

## **Demographic Predictors of Unethical Behavior: A Cross-Sectional Study on Gender, Age, and Employment Status**

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### **Abstract**

This study investigates the demographic predictors of unethical behavior, focusing on the roles of gender, age, and employment status among employees in various sectors in Nigeria. The study investigates how demographic factors, specifically gender, age, and employment status, predict unethical behavior among Nigerian employees. Using a cross-sectional research design, data were collected from a sample of 2,623 respondents through structured questionnaires. The study applied statistical techniques such as ANOVA and Chi-square tests to examine the relationships between demographic variables and unethical behavior. The findings revealed no significant differences in unethical behavior based on gender or age, challenging some prior research that suggested women and older individuals are less likely to engage in unethical practices. However, employment status significantly influenced unethical behavior, with employed individuals reporting higher levels of unethical behavior than their unemployed counterparts. This suggests that organizational pressures and workplace ethical climate play a more critical role in shaping unethical behavior than inherent demographic characteristics. The study highlights the importance of organizational ethics programs, moral leadership, and transparent reporting systems to mitigate unethical behavior in the workplace. Recommendations for future research include longitudinal studies to explore the interaction between demographic characteristics and organizational factors such as job stress and leadership style in shaping ethical decision-making over time.

**Keywords:** Demographic predictors, Employment status, Ethical climate, Organizational ethics, Unethical behavior.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Unethical behavior in organizational contexts refers to behaviors that contravene moral or legal standards, causing harm to individuals, organizations, or society at large. Instances of unethical conduct include deceit, fraudulence, corruption, larceny, and the improper utilization of resources. Such behaviors can result in significant consequences, including financial losses, legal ramifications, reputational harm to the organization, and

decreased staff morale. Workplace ethics is essential for fostering trust, assuring responsibility, and attaining organizational success (Trevino & Nelson, 2017).

Researchers have long sought to understand what drives individuals to engage in unethical conduct. Organizational factors such as leadership, corporate culture, and pressure to meet performance targets are well-established predictors (Kish-Gephart, Harrison, & Treviño, 2010). However, individual demographic

factors like age, gender, and employment status are less understood but may play a significant role in shaping employees' ethical behavior. Understanding how these demographic factors predict unethical behavior is essential for developing targeted interventions aimed at promoting ethical conduct in diverse workplace environments (Lasthuizen, and Badar 2023).

While research on the causes of unethical behavior has focused extensively on organizational influences, there is limited understanding of how demographic characteristics such as gender, age, and employment status predict unethical conduct in the workplace. Gender has been linked to differences in ethical decision-making, with studies suggesting that women may generally adhere to higher ethical standards than men, though findings remain inconsistent (Adekanmbi and Ukpere 2022; Dadaboyev, Peak, & Choi 2023). Similarly, age may influence unethical behavior, with younger employees often considered more prone to unethical practices due to a lack of experience or maturity (Deshpande, Joseph, & Maximov, 2000). Employment status—whether one is employed in the public, private, or self-employed sectors—may also affect ethical behavior, given the varying organizational pressures, resources, and cultural dynamics across these sectors (Victor & Cullen, 1988).

However, there is a dearth of information regarding the combined impact of these demographic factors in predicting unethical behavior, particularly in the context of developing countries like Nigeria. This study seeks to address this gap by examining the relationship between gender, age, and employment status and their influence on unethical behavior among Nigerian employees. The specific objectives of this research are threefold: first, to examine the relationship between gender and unethical behavior, exploring whether male or female employees are more likely to engage in unethical practices; second, to assess how age influences unethical behavior, investigating whether younger or older employees demonstrate different patterns of unethical conduct; and third, to explore the role of employment status (i.e., government, private, or self-employed) in shaping unethical behavior, analyzing whether the nature of employment affects employees' likelihood to

engage in unethical practices. These objectives aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of the demographic factors that influence unethical behavior in the workplace.

On the strength of these objectives, the study is guided by the following research questions:

- i. Does gender significantly influence unethical behavior in the workplace?
- ii. Is age a significant predictor of unethical behavior?
- iii. How does employment status affect unethical behavior in the workplace?

This study is important for several reasons. First, understanding how demographic factors influence unethical behavior can help organizations tailor ethics training programs and policies to address the specific needs and risks associated with different employee groups. For instance, if younger employees are found to be more prone to unethical behavior, organizations can design mentorship programs to guide them in ethical decision-making (Deshpande, Joseph, & Maximov 2000). Similarly, if employment status plays a significant role in predicting unethical behavior, organizations in the public, private, and self-employment sectors can create tailored ethical guidelines that reflect the unique challenges faced in these environments (Victor & Cullen, 1988).

However, this research has broader implications for business ethics in Nigeria, where unethical practices have been a persistent challenge in both the public and private sectors (Adeyeye, Adenugba, & Okeke, 2021). By identifying the demographic predictors of unethical behavior, the study provides insights that can inform policies aimed at promoting ethical behavior in the Nigerian workforce. Furthermore, the findings will contribute to the broader literature on business ethics by exploring the role of demographics in shaping ethical behavior in an African context, which has been understudied in comparison to Western settings (Kolade & Ogbari, 2015).

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Theoretical Foundation**

The theoretical framework for this study is grounded in ethical decision-making theories and demographic-based theories of unethical

behavior. Two key models underpin this framework:

**Rest's Four-Component Model of Ethical Decision-Making:** Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau, & Thoma, (1999) proposes that ethical decision-making occurs in four stages: moral awareness, moral judgment, moral intention, and moral action. Individuals must first recognize the ethical dimensions of a situation, make a judgment about the appropriate course of action, form the intention to act ethically, and then follow through with ethical behavior. Demographic factors such as age, gender, and employment status may influence how individuals navigate these stages.

**The Person-Situation Interactionist Model:** This model proposed by Trevino (1986) highlights the interaction between individual characteristics (e.g., gender, age) and situational factors (e.g., organizational culture) in shaping ethical behavior. According to Trevino, personal values and demographic factors interact with organizational variables to predict unethical conduct. For example, a younger employee working in a high-pressure environment may be more susceptible to unethical behavior than an older employee in the same situation.

The justification for these theories rests in their focus on both individual and situational factors in unethical behavior. For instance, Rest's model explains how individuals progress through stages of ethical decision-making—moral awareness, judgment, intent, and behavior—highlighting how demographic characteristics like age and gender may influence this process. Meanwhile, Treviño's Interactionist Model emphasizes the interplay between personal traits (e.g., gender, age) and organizational pressures, aligning with this study's exploration of employment status as a determinant. Together, these theories provide a comprehensive framework for analyzing unethical behavior in both individual and organizational contexts, particularly within the complex socio-cultural landscape of Nigeria.

#### Gender and Unethical Behavior

Gender differences in ethical decision-making have been a topic of interest in the literature for decades. According to social role theory, men and women are socialized into different roles,

with women generally being more nurturing and concerned with the welfare of others, while men are more likely to focus on achievement and competition (Eagly & Wood, 2012). These socialization processes may lead to differences in ethical behavior. Some studies have found that women are less likely than men to engage in unethical practices in the workplace (Adekanmbi and Ukpere 2022). For example, research by Beu, Buckley, and Harvey (2003) suggests that women are more likely to uphold ethical standards in situations involving fairness and honesty. However, other studies have found no significant gender differences, indicating that this relationship may be context-dependent (Young 2009). Sequel to this postulation, this study hypothesized that:

**H<sub>1</sub>:** *There is a significant relationship between gender and the likelihood of engaging in unethical behavior.*

#### Age and Unethical Behavior

Age has been proposed as a significant predictor of ethical behavior, with research suggesting that older individuals may exhibit higher levels of ethical conduct than younger individuals due to greater life experience and a more developed sense of moral reasoning (Deshpande, Joseph, & Maximov, 2000). Kohlberg's theory of moral development supports this view, as it posits that individuals progress through stages of moral reasoning as they age, becoming more concerned with universal ethical principles over time (Kohlberg, 1981). Several studies have shown that younger employees are more likely to engage in unethical behavior, particularly in environments where they feel pressure to succeed (Peterson, Rhoads, & Vaught, 2001). However, some studies (Dadaboyev et al., 2023) found no significant correlation between age and unethical behavior. This suggests that other factors, such as job experience and organizational culture may influence the relationship between age and unethical behavior. Nevertheless, the study hypothesizes that:

**H<sub>2</sub>:** *Age is a significant predictor of unethical behavior, with younger employees being more likely to engage in unethical practices.*

#### Employment Status and Unethical Behavior

Employment status refers to whether an individual is employed in the public sector, private sector, or self-employed. This variable is significant because the pressures, incentives, and ethical climates can differ dramatically across these employment contexts (Victor & Cullen, 1988). Public sector employees, for example, may face different ethical dilemmas compared to private sector employees due to differences in regulatory environments, public scrutiny, and organizational cultures (Perry & Hondeghem, 2008). Research suggests that private sector employees may be more likely to engage in unethical behavior due to the profit-driven nature of their work, while self-employed individuals might experience less oversight, increasing their vulnerability to unethical practices (Buchan, 2005). Consequently, this study hypothesized that:

*H<sub>3</sub>: Employment status (government, private, or self-employed) significantly influences the likelihood of engaging in unethical behavior.*

Based on the theoretical and conceptual frameworks outlined, this study conceptualizes that gender, age, and employment status are significant predictors of unethical behavior. In this model, each demographic variable (gender, age, and employment status) is hypothesized to have a direct influence on the likelihood of engaging in unethical behavior. These relationships are guided by the theoretical underpinnings of ethical decision-making and person-situation interactionist models.

Despite extensive research on unethical behavior in organizations, several gaps remain. First, much of the existing literature has focused on Western contexts, with limited research exploring these dynamics in developing countries like Nigeria. Cultural differences may play a significant role in ethical decision-making, and there is a need to understand how demographic predictors operate within non-Western organizational settings (Kolade & Ogbari, 2015).

Second, while gender and age have been explored as predictors of unethical behavior, the role of employment status (particularly self-employment) has received less attention. Studies tend to focus on organizational employees, overlooking the ethical challenges faced by self-employed individuals, who may

operate with less oversight and greater autonomy (Chiu & Erdener, 2003).

Finally, existing research has produced mixed findings regarding the relationship between demographic variables and unethical behavior, indicating the need for further empirical investigation. For example, while some studies suggest that women are more ethical than men, others find no significant gender differences in internet misuse (Young 2009). Similarly, while younger employees are often assumed to be more unethical, the interaction between age and organizational context remains underexplored. This study addresses these gaps by examining how gender, age, and employment status predict unethical behavior in the Nigerian workforce, a context that has received limited attention in the literature.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study adopts a cross-sectional research design to examine the demographic predictors of unethical behavior among employees in various sectors in Nigeria. The choice of a cross-sectional design allows for collecting data from a large and diverse sample at a single point, making it ideal for identifying relationships between demographic factors (such as gender, age, and employment status) and unethical behavior. This quantitative study uses structured questionnaires to gather data from respondents and applies statistical techniques to test the hypotheses regarding the influence of these demographic variables on unethical behavior. The use of this design enables the study to explore key patterns while being constrained by the limitations of a single time frame.

The population and sample for the study consist of employees (N=2,364) from various sectors in Nigeria and a few unemployed individuals (N=206) with a total sample size of 2,623 respondents. In addition, a few missing values across variables (30 for gender and 21 for marital status) were also recorded. The demographic variables of interest include gender (coded male and female), age (coded into five categories), and employment status (coded as employed and unemployed). The dependent variable (unethical behavior) is measured on a scale from 9 to 100, with a mean score of 70.73 and a standard deviation of 9.246. Data was collected through physical

questionnaires, which included demographic questions and a 20-item Likert-type questionnaire measuring unethical behavior.

The study also used SPSS to perform various statistical tests. Descriptive statistics were calculated to summarize the demographic characteristics of respondents and their levels of unethical behavior. The average unethical behavior score was approximately 70.7, with variations observed across different age groups and employment statuses. A one-way ANOVA was conducted to assess whether significant differences existed in unethical behavior based on gender, age, and employment status, followed by post-hoc tests (Tukey's test) to explore differences between specific groups. Chi-square tests were used to evaluate relationships between categorical variables such as gender and employment status with unethical behavior. The reliability of the test instrument was confirmed with a Cronbach's

#### **Descriptive Statistics**

Table 1 provides a summary of the descriptive statistics for the unethical behavior scores across different demographic groups, including gender, age, and employment status.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Unethical Behavior by Demographic Variables

<b>Demographic Variable</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Deviation</b>
<b>Gender</b>			
Male	1,569	70.76	9.08
Female	1,024	70.78	9.33
<b>Age Group</b>			
18 & below	60	68.48	10.12
19-29	948	70.61	9.32
30-39	1,008	70.61	8.77
40-49	388	71.16	9.47
50 & above	95	71.64	8.43
<b>Employment Status</b>			
Worker	2,364	70.97	9.02
Unemployed	206	68.84	10.80

Source: Survey, 2024

Alpha value of 0.696, indicating acceptable internal consistency (George and Mallery 2003), and Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) confirmed strong construct validity, with items loading onto four distinct components related to employee satisfaction, ethical pressures, and control behaviors (Field 2013). Ethical approval was obtained, and informed consent was collected from all participants, though the reliance on self-reported data and the cross-sectional design were noted as limitations of the study.

#### **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The study investigated the influence of gender, age, and employment status on unethical behavior. Descriptive statistics, ANOVA tests, and post-hoc analyses were used to test the research hypotheses. The key findings are presented below.



A one-way ANOVA was conducted to determine whether there were significant differences in unethical behavior between

males and females. The result is presented in Table 2.

Table 2: ANOVA Results for Gender and Unethical Behavior

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	113.12	2	56.56	0.672	0.511
Within Groups	218,655.05	2,598	84.16		
<b>Total</b>	<b>218,768.17</b>	<b>2,600</b>			

Source: Survey, 2024.

The p-value (0.511) is greater than 0.05, indicating that there is no statistically significant difference in unethical behavior between males and females. Thus, **H<sub>1</sub> is not supported.**

The study also conducted a one-way ANOVA to assess whether age significantly predicts unethical behavior. This is presented in Table 3

Table 3: ANOVA Results for Age and Unethical Behavior

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	477.69	4	119.42	1.438	0.219
Within Groups	207,098.72	2,494	83.04		
<b>Total</b>	<b>207,576.41</b>	<b>2,498</b>			

Source: Survey, 2024

The p-value (0.219) is greater than 0.05, suggesting that age does not significantly predict unethical behavior. Therefore, **H<sub>2</sub> is not supported.**

To evaluate the effect of employment status on unethical behavior, the study also conducted a one-way ANOVA as presented in Table 4.

Table 4: ANOVA Results for Employment Status and Unethical Behavior

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	861.53	1	861.53	10.238	0.001
Within Groups	216,097.87	2,568	84.15		
<b>Total</b>	<b>216,959.40</b>	<b>2,569</b>			

Source: Survey, 2024

The p-value (0.001) is less than 0.05, indicating that employment status has a significant impact on unethical behavior. Therefore, **H<sub>3</sub> is supported.**

showed significant differences ( $p = 0.001$ ), suggesting variance between workers and unemployed individuals. The summary of results revealed no significant difference in unethical behavior based on gender or age, indicating that these demographic factors do not significantly influence unethical practices. However, employment status was found to

Additional tests such as Levene's Test for Homogeneity of Variances indicated equal variances across groups for gender ( $p = 0.917$ ) and age ( $p = 0.110$ ), while employment status

significantly impact unethical behavior, with workers reporting higher levels of unethical behavior compared to unemployed individuals. These findings imply that organizational dynamics and the working environment may have a greater influence on unethical behavior than demographic traits like gender and age.

This study aimed to explore the influence of gender, age, and employment status on unethical behavior among employees and unemployed individuals. The results revealed that while gender and age did not significantly predict unethical behavior, employment status had a significant impact, with workers reporting higher levels of unethical behavior compared to unemployed individuals. These findings contribute to our understanding of how demographic factors shape ethical decision-making in organizational contexts.

#### Gender and Unethical Behavior

The results indicated that there is no significant difference in unethical behavior between males and females ( $p = 0.511$ ). This contradicts some prior research suggesting that women may be less likely to engage in unethical behavior than men, possibly due to social and cultural expectations that emphasize women's responsibility for caregiving and maintaining social harmony (Adekanmbi and Ukpere 2022). However, other studies have found mixed results, with some showing no significant gender differences in ethical decision-making (Young 2009). The findings from this study align more closely with research suggesting that situational factors, such as organizational culture and external pressures, may have a more substantial influence on unethical behavior than gender alone (Kish-Gephart, Harrison, & Treviño, 2010). Therefore, the role of gender in unethical behavior may be context-dependent, with cultural, organizational, and individual differences playing a larger role than inherent gender traits.

#### Age and Unethical Behavior

This study found no significant relationship between age and unethical behavior ( $p = 0.219$ ), challenging the common assumption that younger individuals are more prone to unethical practices due to lower moral development or greater susceptibility to external pressures (Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau, & Thoma, 1999).

Previous research has suggested that older employees may engage in fewer unethical behaviors because they have more experience, greater moral reasoning ability, and a more established sense of professional ethics (Kohlberg, 1981). However, the absence of a significant age effect in this study may be because unethical behavior is influenced by multiple factors, including the ethical climate of the organization and job-related stressors, which may affect individuals across different age groups (Peterson, Rhoads, & Vaught, 2001). Moreover, as this study involved both employed and unemployed individuals, it is possible that external factors, such as employment instability or financial pressures, may have overridden the influence of age.

#### Employment Status and Unethical Behavior

One of the most significant findings from this study is that employment status had a strong influence on unethical behavior ( $p = 0.001$ ), with employed individuals reporting higher levels of unethical behavior than unemployed individuals. This finding supports the idea that individuals who are engaged in organizational work are subject to a range of pressures, incentives, and cultural norms that may encourage unethical behavior (Victor & Cullen, 1988). Employed individuals, particularly those in profit-driven sectors, may face performance pressures or fear of job loss, which could lead to unethical decision-making (Treviño, 1986). Moreover, the higher levels of unethical behavior among workers may reflect the competitive nature of organizational environments, where individuals may feel compelled to cut corners or engage in unethical practices to meet performance targets or gain rewards (Kish-Gephart et al., 2010).

#### Research Contributions

This study contributes to understanding demographic predictors of unethical behavior, specifically by examining the roles of gender, age, and employment status. The findings indicate that gender and age do not significantly influence unethical behavior, which challenges some previous studies that suggested women and older individuals are less likely to engage in unethical practices. However, a significant relationship was found between employment status and unethical behavior, with employed individuals reporting

higher levels of unethical behavior compared to unemployed individuals. This suggests that situational factors such as organizational pressures and the ethical climate within workplaces play a more critical role in shaping unethical behavior than demographic traits like gender or age. The research also reinforces Trevino's Person-Situation Interactionist Model (1986), which emphasizes the interaction between personal and situational factors in influencing ethical decision-making, and Victor and Cullen's Ethical Climate Theory (1988), which highlights the role of organizational context in shaping ethical or unethical conduct.

### Research Implications

The significant impact of employment status on unethical behavior has practical implications for organizations, particularly in addressing the ethical challenges faced by employees. Organizations must recognize that workers may encounter ethical dilemmas due to organizational pressures, such as job performance expectations and cultural norms. This underscores the need for companies to implement strong ethics policies and provide ethics training to help employees navigate these challenges. Furthermore, by establishing transparent reporting systems and promoting a work culture where ethical behavior is valued, organizations can reduce the prevalence of unethical behavior and encourage long-term success. Rest et al. (1999) emphasized the importance of fostering an ethical organizational climate, and this study supports that view, showing that organizational context can strongly influence employees' ethical conduct.

### CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study examined the demographic predictors of unethical behavior, focusing on gender, age, and employment status. The findings revealed that neither gender nor age significantly influenced unethical behavior, contradicting some prior research. However, employment status was significantly related to unethical behavior, with employed individuals reporting higher levels compared to their unemployed counterparts. These results suggest that organizational pressures and workplace ethical climate play a more critical role in

shaping unethical behavior than demographic characteristics. The study reinforces the importance of addressing employees' ethical challenges through organizational strategies that promote ethical decision-making and foster a supportive ethical climate.

To entrench ethical behaviors, organizations should implement comprehensive ethics training programs that will focus on specific ethical challenges faced by employees. Fostering a supportive ethical climate where integrity is valued and rewarded is also crucial. Leadership development programs should focus on promoting ethical behavior and reducing unethical pressures like unrealistic performance goals. Transparent reporting systems with robust whistleblower protections should be implemented to encourage employees to report unethical conduct without fear of intimidation. Additionally, organizations should tailor ethics policies to different employment contexts, considering the unique challenges faced by public sector workers, private sector employees, and self-employed individuals. Future research should explore specific organizational factors, such as job stress and leadership style, that influence unethical behavior across various employment contexts. Finally, longitudinal studies can provide deeper insights into the causal relationships between employment status and ethical decision-making.

### Limitations and Suggestions for Future Studies

This study has several limitations. First, the reliance on self-reported measures of unethical behavior may have introduced social desirability bias, as respondents might underreport unethical actions to present themselves favorably (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Lee 2003). Second, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to establish causality between demographic factors and unethical behavior. Future research could adopt longitudinal designs to track changes in unethical behavior over time and explore how shifts in employment status, organizational culture, or economic conditions affect ethical decision-making. Additionally, future studies should explore interaction effects between demographic variables (e.g., gender and age) and situational factors such as job stress, leadership style, and organizational culture to



gain a more nuanced understanding of predictors of unethical behavior.

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