



Mediating Role of Cultural Values in the Impact of Ethical Ideologies on Chinese Consumers' Ethical Judgments

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Abstract

This paper develops and tests a new conceptual model incorporating the indirect impact of two ethical ideologies (idealism and relativism) on Chinese consumers' ethical judgments under four ethically problematic consumption situations (active benefit, passive benefit, deceptive practice, and no/indirect harm) through two cultural values (integration and moral discipline). Data from a large-scale online consumer survey in five major Chinese cities ($N = 1046$) support most hypotheses. The findings are consistent with the postulated global impact of ethical ideology on forming an individual's beliefs and values and highlight the importance of a thorough understanding of the significant determinants of consumer ethics to promote ethically responsible consumption behaviors. This study also uses an emic approach to conceptualize and measure Chinese cultural values by using cultural constructs and measures that are designed explicitly in the Chinese context.

Keywords Consumer ethics · Cultural values · Ethical ideology

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Introduction

The moral principles that guide consumer behaviors in the consumption process have received much attention from academics and practitioners in the last couple of decades, which has resulted in the emergence of consumer ethics as an important research discipline (Chowdhury, 2019; Hassan et al., 2021; Ozgen & Esiyok, 2020; Vitell, 2015). Several studies examine consumer ethics from an international business and cross-national perspective (e.g., Lim et al., 2019; Summers, 2016; Summers & Van Heuvelen, 2017), but most of these focus on the developed markets in Europe and North America, with limited attention to the emerging markets from Asia (Arunachalam et al., 2020; Lim et al., 2019; Sharma et al., 2018).

Many studies also explore the impact of factors that may influence consumers' beliefs of what constitutes right or wrong consumption practices (e.g., individual-level or personal factors) on the consumers' ethical behaviors. These personal factors may include religiosity (Arli et al., 2021; Huang & Lu, 2017), attitude toward business (Fukukawa & Ennew, 2010; Koay et al., 2020; Lu et al., 2015), materialism (Chowdhury & Fernando, 2013; Ozgen & Esiyok, 2020), spirituality (Vitell et al., 2015), Machiavellianism (Arli et al., 2019), ethical beliefs (Cheung & To, 2021), and ethical ideology (Arli & Pekerti, 2016; Lu & Lu, 2010; Zaikauskaite

et al., 2020). Overall, these studies have revealed varying degrees of influence of all these factors on different ethically questionable consumption practices based on the perceived ethicality of the practice in question.

Among all the above individual-level factors, ethical ideology appears to be the most logical determinant of consumers' responses toward ethically questionable consumption practices because it refers to individuals' most basic moral philosophy that guides their judgment on moral issues of various kinds (Chen & Moosmayer, 2020; Chowdhury, 2019; Forsyth, 1980, 1992). In other words, it serves as the ultimate arbiter of individual responses toward circumstances having ethical overtones (Culiberg, 2015; Forsyth et al., 2008). Given its global impact on individual responses across various ethics-laden situations, ethical ideology is thus expected to influence how consumers perceive and respond to potentially unethical consumption situations (Chowdhury, 2019).

In addition to ethical ideology, prior research also uses Hofstede's national cultural values, particularly the individualism/collectivism dimension, to examine how culture affects individuals' responses to different types of ethically questionable consumer practices (e.g., Culiberg, 2015; Swaidan, 2012). Most of these studies show that collectivist (vs individualist) consumers are less tolerant of unethical practices (e.g., Huang & Lu, 2017). Notwithstanding the popularity of Hofstede's national cultural values framework, these dimensions were developed based on the Western cultural lens, which has raised concerns about their validity when applied to other socio-cultural settings, such as China (e.g., Chen & Moosmayer, 2020; Cheung & To, 2021; Huang and Wen 2021), India (Gillani et al., 2021), and other parts of the world (Bürgin & Wilken, 2021). These concerns suggest the need for researchers to adopt an emic approach to harness specifically developed constructs and measures to better represent the unique socio-cultural setting under investigation.

Despite the important roles played by ethical ideology and culture in consumer ethics, it is surprising to note that previous studies seldom include both factors in their analysis at the same time. Of these studies, Culiberg (2015) and Smith (2009) appear to be two exceptions. Even so, these two studies only treat ethical ideology and culture as two unrelated immediate antecedents of consumer ethics. Specifically, when studying the determinants of consumers' responses toward various ethically questionable practices, Culiberg (2015) has treated both ethical ideology and collectivism as two independent determinants that, respectively, exert a direct impact on these responses. Similarly, Smith (2009) has focused only on the respective direct effect of ethical ideology and major cultural values on an individual's

ethical intention across different ethically problematic scenarios.

When examined more closely, this direct approach does not seem to be conceptually grounded. According to system justification theory (Jost et al., 2008), ideologies reflect an individual's unconscious motivational processes. They comprise sets of basic beliefs or philosophies attributed to an individual or a group of individuals (Jost & Hunyady, 2003). They are some pre-packaged units of interpretation that function because of basic human motives to understand the world, avoid an existential threat, and maintain valued interpersonal relationships. These motives will consequently lead to individuals' adoption of system-justifying worldviews or ideologies to make sense of the world around them, thus shaping how they interpret and interact with their environment and other people (Jost et al., 2008). In short, given the fundamental nature of ideologies, they are likely to be universal or culture-free by nature.

Alongside this theoretical perspective, Clark (2002), in her manuscript titled *In Search of Human Nature*, has further conceptualized the worldviews or ideologies as the shared values and assumptions that set the ground rules for culture. Subsequent researchers also echo this conceptualization by maintaining that ideologies inform and shape cultural values and constitute the soil from which these values are nurtured (Feijs et al. 2008). Overall, this foregoing literature suggests that ideologies are not only likely to be culture-free, but also likely to affect culture. This analysis furnishes new insights into the relationship between ideologies and cultural values, instead of each exerting a respective impact on individuals' responses toward a particular issue. It is plausible that ideologies do indeed serve as an ultimate antecedent of these responses via the mediator of cultural values. Within the context of consumer ethics, the above discussion points to the possibility that cultural values may mediate the influence of ethical ideology on individuals' responses toward ethically questionable consumption practices.

Despite its theoretical plausibility, the posited mechanism of 'ethical ideology → cultural value → consumer ethical judgment' is yet to be empirically tested. Hence, to fill this research gap and to advance understanding of the socio-psychological mechanism underlying consumers' ethical decision-making process, the present study is undertaken to empirically test the mechanism. Given the marked differences between the Chinese and Western cultures (Scarborough, 1998; Varnum et al., 2010), understanding how unique Chinese (i.e., Confucian) cultural values may relate to individuals' fundamental ethical ideologies and consequently affect their judgments on ethically questionable consumption practices are deemed to be academically important. This academic importance becomes even more apparent when judged against the prevalence and

heavy influence of Confucian cultural values within the entire East Asian region, which accounts for around 20% of the world's population (Wang et al., 2018). A better understanding of the socio-psychological mechanism underlying the ethical responses of this vast group of consumers constitutes a valuable addition to the extant consumer ethics literature, which is still largely dominated by research conducted within a Western cultural context (Hassan et al., 2021).

As the software of the mind (Hofstede, 1994), culture has long been conceived as an immediate driver for individual conative and behavioral responses. Due to culture's deep-rootedness, earlier anthropologists such as Hall (1966, p. 188) has also maintained that "people cannot act or interact in any meaningful way except through the medium of culture." Empirical findings from the present study help verify all these classical premises about culture. To address the aforementioned concerns about employing Hofstede's cultural dimensions to a unique socio-cultural setting, this study adopts an emic approach by choosing two specific Chinese cultural values, integration and moral discipline for investigation. Of all the major Chinese cultural values, both integration and moral discipline are strongly correlated with collectivism (Chinese Culture Connection, 1987). Given that collectivism affects ethical decision-making more than other cultural dimensions (Huang & Lu, 2017; Husted & Allen, 2008), this choice is thus considered appropriate.

Being the largest emerging economy that has experienced tremendous economic achievements over the past four decades, China is undoubtedly important for both domestic and foreign firms (Chan & Ma, 2016). To help cultivate an ethically responsible culture and promote sustainable corporate development by creating a more harmonious and fairer marketplace for businesses and consumers, we need to understand the major determinants of consumer ethics in China (Chen & Moosmayer, 2020). Moreover, the Confucian cultural values are quite prevalent and influential in East Asia that comprises highly developed countries/regions, such as Japan, South Korea, Hong Kong, and Macau (Chung et al., 2008). This suggests the applicability of the present findings to these countries/regions too. As these countries/regions are among the world's most prosperous economies that account for up to 30% of the world's gross domestic product (International Monetary Fund, 2020), the heavy influence of Chinese cultural values further points to the practical value of this study. Lastly, because of the foregoing concerns over the validity issue of using Hofstede's cultural value measures developed from a Western cultural perspective, from a theoretical contribution perspective, this study also makes contributions by employing measures specifically designed for assessing Chinese cultural values to enhance the rigor and relevance of the analysis.

Literature Review

Ethical Ideologies

Ethical ideology refers to individuals' most basic moral philosophy that guides their judgment on moral issues of various kinds (Chen & Moosmayer, 2020; Forsyth, 1980). It reflects individual variations in ethical decisions and comprises two dimensions, idealism and relativism (Forsyth, 1992). Idealism is the extent to which people believe that desirable outcomes can always be achieved through ethically right actions. It is based on altruism and concern for the welfare of others. Individuals high on idealism believe that inherent rightness or wrongness exists for an ethical issue and that harming others is always avoidable (Forsyth, 1980). As regard relativism, it is the extent to which people reject universal ethical rules when making ethical decisions (Forsyth, 1980). Individuals high on relativism reject universal moral absolutes and believe that ethical decisions should depend on circumstances or on the trade-off between the potential benefits and harms of the ethical issue at stake (Hunt & Vitell, 1986). Overall, idealism and relativism can be conceived as two basic moral philosophies for individuals to make ethical judgments, and, respectively, stem from deontological and teleological schools of thought (Barnett et al., 1996; Forsyth, 1992). These moral philosophies serve as the ultimate arbiter of individual responses toward ethics-laden situations (Culiberg, 2015) and constitute the basis for forming an individual's attitudes, beliefs, and values (Forsyth, 1980). On this basis, these ideologies are thus expected to directly influence Chinese people's cultural values, such as integration and moral discipline. A more detailed rationale behind the influence of ethical ideology on cultural values will be further discussed in the hypothesis development section below.

Cultural Values

Culture is defined as "the collective programming of the human mind that distinguishes the members of one human group from those of another" and it refers to a system of collectively held values (Hofstede, 1980, p. 25). These cultural values are important beliefs and norms commonly conceived by members of a society that can affect various aspects of members' behavior (Hofstede, 1980; Rokeach, 1973). In the ethics literature, cultural values are regarded as one of the most important variables influencing ethical decision-making (Ralston et al., 1994). Given the popularity of Hofstede's (1980, 1994) cultural value dimensions, previous researchers often use these to conduct

investigation involving cultural values of Chinese consumers (e.g., Elliott & Tam, 2014; Hur et al., 2015; Ramasamy & Yeung, 2008). Such use is not uncommon in prior investigation specifically on the relationship between Chinese cultural values and consumer ethics too (e.g., Huang & Lu, 2017).

Despite the popularity of Hofstede's cultural value dimensions, the fact that measures of these dimensions were developed from the Western cultural perspective, as mentioned, has raised concerns about if these measures could accurately reflect other distinctive non-Western cultural singularities (Laleman et al., 2015). These concerns are particularly heightened among researchers studying cultural values in China (Bond, 1996; Wong & Lau, 2001) and India (Malik & Pereira, 2015, 2016; Pereira & Malik, 2015). Relating specifically to the investigation of Chinese cultural values, a group of researchers known collectively as the Chinese Culture Connection (1987) has adopted an emic approach to developing measurement items to capture cultural values within the setting of a Chinese social value system that is derived from the Confucian ethos (Ackerman et al., 2009; Lu et al., 1999; Ramasamy et al., 2010).

Based on this emic approach and a large-scale cross-cultural survey, the Chinese Culture Connection (1987) identifies four Chinese cultural value (CVS) dimensions, namely integration, moral discipline, human-heartedness, and Confucian work dynamism. Integration reflects a cultural value that emphasizes social stability through promoting harmony, solidarity, and inclusion with others, whereas moral discipline refers to moral restraint and how individuals exercise their self-control. Human-heartedness is concerned with the values of how individuals handle things with compassion, whereas Confucian work dynamism is concerned with Confucian work ethics that preserves such virtues as persistence and thrift. (Chinese Culture Connection, 1987; Wong & Lau, 2001). Subsequently, this CVS instrument has been used in studies examining Chinese cultural values in diverse contexts, such as consumer research (Ackerman et al., 2009; Lu et al., 1999; Ramasamy et al., 2010) and even hospitality and tourism (Tsang, 2011; Wong & Lau, 2001).

Of the four CVS dimensions, integration and moral discipline are regarded as tapping into a more fundamental Chinese cultural dimension, namely collectivism (Chinese Culture Connection, 1987), as evident from their strong correlations with collectivism ($r=0.65$ and 0.54 , respectively). In addition, the limited prior research on the respective influence of ethical ideology and cultural values on consumer ethics has invariably chosen collectivism as a representative cultural value for analysis (Culiberg, 2015; Smith, 2009). Similarly, ethics researchers also contend that collectivism affects ethical decision-making more than other cultural values (Huang & Lu, 2017; Husted & Allen, 2008). Therefore, in view of the dominance of collectivism within the Chinese

culture and for a parsimonious conceptual model, this study focuses on the two collectivism-related cultural values (i.e., integration and moral discipline) for an investigation to see how they may influence Chinese consumers' responses to various ethically questionable consumption practices.

Ethically Questionable Consumption Practices

In their seminal study, Muncy and Vitell (1992, p. 298) define consumer ethics as "the moral principles and standards that guide the behavior of individuals or groups as they obtain, use, and dispose of goods or services." Muncy and Vitell (1992) further propose four types of ethically questionable consumption practices and develop a consumer ethics scale to operationalize these practices in the same study. These practices are (1) consumers' actively benefiting from illegal activities (ACTIVE BENEFIT) (e.g., changing the labels of goods in a store); (b) consumers' passively benefiting from questionable activities (PASSIVE BENEFIT) (e.g., remaining silent when receiving excessive change); (c) consumers' actively benefiting from deceptive but legal activities (DECEPTION) (e.g., using a coupon for merchandise that consumers do not buy); and (d) engaging in no harm and no foul activities (NO HARM) (e.g., returning goods that consumers do not like after use). When examined more carefully, these practices are based on three criteria, including a) actively or passively seeking benefits, b) legal or illegal practices, and c) perceived harm to the seller (Vitell, 2003). Interestingly, this scale has undergone some modifications over time to better reflect the changing social conditions (Vitell & Muncy, 2005; Vitell et al., 2007) and has been used extensively by researchers worldwide.

Since its inception, the consumer ethics scale has been widely employed in research conducted across different settings, and the findings generally demonstrate its reliability and usefulness (Hassan et al., 2021; Lu & Lu, 2010). Most of these studies identify the determinants of consumers' responses toward ethically questionable consumption practices (Hassan et al., 2021). For example, researchers have shown particular interest in examining how consumers' various personal characteristics, such as personality traits (Gentina et al., 2018; Ozgen & Esiyok, 2020), attitudes (Vitell et al., 2007), and demographic attributes (Lu & Lu, 2010; Vitell et al., 2007) are related to these responses.

According to Hassan et al.'s (2021) recent review, most of the previous studies on consumer ethics were conducted in Western developed countries, such as those in North America (#34 or 26%) and Europe (#49 or 37%). Among the relatively fewer consumer ethics studies in Asia (#29 or 22%), nine (7%) were conducted in China. While this indicates the popularity of China as a setting for consumer ethics research in Asia, it does not seem to proportionately reflect the size and spending power of Chinese consumers amidst

the country's rapid economic development. Coupled with the fact that consumer ethics varies among cultures (Huang & Lu, 2017), a more comprehensive investigation of how unique Chinese cultural values may affect Chinese consumers' responses toward ethically questionable practices is thus considered necessary to enrich the extant literature further.

Finally, Vitell and Muncy (2005) caution the use of their modified consumer ethics scale as it was based on small samples for verification (85 students and 96 non-students). Moreover, a systematic review of the original consumer ethics scale confirms its "relatively consistent factor structure...even when used cross-culturally" (Vitell, 2003, p. 40). Many recent consumer ethics studies still employ the original scale to tap responses toward consumption-related unethical behaviors (e.g., Lu & Lu, 2010; Vitell et al., 2018). Hence, this study employs the original consumer scale for greater rigor.

Hypotheses Development

Drawing upon system justification theory (Jost et al., 2008), this study, as mentioned, takes ideologies as sets of basic beliefs that help individuals understand the world, avoid the existential threat and maintain valued relationships with others (Jost & Hunyady, 2003). Consistent with this theory, prior research on worldviews or ideologies further conceptualizes ideologies as some universal shared values and assumptions that lay down the ground rules for culture (Clark, 2002) and constitute the soil to nurture cultural values (Feijs et al. 2008). In short, deviating from some previous researchers' approach to treat both ethical ideology and cultural values as two independent and direct determinants of consumers' ethically questionable practices (Culiberg, 2015; Smith, 2009), the foregoing literature on worldviews and ideologies suggests that ethical ideology may indeed serve as an ultimate antecedent of these practices via the mediator of cultural value. The conceptual model proposing this new perspective is depicted in Fig. 1.

Ethical Ideologies and Cultural Values

In addition to the literature on worldviews and ideologies, Forsyth (1980) provides further justifications for the focal role of ethical ideology for culture. According to him, ethical ideology comprises both the idealistic and relativistic dimensions and due to its deontological heritage, idealism focuses on the action rather than its consequences to judge whether it is ethical (Al-Kathib et al. 2016; Forsyth, 1980). To this end, the action will be benchmarked against rules or principles based on universal laws to determine its ethicality. The universal laws, in turn, refer to some fundamental and unchanging laws of this universe, which reflect how a

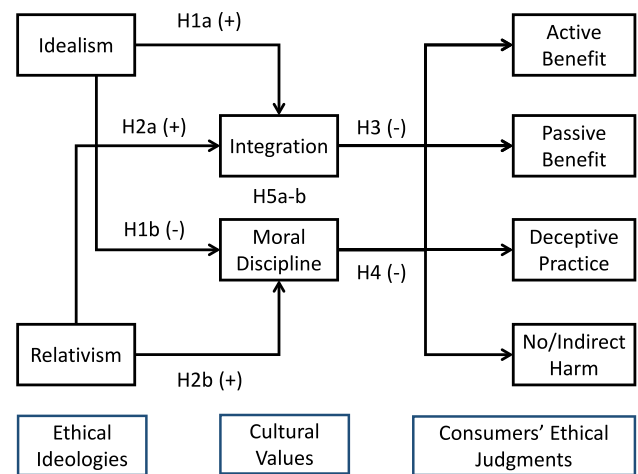


Fig. 1 Conceptual model

rational being may like everyone else to act (MacNab et al., 2011). The reliance on universal laws to judge the ethicality of actions suggests that idealism is likely to be culture-free (Forsyth, 1980).

Given its teleological heritage, relativism, on the other hand, focuses on the consequences of an action to judge if it is ethical or not (Al-Kathib et al. 2016; Forsyth, 1980). At the most basic level, relativists consider the pursuit of happiness the final and ultimate end of all human acts (Barnett et al., 1994; Mudrack & Mason, 2019). This pursuit could occur through either individual hedonism or utilitarianism (Sinnott-Armstrong, 2003). Briefly, while hedonism advocates the greatest pleasure and least pain for the individual, utilitarianism holds that an action is morally right if it promotes happiness and morally wrong if it promotes the reverse (Sinnott-Armstrong, 2003). The reliance on the basic preference of a rational being (i.e., pursuing happiness or avoiding pain) also points to the global nature of relativism.

All in all, the preceding theoretical perspectives point to ideologies' universality or culture-free nature. Relating specifically to the domain of ethics, ethical ideology as a manifestation of individuals' worldviews further suggests that it helps determine their most basic moral philosophies (Dubinsky et al., 2005) and as a basis for forming other beliefs and values (e.g., cultural values) (Forsyth, 1980; Zaikauskaitė et al., 2020). Following this, it is thus posited here that rather than *directly* and *independently* affecting consumers' ethical judgment, ethical ideology indirectly influences this judgment via cultural values.

Effects of Idealism on Cultural Values

As mentioned, individuals high on idealism emphasize others' welfare and try to avoid harming others (Forsyth, 1980). They believe in the absolute value of ethical standards based

on unselfish concern for others (Forsyth et al., 2008). This moral philosophy assumes that desirable consequences can always be obtained with the appropriate action (Forsyth, 1992). When judging the characteristics of idealism against the Chinese cultural value of integration (e.g., see Chinese Culture Connection, 1987; Forsyth, 1992), the two constructs seem to echo well in various aspects. For instance, idealism's unselfish concern for others aligns well with the Chinese cultural value of integration, which promotes harmony and solidarity to achieve social stability. With their strong proclivity to avoid doing things detrimental to others, idealistic individuals are also likely to develop a strong preference to avoid competition with others, one of the key features of integration (Tsang, 2011). Hence, given the compatibility between idealism and integration and those mentioned above possible direct impact of ethical ideology on cultural values, the following hypothesis is offered:

Hypothesis 1a Consumers' level of idealism is positively related to their level of integration.

At first glance, idealism and the cultural value of moral discipline seem to be compatible with each other. For instance, while idealism is associated with subscribing to some moral absolutes or inherent universal ethical rules to encourage ethical behaviors, moral discipline is also characterized by strong adherence to a system of semi-formal behavior norms to improve individuals' manner and self-restraint (Cua, 2002). However, it should be noted that moral discipline is indeed dominated by the Doctrine of the Mean (Chinese Culture Connection, 1987). It is because of this holistic and situation-based doctrine that there may be an inherent incompatibility between idealism and moral discipline. The Doctrine of the Mean is a distinctive and important philosophical thought in Chinese culture (Cheung et al., 2003). In a way, it shares considerable similarities with Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, which focuses on striking a balance between two vices, excess and deficiency, to pursue happiness (Intezari & Pauleen, 2014). This doctrine is the most influential cognitive concept for Chinese people (Ma et al., 2018) and is characterized by holistic information processing, tolerance of apparent contradictions, and avoidance of extremities (Chiu, 2000; Yau, 1988).

Individuals subscribing to this doctrine can recognize and accept contradictions and integrate various perspectives to develop a 'mid-way' approach to cope with differences (Chen, 2002). The ultimate goal of this doctrine is to help individuals avoid conflicts and maintain harmony with other concerned parties within the social system (Cheung et al., 2003). In sum, the doctrine represents the Confucian ideal of perfecting every relationship and activity in human life (Yau, 1988). It guides individuals to resort to appropriate yet flexible courses of action

under different circumstances, depending on the specific requirements of situational contexts and intrinsic personal expectations (Wu & Lin, 2005). This situational approach contradicts idealism, which strongly subscribes to moral absolutes or universal ethical rules (Forsyth, 1980). Because of this inherent incompatibility, the fundamental moral philosophy of idealism may likely serve as an inhibitor rather than a driver for developing the cultural value of moral discipline. Accordingly, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 1b Consumers' level of idealism is negatively related to their level of moral discipline.

Effects of Relativism on Cultural Values

As mentioned earlier, the core feature of the cultural value of integration is to preserve social stability (Chinese Culture Connection, 1987). Culturally integrative individuals stress the importance of promoting harmony and solidarity with others to achieve this stability. Moreover, they stress the importance of tolerating different opinions and avoiding competition with others (Tsang, 2011). Hence, although this Chinese culture-specific value is not aimed at rejecting moral absolutes in the first place, its focus on promoting interpersonal harmony and, ultimately, social stability inevitably prompts its followers to be more flexible and receptive to others' different views. From this perspective, integration seems not to conflict with relativism's fundamental moral philosophy, which rejects universal moral rules and takes a situational approach to arrive at ethical decisions (Forsyth, 1992; Hunt & Vitell, 1986). Based on this discussion and the direct impact of ethical ideology on cultural values, as hypothesized earlier, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 2a Consumers' level of relativism is positively related to their level of integration.

The two constructs appear to relate well with the respective nature and characteristics of relativism and the moral discipline mentioned above. Specifically, while relativism's emphasis on rejecting moral absolutes and adopting a flexible approach to arrive at ethical judgments based on situational contexts (Forsyth, 1992), the heavy influence of the Doctrine of the Mean on moral discipline, as mentioned, prompts individuals to take into account specific situational factors and employ a tempered mind to search for a harmonized 'mid-way' course of action to reconcile different perspectives and seek common ground (Yang et al., 2016). This suggests a compatible relationship between relativism and moral discipline. On this basis, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 2b Consumers' level of relativism is positively related to their level of moral discipline.

Chinese Cultural Values and Ethical Behavior

Effects of Integration on Ethical Behavior

Integration refers to a relationship-oriented cultural value characterized by a broadly integrative, socially stabilizing emphasis (Chinese Culture Connection, 1987). The items constituting this cultural value further highlight that preserving social stability depends much on promoting harmony, solidarity, and inclusion with others (Wong & Lau, 2001). Tapping into the more fundamental cultural dimension of collectivism, integration is characterized by emphasizing group instead of individual beliefs (Hofstede et al., 2010). In collectivist cultures, individuals often prioritize group interests throughout their lives to enable them to be integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups to maintain a loyalty-based society (Hofstede et al., 2010). These individuals also tend to follow ethical regulations and standards generally accepted by their society (Vitell et al., 1993). Prior research shows that consumers with high levels of collectivism are more inclined to reject questionable activities than those with lower levels of collectivism (Swaidan, 2012). Hence, culturally integrative individuals are likely to be more inclined to follow socially acceptable norms to minimize conflicts with others and, finally, achieve social stability. Moreover, they do so even if these norms contradict their beliefs. Thus, consumers high on the cultural value of integration may have more negative judgments about ethically questionable consumption practices that counter prevailing social norms. This leads to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3 Consumers' level of integration is negatively related to their degrees of approval of ethically questionable consumption practices, namely a) Active Benefit, b) Passive Benefit, c) Deception, and d) No Harm.

Effects of Moral Discipline on Ethical Behavior

Moral discipline refers to moral restraint and how individuals exercise their self-control. According to Chinese Culture Connection (1987), this cultural value refers to moderation or the middle-way approach representing a firm and disciplined moral stance. In a way, moral discipline is akin to the Chinese cultural value of activity orientation proposed by Yau (1988). Being influenced by this value, Chinese people are highly disciplined and conform to a system of semi-formal norms of behavior called '*Li*' (propriety). These norms guide Chinese people to live properly, act politely and respectfully when dealing with others, and become socially responsible (Tsang, 2011;

Yau, 1988). The middle-way approach suggests that Chinese people exhibit a high degree of moral self-control or self-regulation, at least publicly (Chou, 1979; Yau, 1988).

It should be noted that moral discipline is heavily influenced by the philosophical thinking of moderation or the 'Doctrine of the Mean' (Cheung et al., 2003). This doctrine is rooted in Confucian philosophy and refers to a stance of not being inclined to either side or extreme (Legge, 1960). At an interpersonal level, this doctrine maintains that an individual should adopt a holistic perspective and consider the interests of other concerned parties when determining his/her appropriate course of action in a particular circumstance (Chiu, 2000). The ultimate purpose is to resolve conflicts among all the relevant stakeholders and maintain social harmony within the interaction system. At a personal level, instead of letting human desires be completely repressed or unrestrictedly gratified, this doctrine teaches individuals to regulate their desires and satisfy them according to socially acceptable ways for fear of troubling others (Cheung et al., 2003).

To effectively regulate their desires or keep themselves disinterested from external temptations, these individuals have long been socialized to exercise self-control over their behaviors (Yau, 1988). Confucian teaching considers self-control to be highly essential for the maintenance of social harmony (Yao, 2000). In Chinese history, various documented prominent role models have exercised extraordinary control over their personal desires to promote society's interests (Ren et al., 2018).

The characteristics mentioned above of moral discipline suggest that individuals influenced by these cultural values are likely to develop a disposition that enables them to view themselves as embedded in a socially interactive system and, thus, see things holistically and in social terms. This disposition also entails that action is not merely according to one's preference but also to the prevailing social norms. In determining the most appropriate course of action, individuals influenced by moral discipline pay particular attention to interpersonal dynamics, assess the possible consequences of different actions, and strive to maintain harmony within their social circles (Yang et al., 2016). The strong emphasis on maintaining social harmony further implies that while these individuals may be more tolerant of others' different opinions and practices to avoid interpersonal confrontation, they may, at the same time, exercise self-restraint over their acts according to prevailing social norms to avoid troubling others (Cheung et al., 2003; Tsang, 2011). Consequent upon these harmony-oriented cultural characteristics, these individuals are likely to judge unethical practices per se unfavorably while still tend not to disapprove of others engaging in these practices openly. Accordingly, we hypothesize as follows:

Hypothesis 4 Consumers' level of integration is negatively related to their degrees of approval of ethically questionable consumption practices, namely a) Active Benefit, b) Passive Benefit, c) Deception, and d) No Harm.

Mediating Role of Cultural Values

As mentioned earlier, this study aims at rectifying the direct approach commonly adopted in previous studies, which treated ethical ideology and cultural value as two immediate independent antecedents of individual ethical judgment. Specifically, drawing upon system justification theory that takes ideologies as individuals' world views or basic shared values and assumptions that set the ground rules for culture (Clark 2003; Jost et al., 2008), we posit that ethical ideology may influence this ethical judgment via cultural values, as follows:

Hypothesis 5 Consumers' levels of a) integration and b) moral discipline mediate the impact of idealism and relativism on their degrees of approval for ethically questionable consumption practices.

Methodology

Sampling and Data Collection

All the hypotheses were tested with data collected from a comprehensive online survey of adult consumers in five major cities of China, including the capital (Beijing), two cities from the economically most advanced regions (Shanghai and Guangzhou) and two from relatively less developed regions (Qingdao and Chengdu). Besides the significant differences in their economic development and income levels, these cities also provide wide geographical coverage of our survey (Beijing in North, Guangzhou in South, Shanghai and Qingdao in East, and Chengdu in West), thus further enhancing the representativeness of our sample. Three hundred fifty ethnic Chinese consumers aged 18 or above in each of the five cities were randomly selected from the sampling frame of a Chinese consumer research agency. They were then requested to complete a questionnaire on the agency's online survey platform, and a token of appreciation was offered to encourage their participation. This process resulted in 1,370 completed questionnaires, representing an overall response rate of about 78%. Appendix 1 shows demographic characteristics of our sample.

Measures

Measures employed in the survey were first generated through a thorough literature review. They were then

fine-tuned based on three expert researchers' knowledge about the topic under investigation and a pre-test with 50 adult Chinese consumers. The questionnaire was then translated into Chinese to facilitate native Chinese respondents' comprehension. Its linguistic equivalence was ensured by back-translation (Bhalla & Lin, 1987). Specifically, items were adapted from Muncy and Vitell (1992) to measure the four ethically questionable consumption practices, ACTIVE, PASSIVE, DECEPTIVE, and NO HARM. The items were coded on a five-point scale anchored with 1 = 'very wrong' and 5 = 'not very wrong.'

Regarding the Chinese cultural value of integration and moral discipline, relevant items were adapted from the Chinese Culture Connection (1987) and coded on a nine-point scale anchored with 1 = 'totally unimportant' and 9 = 'totally important.' Finally, the two ethical ideology dimensions, idealism and relativism, were measured using items adapted from Forsyth (1980). The items were coded on a nine-point scale anchored with 1 = 'totally disagree' and 9 = 'totally agree.' The empirical findings of the survey are discussed.

Data Analysis and Results

Measurement Model

We used the well-established two-stage method with structural equation modeling to analyze the data by testing a measurement model with all the constructs in the conceptual model followed by a path model including all the hypothesized relationships. First, confirmatory factor analysis with AMOS 26.0 shows a close fit for the measurement model with the full sample ($\chi^2 = 2330.68$; $df = 1181$; $\chi^2/df = 1.97$; NFI = 0.95; CFI = 0.96; RMSEA = 0.028; SRMR = 0.038) and a city-wise model with each city as a separate group ($\chi^2 = 23,274.96$; $df = 12,615$; $\chi^2/df = 1.84$; NFI = 0.96; CFI = 0.97; RMSEA = 0.026; SRMR = 0.036), with all the fit indices better than their recommended cut-off values (Hu & Bentler, 1999). All the scales also show good psychometric properties with high factor loadings (0.66–0.88), composite reliabilities (0.80–0.90), and average variance extracted (0.51–0.61), which indicate high convergent validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Average variance extracted for each factor is greater than its squared correlations with other factors, confirming discriminant validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Appendix 2 shows all the scale items and their descriptive properties. Appendix 3 shows all the bivariate correlations and the average variances extracted for all the constructs for the city-wise samples and the full sample. Table 1 shows the correlations of all the hypothesized direct relationships for the overall sample. All the correlations are above the threshold of 0.10 for 'small' effect-sizes in psychological research, about half of them pass the threshold of

Table 1 Correlations table—overall sample

			1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Overall	1	Idealism	<i>0.771</i>							
	2	Relativism	0.397***	<i>0.745</i>						
	3	Integration	0.330***	0.205**	<i>0.742</i>					
	4	Moral discipline	0.205**	0.283**	0.432***	<i>0.741</i>				
	5	Active benefit	-0.183**	-0.064*	-0.164**	-0.120*	<i>0.728</i>			
	6	Passive benefit	-0.196**	-.005	-0.207**	-0.177*	0.289**	<i>0.715</i>		
	7	Deceptive	-0.257***	-0.092**	-0.294**	-0.189**	0.422***	0.554***	<i>0.753</i>	
	8	No harm	-0.109**	-0.026	-0.183*	-0.127*	0.224**	0.310**	0.515***	<i>0.772</i>

Figures in *italics* on the diagonal are the square roots of the average variance extracted (AVE) values; * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

0.20 for ‘medium’ effect, and one even exceeds the threshold of 0.30 for ‘large’ effect (Funder and Ozer 2019).

Path Model

Direct effects (H1-H4) A path model with all the hypothesized direct effects using AMOS 26.0 also shows a close fit for the full sample ($\chi^2 = 62.58$; $df = 32$; $\chi^2/df = 1.96$; NFI = 0.98; CFI = 0.99; RMSEA = 0.030; SRMR = 0.032) and a city-wise model with each city as a separate group ($\chi^2 = 190.57$; $df = 135$; $\chi^2/df = 1.41$; NFI = 0.94; CFI = 0.98; RMSEA = 0.020; SRMR = 0.047), with all the fit indices better than their cut-off values (Hu & Bentler, 1999).

Table 2 shows all the results. First, the ethical ideology of idealism has significant positive effects on integration and negative effects on moral discipline. Hence, H1a and H1b are supported. Next, the ethical ideology of relativism has significant positive effects on both integration and moral discipline. Thus, H2a and H2b are also supported. Chinese cultural value of integration has significant negative effects on the four consumer ethical judgments, including active benefit, passive benefit, deceptive practices, and no/indirect harm, for the full sample and all city samples except Chengdu. Thus, H3a-d are supported. Next, the Chinese cultural value of moral discipline has significant negative effects only on three consumer ethical judgments and no

Table 2 Path model output

H#	Hypotheses	Beijing	Chengdu	Guangzhou	Shanghai	Qingdao	Overall	
H1a (+)	Idealism → integration	0.24***	0.32***	0.28***	0.22**	0.33***	0.29***	
H1b (-)	Idealism → moral discipline	-0.02	0.16*	0.21**	0.07	0.26***	0.11***	
H2a (+)	Relativism → integration	-0.01	-0.10	0.06	0.01	0.26***	0.09**	
H2b (+)	Relativism → moral discipline	0.14*	0.20**	0.25***	0.21**	0.16*	0.24***	
H3a (-)	Integration → active benefit	-0.15*	0.04	-0.33***	-0.07	-0.39***	-0.16***	
H3b (-)	Integration → passive benefit	-0.15*	0.04	-0.20*	-0.36***	-0.24**	-0.18***	
H3c (-)	Integration → deceptive practice	-0.07	-0.12#	-0.48***	-0.39***	-0.32***	-0.28***	
H3d (-)	Integration → No/indirect harm	0.04	-0.05	-0.30***	-0.15*	-0.28***	-0.15***	
H4a (-)	Moral Discipline → active benefit	0.07	-0.03	0.14#	0.17*	0.06	0.06#	
H4b (-)	Moral Discipline → passive benefit	0.14*	-0.14*	-0.02	-0.07	-0.04	-0.002	
H4c (-)	Moral Discipline → deceptive practice	0.02	0.11#	0.08	0.10	-0.21**	0.04	
H4d (-)	Moral Discipline → no/indirect harm	-0.20**	-0.07	0.11	0.19*	-0.25***	-0.07*	
	Chi-sq value	190.574						62.583
	DF	135						32
	Chi-sq/DF	1.412						1.956
	CFI	.980						.990
	NFI	.944						.979
	RMSEA	.020						.030
	SRMR	.0467						.0318

$p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$; *Chi-sq* Chi-square value, *DF* degrees of freedom, *CFI* comparative fit index; *NFI* normed fit index; *RMSEA* root mean square error of approximation, *SRMR* standardized root mean square residual

significant effect on deceptive practices for the full sample and all the city samples except Qingdao. Thus, H4a, H4b, and H4d are supported but not H4c. None of the control variables (age, gender, education, occupation, and income) significantly affect the variables included in the model and their relationships with each other.

Mediating effects (H5) Next, we tested our hypotheses about the mediating roles of cultural values of integration and moral discipline in the impact of the two ethical ideologies (idealism and relativism) on the four ethically questionable consumption practices, using Hayes' PROCESS technique (2017). As shown in Table 3, the mediating effects of integration are significant for idealism on all four ethically questionable consumption practices and on two out of four for relativism. Thus, H5a finds partial support. Finally, the mediating effects of moral discipline are not significant for both idealism and relativism on most of the four ethically questionable consumption practices. Thus, H5b is not supported. We repeated this analysis using SEM with AMOS and found similar results.

We also calculated the squared multiple correlations (R -squared) for all the constructs in our conceptual model to assess the variance in each construct explained by its antecedents. The overall sample shows moderate R -square values (0.03–0.13), which indicates that the two ethical ideologies (idealism and relativism) and cultural values (integration and moral discipline) may have a significant (albeit limited) impact on the Chinese consumers' ethical judgments under the four ethically problematic consumption situations in our study. Finally, we found no meaningful pattern in our results among the samples from the five cities. Moreover, studying the differences across the five cities is not the primary focus of our paper; hence, we do not discuss these differences in detail, but we highlight this as a potential avenue for future research in our limitations and future research section.

Common Method Bias

We controlled for potential common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003) with two approaches. First, we used the marker variable technique, using items conceptually unrelated to all

Table 3 Direct and indirect effects of integration and moral discipline

Hypothesized relationships	Model 1 direct effect						
	Beijing	Chengdu	Guangzhou	Shanghai	Qingdao	Overall	
IDSM → AB	0.06	− 0.20*	− 0.23**	0.04	− 0.14*	− 0.15**	
IDSM → PB	0.08	− 0.22**	− 0.04	− 0.12 [#]	− 0.37**	− 0.18**	
IDSM → DP	0.14*	− 0.26**	− 0.14*	− 0.14 [#]	− 0.27**	− 0.19**	
IDSM → NH	0.17*	0.08	− 0.05	− 0.12	− 0.29**	− 0.07*	
RESM → AB	0.13 [#]	0.15*	0.01	0.03	− 0.02	0.01	
RESM → PB	− 0.07	0.13	0.14 [#]	0.05	0.28**	0.10**	
RESM → DP	− 0.14*	0.22**	0.09	− 0.02	− 0.01	0.02	
RESM → NH	0.03	− 0.05	0.01	0.11	0.05	0.05	
H#	Model 2 mediation effect						
H5a	IDSM → INTEG → AB	− 0.01**	0.01 [#]	− 0.03**	− 0.01	− 0.04*	− 0.02**
	IDSM → INTEG → PB	− 0.02*	0.01	− 0.04*	− 0.07*	− 0.04*	− 0.03**
	IDSM → INTEG → DP	− 0.01 [#]	− 0.01	− 0.07**	− 0.05*	− 0.04*	− 0.04**
	IDSM → INTEG → NH	0.00	− 0.01	− 0.06**	− 0.02 [#]	− 0.06*	− 0.01*
	RESM → INTEG → AB	0.00	0.00	− 0.01	0.00	− 0.03**	0.00*
	RESM → INTEG → PB	0.00	0.00	− 0.01	0.00	− 0.02*	− 0.01**
	RESM → INTEG → DP	0.00	0.00	− 0.01	0.00	− 0.02**	− 0.01**
	RESM → INTEG → NH	0.00	0.00	− 0.01	0.00	− 0.04*	0.00*
H5b	IDSM → MD → AB	0.00	0.00	0.02*	0.01	0.01	0.00**
	IDSM → MD → PB	0.00	− 0.01*	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
	IDSM → MD → DP	0.00	0.01*	0.01	0.00	− 0.03*	0.00*
	IDSM → MD → NH	0.00	− 0.01	0.02	0.01	− 0.06**	− 0.01 [#]
	RESM → MD → AB	0.00	0.00	0.01*	0.01*	0.00 [#]	0.01*
	RESM → MD → PB	0.01*	− 0.01*	0.00	− 0.01	0.00	0.00
	RESM → MD → DP	0.00	0.01*	0.01	0.01	− 0.01*	0.01 [#]
	RESM → MD → NH	− 0.02*	− 0.01	0.02	0.02*	− 0.03**	− 0.01 [#]

INTEG integration, *MD* moral discipline, *IDSM* idealism, *RESM* relativism, *AB* active benefit, *PB* passive benefit, *DP* deceptive practice, *NH* no harm. [#] $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

the other variables in our model, and found no significant differences in our results after controlling for the marker variables. Second, we included a method factor whose indicators included all the constructs' indicators to assess if each indicator's variances may be explained by the focal construct and the method, as suggested by Liang et al. (2007). The ratio of substantive variance to method variance is more than 100:1, with most method loadings as non-significant. Thus, common method bias is unlikely to be a concern for this study.

Discussion

Theoretical Contributions

This study proposes and empirically tests a model delineating how ethical ideologies (idealism and relativism) may influence ethically questionable consumption practices (ACTIVE, PASSIVE, DECEPTIVE, and NO HARM) through the unique Chinese cultural values of integration and moral discipline. To this end, the study involves a large-scale survey of Chinese consumers from five major cities in China. Except for H2c concerning the proposed negative impact of moral discipline on DECEPTIVE and H5b about the mediating role of moral discipline, all the hypotheses are supported. These findings make theoretical contributions to the extant literature on consumer ethics, especially in emerging markets.

First, unlike prior research that focuses on the direct impact of ethical ideology on ethically questionable consumption practices (e.g., Arli & Pekerti, 2016; Culiberg, 2015), this study takes this ideological construct as individuals' fundamental moral principle that at first influences the formation of their specific cultural values, and consequently their ethical judgment on these practices. Based on this approach, the present study furnishes empirical evidence to advance understanding of the relationship among the global moral construct of ethical ideology, unique Chinese cultural values and consumer ethics, thus enriching the extant literature on the socio-psychological mechanism underlying ethical consumption. While this paper focuses only on the cultural values of Chinese consumers, it does pave a new way for undertaking academic inquiry in other nations regarding how their unique cultural values may mediate the impact of ethical ideology on consumer ethics.

Second, the Chinese cultural value of integration is found to negatively affect the four ethically questionable consumption practices under investigation. Third, except for its non-significant influence on DECEPTIVE, the Chinese cultural value of moral discipline, as mentioned, is also found to negatively influence the other three consumption practices. The findings highlight that Chinese consumers' strong proclivity

to maintain social stability (integration) and exercise self-control, particularly on public occasions (moral discipline), effectively refrains them from engaging in various ethically questionable consumption behaviors. As both integration and moral discipline tap into Chinese people's more fundamental cultural orientation of collectivism (Chinese Culture Connection, 1987), the present study disentangles the documented blanket negative influence of collectivism on such behavioral engagement (e.g., Huang & Lu, 2017). In short, by empirically delineating the respective influences of integration and moral integration on each of the four ethically questionable consumption practices, this study helps researchers better appreciate the complexity and dynamics involved in the ethical judgment process of collectivist Chinese consumers. These results would also inspire researchers to employ the two emic cultural values (integration and moral discipline) to examine the influence of collectivism in their future studies with Chinese consumers, to advance our understanding of the intricate relationships between Chinese consumers' collectivist characteristic and their psychological responses across various behavioral categories.

Third, it is somewhat surprising to see a non-significant (negative) influence of moral integration on DECEPTIVE (H2c) and its mediating role in the impact of ethical ideologies on ethically questionable practices (H5b). Given the dominance of the Doctrine of the Mean in moral discipline, Chinese consumers may tend to take a more compromising approach when dealing with apparent contradictions (Chiu, 2000). For instance, although DECEPTIVE consists of consumption practices that involve dishonesty and thus unethically, they are generally perceived as legally permissible (Muncy & Vitell, 1992). This perceived legality may somehow cloud Chinese consumers' ethical judgment and prompt them to unconsciously exhibit higher tolerance to these deceptive practices. In addition, there is growing evidence that modern Chinese consumers may not adhere to traditional Confucian cultural values, such as moral discipline, due to the rise in the popularity of capitalism in the last few decades (Jackson, 2018). Despite the plausibility of these explanations, further empirical verification will help establish their tenability.

Fourth, by employing measures specifically designed for assessing Chinese cultural values, this study also helps address the concerns over the validity of applying Hofstede's cultural value measures to study individuals from a non-Western cultural setting (Wong & Lau, 2001). This emic approach furnishes empirical results to supplement previous studies based on Hofstede's instruments and enhances the rigor and relevance of the analysis involving ethnic Chinese subjects. As mentioned, this approach helps disentangle the complex dynamics associated with the influence of collectivism on Chinese people's psychological responses. In sum, the approach helps generate findings that complement the

extant literature based on a Western perspective to operationalize Chinese collectivism.

Fifth, the respective influences of idealism and relativism on integration and moral discipline warrant some further discussion. In short, while idealism positively influences integration, its influence on moral discipline is negative. This contrasts the positive influences of relativism on both integration and discipline. The above findings lead to an interesting conclusion: relativism could represent a more effective moral philosophy to discourage various ethically questionable consumption practices compared to idealism. In short, while previous studies propose that idealism and relativism lead to direct disapproval and tolerance of ethically questionable consumption practices, respectively (Swaidan et al., 2004; Zaikauskaitė et al., 2020), this study extends the extant literature by highlighting a more complex set of relationships among the two moral philosophies and ethically questionable consumption practices mediated by Chinese cultural values.

Finally, this study empirically demonstrates the global impact of ethical ideology on unethical consumption practices via two unique Chinese cultural values for Chinese consumers. The model proposed and verified here contributes to future research for business ethics, and in particular, within the domain of consumer ethics, by highlighting the ultimate determining role of ethical ideology for subsequent ethical practices as well as the potential to adopt an emic approach to study the relationship between cultural values and these practices. All these would serve as valuable references to guide business ethics researchers to pursue their research endeavors in this domain.

Practical Implications

Apart from its theoretical contributions, this study offers valuable practical insights into promoting ethical consumption practices among Chinese consumers. First, the present findings demonstrate that Chinese consumers high on integration and moral discipline (albeit to a lesser extent) are likely to disapprove of ethically questionable consumption practices of various kinds. With the gradual dilution of traditional Chinese cultural values through China's rapid economic development over the past couple of decades (Lin, 2013), consumers there have become more materialistic and focused more on self-gratification in their consumption (Wang et al., 2013). This egoistic consumption style may divert their attention from ethical considerations in the purchase and eventually undermine the country's morality. The significant negative influences of integration and moral discipline on various unethical consumption practices derived from the present study provide the Chinese government with useful insights into how to crack down on unethical consumption practices in the country.

Specifically, if the government could further refine its civic education to make its citizens subscribe more to the traditional cultural values of integration and moral discipline, they may even refrain from engaging in such practices. Such refinement in civic education may be done by better embedding these important cultural values into the curricula of the country's formal educational system and through well-crafted communications messages to appeal to its citizens at large. Relating specifically to the latter, messages may include featuring how social harmony between sellers and buyers could be achieved if both parties could deal with each other fairly and honestly. These messages should also emphasize how this dealing would eventually lead to the continued healthy economic development of the country and an enhanced national image in the international community.

Second, retail firms may also crack down on various ethically questionable consumption practices through tactually designed communication campaigns. Given the debilitating effect of integration and moral discipline on unethical consumption practices, and the focus of these two cultural values on preserving social harmony, retailers may consider featuring their communications with real-life stories about how unethical consumption practices will jeopardize such preservation. For instance, the communications may convey that, once discovered, unethical consumption practices would lead to conflicts between store employees and wrongdoing consumers, undermining social harmony. By highlighting the undesirable social consequences that contravene the inherent cultural virtues of integration and moral discipline, Chinese customers may be more restrained from engaging in these practices.

Similarly, as the Doctrine of the Mean prompts Chinese people to avoid doing things that are not endorsed by the public, communication messages and materials (e.g., posters, advertisements) may feature on a public occasion on which others show disrespect to a consumer who has been caught red-handed for unethical practices. Finally, the present results reveal the non-significant influence of moral discipline on DECEPTION. As moral discipline is highly concerned with adherence to socially acceptable norms, it is plausible that the non-significance is attributed to Chinese customers' lack of adequate awareness of the anti-social nature or even illegality involved in deception-laden unethical consumption practices. On this premise, it is thus considered necessary for the government to strengthen its civic education to help Chinese customers better recognize the anti-social nature of these practices. To this end, it may even highlight the severe legal consequences of those gravely wrong, deceptive practices. In short, as Chinese customers become conscious of the social unacceptability and/or illegality of engaging in these deceptive practices, their espoused cultural value of moral discipline would

likely exert a more substantial deterrence effect on such engagement.

Limitations and Future Research

This paper has a few limitations that future research may address. First, this study is confined to consumers in China. Although this confinement is considered practically significant due to the country's vast and lucrative domestic consumer market, future research may still apply similar frameworks to study other countries worldwide further to establish the external validity of the present findings. Second, although the extant literature mentioned above provides theoretical justifications for the culture-free nature of ideologies, such justifications are yet to be empirically tested. It is thus desirable to conduct research in the future to empirically verify them. Third, while it is considered theoretically and empirically justified to focus on the two collectivism-laden Chinese cultural values, integration and moral discipline, in the present investigation, excluding the remaining two cultural values (i.e., Confucian work dynamism and

human-heartedness) from the proposed model would still undermine the completeness of the analysis. Future research that takes all the four Chinese cultural values into account would thus help further verify the present proposed model.

Fourth, the ethically questionable consumption practices under investigation here are based on Muncy and Vitell (1992). Given that ethically questionable consumption practices are likely to evolve over time, future research may incorporate the violations of more recently evolved practices (e.g., recycling, saving energy, buying from socially responsible firms, etc.) into the analysis to further confirm the generalizability of the proposed model. Fifth, although the explanation for the non-significant influence of moral discipline on DECEPTION appears plausible, a more thorough examination is still necessary to further assess its tenability. Finally, scholars can further advance the field's knowledge by employing an experimental design to help unbundle the issue of causality.

Appendix 1

See Table 4.

Table 4 Sample profile—city-wise and overall

Demographics	Beijing (<i>n</i> = 257)	Chengdu (<i>n</i> = 313)	Guangzhou (<i>n</i> = 269)	Shanghai (<i>n</i> = 274)	Qingdao (<i>n</i> = 277)	Overall (<i>N</i> = 1370)
Gender						
Male	121 (47.3%)	157 (50.2%)	134 (49.8%)	114 (44.9%)	138 (49.8%)	664 (49.8%)
Female	136 (52.9%)	156 (49.8%)	135 (50.2%)	140 (55.1%)	139 (50.2%)	706 (50.2%)
Age						
25 years or below	17 (6.6%)	51 (16.3%)	48 (17.8%)	31 (12.2%)	40 (14.4%)	187 (13.6%)
26–35 years	69 (26.8%)	108 (34.5%)	74 (27.5%)	58 (22.8%)	67 (24.2%)	376 (27.4%)
36–45 years	105 (40.9%)	102 (32.6%)	82 (30.5%)	96 (37.8%)	84 (30.3%)	469 (34.2%)
46–55 years	54 (21.0%)	45 (14.4%)	44 (16.4%)	54 (21.3%)	70 (25.3%)	267 (19.5%)
56–65 years	11 (4.3%)	6 (1.9%)	13 (4.8%)	13 (5.1%)	14 (5.1%)	57 (4.2%)
Above 65 years	1 (0.4%)	1 (0.3%)	8 (3.0%)	2 (0.8%)	2 (0.7%)	14 (1.8%)
Education						
Junior school and below	63 (24.5%)	118 (37.7%)	73 (27.1%)	66 (26.0%)	65 (23.5%)	385 (28.1%)
High school	90 (35.0%)	89 (28.4%)	82 (30.5%)	132 (52.0%)	80 (28.9%)	473 (34.5%)
Vocational/technical	42 (16.3%)	42 (13.4%)	41 (15.2%)	32 (12.6%)	26 (9.4%)	183 (13.4%)
Undergraduate and above	62 (24.1%)	64 (20.4%)	73 (27.1%)	24 (9.5%)	106 (38.3%)	329 (24.7%)
Occupation						
Blue collar workers	97 (37.7%)	116 (37.1%)	78 (29.0%)	125 (49.2%)	85 (30.7%)	501 (36.6%)
White collar workers	44 (17.1%)	72 (23.0%)	59 (21.9%)	47 (18.5%)	65 (23.5%)	287 (20.9%)
Managers	15 (5.8%)	34 (10.9%)	23 (8.6%)	16 (6.3%)	20 (7.2%)	108 (7.9%)
Professionals	52 (20.2%)	28 (8.9%)	52 (19.3%)	20 (7.9%)	42 (15.2%)	194 (14.2%)
Self-employed	21 (8.2%)	37 (11.8%)	23 (8.6%)	14 (5.5%)	43 (15.5%)	138 (10.1%)
Others	28 (10.9%)	26 (8.3%)	34 (12.6%)	32 (12.6%)	22 (7.9%)	142 (10.4%)
Personal monthly income						
RMB 5000 or below	8 (3.1%)	45 (14.4%)	9 (3.3%)	4 (1.6%)	40 (14.4%)	106 (7.7%)
RMB 5001–10000	76 (29.6%)	123 (39.3%)	54 (20.1%)	52 (20.5%)	70 (25.3%)	375 (27.4%)
RMB 10001–15000	145 (56.4%)	128 (40.9%)	144 (53.5%)	156 (61.4%)	119 (43.0%)	692 (50.5%)
Above RMB 15000	28 (10.9%)	17 (5.4%)	62 (23.0%)	42 (16.5%)	48 (17.3%)	197 (14.4%)

Appendix 2

See Table 5.

Table 5 Scale items and factor loadings—city-wise and overall

Scale item	Beijing	Chengdu	Guangzhou	Shanghai	Qingdao	Overall
Idealism						
A person should make certain that actions never internationally harm another even to a small degree	0.722	0.759	0.724	0.762	0.772	0.774
Risks to another should never be tolerated, respective of how small the risks might be	0.728	0.708	0.663	0.698	0.747	0.689
The existence of potential harm to others is always wrong, irrespective of the benefits to be gained	0.735	0.719	0.731	0.687	0.769	0.739
One should never psychologically or physically harm another	0.844	0.849	0.856	0.881	0.820	0.856
One should not perform an action which might in any way threaten the dignity and welfare of another individual	0.799	0.752	0.826	0.775	0.880	0.810
If an action could harm an innocent other, then it should not be done	0.745	0.743	0.707	0.778	0.696	0.745
Relativism						
There are no ethic principles that are so important that they should be a part of any code of ethics	0.791	0.786	0.785	0.750	0.730	0.775
What is ethical varies from one situation and society to another	0.743	0.706	0.729	0.729	0.764	0.731
Moral standards should be seen as being individualistic; what one person considers to be moral may be judged to be immoral by another person	0.765	0.749	0.727	0.774	0.746	0.723
Different types of moralities cannot be compared as to “rightness”	0.708	0.789	0.759	0.798	0.802	0.768
Moral standards are simply personal rules which indicate how a person should behave, and are not to be applied in making judgments of others	0.698	0.675	0.740	0.775	0.762	0.729
Ethical considerations in interpersonal relations are so complex that individuals should be allowed to formulate their own individual codes	0.717	0.685	0.759	0.763	0.709	0.760
No rule concerning lying can be formulated; whether a lie is permissible or not permissible totally depends on the situation	0.766	0.804	0.787	0.781	0.767	0.727
Integration						
Tolerance of others	0.679	0.748	0.669	0.725	0.757	0.757
Harmony with others	0.688	0.708	0.777	0.717	0.756	0.741
Solidarity with others	0.772	0.761	0.711	0.740	0.784	0.719
Trustworthiness	0.716	0.689	0.747	0.753	0.734	0.785
A close, intimate friend	0.685	0.695	0.712	0.760	0.799	0.709
Filial piety	0.800	0.782	0.669	0.706	0.747	0.739
Moral discipline						
Moderation, following the middle way	0.689	0.702	0.702	0.714	0.737	0.718
Keeping oneself disinterested and pure	0.730	0.682	0.742	0.687	0.726	0.749
Keeping oneself without desire and demand	0.727	0.801	0.781	0.741	0.730	0.754
Actively benefiting						
Reporting a lost item as “stolen” to an insurance company in order to collect money	0.712	0.718	0.748	0.743	0.757	0.696
Giving misleading price information to a clerk for an unpriced item	0.690	0.733	0.763	0.748	0.692	0.704
Returning damaged merchandise when the damage is your own fault	0.748	0.695	0.719	0.745	0.744	0.782
Passively benefiting						
Getting too much change and not saying anything	0.755	0.775	0.746	0.788	0.743	0.695
Observing someone shoplifting and ignoring it	0.726	0.694	0.735	0.692	0.705	0.703
Lying about a child’s age in order to get a lower price	0.713	0.711	0.735	0.686	0.788	0.719
Not saying anything when the waitress miscalculates the bill in your favor	0.751	0.747	0.672	0.834	0.752	0.742
Deceptive, “legal” practices						
Stretching the truth on an income tax return	0.803	0.755	0.720	0.798	0.729	0.790
Returning merchandise to a store by claiming that it was a gift (when it was not) so that you were unable to present the receipt	0.753	0.785	0.743	0.753	0.763	0.759
Taking items as “souvenirs” from a hotel	0.756	0.775	0.770	0.744	0.722	0.778
Buying merchandise with a coupon which was dropped by someone	0.759	0.727	0.771	0.729	0.725	0.731
Trying to buy merchandise with an expired coupon	0.691	0.776	0.742	0.705	0.733	0.707

Table 5 (continued)

Scale item	Beijing	Chengdu	Guangzhou	Shanghai	Qingdao	Overall
Joining an online shop as a member just to get a free gift but without any intention of buying anything there	0.685	0.745	0.753	0.757	0.807	0.737
Not telling the truth when trying to sell your used car to another	0.712	0.771	0.758	0.789	0.774	0.769
No harm/indirect harm						
Using pirated computer software or games	0.707	0.832	0.748	0.725	0.736	0.767
Returning an item after finding out that the same item is now on sale	0.744	0.751	0.743	0.714	0.772	0.798
Returning merchandise after trying it and not liking it	0.756	0.767	0.733	0.783	0.787	0.742
Spending over an hour trying on different clothes and not purchasing any	0.804	0.762	0.744	0.778	0.726	0.759
Accessing an illegal piracy website for movies	0.702	0.752	0.750	0.738	0.756	0.795

Appendix 3

See Table 6.

Table 6 Correlations table—city-wise and overall

			1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Beijing	1	Idealism	<i>0.763</i>							
	2	Relativism	0.292**	<i>0.742</i>						
	3	Integration	0.231**	0.061	<i>0.725</i>					
	4	Moral Discipline	0.016	0.132*	0.443***	<i>0.716</i>				
	5	Active benefit	-0.057	-0.140*	-0.117*	0.007	<i>0.717</i>			
	6	Passive benefit	-0.125*	-0.039	-0.181*	0.057	0.250**	<i>0.736</i>		
	7	Deceptive	-0.175**	-0.134*	-0.065	-0.140*	0.451***	0.557***	<i>0.738</i>	
	8	No Harm	-0.169**	-0.050	-0.150*	-0.182**	0.456***	0.337***	0.657**	<i>0.744</i>
Chengdu	1	Idealism	<i>0.756</i>							
	2	Relativism	0.493***	<i>0.744</i>						
	3	Integration	0.274**	0.061	<i>0.731</i>					
	4	Moral Discipline	0.252**	0.271***	0.287**	<i>0.730</i>				
	5	Active benefit	-0.112	0.043	0.035	-0.016	<i>0.716</i>			
	6	Passive benefit	-0.167*	-0.009	-0.120*	-0.127*	0.365***	<i>0.732</i>		
	7	Deceptive	-0.142*	-0.122	-0.202**	-0.145*	0.298**	0.467***	<i>0.762</i>	
	8	No Harm	-0.017	-0.034	-0.171*	-0.190*	0.112	0.181**	0.307**	<i>0.757</i>
Guangzhou	1	Idealism	<i>0.754</i>							
	2	Relativism	0.457***	<i>0.755</i>						
	3	Integration	0.301**	0.183*	<i>0.715</i>					
	4	Moral Discipline	0.328***	0.346**	0.558***	<i>0.742</i>				
	5	Active benefit	-0.253**	-0.083	-0.263**	-0.051	<i>0.744</i>			
	6	Passive benefit	-0.037	-0.085	-0.184*	-0.079	0.200**	<i>0.723</i>		
	7	Deceptive	-0.204**	-0.021	-0.435***	-0.174*	0.492***	0.482***	<i>0.751</i>	
	8	No Harm	-0.096	-0.029	-0.252**	-0.073	0.161*	0.372***	0.560***	<i>0.744</i>
Shanghai	1	Idealism	<i>0.766</i>							
	2	Relativism	0.043	<i>0.767</i>						
	3	Integration	0.222**	0.015	<i>0.734</i>					
	4	Moral Discipline	0.076	0.207**	0.328***	<i>0.714</i>				
	5	Active benefit	-0.038	0.060	-0.016	0.148*	<i>0.745</i>			
	6	Passive benefit	-0.198**	-0.026	-0.396***	-0.182*	0.263**	<i>0.753</i>		
	7	Deceptive	-0.209**	-0.011	-0.355***	-0.037	0.403***	0.579***	<i>0.754</i>	
	8	No Harm	-0.129	-0.134*	-0.094	-0.135*	0.303**	0.248**	0.482***	<i>0.748</i>
Qingdao	1	Idealism	<i>0.783</i>							
	2	Relativism	0.518***	<i>0.755</i>						
	3	Integration	0.466***	0.431***	<i>0.763</i>					
	4	Moral Discipline	0.339***	0.293**	0.562***	<i>0.731</i>				
	5	Active benefit	-0.283**	-0.214**	-0.343***	-0.134	<i>0.732</i>			
	6	Passive benefit	-0.318***	0.003	-0.240**	-0.165*	0.334***	<i>0.748</i>		
	7	Deceptive	-0.436***	-0.297**	-0.443***	-0.395**	0.383***	0.486***	<i>.751</i>	
	8	No Harm	-0.421***	-0.239**	-0.425***	-0.420**	0.143*	0.444***	0.614***	<i>0.756</i>
Overall	1	Idealism	<i>0.771</i>							
	2	Relativism	0.397***	<i>0.745</i>						
	3	Integration	0.330***	0.205**	<i>0.742</i>					
	4	Moral Discipline	0.205**	0.283**	0.432***	<i>0.741</i>				
	5	Active benefit	-0.183**	-0.064*	-0.164**	-0.120*	<i>0.728</i>			
	6	Passive benefit	-0.196**	-0.005	-0.207**	-0.177*	0.289**	<i>0.715</i>		
	7	Deceptive	-0.257***	-0.092**	-0.294**	-0.189**	0.422***	0.554***	<i>0.753</i>	
	8	No Harm	-0.109**	-0.026	-0.183*	-0.127*	0.224**	0.310**	0.515***	<i>0.772</i>

Figures in *italics* on the diagonal are the square roots of the average variance extracted (AVE) values; * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

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Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Research Involving Human and Animal Rights Yes.

Informed Consent Yes.

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