hence, given that cultural background is believed to affect ethical sensitivity, we must test whether groups from different cultural backgrounds have different perceptions of ethicality, leading to our last hypothesis:

*H6: There will be differences in perceptions of ethicality between individuals of contrasting cultural background.*

### **4. Methodology**

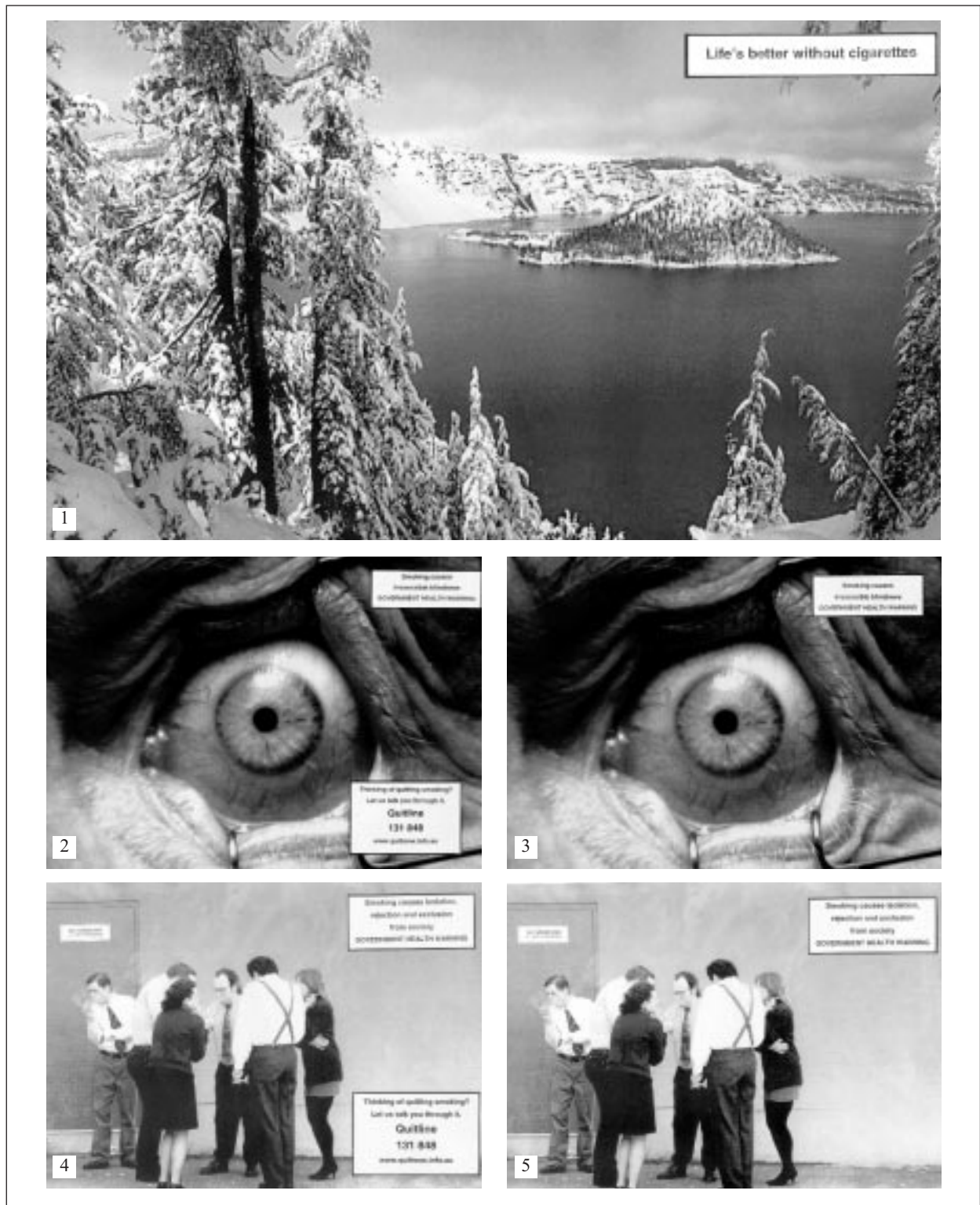
To test these hypotheses a quasi-experimental design was used. This consisted of participants randomly viewing one of six possible print advertisements, before answering a set of attitudinal questions.

#### **4.1 Data Collection**

A review of the marketing and psychology literature reveals that most research studies of fear appeals have been obtained through the use of a convenience sample (e.g. Maddux et al, 1983; Tanner, Hunt and Eppright, 1991; Brouwers et al., 1993). This has resulted in many samples that comprise American undergraduate college students. Although these are not probabilistic samples, convenience samples are often legitimised in marketing research if their results are not generalised beyond the boundaries of the subject profile (Zikmund, 1997).

The sample chosen for our study (undergraduates from the University of Adelaide) was also one of convenience, although the inclusion of primarily juvenile respondents is a valid choice given the importance of convincing them of the dangers of smoking before long-term health consequences occur. Moreover, the nature of the experimental design results in comparison being made between groups, which in part alleviates the need for samples to be representative (as demographic factors that are shared by the different treatment groups are secondary to the effects of the treatments). However, the nature of the sample used in this study will clearly demand that the results of this study be generalised only with great caution beyond the boundaries of the subject profile.

Questionnaires were shuffled before distribution, which resulted in random group assignments. The questionnaire was distributed during the first 15 minutes of a lecture and participants were requested not to answer it until



Figures 1 to 5: The ethicality of using fear for social advertising  
(The authors gratefully acknowledge the use of the advertising material provided by the National Tobacco Campaign of Australia for Figures 2 and 3, and by adbusters.org for Figures 4 and 5.)



instructed. Instructions stressed that all individual responses would be kept strictly confidential, for ethical reasons as well as to encourage honest and accurate answers. To simulate realistic conditions of exposure to the advertisements, respondents were informed to take only 15–20 seconds to examine the stimuli. Finally, the respondents were informed that they would be eligible to enter a draw to win \$50 after completing the questionnaire. This incentive was provided to encourage participation, to foster complete and accurate responses, and to offer a sign of appreciation.

A total of 248 questionnaires were completed, six of which were discarded because data that were considered crucial to the analysis were insufficiently provided. Within the remaining 242 questionnaires, there were 15 missing observations within multi-item measurement scales. To avoid the problems associated with missing observations, the missing values were replaced with estimates computed using the mean of the remaining items in the multi-item measurement scale. This was deemed appropriate since Cronbach's alpha, a measure of scale reliability, was relatively high for each scale concerned.

In terms of demographic profile, the age of our sample appeared typical of second and third year university students with 69% of the sample aged between 19 and 21. Forty-one percent of respondents were born overseas, the majority of whom came from an Asian country, and 15% of the sample indicated they smoked.

#### **4.2 Stimulus Advertisements**

A three (type of threat: control, physical, or social) by two (coping strategy: with or without) between subjects factorial design was used to test the five hypotheses previously listed. Despite the predominant use of television as the medium of choice for recent anti-smoking campaigns, print advertisements were used for this study as they could be cost-effectively replicated and manipulated for the experimental design. Print was also favoured because it permitted different treatments to be administered to individuals simultaneously. To avoid any preconceived attitudes about the advertisements used in the experiment, advertisements that had not been previously used in South Australia were selected.

By design, the advertisements for each treatment were as similar as possible, apart from the type of appeal used. This was to ensure that the attitudes measured were a response to the manipulations, rather than a response to the design of the advertisements. The stimuli used for

this study are shown in Figures 1 to 5. The control advertisement contained a scenic winter landscape, with the caption "Life's better without Cigarettes" in the top right hand corner. This advertisement was designed to arouse no emotion at all. The caption "Life's better without Cigarettes" was included to reduce any cognitive dissonance regarding the advertisement. Despite its use of a winter scenery featuring a lake and snow-covered trees, the control advertisement was not associated with the snowy mountain peaks of the Alpine brand by any of our pre-test subjects, probably because of the intrinsic difference between the types of landscape used as well as the relatively rare exposure of Australian consumers to Alpine promotional material.

The remaining advertisements all contained a Government Health Warning similar to those currently found on Australian cigarette packets and cigarette advertisements. An anti-smoking advertisement designed by the National Tobacco Campaign of Australia was manipulated for the purpose of developing a physically threatening advertisement. This advertisement stated, "Smoking causes irreversible blindness" and contained an extreme close up of a human eye. This picture was selected after pre-testing four available visuals provided by the Anti-Cancer Society of South Australia with a small group of undergraduate students who rated it as evoking greater fear. The physical threat with coping strategy was identical to the physical threat without coping strategy, apart from the inclusion of the coping information situated on the bottom right hand corner.

The socially threatening advertisements were developed by manipulating a parody of an existing cigarette advertisement obtained from the Adbuster website. These advertisements showed a small group of men and women forced outside to smoke and stated "Smoking causes isolation, rejection and exclusion from society." While this caption may be somewhat exaggerated and controversial, it was justified by the need to make the social threat as extreme as possible to match the level of the physical threat. The social threat with coping strategy was identical to the social threat without coping strategy, apart from the inclusion of the coping strategy information situated on the bottom right hand corner. Two experts in the field examined the appeals and agreed that all the treatment advertisements were believable and realistic. That is, the physically threatening advertisements posed a physical threat, and the socially threatening advertisements posed a social threat.

Table I: Measurement of Ethicality

When you viewed the previous advertisement, to what extent did you think the ad was:								
1) Fair	①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥	⑦	Unfair
2) Just	①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥	⑦	Unjust
3) Morally right	①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥	⑦	Not morally right
4) Acceptable to my family	①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥	⑦	Not acceptable to my family
5) Acceptable in my culture	①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥	⑦	Not acceptable in my culture
6) Traditionally acceptable	①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥	⑦	Not traditionally acceptable

### 4.3 The Questionnaire

The survey employed a self-administered questionnaire comprising many scales previously validated in research studies. The questionnaire was pre-tested with a convenience sample of 18 respondents representative of the final sample (the age of the sample ranged between 16 and 25, and 33% of the sample was Asian). The conditions under which the questionnaire was administered in the pre-test were very similar to those anticipated in the final experiment. As a result of the pre-test, however, the exposure time was increased to 20 seconds, scale anchors were standardised to use

‘strongly agree’ to ‘strongly disagree’ throughout, and the demographic section was moved to the back to improve the overall flow and completion rate of the questionnaire.

#### 4.3.1 Measurement of Ethicality

Traditionally, marketers have relied on a single-item measurement scale of ethics anchored by such phrases as ‘very ethical’ and ‘very unethical’. According to Herche and Engelland (1996), single-item measures may be adequate in measuring very specific and narrow constructs, but broad and complex constructs require

Table II: Rotated Component Matrix for Ethicality

	Component	
	1	2
Fair	0.151	0.907
Just	0.176	0.924
Morally right	0.490	0.632
Acceptable to my family	0.861	0.250
Acceptable to my culture	0.909	0.204
Traditionally Acceptable	0.854	0.155

Table III: Measurement of Fear

When you viewed the previous advertisement, to what extent did you feel:

	Not at all				Very much so		
a) Fearful	①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥	⑦
b) Tense	①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥	⑦
c) Nervous	①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥	⑦
d) Scared	①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥	⑦

more comprehensive measures. As the construct of ethics is complex in interpretation and not directly observable, multi-item measures were used in this study. As previously noted, Reidenbach et al. (1988) found that individuals use more than one ethical philosophy in making ethical evaluations of marketing activities. This finding led to the development of the Reidenbach-Robin multidimensional ethics scale which encompasses teleological, deontological and relativism philosophies. The scale is composed of three dimensions of ethical decision-making: a ‘moral equity’ dimension, related to issues of fairness and what is right and wrong; a ‘relativism’ dimension, concerned with social guidelines and influences as they impact on the individual; and a ‘contractualism’ dimension, concerned with the implied obligations (Reidenbach et al., 1990).

The moral equity dimension (consisting of the variables morally right/not morally right, fair/unfair, just/unjust, and acceptable to my family/ not acceptable to my family) comprises seven-point bi-polar adjective items and is based on lessons learned early in life from basic institutions (e.g. family and religion) (Reidenbach et al., 1990). The insights acquired from basic institutions are considered decisive in establishing what individuals consider to be decent or objectionable in advertising (LaTour et al., 1994). The moral equity dimension can be viewed as a composite dimension in the sense that it consists of variables based on all three philosophies used by Reidenbach and Robin.

The relativism dimension (consisting of the items culturally acceptable/not culturally acceptable, and traditionally acceptable/not traditionally acceptable) comprised seven-point bi-polar adjective items and

represented the guiding principles that influence the behaviour of society. Given the overlapping foundations of the ethical philosophy used in developing the scales, a high degree of correlation has been found between some dimensions. Indeed, the ‘moral equity’ and ‘relativism’ dimensions have also been shown to combine into a single comprehensive dimension in previous research (Reidenbach et al., 1988; Reidenbach et al., 1990). This suggests there is a relationship between what people see as culturally acceptable and what people see as just.

Reidenbach and Robin (1990) included a third dimension, ‘contractualism’, in their scale. This dimension (consisting of two bi-polar items ‘violates an unspoken promise/does not violate an unspoken promise’, and ‘violates an unwritten contract/does not violate an unwritten contract’) represents the notion of a social contract between an individual and society. Given that the Reidenbach–Robin multidimensional ethics scale was developed and validated using business practice scenarios, researchers have argued that the combined ‘moral equity’ and ‘relativism’ dimension is more suitable than the ‘contractualism’ dimension for use in an advertising study (LaTour et al., 1994; Snipes et al., 1999). For this reason, the ‘contractualism’ dimension was excluded from the current study.

Table I shows the items used in this study to measure the ethicality of advertisements. In previous studies, scales combining the moral equity and relativism dimensions have been shown to exhibit a relatively high correlation with a univariate measure of the ethical content of situations, indicating its relatively high degree of convergent validity (Reidenbach et al., 1988; LaTour et al., 1994; Stangor, 1998). Previous studies have also

Table IV: Measurement of Response Efficacy\*

For a smoker, giving up cigarettes will eliminate the chance of suffering from irreversible blindness.

Strongly disagree	①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥	⑦	Strongly agree
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For a smoker, giving up cigarettes will eliminate the chance of suffering from isolation, rejection and exclusion from society.

Strongly disagree	①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥	⑦	Strongly agree
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\* We used the first item here for respondents exposed to physical threats treatments and the second item for respondents exposed to social threat treatments

found that a single comprehensive scale has a high degree of reliability (Reidenbach et al., 1988; LaTour et al., 1994; Stangor, 1998).

Exploratory factor analysis was conducted to establish the validity and dimensionality of the ethicality scale. As indicated in Table II, Varimax rotation extracted two components consisting of all items. However, Component 1 was heavily weighted towards the relativism dimension (consisting of the items culturally acceptable/not culturally acceptable, and traditionally acceptable/not traditionally acceptable) and explained 59% of the variation in the data, while Component 2 was heavily weighted towards the moral equity dimension (consisting of the variables morally right/not morally right, fair/unfair, and just/unjust) and explained 21% of the variation in the data.

Interestingly, the item ‘acceptable to my family’ did not load on the moral equity dimension as in Reidenbach and Robin’s (1990) study, but loaded strongly on the relativism dimension. As Reidenbach and Robin (1990) indicated that a panel of three experts in moral philosophies defined the item ‘acceptable to my family’ to be a relativist item within the moral equity dimension, its inclusion as part of the relativism dimension seemed justified. Furthermore, as family plays a vital role in

many Asian cultures, and since Asians constituted some 31% of our sample, it seemed valid to include this item within our relativism dimension.

Cronbach alphas revealed the reliability for the relativism and the moral equity dimensions to be 0.83 and 0.89 respectively, indicating a high degree of internal consistency among the scale items and suggesting they belong to the same domain of content. As expected, the two dimensions were strongly and positively correlated; the correlation coefficient was 0.512 (p=0.000). Hence, an overall ethicality index was created for our initial analysis (H1 to H5) combining the scores for all 6 items. For H6, however, a closer investigation of cultural differences in perceived ethicality justified the use of the two latent dimensions of the ethicality construct when comparing samples of contrasting cultural backgrounds. Hence, individuals’ scores on each of the final three seven-point items were summed up to measure the relativism dimension. Similarly, individuals’ scores on the first three items were summed up to measure the moral equity dimension.

4.3.2 Measurement of Fear

The Maheswaran and Meyers-Levy (1990) index measurement scale was developed to measure the fear a

Table V: Measurement of Behavioural Intentions

Within the next two weeks I will quit smoking, or encourage a smoker to quit smoking.

Likely	①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥	⑦	Unlikely
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Table VI: Normality Tests for Ethicality

Treatments	Statistic	Sig.
Control advertisement	0.948	0.064
Physical threat	0.972	0.458
Physical threat w/ coping strategy	0.981	0.742
Social threat	0.948	0.058
Social threat w/ coping strategy	0.965	0.311

person reports feeling about some stimulus (cited in Bruner and Hensel, 1996). The validity and reliability of this scale was pre-tested with a sample of 47 commerce undergraduates from the University of Adelaide. Factor analysis indicated the reliability of the scale could be improved by removing ‘reassured,’ ‘relaxed,’ and ‘comforted’, the three reversed-mood adjectives. Table III indicates the items used to measure fear in this study. The level of fear a respondent felt was determined by compiling a ‘fear index’, calculated as the sum of their answers to the four seven-point response items. A high score on this index indicated that the respondent experienced a high degree of fear in reaction to the stimulus, a low score suggested the respondent felt no fear at all. A Cronbach alpha of 0.94 indicated a high degree of scale reliability.

*4.3.3 Measurement of Coping Response Efficacy*

The scale developed to measure ‘response efficacy’ was

adapted from Rogers and Mewborn’s (1976) study of fear appeals. Both questions were worded in an identical manner to reduce response error resulting from the wording of the questions. As indicated in Table IV, both questions began with, “For a smoker...” to meet the need of our sample that comprised both smokers and non-smokers. Respondents were required to give their answer on a seven-point response scale anchored by “strongly agree” and “strongly disagree,” and the answer coded was the one that addressed the threat the individual faced.

*4.3.4 Measurement of Behavioural Intentions*

The measurement scale constructed to measure behavioural intentions was adapted from Rippetoe et al.’s (1987) study. Again, as indicated in Table V, the wording of the question was adapted to account for both smokers and non-smokers. Respondents were required to give their answer on a seven-point response scale anchored by “strongly agree” and “strongly disagree.”

Table VII: Independent Sample T-Tests Significance Values for Ethicality

Treatments	Mean	Std. Dev.	(C1)	(P2)	(P3)	(S4)	(S5)
(C1) Control advertisement	17.37	6.96	-				
(P2) Physical threat	19.32	7.07	0.182	-			
(P3) Physical threat w/ coping strategy	18.63	6.14	0.351	0.610	-		
(S4) Social threat	21.00	7.08	0.013	0.246	0.079	-	
(S5) Social threat w/ coping strategy	20.45	6.84	0.032	0.428	0.169	0.697	-

Table VIII (a): Descriptive Statistics

Treatments	Fear		Response Efficacy		Behavioural Int.	
	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.
Control advertisement	5.13	2.75	-	-	3.13	2.13
Physical threat	12.89	6.25	3.70	1.93	3.51	2.18
Physical threat w/ coping strategy	12.49	6.78	3.84	1.70	3.04	1.81
Social threat	8.16	4.85	3.04	1.60	2.76	1.97
Social threat w/ coping strategy	8.16	5.63	3.33	1.63	2.98	2.18

**5. Results and Discussion**

The reliability of the overall ethicality measurement scale was examined using Cronbach’s alpha. Cronbach’s alpha was 0.86, which indicated a high degree of internal consistency among the scale items and suggested that they all belong to the same domain of content. In addition, this reliability measure compared favourably to those reliability measures obtained in other marketing research studies (Reidenbach et al., 1990; LaTour et al., 1994). Furthermore, as indicated in Table VI, Shapiro Wilk tests for normality were conducted and revealed all five treatments were normally distributed at the 95% significance level.

Independent sample t-tests were considered appropriate since different participants were exposed to only one of the different treatments and because the treatments were

normally distributed. For each treatment, the significance value for the Levene’s test ranged between 0.305 and 0.921. These are relatively high significance values ( $p > 0.05$ ), allowing the assumption of equal variance to be made for all groups. Table VII displays the significance values for the independent sample t-tests. Significant differences were found between the control advertisement and both social threat advertisements ( $p < 0.05$ ). Thus, according to the independent samples t-tests, we can reject Hypothesis 2, and conclude with 95% confidence that the social threat advertisements were viewed as more unethical than the control advertisement, even when used for socially beneficial causes. Since no other significant differences were found, we cannot reject Hypothesis 1, and must conclude that the physical threat advertisements were not viewed as more unethical than the control advertisement.

Table VIII (b): Mann Whitney U Tests Significance Values for Manipulation Checks

Treatments	Fear	Response Efficacy	Behavioural Intentions
Physical threat $\leftarrow \rightarrow$ Social threat	0.000	0.116	0.101
Physical threat $\leftarrow \rightarrow$ Social threat w/ coping strategy	0.000	0.399	0.193
Physical threat w/ coping strategy $\leftarrow \rightarrow$ Social threat	0.001	0.022	0.297
Physical w/ coping strategy $\leftarrow \rightarrow$ Social w/ coping strategy	0.000	0.138	0.545

Table IX (a): Multivariate and Univariate Analysis of Variance Results

95% Confidence Interval								
Dimension	Treatment	Birth	Mean	Std. Dev.	No.	Std. Error	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Moral Equity	Control advertisement	Australian	10.96	3.33	33	0.592	9.79	12.12
		Asian	9.33	3.55	12	0.981	7.4	11.27
		Total	10.52	3.43	45			
	Physical threat	Australian	9.85	3.19	27	0.654	8.56	11.14
		Asian	11.71	3.63	14	0.908	9.92	13.5
		Total	10.49	3.42	41			
	Physical threat with coping strategy	Australian	9.46	4.13	28	0.642	8.2	10.73
		Asian	9.28	2.92	17	0.824	7.66	10.91
		Total	9.40	3.69	45			
	Social threat	Australian	9.93	2.89	28	0.642	8.66	11.19
		Asian	12.80	3.44	16	0.85	11.13	14.47
		Total	10.97	3.37	44			
	Social threat with coping strategy	Australian	10.22	3.48	27	0.654	8.93	11.51
		Asian	12.06	3.23	16	0.85	10.39	13.74
		Total	10.91	3.47	43			
Total	Australian	10.12	3.42	143				
	Asian	11.09	3.56	75				
	Total	10.45	3.49	218				
Relativism	Control advertisement	Australian	7.33	4.24	33	0.72	5.91	8.75
		Asian	7.25	4.03	12	1.195	4.89	9.61
		Total	7.31	4.14	45			
	Physical threat	Australian	8.07	4.10	27	0.796	6.5	9.64
		Asian	11.93	4.08	14	1.106	9.75	14.11
		Total	9.39	4.45	41			
	Physical threat with coping strategy	Australian	7.93	3.99	28	0.782	6.39	9.47
		Asian	11.59	4.29	17	1.004	9.61	13.57
		Total	9.31	4.44	45			
	Social threat	Australian	8.04	3.28	28	0.782	6.49	9.58
		Asian	13.63	4.73	16	1.035	11.59	15.66
		Total	10.07	4.69	44			
	Social threat with coping strategy	Australian	8.15	4.50	27	0.796	6.58	9.72
		Asian	11.56	4.30	16	1.035	9.52	13.6
		Total	9.42	4.68	43			
Total	Australian	7.88	4.00	143				
	Asian	11.39	4.64	75				
	Total	9.09	4.54	218				

Table IX (b): Multivariate and Univariate Analysis of Variance Results for Ethics

Multivariate Tests				
	Effect	Pillai's Trace F Statistic	df	Sig.
	Treatment	3.15	8	0.002
	Birth	15.66	2	0.000
	Treatment * Birth	1.86	8	0.064
Tests of Between-Subjects Effects				
Source	Dependent Variable	Univariate F Statistic	df	Sig.
Treatment	Moral Equity	2.33	4	0.058
	Relativism	3.78	4	0.005
Birth	Moral Equity	3.83	1	0.052
	Relativism	30.66	1	0.000
Treatment * Birth	Moral Equity	2.71	4	0.031
	Relativism	2.31	4	0.059

Past researchers have indicated that fear appeals may be perceived as more unethical if consumers believe the recommended coping response will not effectively eliminate the posed threat (Snipes et al., 1999, Spence et al., 1972; Quinn et al., 1992; LaTour et al., 1996). An examination of the manipulation checks, shown in Tables VIII (a and b), reveals only one significant difference ( $p=.022$ ) between the ability of the coping response to eliminate the threat of irreversible blindness (in the physical threat with coping strategy treatment) and the threat of exclusion from society (in the social threat without coping strategy). In all other cases, there was no significant difference between the perceived ability of quitting smoking to eliminate the threat of blindness and that of suffering social rejection or isolation. This result was unexpected as the threat of irreversible blindness can be backed by medical evidence, while the threat of rejection, isolation and exclusion from society could be argued. However, this provides support for Hypothesis 3, given that the social threat advertisement was perceived as significantly more unethical than the control advertisement (see H2), while the physical threat in coping strategy advertisement was not (see H1).

Furthermore, as shown in Table VIII (b), the social threat advertisements generated significantly less fear than the

physical threat advertisements, even though the social threats were viewed as significantly more unethical than the control advertisement ( $p<0.05$ ). This provides support for Hypothesis 4 and suggests individuals consider other significant factors when making a moral judgement of a fear appeal. In today's egalitarian society, for example, it is possible individuals consider it unethical to persecute others by highlighting the social implications of their habit. On the other hand, it appears that highlighting the physical effects that smoking causes was seen as ethical, as these messages do not discriminate, and if used effectively, may save lives.

As also indicated in Table VIII (b), there was no significant difference in behavioural intentions between the physical threat and social threat advertisements, even though the social threat advertisements were viewed as significantly more unethical than the control advertisement ( $p<0.05$ ) while the physical threat advertisements were not. This provides partial support for Hypothesis 5 and suggests the perceived ethicality of an advertisement is not necessarily related to a change in behavioural intentions.

To examine our last hypothesis, our data set was manipulated to provide only two distinct cultural sub-groups, Australian-born and Asian-born. While it is clear

that different Asian countries have a distinctive and unique culture, they also tend to rate similarly in terms of Hofstede's (1984) cultural dimensions, justifying a grouping of respondents from Asian countries into one single group for the purpose of comparison with the Australian-born subjects. Our Asian-born sample comprised a total of 75 respondents who indicated their country of birth as Malaysia (48), Singapore (11), Hong Kong, (9) Sri Lanka (4) or China (3). A further 24 respondents, who had indicated they were born in neither Australia nor Asia, were therefore excluded from the rest of the analysis, leaving a total usable sample of 218 respondents.

Before proceeding to any further analysis, the data set was once again checked for normality. Shapiro Wilk tests for normality revealed that all five treatments were no longer normally distributed at the 95% significance level. This suggests analyses that rely on the assumption of normality (including MANOVAs) should be used with caution. However, to address some of the potential problems associated with non-normal data, we used Pillai's Trace criterion, considered to be the most robust statistic against violations of assumptions.

To examine the nature of the influence of culture on perceptions of ethicality, we used the two latent dimensions of ethicality, namely relativism and moral equity, and undertook multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA), the results of which are shown in Tables IX (a and b). We also examined the significance of the interaction between exposure to treatment and country of birth.

As can be seen from Table IX (b), significant multivariate effects were observed for treatment and country of birth, allowing us to interpret the univariate between subject effects also given in Table IX (b). An examination of the univariate F tests for each dependent variable indicates which individual dimension of ethicality contributed to the significant multivariate effect. To evaluate these effects, we used a Bonferroni-type adjustment to decrease the chance of type 1 error. The simple formula we applied is  $\alpha/\text{number of tests}$ ; hence the adjusted alpha is equal to 0.025 (Coakes and Steed 2001). Using this alpha, a significant univariate main effect for the relativism dimension was found in relation to treatment and birth ( $p < 0.025$ ). However, the relativism dimension was not found to be significant in relation to the interaction effect. No significant main effects were found for the moral equity dimension. As a result, we conclude H6, that culture influences perceived ethicality, is strongly supported by our findings. More

specifically, country of birth influences the relativism dimension of ethicality.

## **6. Conclusions, Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

The results of this study suggest social threat advertisements may be considered unethical even when used for socially beneficial causes. This should act as a warning to marketers, cautioning them against the indiscriminate use of social threats in advertisements. This is particularly so, given the results of Shore and Gray's (1999) research, which found that social threats were no more effective than physical threats to discourage drink driving, questioning earlier findings by Schoenbachler and Whittler (1996) in the case of anti-drug messages.

Furthermore, our study did not find a relationship between the amount of fear an advertisement generates and its perceived ethicality. Hence, marketers should consider carefully the use of threat in general when designing their advertising, as it is difficult to identify which specific factors individuals will consider when making an ethical judgement. Finally, our results suggest that the relativism dimension of ethicality is more relevant than the moral equity dimension when trying to understand cultural differences in perception of ethics, a useful finding for international marketers seeking to pre-test their advertising messages. Indeed, our findings emphatically demonstrate the importance of pre-testing threatening messages before launching any advertising campaign aimed at combating undesirable behaviour.

As is often the case in studies of this kind, a number of limitations must be acknowledged. First, this study relied on a convenience sample of undergraduate students who are not necessarily representative of the broader population. While the focus on juveniles in previous research and the demographic profile of our sample made a comparison of our results with previous studies possible, future research should clearly aim to ensure that a broader and more representative sample of juveniles are included, possibly by using a snow-balling technique or random sampling at youth events. Second, the lecture theatre setting and experimental procedure may have produced a degree of 'forced exposure', even though they also allowed the researchers a degree of control unachievable in more realistic conditions. A third weakness of the current study is that the findings were based on self-reported measures of attitude change. Evans, Rozelle, Lasater, Dembroski, and Allen (1970)



suggested that actual behavioural change and reported behavioural intentions do not necessarily correspond. This may be partly explained by the fact that the effects of fear dissipate rapidly over time (Leventhal et al., 1965; Evans, et al., 1970).

Another possible methodological concern stems from the stimulus advertisements used. First, print may not be the most effective medium for generating an emotional response. Hence, the amount of fear generated by our treatments was limited. Future research should take advantage of other forms of communications that generate a greater amount of fear to determine whether they are still considered unethical. A second concern was the mention of isolation in the socially threatening advertisements used in the experiment, as these depicted a small group of smokers, which may not be congruent with isolation. Hence, an advertisement containing a single smoker standing outside should be used in any replication of this study.

Finally, cigarette smoking poses many threats, not just the two (irreversible blindness and exclusion from society) used in the study. As most individuals are already aware these threats exist, they may have already developed ways of coping, other than those proposed in our treatments. It is also likely that smokers perceived the threatening stimuli differently from non-smokers. Indeed, the smaller than expected number of smokers in our sample precluded any segmented analysis of their response to the treatments. For example, we were unable to split the sample between smokers and non-smokers as cell size became as low as 3 or 4. In any replication of this study, future research should address this area by ensuring a balance between smoking and non-smoking respondents. This may be achieved by targeting outdoor venues where smoking by juveniles may be prevalent (such as skateboard facilities, or alfresco meeting places).

Overall, our results indicate that fear appeals may be viewed as unethical by consumers, even when used for socially beneficial causes. Interestingly, the advertisements perceived as most unethical did not generate the greatest amount of fear, suggesting there are other significant factors that individuals consider when making a moral judgement of a fear appeal. Future research studies should investigate the relationship between the perceived ethicality of fear appeals and their capacity for persuasion.

Our finding that culture influences only one dimension of perceived ethicality is new and interesting for practitioners and academics alike. Whilst previous

research agreed that culture influences ethics, no attempt had been made to date to investigate specifically how the response to fear appeals by two different groups of contrasting cultural backgrounds would be affected. That only relativism, and not moral equity, was the source of significant difference between groups of different culture should act as a warning to organisations seeking to use 'imported' social marketing campaigns when only local pre-testing of such messages will allow the determination of whether the campaign is perceived as ethical by its intended audience.

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