

# Comprehensive Review of the Marketing Ethics Literature: A Bibliometric Approach

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**Abstract:** In this study, it is aimed to draw the general view of marketing ethics literature by evaluating the field via trend analysis with the journal-based evaluations obtained from a bibliometric approach. SCOPUS was selected as the database to search academic studies published between 2000-2020 via the keywords "Marketing" and "Ethics". After this process, which is called preliminary search, predetermined 55 topics related to marketing mix were searched among 6.254 articles and assigned to a specific concept list. Accordingly, 1.181 unique articles were analyzed to reveal the inferences of the marketing ethics literature. The results show that the publication trend of the marketing ethics field is rising over the fifty years. On the other hand, the increasing number of the published articles in the field needs an international journal named 'marketing ethics' for researchers to publish in a target-specific way. Additionally, the importance of some topics such as greenwashing, product design and safety, socially controversial products, sexuality advertising, and planned obsolescence come to the forefront with parallel to nowadays unethical behavior of practitioners. The findings also contribute to the Ethical Theory and Theory of Moral Development by identifying the ethical issues in the topic-specific level that match with the variables Perceived Ethical Problems, Ethical Intentions, and Corporate Ethical Values. In brief, the presence of unethical business practices in all areas of marketing makes 'marketing ethics' a substantial area for researchers.

**Keywords:** Marketing ethics, bibliometric analysis, systematic review, ethics literature, marketing mix, content analysis.

## Pazarlama Etiği Literatürünün Kapsamlı İncelemesi: Bibliyometrik Bir Yaklaşım

**Öz:** Bu çalışma, alandaki dergilerden elde edilen verilerin bir trend analizini bibliyometrik yaklaşım esasında değerlendirilerek, pazarlama etiği literatürünün genel bir görünümünü ortaya çıkarmak amacıyla gerçekleştirilmiştir. 2000-2020 yılları arasında yayınlanan akademik çalışmaların taranmasında veritabanı olarak SCOPUS seçilmiş ve "Pazarlama" ile "Etik" anahtar kelimeleri kullanılmıştır. Ön tarama olarak adlandırılan bu sürecin ardından, daha

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Yıldırım, E., Mert, K., Cebeci, H. İ. (2021). Comprehensive Review of the Marketing Ethics Literature: A Bibliometric Approach. İş Ahlakı Dergisi, 14 (2), ss. 242-269.

Research Paper

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DOI: 10.12711/tjbe.2021.14.2.2059  
İş Ahlakı Dergisi, 2021  
isahlakidergisi.com

Başvuru : 31.01.2021  
Revizyon : 29.07.2021  
Kabul : 02.09.2021  
Basım : 11.2021

önceden belirlenen ve pazarlama karmasıyla doğrudan ilişkili olan 55 konu başlığı 6.254 makale arasında taratılarak belirli bir listeye aktarılmıştır. Bu doğrultuda, pazarlama etiği literatürüne ait çıkarımlara ulaşabilmek amacıyla 1.181 makale analiz edilmiştir. Bulgular, pazarlama etiği literatüründe basılan makale sayısının yıllar içinde arttığını göstermektedir. Diğer taraftan, bu artış, alan araştırmacılarının hedefe yönelik bir makale yayınlatabilmeleri için 'pazarlama etiği' kapsamlı uluslararası bir derginin varlığına ihtiyaç doğurmuştur. İlaveten, yeşil göz boyama, ürün tasarımı ve güvenliği, sosyal açıdan tartışmalı ürünler, reklamda sex ögesi ve planlı eskitme gibi konular, günümüz işletmelerinin gerçekleştirdiği etik dışı uygulamalara paralel olarak ön plana çıkmaktadır. Bulgular, Algılanan Etik Problemler, Etik Niyetler ve Kurumsal Etik Değerler değişkenleri ile eşleşen etik problemlerin konu seviyesinde tanımlanmasını sağlayarak aynı zamanda Etik Teorisi ve Ahlaki Gelişim Teorisi'ne de katkıda bulunmaktadır. Özetle, pazarlamanın her alanında gerçekleşen etik dışı uygulamaların varlığı 'pazarlama etiği'ni oldukça önemli bir çalışma alanı haline getirmektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Pazarlama etiği, bibliyometrik analiz, sistematik inceleme, etik literatürü, pazarlama karması, içerik analizi.

## Introduction

"Marketing is the art of persuasion and some manipulation" says Kotler, Kartajaya & Setiawan (2010: p.31). In that case, all marketing activities may be considered as practices that involve some persuasive methods. There is no problem when the artists -in other words companies- perform this process in accordance with the rules. However, when it comes to convincing consumers in an increasingly competitive marketplace, companies may frequently approach some tricks via different tools related to the 4Ps of marketing and others. Ambition for more profit, to gain more market share, and to beat competitors may force managers/marketers, especially those who have Friedman's perspective (Friedman, 1970), to practice in an unethical way.

This orientation makes ethics insight and being socially responsible in marketing vital due to the reflection of its practices on the society directly (Singhapakdi, 1999). Furthermore, it is the key element for managers to enlarge the boundaries of the company's market; because, consumers tend to trust companies that see them as *humans to care*, not as just people to sell to (Kotler et al., 2010). That's why companies should turn their focus from sales to act ethically. This tendency puts the issues of "ethics" in marketing to the center. Actually, the issue of "ethics" in marketing is a concept that has been at the center for a long time. As Tosun (2020) asserted, what makes it more critical stems from the increasing level of unethical and deceptive marketing practices.

The above-mentioned change can also be seen in the scopes of marketing ethics definitions. For instance, while marketing ethics were defined as "*the judgment of marketing activities as morally right and wrong*" (Smith & Murphy, 2012: p.2) from a narrow perspective, now it refers to "*practices that emphasize transparent, trustworthiness and responsible marketing policies and activities that embodies all the stakeholders*" (Murphy, 2017: p.85). Starting from this crossroad, marketing ethics is not simply

evaluating the business practices as right and wrong. Conversely, it is the compass that guides businesses', consumers', and other stakeholders' behavior. Thus, marketing ethics becomes more important owing to the increased level of coverage today.

The increased level of unethical business practices and the expanding coverage of marketing ethics field in recent years also attracted the attention of researchers. According to the research conducted by Eagle, Dahl, De Pelsmacker & Taylor (2020), based on Google Scholar data, the number of the published articles related to marketing ethics are increasing over the years. Although there were only 29 articles published before the 1970s, the number reached 1.100 up to 1999 over the ongoing years. From the beginning of the 2000s to the end of 2019, 11.300 published articles were reported, which means that marketing ethics is a potential field to research and will continue to be a promising field for researchers in the future as well.

Despite this increase in the number of articles, the field has to be investigated deeply from the perspective of topics related to 4Ps of marketing to reveal the gaps and saturated points in the literature for researchers, including marketing managers and policymakers. Because this field involves many categories and sub-topics from the issues related to the product (e.g., counterfeit products, label misleading, deceptive packaging), price (e.g., misleading pricing, predatory pricing, price gouging), place (e.g., slotting fee, commercial bribery, grey market) and promotion (e.g., deceptive ads., women presentation in ads., fake news) (Kaufmann, Smith & Ortmeier, 1994; Chonko, 1995; Levy & Weitz, 2004; Parsons, 2008; Zwolinski, 2008; Yıldırım & Mert, 2020). To this end, a better understanding of the area via a comprehensive literature review of the marketing ethics field may guide researchers and companies on what to do or not.

Literature reviews are highly valued studies in academia since they present the general view and orientation of a certain field (Bhimani, Mention & Barlatier, 2019). Hence, these studies are classified as publication and concept-oriented. In publication-oriented studies, assertions of a publication on a particular subject are evaluated, while in concept-oriented studies, the collective evaluation of publications categorized under certain fields is made (Webster & Watson, 2002). Especially in recent years, concept-oriented studies have come to the fore as a natural result of the easy access to academic publications with online technologies and the presence of many new open-access resources.

Table 1 delineates the literature reviews related to marketing ethics in the field. Considering the table, the research done by Tsalikis & Fritzdche (1989) is the

most comprehensive publication-oriented review study in terms of both coverage in the marketing ethics field and the number of studies examined. They examined approximately 300 articles in terms of normative (ethical codes, normative ethical decision models, specific area of marketing and ethical abuses) and positive approaches (causes of unethical behavior, the ethics of future executives, the relationship between ethical behavior and profitability, social marketing ethics and cross-cultural studies).

**Table 1. Literature Reviews Related to Marketing Ethics**

Author, Year	Title	Sample Size	Methodology	Review Approach	
				Journal Based	Concept Based
Tsalikis & Fritzdche, 1989	Business Ethics: A Literature Review with a Focus on Marketing Ethics	~300	Manual	No	All related concepts of marketing ethics theory
Nil & Schibrowsky, 2007	Research on Marketing Ethics: A Systematic Review of the Literature	421	Manual	Yes, (58 Journal)	22 Topics in 3 categories (Functional areas (4Ps), marketing sub-discipline, ethics-related)
Schlegel-milch & Öberseder, 2010	Half a Century of Marketing Ethics: Shifting Perspectives and Emerging Trends	538	Manual	Yes, (58 Journal)	18 Marketing ethics topics
Javalgi & Russel, 2018	International Marketing Ethics: A Literature Review and Research Agenda	83	Manual	Yes, (58 Journal)	6 Marketing ethics topics

On the other side, the research made by Nill & Schibrowsky (2007) can be considered the most basic example of concept-oriented studies in marketing ethics. The researchers generated a topical categorization based on the functional areas of marketing (4Ps), marketing sub-disciplines, and ethics-specific topics relevant for marketing. Consequently, they evaluated 421 published articles from the perspective of the 22 main headings (including 4Ps, topics from sub-disciplines, and specific ethics topics) related to marketing ethics.

The topics determined by Nill & Schibrowsky (2007) have also provided the basis for Schlegelmilch & Öberseder (2010) and Javalgi & Russel (2018) to prepare literature reviews. The authors Schlegelmilch & Öberseder (2010) did concept-oriented research based on the list (including 18 marketing ethics topics) they determined. This study, in which 538 articles were examined, stands out as the most representative article in the field of marketing ethics. In the meantime, Javalgi & Russel (2018) evaluated marketing ethics topics from the perspective of international marketing and examined the articles in consideration of 6 topics (culture and ethics, ethical problems and judgments, moral philosophies, deontological and teleological evaluation, marketing education, and corporate ethical values) related to marketing ethics.

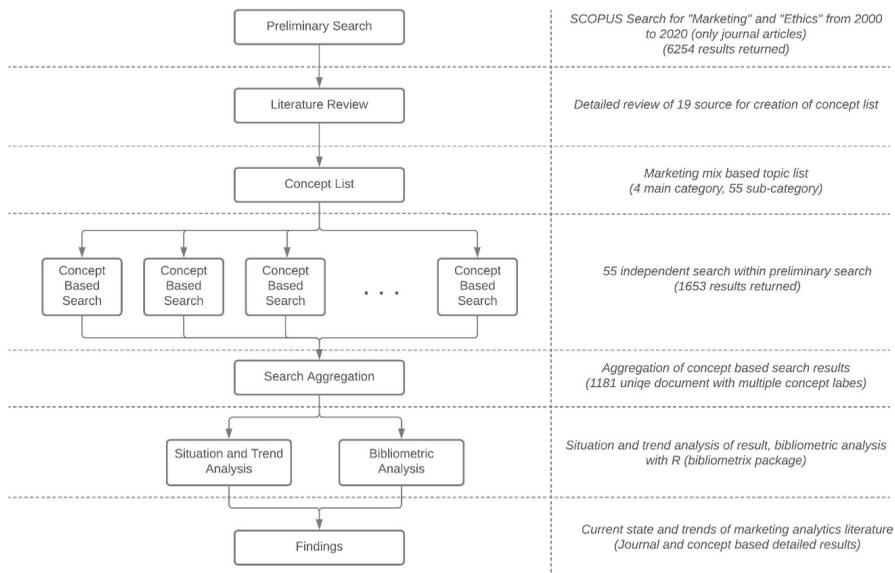
To draw the general view, and determine the orientation of a certain field, a literature review has to be carried out in a holistic way by including as many articles as possible from the field. However, conducting this process via traditional analysis methods leads to the waste of time and effort. The bibliometric analysis method provides a systematic evaluation of the field (Xu, Chen, Jia, Brown, Gong, & Xu, 2018). In recent years, bibliometric studies have come to the fore thanks to collective evaluation and analysis approaches (Eskin & Kurt, 2020). Especially, thanks to the emergence of free software and the fact that academic publication databases such as SCOPUS and WOS offer collective outputs suitable for such analysis, publications based on bibliometric analysis are seen in many fields (Feng, Zhu & Lai, 2017). In the field of marketing ethics, such a systematic literature review based on bibliometric analysis has not been encountered.

Considering the previous literature reviews that are seen as limited in terms of the examined articles, it is believed that bibliometric tools particularly can enhance the representation ability of the marketing ethics field. Since these tools offer different perspectives, the present study provides a concept-oriented and systematic literature review on the articles about marketing ethics which were published in business literature between 2000-2020. In this study, it is aimed to reveal a com-

prehensive view of the field and provide some hints that illustrate the change of the field within this 20-year process for academics and professionals. To this end, the issues related to marketing ethics will be presented from the perspective of the marketing mix in the ongoing sections. Then, some evaluations based on the findings will be made after explaining the systematic literature review method.

## Methodology

Literature reviews are an essential approach in determining the general situation and future trends of a specific area. If the area to be reviewed in given studies can be narrowed sufficiently, the approach where the studies are evaluated one by one in a certain system can be preferred. However, if a broader field survey is planned, informatics-supported semi-automatic analysis processes may be needed. In general, field studies supported by statistical analysis, which are called Bibliometric (scientometrics or citation analysis) analysis, have been preferred in recent years because they can facilitate the examination of many documents. In this study, bibliometric approaches were preferred to explore the general situation, orientation, and future trends of marketing ethics in 2000s. The field research method to be followed in the study is presented in Figure 1 below.



**Figure 1.** Systematic Review Methodology of Marketing Ethics Literature

In order to conduct a concept-oriented field search in the area of marketing ethics, it is necessary to select suitable studies to evaluate the total number of publications in the field and create a concept list by making a pre-search among these publications. The first step in this stage, which is called Preliminary Search, is to determine the search word criteria and select the appropriate academic publication database. At this point, SCOPUS, which indexes a wide range of academic publications, has been selected as the database at the stage of data collection. The preliminary search was finalized by filtering the obtained results by searching the keywords “Marketing” and “Ethics” and choosing academic articles published in English between 2000-2020. Abstracts and bibliometric data of a total of 6.254 articles have formed the first review.

In the second stage, an evaluation was made on the resources obtained from the literature search, and then the necessary lists were created for the concept-oriented searches. Afterwards, in the next stage, the marketing ethics topics based on the marketing mix are determined in Table 2. Finally, indexing was performed from the perspective of the four main topics. These topics were divided into 55 (10 topics from product, 16 topics from price, 13 topics from place, and 16 topics from promotion) sub-topics in total.

**Table 2.** The Marketing Ethics Topics Based on the Marketing Mix

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
Product- Related Topics	Product design and safety	√												√
	Misleading or missing information on labels / Label misleading	√												√
	Warning labels	√												√
	Package misleading / Deceptive packaging	√												√
	Product recalls	√												√
	Void warranty	√												√
	Counterfeit products	√												√
	Socially controversial products	√												√
	Environmentally incompatible products	√												√
	Planned obsolescence	√												√
	Price- Related Topics	Non-price price increase	√											
Price discounting		√												√
Price advertising / Bait and switch pricing		√												√
Price fixing / Resale price maintenance		√												√
Predatory pricing		√												√
Discriminatory pricing / Price discrimination		√												√
Misleading pricing (High-low pricing & Comparative pricing)		√	√											√
Pricing cartels / Price fixing agreement				√										√
Dumping					√									√
Price displays / Price tags														√
Price gouging / Excessive pricing						√								√
Abuse of dominant position							√							√
Black markets								√						√
Odd-ending pricing / Odd-even pricing/Fractional pricing									√					√
Price differentiation / Price disparity										√				√
Price discrepancy / Shelf and cash register price mismatch														√

Continued

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
Place- Related Topics	Slotting fee / Slotting allowance / Trade spending									√				√
	Commercial bribery									√				√
	Gray market / Parallel import									√				√
	Exclusive territory / Territorial restrictions									√				√
	Exclusive dealing agreement									√				√
	Tying contracts									√				√
	Refusals to deal									√				√
	Dual distribution									√				√
	Backdoor selling												√	√
	Offering bribe												√	√
	Business espionage / Corporate espionage										√	√		√
	Unfair recruitment												√	√
	Trade libel / Competitor defamation												√	√
Promotion- Related Topics	Deceptive advertising	√												√
	Puffery / Exaggerating advertising	√												√
	Comparative advertising	√												√
	Using children in advertising / Advertising to children	√												√
	Women presentation in ads. / Image of women / Body portrayals / Body image ads.	√												√
	Sexuality advertising	√												√
	Coupon fraud	√												√
	Sweepstakes, contests, and games	√												√
	High-pressure persuasion	√												√
	Customer discrimination	√												√
	Misinterpretation	√												√
	Offering gifts	√												√
	Exclusionary behavior	√												√
	Interfering with competitive offerings	√												√
	Offering deceptive information													√
False agenda / Fake news													√	√

Sources: Chonko, 1995<sup>1</sup>; Kaufmann et al., 1994<sup>2</sup>; Kaplow, 2013<sup>3</sup>; Delener, 1998<sup>4</sup>; Zwolinski, 2008<sup>5</sup>; Macatangay, 2001<sup>6</sup>; Robie, Kidwell Jr. & King, 2003<sup>7</sup>; Choi, Li, Rangan, Chatterjee & Singh, 2014<sup>8</sup>; Fassnacht & Unterhuber, 2016<sup>9</sup>; Levy & Weitz, 2004<sup>10</sup>; Budiono & Sawitri, 2017<sup>11</sup>; Varinli, 2013<sup>12</sup>; Parsons, 2008<sup>13</sup>; Yıldırım & Mert, 2020<sup>14</sup>.

In the concept-based research stage, sub-topics in Table 2 were searched among 6.254 articles obtained from preliminary search and assigned to a specific concept list. Then, 1.653 unique articles were cataloged according to the concept index lists of marketing ethics. This list is repetitive because some articles contain more than one topic. In the next stage, the integration process was carried out to get rid of the above-mentioned repetition. Finally, the corpus creation stage was completed by determining 1.181 articles as ready for the analysis. Thanks to the concept-based search model, since each article is cataloged according to 55 sub-topics during the collection stage, there was no need for a new coding afterward.

The analysis phase includes three different types of analyses. First, the situation analysis includes detailed frequency tables and their derivatives prepared as concept-oriented. The current status of the marketing ethics literature is evaluated on a yearly basis with the help of this analysis. In trend analysis, it is aimed to make inferences about the future of the marketing ethics literature by determining the direction of the change in the current situation by using time series modeling with the regression method. In the bibliometric analysis, the bibliometric package and Biblioshiny interface within the R software language were used to perform journal-oriented comparative analyses.

The last part (findings) aimed to make an aggregated assessment on the field of marketing ethics by combining the subject-oriented analysis results from the situation and trend analysis with the journal-based evaluations obtained through bibliometric analysis.

## Findings

This section is categorized by narrowing from general to specific as *General Perspective*, *Journal Perspective*, and *Topic Perspective* to draw the orientation of the marketing ethics field more accurately for researchers and practitioners as well.

### General Perspective

Considering Table 3, 1.181 articles (1.373 articles due to multiple indexing) were published in the field of marketing ethics during the process beginning from 2000 up to 2020/Q3. Thus, the number of the published articles related to marketing ethics is on the rise during the 20-year period.

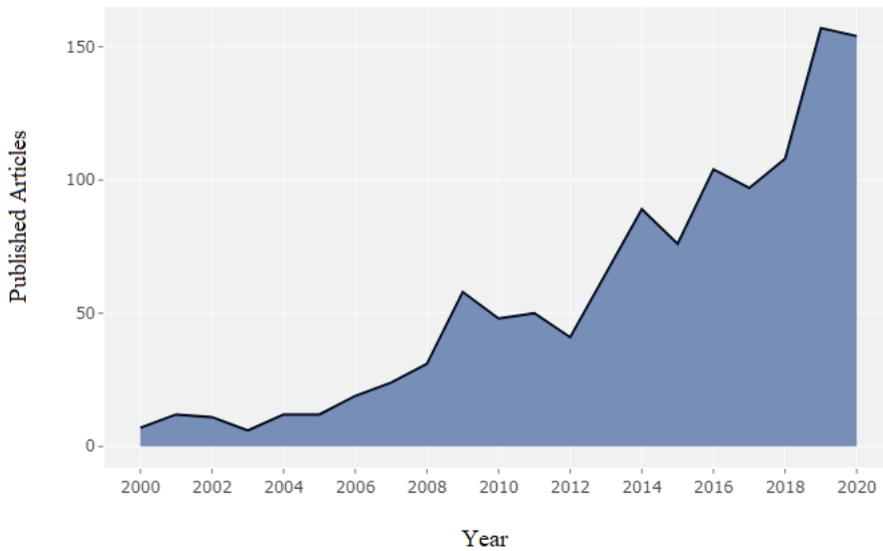
This tendency can also be seen in Figure 2 more clearly. The first two marketing mix elements most studied emerged as promotion (38%) and product (35%),

**Table 3. The Numbers and Percentages of the Published Articles in 20 Years**

<b>Years</b>	<b>Product</b>	<b>Price</b>	<b>Place</b>	<b>Promotion</b>	<b>Total</b>
2000	2 (0,20)	2 (0,20)	2 (0,20)	4 (0,40)	10
2001	4 (0,29)	6 (0,42)	0 (-)	4 (0,29)	14
2002	1 (0,08)	6 (0,46)	1 (0,08)	5 (0,38)	13
2003	0 (-)	0 (-)	0 (-)	6 (1,00)	6
2004	3 (0,19)	3 (0,19)	2 (0,13)	8 (0,49)	16
2005	8 (0,57)	1 (0,7)	1 (0,7)	4 (0,29)	14
2006	6 (0,30)	7 (0,35)	1 (0,05)	6 (0,30)	20
2007	11 (0,37)	5 (0,17)	4 (0,13)	10 (0,33)	30
2008	7 (0,21)	10 (0,29)	5 (0,15)	12 (0,35)	34
2009	26 (0,41)	15 (0,23)	5 (0,08)	18 (0,28)	64
2010	15 (0,28)	6 (0,11)	8 (0,15)	24 (0,46)	53
2011	22 (0,39)	9 (0,16)	1 (0,02)	25 (0,43)	57
2012	20 (0,40)	9 (0,18)	4 (0,08)	17 (0,34)	50
2013	22 (0,31)	14 (0,19)	7 (0,10)	29 (0,40)	72
2014	32 (0,31)	19 (0,18)	7 (0,07)	45 (0,44)	103
2015	34 (0,38)	15 (0,17)	5 (0,05)	36 (0,40)	90
2016	50 (0,43)	18 (0,16)	5 (0,04)	43 (0,37)	116
2017	38 (0,33)	17 (0,15)	11 (0,09)	50 (0,43)	116
2018	37 (0,30)	29 (0,24)	8 (0,07)	49 (0,39)	123
2019	75 (0,39)	40 (0,21)	7 (0,04)	72 (0,36)	194
2020	61 (0,35)	49 (0,27)	8 (0,04)	60 (0,34)	178
<b>Total</b>	<b>474 (0,35)</b>	<b>280 (0,20)</b>	<b>92 (0,07)</b>	<b>527 (0,38)</b>	<b>1.373*</b>
Q1	195 (0,35)	121 (0,21)	36 (0,06)	213 (0,38)	565
Q2	96 (0,34)	52 (0,19)	16 (0,06)	117 (0,41)	281
Q3	19 (0,27)	14 (0,20)	5 (0,07)	32 (0,46)	70
Q4	2 (0,20)	1 (0,20)	1 (0,10)	6 (0,60)	10
M**	312 (0,34)	188 (0,20)	58 (0,06)	368 (0,40)	926
O**	162 (0,36)	92 (0,21)	34 (0,08)	159 (0,35)	447

\* The total number of unique articles is 1.181. There are articles indexed within more than one marketing mix element at the same time. \*\* M: Marketing journals, O: Other journals.

respectively. On the other hand, place (7%) was not preferred by researchers as much as others in marketing ethics. This finding might originate from the fact that the place (distribution of the products) as an element of the 4Ps of marketing is an interdisciplinary area. It is also studied in the field of logistics, supply chain management, and manufacturing which can be regarded as the sub-disciplines of engineering (Huang, Wang & Dismukes, 1970).



**Figure 2.** The Change in the Number of the Published Articles in 20 Years

As mentioned above, the rise of publishing in marketing ethics continues up to 2020, although there are some minor declines in the 20-year period. Nevertheless, almost an 18-fold increase from 2000 to 2020/Q3 indicates that marketing ethics is a promising area for researchers even if 2020 is not completed yet.

**Table 4.** Published Article Numbers and Percentages Based on the 5-Year Period

	2000-2005	2006-2010	2011-2015	2016-2020	Total
Product	18 (0,04)	65 (0,14)	130 (0,27)	261 (0,55)	474
Price	18 (0,06)	43 (0,15)	66 (0,24)	153 (0,55)	280
Place	6 (0,07)	23 (0,25)	24 (0,26)	39 (0,42)	92
Promotion	31 (0,06)	70 (0,13)	152 (0,29)	274 (0,52)	527

Table 4 aims to reveal the rise of publishing in marketing ethics prominently. It represents the numbers and percentages of the published articles from the 5-year period perspective. Considering the publishing trend, the elements of the product, price, and promotion have a 2-fold increase in every 5-year group while the place has less. This normalcy may be explained via the increased access to electronic sources at the same time.

### Journal Perspective

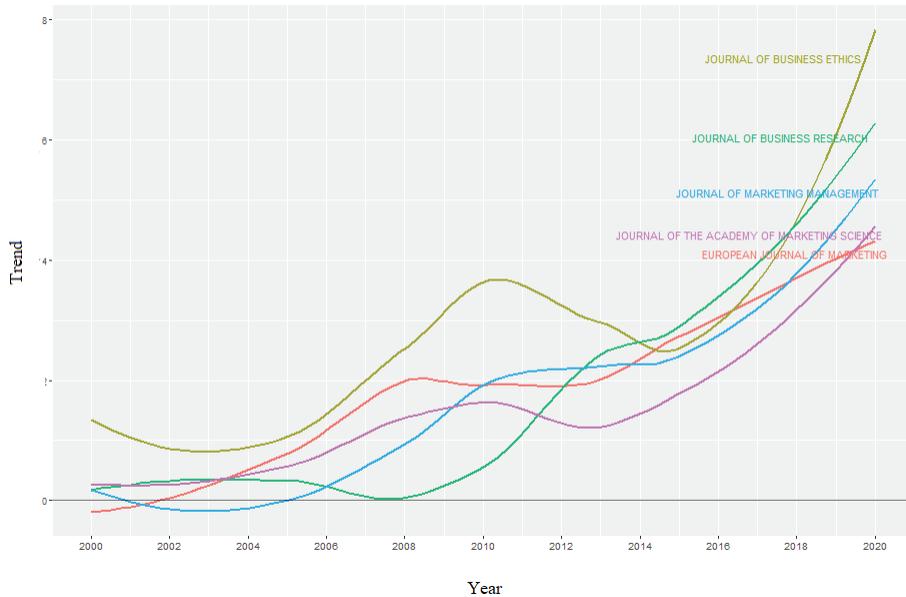
Journal, author, and subject-oriented analyses are used while making the general assessment of the field in comprehensive literature reviews. In this section, a journal-based evaluation of the marketing ethics literature is made.

**Table 5. The Most Publishing Journals in the Area of Marketing Ethics**

Sources	Articles	Q?
JOURNAL OF BUSINESS ETHICS**	57	Q1
EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF MARKETING*	39	Q2
JOURNAL OF BUSINESS RESEARCH*	37	Q1
JOURNAL OF MARKETING MANAGEMENT*	35	Q1
JOURNAL OF THE ACADEMY OF MARKETING SCIENCE*	32	Q1
JOURNAL OF MACROMARKETING*	30	Q2
JOURNAL OF ISLAMIC MARKETING*	29	Q2
JOURNAL OF PUBLIC POLICY AND MARKETING*	29	Q1
ASIA PACIFIC JOURNAL OF MARKETING AND LOGISTICS*	28	Q1
JOURNAL OF MARKETING*	23	Q1
JOURNAL OF CLEANER PRODUCTION**	21	Q1
INDUSTRIAL MARKETING MANAGEMENT*	20	Q1
JOURNAL OF CONSUMER MARKETING*	20	Q2
MARKETING THEORY*	18	Q1
BRITISH FOOD JOURNAL**	17	Q1
JOURNAL OF MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS*	17	Q1
MARKETING INTELLIGENCE AND PLANNING*	16	Q2
PSYCHOLOGY AND MARKETING*	16	Q2
JOURNAL OF RETAILING AND CONSUMER SERVICES*	15	Q1
AUSTRALASIAN MARKETING JOURNAL*	14	Q2

\* Marketing journals; \*\* Other journals

Table 5 represents the most preferred 20 journals from the area of marketing ethics. The Journal of Business Ethics is at the top with 57 published articles in terms of article numbers, which proves that researchers mostly prefer to publish articles related to marketing ethics in a journal indexed out of the marketing field. In this manner, the lack of a *marketing ethics journal* pushes researchers to choose a journal outside the field. In addition to this, 95 published articles outside the field of a total of 513 show that almost one of every five article is submitted to journals outside the field by researchers. Combining these findings with the total number of published articles related to marketing ethics from journals only in the business area till 2020/Q3 (178 articles), this marketing ethics journal may have an excellent article repository.

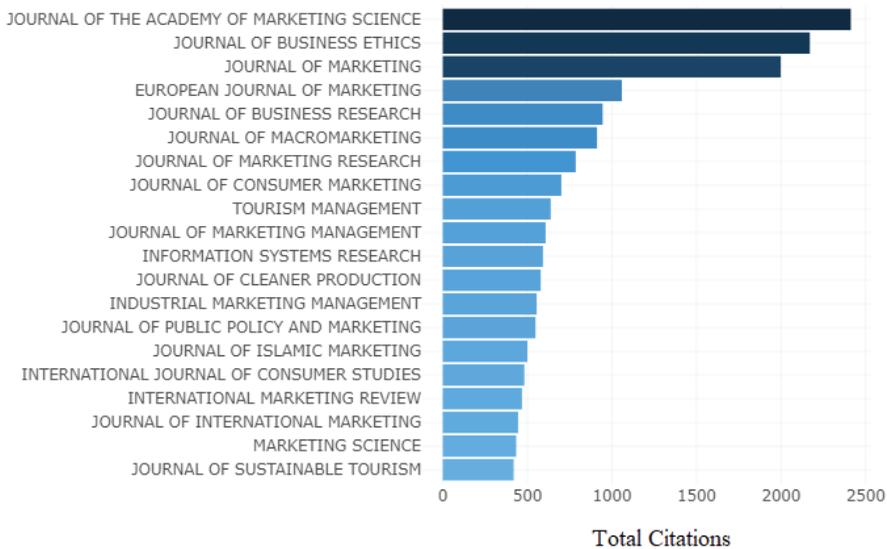


**Figure 3.** 20-Year Trend for the most Publishing 5 Journals

Figure 3 also supports the above-mentioned findings related to the shifting of researchers from marketing journals to outside the field. Considering the last five years, researchers canalize publishing their articles from the two leader marketing journals: the European Journal of Marketing and the Journal of Business Research (see also Table 5) to the Journal of Business Ethics. The acceleration of publishing at the Journal of Business Ethics is outstanding, particularly in the last two years.

On the other hand, considering the number of citations from Figure 4, the journals indexed in the marketing area (e.g., Journal of the Academy of Marketing

Science and Journal of Marketing), which fall behind the journals from outside the field, come into prominence this time. Meanwhile, the Journal of Business Ethics at the second place emphasizes the importance of the 'ethics' issue and highlights the need for a *marketing ethics journal* once again.



**Figure 4.** Top 20 Journals in terms of Citation Numbers

It is an undeniable fact that the trend in publishing in the field of marketing ethics is increasing over the past 20 years. However, researchers are obliged to submit their manuscripts to other journals with different scopes due to the lack of marketing ethics journals. Articles are widespread among the journals from the business area, although the field has many topics inside. Therefore, examining the field in terms of topics of marketing ethics can lead to clearer results.

### Topic Perspective

In order to draw the picture of the marketing ethics field more clearly, it has to be reduced to the topic perspective from a general standpoint. This process is found to be very important due to reveal the gaps in the literature and gives researchers insight into the publishing tendency of the topics.

According to Table 6, researchers mostly prefer to study the topics related to marketing ethics coming from the product, promotion, and pricing elements,

respectively. However, considering the table's left column, 'product design and safety' and 'greenwashing' are the most challenging topics among researchers. This finding may be due to the interdisciplinary nature of these topics; additionally, the significant effects of companies' sustainability claims on green consumerism owing to the rapid growth in the green product market, as Urbanski & ul Haque (2020) mentioned.

**Table 6. Publishing Preferences of Marketing Ethics Topics in Journals**

The most studied 10 topics		The least studied 10 topics			
1	Product design and safety <sup>p1</sup>	1,206	1	Slotting fee / Slotting allowance / Trade spending <sup>p3</sup>	0,023
2	Greenwashing <sup>p4</sup>	0,965	2	Commercial bribery <sup>p3</sup>	0,051
3	Price discounting <sup>p2</sup>	0,606	3	Offering deceptive information <sup>p4</sup>	0,056
4	Misleading pricing (High-low pricing & Comparative pricing) <sup>p2</sup>	0,555	4	Exclusive territory / Territorial restrictions <sup>p3</sup>	0,057
5	Women presentation in advertising / Image of women / Body portrayals / Body image advertising <sup>p4</sup>	0,535	5	Non-price price increase <sup>p2</sup>	0,060
6	Sweepstakes, contests and games <sup>p4</sup>	0,508	6	Tying contracts <sup>p3</sup>	0,064
7	Misleading or missing information on labels / Label misleading <sup>p1</sup>	0,503	7	Offering gifts <sup>p4</sup>	0,066
8	Sexuality advertising <sup>p4</sup>	0,436	8	Puffery / Exaggerating advertising <sup>p4</sup>	0,074
9	Product recalls <sup>p1</sup>	0,414	9	Customer discrimination <sup>p4</sup>	0,096
10	Socially controversial products <sup>p1</sup>	0,381	10	Price fixing / Resale price maintenance <sup>p2</sup>	0,100

p1: product, p2: price, p3: place, p4: promotion

On the other hand, as can be seen from the right column of the table, the topics related to place are not studied as much as others. 'Slotting fee' and 'commerci-

al bribery' lead among the least studied ten topics. This present finding does not show that these topics have less importance. Conversely, they have a great potential for researchers.

**Table 7. Publishing Preferences of Marketing Ethics Topics in Marketing Journals**

The most studied 10 topics		The least studied 10 topics		
1	Using children in advertising / Advertising to children <sup>p4</sup>	0,931	1 Commercial bribery <sup>p3</sup>	0,417
2	High pressure persuasion <sup>p4</sup>	0,900	2 Greenwashing <sup>p4</sup>	0,433
3	Socially controversial products <sup>p1</sup>	0,852	3 Non-price price increase <sup>p2</sup>	0,471
4	Warning labels <sup>p1</sup>	0,850	4 Slotting fee / Slotting allowance / Trade spending <sup>p3</sup>	0,500
5	Comparative advertising <sup>p4</sup>	0,833	5 Exclusive territory / Territorial restrictions <sup>p3</sup>	0,545
6	Women presentation in advertising / Image of women / Body portrayals / Body image advertising <sup>p4</sup>	0,828	6 Product design and safety <sup>p1</sup>	0,587
7	Offering deceptive information <sup>p4</sup>	0,818	7 Planned obsolescence <sup>p1</sup>	0,606
8	Puffery / Exaggerating advertising <sup>p4</sup>	0,813	8 Misleading or missing information on labels / Label misleading <sup>p1</sup>	0,636
9	Counterfeit products <sup>p1</sup>	0,800	9 Price fixing / Resale price maintenance <sup>p2</sup>	0,647
10	Sexuality advertising <sup>p4</sup>	0,800	10 Tying contracts <sup>p3</sup>	0,650

p1: product, p2: price, p3: place, p4: promotion

Table 7 aims to indicate the publishing preferences of marketing ethics topics from the perspective of marketing journals. Considering the most studied topics, 70% of titles come from the promotion element and the rest from the product. In

this manner, the topics related to promotion and product elements are outstanding among researchers who prefer to publish their articles in marketing journals.

Ethical issues related to advertising are not surprising due to the significant effect of 'persuasion on target audience'. Companies frequently approach this method to sell their products and services. Besides, the other remarkable point is 'women presentation in advertising', 'sexuality advertising' and 'socially controversial products' are the mutual topics studied both in general and marketing journals. Especially, the fact that 'socially controversial products' topic is being published more frequently in marketing journals. It is possible to interpret this as both researchers and businesses act together with the UN Sustainable Development Goals and try to create environmental awareness.

On the other side, the topics 'greenwashing' and 'product design and safety' are the most studied titles in general journals (*see also Table 6*), which are not preferred by researchers to publish in marketing journals. The present situation may stem from that greenwashing is preferred to be published in journals with environmental and sustainable scopes. According to Gatti, Seele & Rademacher (2019), greenwashing is mainly published in the Journal of Business Ethics and others outside the marketing field. Moreover, only 32 of 94 greenwashing papers (34%) fit with journals' scope from the marketing field, which means it is also studied in the fields such as corporate communication, management, law, *etc.* In addition to this, 'product design and safety' may be considered as a topic studied by researchers from the engineering field. The article made by Pessoa & Becker (2020) supports this finding from the technical aspect.

When it comes to Q1 indexed marketing journals, there are some changes in the ranking. As can be seen from Table 8, the top three most studied topics come from the promotion element. Especially, the presence of 'offering deceptive information' in the first place is not surprising due to the misrepresentation nature of the promotion elements. As mentioned before, companies may approach this method to convince their customers via advertising, personal selling, sales promotion, or public relations, regardless of which method is used.

**Table 8. Publishing Preferences of Marketing Ethics Topics in the Best Marketing Journals (Q1 Indexed)**

The most studied 10 topics		The least studied 10 topics			
1	Offering deceptive information <sup>p4</sup>	0,727	1	Slotting fee / Slotting allowance / Trade spending <sup>p3</sup>	0,200
2	Using children in advertising / Advertising to children <sup>p4</sup>	0,690	2	Commercial bribery <sup>p3</sup>	0,250
3	Customer discrimination <sup>p4</sup>	0,579	3	Puffery / Exaggerating advertising <sup>p4</sup>	0,250
4	Product recalls <sup>p1</sup>	0,566	4	Greenwashing <sup>p4</sup>	0,250
5	High pressure persuasion <sup>p4</sup>	0,550	5	Planned obsolescence <sup>p1</sup>	0,303
6	Grey market / Parallel import <sup>p3</sup>	0,522	6	Offering gifts <sup>p4</sup>	0,308
7	Price discounting <sup>p2</sup>	0,521	7	Package misleading / Deceptive packaging <sup>p1</sup>	0,333
8	Deceptive advertising <sup>p4</sup>	0,514	8	Misleading or missing information on labels / Label misleading <sup>p1</sup>	0,348
9	Counterfeit products <sup>p1</sup>	0,514	9	Tying contracts <sup>p3</sup>	0,350
10	Warning labels <sup>p1</sup>	0,475	10	Socially controversial products <sup>p1</sup>	0,352

p1: product, p2: price, p3: place, p4: promotion

The other remarkable points here are the presence of 'grey market/parallel import' -a topic from the place element- for the first time and 'price discounting' that comes from the pricing element. However, it is not ranked in the most studied ten topics published in the marketing journals. These topics may be valuable to be published by Q1 journal editors because they are important up-to-date marketing issues. Nowadays, consumers are price-sensitive, and this feature may forward them to look for high-quality cheaper products such as parallelly imported (Rojanasingsawad, Ryding, & Barnes, 2020) or discounted priced.

Considering the right column of the table, there are two topics, 'slotting fee' and 'commercial bribery' from the place element. This may be due to the topics which are related to place are generally the least studied among researchers. Additionally, 'greenwashing' is not preferred mainly by researchers to study again.

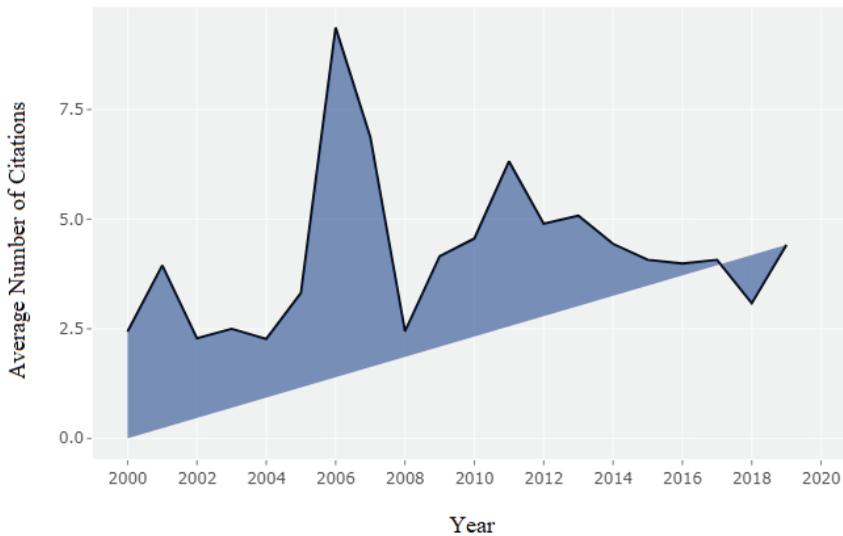
Considering Table 9 and Figure 5 together, the number of citations show that the marketing ethics field has come up to the 2007s with a rising trend. Although it tries to recover again after a fall sharp, its popularity has shrunk in the past years. As a matter of fact, this result may stem from the decline of the citation numbers of price, promotion, especially place except product up to 2014. When we come to the present, the field started to get fewer citations than usual, especially after 2017.

**Table 9.** Average Number of Citations per Publication Based on the 5-Year Period

	2000-2004	2005-2009	2010-2014	2015-2019*	Total**
Product	3,27	4,89	5,24	2,88	3,45
Price	3,29	5,57	5,06	2,73	3,31
Place	2,79	2,72	1,97	1,85	1,99
Promotion	1,86	4,86	4,35	2,67	3,14

\* The number of citations of 2020 could not be calculated as the year has not yet been completed.

\*\* Total average number of citations from 2000 up to 2019 is 2,97.



**Figure 5.** The Change in Annual Average Number of Citations per Year

However, some topics still maintain their popularity from the citation perspective although the downward trend. As can be seen from the left column of Table 10, all the average numbers of citations are over the total average number of 2,97 (see also Table 9). This result proves that the marketing ethics field has to change its point of view from traditional scopes to today's modern topics that fit consumers' needs and priorities, such as the topics presented below.

**Table 10.** The Best 10 Topics in terms of Average Number of Citations

Based on 20 Years		Based on Last 5 Years (2015-2019)		
1	Planned obsolescence <sup>p1</sup>	4,57	1 Dumping <sup>p2</sup>	3,05
2	Product design and safety <sup>p1</sup>	4,29	2 Greenwashing <sup>p4</sup>	2,43
3	Greenwashing <sup>p4</sup>	4,25	3 Product recalls <sup>p1</sup>	2,20
4	Customer discrimination <sup>p4</sup>	4,02	4 Misleading or missing information on labels / Label misleading <sup>p2</sup>	1,66
5	Dumping <sup>p2</sup>	3,94	5 Discriminatory pricing / Price discrimination <sup>p2</sup>	1,63
6	Misleading or missing information on labels / Label misleading <sup>p1</sup>	3,86	6 Price discounting <sup>p2</sup>	1,54
7	Personal selling <sup>p4</sup>	3,71	7 Product design and safety <sup>p1</sup>	1,53
8	Discriminatory pricing / Price discrimination <sup>p2</sup>	3,42	8 Planned obsolescence <sup>p1</sup>	1,52
9	Misleading pricing (High-low pricing & Comparative pricing) <sup>p2</sup>	3,42	9 False agenda / Fake news <sup>p4</sup>	1,48
10	Price discounting <sup>p2</sup>	3,32	10 Package misleading / Deceptive packaging <sup>p4</sup>	1,35

p1: product, p2: price, p3: place, p4: promotion

Interestingly, 'planned obsolescence' is ranked as one of the least studied topics in marketing journals. However, it has the highest average number of citations, which means that it has a great potential to be a value-added field of study for researchers. Another point to be emphasized is the high number of citations of

the topics ‘product design and safety’ and ‘greenwashing’. It can be noted that these two topics always have popularity, although they are not studied in marketing journals, since they are interdisciplinary topics studied in many fields. Moreover, they are going to get a remarkable number of citations during the downward trend, including the last five years.

## Discussion and Conclusion

With the development of technology in recent years, the increase in the number of open access resources has naturally led to the rise in the number of publications in the field of marketing ethics, similar to other academic fields. However, this increase has not occurred at the same rate in all dimensions of marketing ethics literature evaluated within the scope of the marketing mix. Especially the ‘place’ dimension (7%), which can be regarded as the subject of logistics, supply chain management, and manufacturing (Huang *et al.*, 1970), can be shown as an example of this situation. This topic attracts researchers from other fields rather than marketing academics due to its interdisciplinary nature.

The other remarkable point is that one-third of the publications in the field of marketing ethics shift towards academic journals outside the field. The reason for this situation is the absence of a journal that has a scope of ‘marketing ethics’ directly in the area. Considering the number of publications in the last five years, there is an academic publication repository with an average of approximately 150 articles per year. In order to evaluate this academic repository effectively and accurately, it is necessary to have an internationally active journal under the name of ‘Marketing Ethics’. Furthermore, starting such a journal will contribute to a more detailed investigation and development of the field itself; because the subject-oriented investigation of the field help researchers to see which topics to study, more clearly.

To this end, subject and topic-oriented analyses were made. The results show that the topics such as ‘product design and safety’ and ‘greenwashing’ are primarily preferred in the marketing ethics literature; however, they are mostly published in journals outside the field such as engineering, technology, and innovation. This may be owing to the topic ‘greenwashing’ is more appropriate for the journals with the scope of sustainability, as Gatti *et al.* (2019) stated. Besides, improvement in environmental awareness and increasing level of education has led to skepticism (Sobande, 2019). This is why greenwashing is one of the best ten topics to

study among researchers. Furthermore, companies benefit from Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) activities to reflect themselves as socially conscious of gaining the public's approval and increasing their profit. Nevertheless, this is perceived as marketing tricks as Dinçer, Yildirim & Arslan (2021) stated. Additionally, the topic 'product design and safety' about innovation and has a technical aspect may be regarded as the field of study of engineers as Pessoa & Becker (2020) expressed. Considering that these areas are at the forefront in terms of citation, these topics need to be studied more in the field of marketing. To fulfill this need, the need for an international 'marketing ethics journal' comes to the fore again.

The results of the topic-oriented analyzes also indicate that the publication density in the marketing journals is mostly in the 'promotion' dimension from the perspective of the marketing mix. This is hardly surprising because it contains methods suitable for providing deceptive and misleading information (Emamalizadeh, 1985) to stimulate purchasing desires in consumers. In this manner, the rising number of companies that benefit from such unethical business practices related to promotion, particularly advertising, attracts researchers to study this sub-topic of the marketing ethics field. An essential part of these publications in this area occurs especially in the topics such as women's presentation in advertising, sexuality advertising, and socially controversial products. This may be due to the extensive usage of women bodies in advertising via sexuality and representation of their roles as homemaker and mother as Tuchman (2000) said, and the perception of 'sex really sell' still gains acceptance among a remarkable number of practitioners (Business News Daily, 2020; Gong, Holiday & Cummins, 2020). On the other hand, Eliasson & Rakocevic (2018) state that as changing norms, sexuality in advertising is not widely accepted in society, particularly by females. This counter-view also makes the topic more attractive to researchers.

Besides, the topic 'socially controversial products' has been frequently studied in marketing journals in recent years. This situation shows parallelism with the increasing awareness of researchers in the field of marketing ethics through the topics such as 'Responsible Consumption and Production', 'Affordable and Clean Energy', and 'Climate Action' of the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Although this issue is frequently studied by researchers, expressing that there are many unethical practices in this field, it will contribute to creating and maintaining a sustainable world with the awareness generated. As Nielsen, Holmberg & Stripple (2019) mentioned, the growing concerns about plastic pollution among companies make them restrict the usage of that kind of material.

Last, although some topics (e.g., planned obsolescence) are just beginning to appear in the marketing ethics literature, publications in this scope are valuable in terms of citations obtained. The case of Apple for iPhone can be a good example of this unethical business practice. Apple was fined \$25 for each phone (\$500 million is expected in total) for slowing down old iPhones (BBC, 2020) to enable iPhone users to purchase newer models. The increasing number of these kinds of cases in recent years has a remarkable potential for those who want to study in the field of marketing ethics.

The study also has theoretical contributions. First of all, revealing the current and promising topics shed light on marketers' main ethical problems, values, and decision-making processes. The results provide practitioners an orientation on what to do or not. As the 55 topics related to marketing mix mostly cover the marketing ethics literature, the findings provide a better understanding of Ethical Theory. Recognizing the most studied unethical activities specifically in terms of topics, make the variables *Perceived Ethical Problems*, *Ethical Intentions* and *Corporate Ethical Values* (Singhapakdi, Gopinath, Marta & Carter, 2008; Singhapakdi, Higgs-Kleyn & Rao, 1999) easier to understand. The identification of unethical business practices at the topic-specific level has great importance in overcoming these issues.

Considering the unethical business practices via the promotion tool, which is mostly studied among researchers, most of the topics match with the ethical codes of the European Association of Communication Agencies. The valuable findings of such studies put society and citizens, consumers, media, clients, employees and colleagues, competitors, suppliers, and investors under protection (EACA, 2016). The studies made by researchers force practitioners to create advertisements in line with society's expectations, to perform in a sustainable way, to operate not because it is mandatory by law but because they have ethical norms, in parallel with the postconventional stage of Theory of Moral Development (Kohlberg & Hersh, 1977), to broadcast accurate and reliable information via media, to compete and deal fairly with the inner and outer stakeholders.

The latter is this research comes to the forefront with its sampling size and topics coverage. The studies conducted by Nill & Schibrowsky (2007) and Schlegelmilch & Öberseder (2010) approach the marketing ethics literature by means of main topics such as ethical issues related to price, related to the product, related to sales, etc. while Javalgi & Russel (2018) focuses on the primary areas of study such as culture and ethics, ethical problems, ethical decision making, etc. Moreover,

these studies investigate only 58 journals. However, the present study discusses marketing ethics literature from a detailed topic perspective in each marketing mix category by analyzing 1.181 unique articles from 296 journals. The extensivity of the investigation area fills the void by removing the missing aspects of the 4P perspective in the marketing ethics literature.

### **Limitations and Implications for Further Research**

The study's main limitation is to determine SCOPUS as the database for academic publications subjected to the literature review. At this point, researchers can expand the academic publication repository by including other databases like the Web of Science. However, SCOPUS is well accepted as an extensive database indexing many academic journals. In addition, abstracts and bibliographic information of articles were used in this study due to the open-access restriction of the journals. For more detailed evaluations, full texts of the articles can be used as well.

The other limitation is to use the 'marketing ethics' keyword for selecting academic publications. This search was filtered by the 'business, management, and accounting' category. This filter can be expanded to include topics (e.g., advertising ethics) that may be the subject of collaboration with other fields. Besides that, 55 ethics topics and their alternatives related to the marketing mix were used as the search keyword. In this manner, the semi-automatic clustering technique process can be extended in terms of text mining. Additionally, the number of marketing ethics topics can be increased by covering other marketing areas such as digital marketing, social media marketing, marketing management, etc.

While examining the current situation of the marketing ethics literature with bibliometric analyses, citation-oriented and topical modeling was preferred. However, the study can be extended with other analytical approaches such as co-citation and network analysis. Moreover, literature review and marketing mix-oriented manual coding were performed in topic modeling. In this regard, a different perspective can be gained to the article by automatic topical modeling with machine learning techniques.

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