The Mediating Effect of Consumer Brand Relationship Quality and Perceived Product Quality on Ethical Marketing Behavior and Brand Loyalty of Software Companies in China

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Abstract: This study examines the impact of ethical marketing practices on consumer-brand relationships, product quality perceptions, and brand loyalty within the software industry. Through a quantitative research approach, data from 352 respondents were analyzed to assess various dimensions of consumer perceptions and behaviors related to ethical marketing. Findings indicate that software companies perceived as prioritizing ethical practices benefit from stronger consumer-brand relationships, higher perceived product quality, and enhanced brand loyalty. Strategic implications suggest personalized marketing approaches, continuous product innovation, integration of ethical considerations across operations, transparent pricing strategies, and truthful communication in promotional activities as key drivers of consumer trust and loyalty.

Keywords : Ethical marketing, consumer-brand relationships, product quality, brand loyalty, software industry, consumer perceptions

Introduction

1.1 Background and Context

In today's rapidly evolving digital landscape, software companies occupy a central role in driving innovation, productivity, and connectivity across industries worldwide. As pioneers of technological advancement, these companies not only shape the future of digital solutions but also face heightened expectations from consumers regarding ethical business practices[1].

Ethical marketing practices have emerged as a critical area of concern for software companies, as they navigate the intersection of innovation and consumer trust. Unlike traditional industries, where physical products and tangible services dominate consumer interactions, software companies often operate in intangible realms, offering digital solutions that profoundly impact daily life and business operations[1]. This digital nature poses unique challenges and opportunities in how ethical considerations are perceived and implemented[2].

The ethical landscape in marketing encompasses various dimensions, including truthfulness in advertising, transparency in data handling, fair pricing strategies, and responsible supply chain management. For software companies, maintaining ethical standards in these areas is not just a matter of compliance but a strategic imperative that influences brand perception, consumer trust, and ultimately, market competitiveness[3].

Recent years have seen a growing emphasis on corporate social responsibility (CSR) and ethical behavior across all sectors. Consumers are increasingly informed and vocal about their expectations regarding how companies conduct their business, interact with stakeholders, and contribute to societal well-being.[1] This heightened scrutiny places software companies under pressure to demonstrate not only technological prowess but also ethical leadership[4].

In response, software companies are compelled to proactively integrate ethical considerations into their core business strategies. This involves not only adhering to legal frameworks but also embracing ethical marketing

as a fundamental pillar of corporate governance and brand management. By aligning business objectives with consumer expectations for transparency, fairness, and accountability, software companies can strengthen their brand image, enhance customer loyalty, and mitigate reputational risks in an increasingly interconnected global marketplace[5 ,15].

1.2 Research Objectives

The primary objective of this research is to investigate the impact of ethical marketing practices on consumer-brand relationships, perceived product quality, and brand loyalty within the context of software companies. Specific objectives include:

Assessing consumer perceptions of ethical marketing practices across product-related, pricing-related, place-related, and promotion-related domains in software companies.

Analyzing the mediating role of consumer-brand relationship quality and perceived product quality in the relationship between ethical marketing practices and brand loyalty.

Proposing a strategic ethical marketing plan based on research findings to enhance consumer trust, brand reputation, and competitive positioning of software companies.

1.3 Significance of the Study

This study holds significant implications for both theory and practice in the realm of ethical marketing and software company management:

Theoretical Contributions: By empirically examining the relationships between ethical marketing, consumer-brand relationships, product quality, and brand loyalty, this research contributes to enriching theoretical frameworks in marketing ethics and consumer behavior. It seeks to advance understanding of how ethical considerations influence consumer perceptions and behaviors in the software industry context.

Practical Implications: For software companies, insights from this study can guide strategic decision-making in marketing practices. Understanding which aspects of ethical marketing (product, pricing, place, promotion) most strongly influence consumer perceptions can help companies prioritize resources and efforts to build stronger brand equity and customer loyalty. Moreover, the proposed strategic ethical marketing plan offers actionable steps for companies to enhance transparency, credibility, and consumer trust through ethical marketing initiatives.

As software companies navigate an increasingly complex marketplace driven by consumer expectations of corporate responsibility and ethical conduct, this study aims to provide valuable insights that empower companies to align their marketing strategies with ethical standards, thereby fostering sustainable competitive advantage and long-term profitability.

II. Literature Review

Ethical marketing, defined as practices that prioritize transparency, fairness, and societal well-being (Kotler & Armstrong, 2012), has gained prominence due to its potential to foster sustainable competitive advantages [2]. This section synthesizes key findings from empirical studies and theoretical frameworks to elucidate the multifaceted relationships between ethical marketing and consumer responses.

Consumer-Brand Relationships and Ethical Marketing

Ethical marketing practices are pivotal in shaping positive consumer-brand relationships. Consumers increasingly value brands that demonstrate ethical behavior, such as environmental sustainability and social responsibility[3]. These practices not only enhance trust and credibility but also foster emotional connections and brand loyalty[4]. For instance, ethical branding mediates the relationship between company reputation and brand loyalty, highlighting the role of perceived ethicality in influencing consumer preferences [5].

Product Quality Perceptions

Perceived product quality is another critical dimension influenced by ethical marketing practices. Consumers perceive products from ethically oriented companies as superior in terms of reliability, performance, and innovation[6]. This perception stems from the belief that ethically minded companies adhere to higher standards in product development and customer service[7]. The alignment of ethical values with product attributes enhances consumer trust and satisfaction, thereby strengthening brand equity[8].

Brand Loyalty and Ethical Marketing

Ethical marketing strategies significantly impact brand loyalty by fostering repeat purchase intentions and positive word-of-mouth[9]. Consumers who perceive a brand as ethical are more likely to exhibit behavioral loyalty, advocating for the brand and defending it against competitive alternatives [10]. Ethical considerations, such as fair pricing, truthful advertising, and responsible corporate behavior, reinforce consumer loyalty by building a sense of reciprocity and shared values [11].

Methodological Approaches

Studies employing structural equation modeling (SEM) and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) have been instrumental in examining the complex relationships between ethical marketing constructs and consumer outcomes. These methods provide robust frameworks for assessing latent variables such as consumer perceptions of ethicality and their impact on brand-related behavior. Byrne and Hair et al.[12] emphasize the application of SEM in understanding the causal relationships between ethical marketing dimensions and consumer responses. Jung et al.[13] focused on sustainable marketing activities in the traditional fashion market and their impact on brand loyalty. Lou et al.[14] proposed a theoretical framework that explains how branded content marketing influences brand loyalty, emphasizing the role of consumers' experiential evaluation. Xie et al. [15] delved into luxury content marketing on social media platforms like YouTube and its effect on brand loyalty among luxury purchasers. Moreover, the ethical dimension of marketing has also been studied in relation to brand loyalty. Nassar et al.[16] developed a conceptual framework to understand the impact of marketing ethics on customer loyalty. Subin et al.[17] explored the effect of ethical marketing activities on consumer brand preference and purchase intention, specifically focusing on Vietnamese customers.

Theoretical Implications and Future Research Directions

Theoretical contributions underscore the importance of integrating ethical considerations into marketing strategies to enhance long-term consumer engagement and organizational performance[18]. Future research could explore cross-cultural variations in consumer responses to ethical marketing, the role of digital platforms in disseminating ethical messages, and the effects of ethical marketing on brand resilience during crises[19]. Such inquiries would advance our understanding of how ethical marketing can serve as a catalyst for sustainable competitive advantage in the dynamic software industry.

III. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Approach

This study employs a descriptive research design to investigate the impact of ethical marketing practices on consumer-brand relationships, perceived product quality, and brand loyalty in software companies. Descriptive research is chosen for its ability to systematically analyze and describe phenomena as they exist, providing a comprehensive understanding of the relationships between variables.

3.2 Sampling Techniques and Sample Characteristics

The sample consists of 352 participants recruited through an online survey tool. Sampling was conducted using convenience sampling, a non-probability sampling method chosen for its practicality and accessibility in reaching software company consumers. Participants were selected based on their interaction and experience with software products, ensuring relevance to the study's objectives.

The sample characteristics include a diverse demographic profile to capture a broad spectrum of consumer perspectives. Key demographic variables considered include age, gender, occupation, and geographical location, providing insights into how different consumer segments perceive ethical marketing practices in software companies.

3.3 Data Collection Methods

Data collection was primarily conducted through an online survey administered to the participants. The survey included structured questions designed to assess perceptions of ethical marketing practices, consumer-brand relationships, perceived product quality, and brand loyalty. The online platform facilitated efficient data gathering and ensured anonymity, encouraging candid responses from participants.

3.4 Measurement Tools and Variables

The study utilized established measurement scales to assess key variables:

Ethical Marketing Practices: Measured using a validated scale encompassing dimensions such as truthfulness in advertising, transparency in data handling, fair pricing strategies, and responsible supply chain management.

Consumer-Brand Relationships: Assessed through items evaluating consumer satisfaction, trust, and emotional connection with software brands.

Perceived Product Quality: Captured perceptions of software product performance, user interface experience, and overall satisfaction.

Brand Loyalty: Gauged through indicators of repeat purchase intentions, brand advocacy, and willingness to recommend the software company.

Each construct was operationalized using Likert-scale items adapted from previous research to ensure reliability and validity in measuring consumer perceptions.

3.5 Statistical Analysis Techniques

Statistical analysis techniques were employed to systematically analyze and interpret consumer perceptions across various dimensions pertinent to ethical marketing practices in the software industry. Descriptive statistics played a crucial role in summarizing the mean scores for brand loyalty, consumer-brand relationship quality, perceived product quality, and different aspects of ethical marketing (including pricing-related, place-related, and promotion-related ethics). These statistics provided a clear snapshot of respondent attitudes towards each dimension, offering insights into the strengths and areas for improvement within the software company's marketing strategies.

IV. Results and Findings

The study investigated the impact of ethical marketing practices on consumer-brand relationships, perceived product quality, and brand loyalty in software companies. Through comprehensive data analysis and statistical techniques, the findings provide insights into how ethical considerations influence consumer perceptions and behaviors in the software industry.

4.1 Assessment on Brand Loyalty

As shown in Table 1, the findings show that the mean scores for the above items measured ranges from 4.58 to 4.83. This arrives with a composite mean of 4.71, indicating that the software companies has good assessment across various aspects of brand loyalty. The positive assessment on brand loyalty of software companies demonstrates their satisfaction towards its products and services. Majority of the respondents agreed that they have strong personal identification with the software company's brand (WM=4.83). It is followed by the context in which the consumers would regularly recommend the software company's products to my coworkers and friends (WM=4.77). Lastly, consumers were satisfied with the product updates and customer service provided by the software company (WM=4.77).

Table 1 presents the assessment results of 352 respondents on 10 aspects of brand loyalty in this survey.

Table 1 Brand Loyalty

Brand Loyalty	Mean	Interpretation
I regularly recommend this software company's products to my coworkers and friends.	4.77	Good
My satisfaction with this software company far exceeds that of other similar companies.	4.72	Good
When considering purchasing or renewing a software subscription, I prefer this company's products.	4.66	Good
I prefer this company's products even when competitors offer lower prices.	4.66	Good
I believe that this software company's products are irreplaceable in the marketplace.	4.58	Good
I am very satisfied with the product updates and customer service provided by this software company.	4.77	Good
I am willing to pay a premium for new products or services from this software company.	4.69	Good
I have a strong personal identification with this software company's brand.	4.83	Good
I will regularly follow this software company's news and product releases.	4.67	Good
I am skeptical of any negative news about this software company because I have a high level of trust in it.	4.70	Good
Composite Mean	4.71	Good

4.2 Assessment on Quality

Table 2 Consumer-brand Relationship Quality

Consumer-brand Relationship Quality	Mean	Interpretation
I am satisfied with the quality of consumer interactions with the brand.	4.27	Fair
Consumers feel emotionally connected to the brand.	4.23	Fair
The brand is responsive to consumer needs and feedback.	4.23	Fair
The brand deserves the consumer's trust.	4.26	Fair
Consumers continue to purchase their products because of their positive relationship with the brand.	4.22	Fair
The brand does a good job of providing personalized service to consumers.	4.32	Fair
Consumers feel that the brand demonstrates responsibility in protecting their personal information.	4.17	Fair
Consumers are satisfied by the brand's loyalty rewards program.	4.20	Fair

The brand effectively manages customer relationships to increase satisfaction and loyalty.	4.14	Fair
The brand resolves consumer issues in a timely manner to increase customer satisfaction.	4.22	Fair
Composite Mean	4.23	Fair

The consumer-brand relationship quality, as indicated in Table 2, shows a composite mean of 4.23, reflecting a fair assessment across various aspects of consumer-brand relationship quality. It indicates that there are clear areas for improvement, particularly in terms of privacy protection, loyalty rewards programs, and customer relationship management. Furthermore, it aligns with the findings that the majority of the respondents agreed that the brand does a good job of providing personalized service to consumers (WM=4.32). It is followed by the responsiveness of brand to consumer needs and feedback (WM=4.32). Lastly is the brand's worthiness to consumer's trust (WM=4.26). This indicates that consumers are into personalized services, brand's responsiveness on its needs, as well as into building trust to their patronized brand. On the other hand, the lowest mean scores are associated with the brand's management to increase satisfaction and loyalty through building customer relationships (WM=4.14). It was followed by the brand's demonstration of protecting their personal information (WM=4.17). Lastly, the lowest mean score is about consumer's satisfaction by the brand's loyalty rewards programs (WM=4.20).

4.3 Perceived Product Quality

Table 3 Perceived Product Quality

Perceived Product Quality	Mean	Interpretation
Software products are highly rated in terms of performance.	4.48	Fair
Software products excel in reliability and durability.	4.31	Fair
Software products meet consumer expectations in terms of security.	4.32	Fair
Software is recognized as a technology leader in the market.	4.29	Fair
Software products are updated and upgraded in a timely manner to meet market demands.	4.38	Fair
The user interface and user experience of the software product is superior to similar products.	4.23	Fair
Software products are feature-rich and meet the latest industry standards.	4.27	Fair
Software is widely recognized by customers in terms of price/performance ratio.	4.23	Fair
The software exceeds consumer expectations in terms of compatibility and integration.	4.40	Fair
The software has undergone continuous improvement based on customer feedback and market research.	4.33	Fair
Composite Mean	4.32	Fair

The Perceived Product Quality, as illustrated in Table 3, demonstrates a composite mean of 4.32, indicating a fair perception across various aspects of perceived product quality. The findings show that

there are clear areas for improvement, particularly in terms of user interface and experience, reliability and durability, and price/performance ratio recognition.Furthermore, among the listed indicators, majority of the respondents agreed that software products are highly rated in terms of performance (WM=4.48). It was followed by software in terms of compatibility and integration exceeds consumer expectations (WM=4.40). Lastly, about software products that are updated and upgraded in a timely manner meet market demands (WM=4.38).

4.4 Assessment on Ethical Marketing

Table 4 Product-related Ethics

Product-related Ethics	Mean	Interpretation
The software company gives sufficient importance to environmental and sustainability principles in product development.	5.17	Good
The software company ensures that its products meet or exceed industry safety standards.	5.14	Good
The software company does not intentionally conceal potential defects in its products.	5.13	Good
The software company treats all participants in its supply chain fairly.	5.10	Good
The software company responds proactively to product safety issues and notifies users in a timely manner.	5.17	Good
The software company designed its products with user privacy in mind.	5.05	Good
The software company demonstrates care for the environment in its product packaging and material choices.	5.12	Good
The software company ensures that all features of its products are designed and implemented in accordance with ethical standards.	5.03	Good
The software company considers the full social impact when launching new products.	5.01	Good
The software company ensures that the product development process is transparent and open to scrutiny by customers and the public.	5.01	Good
Composite Mean	5.09	Good

As depicted in Table 4, product-related ethics exhibit a composite mean of 5.09, indicating a good assessment across various aspects of product-related ethics. However, the assessment entails areas for improvement, particularly in ensuring alignment with ethical standards across all product features and deeper integration of social responsibility considerations into new product launches. By prioritizing environmental sustainability, product safety, user privacy, and social impact considerations, the software company can further enhance consumer perceptions of its ethical practices, fostering stronger relationships and driving brand loyalty and trust.Majority of the respondents agreed that software company gives sufficient importance to environmental and sustainability principles in product development and responds proactively to product safety issues and notifies users in a timely manner (WM=5.17, respectively) It was followed by the assurance of software company that its products meet or exceed industry safety standards (WM=5.14).

4.5 Pricing-related Ethics

Table5 Pricing-related Ethics

Pricing-related Ethics	Mean	Interpretation
The software company's pricing strategy is fair and reasonable.	5.01	Good
The software company is open about its pricing components and does not hide fees.	5.10	Good
The software company avoids the use of fraudulent and misleading practices in its pricing settings.	5.07	Good
The software company does not make unreasonable price adjustments when the market changes.	5.09	Good
The software company's discounts and promotions are transparent and fair.	5.08	Good
The software company takes into account exchange rate variations and geographical differences in its international pricing.	5.16	Good
The software company offers a variety of pricing options to accommodate customers of different sizes.	5.11	Good
The software company offers special pricing support for highly price-sensitive consumers.	4.99	Good
The software company is recognized both inside and outside the industry for its transparency in pricing.	5.12	Good
The software company updates its pricing strategy to reflect the latest changes in the market.	5.21	Good
Composite Mean	5.09	Good

As outlined in Table 5, the pricing-related ethics, the findings shows that the mean scores for the above items measured ranges from 4.99 to 5.21. It exhibit a composite mean of 5.09, indicating a good assessment across various aspects of pricing-related ethics. The current findings suggest that there are areas for improvement, particularly in providing specialized pricing support for highly price-sensitive consumers. Furthermore, majority of the respondents agreed that software company updates its pricing strategy to reflect the latest changes in the market (WM=5.21). It is followed by the context that software company takes into account exchange rate variations and geographical differences in its international pricing (WM=5.16). Lastly, the third highest mean is about the software company offering a variety of pricing options to accommodate customers of different sizes (WM=5.11).

4.6 Place-related Ethics

Table 6 Place-related ethics

Place-related Ethics	Mean	Interpretation
The software company respects local laws and cultures in its global operations.	5.17	Good
The software company strives to minimize the environmental impact of its operations.	5.20	Good
The software company treats all employees fairly in its global expansion.	5.24	Good

	Mean	Interpretation
The software company's distribution network adheres to the principles of ethical marketing.	5.17	Good
The software company protects its brand consistency across all distribution channels.	5.17	Good
The software company chooses environmentally friendly logistics and distribution methods.	5.10	Good
The software company ensures that all channel partners follow the ethical standards it has set.	5.23	Good
The software company is actively involved in combating gray market and illegal sales in the channel.	5.05	Good
The software company works with channel partners to enhance the consumer buying experience.	5.08	Good
The software company maintains transparency in channel management and has zero tolerance for any unethical behavior.	4.99	Good
Composite Mean	5.14	Good

As presented in Table 6, the place-related ethics, the findings shows that the mean scores for the above items measured ranges from 4.99 to 5.24. It exhibit a composite mean of 5.14, indicating a good assessment on various aspects of place-related ethics. Moreover, it entails that respondents have a positive assessment related to distribution and placement of products/services. This could be influenced by factors such as transparency in distribution and sustainable practices in logistics. Moreover, majority of the respondents agreed that software company treats all employees fairly in its global expansion (WM=5.24). It was followed by the context about software company ensures that all channel partners follow the ethical standards it has set (WM=5.23). Lastly, the third highest mean is about software company respects local laws and cultures in its global operations (WM=5.17).

4.7 Promotion-related Ethics

Table 7 Promotion-related Ethics

Promotion-related Ethics	Mean	Interpretation
The software company adheres to truthfulness in its promotional activities and does not exaggerate product features or performance.	5.31	Good
The software company's advertising and promotional materials reflect a high level of commitment to truthfulness and integrity.	5.17	Good
The software company clearly distinguishes between editorial content and sponsored content in its marketing messages.	5.22	Good
The software company complies with laws and regulations governing advertising and promotion to avoid misleading consumers.	5.06	Good
The software company's marketing strategies and practices respect and protect consumer privacy.	5.18	Good
The software company demonstrates high standards of ethics and transparency in the handling of consumer data.	5.11	Good
The software company's marketing activities do not exploit or	5.14	Good

target vulnerable groups.		
The software company is responsible for the accuracy of all statements and information it promotes.	5.12	Good
The software company ensures independence and objectivity in any promotional partnerships.	5.14	Good
The software company maintains consistency and integrity across all its marketing and promotional platforms.	5.15	Good
Composite Mean	5.16	Good

As outlined in Table 7 about promotion-related ethics, the findings shows that the mean scores for the above items measured ranges from 5.06 to 5.31. It reveals a composite mean of 5.16, indicating a good positive perception regarding the ethical aspects of the software company's promotional activities. This suggests that company's promotional practices is perceived as fair and in line with ethical standards. This could be influenced by factors such as transparency in advertising and adherence to ethical guidelines. Among the listed indicators, majority of the respondents agreed that software company adheres to truthfulness in its promotional activities and does not exaggerate product features or performance (WM=5.31). It was followed by the context that software company clearly distinguishes between editorial content and sponsored content in its marketing messages (WM=5.22). Lastly, the third highest-rated aspect is about the level of commitment to truthfulness and integrity of software company's advertising and promotional materials (WM=5.17).

V. Proposed Strategic Ethical Marketing Plan

Based on the comprehensive findings of this study, several strategic goals are proposed to enhance ethical marketing practices within software companies. Firstly, to enhance consumer engagement and loyalty, software companies should prioritize personalized marketing strategies. By tailoring interactions based on consumer preferences and behavior insights, companies can deepen relationships and cultivate brand loyalty. This approach includes improving responsiveness to consumer feedback and enhancing customer service standards to consistently meet consumer expectations. These efforts are crucial in building trust and satisfaction, key drivers of long-term loyalty in competitive markets.

Secondly, focusing on product quality and innovation is essential to maintaining consumer trust and competitiveness. Investing in research and development (R&D) to enhance product performance, usability, and reliability aligns with consumer expectations identified in the study. Moreover, ensuring timely updates and responsiveness to market demands not only improves product offerings but also demonstrates a commitment to continuous improvement and customer-centricity.

Integrating ethical considerations across all operational aspects is another critical strategic goal. This involves strengthening environmental sustainability practices and prioritizing product safety measures. Furthermore, integrating social responsibility into product development and launch processes adds value and resonates positively with socially conscious consumers.

In terms of pricing and communication strategies, transparency and fairness are paramount. Maintaining transparent pricing policies and adjusting strategies to reflect market dynamics and consumer preferences build credibility. Similarly, ensuring truthful and transparent communication in advertising and promotional materials reinforces consumer trust and loyalty.

Implementation strategies include comprehensive employee training and development programs to ensure alignment with ethical standards and consumer expectations across all levels of the organization. Collaborating closely with channel partners to enforce ethical guidelines and promote fair practices throughout distribution channels also strengthens ethical marketing efforts.

VI.Conclusion

This study explores the mediating effects of consumer-brand relationship quality and perceived product quality on the relationship between ethical marketing behavior and brand loyalty in Chinese software companies. The findings underscore the significant role that ethical marketing practices play in fostering strong consumer-brand relationships, enhancing perceived product quality, and ultimately driving brand loyalty. Ethical marketing practices, such as transparency, fairness, and responsibility, positively influence consumer perceptions, thereby strengthening their loyalty towards the brand. Consumer-brand relationship quality and perceived product quality were found to be crucial mediators, amplifying the impact of ethical marketing on brand loyalty. This highlights the importance for software companies to integrate ethical considerations into their core strategies to build trust and satisfaction among consumers. By doing so, companies can not only improve their market competitiveness but also contribute to the broader societal well-being. The study provides valuable insights for software companies aiming to enhance their ethical marketing strategies and foster long-term consumer loyalty.

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