

## **Business Students' Ethics in the Digital Age**

**Nada Almasri**

**Gulf University for Science and Technology**

**Luay Tahat**

**Gulf University for Science and Technology**

*Business students are the future business leaders, and investigating their ethical behavior as students can be viewed as a predictor of their work ethics in the future. This paper aims at investigating business students' ethical intentions in IT context. The study investigates whether business students handle an ethical issue within IT context in the same manner as they would handle it in a traditional context. Questionnaires were administered to university students in the Middle East, and a total of 188 usable questionnaires were returned. Furthermore, to check if this result is specific to business students, the questionnaire was distributed to IT students, and a total of 91 usable questionnaires were returned. The study found that business students have statistically significant lower ethical intention scores when addressing ethical issues in an IT context compared to a traditional non-IT context. The results show that even IT students have statistically significant lower ethical intention scores when addressing ethical issues in an IT context compared to a traditional non-IT context. Furthermore, there was no significant difference found between Business and IT students' ethics in IT context.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Because business students are the future of business leadership, it is important to study their behavior as a predictor for their moral attitudes in the future (Bolhari et al, 2017). In order for these students to become ethical professionals, they need to first be held to moral standards as students. Consequently, almost all business colleges have a mandatory business ethics course to increase students' ethical awareness and to guide their ethical decision making process. In fact, some disciplines include an ethics course unit to allow students to become eligible to sit for regular examinations (Cronan et al, 2005).

As information technology (IT) continues to infuse almost every phase of a typical student's life, it has become gradually essential to comprehend student moral decision-making in such a context (Chen et al, 2009). Colleges and Universities also continue to struggle when dealing with issues to do with cheating during assignments, term papers, quizzes, and online examinations (Cronan & Al-Rafee, 2008). Although there are no dedicated course units necessarily designed to teach in ethics concerning the use of IT, moral behavior is indispensable in this enormously shifting discipline (Leonard et al, 2004). Many business students admit to copying works from the Internet and utilizing them to complete academic assignments (Liao et al, 2010). In particular, many undergraduate students believe that violating of

intellectual property is more acceptable whenever IT is included than when it is not. Also, they make this more of an explanation for them using IT to cheat during exams.

According to Molnar, Kletke & Chongwatpol (2008), the application of IT makes executing such an activity quite simple. For instance, plagiarizing other people's work from the Internet is done by simply copying and pasting (Lwin & Williams, 2003). In a sense, one may find that finishing a similar task manually would necessitate writing physical material word after word. The action of typing increases the chances that a student can revise the material because effort is exerted to completing the task in one way or the other (Plowman & Goode, 2009). The other prevalent moral concern using IT is the falsifying of information (Moore, Nill & Rothenberger, 2009). Previous research including Stone, Jawahar & Kisamore (2009) posits that online consumer fabrications are affected by an individual's attitude, apparent behavioral control, and perceived ethical duty.

Because IT brings about challenges for moral behavior, this assessment studies the ethical intentions of business students in IT context compared to a traditional non-IT context. While a few studies targeted this issue in the developed countries, no evidence was collected from countries in the Middle East. Consequently, this study investigates the Middle East business students' ethics. Furthermore, to gain better understanding of how business students behave in and IT context compared to students majoring in IT related discipline, the study compares the ethical intentions of business students compared to IT students.

The rest of this paper is structured as follows: The literature review is presented in section 2, while sections 3 and 4 present the theoretical framework and the research method. The results are discussed in section 5, and the conclusion and future research are provided in section 6.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Business ethics are proper business policies and practices concerning potentially controversial issues. Grayson and Hodges (2017) have argued that some examples of these issues include bribery, discrimination, fiduciary and corporate social responsibilities. The world of business has changed over the years as IT takes the center of everything. Central to the study by Teece (2010), business is being conducted online with different categories of wired transactions, such as paying for goods being done through the platform, making it a relevant subject in business studies. As a consequence of these factors, business studies have also evolved whereby students are required to take IT courses. Therefore, due to the changes in the business world, ethics have been put in place when it comes to business students and their ethical behavior in IT context.

While studying the ethical decision making of students in an IT context, Riemenschneider, Leonard, & Manly (2011) posited that the aspects of attitude, perception, and subjective norm tend to influence their moral decisions. The authors used the (TPB) Theory of Planned Behavior to identify other factors that affect ethical behavior including moral judgment and perceived importance of IT resources. According to Simkin & McLeod (2010), TPB refers to a model utilized in the assessment of the behavioral intentions of students when using IT. In particular, the aspect of ethical judgment has been considered an essential idea in IT ethical decision making (Martin & Woodward, 2011).

Leonard, Cronan & Kreie (2004) suggested that the concept of behavioral intention also influences the ethical decisions made by students. The study further notes that because behavioral intention is an individual's intent to perform or otherwise, it influences their ultimate ethical behavior in the context of IT. The investigation by Cherry (2006) also noted that moral judgment and perceived importance are critical determinants of behavioral intention.

Stone, Jawahar, & Kisamore (2009) also stipulated that ethical behavior tends to be influenced by an individual's attitude. Riemenschneider et al (2011) agrees that the TPB validates that attitude is a dependable factor of moral behavior. The study observed that attitude is contingent on an individual's beliefs and the evaluation of those beliefs. To add on, an assessment by Leonard et al. (2004) revealed that attitude oftentimes influences behavioral intention among numerous different IT contexts. According to Liao, Lin & Liu (2010), attitude tends to affect student's ethical intentions of IT especially the ideas to

use pirated software or buying term papers online for the sake of passing. Therefore, the authors concluded that attitude is linked with behavioral intention when students utilize IT.

Dorantes et al. (2006), while reviewing ethical decision making in the context of IT discussed the concept of moral intensity as a determinant of ethical decision making in terms of IT. It is founded on the principle that intentions and following behavior arise from a person's perception of whether a set of ethical components exists in a given situation and to what extent (Erturk, 2013). The concept of moral intensity varies according to several factors including the extent of the results, concentration effect, and the probability effect (Gulli, Kohler & Patriquin, 2007). These essentially influence a person's moral behavior while using IT.

Furthermore, With the huge increase in online learning, and the high dependence on the use of technology for traditional classes, the literature review shows the increasing interest of researchers in investigating the ethical issue of cheating using IT (Josephson Institute of Ethics 2006, McCanbe et al. 2005, Shurden et al.,2010; Tang and Chen, 2008; Molnar, et al.,2008). However, most of these studies targeted students in Western developed countries, and the authors noticed a clear lack of evidence from developing countries such as the countries in the Middle East.

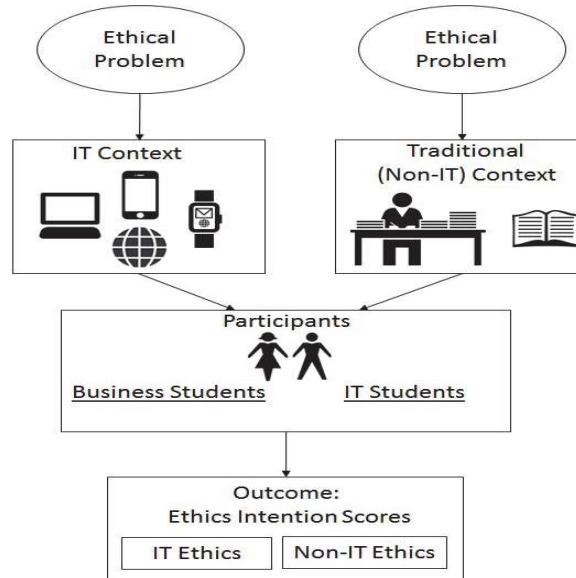
Tahat et al. (2014) compared between IT professionals' Ethics in the Middle East and in the USA. Their study revealed a higher maturity of IT ethics by USA IT professionals compared to IT professionals in the Middle East.

Almasri and Tahat (2018) compared between the ethical intentions of college students in different disciplines in the Middle East students and in the USA. Their study found that for both regions, students showed lower ethical intentions in IT context compared to traditional context. It also found that college students in the USA have higher ethical intentions compared to students in the Middle East. Their study, however, didn't investigate whether IT students were more aware of ethical issues in IT context compared to students in other majors. Their study, however, didn't attempt to focus on business students' ethics compared to IT students.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

In this study, we investigate the difference in business students' ethical intentions in an IT context compared to their ethical intentions in a traditional (non-IT) context. To check if the results obtained for business students would differ from the results of IT students, we consider in our study both Business and IT students.

**FIGURE 1  
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**



Each subject in the study is required to agree or disagree (to a certain extent) with a set of statements which target an ethical issue within a traditional (non-IT) context and another set of statements which target ethical issues within an IT context. The outcome of the subjects' responses is summarized in two ethical intention scores which are detailed in the analysis method section. Figure 1 shows the conceptual model of this research study.

To guide our analysis of the study, we perform two types of comparative analysis. In the first comparison analysis, we focus on comparing IT ethics and Non-IT ethics for each of the two groups of students (Business students and IT students). The objective of this analysis is to check if the pattern of the difference between IT and non-IT ethics is the same for both majors. The second comparison analysis focuses on comparing Business students' ethics with IT students' ethics within the IT context. The objective of this type of analysis is to check if Business students' ethics are similar to IT students' ethics even when considering IT context.

**TABLE 1  
ANALYSIS FRAMEWORK**

1. IT vs Non-IT Comparison Analysis For each Major				2. Business Students vs IT Students Comparison Analysis For each Ethics Type			
Business Students		IT Students		IT		Non-IT	
IT	Non-IT	IT	Non-IT	Business Students	IT Students	Business Students	IT Students
<i>H 1</i>		<i>H 2</i>		<i>H 3</i>		<i>H 4</i>	

Table 1 shows the analysis framework which lays out the main axis of comparison. Within the first type of comparison analysis, two hypotheses are tested (H1 and H2) to compare between IT and non-IT ethics for each major (Business and IT). Within the second type of comparison analysis, two other hypothesis are tested (H3 and H4) to compare between business and IT students for each type of ethics (IT and non-IT). The formulation of each hypothesis is given below.

**H1:** Business students show similar ethical intentions when judging ethical issues in an IT context compared to ethical issues in a traditional context.

**H2:** IT students show similar ethical intentions when judging ethical issues in an IT context compared to ethical issues in a traditional context.

**H3:** Business students and IT students show similar ethical intentions when judging ethical issues in an IT context.

**H4:** Business students and IT students show similar ethical intentions when judging ethical issues in a traditional (non-IT) context.

## RESEARCH METHOD

### The Survey

The survey administered for this study is adapted from (Molnar et al., 2008; and Almasri and Tahat 2018) and it includes 5 statements targeting IT ethics, and 5 statements targeting non-IT ethics. It measures the intention rather than the actual commitment of the act, so instead of asking “Did you download a copyrighted song from the web”, the survey items are formulated as “It is okay for me to download a copyrighted song from the web”. The questionnaire was previously used and refined in a previous studies by Molnar et al (2005) which targeted undergraduate students in the USA. More recently, the questionnaire was used by Almasri and Tahat (2018), and Cronbach’s alpha analysis revealed that respondents were confused about the survey items which were formulated in a reversed wording such as “It is NOT okay for me”. Consequently, in this study the questions were all formulated without reversal in wording. Additionally, the questionnaire was administrated to undergraduate students from the Middle East including Kuwait, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Jordan, and Syria.

**TABLE 2  
SURVEY ITEMS**

<i><b>IT Ethics Statements</b></i>
<i><b>1.1</b></i> It is okay for me to download or copy copyrighted music/software/computer games for my own personal use without complying with the licensing agreement.
<i><b>1.2</b></i> It is okay for me to copy an electronic file such as an Excel spreadsheet and submit it to a class as my own work for a grade.
<i><b>1.3</b></i> It is okay for me to use a text messaging/social media on a cell phone or another device to get an answer to a question when it is not allowed during a quiz or an exam.
<i><b>1.4</b></i> It is okay for me to copy text or images from the Internet (without citing it in my work) and submit it to a class as my own work for a grade.
<i><b>1.5</b></i> It is okay for me to purchase a term/research paper from the Internet and submit it to a class as my own work for a grade.
<i><b>NON-IT Ethics Statements</b></i>
<i><b>2.1</b></i> It is okay for me to shoplift (steal) a CD or computer disk.
<i><b>2.2</b></i> It is okay for me to copy written homework (such as math or accounting problems or computer programs) from someone else and submit it to a class as my own work for a grade.
<i><b>2.3</b></i> It is okay for me to look at another student's paper and take an answer during an exam.
<i><b>2.4</b></i> It is okay for me to copy material from a book, periodical or newspaper (without citing it in my work) and submit it to a class as my own work for a grade.
<i><b>2.5</b></i> It is okay for me to share answers to a quiz or an exam with other students who have not yet taken the quiz or exam.

The survey contains two main sections. The first section contains demographic information about the respondents, namely: age group, gender, and major. The second section of the survey contains 10 statements targeting ethical issues facing college students. Five of these statements target IT ethics, and the other five target Non-IT ethics. Respondents were requested to indicate their stance on each ethical statement as: strongly disagree, disagree, no opinion, agree, and strongly agree. The survey statements which target IT ethics and those which target non-IT ethics are listed in Table 2.

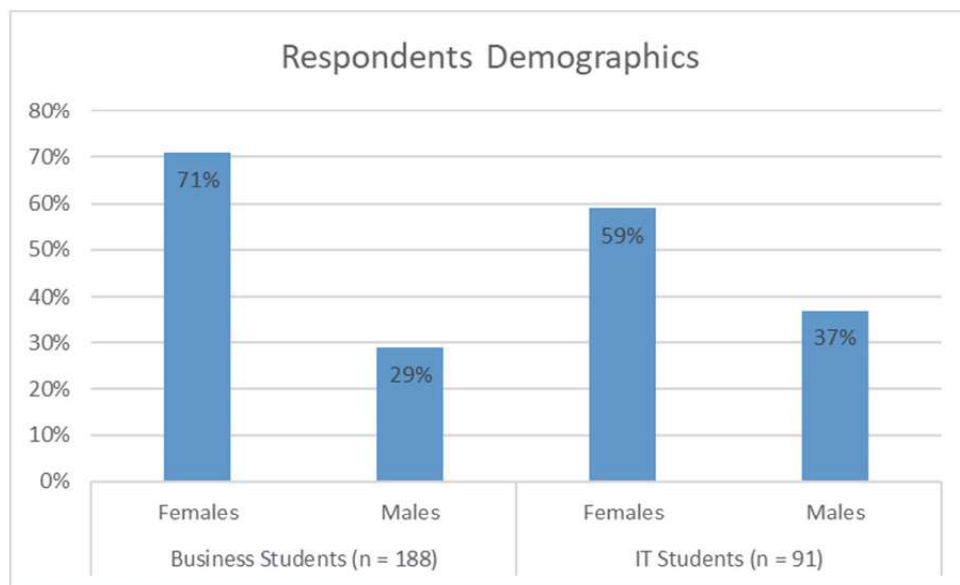
### Measuring Ethical Intention

Students' responses to the questionnaires were coded according to Likert-scale of 1-5, where 1 represents "strongly agree" with the statement and 5 represents "strongly disagree" with the statement (Joshi, Kale, Chandel & Pal, 2015). Accordingly, 4 and 5 points indicate higher levels of ethical intentions, while 1 and 2 represent lower levels of ethical intentions, and 3 is the midpoint. For each student, a total score for IT ethics was calculated by computing the average grade on all survey items targeting IT ethics. Similarly, the average grade on all survey items targeting Non-IT ethics was considered as Non-IT ethics intention score for the student.

### Demographic and Students Profiles

A total of 279 usable questionnaires were returned. Out of these 188 were answered by Business students, while the remaining 91 were answered by IT students. Business students sample consisted of 134 (71%) females and 54 (29%) males, while IT students sample had 54 (59%) females and 37 (41%) males. All respondents were undergraduate college students between the age of 18 and 24.

**FIGURE 2**  
**STUDENTS PROFILES**



## DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

### Results per Survey Item

Table 3 shows the percentage of business students agreement or disagreement with each of the IT and non-IT ethical statements in the survey. We notice that the question where the students showed the lowest ethical intention is question number 1.1 where more students agreed/strongly agreed with downloading a software without complying with the license agreement. The mean ethics score obtained in this question on a 5-pts Likert scale was 3. On the other hand, the business students showed the highest ethical

intentions when they were asked if they would physically shoplift a CD, the mean intention score for this question was 4.3. The overall mean score obtained in all IT questions for business students was 3.6, while their mean ethics score for all Non-IT questions was 3.77.

**TABLE 3**  
**BUSINESS STUDENTS SURVEY RESULTS PER ITEM**

	QUESTION	STRONGLY DISAGREE		NEUTRAL	AGREE		STRONGLY AGREE	MEAN	SD
		DISAGREE	DISAGREE		AGREE	AGREE			
<b>IT</b>	1.1	14%	23%	22%	32%	9%	3.00	1.21	
	1.2	37%	29%	13%	17%	4%	3.79	1.22	
	1.3	31%	32%	24%	10%	3%	3.79	1.09	
	1.4	27%	31%	21%	17%	4%	3.62	1.16	
	1.5	36%	28%	22%	10%	4%	3.81	1.15	
<b>NON-IT</b>	2.1	61%	16%	15%	6%	2%	4.30	1.03	
	2.2	34%	31%	14%	18%	3%	3.74	1.19	
	2.3	33%	32%	21%	10%	4%	3.81	1.12	
	2.4	25%	35%	22%	15%	3%	3.65	1.10	
	2.5	28%	20%	22%	22%	8%	3.37	1.32	

As for the results obtained for IT students, we can notice a similar pattern to the results obtained for business Students. Their lowest ethical intention was associated to question 1.1 with a mean score of 3, while the highest score was associate to question number 2.1 with a score of 4.4 (Table 4). The overall mean score obtained in all IT questions for IT students was 3.55, while their mean score for all Non-IT questions was 3.76.

**TABLE 3**  
**IT STUDENTS SURVEY RESULTS PER ITEM**

	QUESTION	STRONGLY DISAGREE		NEUTRAL	AGREE		STRONGLY AGREE	MEAN	SD
		DISAGREE	DISAGREE		AGREE	AGREE			
<b>IT</b>	1.1	21%	18%	15%	34%	12%	3.01	1.36	
	1.2	42%	28%	9%	18%	3%	3.88	1.23	
	1.3	40%	20%	23%	9%	8%	3.77	1.28	
	1.4	29%	33%	14%	16%	8%	3.58	1.27	
	1.5	31%	22%	25%	14%	8%	3.54	1.28	
<b>NON-IT</b>	2.1	62%	21%	12%	2%	3%	4.35	1.00	
	2.2	35%	25%	17%	18%	5%	3.67	1.27	
	2.3	40%	24%	18%	8%	10%	3.78	1.32	
	2.4	33%	29%	21%	14%	3%	3.74	1.16	
	2.5	27%	22%	16%	20%	15%	3.26	1.44	

### Hypotheses Testing

In this section we present the results for the statistical analysis performed for each of the four hypotheses presented in section 3.

*H1: Business students show similar ethical intentions when judging ethical issues in an IT context compared to ethical issues in a traditional context.*

Paired t-test was conducted to validate this hypothesis given that each student had to answer both IT and Non-IT statements. The test result shows that there is a highly significant difference in the ethics intention scores for IT ethics (M=3.6, SD=0.85) and Non-IT ethics (M=3.78, SD=0.88);  $t(187) = -4.6$ ,

$p \approx 0.00$ . These results suggest that business students' ethics in IT context is consistently lower than their own ethics in a traditional non-IT context.

*H2: IT students show similar ethical intentions when judging ethical issues in an IT context compared to ethical issues in a traditional context.*

Similar to H1, this hypothesis was also tested with paired t test. The result shows that even for IT students, their ethical intention is significantly lower in an IT context ( $M=3.55$ ,  $SD=0.94$ ) compared to non-IT context ( $M=3.76$ ,  $SD=0.94$ );  $t(90)=-3.2$ ,  $p=0.002$ .

*H3: Business students and IT students show similar ethical intentions when judging ethical issues in an IT context.*

This hypothesis was tested with unpaired t-test, and the results didn't show any statistical difference between the IT ethics intentions for business students ( $M=3.6$ ,  $SD=0.84$ ) and the IT ethics intention for IT students ( $M=3.55$ ,  $SD=0.94$ );  $t(277)=0.39$ ,  $p=0.69$ . This suggests that business student don't have lower IT ethics compared to students majoring in IT, despite that IT students might have larger exposure to several IT related issues and ethical problems, and might also be more aware of IT ethical topics.

*H4: Business students and IT students show similar ethical intentions when judging ethical issues in a tradition (non-IT) context.*

Similar to H3, this hypothesis was also tested with unpaired t test, and similarly the results didn't reveal any statistical significant difference between the non-IT ethics intention scores for business students ( $M=3.77$ ,  $SD=0.88$ ) and those for IT students ( $M=3.76$ ,  $SD=0.94$ );  $t(277)=0.13$ ,  $p=0.89$ .

## **Result Discussion and Implications**

The results of this study showed that business students in the Middle East have lower ethical intentions when judging moral issues in an IT context compared to those in a traditional context. This finding matches Molnar et al. (2008) results which found that undergraduate student in the USA find cheating using IT is in general more acceptable than cheating without the use of IT. This position is reflected in the findings of the study which show that business students' ethics in IT context were consistently lower than their own ethics in a traditional non-IT context.

The findings also showed that both business and IT students showed similar ethical intentions when judging moral issues in an IT context. Essentially, this meant that business students do not have lower IT ethics compared to students majoring in IT, as much as IT students might have larger exposure to numerous IT related issues. This agrees with Molnar et al. (2008) who noted that USA business students' ethics in both IT and non-IT related issues didn't differ from those majoring in other non-business disciplines.

Similarly, the results of the study showed that IT students also show lower ethical intentions when judging moral issues in an IT context compared to those in a traditional context, despite the fact that most IT related disciplines offer a dedicated IT ethics course. This position agrees with Dorantes et al. (2006) who reviewed ethical decision making in the context of IT and argued that moral intensity is a determinant of ethical decision making in terms of IT. It is because most of the students felt it was of perceived importance to use IT resources for their own benefit.

The evaluation confirmed that both business and IT students show similar ethical intentions when judging moral issues in a traditional (non-IT) context. Most studies including Sedmak and Nastav (2010) claim that ethical decisions are based on moral perception and behavioral intentions which accounts for the little difference.

Finally, it appears that the general trend for business students in the Middle East is similar to students in other developed countries in that they all seem to have lower ethical intentions/behavior in an IT context. Students in the Middle East, however, might differ from students in developed countries when the gap of between their ethical intentions in a traditional context and in IT context. According to Almasri and Tahat (2018), this gap seems narrower for students in developed countries. This can be due to the fact that the process of sensing critical issues, researching them, and reacting to them is more rapid in developed countries compared to developing countries.



## CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK

The study found that business students in the Middle East showed lower ethical intentions in an IT context compared to a traditional non-IT context, however, when compared to students majoring in IT related discipline, their IT ethical intention scores were similar. It should be noted that the findings of the study seem to be consistent with the conclusions from prior studies concerning the idea of ethical decision making by business students in the IT and traditional context in other regions such as North America. Universities and Colleges are advised to direct their efforts towards creating more innovative ethics courses which particularly target IT ethics and different ethical issues in IT context. Finally, the findings of this study is in favor of considering IT ethics as an independent discipline that needs its own foundation since existing ethical models don't meet the challenging new IT ethical problems (Almasri and Tahat 2018, Floridi 1999, Maner 1996, Moor 1985). Ideally in our digital age, all professionals from different disciplines such as Business, Medicine, Humanities and others, should be educated in the subject of IT ethics, at least for being IT users.

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