

The Effect of Unethical Sales Behaviors on Consumer Cynicism and the Moderating Role of Demographic Characteristics: A Study on the Service Sector*

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ABSTRACT

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Purpose - Although it is frequently emphasized in the literature that companies' ethical violations are effective in developing consumer cynicism, the effect of salespeople's unethical behaviors on consumer cynicism towards the service sector has not been investigated yet. Therefore, this study aims to reveal the effect of unethical sales behaviors on consumer cynicism towards the service sector and whether this effect differs according to demographic characteristics.

Design/methodology/approach - The convenience sampling method was used in this study, and the data were obtained from consumers who buy/consume services in Bursa province. Face-to-face survey was used as data collection method. The data reached were analyzed by structural equation modeling (SEM).

Findings - As a result of the study, it was found that unethical sales behaviors had a significant and positive effect on consumer cynicism towards the service sector. It was also found that the effect of unethical sales behaviors on consumer cynicism towards the service sector differed significantly according to education level but did not differ significantly according to gender, marital status, age, and income. Accordingly, the effect of unethical sales behaviors on consumer cynicism towards the service sector is higher for consumers with postgraduate education than consumers with undergraduate education.

Discussion - This study contributes to the marketing literature by revealing that unethical sales behaviors affect consumer cynicism towards the service sector and this effect differs according to education level. In addition, the results obtained in this study are thought to be beneficial for service companies in terms of preventing consumer cynicism and reducing the harmful effects of cynicism.

1. INTRODUCTION

With the effect of globalization and rapidly developing technology, today's consumers, who are becoming more conscious, expect companies to act in the context of ethical values and principles in their decisions and practices beyond meeting their needs and demands. Therefore, companies adopt and apply ethical standards in marketing activities as well as in all their decisions and practices.

Personal selling is one of the marketing practices where ethical issues are common. Salespeople, who are the critical elements of the personal sales process, are the company's visible face to the customer and are often the primary contact point for customers before and after-sales. Especially in the service sector, the service's intangible nature increases the importance of salespeople who sell services (Crosby et al., 1990: 68). Unethical behaviors of salespeople, which are so important for service companies, confront companies with many problems such as dissatisfied and distrustful customers, negative word of mouth communication, and decreased sales and profit rates (Dubinsky et al., 1991: 653). Therefore, service companies should not ignore ethical issues in personal selling.

* In this study, the data of the doctoral dissertation titled "The Antecedents and Consequences of Consumer Cynicism: A Study on the Service Sector" completed by Gamze Akçay under the supervision of Professor Doctor Erkan Özdemir in 2021 was used.

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Cynicism, which has been investigated for many years in different disciplines of social sciences (psychology, sociology, organizational behavior, etc.), is a relatively new area of research for marketing literature. Consumer cynicism is a learned attitude characterized by a belief that companies lack integrity and negative feelings towards companies (Helm, 2004: 345). More clearly, cynical consumers believe that companies have hidden goals or intentions behind their activities (Indibara & Varshney 2020: 78) and experience negative feelings such as bitterness, anger, or resentment associated with this (Helm, 2006: 23). According to consumer cynicism studies, the antecedents of consumer cynicism are personality traits (Helm, 2006; Indibara & Varshney, 2020), specific incidents experienced or witnessed by consumers (Helm, 2004, 2006), and goal and value incongruence (Chylinski & Chu, 2010). Cynical consumers exhibit behaviors such as caution, complaint, negative word of mouth, switching/exit, and retribution (Chu & Chylinski, 2006).

Previous studies have generally examined consumer cynicism towards a particular company (Chylinski & Chu, 2010) or the marketplace (Helm, 2006; Helm et al., 2015), but not consumer cynicism towards the service sector. Therefore, in this study, consumer cynicism towards the service sector has been investigated. Service companies are more disadvantageous than companies that produce and sell products because the main characteristics of services such as intangibility, inseparability, variability, and perishability (Kotler, 1999: 200) make it difficult for service companies to achieve customer satisfaction and build customer loyalty. On the other hand, cynical consumers are distrustful and skeptical of companies. They have negative feelings such as bitterness, or resentment, and the perceived risk level of cynical consumers' purchasing decisions is considerably higher than non-cynical consumers (Helm, 2006: 66). Thus cynicism is a more serious threat to service companies than other companies. In this respect, it is thought that it is essential to investigate consumer cynicism in the service sector.

When the consumer cynicism literature is examined, it is seen that existing studies (Chylinski & Chu, 2010; D'Souza, 2016; Helm, 2004; Helm, 2006) provide theoretical and empirical evidence that unethical marketing practices are effective on consumer cynicism. However, the effect of unethical sales behaviors on consumer cynicism towards the service sector and the moderator role of demographic characteristics on this effect has not been investigated yet. Therefore, this study aims to reveal the effect of salespeople's unethical sales behaviors on consumer cynicism towards the service sector and whether this effect differs in terms of the demographic characteristics. It is thought that this study will provide theoretical and empirical contributions to the marketing literature. It is also thought that this study can help service companies to minimize the potential harms of consumer cynicism by developing strategies to prevent consumer cynicism arising from unethical sales behavior and to reduce existing cynicism.

In this study, firstly, information about ethical issues in personal selling and then consumer cynicism was given. Secondly, the relationship between unethical sales behaviors and consumer cynicism was examined based on a literature review. Then, the methodology and the findings obtained from the analysis were presented. Finally, in the conclusion part, the study findings were evaluated, the theoretical and practical contributions of the study were presented, and suggestions were made for future studies and service companies.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Ethical Issues in Personal Selling

The word "ethics" comes from the Greek "ethos," which means "the custom or the way of life" or "character" (Marbaniang, 2012: 2). Ethics is defined as the moral rules and standards that guide the individual's behaviors (Muncy & Vitell, 1992: 298). Ethics in personal selling is the set of moral rules and standards that regulate salespeople's decisions and behaviors towards the companies and consumers (Bozyiğit & Akkan, 2013: 52).

Personal selling is one of the marketing activities where ethical issues are most frequently encountered. The most important reason for this is that the salespeople are responsible for generating the company's revenues. Another reason is that salespeople are exposed to more pressure than other employees. Salespeople under pressure may engage in unethical activities and practices to increase sales (Roman & Munuera, 2005: 473). On the other hand, salespeople's commission-based work generally causes them to focus only on increasing the sales of products or services without considering ethical standards (Adnan et al., 2013: 425).

Ethical issues in personal selling arise mainly in salespeople's relationships with customers, competitors, and business management. In this study, since the ethical issues arising in salespeople's relations with customers are examined, other ethical issues in personal selling are not considered. The first of the ethical issues in salespeople's relationships with customers is that salespeople pressure the customer to buy the product or service. Sales closing techniques are oriented towards the customer deciding to purchase the product and service, and salespeople often take away the customer's right to make free choices by not offering the customer the option of "not to buy" (Özdemir, 2011: 139).

Discriminating among customers is another ethical issue that arises in salespeople's relationships with customers. Applying high price discounts to some customers, enabling some customers to receive the product faster (Chonko, 1995: 251; Koop, 1993: 547), not helping customers who are unlikely to buy, and ignoring some customers (Levy & Dubinsky, 1983: 57) are some of the discrimination practices made by salespeople.

Other ethical issues that arise in salespeople's relationships with customers are as follows; informing the customer incompletely or incorrectly about the features or price of the product or service, selling products and services that will not benefit the customer, lying to the customer about the product's delivery date and making excuses for the products that are not in stock (Hansen & Riggle, 2009: 152; Levy & Dubinsky, 1983: 57). In addition, giving gifts to customers and inviting customers to lunch or dinner are the other most common unethical sales practices (Özdemir, 2011: 142-144).

When the relevant literature is examined, it is seen that the researchers generally focus on the effects of the ethical and unethical behaviors of salespeople on trust, satisfaction, and loyalty. Roman (2003), who examined the salespeople's ethical sales behaviors in the finance sector, concluded that the salespeople's ethical sales behaviors positively affect customer satisfaction, trust, and loyalty. Pezhman et al. (2013) investigated the role of ethical sales behaviors in the development of customer loyalty through customer satisfaction and trust in the insurance sector. They found that ethical sales behaviors positively affected customer satisfaction and trust, and customer satisfaction and trust had a mediator role in the relationship between ethical sales behaviors and customer loyalty. Tolba et al. (2015) investigated the effects of ethical sales behaviors on customer loyalty and customer satisfaction in the banking sector. They found that ethical sales behaviors had a positive effect on customer satisfaction but did not have a statistically significant effect on customer loyalty.

Some researchers have examined the effects of ethical and unethical sales behaviors on sales performance. For example, Agnihotri and Krush (2015) found that ethical sales behaviors positively affected sales performance. Kethüda and Yıldırım (2017) found that unethical sales behaviors negatively affected sales performance. Unlike other studies, Howe et al. (1994) found that salespeople with high sales performance exhibited more unethical sales behaviors than those with low sales performance.

2.2. Consumer Cynicism

Cynicism originated as an intellectual movement in ancient Greece in the 5th century BC (Luck, 2011: 15). Ancient Greek cynics aim for a virtuous life (Luck, 2011: 18). The only condition for the cynics to attain virtue and happiness is to live frugally (wearing a single garment, eating food only for nourishment, etc.) (Kennedy, 2017: 39). Defending that societal life is unnatural, cynics tried to avoid the conventions of society as much as possible and believed that a good life is possible with independence and self-sufficiency (Dean et al., 1998: 342). Today, cynicism has lost its aim and meaning in ancient times and turned into a pessimistic and distrust view of life (Mantere & Mantinsuo, 2001: 5).

Cynicism represents a general belief that other individuals, groups or institutions have hidden motives behind their actions, and it is associated with unrealistic expectations, disillusionment, frustration, and negative affect (Andersson, 1996: 1397; Fortier, 2003: 4; Hochwarter et al., 2004: 46). For many years, cynicism has been investigated in various contexts such as personality (Cook & Medley, 1954; Costa et al., 1986), organizational behavior (Andersson, 1996; Dean et al, 1998), social and political (Cappella & Jamieson, 1996; Kanter & Mirvis, 1989; Leung et al., 2010). Cynicism started to be investigated in the consumer behavior context in the early 2000s.

Consumer cynicism has been defined by researchers in various ways. Chylinski and Chu (2010: 799) define consumer cynicism as "a process of related cognitive, behavioral, and affective reactions expressed by initial suspicion, defensive attempts, and eventual alienation of the consumer". Helm et al. (2015: 516) define

consumer cynicism as “a stable, learned attitude toward the marketplace characterized by the perception that pervasive opportunism among firms exists and that this opportunism creates a harmful consumer marketplace”.

Early studies on consumer cynicism generally focused on the antecedents and consequences of consumer cynicism. Helm (2006), who made essential contributions to introducing the concept of consumer cynicism into the marketing literature, investigated personality traits as the antecedents of consumer cynicism and behavioral consequences of consumer cynicism. They found that negative affectivity and social cynicism were the antecedents of consumer cynicism, and marketplace shaping and marketplace withdrawal behaviors were the consequences of consumer cynicism. Chylinski and Chu (2010) found that incongruence between consumers’ goals or values and the company’s actions lay at the root of consumer cynicism. Repeated incongruence results in cynical behaviors such as complaint, spreading negative word of mouth, exiting/switching, and seeking compensation. Gillani et al. (2011), investigating consumer cynicism towards Fairtrade, found that goal incongruence and value incongruence are two main antecedents of consumer cynicism towards Fairtrade.

Atilgan et al. (2017) investigated the relationships between attitude towards boycotting, purchase intention, and consumer cynicism. As a result of the study, it was found that there was a positive relationship between consumer cynicism and attitude towards boycotting and a negative relationship between consumer cynicism and purchase intention. Gökteş (2019), who investigated the relationship between word-of-mouth marketing and consumer cynicism, concluded that word-of-mouth marketing had a low positive effect on consumer cynicism.

Mikkonen et al. (2011) examined anti-Christmas sites on the internet and found that cynicism underlay consumer criticism of values and norms associated with Christmas celebrations. They evaluated consumer cynicism as a consumer resistance and a form of social criticism against the order of consumption society by presenting a more positive perspective on consumer cynicism, which is generally seen as a negative attitude or force in the literature.

Studies on consumer cynicism have generally limited consumer cynicism as a defense tool for consumers and focused only on the defensive aspect of cynicism (Chylinski & Chu, 2010; Helm, 2004, 2006). Contrary to these studies, Odou and Pechpeyrou (2011) proposed three different perspectives on consumer cynicism: offensive, subversive and ethical, in relation to resistance and anti-consumption behaviors. All perspectives are based on the idea that companies hide their self-interests behind their altruistic discourses. However, these perspectives differ in terms of the reactions of the consumers.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW AND RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

In this part of the study, the relationship between unethical sales behaviors and consumer cynicism was examined. Based on the literature review, the hypotheses of the research were developed, and the research model was presented.

3.1. The Relationship Between Unethical Sales Behaviors and Consumer Cynicism

Some cynicism researchers argue that companies’ unethical marketing practices, especially advertisements and unethical sales behaviors, affect consumer cynicism (Akçay & Özdemir, 2019; Helm, 2004, 2006; Kanter & Mirvis, 1989; Pollay, 1986). For example, Pollay (1986: 907) argues that unreal advertisements contribute to the development of cynicism by leading society to doubt about advertisers, media, and authority. According to Helm (2006: 107), cynical consumers believe that many companies are only after their self-interests, regardless of ethical principles and consumer interests, and they think that marketing practices are intended to deceive or manipulate consumers. According to Akçay and Özdemir (2019), companies’ unethical marketing practices can contribute to the development of consumer cynicism by reducing the trust of consumers.

Some researchers have found that the incongruence between consumers’ ethical values and perceived company values affects consumer cynicism (Chylinski & Chu, 2010; Gillani et al., 2011).

Helm (2004) found that personal incidents experienced by consumers were influential in the development of consumer cynicism. Many of these incidents are related to salespeople’s unethical behaviors. For example, a consumer tried on a dress that is too small on her at the store. But the salesperson said, “This looks great on

you!". This consumer stated that she realized that this was a sales tactic and that she was no longer a naive consumer (Helm, 2004: 349). Another consumer, who wanted to buy a second-hand car, stated that the car dealer said the car was about to be sold and that he was pressuring him to buy the car. This consumer stated that he went back to the car dealer a few weeks later and saw that the car was still not sold and realized that the car dealer was lying to him. After this incident, this consumer stated that he never trusted the salespeople and acted more carefully against sales tactics (Helm, 2004: 350).

Some researchers examining ethical and unethical sales behavior (Minh Tuan, 2015; Pezhman et al., 2013, Roman, 2003) found that ethical sales behavior creates positive effects on customers, while unethical sales behavior decreases customer trust. Distrust arising from unethical sales behaviors may be a symptom of consumer cynicism, or distrust may turn into cynicism by increasing its severity. Because distrust is the most important component of cynicism (Rijkhoff, 2018: 335).

As explained above, the relevant literature provides evidence that unethical sales behaviors are effective on consumer cynicism. However, the effect of unethical sales behaviors on consumer cynicism towards the service sector and whether this effect shows a significant difference according to the demographic characteristics has not been investigated. Based on this, the following hypotheses were developed to reveal the effect of unethical sales behaviors on consumer cynicism towards the service sector and whether this effect differs significantly according to the demographic characteristics:

H₁: *Unethical sales behaviors have a significant and positive effect on consumer cynicism towards the service sector.*

H₂: *The effect of unethical sales behaviors on consumer cynicism towards the service sector differs significantly according to the respondents' demographic characteristics.*

H_{2a}: *The effect of unethical sales behaviors on consumer cynicism towards the service sector differs significantly according to the respondents' gender.*

H_{2b}: *The effect of unethical sales behaviors on consumer cynicism towards the service sector differs significantly according to the respondents' marital status.*

H_{2c}: *The effect of unethical sales behaviors on consumer cynicism towards the service sector differs significantly according to the respondents' age.*

H_{2d}: *The effect of unethical sales behaviors on consumer cynicism towards the service sector differs significantly according to the respondents' education level.*

H_{2e}: *The effect of unethical sales behaviors on consumer cynicism towards the service sector differs significantly according to the respondents' income.*

The research model is shown in Figure 1 below.

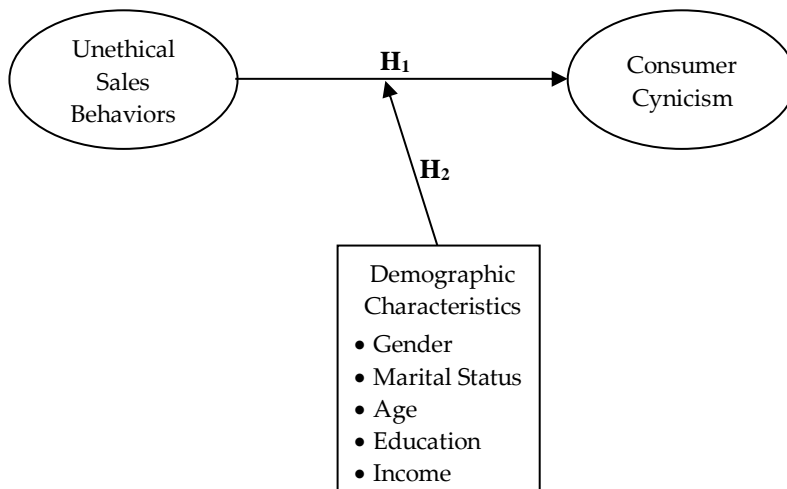


Figure 1. Research Model

4. METHODOLOGY

The study aims to determine the effect of unethical sales behaviors on consumer cynicism towards the service sector and whether this effect differs significantly according to consumers' demographic characteristics. The study was carried out on consumers who buy/consume services in Bursa. As of December 31, 2018, the number of people aged 15 and over in Bursa is 2.339.964 (TUIK, 2019). Therefore, the population of this study consists of 2.339.964 people aged 15 and over in Bursa. According to Sekaran (2003: 294), if the population size is 1.000.000 and above, the sample size should be at least 384. Therefore, in this study, the minimum sample size considered for the population, which was determined as 2.339.964, is 384.

In the study, considering the limiting factors such as time and cost, the convenience sampling method was used. The study data were collected from consumers who buy/consume services in Bursa between 3 March and 4 June 2019 via face-to-face survey method, and 432 questionnaires suitable for analysis were reached. IBM SPSS 23 was used for frequency analysis and overall reliability analysis of the scale. SmartPLS 3.3.3 was used for the measurement model and structural equation modeling analyzes.

The questionnaire form of the study consists of two parts. In the first part, there are 23 questions to measure unethical sales behaviors and consumer cynicism. The questions in this part were evaluated using a five-point Likert type scale. The response category of this scale is as follows: 1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Neutral, 4=Agree, 5=Strongly Agree. In the second part, there are 5 categorical questions to reveal the respondents' demographic characteristics.

The scale developed by Levy and Dubinsky (1983) was used to measure the salespeople's unethical sales behaviors. The original scale consists of 18 questions. However, 3 questions were excluded from the questionnaire because they were not suitable for the study, and the remaining 15 questions were used to measure unethical sales behaviors. The 8-questions scale developed by Helm et al. (2015) was used to measure consumer cynicism.

5. DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Firstly, frequency analysis was carried out to reveal the respondents' demographic characteristics. Then, the validity and reliability analyzes of the scale dimensions (unethical sales behaviors and consumer cynicism) were carried out. Finally, the research model was analyzed by structural equation modeling.

5.1. Findings on the Respondents' Demographic Characteristics

Data on the respondents' demographic characteristics were analyzed using frequency analysis. Table 1 below shows the findings on the respondents' demographic characteristics.

Table 1. Respondents' Demographic Characteristics

Demographic Characteristics		N	%
Gender	Male	223	51,6
	Female	209	48,4
Age	30 and below	253	58.6
	31 and over	179	41.4
Marital Status	Single	284	65.7
	Married	148	34.3
Education	Secondary Education	63	14.6
	Undergraduate	262	60.6
	Postgraduate	107	24.8
Income (Turkish Lira / TL)	2000 TL and below	144	33.3
	2001 TL - 4000 TL	154	35.6
	4001 TL and over	134	31
Total		432	100

As shown in Table 1 above, male respondents (51.6%) are more than female respondents (48.4%). In terms of age, more than half of the respondents are 30 age and below (58.6%), followed by those aged 31 and over

(41.4%). In terms of marital status, single respondents (65.7%) are more than married (34.3%). In terms of educational status, more than half of the respondents are undergraduate (60.6%). Finally, the respondents' income levels are listed as 2001 TL-4000 TL (35.6%), 2000 TL and below (33.3%), and 4001 TL and over (31%).

5.2. Measurement Model Analysis Results

The research model was tested with structural equation modeling (SEM). In recent years, structural equation modeling (SEM) is a statistical analysis method that has been very popular in the field of marketing (Henseler, 2017: 361). In this study, the partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) technique was used to test the research model. PLS-SEM is a variance-based analysis technique and aims to maximize the explained variance of endogenous constructs (Hair et al., 2011: 139). PLS-SEM differs from the covariance-based structural equation modeling (CB-SEM) techniques in terms of its methodological features such as does not presume that the data are normally distributed, does not require large samples, can efficiently process latent variables that have few indicators and enables the evaluation of reflective and formative measurement models (Hair et al., 2013: 16-17).

In this study, the sample size is sufficient, and data are normally distributed. However, PLS-SEM is widely used in empirical study in marketing as an alternative technique to CB-SEM (Henseler, 2009: 278). Also, the user interface of SmartPLS used in PLS-SEM analysis is relatively easy. Therefore, the PLS-SEM technique was used in this study.

In the analysis of the measurement model, internal consistency reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity analyzes of the constructs in the research model were carried out. Cronbach's Alpha values and Composite Reliability (CR) values were examined for internal consistency reliability. According to Hair et al. (2014: 618-619), Cronbach's Alpha values and Composite Reliability (CR) values should be above 0.70. For convergent validity, Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values were calculated. Also, factor loadings were examined. AVE value is a measure of convergence among indicators (items) representing a latent construct (Hair et al., 2014: 601). According to Hair et al. (2014: 618-619), factor loadings and AVE values should be above 0.50.

Before analyzing the measurement model, the overall reliability of all items in the scale used in the study was calculated. As a result of the reliability analysis, Cronbach's Alpha value of a total of 23 items in the scale was found to be 0.853. This value is above the threshold of 0.70 suggested for Cronbach's Alpha. Therefore, the overall reliability of the scale is high.

In Table 2 below, the measurement model analysis results of the constructs in the research model are seen.

Table 2. Results of Measurement Model Analysis

Construct	Item Codes	Items	Factor Loading	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability (CR)	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Unethical Sales Behaviors	USB11	Many salespeople don't tell customers the complete truth about the characteristics of a service.	0.723	0.718	0.825	0.541
	USB12	Many salespeople don't assist customers they believe are less likely to buy.	0.750			
	USB13	Many salespeople make excuses to customers about the unavailable product that is not yet in stock or is sold out.	0.750			
	USB14	Many salespeople give preferential treatment to certain customers.	0.717			
Consumer Cynicism	CC6	Most companies will sacrifice anything to make a profit.	0.829	0.726	0.875	0.778
	CC7	To make a profit, companies are willing to do whatever they can get away with.	0.932			

As seen in Table 2 above, as a result of the analysis starting with 8 items in the consumer cynicism dimension and 15 items in the unethical sales behaviors dimension (23 items in total), 17 items with low factor loadings were excluded from the analysis to obtain reliability and validity values above the threshold values. Hair et al. (2014: 618) suggest that factor loadings should be 0.50 and above, ideally 0.70 and above. Therefore, to obtain the desired values for reliability and validity, firstly the items with a factor loading of less than 0.70 and then the items that decrease the threshold value were excluded from the analysis. The codes of the items excluded from the analysis are: USB1, USB2, USB3, USB4, USB5, USB6, USB7, USB8, USB9, USB10, USB15, CC1, CC2, CC3, CC4, CC5, CC8. When these items were excluded from the analysis, factor loadings were found between 0.717 and 0.932. As a result of the items excluded from the analysis, the constructs' AVE values were found between 0.541 and 0.778. These values are above 0.50, which is considered as the threshold value of AVE. Hence, convergent validity is met. The AVE values obtained show that, on average, more than 50% of the indicators' variance is explained by the latent construct (Hair et al., 2011: 146).

As seen in Table 2, the Cronbach's Alpha values of the constructs are 0.718 and 0.726. These values are above 0.70, which is considered the threshold value for Cronbach's Alpha. On the other hand, it is seen in Table 2 that the Composite Reliability (CR) values are between 0.825 - 0.875. These values are above 0.70, which is considered the threshold value for Composite Reliability (CR). When the Cronbach's Alpha coefficients and Composite Reliability (CR) values seen in Table 2 are evaluated in general, it can be stated that the internal consistency reliability is met.

For assessing the discriminant validity, the Fornell-Larcker criterion and HTMT (Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio) criterion were used. Discriminant validity expresses the extent to which a construct differs from other constructs in the model (Hulland, 1999: 199). According to the criterion proposed by Fornell and Larcker (1981), the square root of each construct's AVE value should be greater than its correlation with any other construct (Hair et al., 2013: 105). Table 3 below shows the discriminant validity analysis results according to the Fornell-Larcker criterion.

Table 3. Results of the Discriminant Validity Analysis according to Fornell-Larcker Criterion

	Consumer Cynicism	Unethical Sales Behaviors
Consumer Cynicism	0,882	
Unethical Sales Behaviors	0,300	0,735

Note: The table's bolded values represent the AVE values' square roots, while the other values show the constructs' correlations with each other.

In table 3 above, it is seen that the square roots of the constructs' AVE values are greater than the correlation of these constructs with each other. Therefore, the Fornell-Larcker criterion is met.

HTMT criterion proposed by Henseler et al. (2015: 121) shows the ratio of the average of the correlations of all constructs' indicators in the research model to the geometric mean of the correlations of the same construct's indicators. Although it is suggested that the HTMT value is below 0.85, this value can reach up to 0.90 (Henseler et al., 2015: 128). HTMT values for the discriminant validity are shown in Table 4 below.

Table 4. Results of the Discriminant Validity Analysis according to HTMT Criterion

	Consumer Cynicism	Unethical Sales Behaviors
Consumer Cynicism		
Unethical Sales Behaviors	0,396	

As seen in Table 4 above, the HTMT value is less than 0.85. Therefore, the HTMT criterion is met. It can be stated that the discriminant validity is met depending on the Fornell-Larcker and HTMT criteria. As a result, the constructs in the research model are suitable for structural equation modeling (SEM) analysis.

5.3. Structural Model Analysis Results

After analyzing the measurement model, the proposed research model was analyzed using partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) to test the research hypotheses. In the research model, unethical sales behavior is an exogenous construct, and consumer cynicism is an endogenous construct. In the analysis of the structural model, path coefficients (β), t values ($t > 1.96$), p values ($p < 0.05$), VIF values, coefficient of determination (R^2), effect size (f^2) and the predictive relevance (Q^2) values were calculated. To evaluate PLS

path coefficients' significance, 5000 subsamples were taken from the sample using the Bootstrapping technique, and t values were recalculated. Blindfolding analysis was used for the predictive relevance (Q^2) value. In Figure 2 below, the results of the PLS-SEM analysis can be seen.

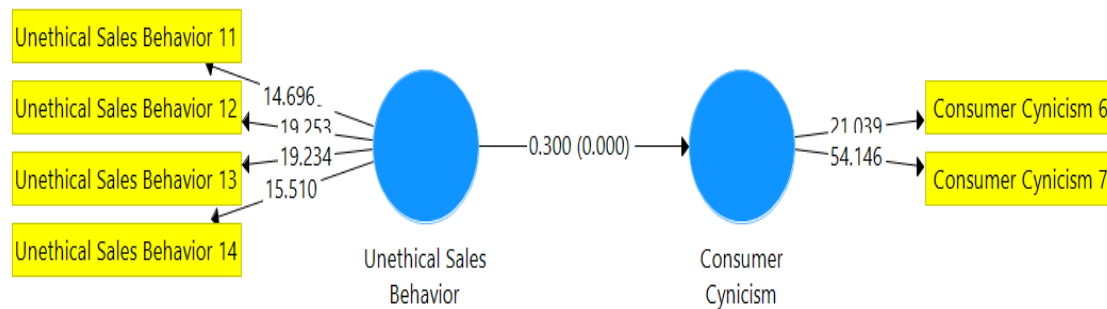


Figure 2. The Results of the PLS-SEM Analysis

Table 5 below shows the results of the PLS-SEM analysis.

Table 5. The Results of the PLS-SEM Analysis

Hypotheses	Path	Standardized β Coefficient	Standard Deviation	t Statistics	p Values	Result
H ₁	Unethical Sales Behaviors → Consumer Cynicism	0.300	0.042	7.147	0.000	Supported

As shown in Table 5, the effect of unethical sales behaviors on consumer cynicism, which expresses the hypothesis H₁, is 0.300. This effect is significant since the significance value of the H₁ hypothesis is $p=0.000$ ($p < 0.05$). Hence, the H₁ hypothesis is supported.

Table 6 below shows the R^2 , f^2 , Q^2 , and VIF values obtained as a result of the PLS-SEM analysis.

Table 6. Results of Determination Coefficient (R^2), Effect Size (f^2), Predictive Relevance (Q^2) and VIF Values

Hypotheses	Path	R^2	f^2	Q^2	VIF
H ₁	Unethical Sales Behaviors → Consumer Cynicism	0.090	0.099	0.064	1.000

As seen in Table 6 above, the VIF value is below 5, which is accepted as the threshold value (Hair et al., 2013: 186). Hence, there is no collinearity problem.

In the evaluation of the structural model, the coefficient of determination (R^2), effect size (f^2), and predictive relevance (Q^2) values should also be analyzed. The R^2 value indicates the ratio of an endogenous construct's variance explained by exogenous constructs (Hair et al., 2013: 115-175). R^2 values of 0.75, 0.50, and 0.25 for endogenous constructs can be respectively expressed as substantial, moderate, and weak (Hair et al., 2011: 147). When the R^2 value in Table 6 is examined, it is seen that unethical sales behaviors explain 9% of consumer cynicism. This value shows that consumer cynicism is weakly explained.

In addition to assessing R^2 values, f^2 (effect size) values were also examined. The f^2 value is used to evaluate an exogenous construct's contribution to an endogenous construct's R^2 value (Hair et al., 2013: 186). f^2 values of 0.35, 0.15 and 0.02 express large, medium and small effects, respectively (Cohen, 1988: 413-414). As seen in Table 6 above, unethical sales behavior has a small effect size ($f^2=0.099$).

The Q^2 value found based on the blindfolding procedure evaluates the model's predictive relevance by removing the data for a given block of indicators from the model. Q^2 values greater than zero ($Q^2 > 0$) show that the model has predictive relevance (Ali et al., 2015: 463). As seen in Table 6, the Q^2 value was found to be 0.064. The obtained Q^2 value is greater than zero ($Q^2 > 0$). Therefore, it can be stated that the model has predictive relevance for the consumer cynicism endogenous construct.

5.4. Multi-Group Analysis Results

In this section, the moderating role of gender, marital status, age, education level, and income categorical variables on the research model was investigated. For this purpose, whether the research model differentiates according to the mentioned categorical variables was analyzed with SmartPLS multi-group analysis. The results of the multi-group analysis performed according to each categorical variable are shown below.

5.4.1. The Multi-Group Analysis Results by Gender

First, it was analyzed whether the effect of unethical sales behaviors on consumer cynicism towards the service sector differs according to the gender categorical variable. The sample according to gender, which is a categorical variable, is divided into two groups as female (N = 209) and male (N = 223). The results of the multi-group analysis performed according to gender are given in Table 7 below.

Table 7. Path Coefficients and Significance Levels by Gender

H _{2a} : Unethical Sales Behaviors → Consumer Cynicism		Standardized β Coefficients	STDEV	t-Value	p-Value
Gender	Female	0.340	0.056	6.087	0.000
	Male	0.266	0.059	4.491	0.000

As seen in Table 7 above, the effect of unethical sales behavior on consumer cynicism towards the service sector is significant for both genders ($p=0.000<0.05$). When the standardized beta coefficients are examined, it is seen that the effect of unethical sales behavior on consumer cynicism is (β) 0.340 in women and (β) 0.266 in men. In Table 7, the path coefficients of the relationship between unethical sales behavior and consumer cynicism towards the service sector in terms of male and female groups and the significance levels of these coefficients are given. However, although the path coefficients of both groups are significant, there may be a significant difference between the path coefficients. Therefore, the following Table 8, which shows the analysis results regarding the difference between the path coefficients and the significance level of this difference, should be examined.

Table 8. Difference Between Path Coefficients and Significance Level of the Difference by Gender

H _{2a} : Unethical Sales Behaviors → Consumer Cynicism		Path Coefficients-diff	p-Value
Gender	Female – Male	0.073	0.365

As can be seen in Table 8 above, the difference between the path coefficients according to gender is 0.073. However, this difference is not significant since it is $p=0.365$ ($p<0.05$). As a result, when Table 7 and Table 8 are evaluated together, although the effect of unethical sales behavior on consumer cynicism towards the service sector is significant for both genders ($p=0.000<0.05$), the difference between the path coefficients is not significant ($p=0.365>0.05$). Therefore, the H_{2a} sub-hypothesis is not supported. In other words, the effect of unethical sales behaviors on consumer cynicism towards the service sector does not differ significantly according to gender.

5.4.2. Multi-Group Analysis Results by Marital Status

It was analyzed whether the effect of unethical sales behaviors on consumer cynicism towards the service sector differs according to the marital status categorical variable. According to marital status, which is a categorical variable, the sample is divided into two groups as single (N = 284) and married (N = 148). The results of the multi-group analysis performed according to marital status are shown in Table 9 below.

Table 9. Path Coefficients and Significance Levels by Marital Status

H _{2b} : Unethical Sales Behaviors → Consumer Cynicism		Standardized β Coefficients	STDEV	t-Value	p-Value
Marital Status	Single	0.302	0.051	5.964	0.000
	Married	0.313	0.065	4.792	0.000

As seen in Table 9 above, the effect of unethical sales behavior on consumer cynicism towards the service sector is significant for both marital statuses ($p=0.000<0.05$). When the standardized beta coefficients are examined, it is seen that the effect of unethical sales behavior on consumer cynicism is (β) 0.302 in single

consumers and (β) 0.313 in married consumers. However, although the path coefficients of both groups are significant, the significance level of the difference between the path coefficients should also be examined. Table 10 below shows the difference between the path coefficients and the significance level of this difference.

Tablo 10. Difference Between Path Coefficients and Significance Level of the Difference by Marital Status

H _{2b} : Unethical Sales Behaviors → Consumer Cynicism		Path Coefficients-diff	p-Value
Marital Status	Single – Married	-0.011	0.896

As seen in Table 10 above, the difference between the path coefficients according to marital status is -0.011. However, this difference is not significant since it is $p=0.896$ ($p < 0.05$). As a result, when Table 9 and Table 10 are evaluated together, although the effect of unethical sales behaviors on consumer cynicism towards the service sector is significant in terms of both marital status ($p=0.000 < 0.05$), the difference between the path coefficients is not significant ($p = 0.896 > 0.05$). Therefore, the H_{2b} sub-hypothesis is not supported. In other words, the effect of unethical sales behaviors on consumer cynicism towards the service sector does not differ significantly according to marital status.

5.4.3. The Multi-Group Analysis Results by Age

It was analyzed whether the effect of unethical sales behaviors on consumer cynicism towards the service sector differs according to the age categorical variable. The sample according to age, which is a categorical variable, is divided into two groups as 30 and below ($N=253$) and 31 and above ($N=179$). The results of the multi-group analysis performed according to age groups are shown in Table 11 below.

Table 11. Path Coefficients and Significance Levels by Age

H _{2c} : Unethical Sales Behaviors → Consumer Cynicism		Standardized β Coefficients	STDEV	t-Value	p-Value
Age	30 and below	0.284	0.054	5.287	0.000
	31 and over	0.348	0.062	5.589	0.000

As seen in Table 11 above, the effect of unethical sales behaviors on consumer cynicism towards the service sector is significant for both age groups ($p=0.000 < 0.05$). When the standardized beta coefficients are examined, it is seen that the effect of unethical sales behaviors on consumer cynicism is (β) 0.284 in the age group 30 and below, and 0.348 (β) in the age group 31 and over. Although the path coefficients of both groups are significant, the significance level of the difference between the path coefficients should also be examined. Table 12 below shows the difference between the path coefficients and the significance level of this difference.

Tablo 12. Difference Between Path Coefficients and Significance Level of the Difference by Age

H _{2c} : Unethical Sales Behaviors → Consumer Cynicism		Path Coefficients-diff	p-Value
Age	30 and below - 31 and over	-0.065	0.435

As seen in Table 12 above, the difference between the path coefficients according to age is -0.065. However, this difference is not significant since it is $p=0.435$ ($p < 0.05$). As a result, when Table 11 and Table 12 are evaluated together, although the effect of unethical sales behaviors on consumer cynicism towards the service sector is significant for both age groups ($p=0.000 < 0.05$), the difference between the path coefficients is not significant ($p=0.435 > 0.05$). Therefore, the H_{2c} sub-hypothesis is not supported. In other words, the effect of unethical sales behaviors on consumer cynicism towards the service sector does not differ significantly according to age.

5.4.4. The Multi-Group Analysis Results by Education Level

It was analyzed whether the effect of unethical sales behaviors on consumer cynicism towards the service sector differs according to the educational level categorical variable. The sample according to education level, which is a categorical variable, is divided into three groups as secondary education ($N=63$), undergraduate ($N=262$), and postgraduate ($N=107$). The results of the multi-group analysis performed according to education level are shown in Table 13 below.

Table 13. Path Coefficients and Significance Levels by Education Level

H _{2a} : Unethical Sales Behaviors → Consumer Cynicism		Standardized β Coefficients	STDEV	t-Value	p-Value
Education	Secondary Education	0.250	0.183	1.361	0.173
	Undergraduate	0.259	0.054	4.790	0.000
	Postgraduate	0.506	0.065	7.755	0.000

As seen in Table 13 above, the effect of unethical sales behaviors on consumer cynicism towards the service sector has different significance levels for each educational level. This relationship is significant since $p=0.000$ ($p<0.05$) according to undergraduate education and postgraduate education, but this relationship is not significant since $p=0.173$ ($p<0.05$) according to secondary education. When the standardized β coefficients are examined, it is seen that the effect of unethical sales behaviors on consumer cynicism towards the service sector is (β) 0.250 for secondary education, (β) 0.259 for undergraduate education, and (β) 0.506 for postgraduate education. Although the path coefficients of undergraduate and graduate educations are significant, the significance levels of the differences between the path coefficients should also be examined. Table 14 below shows the differences between the path coefficients and the significance levels of these differences.

Table 14. Differences Between Path Coefficients and Significance Levels of the Differences by Education Level

H _{2a} : Unethical Sales Behaviors → Consumer Cynicism		Path Coefficients-diff	p-Value
Education	Secondary Education - Undergraduate Education	-0.010	0.846
	Secondary Education - Postgraduate Education	-0.256	0.058
	Undergraduate Education - Postgraduate Education	-0.246	0.004

Table 14 above, it is seen that the difference between secondary education and undergraduate education is -0.010. However, this difference is not significant since it is $p=0.846$ ($p<0.05$). The difference between secondary education and postgraduate education is -0.256. However, this difference is not significant since it is $p=0.058$ ($p<0.05$). The difference between undergraduate education and postgraduate education is -0.246. This difference is significant since it is $p=0.004$ ($p<0.05$). Hence, the H_{2a} sub-hypothesis, which states that the effect of unethical sales behaviors on consumer cynicism towards the service sector differs significantly according to education level, is supported. The effect of unethical sales behaviors on consumer cynicism towards the service sector is higher for consumers with postgraduate education ($\beta=0.506$) than for consumers with undergraduate education ($\beta=0.259$) (Table 13).

5.4.5. The Multi-Group Analysis Results by Income

It was analyzed whether the effect of unethical sales behaviors on consumer cynicism towards the service sector differs according to the income categorical variable. The sample according to education level, which is a categorical variable, is divided into three groups as 2000 TL and below ($N=144$), 2001 TL - 4000 TL ($N=154$), and 4001 TL and over ($N=134$). The results of the multi-group analysis performed according to income are shown in Table 15 below.

Table 15. Path Coefficients and Significance Levels by Income

H _{2e} : Unethical Sales Behaviors → Consumer Cynicism		Standardized β Coefficients	STDEV	t-Value	p-Value
Income	2000 TL and below	0.248	0.072	3.455	0.001
	2001 TL - 4000 TL	0.387	0.060	6.489	0.000
	4001 TL and over	0.310	0.076	4.109	0.000

As seen in Table 15 above, the effect of unethical sales behaviors on consumer cynicism towards the service sector is significant for all income groups ($p<0.05$). When the standardized β coefficients are examined, it is seen that the effect of unethical sales behaviors on consumer cynicism is (β) 0.248 in the income group 2000 TL and below, (β) 0.387 in the 2001 TL - 4000 TL income group, and (β) 0.310 in the income group 4001 TL and over. Although the path coefficients of all income groups are significant, the significance levels of the

differences between the path coefficients should also be examined. Table 16 below shows the differences between the path coefficients and the significance levels of these differences.

Table 16. Differences Between Path Coefficients and Significance Levels of the Differences by Income

H _{2c} : Unethical Sales Behaviors → Consumer Cynicism		Path Coefficients-diff	p-Value
Income	2000 TL and below - 2001 TL - 4000 TL	-0.139	0.121
	2000 TL and below - 4001 TL and over	-0.063	0.513
	2001 TL - 4000 TL - 4001 TL and over	0.077	0.412

When the differences between the path coefficients in Table 16 above are examined, the difference between 2000 TL and below and 2001 TL - 4000 TL income groups is -0.139. However, this difference is not significant since it is $p=0.121$ ($p<0.05$). The difference between 2000 TL and below and 4001 TL and over income groups is -0.063. However, this difference is not significant since it is $p=0.513$ ($p<0.05$). The difference between 2001 TL - 4000 TL and 4001 TL and above income groups is 0.077. However, this difference is not significant since it is $p=0.412$ ($p<0.05$). As a result, although the effect of unethical sales behaviors on consumer cynicism towards the service sector is significant ($p<0.05$) for all income groups (Table 15), the differences between the path coefficients are not significant ($p>0.05$) (Table 16). Hence, the H_{2c} sub-hypothesis is not supported. In other words, the effect of unethical sales behaviors on consumer cynicism towards the service sector does not differ significantly according to income.

When the findings obtained as a result of the study are evaluated in general, the H₁ hypothesis, which states that unethical sales behaviors have a significant and positive effect on consumer cynicism towards the service sector, is supported. The H₂ hypothesis, which states that the effect of unethical sales behaviors on consumer cynicism towards the service sector differs significantly according to demographic characteristics, is partially supported. Because, according to the results of multi-group analysis, the effect of unethical sales behaviors on consumer cynicism towards the service sector differs significantly according to education level, but does not differ significantly according to gender, marital status, age, and income. The significant difference according to education level is seen only between undergraduate education and postgraduate education levels. Accordingly, the effect of unethical sales behaviors on consumer cynicism towards the service sector is higher for consumers with postgraduate education than for consumers with undergraduate education.

6. CONCLUSION

6.1. Theoretical Implications

In this study, the effect of unethical sales behaviors on consumer cynicism towards the service sector and whether this effect differs according to demographic characteristics was examined. As a result of the study, it was found that unethical sales behaviors had a significant ($p=0.000$) and positive effect ($\beta=0.300$) on consumer cynicism towards the service sector. There is no empirical study directly investigating the effect of unethical sales behaviors on consumer cynicism towards the service sector in the marketing literature. However, some studies claim that companies' unethical marketing practices (D'Souza, 2016; Helm, 2004, 2006; Kanter & Mirvis, 1989; Pollay, 1986) and the incongruences between the consumers' ethical values and the companies' ethical values (Chylinski & Chu, 2010; Gillani et al., 2011) contribute to developing a cynical attitude. Therefore, the finding of this study is similar to those of previous studies. Also, unethical sales behaviors weakly (9%) explain consumer cynicism towards the service sector. However, this can be considered normal because consumer cynicism is affected by many factors such as personal incidents (Helm, 2004, 2006), personality traits (Helm, 2006; Indibara & Varshney, 2020), and unmet expectations (Chu & Chylinski, 2006, 2010), beyond unethical sales behaviors. The literature also supports this.

Another aim of the study is to investigate whether the effect of unethical sales behaviors on consumer cynicism towards the service sector differs according to demographic characteristics. As a result of the study, it was found that the effect of unethical sales behaviors on consumer cynicism towards the service sector did not differ significantly according to gender, marital status, age, and income demographic variables but differed significantly according to education level. The significant difference according to education level is seen only between undergraduate education and postgraduate education. The effect of unethical sales behaviors on consumer cynicism towards the service sector is higher for consumers with postgraduate education ($\beta=0.506$)

than consumers with undergraduate education ($\beta=0.259$). It is thought that the level of knowledge and awareness that increase with the education level may be effective in the emergence of this finding. Consumers with postgraduate education are aware of unethical sales practices such as deceptive and manipulating sales tactics, discriminatory practices, and buying pressure. This awareness can lead them to develop cynicism against service companies.

Although researchers (Akçay & Özdemir, 2019; Helm, 2004, 2006; Kanter & Mirvis, 1989; Pollay, 1986) claim that unethical marketing practices play a role in developing consumer cynicism, no empirical studies are investigating the effect of unethical sales behaviors on consumer cynicism in the literature. Furthermore, in previous studies, consumer cynicism has generally been treated as an attitude towards a particular distrusted company (Chylinski & Chu, 2010) or the marketplace (Helm et al., 2015). Consumer cynicism towards the service sector has not been investigated. On the other hand, before this study, the moderating role of demographic characteristics in the relationship between unethical sales behaviors and consumer cynicism towards the service sector has not been investigated. Therefore, this study is thought to make valuable contributions to the literature by revealing that unethical sales behaviors affect consumer cynicism towards the service sector and this effect differs according to the education level of consumers. Also, this study, which examines service sector-level consumer cynicism and reaches statistically significant results, is thought to guide future studies, as it shows that a more specific level of cynicism can be examined.

6.2. Practical Implications

This study indicates that the salespeople's unethical behaviors contribute to consumer cynicism towards the service sector. Service companies can prevent consumer cynicism and minimize the harmful effects of cynicism on the company by eliminating unethical decisions and practices in personal selling. To prevent unethical sales practices, managers should be aware of the factors that cause salespeople to exhibit unethical behaviors and then develop effective strategies to eliminate these factors. Salespeople work under high pressure as they are responsible for generating the companies' revenues (Roman & Munuera, 2005: 473). Therefore, managers can reduce the pressure on salespeople and prevent them from engaging in unethical behaviors to increase sales. On the other hand, salespeople generally work commission-based. However, it is thought that the fixed fee system will benefit managers in preventing salespeople's unethical behaviors. Also, improving the working conditions of salespeople, adopting a high wages policy, and giving gifts to salespeople can benefit managers in preventing unethical sales behaviors. Training the salespeople can be an effective strategy for salespeople to act by ethical values and principles.

In this study, it was found that the effect of unethical sales behaviors on consumer cynicism towards the service sector differs significantly according to education level. This effect is higher for consumers with postgraduate education than consumers with undergraduate education. This result is essential in showing service companies that strategies to reduce the effect of unethical sales behaviors on consumer cynicism should be planned by considering the education level of consumers. In this context, it is recommended for service companies to have information about consumers' demographic characteristics and use different communication and persuasion techniques, especially for consumers with postgraduate education.

Cynical consumers believe that companies are only after their self-interests and manipulate and deceive consumers for their self-interest. Also, cynical consumers have negative feelings toward companies (Helm et al., 2015: 516). Therefore, it is very difficult for companies to build trusting and long-term relationships with cynical consumers compared to non-cynical consumers. This situation also makes it difficult to achieve customer satisfaction and build customer loyalty for companies. Therefore, this study can help service companies develop strategies to turn cynical consumers into satisfied and loyal customers.

6.3. Limitations and Suggestions for Future Studies

The most important limitation of this study is that it was carried out on consumers who purchase services in Bursa. Different results may be obtained if future studies are carried out on consumers in other cities or foreign countries or on larger samples. Consequently, it may be suggested to differentiate the scope of future studies from these aspects. On the other hand, in this study, the service sector is considered as the main sector, including many sub-sectors. For future studies, it can be suggested to investigate consumer cynicism towards

the sub-sectors of the service sector (health, education, communication, tourism, etc.). Also, consumer cynicism towards specific brands, product categories, or non-service sectors may be investigated in the future.

In this study, unethical sales behaviors are not divided into various dimensions. Investigating the salespeople's unethical behaviors into dimensions such as pressuring the customer to purchase the service and discriminatory practices may be presented as a suggestion for future studies. Furthermore, in this study, although the relationship between unethical sales behaviors and consumer cynicism towards the service sector was examined, the relationship between other unethical marketing practices and consumer cynicism towards the service sector was not examined. Therefore, it is recommended to investigate the effect of unethical practices related to product, price, place, and promotion on consumer cynicism in the future.

In this study, whether the effect of unethical sales behaviors on consumer cynicism towards the service sector differs in terms of demographic characteristics such as gender, marital status, age, education level, and income was investigated. For future studies, it is suggested to examine the effect of unethical sales behaviors on consumer cynicism towards the service sector in terms of demographic factors (occupation, etc.) other than gender, marital status, age, education level, and income.

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