

Ethics perception: evidence from accountants and accounting students in Brazil

Percepção ética: evidência de contadores e estudantes de contabilidade no Brasil

Percepción ética: evidencia de contables y estudiantes de contabilidad en Brasil

Perception éthique: témoignages de comptables et d'étudiants en comptabilité au Brésil

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Abstract: Due to the new international ethics standards law, knowing what Brazilian accountants and accounting students perceive as ethical is extremely important. An online survey with 29 questions was conducted in MS/Brazil with different scenarios, involving different aspects that may influence someone's decision, to assess the acceptance of unethical behaviors. The results showed difference in the ethics perception by students and accountants, but the difference was greater based on gender.

Keywords: ethics code; accountants' ethics; ethics perception; Brazil.

Resumo: Devido à nova lei internacional de padrões éticos, saber o que os contadores e estudantes de contabilidade percebem como ético é de extrema importância. Uma pesquisa online com 29 questões foi conduzida no MS/Brasil com diferentes cenários, envolvendo diferentes aspectos que podem influenciar a decisão de alguém, para avaliar a aceitação de comportamentos antiéticos. Os resultados mostraram diferenças entre a percepção ética dos estudantes e contadores, mas a diferença foi maior baseada no gênero.

Palavras-chave: código de ética; ética do contador; percepção ética; Brasil.

Resumen: Debido a la nueva ley internacional de estándares éticos, saber lo que los contadores y estudiantes de contabilidad perciben como ético es muy importante. Una encuesta en línea con 29 preguntas fue conducida en MS/Brasil con diferentes escenarios, involucrando diferentes aspectos que pueden influir en la decisión de alguien, para evaluar la aceptación de comportamientos antiéticos. Los resultados mostraron diferencias entre la percepción ética de los estudiantes y los contadores, pero la diferencia fue mayor basada en el género.

Palabras claves: código de ética; ética del contador; percepción ética; Brasil.

Résumé: En raison de la nouvelle loi internationale sur les normes éthiques, il est important de savoir ce que les comptables et étudiants en comptabilité perçoivent comme éthique. Un sondage en ligne de 29 questions a été mené dans de MS/Brésil. À travers différents scénarios comprenant différents aspects pouvant influencer la décision d'une personne, le sondage évalue l'acceptation de comportements contraires à l'éthique. Les résultats indiquent des différences de perception éthique entre étudiants et comptables, mais la différence est d'avantage marquée selon le sexe du répondant.

Mots-clés: code d'éthique; éthique comptable; perception éthique; Brésil.

1 INTRODUCTION

There are no human group that does not oblige to a moral code even if what is perceived as normal to one group can be considered as the door to hell to another (SROUR, 1994). The historical evolution of ethics dates back to ancient Greek, however the lack of records does not prevent that the cave man for example, had a code of conduct. Gilles (1994) reports that over

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two thousand years ago, Christianity already tried to introduce values and moral principles to the human kind.

Each human has a specific behavior usually guided by what is acceptable by the group. Sá (2001) stated that most of the time the group decision is for self-defense creating different ethical behaviors throughout. All the differences can generate conflicts when there is interaction between groups and since the globalization made the relations between countries more active, the debate about ethical practices is even more relevant.

Specifically, since the adoption of the International Financial Reporting Standards the accounting profession has become more important in the business world and with so, the understanding of accountants' proper ethical behavior is not only needed but necessary. Antonovz, Stanley and Espejo (2016) noted that in the many recent accounting scandals the lack of ethical behavior and corporate governance failures have been crucial in the process.

The scandals involving Enron, WorldCom and Quest have contributed to the creation of the Sarbanes-Oxley Act (2002) in the USA. Called by SOX, the new act requires senior executives to establish and follow a Code of Corporate Conduct and ethics policies. These requirements affect any company that intends to public trade in the American Market. Despite all the evidence of how crucial the accountants' ethics is, not all countries require compliance with the code of ethics. Brazil is one of these countries.

Brazil had major recent scandals with Petrobras, the country's oil company. Many politicians involved, many arrests, and a national embarrassment to all finally led Brazil to realize that something had to be done. In 2017 Brazil should have implemented the NOCLAR, non-compliance with laws and regulations, along many other countries. This project should change the standards for Accountants Ethics' Code and make it mandatory for all the companies. However, due to the necessity to change the Brazilian law and regulations to fully commit, Brazil is not yet in conformance with the NOCLAR. On this topic, at the International Federation of Accountants' (IFAC) meeting held in New York on February 28th, 2018, the Brazilian Federal Accounting Council's (CFC) technical vice-president Idésio Coelho assured that the efforts to regulate and adapt to the new standards are being made (CFC Brazil, 2018).

Since the scenario is changing the understanding of the ethics perception of the accountants is necessary. This is the primary issue for this empirical study: What is the ethics perception for accountants and accounting students. The main objective of this paper is to analyze if there is a difference between what students are learning to be ethical and what accountants' practice in the organizations as being ethic.

For the future, it is critical to know what constitute the Brazilian accountant's ethics standards.

This paper is presented as follows: (1) literature review, (2) methodology with the sample and techniques used (3) analyses and results of the data collected and (4) conclusion with the limitations of this study.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Ethics and moral

Ethics and moral are often mistaken to be the same thing, Alves (2005) explain that even though the concepts are similar when it comes to behavior they differentiate when ethics is perceived as science and moral is a rule of conduct. Santos (1959) also articulate that despite the

similarities they are distinguished in their understanding being that the moral can be understood as the behaviors established by men and ethics dedicates to the study of the rules.

2.2 Accountants Ethics Code

Some authors express the Professional Ethics Code as the standard behavior conduct with specifications of each profession (ALVES *et al.*, 2007; SÁ, 2001; LISBOA, 1996). Sá (2001) complements saying that one profession should follow the same order to allow growth of the collective and not the individual. With so, the Ethics Code is used as a guideline with principles known and acceptable by society, more specifically, for the accountants these guidelines are used to maintain the professional image, the duties and responsibilities with society and the profession, and loyalty with the clients (LISBOA, 1996).

2.3 Brazilian law

Carrança (2016) interviewed the president of the Institute of Independent Auditors in Brazil (Ibracon³), at the time Idésio Coelho, about the new international law of non-compliance with laws and regulations also known as NOCLAR, and according to him the law was still being translated to Portuguese, but it should bring more responsibility to those preparing the financial reports. However, Coelho also reported that some details must be sorted out before the implementation of the new law in Brazil, such as which authority should the professionals report to, something that the original law does not detail.

This project develops new standards for the Accountants Code of Ethics and all the accountants should consider its implications. Brazil should have fully adopted the new law, by July of 2017 and even though it is not mandatory yet, the CFC is working alongside the Legislative to change the laws and regulate this as soon as possible (CFC Brazil, 2018).

The current tax law in Brazil already states that any suspicious activity in the company should be reported by the independent auditors but with the new law, the company's accountants and the independent auditors are obligated to report to the authorities any findings that deviate from the law or regulations such as money laundry, tax avoidance and corruption (CARRANÇA, 2016).

Still in Carrança's interview (2016) Coelho points it out that the new law is more challenging to the company's accountants since the recommendation for the independent auditors is to terminate the contract as soon as the irregularity is identified and for the company's accountant this could mean being forced to resign. The NOCLAR suggests the accountant should report the irregularities to the superiors and if not resolved internally it is mandatory to report to the authorities. Nonetheless, Coelho said that this subject is still in debate with the Brazilian Accounting Federal Board.

2.4 Influential factors in the decision-making process

According to Sá (2001) some individuals' characteristics can be influenced by some factors and many are inherent to everyone making a difference in the behavior. Some factors are individuals such as genre, age, nationality, personality, attitude, values, education, profession

³ Brazilian regulator for independent auditors.

and religion. Previous studies do not all agree that all these factors can influence in the ethical perception, e.g. Gilligan (1982) and Biaggio (1999) attested that women are more ethical than men, and this hypothesis was proven by following studies such as Adkins and Radtke (2004), Emerson, Stanley and Conroy (2007). However, some studies disagree with such hypothesis (ABDOLMOHAMMADI; READ; SCARBROUGH, 2003; LOE; FERRELL; MANSFIELD, 2000) and did not find significant differences between women and men's perception of ethics.

Despite any arguments, the character of each individual is what each accepts as good behavior and the acceptance of each behavior can be influenced by many factors, however, the human nature is the first source of ethics (LISBOA, 1996). The other sources of ethics listed by Lisboa (1996) is the environment, the consideration of human behavior, the country's culture and particular behaviors, as shown on Table 1.

Table 1 – Ethics Source

Origin	Source
Human Nature	Correct character of man
Standards of character	Standards of the involved agents
Consequences of reflecting human behavior principles	Each meaning of ethics becomes the object of societies' reflection
Country Laws	Distinct laws for each country
Behaviors	Irrational accessible to reason's appeal.

Source: Adapted from Lisboa (1996).

3 METHODOLOGY

With the already mentioned objective in mind, the hypotheses were developed as follow.

H_0 – There is a difference in the ethics perception between accounting students and accountants.

H_1 – There is a difference in the ethics perception among men and women.

The online survey leaves room for the self-selection since the receptor can decide to answer the questionnaire or not. With so, the accounting students and the accountants both faced the same ethical situations developed in the questionnaire to assess their ethical attitudes perceptions. Each scenario considers different aspects that may influence someone's decision such as environmental, financial, competition, social and health risks, bribery, cultural and information. There were 28 questions in the Acceptance Questionnaire and it was available in the website for a month in the state of Mato Grosso do Sul. The questions were adapted from the original study performed in the USA by Emerson, Stanley and Conroy (2007).

The first three questions were regarding demographics providing information on age and gender. Following Emerson, Stanley and Conroy (2007) model, the next twenty-five questions were ranked by the respondents using a 07-point Likert-type scale, which range from 01, never acceptable, to 07, always acceptable. On Table 2 we can see which constructs and variables were used in each scenario and the supporting research.

Table 2 – Research variables in the questionnaire

	Construct	Variables	Scenario	Authors
Ethics Perception	Competition	Pressure; Search for results; Unfair competition; Hiring managers or specialists from competitors to obtain information on ongoing projects; Altering weight or measurements of produced goods.	C, F and Q	Ferrell, Fraedrich and Ferrell (2001); Srour (2003)
	Environmental	Relation to the environment: final residue disposition, pollution, water and energy usage, consumption of natural resources.	B, R and Y	Moreira (1999); Ferrell, Fraedrich and Ferrell (2001)
	Financial	Fiscal evasion; Safety and usage of classified information; Piracy, software violation; Lying or omissions policies.	D, I A, P and W	Arruda, Whitaker and Ramos (2001); Srour (2003); Sayeg (2003)
	Social and Health risks	Lying or omissions policies that might cause health risks; adulteration of weight or measurement of produced goods; product liability.	L, O, S and X	Moreira (1999); Arruda, Whitaker and Ramos (2001)
	Informational	Transparency of balance sheet, financial reports, and board reports directed to shareholders, accounting practices; deceitful advertisement.	K and N	Moreira (1999); Leal (2002); Srour (2003); Srour (2005)
	Bribes	Collusion, bribe, paying off biddings, exportation, oversights or lawsuits; Acceptance of gifts, gratification, favors, invitations of suppliers or customers.	E, G, H, U and V	Moreira (1999); Ferrell, Fraedrich and Ferrell (2001); Arruda, Whitaker and Ramos (2001); Powpaka (2002); Srour (2003)
	Cultural	Nepotism, favoritism, protection; Recruitment diversity: women, disabled, ex-prisoners, black, elderly, youth and poor people.	J and M	Srour (1994); Srour (2000); Arruda, Whitaker and Ramos (2001); Daft (2002); Souza, Pereira and Maffei (2004); Machado (2005); Matos (2008);
Individual Profile	Personal attributes connected to the decision-making process	Age and gender		Borkowski and Ugras (1992); Adkins and Radtke (2004); Emerson, Stanley and Conroy (2007)

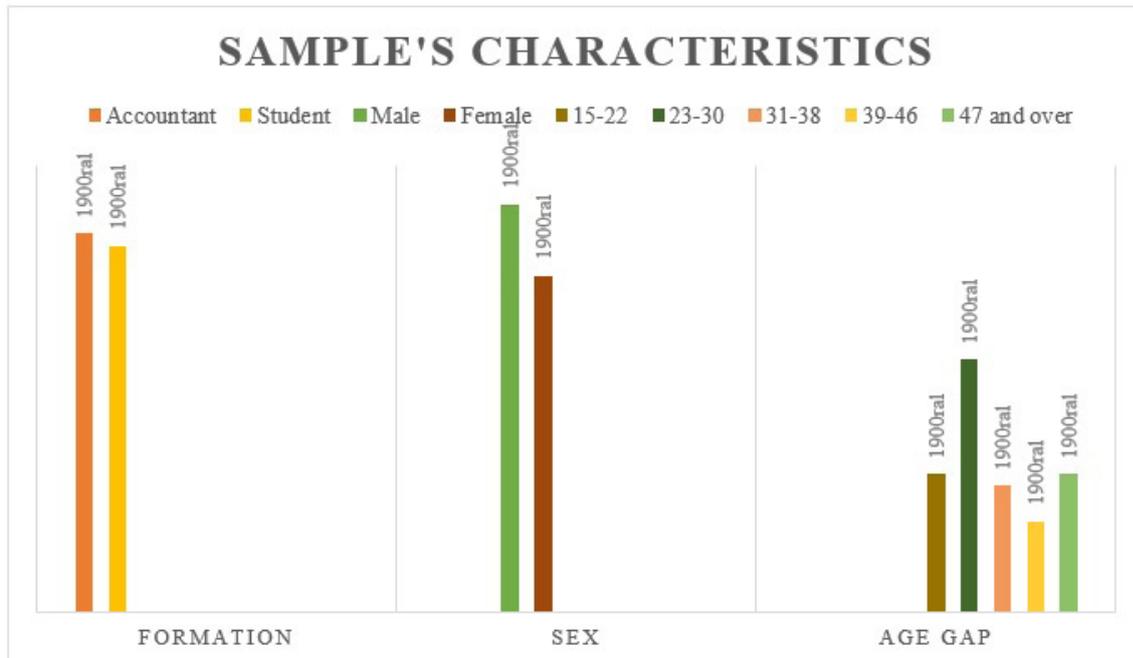
Source: Adapted from Antonovz (2010).

The data collected was analyzed through the Stata 14.0 software with different techniques such as descriptive analysis, mean and standard deviation, factor analysis, Cronbach's Alpha to validate. For the comparison and the test of the hypothesis between the students and accountants the data was compiled with the Cluster analysis and the One-Way ANOVA.

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

After the sample collection of 124 valid questionnaires responded by accounting students and accountants the sample was characterized by 61 students and 63 accountants, 45.2% were female and 54.8% male and the age gap between 23 and 30 years old was more representative with 33.9%. All of which can be seen in the charts below.

Graphic 1 – Sample's characteristics



Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Analyzing the mean of the sample in this research it was possible to identify which questions were perceived as more or less acceptable by the individuals. The results can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3 – Overall summary of descriptive statistics

Variable	N. Obs.	Mean	Std. Dev.
Accountant/Student	124	.5080645	.5019631
Sex	124	.4516129	.4996721
Age Gap	124	2.782258	1.382589
A	124	2.282258	1.783212
B	124	1.516129	1.290893
C	124	1.612903	1.254
D	124	1.927419	1.588441
E	124	2.217742	1.850337
F	124	2.459677	1.871477
G	124	2.379032	1.823927
H	124	2.282258	1.787765
I	124	2.169355	1.80659
J	124	2.66129	1.958459
K	124	2.580645	2.099542

Variable	N. Obs.	Mean	Std. Dev.
L	124	1.629032	1.456512
M	124	2.112903	1.790715
N	124	2.33871	1.84297
O	124	1.629032	1.439669
P	124	2.758065	1.922782
Q	124	1.387097	1.234396
R	124	3.169355	2.105825
S	124	2.112903	1.786169
T	124	4.112903	2.245898
U	124	2.080645	1.704116
V	124	2.056452	1.649353
X	124	2.717742	1.906602
Y	124	1.5	1.4511
Z	124	2.193548	1.732883

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

With the selected group, the most acceptable situation was scenario T, donate obsolete computers, with a mean of 4.11. These findings are similar with the original study by Emerson, Stanley and Conroy (2007) and with the previous study made in the south of Brazil by Antonovz, Stanley and Espejo (2016) where both had the T situation with above 04 results. Also, the least acceptable situation, scenario B, exceeding legal limits of pollution and scenario Q, rolling back car's odometers to increase sales, had comparable results with the literature.

The answers were submitted to a factorial analysis to group the dimensions with similar characteristics into factors. To verify if there is a significant correlation it was performed the Bartlett Sphericity test with the significance below 0.05, meaning that there is a positive correlation between the variables. Also, the adequacy was tested with the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) and with a result of 0.849 considered a good result and validating the adequacy of the sample to the factor analysis. Moreover, it was performed the Alpha's Cronbach which is a measurement of reliability that varies from 0 to 1 and the values of 0.6 to 0.7 being the inferior limit of acceptance. The result was of 0.9333 representing that the analysis is acceptable.

Emerson, Stanley and Conroy (2007) originally categorized the scenarios as: (1) legal, even though it might be ethically questionable it is still legal by law; (2) illegal, there is a clear violation of the law; (3) and one question that is ambiguous. The author also categorized the possible results of the actions taken in the stories as being physical or financial harmful. In Table 4 the answers collected are available by category and by groups for the comparison.

Table 4 – Summary statistics by category and group

Scenario	Categories		Student Sample			Accountants Sample		
	Legality	Harm	Mean	Std. Dev.	Obs.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Obs.
A	Illegal	Financial	2.04918	1.575079	61	2.507937	1.949963	63
B	Illegal	Physical	1.57377	1.146866	61	1.460317	1.423596	63
C	Legal	Financial	1.540984	.9411654	61	1.68254	1.50081	63
D	Illegal	Financial	1.622951	1.293109	61	2.222222	1.791057	63
E	Illegal	Financial	2.344262	1.887549	61	2.095238	1.820265	63

Scenario	Categories		Student Sample			Accountants Sample		
	Legality	Harm	Mean	Std. Dev.	Obs.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Obs.
F	Legal	Financial	2.52459	1.885087	61	2.396825	1.871171	63
G	Illegal	Financial	2.311475	1.746816	61	2.444444	1.907352	63
H	Legal	Financial	2.081967	1.563064	61	2.47619	1.974492	63
I	Illegal	Financial	2.278689	1.808601	61	2.063492	1.812795	63
J	Legal	Financial	2.688525	2.03749	61	2.634921	1.894828	63
K	Legal		2.704918	2.201093	61	2.460317	2.006645	63
L	Legal	Physical	1.459016	1.162953	61	1.793651	1.686366	63
M	Illegal	Financial	1.836066	1.593532	61	2.380952	1.937978	63
N	Illegal	Financial	2.311475	1.775209	61	2.365079	1.920195	63
O	Ambiguous	Physical	1.57377	1.296907	61	1.68254	1.574242	63
P	Illegal	Financial	2.721311	1.898518	61	2.793651	1.960569	63
Q	Illegal	Financial	1.196721	.653699	61	1.571429	1.593477	63
R	Legal	Physical	3.098361	1.989178	61	3.238095	2.226775	63
S	Legal	Financial	2.032787	1.741333	61	2.190476	1.839154	63
T	Legal		4.344262	2.344392	61	3.888889	2.141081	63
U	Illegal	Financial	1.934426	1.504093	61	2.222222	1.878953	63
V	Legal		1.57377	1.189664	61	2.52381	1.891041	63
X	Legal	Financial	2.442623	1.793735	61	2.984127	1.987802	63
Y	Legal	Physical	1.47541	1.298801	61	1.52381	1.594923	63
Z	Legal		2.032787	1.494068	61	2.349206	1.935731	63

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

With these results, we can accept H_0 . There is a difference in the ethics perception between accounting students and accountants. Taking a further analysis, we can single out the questions with more variability. Scenario D, underreport of income tax, scenario M, hiring a male employee instead of a female only because of gender, scenario V, bribe manager to make a sale, and scenario X, cut production costs with risks of injuries, has a significant difference between the perception of students and accountants. Emphasizing the bribery situation with an alarming .95004 difference that accountants find it more acceptable than the students.

In addition, looking at Table 4, there is a difference between accountants and students in the least acceptable situation. Although both the accountants and the students agree with scenario T of donating obsolete computers as being the most acceptable situation, accountants find that scenario B, exceeding legal limits of pollution, as the least acceptable case and the students points at scenario Q, rolling back car's odometers to increase sales, as the worst case. These results also differ from the study by Antonovz, Stanley and Espejo (2016) applied in the state of Paraná in Brazil, where they also found difference between accountants and students, but the questions with more significant difference is besides M, hiring a male employee instead of a female only because of gender, P, downloading paid software for free and U, announcing being open to bribery.

In order to prove the next hypothesis that the gender can have significant difference in the ethics perception, it was performed a discriminant analysis separating by gender as showing in Table 5.

Table 5 – Summary of descriptive analysis by gender

Variable	Accountants						Students					
	Men			Women			Men			Women		
	Mean	Std. Dev.	Obs.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Obs.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Obs.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Obs.
A	2.647059	1.952192	34	2.344828	1.968971	29	2	1.576340	34	2.111111	1.601282	27
B	1.558824	1.636537	34	1.344828	1.142549	29	1.91177	1.400598	34	1.148148	0.4560452	27
C	1.617647	1.371014	34	1.758621	1.661651	29	1.79412	1.148897	34	1.222222	0.4236593	27
D	2.117647	1.701420	34	2.344828	1.913782	29	1.61765	1.206415	34	1.62963	1.418237	27
E	2.000000	1.890967	34	2.206897	1.760262	29	2.73529	2.093407	34	1.851852	1.485926	27
F	2.470588	1.862473	34	2.310345	1.910562	29	2.94118	2.214842	34	2	1.208941	27
G	2.323529	1.980520	34	2.586207	1.842305	29	2.5	1.862712	34	2.074074	1.591466	27
H	2.705882	2.125308	34	2.206897	1.780436	29	2.47059	1.744868	34	1.592593	1.152231	27
I	2.205882	1.996655	34	1.896552	1.588909	29	2.52941	1.894734	34	1.962963	1.675192	27
J	2.882353	2.099996	34	2.344828	0.016097	29	3.08824	2.234274	34	2.185185	1.664956	27
K	2.735294	2.206173	34	2.137931	1.726353	29	2.94118	2.228482	34	2.407407	2.170772	27
L	1.970588	0.185023	34	1.586207	1.476416	29	1.61765	1.34873	34	1.259259	0.8590063	27
M	2.852941	2.090851	34	1.827586	1.605103	29	2.14706	1.844441	34	1.444444	1.120897	27
N	2.588235	1.971273	34	2.103448	1.858279	29	2.58824	1.940285	34	1.962963	1.505924	27
O	1.735294	1.746144	34	1.620690	1.373572	29	1.61765	1.231277	34	1.518519	1.396985	27
P	3.235294	2.045821	34	2.275862	0.175044	29	2.91177	2.035557	34	2.481481	1.718013	27
Q	1.705882	1.642788	34	1.413793	1.547284	29	1.17647	0.626224	34	1.222222	0.6979824	27
R	3.588235	0.240098	34	2.827586	1.965215	29	3.61765	2.174434	34	2.444444	1.527525	27
S	2.205882	1.771481	34	2.172414	1.946957	29	2.17647	1.833536	34	1.851852	1.633865	27
T	4.411765	2.046692	34	3.275862	2.119578	29	4.73529	2.219867	34	3.851852	2.444833	27
U	2.411765	2.031832	34	2.000000	1.690309	29	2.35294	1.756069	34	1.407407	0.8883545	27
V	2.735294	2.019733	34	2.275862	1.729916	29	1.79412	1.493002	34	1.296296	0.5417078	27
X	3.382353	2.322677	34	2.517241	1.404602	29	2.94118	1.90599	34	1.814815	1.442141	27
Y	1.558824	1.636537	34	1.482759	1.572548	29	1.79412	1.665686	34	1.074074	0.2668803	27
Z	2.794118	2.100208	34	1.827586	1.605103	29	2.52941	1.762149	34	1.407407	0.6938887	27

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Analyzing the results presented, specially the highlighted results the hypothesis H_1 There is a difference in the ethics perception among men and women is accepted by the greater difference spotted in the least acceptable scenarios Y, noisy factory in residential area, B, exceeding legal environmental limits of pollution and Q, rolling back car's odometers to increase sales. The results align with the results found in the studies of Gilligan (1982), Biaggio (1999), Adkins and Radtke (2004), and Emerson, Stanley and Conroy (2007).

5 CONCLUSIONS

The present study was motivated by the current corruption scandals in Brazil and the new international law about ethics, NOCLAR, being implemented since July 2017. Previous researches, motivated by similar reasons, by Emerson, Stanley and Conroy (2007) and Antonovz, Stanley and Espejo (2016) were used to compare the results since the questionnaire utilized in this paper was developed by Emerson, Stanley and Conroy (2007).

The findings of this research accepted the Null Hypothesis (H_0) with the affirmative of a difference between students and accountants' ethics perceptions, since the results indicated

less tolerance of the students towards questionable scenarios. Most likely due to working with such situations, made the accountants more susceptible to it. These were also the finding of the previous researches.

To achieve the whole scope of the objective, further analysis was conducted in order to prove H_1 – There is a difference in the ethics perception among men and women. With the results obtained the difference between men and women's perception showed relevancy, accepting H_1 and not only the findings proved the hypothesis but there is a greater difference between women and men's ethics perception than between accountants and students.

It is important to highlight the limitations of this research that cannot be controlled. The sample was self-selected by an online survey, and since the number of responses were not as expected it is hard to generalize the results. However, the sample was almost even with students and accountants, so the comparison between them is possible.

This study is only one step towards the understanding of accounting ethical behavior across the world. As in the original study, it is suggested that future research expand the number of regions or even countries at the same time, for a deeper understanding of the global population's perception of ethics.

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