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Examining Education and Newsroom Work Experience as Predictors of Communication Students' Perceptions of Journalism Ethics

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Examining Education and Newsroom Work Experience as Predictors of Communication
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Abstract

This study examines education and work experience in newsrooms as predictors of ethical perceptions amongst communication undergraduates at a large Singaporean university (N= 826). Results indicate that education is associated with ethical ideologies, perceived importance of journalism ethics codes, justifiability of using contentious news gathering methods and concern towards journalistic plagiarism and fabrication. However, in this context education is not a significant predictor of agreement with ethical principles or support for sanctions against journalistic plagiarism and fabrication. Ethical ideologies (idealism and relativism) are associated with ethical principles and the degree to which using contentious news gathering methods is justifiable. Work experience in newsrooms is associated with perceived justifiability of using contentious news gathering methods but not with ethical ideologies. The pattern of results was not entirely as predicted, and may be a function of the way journalism is practiced and perceived in Singapore.

Introduction

Journalists frequently have to grapple with moral dilemmas at work. Often, it is difficult for journalists to perform their roles without compromising integrity (Paterno, 1998). As a significant proportion of students from media and communication programs are likely to become journalists in future, media scholars have also emphasized the importance of providing media ethics training at the undergraduate level so that students are equipped with an understanding of the moral dilemmas that journalists face (Braun, 1999; Lambeth, Christians, & Cole, 1994; Lee & Padgett, 2000). Increasingly, scholars are also beginning to examine how communication undergraduates' attitudes towards ethical issues change with education and work experiences such as internship (Ball, Hanna, & Sanders, 2006; Conway & Groshek, 2008; Reinardy & Moore, 2007). However, there has been little research done in Asian countries examining the ethical perceptions of communication undergraduates and how they change over time.

The present study represents an effort to help fill this gap, and constitutes part of an ongoing, longitudinal survey designed to track developments in communication undergraduates' ethical perceptions in Singapore (Detenber, Cenite, Wijaya, Hao, & Malik, 2009). Using established survey items, this study examines differences in ethical ideologies among undergraduates and how these relate to views of controversial methods of gathering information, and level of agreement with the four ethical principles from the Society of Professional Journalists' (SPJ) Code of Ethics: seek truth and report it, minimize harm, act independently and be accountable. It also examines differences in concerns over plagiarism and fabrication among first and final year students as well as among those with and without newsroom work experience.

Literature Review

The common view among developmental psychologists is that ethical reasoning becomes increasingly complex with age (Kolhberg, 1984). In recent years, media scholars have expressed interest in examining the impact of journalism education on students' ethical reasoning over time. Findings from comparative studies done in Western countries such as the United Kingdom and the United States strongly suggest that age and education are factors that concurrently shape the way journalism students view ethical issues (Ball et al., 2006; Reinardy & Moore, 2007). In order to better understand the extent to which this pattern of influence applies in non-Western contexts, this study assesses a wide range of ethical views among students at Nanyang Technological University's Wee Kim Wee School of Communication & Information, the only program in Singapore that offers an undergraduate specialization in journalism.

Singapore presents a complex context for studying journalism ethics. Some have described the Singapore press as adopting a "development model" in which independence is sacrificed because the press takes a role as partner to government in reaching national development goals, and government leaders have specifically rejected the characterization of the Singapore press as the fourth estate (Cenite et al., 2008). Nonetheless, journalism education and journalism workplaces in Singapore share many professional standards and characteristics as their Western counterparts (Hao, George, & Shi, 2011). At the school where this research was conducted, the diverse international faculty was trained in the West and the curriculum is in most ways similar to those of Western communication schools ("New curriculum by concentrations," 2008). For example, media law and ethics constitutes a core course required for all students. Furthermore, faculty members in the school have rejected claims of a specifically "Asian" model of journalism and instead endorsed global standards and practices, asserting that there is "no

demand—even from Asian media organizations—for such journalists” following an Asian model (George, 2010, p. 5).

Ethics Principles in Journalism

According to the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ), four core ethical principles are critical to news reporting: to seek truth and report it, to minimize harm, to act independently and to be accountable (Society of Professional Journalists, 1996). Though these principles were developed by a North American organization of journalists and reflect priorities that may not be universal, to a certain extent, they do represent values held by journalists in Singapore (Hao et al., 2011). A long term goal of this research project is to compare the extent to which students and media professionals in different press systems embrace them. This first stage of the research, reported here and conducted with student participants in Singapore, lays the groundwork for future comparative research that will allow us to examine the extent to which other students and professionals endorse principles like those of the Society of Professional Journalists.

Scholars contend that age (e.g., Borkowski & Ugras, 1998; Kohlberg, 1984) and education (Sankaran & Tung, 2003) are correlated with heightened awareness of ethical principles. A study by Coombe and Newman (1997) showed that older students expressed greater confidence in their abilities to apply ethical principles appropriately to challenging workplace scenarios. Furthermore, Kim and Choi (2003) found that age was associated with greater approval of professional ethical principles amongst public relations practitioners.

At the university where this study was administered, it is compulsory for students to take media ethics classes in their final year. Given that the final year students have had greater exposure to potential ethical dilemmas faced by journalists and are obviously older than their freshmen counterparts, it is plausible that final year students and first year students will differ in

their views regarding ethical principles (Detenber et al., 2009). Hence, this study examines if there are any differences in students' level of agreement with the four ethical principles of the SPJ code. We hypothesize that:

H1: First year students will express less agreement with journalists' ethical principles of a) truth telling, b) minimizing harm, c) independence, and d) accountability than final year students.

Ethical Ideologies

One broad, widely used way to characterize approaches to ethics is on the dimensions of idealism and relativism (Forsyth, 1980; Forsyth et al., 2008). Idealists believe that “correct” actions lead to beneficial results, whereas relativists tend to take situational factors and (i.e., the context) into consideration when making judgments, and they generally reject the notion of universal moral rules (Forsyth, 1980). Although there are other ways of categorizing moral philosophies, such as deontological, utilitarian and virtue-based approaches, these broad distinctions between idealism and relativism are one way that is used particularly by social scientists to describe how individuals approach ethical questions

According to Kohlberg (1984), older people are likely to be less idealistic than younger people. As such, it is possible that first year students will be more idealistic than final year students. Also, scholars have said that media ethics classes play a prominent role in molding students into socially responsible individuals who use ethical ideologies to make sound judgments on controversial issues (Plaisance, 2007; Surlin, 1987). As final year students have been exposed to ethical issues in media ethics classes, we expect them to be more nuanced in their ethical reasoning and be more relativistic than first year students.

Hence, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H2a: First year students will be more idealistic than final year students.

H2b: Final year students will be more relativistic than first year students.

Previous studies conducted in marketing and business contexts have shown that ethical ideologies are one of the strongest predictors of moral judgment (Barnett, Bass, Brown, & Hebert, 1998; Forsyth, 1992; Kim & Choi, 2003). Also, Detenber et al.'s (2009) study showed that communication students high in idealism concur more with ethical principles than those high in relativism. As idealists tend to be more absolute in their moral reasoning than relativists (Forsyth, 1980), this study hypothesizes that those who exhibit high levels of idealism will tend to concur more with ethical principles than those with high levels of relativism.

H3: Students with high levels of idealism will express greater agreement with the ethical principles of a) truth telling, b) minimizing harm, c) independence, and d) accountability than those with high levels of relativism.

Journalism Ethics Codes

Journalism ethics codes consist of guiding principles on appropriate journalistic conduct and usually vary from one country to another (Hafez, 2002). However, scholars and media practitioners hold mixed views about journalism ethics codes. Some contend that journalism ethics codes serve as a non-legislative means of ensuring that the press maintains accountability towards a country's citizens (Bertrand, 2000), whereas others have argued that ethics codes do little to instill ethical values in journalists (Black & Barney, 1985). Despite the critiques, ethics codes remain an important part of the character of professional organizations.

As it is likely for final year communication students to show greater complexity in their ethical reasoning (Kohlberg, 1984) and to have internalized ethical principles after four years of education (Surlin, 1987), it is plausible for them to rely more on their own discretion than formal

ethics codes when making news judgments (Black & Barney, 1985), and as such, deem journalism ethics codes to be less important than first year students. With that, we hypothesize that:

H4: First year students will perceive journalism ethics codes to be more important than final year students.

Work Experience in Newsrooms

A student's ethical perceptions of newsroom practices can be shaped through work experience (Fosdick, 1979). A study by Conway and Groshek (2008) showed that students who had worked with news companies expressed greater concern towards unethical journalistic practices and were more likely to support punitive measures for journalistic plagiarism and fabrication. As students working in the newsroom often gain firsthand experience of the ethical dilemmas that journalists grapple with, they are likely to develop a more accurate overview of journalistic practices and become more pragmatic (Conway & Groshek, 2009; Fosdick, 1979).

In this study, we have chosen to focus on newsroom work experience as it is a more salient predictor of journalism ethics than other types of media-related occupations. During the semester breaks, students can choose to work part-time at news companies. Furthermore, under the university's compulsory professional attachment program, all third year undergraduates from this school are given the opportunity to choose whether to intern at news companies. Given that work experience in newsrooms can potentially influence ethical ideologies (Ball et al., 2006; Conway & Groshek, 2009), we postulate that:

H5: Students with work experience in newsrooms will be less idealistic than those without work experience.

Contentious Methods of Getting Information

Oftentimes, journalists have to decide whether to resort to controversial methods to obtain information from their sources. Some examples of controversial methods of obtaining information include using classified documents without official permission, renegeing on promises to protect source confidentiality and using hidden microphones or cameras (Ball et al., 2008; Reinardy & Moore, 2007). While some would argue that the ends can justify the means when obtaining information, different methods engender varying levels of approbation.

As many studies have shown that age is negatively associated with approval towards using contentious methods of achieving goals (e.g., Ball et al., 2006; Kim & Choi, 2003; Peterson, Rhoads, & Vaught, 2001; Reinardy & Moore, 2007), it is plausible that first year students will express greater disapproval towards contentious methods of gathering information. Recent research has also shown that newsroom work experience was a significant predictor of perceived justifiability of using contentious news gathering methods (Ball et al., 2008; Detenber et al., 2009). Furthermore, Detenber et al.'s (2009) study showed that students who showed strong support for ethical principles and exhibited high levels of idealism were more likely to frown upon contentious methods of news gathering. With this, we propose the following four hypotheses:

H6: First year students will be less likely than final year students to say that contentious newsgathering methods are justifiable.

H7: Students without work experience in the newsroom will be less likely than those with work experience to say that contentious newsgathering methods are justifiable.

H8: Students who express high levels of agreement with the journalistic ethical principles of a) truth telling, b) minimizing harm, c) independence, and d) accountability will be

less likely than those who disagree with these principles to say that contentious newsgathering methods are justifiable.

H9: Students with high levels of idealism will be less likely than those with high levels of relativism to agree that contentious newsgathering methods are justifiable.

Plagiarism & Fabrication

In the field of journalism, plagiarism and fabrication are considered serious offenses (Conway & Groshek, 2008). In recent years, prominent journalists have been severely castigated for passing off other people's work as their own and making up facts ("Times Reporter Who Resigned," 2003; "Witnesses and Documents," 2003). However, few studies have examined students' perceptions of plagiarism and fabrication. It is important to gauge students' level of concern towards journalistic plagiarism and fabrication and their perceptions of penalties which should be imposed on people who commit such offenses as these two infractions are much more strongly associated with the journalistic profession than other media-related careers that they might choose to embark on after graduation (Conway & Groshek, 2008, 2009).

As final year students have arguably become well acquainted with ethical issues through media ethics classes and internships with media companies (Gibson & Hester, 2000; Lee & Padgett, 2000; Plaisance, 2007), it is likely for them to take a more serious view of journalistic misconduct than first year students. Indeed, Groshek and Conway (2010) found that students became increasingly concerned with plagiarism and fabrication during their years in college. A study by Kostyu (1990) showed that communication students in the United States viewed journalistic plagiarism as the most severe breach of ethical conduct (Kostyu, 1990). Also, studies have shown that final year students are more likely than freshmen to approve of tougher

sanctions for journalistic plagiarizing (Conway & Groshek, 2008, 2009; Groshek & Conway, 2010; Kostyu, 1990). Hence, we hypothesize that:

H10: Final year students will a) express greater concern and b) support harsher sanctions for journalistic plagiarism than first year students

H11: Final year students will a) express greater concern and b) support harsher sanctions for journalistic fabrication than first year students

Method

Sampling and Participants

Utilizing a combination of purposive and convenience sampling, three batches of first and final year students were surveyed for this study. A total of 458 first year and 368 final year undergraduates ($N = 826$) from a communication school at a major university in Singapore participated in the survey over the course of nearly four years (2007-2010). Participants were awarded with the following incentives: extra credit for the course they were taking for first year students, and a movie pass or a shopping voucher for final year students.

Responses from three first year students and two final year students were removed because of logical inconsistencies (e.g., responded with all “agree” in one survey section even though there were a number of reversed items) or missing responses on more than eight questions (i.e., more than 10% of the total questions), leaving a total of 821 respondents ($n_{first\ year} = 455$ and $n_{final\ year} = 366$) for data analysis. Similar to the demographics proportion of the school, the majority of the participants were female (74.2 %) and Chinese (88.9%). The mean age of the respondents was 19.6 years-old for first year students and 23.1 years-old for the final year students.

Procedure

In gathering the data, respondents completed the paper-and-pen survey questionnaire. As an effort to offset question-order bias, we created four versions of the same survey questionnaire in which both the order of the sections and the questions within each section were randomized using a random generator tool. However, the introduction and demographic profile sections were kept as the first and the last sections, respectively, for all of the four questionnaire versions.

Data from first year students were collected in August 2007, August 2008, and September 2009, while the surveys for final year students were administered in April 2008, April 2009, and April 2010. As August marks the start of the first year students' first semester, they had not taken any media ethics class or gone for a six-month compulsory internship when the surveys were carried out. In contrast, April is near the end of the final year students' last semester, and therefore at the time of the surveys, they had undergone both the compulsory media ethics class and internship. All students signed a consent form, which was presented to them at the beginning of the survey administration, to indicate their agreement to participate in the survey.

Measures

Both well-established and newly developed measures were used for this study. We conducted pretests and a pilot study to refine the initial drafts of the survey instrument. The items comprising the composite measures are shown in the Appendix section.

Journalism Ethical Principles. The four aspects of journalism ethics principles – truth telling, minimizing harm, independence, accountability – were measured using a combination of well established and newly created measures. Seven items for truth telling and four items for minimizing harm were adapted from a blogging ethics study (Cenite, et al., 2007), while four

items for independence and four accountability items were newly developed for this study based on the SPJ code of ethics. The respondents' levels of agreement for each statement were assessed using a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = "*Strongly Disagree*" to 7 = "*Strongly Agree*". The measures attained a reliable Cronbach's alpha of .73 for truth telling, .77 for minimizing harm and .72 for accountability. A moderate level of alpha of .59 for independence was achieved after one item was dropped from the scale.

Journalism Ethics Codes. Two items were constructed to assess the levels of importance respondents attached to code of ethics. Respondents indicated the extent of their agreement on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = "*Strongly Disagree*" to 7 = "*Strongly Agree*." The statements were found to be highly correlated to each other ($r(282) = .747, p < .001$).

Ethical Ideologies. Forsyth's (1980) Ethics Position Questionnaire (EPQ), which has been widely used in ethics research, including in Asia (Redfern & Crawford, 2004), was used to measure ethical ideologies. Out of the original measures of ten items each for idealism and relativism, we selected only four items for each of the ethical ideologies. Respondents were asked to indicate the extent of their agreement on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = "*Strongly Disagree*" to 7 = "*Strongly Agree*". The idealism scale had a Cronbach's Alpha of .65, while the Cronbach's Alpha for the relativism scale was .76.

Contentious Methods of Getting Information. Ten items to measure contentious methods of getting information practiced by journalists were modified from Ball, Hanna, and Sanders' (2006) study. To generate data with greater variance, respondents were asked to indicate their responses on a 4-point scale, ranging from 1 = "*Often Justifiable*" to 4 = "*Never Justifiable*", instead of the original dichotomous response ("*Justifiable*" – "*Not Justifiable*"). Three items were excluded from analysis and one item was rephrased to better fit the context of the study.

The seven items attained a good level of reliability with alpha of .70.

Plagiarism and Fabrication in News Reporting. Two sets of seven items were used to measure the level of concerns over plagiarism and fabrication conducted by journalists and how a news organization should handle such cases. Four items from each set were newly created, while three items were modified from Conway and Groshek (2008). Respondents indicated the extent of their concerns with journalists' plagiarism and fabrication on a 4-point scale, ranging from 1 = "not concerned at all" to 2 = "very concerned", and their opinion on the level of sanctions for plagiarism and fabrication that should be given by a news organization on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 = "do nothing" and 5 = "fire the journalist". The reliabilities of these scales were .81 for concerns on journalistic plagiarism (three items), .72 for concerns on journalistic fabrication (four items), .73 for how a news organization should handle plagiarism cases (three items), and .82 for how a news organization should handle fabrications cases (four items).

Demographics variables. A standard set of demographic variables relating to gender, age, household income, and housing type was asked. In addition, we asked the respondents questions pertaining to their media consumption habits, whether they had working experience in newsroom, whether they personally knew any journalists, and whether they wanted to pursue a journalism career.

Results

Demographics

Nearly two-third of the respondents (63.2%) personally knew someone who worked as a journalist either now or in the past. Just one fourth of them had any newsroom working experience (24.4%) and only 13.3% were certain that they wanted to pursue a career in

journalism. Final year students were more likely to know anyone who was a journalist or an ex-journalist (83.3%) and had an experience working in newsrooms (39.2%) as compared to first year students (47.1% and 12.5%, respectively). While there was almost no difference in the percentage of students who were certain that they wanted to pursue a journalism career between first year (13.9%) and final year students (12.6%), first year students were more likely to indicate a possibility to pursue a journalism career (67.4%) as compared to the final year cohorts (49.6%).

Around half of the respondents read a newspaper 1-4 days a week (50.6%), with The Straits Times read most often (69.8%). Slightly more than half of them spent 1-4 days a week to watch news on TV (54.3%), in which local (Singapore) news were watched more often (72.1%) than international broadcast news (17.5%). News sites on the Internet were visited daily by only 15.5% of the respondents while 21.0% hardly ever or never did so. While the amount of time spent on watching news on TV and visiting news sites in the Internet was similar between first and final year students, first year students (56.6%) were more likely to spend more time reading newspapers as compared to the final year students (43.0%).

Journalism Ethical Principles

Hypothesis 1 proposed that first year students would express less agreement with journalists' four ethical principles than final year students. Results from an independent sample *t*-test showed that there was no significant difference between the two cohorts in all ethical principles of truth telling, minimizing harm, independence, and accountability (see Table 1 for summary). Therefore, Hypothesis 1 was not supported.

Ethical Ideologies

Hypotheses 2a and 2b proposed that first year students would be more idealistic than final year students and final year students would be more relativistic than first year students. An

independent sample *t*-test showed an insignificant result for idealism. There was a significant difference for relativism [$t(754.7) = 2.542, p < .01$], however, the direction was in the opposite direction of the prediction. First year students ($M = 5.23, SD = 1.07$) were more likely to be relativistic than final year students ($M = 5.03, SD = 1.15$). Thus, both hypotheses 2a and 2b were not supported.

Hypotheses 3a, b, c, and d proposed that students with high levels of idealism would express greater agreement with the four ethical principles than those with high levels of relativism. To classify respondents who were high in idealism and relativism, we divided the idealism and relativism variables into two categories based on median split. Respondents who scored high in idealism and low in relativism were classified into the ‘high levels of idealism’ category while those who scored high in relativism and low in idealism were classified into “high levels of relativism” category. The results revealed significant differences for truth telling [$t(296) = -2.73, p < .01$], independence [$t(296) = -2.88, p < .01$], and minimizing harm [$t(304.7) = -6.22, p < .001$]. Specifically, those with high idealism were more likely than those with high relativism to express a higher level of agreement with the truth telling ($M = 5.25, SD = .70$ vs. $M = 5.02, SD = .77$, respectively), independence ($M = 5.21, SD = 1.04$ vs. $M = 4.86, SD = 1.08$), and minimizing harm principles ($M = 5.79, SD = .71$ vs. $M = 5.21, SD = 1.01$). The result for accountability principle, however, was not significant (see Table 2 for summary). Hence, hypotheses 3a, 3b, and 3c were supported while hypothesis 3d was not.

Journalism Ethics Codes

Hypothesis 4 proposed that first year students would perceive journalism ethics codes to be more important than final year students. An independent *t*-test showed that first year students ($M = 5.98, SD = 1.00$) were more likely to perceive journalism ethics codes to be more important

than final year students ($M = 5.57$, $SD = 1.11$) [$t(280) = 3.27$, $p < .001$]. Therefore, hypothesis 4 was supported.

Work Experience in Newsrooms

Hypothesis 5 proposed that students who had newsroom work experience would be less idealistic than those who had not. The result from an independent t -test showed no significant difference and thus, hypothesis 5 was not supported (see Table 3 for summary).

Contentious Methods of Getting Information

Hypothesis 6 proposed that first year students would be less likely than final year students to say that journalists' contentious methods of gathering information were justifiable. The result from an independent t -test showed a significant difference [$t(815) = 6.30$, $p < .001$], in which first year students ($M = 2.91$, $SD = .48$) were less likely to find the contentious methods justifiable as compared to the final year students ($M = 2.70$, $SD = .46$; see Table 4 for summary). Hence, hypothesis 6 was supported.

Hypothesis 7 proposed that students who had no working experience in newsrooms would be less likely than those who had to say that contentious methods of gathering information were justifiable. The result of an independent t -test was significant [$t(813) = -5.44$, $p < .001$]. Students who had no newsroom working experience ($M = 2.86$, $SD = .48$) were less likely to agree with the contentious methods of newsgathering than those with work experience ($M = 2.66$, $SD = .45$; see Table 5 for summary). Hypothesis 7 was, therefore, supported.

Hypotheses 8 proposed that students who expressed high levels of agreement with the journalistic ethical principles of a) truth telling, b) minimizing harm, c) independence, and d) accountability would be less likely than those who disagreed with these principles to say that contentious newsgathering methods were justifiable. Based on each of the four ethical principles median split, we divided each principle into two categories, high and low levels of agreement.

Four independent *t*-tests were then performed for the ethical principles. The analyses revealed a significant difference only for the “Minimizing harm” principle [$t(794) = -6.03, p < .001$].

Respondents who expressed high level of agreement with the “Minimizing harm” principle ($M = 2.92, SD = .46$) were less likely than those with low level of agreement in it ($M = 2.72, SD = .47$) to say that the methods were justifiable (see Table 6 for summary). Therefore, hypothesis 8b was supported while hypotheses 8a, 8c, and 8d were not supported.

Hypothesis 9 proposed that students with high levels of idealism would be less likely than those who were high in relativism to say that contentious newsgathering methods were justifiable. An independent *t*-test result showed a significant result [$t(365) = -3.25, p < .001$]. Respondents with high levels of idealism ($M = 2.88, SD = .46$) were less likely to think that journalists’ contention methods in gathering information were justifiable as compared to those with high levels of relativism ($M = 2.72, SD = .48$). Hence, hypothesis 9 was supported.

Plagiarism and Fabrication in News Reporting

Hypothesis 10 proposed that final year students would express greater concern and support harsher sanctions for journalistic plagiarism than first year students. The analyses revealed a significant difference in the levels of concerns on journalists’ conduct of plagiarism [$t(280) = -2.32, p < .05$] in the predicted direction¹. Specifically, final year students were more likely than first year students to express greater concern for journalistic plagiarism ($M = 3.20, SD = .68$ vs. $M = 3.01, SD = .69$, respectively; see Table 7 for summary). However, the result for sanctions that should be given by a news organization for plagiarism cases was not significant. Therefore, hypothesis 10a was supported but hypothesis 10b was not.

¹ The scales for journalistic plagiarism and fabrication are ordinal. However, we treated them as interval in order to run an independent *t*-test. Separately, we ran a Wilcoxon Mann-Whitney test and found that the results were similar to the independent *t*-test. The only difference was the result for ‘how a news organization should handle plagiarism’ in which a significant difference ($Z = -1.897, p < 0.05$) was found in the non-parametric test, but not in the parametric test.

Lastly, hypothesis 11 proposed that final year students would express greater concern and support harsher sanctions for journalistic fabrication than first year students. The result showed that there was a significant difference in the levels of concerns on journalistic fabrication [$t(279.6) = -2.80, p < .01$], in which final year students ($M = 3.75, SD = .38$) were more likely to express greater concern than first year students ($M = 3.61, SD = .46$; see Table 8 for summary). However, again there was no significant difference in the levels of sanctions that should be given for fabrication instances. Hence, hypothesis 11a was supported while hypothesis 11b was not.

Discussion

Overall, this study found that first year students were more likely than final year students to perceive that journalism ethics codes were important and were less likely to agree that contentious methods of news gathering were justifiable. Final year students were less relativistic than first year students, and expressed more concern for journalistic plagiarism and fabrication than first year students. However, there was no difference in the level of agreement with ethical principles and support for sanctions against journalistic plagiarism and fabrication between the first and final year students. Also, students with high levels of relativism generally expressed less agreement with ethical principles and were more likely to say that contentious methods of news gathering were justifiable than students with high levels of idealism. Furthermore, those who agreed more with ethical principles were less likely to support contentious methods of gathering news information. Students who had worked in newsrooms were more likely to agree that contentious methods of news gathering were justifiable than those with no such experience. By contrast, ethical ideologies of respondents were not significantly different between those with and without newsroom work experience.

Contrary to what was hypothesized, first and final year students did not differ in their levels of agreement with journalistic principles. This suggests that year of study is not a strong standalone predictor of students' agreement with journalistic principles. Although one should be careful when interpreting null findings, the lack of differences could be attributed to the fact that some of these ethical principles are widely held, transcending cultural and racial differences (insert citation). Among journalistic principles investigated, researchers have suggested that truth (Christians & Traber, 1997; Herrscher, 2002; Lambeth, 1992), avoiding harm (Christians & Traber, 1997; Lambeth, 1992), and accountability (Strenz, 2002) are universal. It is possible that these values may not be unique to the practice of journalism. This may be especially true when the values are expressed in the abstract. That is, when addressed in very broad and general terms as they were in the survey, truth, minimizing harm, and accountability are likely to be universally accepted principles. If this is the case, media ethics education is unlikely to significantly influence adherence to these broadly stated ethical principles. However, education may make a difference in terms of how the principles apply in specific situations. For example, final year students were more likely than first year students to agree that contentious newsgathering methods were justifiable.

Also, final year students were less relativistic than first year students. These findings are consistent with research that has shown that older people tend to exhibit lower levels of relativism than younger people (Kim & Choi, 2003; Shamir, Reid, & Connell, 1990). While the absolute age difference in our samples is not large, it can be argued that the four years spent in university constitute a period of significant personal growth and maturation (at least for most people). Although older people tend to exhibit greater sophistication in terms of moral reasoning (Kohlberg, 1984), Gergen (1980) suggests that as peoples' responsibilities and duties increase

with age, they are more likely to hold themselves to stricter codes of moral conduct and make deliberate choices to abide by ethical values. While this may explain a reduction in relativism across some parts of the life span it is unclear whether it applies to the age groups studied in this research.

Contrary to findings from previous studies (e.g., Kim & Choi, 2003), the results of this study showed that first and final year students do not differ in terms of their level of idealism. Though people with high levels of idealism have sometimes been regarded as being rather naive (Furlong & Maynard, 1995), Shkedi and Laron (2004) contend that idealism ought to be perceived as a positive quality and further lament that the shift from idealism to a more pragmatic world view represents a compromise of one's moral standards. Hence, this apparent lack of difference between first and final year students' levels of idealism need not necessarily be construed negatively.

Unsurprisingly, students who were highly idealistic tended to agree more with ethical principles than those who were highly relativistic. These findings are largely consistent with the results from previous studies (e.g., Detenber et al., 2009; Kim & Choi, 2003). Indeed, it is more likely for people with high levels of idealism to believe in moral absolutes and express agreement with ethical principles than those with high levels of relativism (Forsyth, 1980).

Consistent with what was hypothesized, results showed that first year students perceived journalism ethics codes to be more important than final year students. It is possible that final year students have a better understanding of ethical issues than first year students and hence feel less of a need to rely on ethics codes.

There was no significant association between work experience and ethical ideologies. Although this finding runs counter to results obtained from earlier studies (e.g., Fosdick, 1979),

it is plausible that the amount of time these students' spent working in newsrooms was insufficient to bring about any change in ethical ideologies (Detenber et al., 2009).

In contrast, students who had experience working in newsrooms were more likely to support contentious methods of gathering news information. This is consistent with findings from Reinardy and Moore's (2007) study and implies that students exhibit greater tolerance towards using controversial newsgathering methods after being exposed to the realities of the newsroom environment. Also, students who expressed greater agreement with the journalistic principle of minimizing harm were less likely to agree that contentious newsgathering methods were justifiable. The other ethical principles had no significant influence on attitudes toward using contentious newsgathering methods. This pattern of results is likely due to the nature of the measures used in this study and by Reinardy and Moore (2007), that is, the measures of contentious news gathering involve situations pitting the greater public good against the welfare of an individual or organization. As such, concern over the potential harm being done affects how one views these methods.

Ethical ideologies were significantly associated with students' attitudes towards contentious methods of news gathering. Students who were highly idealistic were less likely to say that contentious news gathering methods were justifiable. This finding is in line with previous studies that indicate controversial business practices have lower levels of approval among those with high levels of idealism (e.g., Kim & Choi, 2003). Central to journalism ethics is the debate over competing values, benefits and harm, and when the ends can justify the means, if ever.

Consistent with the results from previous studies (Conway & Groshek, 2008), final year students were more likely to express greater concern for journalistic plagiarism and fabrication

than first year students. However, first and final year students did not differ in their level of support for penalties against plagiarism and fabrication. It is possible that undergraduate education and work experience are effective in raising students' level of concern towards these types of transgressions but do not necessarily translate into support for harsher penalties on journalists who plagiarize and fabricate information.

Limitations and Future Research

This survey was administered only to undergraduates in Singapore. In order to have a more complete overview of perceptions on journalism ethics, future research should attempt to make comparisons between other Asian and Western samples, and determine if there are differences in undergraduates' and journalists' ethical views.

As discussed in the previous section, the failure to find differences in support for the ethical principles may be due to near universal support for such principles. However, to test the possibility that the responses are not an artifact of social desirability, future research in this area can incorporate the Crowne-Marlowe Social Desirability Scale (Crowne & Marlowe, 1960). Some measures could also be refined. For example, this study's measure of work experience simply asked respondents if they had worked in newsrooms before. It is possible for people to work in newsrooms but perform tasks such as pagination or layout design that are unrelated to news writing and information gathering. Furthermore, this study did not account for other factors which could potentially influence ethical perceptions like religiosity and value predispositions. Future studies should consider incorporating such variables so that a more comprehensive understanding of the factors predicting ethical perceptions can be reached.

Although more research needs to be done to obtain a better understanding of the factors that shape the development of journalism ethics, this study's findings have nonetheless shed light on Asian students' ethical perceptions. Broadly speaking, the findings from this study indicate

that first and final year students differ in terms of ethical ideologies and ethical reasoning. Future research may help determine the role of maturation, education and work experience in the development of journalistic ethics. While this current study revealed some differences among undergraduates in a communication school in Singapore, a nation often described as a place where east meets west, it suggests directions for future comparative studies in other contexts as well.

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Appendix – Item Inventory for Composite Measures

Ethical Principles

Response Scale: 1. Strongly Disagree; 2. Disagree; 3. Slightly Disagree; 4. Neither Agree or Disagree (i.e., neutral); 5. Slightly Agree; 6. Agree; 7. Strongly Agree

A. Truth telling ($\alpha = .73$)

1. Telling the truth should be a guiding principle when journalists write stories, even if the truth results in harm to others.
2. Journalists should always tell the complete truth, even if it results in harm to individuals.
3. Journalists should always tell the complete truth, even if it results in harm to the local economy.
4. Journalists should always tell the complete truth, even if it results in harm to the national security.
5. Journalists should always tell the complete truth, even if it hurts their relationship with advertisers.
6. Journalists should always avoid distorting the truth in a story, even if it will sell more newspapers.
7. Journalists should never distort the truth, even if there is no harm in doing so.

B. Minimizing Harm ($\alpha = .78$)

1. It is important to be mindful of others' feelings when journalists write stories.
2. Journalists should protect confidential information of the people they write about.
3. It is important to respect people's privacy when writing news stories.
4. Respect for others should be a guiding principle when journalists write stories.

C. Independence ($\alpha = .59$)

1. Journalists should be free of obligations to any interest other than the public's right to know.
2. Journalists should remain free of associations and activities that may compromise integrity.
3. Journalists should avoid conflicts of interest, real or perceived.

D. Accountability ($\alpha = .72$)

1. News media should accept public criticism for editorial decisions.
2. News media should invite dialogue with the public over journalistic practices.
3. Journalists should encourage the public to voice grievances against news media.
4. Journalists should be more accountable to the public than to their organization.

Ethical Ideologies

Response Scale: 1. Strongly Disagree; 2. Disagree; 3. Slightly Disagree; 4. Neither Agree or Disagree (i.e., neutral); 5. Slightly Agree; 6. Agree; 7. Strongly Agree

A. Idealism ($\alpha = .65$)

1. A person should make certain that their actions never intentionally harm another, even to a small degree.
2. One should never psychologically or physically harm another person.
3. It is never necessary to sacrifice the welfare of others.
4. The dignity and welfare of people should be the most important concern in any society.

B. Relativism ($\alpha = .76$)

1. What is ethical varies from one situation and society to another.
2. Moral standards should be seen as being individualistic; what one person considers to be moral may be judged to be immoral by another person.
3. Different types of moralities cannot be compared as to their "rightness"
4. Questions of what is ethical for everyone can never be resolved since what is moral or immoral is up to the individual.

Journalism Ethics Codes ($r = .86$)

Response Scale: 1. Strongly Disagree; 2. Disagree; 3. Slightly Disagree; 4. Neither Agree or Disagree (i.e., neutral); 5. Slightly Agree; 6. Agree; 7. Strongly Agree

1. It is necessary for a journalist to have a formalized code of ethics.
2. A formalized code of ethics is important for the profession of journalism.

Contentious Methods of Newsgathering ($\alpha = .70$)

Response Scale: 1. Often justifiable; 2. Sometimes justifiable; 3. Rarely justifiable; 4. Never justifiable

1. Using confidential business or government documents without authorisation.
2. Claiming to be someone other than a journalist in order to obtain information.
3. Agreeing to protect confidentiality and not doing so.
4. Repeatedly questioning unwilling informants in order to get a story.
5. Using personal documents such as letters and photographs without permission.
6. Becoming employed in a firm or organization in order to gain inside information.
7. Using hidden microphones or cameras.

Journalistic Plagiarism and Fabrication

Response Scale for A and C: 1. Not concerned at all; 2. Somewhat concerned; 3. Quite concerned; 4. Extremely concerned

Response Scale for B and D: 1. Do nothing; 2. Reprimand the journalist; 3. Suspend the journalist; 4. Suspend and demote the journalist; 5. Fire the journalist

A. Concerns over Plagiarism ($\alpha = .81$)

How concerned are you when you hear that:

1. a journalist has plagiarized in a story?
2. a journalist has used material from another source without proper attribution?
3. a journalist has used another journalist's words without giving the journalist credit?

B. How A News Organization Should Handle Plagiarism ($\alpha = .73$)

How do you think a news organization should handle a situation when:

1. a journalist has been found to have plagiarized?
2. a journalist has been found to have used material from another source without proper attribution?
3. a journalist has been found to have used another journalist's words without giving the journalist credit?

C. Concerns over Fabrication ($\alpha = .72$)

How concerned are you when you hear that:

1. a journalist has fabricated material for a story?
2. a journalist made up a source for a story?
3. a journalist has made up a quote from a source he/she has not spoken to?
4. a journalist has written about a fictional event as if it were a fact?

D. How A News Organization Should Handle Fabrication ($\alpha = .82$)

How do you think a news organization should handle a situation when:

1. a journalist has been found to have fabricated material for a story?
2. a journalist has been found to have made up a source for a story?
3. a journalist has been found to have made up a quote from a source he/she has not spoken to?
4. a journalist has been found to have written about a fictional event as if it were a fact?

Tables

Table 1 – First and Final Year Students' View on Journalists' Ethical Principles and Ethical Ideologies

	First Year	Final Year	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>
Truth telling	5.12 (0.78)	5.04 (0.76)	1.300	666
Minimizing Harm	5.44 (0.81)	5.52 (0.85)	-1.232	666
Independence	5.05 (1.07)	5.08 (1.02)	-0.393	667
Accountability	5.56 (0.91)	5.48 (0.80)	1.187	788.4
Idealism	5.32 (0.89)	5.26 (0.87)	0.994	817
Relativism	5.23 (1.07)	5.03 (1.15)	2.542**	754.7
Journalism Ethics Codes	5.98 (1.00)	5.57 (1.11)	3.273***	280

Note: Standard deviation in parenthesis; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$; degrees of freedom adjusted for unequal variances.

Table 2 – Relationship between Ethical Ideologies and Ethical Principles

	High Relativism	High Idealism	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>
Truth telling	5.02 (0.77)	5.25 (0.7)	-2.727**	296
Accountability	5.51 (0.83)	5.6 (0.79)	-1.004**	294
Independence	4.86 (1.08)	5.21 (1.04)	-2.878	296
Minimizing Harm	5.21 (1.01)	5.79 (0.71)	-6.218***	304.7

Note: Standard deviation in parenthesis; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$; degrees of freedom adjusted for unequal variances.

Table 3 – Ethical Ideologies and News Consumption of Students with and without Work Experience

	With Work Experience	Without Work Experience	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>
Idealism	5.23 (0.96)	5.31 (0.86)	-1.144	815
Relativism	5.14 (1.09)	5.14 (1.12)	0.015	812

Note: Standard deviation in parentheses.

Table 4 – First and Final Year Student’s Attitudes towards Journalists’ Methods of Getting Information

Methods of Getting Information	First Year	Final Year	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>
Using confidential business or government documents without authorization	3.18 (0.8)	2.86 (0.83)	5.666***	820
Claiming to be someone other than a journalist in order to obtain information	2.53 (0.88)	2.32 (0.79)	3.611***	808.1
Agreeing to protect confidentiality and not doing so	3.65 (0.65)	3.55 (0.74)	2.085*	730.2
Repeatedly questioning unwilling informants in order to get a story	2.45 (0.85)	2.43 (0.83)	0.449	819
Using personal documents such as letters and photographs without permission	3.24 (0.75)	3.01 (0.80)	4.174***	820
Becoming employed in a firm or organization in order to gain inside information	2.61 (0.82)	2.38 (0.73)	4.095***	813.8
Using hidden microphones or cameras	2.67 (0.84)	2.35 (0.72)	5.976***	818.5

Note: Standard deviation in parenthesis; * $p < .05$; *** $p < .001$; degrees of freedom adjusted for unequal variances.

Table 5 – Attitudes towards Journalists' Methods of Getting Information of Students with and without Work Experience

Methods of Getting Information	With work experience	Without work experience	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>
Using confidential business or government documents without authorization	2.88 (0.81)	3.08 (0.83)	-3.106**	818
Claiming to be someone other than a journalist in order to obtain information	2.27 (0.79)	2.49 (0.86)	-3.470***	363.9
Agreeing to protect confidentiality and not doing so	3.50 (0.70)	3.64 (0.68)	-2.446**	329.5
Repeatedly questioning unwilling informants in order to get a story	2.25 (0.81)	2.51 (0.84)	-3.959***	350.6
Using personal documents such as letters and photographs without permission	2.95 (0.81)	3.20 (0.76)	-3.946***	818
Becoming employed in a firm or organization in order to gain inside information	2.43 (0.79)	2.53 (0.79)	-1.559	819
Using hidden microphones or cameras	2.33 (0.78)	2.59 (0.80)	-4.230***	346.6

Note: Standard deviation in parenthesis; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$; degrees of freedom adjusted for unequal variances.

Table 6 – Attitudes towards Journalists' Methods of Getting Information of Students with High and Low Ethical Principle of "Minimizing Harm"

Methods of Getting Information	Low principle	High principle	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>
Using confidential business or government documents without authorization	2.93 (0.84)	3.17 (0.79)	-4.126***	799
Claiming to be someone other than a journalist in order to obtain information	2.40 (0.83)	2.48 (0.86)	-1.241	796
Agreeing to protect confidentiality and not doing so	3.49 (0.77)	3.74 (0.57)	-5.220***	765.5
Repeatedly questioning unwilling informants in order to get a story	2.31 (0.81)	2.59 (0.85)	-4.795***	797
Using personal documents such as letters and photographs without permission	3.02 (0.78)	3.28 (0.76)	-4.750**	793.8
Becoming employed in a firm or organization in order to gain inside information	2.42 (0.75)	2.59 (0.82)	-3.170*	771.4
Using hidden microphones or cameras	2.48 (0.78)	2.59 (0.83)	-1.935***	799

Note: Standard deviation in parentheses; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$; degrees of freedom adjusted for unequal variances.

Table 7 – Concerns over Journalistic Plagiarism and How News Organization Should Handle Plagiarism

Journalistic Plagiarism	First Year	Final Year	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>
How concerned are you when you hear that:				
a journalist has plagiarized in a story?	3.24 (0.77)	3.40 (0.75)	-1.741*	280
a journalist has used material from another source without proper attribution?	2.79 (0.80)	2.98 (0.83)	-1.950*	280
a journalist has used another journalist's words without giving the journalist credit?	3.00 (0.88)	3.22 (0.80)	-2.202*	280
How do you think a news organization should handle a situation when:				
a journalist has been found to have plagiarized?	3.51 (0.97)	3.34 (1.12)	1.383	259.4
a journalist has been found to have used material from another source without proper attribution?	2.85 (0.91)	2.78 (0.97)	0.674	280
a journalist has been found to have used another journalist's words without giving the journalist credit?	3.05 (0.95)	2.91 (0.98)	1.202	279

Note: Standard deviation in parentheses; * $p < .05$; degrees of freedom adjusted for unequal variances.

Table 8 – Concerns over Journalistic Fabrication and How News Organization Should Handle Fabrication

Journalistic Fabrication	First Year	Final Year	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>
How concerned are you when you hear that:				
a journalist has fabricated material for a story?	3.72 (0.48)	3.79 (0.48)	-1.237	280
a journalist made up a source for a story?	3.58 (0.67)	3.72 (0.50)	-2.027*	274.4
a journalist has made up a quote from a source he/she has not spoken to?	3.46 (0.69)	3.69 (0.53)	-3.074**	275.7
a journalist has written about a fictional event as if it were a fact?	3.70 (0.53)	3.82 (0.46)	-2.094*	280
How do you think a news organization should handle a situation when:				
a journalist has been found to have fabricated material for a story?	3.85 (0.89)	4.02 (0.96)	-1.524	280
a journalist has been found to have made up a source for a story?	3.70 (0.90)	3.68 (0.99)	0.201	280
a journalist has been found to have made up a quote from a source he/she has not spoken to?	3.52 (0.94)	3.53 (1.01)	-0.065	279
a journalist has been found to have written about a fictional event as if it were a fact?	4.11 (0.95)	4.18 (0.94)	-0.628	279

Note: Standard deviation in parentheses; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; degrees of freedom adjusted for unequal variances.