Do Business Ethics and Ethical Decision Making Still Matter: Perspective of Different Generational Cohorts

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Abstract

Background: Research in business ethics shows that individual differences can influence one's ethical behaviour. In addition, variability in attitudes towards ethical issues among different generations is emphasized. Still, results are inconclusive and call for an additional examination of possible generational differences with regard to ethics and ethical values. **Objectives:** Our objective is to test if the perception of the importance of business ethics, attitudes towards ethical issues and aspects influencing ethical behaviour, differ among the four generations currently present in the workforce. **Methods/Approach:** Theoretical implications are empirically tested on a sample of 107 individuals, members of Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials and Generation Z. **Results:** In general, the results indicate that there are little or no generational differences related to the analysed aspects of business ethics. The significant difference is present only in the importance given to factors that influence ethical decision-making: (i) formal rules and procedures, (ii) performance management system and (iii) job pressures, between the members of Generation Z and older generations. **Conclusions:** In spite of employee diversity, ethics continues to present an important aspect of the business environment. Thus, organizations need to be oriented towards creating ethical leaders and a positive ethical climate that ensures that ethical values and behaviours are present throughout the organization.

Keywords: business ethics, ethical decision making, generations
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Introduction

Because of major business scandals and crises, business ethics has been under the spotlight of not only academics and scientists but also business practitioners and professionals for the last decades. Significant efforts have been done in theoretically and empirically exploring different aspects of business ethics, ethical decision-making, and development of business curricula aimed at enhancing knowledge of this important interdisciplinary scientific field.

The imperative of a successful organization calls for the "clutter" of ethics and profitability. As a part of general and practical ethics, business ethics focuses on moral or ethical principles and issues that occur in the business environment, providing judgments as to good and bad, right and wrong, acceptable and non-acceptable, and what ought to be (Singh et al., 2018). It reflects the ethical choices made by stakeholders in the realization of certain activities and examines the application of personal norms in relationships between employees, managers, business entities, and the environment (Vujić et al., 2012, p. 48). In the centre of its inquiry, there are balanced and strong relations between personal, legal and social ethics and the consequences of decisions on certain structures of society and the business system as a whole. In the end, as Gerde et al. (2019, p. 916) stress, business ethics is aimed at connecting ethics and the economy to achieve general welfare.

However, it is difficult to implement the concept of ethics as it contains the idea of universality or equality in the applicability of the rules. What ethics and ethical behaviour are for one organization or an individual, in one country and culture can be completely unimaginable for another organization, individual, in another country and culture. Ethical behaviour and ethical decision-making are under the influence of many individual attributes and organizational, social and cultural environments (Loe et al., 2000; Kish-Gephart et al., 2010; Ma et al., 2012), and they need to be acknowledged.

When it comes to individuals, as Ma et al. (2012) emphasize ethics is the result of the process of moral development. This process can be under the influence of many personal experiences as well as situational factors that shape one's behaviour. The generational theory emphasizes accordingly that individual ethics and ethical values are strongly influenced by common political, social, and historical events that were significant for a group of people born and living at a certain timeline (VanMeter et al., 2012), the so-called generations. Each generation develops consequently their distinctly personal and works values, thus potentially leading to differences regarding ethical values and ethical behaviour. Previous reports (Verschoor, 2013), as well as empirical results of specific generation ethical ideology (e.g. VanMeter et al., 2013), do indicate variability in attitudes towards ethical issues among different generations. Still, there is a lack of empirical support that differences truly exist (Costanza et al., 2015).

Therefore, within this paper, we wanted to test if members of different generations do show distinct attitudes to several aspects of business ethics and ethical decision-making. More specifically, our objective is to test if the perception of the importance of business ethics, different attitudes towards ethical issues and towards aspects influencing ethical behaviour, as well as towards pressures for unethical behaviour, differ among the four generations in the current workforce. Theoretical implications have been empirically tested on a sample of individuals, members of Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials and Generation Z.

After the introduction, the paper provides an overview of business ethics and ethical decision-making, their main approaches as well as their distinct contribution and role in business and organizational context. This is followed by an analysis of the current theoretical framework and empirical work on generational differences concerning ethical values. The empirical part refers to methodology and presents the main research results. Discussion of research results, research limitations, future research direction, and final remarks conclude the paper.

Literature review

Ethics in the organizational context

In general, ethics can be defined as the systematic reflection on values and norms: their content and changes, and their meaning, justification, and determination (Becker, 2019, p. 15). In the business environment, business practices were first developed in trade, and in the beginning, they were just the customs that eventually became the rules of conduct. With the development of the world economy and the emergence of an industrial revolution, trade laws were introduced for each particular country, and different laws were passed that defined the rules of business conduct at that time. The period between the two world wars was marked by the adoption of different codes of conduct in certain activities, while after 1945 much of the business conduct was regulated by the rules and directives of the United Nations Organization. The study of ethics in business began in the 1950s (Mladenovic et al., 2019) as this is the period when workers began to fight for their rights. The mid-1980s and early 1990s witnessed advancements in the field, as many theoretical models applying ethics while making decisions were developed (O'Fallon et al., 2005). With globalization, business ethics gained a new dimension, and a large number of companies in their business increasingly include a code of ethics and emphasize their social responsibility (Aleksić, 2007).

van Luijk (1997, p. 1579) definitions of business ethics captures the essence of today's ethics, defining it as"a social configuration, consisting of a mixture of shared basic concepts, well-tested methods of moral analysis, local customs in commercial transactions and employment policies, historically grown assumptions on fairness, decency and misdemeanor, long-term positions of power and influence, and specific market constraints and opportunities". The ultimate mission is to provide guidance and in terms of ethics to enrich activities and decisions at the personal, organizational and systemic levels and their interconnections (De George, 1987; Enderle, 2018).

It needs to be emphasized that ethics and morality are often considered interrelated with corporate social responsibility and somehow interdependent (Joyner et al., 2002). However, as O'Ferrell et al. (2019, p. 492) emphasize ethics is considered to be"more related to individual and social unit decision making while corporate social responsibility relates more to the impact on stakeholders."

Ethics has received growing attention among employees as well as employers, as it is seen as a certain signpost that directs their professional and personal success, but also influences overall organizational performance (Joyner and Payne, 2002; Lipska et al., 2019). Besides, in the end, ethics can help improve company image and bring various benefits to different stakeholders like investors, employees, consumers, local communities and actors on the labour market (Lipska et al., 2019).

Study of ethics in business has expanded into two main streams (i) normative ethics, providing individuals with guidelines, principles, and norms how they should behave, and mostly residing in moral philosophy and theology and (ii) descriptive, empirical

ethics concerned with explaining and predicting individual actual behaviour, residing mostly in the management field (O'Fallon et al., 2005).

The ethical decision, in general, is seen as a decision that in terms of legal and moral requirements is suitable to a larger society (Jones, 1991). Ethical decision-making includes the perception of a moral problem, the process of moral reasoning and moral behaviours (Ma et al., 2012).

The starting point for business ethics is primarily from organizational managers and leaders who present a key to creating an ethical climate in their organization. When ethical leaders fairly treat their employees and exhibit a high level of ethical conduct, they provide examples for their employees; create a positive ethical climate and a sense of obligation for their employees to reciprocate similar behaviour (Babalola et al., 2019). Furthermore, employees' perception of their leader's ethics can be seen as a strong predictor of ethical practice (Greenwood et al., 2018). In addition to these informal ways, managing business ethics in organizations includes the following formal components (Crane et al., 2004, p. 144): (i) company values, (ii) code of ethics, (iii) reporting and counselling lines, (iv) ethical managers, employees, and committees, (v) ethical consultants, (vi) ethical education and training, (vii) reporting, accounting, and auditing. Research (e.g. Trevino et al., 1999) shows that although formal programs and components can have a positive impact, these programs were found to be relatively unimportant when compared to informal ones.

Generational cohorts' differences and ethics

Special attention in the study of ethics is on individuals and their behaviour when faced with ethical issues and decision making, where individual differences have been often analysed and seen as a possible factor contributing to deviations in ethical behaviour. For example, gender is one of the most studied individual variables, with results indicating no or very few gender differences (e.g. Loo, 2013) or found men less ethical than women (e.g. Arlow, 1991; Glover et al. 2002,). Research on age has also produced mixed results (e.g. O'Fallon et al., 2005).

The emergence of generational theory brought new interest into individual factors and raised the question if one generation, as opposed to previous generations, has distinct and novel attitudes and aptitudes towards ethics that are a result of their environment (Oblinger, 2003). Generation presents an identifiable group that shares specific events (Kupperschmidt, 2000). These specific events have influenced that individuals from identifiable groups have similar work and personal values, eventually affecting their work behaviour and work-related outcomes.

Distinguishing features of generational cohorts engaged in the current labour market and their presumed values are presented in the following Table. An earlier generation, the veteran generation (born till 1940) as well as alpha generation (born after 2010) are not included in the analysis.

As regard to ethics and ethical values, research (e.g. Boyd, 2010; van der Walt, Jonck et al., 2016) suggests generational differences in perception of ethical and unethical behaviours as well as facets of work ethics. Furthermore, the literature suggests in terms of work ethics, older generations give higher emphasis on it than the younger generation. Zabel et al. (2017) in their paper stress how previous research, for instance, showed Baby boomers incline more towards ethics, as opposed to Millennials (generation Y) and in most cases as opposed to Generation X members. VanMeter et al. (2012) in their research support the notion that specific generation Y values affect their ethical ideologies and the way they will behave regarding workplace ethical norms and standards.

Table 1
Characteristics of generational cohorts

Generation	Baby – boomer 1940-1959	Generation X 1960-1979	Millennials (Generation Y) 1980-1994	Generation Z 1995-2010
Context	Postwar	Political transition Capitalism and meritocracy dominate	Globalization Economic stability Emergence of internet	Mobility and multiple realities Social networks Digital natives
View	Communal, unified thinking	Self-centred and medium-term	Egotistical, short term	No sense of commitment, be happy with what you have and live for the present
Aim	Solid existence	Multi-environment, Secure position	Rivalry for the leader position	Live for the present
Self-realization	Conscious carrier building	Rapid promotion	Immediate	Questions the need for it at all
Values	Patience, soft skills, respect for traditions, EQ, hard work	Hard work, openness, respect for diversity, curiosity, practicality	Flexibility, mobility, broad but superficial knowledge, success orientation, creativity, freedom of information takes priority	Live for the present, rapid reaction to everything, initiator, brave, rapid information access and content search
Other possible characteristics	Respect for hierarchy, exaggerated modesty or arrogant inflexibility, passivity, cynicism, disappointment	Rule abiding, materialistic, fair play, less respect for hierarchy, has a sense of relativity, need to prove themselves	Desire for independence, no respect for tradition, quest for new forms of knowledge, inverse socialization, arrogant, home office and part-time work, interim management, undervalue soft skills and EQ	Differing viewpoints, lack of thinking, happiness, pleasure, divided attention, lack of consequential thinking, no desire to make sense of things, the boundaries of work and entertainment overlap, feel at home anywhere

Source: Adapted from Bencsik et al. (2016), Francis et al. (2018)

Verschoor (2013) in his paper provides an overview of major findings from Generational Differences in Workplace Ethics report. Results indicate a change in perception in younger workers, as a high percentage of Millennials consider certain behaviours to be ethical (e.g. using company software for personal use). Furthermore, Millennials report they observe unethical behaviour more often than their older colleagues do, but at the same time, they are more willing to ignore this type of behaviour if they consider that behaviour will help save jobs. Verschoor (2012) also reports that younger ones more often feel pressure from their peers to go against defined ethical norms and rules. In terms of formal and informal guidance, older employees would more often consult formal company channels and be guided by organizational values, whereas younger workers consult more often their family members. Baby Boomers are least likely to talk to their co-workers about a certain ethical dilemma.

Change in perception of acceptable ethical behaviour is even more expressed among Generation Z, as results of an additional study (Barna, 2018) reveal Generation Z's morality has dramatically shifted with a belief of moral relativism as a prevailing one. More specifically, generation Z members consider changes in what is morally right and wrong are under a strong influence on society and depend on personal believes.

Empirical Research

Sample and procedure
Several authors (e.g. Perry et al., 2011) critically question the existence of differences in ethics among generations, as of many methodological and theoretical issues. Besides, Costanza et al. (2015) emphasize a lack of empirical evidence that differences truly exist about ethical values, while Zabel et al. (2017) through their analysis of published studies found no support for the effect of generations on ethics endorsement.

Therefore, through our research, we test the perception of the importance of business ethics, different attitudes towards ethical issues and aspects influencing ethical behaviour, as well as towards pressures for unethical behaviour, and if they differ among the four generations currently present in the workforce.

We used a convenience sample, including 107 respondents, equally represented members from 4 generational cohorts: Baby boomers, Generation X, Millennials and Generation Z, working mostly in public sector organizations (83.7%). Respondents were mostly women (72.6%) with high school (47.7%) or university (29.9%) degree and with average more than 20 years of work experience (57%).

We provided respondents with a list of statements and asked them to asses if certain statements refer to them and their organization, by using a 1 to 7 Likert scale (1-completely disagree, 7 – completely agree).

Results
At first, we wanted to analyse the practice of respondents' organizations regarding business ethics, the presence of formal ethical framework and guidelines, as well as forms of communication about organizational ethical activities.

Table 2 presents an outline of several elements and practices related to business ethics inside respondents' organizations, and percentage of respondents that agreed with the specific statement.

Most of the organizations have implemented several aspects of ethics in their business and organizational practice. Most of the sample respondents state their organization has an ethical code and/or some other document that defines rules of expected employee behaviour. Furthermore, most of the organizations have a practice that upon employment new employees are introduced with a code of ethics and learn about ethical guidelines and rules they can use in their future behaviour. Still, it looks, upon results received, that organizations do not work too much further into ensuring ethical employee behaviour. Only 49.1% of respondents state that their organization has formal structures and policies for implementing and ensuring employee ethical behaviour, and only 31.8% of them state their organizations have organized additional employee education in aspects related to ethical behaviour.

Table 2
Business ethics elements and practice (n=107)

Business ethics statement regarding organizational practice	Affirmative (%)
Presence of a document that defines rules of employees' behaviour	86.9
Presence of the code of ethics	82.2
Learning about code of ethics upon employment	73.1
Structures in charge of implementing ethical employee behaviour	49.1
Employee education related to ethical behaviour	31.8
Organizational support for charity campaigns in its environment	60.7
Encouraging employee volunteering in the local community	22.4

Source: Authors' work

Some aspects of corporate social responsibility are also present, as respondents state their organizations do support charity campaigns (60.7% of organizations) but do not encourage enough employee volunteering in the local community (only in 22.4% of cases). The organizations use to publicly present ethical aspects of their business to interested stakeholders (employees, management, local community) respondents state that most often this is done through internal acts of communication (including Intranet) (89.6%) or as a part of their annual financial reports (11.4%). When it comes to individual perception of business ethics, in general results reveal respondents attribute significant importance to business ethics and its influence on various aspects of the business (Table 3.).

As average grades show, ethics is considered to ensure good company reputation, increases trust in relations to different internal and external stakeholders, and ensures an increase in efficiency and efficacy of business. Furthermore, it contributes to employee growth and development as well as lowering the costs associated with omissions in the workplace.

By using Anova one-way test we aimed to analyse if perception about ethics contribution to business differs among respondents depending on the generation they belong. Results of differences (Table 3) regarding importance attributed to business ethics show no statistically significant difference regarding the perception of business ethics importance across generational groups for all but one statement. The exception is the perception that ethics increases trust in relations both in an internal and external organizational environment, where results of the Tukey post hoc test indicate a detectable statistically significant difference between Generation X and Z members. Generation Z members give less importance to business ethics contribution

for increasing trust in relations both in the internal and external organizational environment.

Table 3
Influence of ethics on business – Total mean values and Anova test according to cohorts

Ethical business...	Mean	Std. Deviation	F	p
Increases efficiency and efficacy	5.89	1.396	1.962	0.124
Ensures good reputation	6.19	1.326	1.903	0.134
Increases trust in relations both in the internal and external organizational environment	6.14	1.292	2.376	0.074*
Contributes to employee growth and development	5.85	1.420	1.016	0.389
Lowers the costs associated with omissions in the workplace	5.50	1.562	1.479	0.225

Source: Authors' work; * Statistically significant at 10%; 1- completely disagree, 7 – completely agree

Furthermore, we asked respondents about their perception of their supervisory manager's business ethics (Table 4). To test for perception of their supervisor's behaviour regarding ethics and ethical decision making, we asked respondents to assess in which degree from 1 to 7 (1- completely disagree, 7 – completely agree) statements refer to the ethical behaviour of their supervisory manager. Average grades, as well as F and p values of Anova, used to test for differences between groups are present in Table 4.

As regards to their supervisor's ethical behaviour, average grades indicate not completely ethical behaviour of the respondent's supervisory manager. Among respondents' manager's behaviour, several aspects of unethical behaviour are considered more present, such as favouring employees (average - 5.37) or transferring guilt to other employees in order to protect him/herself (average - 4.73).

As emphasized in our literature review, previous studies reveal younger employees are more subject to pressure from their environment to behave unethically. Therefore, we further tested if respondents do things they consider unethical if their supervisor asks them and if there is a significant difference between generations. In general, most of the respondents (61.7%) state they do not do things considered unethical if their supervisor asks them, 27.1% of them stated sometimes, while 11.2% said yes. In general, as seen, respondents do not engage in unethical behaviour as of supervisor's pressure.

Analysing if differences between generations exist by Anova one way, results show no statistically significant difference are present among members of different generations [F (3.103) =0.249, p= 0.862].

Table 4
Perception of supervisors' ethical behaviour – Total mean values and Anova test according to cohorts

	Mean	Std. Deviation	F	p
Employees' mistakes are used to attack them	4.42	1.762	0.294	0.830
The supervisor is inclined to "complicate/mess up" things for others	4.52	1.747	0.452	0.717
Favouring employees	5.37	1.672	0.248	0.863
Lying to members of the supervisor's department to fulfil their goal	4.30	1.925	0.914	0.437
Transferring guilt to other employees to protect him/herself	4.73	1.912	0.214	0.887
Deliberately encouraging conflicts between employees	3.66	1.782	0.836	0.477
Individuals who know your supervisor better, consider your supervisor as inconsistent	4.29	1.793	0.957	0.416
Use talks about your success as a form of criticism	4.12	1.749	0.678	0.567
Constant criticism of employees	3.95	1.748	0.526	0.665
Employee manipulation	3.95	1.841	1.917	0.131
Forgery of data for personal benefit	3.19	1.885	0.574	0.633
Personal morality of a supervisor is not high	3.74	1.876	1.003	0.395
Mockery of employees' mistakes	4.04	1.864	2.006	0.118
Exaggerating subordinates' errors	4.00	1.904	0.801	0.496
They like to revenge	3.72	1.853	0.844	0.473
Avoid to consult and instruct employees	3.79	1.899	0.553	0.647
Tend to participate in unprofessional employment of acquaintances	4.16	2.083	1.139	0.337
Often fail to tell the truth	3.85	1.848	1.281	0.285
Consciously prevent others in their advancement	3.87	1.885	0.346	0.792
They are ready to blackmail other employees and subordinates	3.19	1.895	0.713	0.547
Enjoy refusing demands of their department members	3.31	1.779	1.388	0.251
Taking credits for idea of others	4.12	1.898	0.687	0.562
Laying off employees they do not like	3.72	1.833	1.598	0.195
Non-compliance with organizational policies	3.61	1.792	0.141	0.935

Source: Authors' work; 1- completely disagree, 7 – completely agree

In general, it is considered that the supervisor's behaviour is the most relevant factor influencing one's ethical decision making in organizations (average - 6,05) followed by a reward system (average - 5.72) and formal rules and procedures (average - 5.64). (Table 5.)

However, there are differences when it comes to the analysis of factors that influence ethical decision making regarding generational groups, as presented in the table above. Results of Anova on differences regarding importance attributed to elements influencing ethical decision-making indicate a statistically significant difference between groups regarding importance given to formal rules and procedures, performance assessment system and job pressures. Results of Tukey post hoc test shows there is a statistically significant difference in relevance given to formal rules and procedures for ethical decision-making, performance management system as well as job pressures between the members of Z generation and older generation.

More specifically, as opposed to Baby boomers, generation Z member gives less importance to formal rules and procedures (p=0.004), and performance assessment system (p= 0.006) in influencing ethical behaviour. Also, results show less importance given to job pressures by members of generation Z, as opposed to Baby boomers (p=0.041) and X generation (p=0.032) and marginally also as opposed to Millennials (p=0.051).

Table 5
Factors that influence ethical decision-making – Total mean values and Anova tests according to cohorts

	Mean	Std. Deviation	F	p
Formal rules and procedures	5.64	1.538	4.265	0.007***
Supervisors' behaviour	6.05	1.501	0.589	0.624
Performance assessment system	5.59	1.584	3.883	0.001***
Reward system	5.72	1.612	0.689	0.561
Job pressures	5.21	1.807	3.361	0.022**

Source: Authors' work; *** Statistically significant at 1%; ** 5% 1- completely disagree, 7 – completely agree

Discussion and Conclusion

Workplace diversity implies organizations encompass individuals who are members of different generations, and thus with presumed differences in work values. As of specific economic, social and cultural events members of certain generations have developed a specific set of beliefs and values that eventually can influence their perception of ethical values and beliefs.

Perception and attitudes towards business ethics among members of four generational groups, namely members of Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials and Generation Z were assessed through this research paper.

Results of our empirical research show that all respondents give significant support for ethics in business as respondents consider ethics can help to ensure good company reputation, increases trust in relations with stakeholders, ensures the increase in efficiency and efficacy of business, contributes to employee growth and development as well as to lower the cost associated with omissions in the workplace. Still, we did not ask about the specific behaviour and if it is considered ethical, as this would probably result in differences in perception between generations, as previous results did show shift in ethic values among newer generations when it comes to acceptable and unacceptable ethical behaviour (Verschoor, 2013; Barna, 2018).

Most of the respondents have ethical codes in their organization and upon employment; new employees are introduced with a code of ethics and learn about ethical guidelines and rules for their future behaviour. Still, it looks, upon results received that organizations do not work too much further into ensuring ethical employee behaviour after their employment and positive ethical climate needs to be more enhanced. Especially as, in general, results indicate not completely ethical behaviour of respondents' supervisory manager and several aspects of unethical behaviour, like favouring employees, are considered more present. For the implementation of business ethics into an organizational context, organizations must ensure continuous training programs, as well as other formal and structural components (Murphy, 1988). In this process of implementation, top management has a crucial role, and its role is even greater in the creation of an ethical climate and ensuring ethical behaviours at different organizational levels.

Our result regarding pressure for unethical behaviour, contrary to previous research (e.g. Verschoor, 2013), did not indicate differences between generations and that younger generations are more subject to pressure. In general, results reveal most of the respondents' state when it comes to pressure to do things considered unethical they do not do it despite the supervisor's pressure.

Supervisors' behaviour is considered as the most relevant factor influencing one's ethical decision making among members of all generations, while members of Z generation consider formal rules and procedures, and performance assessment system less important than Baby boomers. These results tie well with previous studies that confirm older workers are more guided by formal organizational rules and systems as opposed to younger workers. Besides, result show generation Z members consider job pressures less important for ethical decision making then members of other generations. Taken altogether results confirm that Z generation is more oriented on individual believes than organizational guidelines for ethical behaviour and thus confirming emerging research results on this subject.

Besides this, in general, our result provides support for little or no generational differences related to the analysed aspect of business ethics between members of different generations, which is in accordance to some existing research (e.g. Zabel et al., 2017). Our results also imply organizations should be more oriented towards creating the ethical climate and positive ethical leadership in the organization, as opposed to creating specific formal rules and guidelines. There are necessary as of importance given to them by older workers, but the emphasis needs to be on creating ethical leaders and a positive ethical climate that ensures ethical values and behaviour are present throughout the organization, at all organizational levels.

Still, our research has certain limitations that potentially affected research results. The first is related to sample size and a limited number of respondents per each generation. Furthermore, our sample was gendered bias (72.6% of women) which could potentially affect our results as previous research did show women to be more ethical than men. Second, there is the question of subjectivity connected with questionnaires as well as that we analysed respondents' perceptions. Therefore, besides a larger number of respondents, future research should analyse concrete ethical behaviour and decision making in real-time situations or examples. Besides, in this paper, we oriented on an individual dimension, while for some future studies it could be valuable to analyse mutual influences of this individual and organizational (e.g. culture), situational (e.g. national culture) and issue-related factors (e.g. importance of subject matter), that can all simultaneously affect individual ethical behaviour. In that sense, more clear insights into generational differences in ethics could be captured.

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