

# Personal Values and its Influence on Ethical Judgment of Malaysian Future Accountants

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to investigate the influence of personal values on ethical judgement of future accountants in Malaysia. The study used a questionnaire survey and the respondents were final year undergraduate accounting students from three public universities in Malaysia. The questionnaire comprised of instruments about personal values and ethical judgment. A total of 205 usable responses were received. Descriptive statistics and multiple regression were performed to achieve the objectives. The findings revealed that self-transcendence and self-enhancement had significant influence on ethical judgment of future accountants in Malaysia. The remaining two personal values (conservation and openness to change) had no significant influence on ethical judgment. The study contributes to the empirical evidence on the types of personal values of future accountants and their influence on ethical judgment which is currently limited. To some extent, the findings are useful to enhance ethical judgment among future accountants in relation to their personal values, which will ultimately improve the credibility of the accounting profession.

**Keywords:** Personal Values, Ethical Judgement, Accounting Students, Malaysia

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## INTRODUCTION

Well-known high-profile corporate ethical scandals involving accountants such as Enron, WorldCom, and Arthur Anderson have, to some extent, damaged the reputation of the accounting profession. In the context of Malaysia, the reputation of the accounting profession has been impaired by reported scandals such as 1Malaysia Development Berhad, Port Klang Free Zone, Malaysian Airline, Bank Negara Forex, Deposit taking Co-operative, Bumiputra Bank and Pan-Electric Industries cases (Shiong 2006; Bakar et al 2010; Mohamad & Muhamad 2011; Jones, 2020). There are several notable cases where accountants have been sued by their clients. For instance, Johari Abas and Anor v. David Low See Keat and Ors is a prominent case where the accountants were held accountable for their professional conduct. Similarly, the case of Tan Ah Lek v. Foo Chee Peng and Ors highlighted issues regarding the professional responsibilities of accountants (Lee, 2022; Wong, 2023). Moreover, Malaysia has witnessed an increase in white-collar crime, underscoring the failures of accountants in detecting such crimes. Recent reports indicate a growing trend of undetected financial crimes, as highlighted by recent studies (Rahman & Ahmad, 2022; Zainal et al., 2023). Although these scandals are committed by accountants who are already part of the profession, Ho et al. (2006) argued that the universities should play an important role in solving the ethical issues that are currently pervading the accounting profession by making sure that universities are producing future accountants that are more ethical.

In ensuring more ethical future accountants, the universities are currently facing important challenges as accounting and ethics education researchers have reported that the issue of academic integrity among accounting students in terms of cheating, plagiarism and other deceptive unethical behaviours is alarming (Smith et al., 2007; Salleh, 2011; Ismail & Yussof, 2016; Yussof & Ismail, 2018). Ismail and Yussof (2016) discovered that 3% to 6.5% of the accounting students from a public university in Malaysia claimed that they were involved in cheating activities during their studies. The reputation of the accounting profession and the increasing of instances of academic dishonesty among accounting students that reflects the questionable ethical standard of future accountants are the key problems that led to the current study.

According to Stanga and Turpen (1991, p 740, see also Lehmann, 1988) “accountants have special obligations to behave ethically because of the considerable trust that investors and creditors place in them”. However, the question arises whether the value system of accounting professionals is strong enough to withstand client and economic pressure that potentially compromises their professional judgment. To address the ongoing challenges, there is a crucial need for a more robust framework of accounting ethics (Armstrong et al, 2003). Professional and educational institutions have responded by calling for more ethics education in the accounting curriculum. Since then, there have been greater involvement of educational institutions to ensure more that ethical future accountants are produced (Jackling et al., 2007). Future accountants are the present accounting students who will have to uphold this responsibility held in the near future. Hence, the future of the accounting profession depends on the ethical standards of accounting students currently enrolled in the university.

Personal values can influence the ethical judgment of individuals. Lan et al. (2009) opined that the way individuals behave is shaped by their personal values. Individuals’ values drive them to act ethically or unethically in pursuit of their goals. The likelihood that individuals will behave unethically depends to some extent on the personal values motivating them to evaluate their actions. More importantly, the significance of personal factors has been highlighted in a number of ethical decision- making models, such as in Ferrell and Gresham (1985), Hunt and Vitell (1986), Trevino (1986), Rest (1986), and Jones (1991). In light of above, the present study aimed to examine the influence of personal values on the ethical judgment of future accountants in Malaysian public universities. The findings of the present study contributes in several ways. First, it provides awareness and information on the types of personal values to be imbued and inculcated among the future accountants in order to prepare them for a more challenging career environment and profession. Second, it adds on in terms of empirical evidence supporting Trevino’s (1986) framework that claims personal factors may have influenced on ethical judgment.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. The next section reviews relevant literature and posits the hypotheses for the present study. The subsequent section presents the research methodology used in

conducting this research. This is followed by the findings and discussion section. A final section offers the implications of the study, limitations and suggestions for future research and concluding remarks.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW, CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESIS**

### **Prior Studies on Influence of Personal Values on Ethical Judgment**

Previous studies investigating ethical decision-making have explored various determinants, including organizational, situational, and individual factors. Among the measures, organizational and situational include management influence (Hayibor & Wasieleski, 2009; Mencl & May, 2009; Ho, 2010), ethical culture (Hwang et al., 2008, Chew Har et. al, 2022), codes of ethics within the organization (McKinney et al., 2010), ethics training (Herington & Weaven, 2008; Zhang et al., 2009), rewards and sanctions within the organizational structure (Watson & Berkley, 2008; Watson et al., 2009), organization size (Marta et al., 2008), organizational culture and climate (Moberg & Caldwell, 2007) and decision style (Groves et al., 2008).

In terms of individual factors, demographic variables such as gender (McCullough & Faight, 2005; Eweje & Brunton, 2010), age (Chan & Leung 2006; Su, 2006; Eweje & Brunton., 2010) education and work experience (McCullough & Faight, 2005 ;Eweje & Brunton 2010), nationality (Sims, 2009), religion and spirituality (Vitell et al., 2009), locus of control (Street & Street, 2006), personality factors such as attitude (Buchan, 2005, Awang et al., 2019), self-efficacy (Flannery & May., 2000) and cynicism (Andersson & Bateman.,1997) cognitive, moral development (Herington & Weaven, 2008; Reynolds, 2006, Zubairu et al., 2019), emotional intelligence (Ismail & Rasheed, 2019), moral philosophy and value orientation (Groves et al., 2008; Ismail & Rasheed, 2019), have been studied by various researchers. As the present study focussed on determining the influence of personal values on the ethical judgment of future accountants, the focus of the remaining review is on this relationship.

Personal values are individualistic in nature, which are largely influenced by societal and cultural factors, and tend to vary across nations (Lan et al., 2009). An individual's values may propel him or her to behave in an ethical or unethical manner (Baird & Zelin, 2007), because values influence an individual's behaviour and attitude. Brief et al. (1996) emphasized that personal values are useful for understanding work-related behaviour. Prior accounting research indicates that ethical decisions are highly influenced by personal values that characterize the decision-makers in accounting (Rokeach, 1973; Akaah & Lund, 1994; Wright et al., 1997; Douglas & Schwartz, 1995; Douglas et al., 2001; Shafer et al., 2001 and 2007; Karacaer et al., 2009). These studies reported mixed findings in support of the influence of personal values on ethical decision-making in, particular within business and organizational contexts. A study by Homer and Kahle (1988) suggested that values form the foundation for the development of individual attitudes that direct specific decision-making behaviour. Similarly, Grube et al. (1994) contended that personal values were more likely to be predictors of attitudes and actual behaviour. The literature has also shown that personal values have been incorporated into many ethical decision-making models where empirical evidence has revealed their influence on ethical decision-making (Ferrell & Gresham 1985; Hunt & Vitell 1986; Fritzsche, 1995; Shafer et al., 2001; Fritzsche & Oz, 2007; Lan et al., 2009; Karacaer et al., 2009). Fritzsche (1995) hypothesized that specific instrumental values (responsibility, honesty, and broadmindedness) and terminal values (self-respect, family security, and freedom) would affect ethical decision-making.

Ahmad and Fadzly (2004) who carried out a survey on Malaysian students found that ethical principles and personal values were two important factors affecting the students' behaviour. Watson et al. (2009) studied the effect of Schwartz's (1992) personality factors (hedonism, value for power, universalism, benevolence) on moral reasoning. The study found that the four personal values influenced ethical decision-making. By contrast, Shafer et al (2001) investigated the effects of personal values on auditors' ethical decision-making and revealed that personal value preferences do not influence ethical decision-making in auditing.

## Schwartz’s (1992) Personal Values Framework and Hypotheses

Building on and extending Rokeach’s (1973) work, Schwartz and his colleagues (e.g. Schwartz, 1992; Schwartz & Sagiv, 1995) derived a typology of personal values based on the universal requirements of human existence (i.e. biological needs, interpersonal coordination and social institutional demands ensure group welfare). Schwartz derived ten types of values, each of which expresses a distinct motivational goal: power, achievement, hedonism, stimulation, self-direction, universalism, benevolence, tradition, conformity and security. He also specified the structure of relations among these values. Table 1 provides the definitions of each value type.

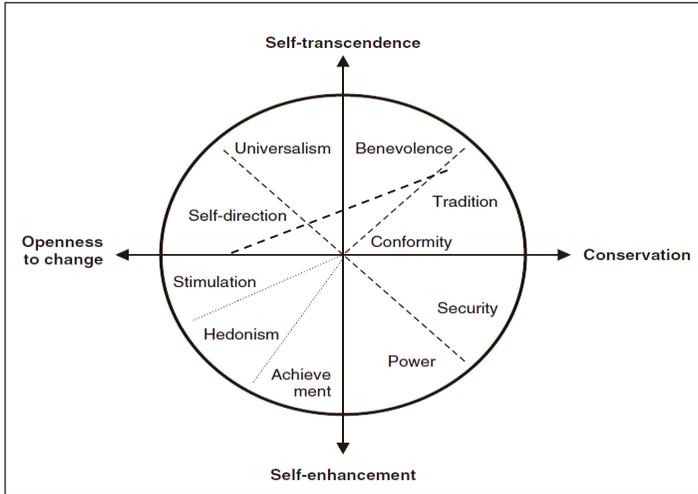
**Table 1: Personal Values and Definitions**

No.	Values and definitions
1	Self-direction: Independent thought and action-choosing, creating, exploring (creativity, freedom, independence, curiosity, choosing own goals)
2	Stimulation: Excitement, novelty, and challenge in life (daring, a varied life, an exciting life)
3	Hedonism: Pleasure and sensuous gratification for oneself (pleasure, enjoying life)
4	Security: Safety, harmony and stability of society, of relationships, and of self (family security, national security, social order, cleanliness, reciprocation of favours’)
5	Conformity: Restraint of actions, inclinations, and impulses likely to upset or harm others and violate social expectations or norms (politeness, obedience, self-discipline, honouring parents and elders)
6	Tradition: Respect, commitment and acceptance of the customs and ideas that traditional culture or religion provide the self (humble, accepting my portion of life, devout, respect for tradition, moderate)
7	Power: Social status and prestige, control or dominance over people and resources (social power, authority, wealth)
8	Achievement: Personal success through demonstrating competence according to social standards (successful, capable, ambitious, influential)
9	Universalism: Understanding, appreciation, tolerance and protection of the welfare of all people and of nature (broadminded, wisdom, social justice, equality, a world at peace, a world of beauty, unity with nature, protecting the environment)
10	Benevolence: Preservation and enhancement of the welfare of people with whom one is in frequent personal contact (helpful, honest, forgiving, loyal, responsible)

Source: Schwartz (1992 and 1994)

Schwartz grouped the ten value types into four clusters lying along the axes of the two-dimensional space as shown in Figure 1. Schwartz labelled the clusters at each end of one axis as conservation and openness to change and the clusters at the end of the other axis as self-transcendence

and self-enhancement (Schwartz, 1992 and 1994). It is important to note that the four clusters of values are presented in a circular arrangement, showing proximity among these clusters. The present study focussed on the four clusters of personal values in examining the influence on the ethical judgement of future accountants.



**Figure 1: Conceptual Model of the Ten Types of Values and the Four Clusters**

(Source: Schwartz, 1992)

The first dimension and structure of Schwartz (1992) is the conservation versus openness to change dimension. Openness to change indicates feeling and readiness for new experience whilst conservation emphasizes self-restriction, order, and resistance to change (Schwartz, 1992 and 1994). The three value types underlying the conservation pole are security, conformity and tradition. The values pertaining to the openness to change are self-direction, stimulation and hedonism. Previous studies found that individuals with a high need for closure tend to have beliefs that are more ethical (Rallapalli et al. 1994, Van Kenhove et al. 2001, Kruglanski, 1989). For instance, if an individual attaches to conservation rather than to openness to change, he/she is more likely to let his/her life be guided by customs, traditions and standards rather than taking challenges to experience excitement and to explore opportunities and this tend to be more ethical (Feather, 1995).

The second dimension of the structure is self-enhancement versus self-transcendence. Self - enhancement refers to the extent to which people are motivated to enhance their own personal interests even at the expense of others. In contrast, self-transcendence means to transcend selfish concerns and promote the welfare of others (Schwartz, 1992, p.43). Underlying the self-enhancement pole are power and achievement. By contrast, self-transcendence encompasses the value types of universalism and benevolence. If a person attaches more self-enhancement than to self-transcendence, it is more likely that he/she will safeguard his/her own well-being and interests, rather than taking into account and preserving the welfare of others and thus tend to act unethically (Feather, 1995). Prior studies have shown that individuals differ in their personal values and these values influence their ethical judgement, whereby conservation and self-transcendence lead to more ethical decisions than do openness and self-enhancement (Schwartz, 2005a, 2005b; Schwartz & Boehnke 2004).

In researching the connection between personal values and ethical decision-making based on the two dimensions of Schwartz's model, the following hypotheses were proposed:

- H1:** Future accountants who attach to conservation values are positively associated with ethical judgement.
- H2:** Future accountants who attach to self-transcendence values are positively associated with ethical judgement.
- H3:** Future accountants who attach to openness to change values are negatively associated with ethical judgement.
- H4:** Future accountants who attach to self-enhancement values are negatively associated with ethical judgement.

## METHODOLOGY

To achieve the objectives of the study, a questionnaire survey method was used. The self-administered questionnaire was adapted with permission from previous studies, including Emerson et al. (2007) and Schwartz (1992). The questionnaire consisted of three parts. Part A included three questions about demographic information, such as gender, year of study, and CGPA. Part B required respondents to respond to six vignettes on ethical scenarios

adopted from Emerson et al. (2007), which were initially developed by Longer Necker et al. (1989), Clark (1966), and Harris (1991). Using vignettes from previously validated instruments increases the reliability of the results and ensures consistency with the approach used in empirical business ethics literature (Ismail, 2014). These six vignettes gauged the ethical judgment of accounting students based on their responses to the ethical dilemmas. For each scenario, respondents were asked to indicate their level of acceptance on a five-point Likert scale (1 being “always acceptable” and 5 being “never acceptable”). Table 2 below summarizes the ethical vignettes used in this study and provides a description of each vignette in the questionnaire. After reading each scenario, respondents were asked to indicate the level of acceptability of the action taken in each scenario. Thus, a higher score implied a lower acceptance of the ethical scenario or a stricter ethical judgment. A rating of five represented complete disagreement or unacceptability of the action, while a rating of one signified that the action was always acceptable.

**Table 2: Ethical Vignettes**

Vignette	Brief description
A	Exceed legal limit pollution
B	Recommend bad stock
C	Underreport income for tax
D	Cut cost increase risk of harm
E	Roll – back odometer
F	Safety design flaw cover-up

Part C of the questionnaire contained an instrument on basic human values (i.e., personal values) developed by Schwartz (1992), comprising 21 items to measure 10 value constructs, which can be grouped into four clusters of two dimensions. The present study used these four clusters to measure the personal values of the respondents, as described in the earlier section. The respondents were asked to think about and describe how much each person is or is not like them. A five-point Likert scale (1 being “very much like me” and 5 being “not at all like me”) was used to capture the respondents’ opinions on each statement. A rating of five represented complete disagreement with such values, which the respondent believed they did not possess. By contrast, a rating of one signified agreement with such values, which the respondent believed they possessed.

The survey questionnaires were distributed to final-year accounting students in three Malaysian public universities that offered accounting degree programs. Although several other public universities also offered accounting degree programs, only three universities were covered in the present study as they are long-established institutions that had offered accounting degree programs for many years (Ismail & Zuhudha, 2019). However, as accounting degree programs in all public universities in Malaysia have a standardized curriculum based on a Halatuju, to some extent, the findings of the current study may also be generalized to accounting students in other universities. University students were chosen because they will become the accountants of tomorrow and, as such, it is important to identify their ethical stance (Sedmak & Nastav, 2010).

To facilitate the distribution of the questionnaire, the researchers sought assistance from the lecturers who taught the final-year courses. The distribution took place towards the end of the students' classes. Each respondent was provided with a set of questionnaires together with a cover letter explaining the objectives of the study and assuring them of the confidentiality of the information given. Each respondent took, on average, 15 minutes to complete the questionnaire. A total of 300 questionnaires were distributed. It was during the students' final exam revision period, and some students left the classes earlier since they had other classes to attend. As a result, 250 respondents completed the questionnaire, representing a response rate of approximately 83 percent.

In analysing the data, descriptive statistics of mean scores and standard deviations were calculated to describe the demographic information and the variables used. Multiple regression analysis was carried out to investigate the influence of the four types of personal values on ethical judgment. The tested regression model is presented below.

$$Y = \alpha_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \beta_3 X_3 + \beta_4 X_4 + \beta_5 G + \beta_6 AP + \epsilon$$

Where:

Y = Ethical judgment

$\alpha_0$  = intercept

$\beta$  = Slope of the regression line

$\epsilon$  = is the error term (RV)

X = Independent variables, which included:

X1 = CONSERVATION                      X2 = SELF TRANSCEDENCE  
X3 = OPENNES TO CHANGE      X4 = SELF-ENHANCEMENT

The control variables are outlined below:

G = Gender

AP = Academic Performance

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Response Rate and Demographic Information

Of the total 250 returned questionnaires, 15 were completely blank, and 30 were incomplete and therefore omitted, resulting in 205 usable questionnaires. This represented an overall usable response rate of 68 percent from the three universities. Table 3 presents the respondents' demographic profiles in terms of gender, CGPA, and year of study. As shown in Table 3, over two-thirds of the respondents (73.2 percent) were female, and the remaining 55 (26.8 percent) were male. This ratio reflected the actual population of accounting graduates produced in Malaysia (Ministry of Education, 2012).

In terms of the cumulative grade point average (CGPA) of the respondents, the majority (57.6 percent) had a CGPA between 3 to 3.5 points. The second highest CGPA range was within 2.5 to 3 points (25 percent) of the total respondents, whereas a CGPA ranging from 3.5 and above comprised (11.3 percent). Only 4.4 percent of the respondents claimed to have a CGPA of 2 to 2.5 points. All the respondents were fourth-year accounting students. Based on this information, the respondents of the current study had relevant CGPAs and were all in their fourth year, about to start their accounting careers. Therefore, their responses were deemed appropriate and reliable for the current study.

**Table 3: Demographic Profile of the Respondents**

		Frequency	Percent (%)
Gender	Male	55	26.8
	Female	150	73.2
	<b>Total</b>	<b>205</b>	<b>100.0</b>
CGPA	2 to 2.5	9	4.4
	2.5 to 3.00	51	24.9
	3 to 3.5	118	57.6
	3.5 and above	23	11.3
	Missing data	4	2.0
	<b>Total</b>	<b>205</b>	<b>99.0</b>
	<b>Year of Study</b>	4th year	205
	<b>Total</b>	<b>205</b>	<b>100.0</b>

### Descriptive Statistics of Variables Used

Table 4 shows the mean and standard deviation for each of the variables.

**Table 4: Descriptive Statistics of Personal Values**

Types of Personal Values	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Conservation	205	4.43	1.64
Openness to change	205	4.34	1.64
Self- enhancement	205	3.35	0.89
Self- transcendence	205	2.74	0.99

In the case of personal values, the mean scores ranged from 2.74 to 4.43. The highest mean score among the four categories of values was 4.43 for conservation, indicating that on average respondents had higher-level conservation, which meant that they emphasized self-restriction, order, and avoided change. Respondents let their life be guided by their customs, traditions and standards of the society in which they live.

**Table 5: Descriptive Statistics of Respondent's Ethical Judgement**

Ethical scenarios	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
A - Exceed legal limit pollution	205	4.02	0.871
B- Recommend bad stock	205	3.76	0.851
C- Underreport income for tax	205	3.98	0.910
D- Cut costs, increase risk of harm	205	4.05	0.996
E- Roll – back odometer	205	3.79	0.970
F- Safety design flaw cover-up	205	3.98	0.987
Overall ethical scenarios	205	3.93	0.708

The dependent variable of this study was represented by ethical judgement. As shown in Table 5, the average mean score for the six vignettes was 3.93, where each of the vignettes had a mean score ranging from 3.76 to 4.05. For the purpose of the current study, only the average mean score of ethical judgement was used for the multiple regression analysis. The mean score of 3.93 suggested that future accountants perceived that ethical dilemmas as unacceptable actions which implied that they were to some extent ethical.

## Multiple Regression Analysis

Table 6 presents the multiple regression results for the hypotheses testing. Based on the results, the model was statistically significant. The R squares was 0.230, while the adjusted R square was 0.183.

**Table 6: Multiple Regression Analysis**

Types of Personal values			
Conservation	-0.097	-0.832	0.406
Openness to change	0.037	0.371	0.711
Self- enhancement	-0.122	-0.505	0.034*
Self- transcendence	0.230	1.759	0.044*
Control variables:			
Gender	0.027	0.380	0.705
Academic Performance	0.067	0.951	0.343

\* Significant at 0.05

Based on the multiple regression results as depicted in Table 6, self-transcendence had a significant positive influence on ethical judgement whilst self-enhancement had a significant negative influence on ethical

judgment, both at 5 per cent significance level. The remaining two types of personal values (conservation and openness to change) did not appear to significantly influence ethical judgement. In terms of control variables, none of the variables (i.e. gender and academic performance) had a significant influence on ethical judgement of future accountants in Malaysia.

The findings indicated that future accountants who were more understanding, appreciative, tolerant and protective of the welfare of all people and nature tended to be more ethical. The values under self-transcendence category included universalism and benevolence. This implied that future accountants who were focused on preserving and enhancing welfare, as well as promoting cooperative and supportive social relations, were making decisions that were considered ethical. Hence, the H2 was supported.

This finding is consistent with prior studies, including Schwartz (2005a, 2005b) and Schwartz and Boehnke (2004). These studies highlighted the importance of self-transcendence values in promoting ethical behaviour. Schwartz's theory of basic human values suggested that values like universalism and benevolence were crucial in guiding ethical decision-making, as they emphasized concern for the welfare of others and the environment (Schwartz, 2005a; Schwartz, 2005b). Additionally, Schwartz and Boehnke (2004) found that individuals who prioritized these values were more likely to engage in prosocial and ethical behaviors.

Moreover, other researchers have also supported the link between self-transcendence values and ethical behavior. Lyons and Duxbury (2012) found that employees with higher levels of benevolence and universalism were more likely to engage in ethical decision-making and prosocial behavior in the workplace. Similarly, a study by Gorsira et al. (2016) demonstrated that individuals who prioritize self-transcendence values were less likely to engage in unethical behavior, as they are more focused on the well-being of others and the broader societal good. More recently, Jasrotia et al. (2023) highlighted that millennials and centennials who value self-transcendence were more inclined toward responsible consumption behaviors, which underscores the ethical implications of these values in various contexts.

Self-enhancement had a significant influence on ethical judgment, with which it was negatively correlated. This implied that future accountants who were focusing on enhancing their own personal interest in terms of self-achievement and power tended to make less ethical decisions. The value of achievement emphasizes on demonstrating self competency such as be more ambitious, successful, influential and more intelligence in order to gain recognition and social approval. However, these characteristics tended to have negative associations with ethical decision of individuals. As they got more achievements, they look forward for power and be dominant over people and resources which as a result they tended to make unethical decision. This result supports finding of prior research by Schwartz (2005a and 2005b) and Schwartz and Boehnke (2004). Therefore, H4 was also supported.

The negative correlation between self-enhancement values and ethical behavior was also revealed by Kasser et al. (2022) and Gino and Mogilner (2014) who found that individuals who prioritized material success and social status were more likely to engage in unethical behaviours to achieve their goals. This is supported by the work of Gino and Mogilner (2014), which showed that individuals focused on future success and self-enhancement are more prone to justify unethical behavior as a means to an end. Treviño, Weaver, and Reynolds (2006) highlighted that self-enhancement goals can lead to rationalizations that justified unethical actions.

On the other hand, openness to change and conservation values had insignificant effect on ethical judgment and hence H1 and H3 were not supported. There are several potential justifications for these insignificant results. Contextual factors might play a critical role. In highly regulated industries like accounting, external regulations and stringent codes of conduct might overshadow the impact of personal values on ethical decision-making (Treviño et al., 2006). In addition, the nature of the values themselves might explain the lack of significant impact. Openness to change values, which included self-direction, stimulation, and hedonism, emphasize individual autonomy and novelty-seeking. These values may not directly relate to ethical considerations in professional settings where conformity and adherence to established standards are crucial (Schwartz, 1992). Similarly, conservation values emphasized security, tradition, and conformity, which might promote adherence to existing norms rather than

encouraging ethical innovation (Schwartz, 1992). Therefore, the values of openness to change and conservation could be less influential compared to the need to comply with external standards.

In comparison with prior studies, Kaygin and Gulluce (2013) found that openness to change and conservation values did not significantly predict ethical behavior among Turkish university students, similar to the current findings. Fatoki (2014) reported comparable results among South African entrepreneurs, further supporting the notion that these values might not be strong predictors of ethical judgment across different settings. However, some studies have found that openness to change can positively influence ethical decision-making, particularly in environments that value innovation and flexibility (Mudrack & Mason, 2012).

To sum up, the results of the current study are to some extent supported by the ethical decision by models of Ferrell and Gresham (1985), Hunt and Vitell (1986), and Trevino (1986) on the influence of individual factors on ethical judgment. Specifically, in the context of the present study personal values of self-enhancement and self-transcendence had positive and negative influences on ethical judgement, respectively.

## **CONCLUSION**

The main objective of the present study was to investigate the effect of personal values on the ethical judgment of future accountants in Malaysia. Using a questionnaire survey method, the study revealed that two types of personal values—self-enhancement and self-transcendence—had a significant influence on ethical judgment, with negative and positive relationships, respectively. There are several implications of the current findings. The evidence that personal values influence the ethical judgment of individuals provides useful input to various parties, including educators in higher education institutions, accounting profession regulators, accounting professional bodies, employers, and existing and future accountants.

Accounting educators may find this information useful in assisting them to design ethics syllabi and propose effective ethics teaching methodologies. This can help develop the right personal values, which will expose future

accountants to integrity and ethical issues in the workplace to some extent. In particular, the findings emphasized the importance of fostering values that promote ethical behaviour in future accountants. Encouraging values such as integrity, honesty, and empathy can counterbalance the negative influence of self-enhancement and support ethical decision-making in professional settings.

It is equally important for accounting professional bodies to revisit their current ethics content and delivery to further emphasize professional ethics. The accounting profession regulator, the Malaysian Institute of Accountants (MIA), together with professional bodies and employers, should consider conducting personal value assessments at the entry point of becoming a member of the profession or at the point of recruiting an employee to ensure that individuals with the right personal values are recruited. At the same time, professional bodies and employers should organize regular ethics and personal development workshops, seminars, or sharing sessions to continuously recharge and remind members (i.e., accountants) of the professional code of conduct and the personal values to be upheld.

The findings of this study also provide fundamental input for the Ministry of Higher Education and MIA on how accounting programs should aim “to educate, build expertise, and shape good character in line with the needs of the nation and the accountancy profession” (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2005). Both parties can develop appropriate plans to foster an environment that encourages the development of ethical accountants with appropriate personal values. Equally important, this study on future accountants may alert the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, educators, and top management of higher education institutions and professional bodies to the strengths and weaknesses of the accounting education system, particularly regarding personal values, professional ethics, and integrity.

Furthermore, the present study also makes a significant contribution to the existing body of knowledge on the influence of personal values on ethical judgment, particularly within the context of future accountants in Malaysia. The findings extend the understanding of the value-ethics relationship in a professional context. While previous research has extensively explored

these relationships in general populations and different cultural settings (Schwartz, 2005a, 2005b; Schwartz & Boehnke, 2004), this study provides specific insights into the accounting profession in Malaysia. The evidence that self-enhancement values lead to less ethical decisions aligns with global findings that emphasize the detrimental impact of values focused on personal success and power on ethical behaviour.

Nonetheless, there are a few limitations and recommendations of the present study. First, the sample used for undergraduate students may not be appropriate for generalizing to the accounting profession because it does not fully represent the population of undergraduate accounting students in Malaysia. Future research could improve upon this by using a larger sample, including students from both public and private universities in Malaysia. Second, the present study focused on only one group of respondents—future accountants. Future studies may include different groups of respondents, such as practicing accountants and academicians, to gain a clearer understanding of the relationship between personal factors and ethical judgment. Furthermore, comparative research involving accounting and non-accounting students may reveal differences in ethical judgment and personal values between the two groups, as well as the relationship between personal factors and ethical judgment in each group.

Third, there is a limitation concerning the vignettes used in this study, which were general and not specific to the job scope of an accountant. It cannot be determined whether the responses provided by the participants accurately reflect what they would actually do in real situations, especially when faced with ethical dilemmas in the workplace. Since students lacked experience in the work environment, their behavior might differ when confronted with such situations. Therefore, it is recommended that future researchers use practical situations in the classroom to observe students' real responses to ethical dilemmas. Additionally, qualitative research techniques, such as interviews and focus groups, are recommended for future studies, as these methods can engage respondents more actively and provide valuable insights into ethical judgments.

Despite these limitations, this study provides relevant information to stimulate further interest in this area of research and pave the way for future studies on ethical judgment. For example, values other than personal

values may also be pertinent to the study of ethical judgment among future accountants.

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