

## Personal Characteristics and Ethical Decision Making Process of Accounting Professionals in Nigeria

Collins Sankay Oboh

Department of Accounting, University of Lagos, Lagos-Nigeria  
e-mail: [pilgrimcol@yahoo.com](mailto:pilgrimcol@yahoo.com)

Solabomi Omobola Ajibolade

Department of Accounting, University of Lagos, Lagos, Nigeria

### Abstract

*This study investigated the ethical decision-making process of accounting professionals in Nigeria based on their personal characteristics. Adopting a cross-sectional survey design, data were obtained from 329 accounting professionals with the aid of a structured questionnaire containing four different vignettes of ethical dilemmas. For each vignette, the study examined the abilities of accounting professionals to recognise the ethical problems, make ethical judgments, as well as show intentions towards unethical decisions. Apart from gender and age, the results of the Wilcoxon rank-sum and Mann–Whitney, and Kruskal–Wallis tests provided statistical evidence that suggests differences in the ethical recognition, ethical judgements, and ethical intentions of accounting professionals based on types of professional membership, educational attainment, economic status, accounting specialisation, subcultural affiliation, conscience, and peer influence. One implication of this study is that it provides evidence to suggest that the ethical decision-making process of accounting professionals in Nigeria can be enhanced by interventions through professional membership. It also provides support for Kohlberg's cognitive moral development theory and Rest's ethical decision-making theoretical model. The study recommends that professional accounting bodies in Nigeria should re-examine their stance on ethical issues relating to the profession.*

**Keywords:** Accounting-professionals, Conscience, Ethical-recognition, Ethical-judgement, Ethical-Intention

### 1. Introduction

The issue of unethical decision-making among accounting professionals has been of significant concern for the accountancy profession since the Enron and Andersen debacles (Dellaportas, 2006; Vladu, Amat, & Cuzdriorean, 2017). Besides, the society is overwhelmed by the pervasive news headlines and reports of unethical accounting practices and corporate scandals around the globe (Adeyeye, Adeyemi, & Otusanya, 2010; Ajibolade & Ogundele, 2006; Bakre, 2007; Griffin, 2015; Otusanya & Uadiale, 2014). Generally, while there are controversies among academics over the roles of accounting professionals in corporate scandals, critical accounting scholars have sought to understand why highly skilled professionals who were supposed to be protectors of public interest would engage in unethical accounting practices (Bakre, 2007; Otusanya, 2010). Much research efforts have been directed towards understanding the cognitive moral development and ethical decision-making processes of accounting professionals (Musbah, Cowton, & Tyfa, 2016; Craft, 2013; Marques & Azevedo-Pereira 2009).

At the moment, on account of the collapses and distresses of many world-leading companies such as WorldCom, America Insurance Group (AIG), Toshiba, and Alberta Motor Association (Herbert, Anyahara, Okoroafor, & Onyilo, 2016; Wokukwu, 2015), the nobility of the accounting profession has suffered a major setback, and pressures for ethics in the profession have increased significantly (Ogunleye, 2015; The International Ethics Standards Board for Accountants (IESBA), 2015). Although, the poser of unethical professional practices (financial theft, accounting irregularities, money laundering, abuse of power and lawlessness) traverses borders, the African episode is however

peculiar and calls for exigent action. Specifically, in Nigeria, a body of documented evidence has shown that in every public institution and private establishment, there appears to be an already established culture of unethical practices, which for years, have sabotaged the potentiality of the nation's economic development (Ajibolade & Oboh, 2017; Akinnaso, 2016; Bakre, 2007; CIA, 2016).

Besides, accounting professionals have been severely censured for their acts of unethical professional practices and decision-making in connivance with the management and directors of companies to deliberately manipulate and overstate companies' accounts with the intent to fiddle unwary stakeholders (Sikka & Willmott, 1995; Sikka, 2009; Bakre, 2007; Otusanya, 2010; Griffin, 2015). In consequence, there has been a pervasive rise in the degree of money launderings, tax evasions, and collapses of companies, which have caused investors and governments around the world to lose several billions of dollars (Otusanya, 2010; Bakre, 2006, 2007).

Generally, while many factors have been found to significantly influence the ethical decision-making process of accounting professionals, most of the studies have been from the developed countries. Only few accounting ethics studies have been conducted to identify such influences in developing countries (Nathan, 2015; Musbah *et al.*, 2016) where the issues of corruption appear endemic (Transparency International, 2017). Thus, using data from Nigeria, this study investigated the ethical decision-making process of accounting professionals based on their personal characteristics. It therefore adds to the sparse research on accounting ethics by providing some empirical evidence that would enhance our understanding of personal characteristics influences on the ethical decision-making process of accounting professionals in Nigeria. In line with Musbah *et al.* (2016), the study examined three stages of Rest's ethical decision-making model as against one or two often examined in the mainstream literature.

The other sections of this study are structured as follows. Section two presents the review of literature regarding the personal determinants of ethical decision-making process. It also presents the hypothesis formulated for the study. Section three describes the research data and methods, while the results and findings are presented and discussed in section four. The conclusion, implication of the study, limitations, and suggestions for future research are presented in section five.

## **2. Literature Review and Hypothesis Development**

Ethics is the branch of moral philosophy consisting of systematising, defending, and recommending concepts of right and wrong behaviours (Bowie & Schneider, 2011). It seeks to resolve issues of human morality by describing concepts such as good and evil, right and wrong, virtue and vice, justice, and crime (Shafer-Landau, 2012). According to philosophers and psychologists, ethics theories can be grouped into metaethics, normative ethics, and applied ethics (Fieser, 2001). These divisions of ethics theories have helped scholars to comprehend the complexity and dimensions of moral philosophies in societies and organisations (Panza & Potthast, 2010).

Metaethics explores the sources, foundations, and nature of ethical principles. It focuses on the metaphysical and psychological issues in human morality (Sinhbabu, 2015). Normative ethics is concerned with the practicality of regulating moral conduct in society (Shafer-Landau, 2012). A classic example of a normative principle is the Golden Rule, which says; '*treat others just as you want to be treated*' (Luke 6:31, Contemporary English Version). Normative ethics is grouped into three sub-theories, namely; virtue, duty, and consequentialist theories (Fieser, 2001). On the other hand, applied ethics is concerned with examining specific controversial issues (Tännsjö, 2011), of which accounting ethics entails (Mintz & Morris, 2008).

### **2.1 Theoretical framework**

In the field of business ethics, for decades there has been a lack of strong theoretical foundation in many studies. This lack of empirical research grounded on theory has substantially impeded the development of the field of business and accounting ethics (Craft, 2013; Lehnert, Park, & Singh, 2015). Rather than theory, researchers often opt to discuss construct development (Craft, 2013).

Therefore, in line with Craft, this study used Kohlberg's (1958) theory of cognitive moral development (CMD) as basis for examining differences in the ethical decision-making process as developed by Rest (1979), of accounting professionals in Nigeria based on their personal characteristics.

### 2.1.1 Rest Model of Ethical Decision-Making (EDM)

Rest model is a theoretical model of decision-making that involves four distinct psychological processes. The model was developed by James Rest in 1979 based on Kohlberg's cognitive moral development (CMD) theory to describe individuals' cognitive stages when faced with ethical dilemmas (Craft, 2013). It is probably the most important framework in understanding ethical decision-making processes within organisations (Schwartz, 2016). The model, which is displayed in Figure 1 consists of (1) *ethical recognition*; (2) *ethical judgment*; (3) *ethical intention*; and (4) *ethical behaviour* (Rest, 1979).

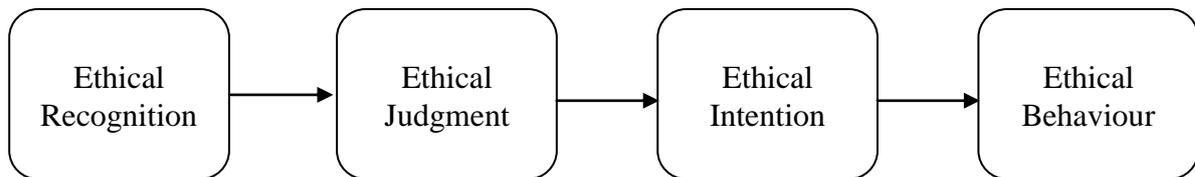


Figure 1: Ethical Decision-Making (EDM) Model

Source: Rest (1979; 1986)

As indicated in the Figure, ethical recognition is the first stage in Rest's (1986) model. It is fundamental and central in initiating the EDM process. This stage involves an individual's ability to recognise that a potential decision or action could affect the welfare, interests, and expectations of someone else directly or indirectly in a way that may conflict with one or more ethical principles (Rest, 1982). Ethical judgment, being the second stage, is the determination of the ethically appropriate course of action among potential alternatives (Schwartz, 2016). Ethical intention, which is the third stage, is the subjective probability that a given behavioural alternative will be performed (Musbah, 2010), while ethical behaviour, the fourth and final stage, is where an individual engages in a proper action because of his/her intentions (Rest, 1986).

This study examined the first three (ethical recognition, judgment, and intention) of the four stages of Rest's EDM model. The fourth stage was exempted because its measurement has been found to be practically difficult and subject to bias (Musbah *et al.*, 2016). Besides, most behavioural theories share a belief that the single best predictor of an individual's behaviour is his intention to engage in the behaviour, which is the decision to act or not act in a particular way (see Ajzen, 1991, 2011, 2012; Ajzen & Fishbein, 2005; Ajzen & Madden, 1986; Buchan, 2005; Flory, Phillips, Reidenbach, & Robin, 1992; Musbah, 2010). The findings from prior studies suggest that personal characteristics (e.g., gender, age, education, and experience) associate with at least one or two stages of Rest's model (Lehnert *et al.*, 2015).

### 2.1.2 Kohlberg Theory of Cognitive Moral Development (CMD)

The theory of cognitive moral development (CMD) propounded by Kohlberg in 1958 holds that moral reasoning, which is the basis for ethical judgment and behaviour, has three morality levels, namely; pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional levels, with each level consisting of two different stages (Kohlberg, 1973; Weber, 1991).

At the Pre-conventional level of morality, individuals are responsive to cultural rules and labels of 'good' and 'bad,' 'right' or 'wrong,' especially when expressed in terms of physical or hedonistic consequences of action (punishment, rewards, and exchange of favours) (Kohlberg, 1973). This level consists of two stages of moral development: Stage 1, punishment and obedience orientation, and

Stage 2, instrumental relativist orientation (Weber, 1991). At the Conventional level of morality, individuals become aware of the interest of others and their duties to society. They seek to maintain the expectations of their families, groups, or nation, which is perceived as valuable in its own right, regardless of immediate and obvious consequences (Kohlberg, 1973). This level also consists of two stages: Stage 3, good boy---nice girl orientation, and Stage 4, law and order orientation. Finally, at the Post-conventional level of morality, there is a clear effort to define moral values and principles, which have legitimacy and application separable from the authorities of the groups or persons holding these principles (Weber, 1991). This level likewise consists of two stages: Stage 5, social-contract legalistic orientation, and Stage 6, universal ethical principle orientation (Mintz & Morris, 2008).

In the literature, Kohlberg's CMD theory has served as the theoretical underpinning for many business ethics studies. The theory, concerned with how individuals formulate ethical judgments and make ethical decisions (Mintz & Morris, 2008), has been widely used in many business ethics studies (Craft, 2013). It has aided business ethics researchers to identify and examine factors associated with the moral disposition and development of individuals (Craft, 2013). Based on Kohlberg's CMD theory, this study made the proposition that the ethical decision-making process of an accounting professional may be influenced by advances in age and educational attainment. This is because the CMD theory suggests that individuals change from one level of morality to a higher level on account of certain individual and environmental changes and conditions (Musbah *et al.*, 2016; Trevino 1986).

Similarly, at the conventional level of morality, the accounting professional will act ethically, not because the law coerces him/her, nor for the fear of punishment or personal benefits, but for the interest of others and the society, which is guided by fairness, societal norms, legal, and religious codes. Within this level of morality, this study also believed that the ethical decision-making process of accounting professionals in Nigeria will differ significantly along types of professional membership, areas of accounting specialisation, and peer influence. That is, an accounting professional will make ethical decisions to appear fair and maintain the expectations of peers as an obligation to be committed to professional ethics codes and to act in conformity with the demands of a particular area of accounting specialisation (auditing, forensic, management, or financial accounting specialisation). These arguments are also supported by the deontological (*nonconsequentialist*) or duty theory, which is strictly stereotype based on prescribed rules (Fieser, 2001).

Furthermore, at the post-conventional level of morality, the accounting professional is stimulated to uphold basic rights, values, and legal contract of society. Apart from what is constitutionally and democratically agreed, the right should be a matter of personal values and morality. The accounting professional is believed to be clearly aware of the relativism of his/her personal values and the laid down rules in resolving ethical issues. Hence, on account of this level of morality, this study examined differences in ethical decision-making process of accounting professionals in Nigeria based on their gender, economic status, and subculture. Likewise, on the basis of moral universality as suggested by the Kohlberg's CMD theory, this study also examined differences in ethical decision-making process based on the conscience of accounting professionals. It is believed that the accounting professional's decision-making process is guided by universal ethical principles, not necessarily an enacted law or societal norms, but by universal intuitive beliefs that transverse societal jurisdictions (Kohlberg, 1973; Weber, 1991). Prior studies that have applied the Kohlberg CMD theory in accounting and business ethics research include Ajibolade (2008), Musbah *et al.* (2016), Dellaportas (2006) Karaibrahimoglu, Erdener, and Var (2009), and Woiceshyn (2011).

## **2.2 Prior Empirical Literature on Ethical Decision-Making (EDM)**

Several business and accounting ethics studies have been conducted in relation to Rest's (1978, 1986) EDM model since the past three decades, and a number of personal variables such as age, gender, experience, and education have been found to affect each stage of the model (Lehnert *et al.*, 2015; Craft, 2013). Consequently, the variables focused in this study are gender, types of professional

membership, age, education, area of accounting specialisation, economic status, subculture, conscience, and peer influence.

On gender, with Gilligan's (1982) socialisation theory predicting differences in values between male and female (Jaffee & Hyde, 2000), and with the structural theory predicting a non-effect of gender differences on values (Musbah *et al.*, 2016), results on gender differences and influence on the EDM process have been mixed (Craft, 2013; Musbah *et al.*, 2016). More studies reported no significant differences in ethical values and decision-making between males and females (see Ajibolade, Ogunleye, & Omorogbe, 2014), but where they were found, females were more ethically predisposed than males (O'Fallon & Butterfield, 2005).

In relation to age, Kohlberg's CMD theory has been the basis for many empirical studies. The CMD theory suggests a positive influence of age on cognitive moral development. However, the results have also been mixed and inconsistent (Lehnert *et al.*, 2015). In Dellaportas (2006), age and EDM were not significantly related. In Ogunleye (2015), age significantly predicted the ethical predisposition of accountants in Nigeria.

As noted from an extensive review of empirical literature in business and accounting ethics for a span of 37 years (1978 – 2015) by Ford and Richardson (1994), Loe, Ferrell, and Mansfield (2000), O'Fallon and Butterfield (2005), Craft (2013), and Lehnert *et al.* (2015), very limited studies have examined the influence of types of professional membership on the EDM process. Among the few available studies, Singhapakdi, Rao, and Vitell (1996) found that individuals with a high standard of professional values tend to recognise ethical issues more than their counterparts. Hume, Larkins, and Iyer (1999) found mixed results, while Choudhury, Mishra, Guyot, Meier, and Bell (2012) found no significant influence of professional licensure on the EDM process.

The role which education plays in the EDM process has been very controversial in business ethics research (Lehnert *et al.*, 2015). However, the CMD theory also suggests a positive relationship between education and ethical judgment and moral development (Kohlberg, 1973). In Craft's (2013) review, education was found to have both a positive and neutral impact on the EDM process. Musbah *et al.* (2016) also found positive significant results relating to education and the EDM process, while Ogunleye (2015) reported a negative relationship.

In the area of accounting specialisation, limited empirical evidences are available. However, there are indications that different areas of professional practices would affect individuals' EDM process differently (Craft, 2013). Lehnert *et al.* (2015) noted that the findings regarding employment level or work area were somewhat mixed. Earlier, Malinowski and Berger (1996) had reported a non-significant difference in the EDM process among marketing, liberal arts, accounting, and management students at a large Eastern University in the United States. In Arnold, Bernardi, Neidermeyer, and Schmee (2007), differences in ethical perception among partners, senior managers, managers, assistant managers, and senior accountants were found. In O'Leary and Stewart (2007), internal auditors as a group were found to demonstrate a reasonably high sensitivity to ethical issues, which may be interpreted to suggest that accountants in audit practice are expected to demonstrate higher level of ethicality than those in other areas of practice. Pierce and Sweeney (2010) found significant differences in ethical judgment based on area of work (audit vs. non-audit).

Economic status is another personal variable that has received little attention in business ethics studies (Craft, 2013; Lehnert *et al.*, 2015). This underscores the need for more empirical research in this regard. Tang and Chiu (2003) reported that high-income employees in Hong Kong have a low level of the love of money, and a high level of pay satisfaction, which make them less likely to engage in evil and unethical behaviour in organisations. In Guyot, Meier, and Bell (2011), income level did not significantly predict the EDM process among business students at a rural Midwestern University and at Historically Black College and University (HBCU), United States.

Generally, throughout the literature cultural differences in ethical decision-making are fairly pronounced (Lehnert *et al.*, 2015). However, the findings have been mixed probably due to the heterogeneity of national culture on account of subcultural diversity. Besides, the challenges of

examining cultural differences in ethical decision-making between countries have been of concern to business and accounting ethics scholars (O'Fallon & Butterfield, 2005; Craft, 2013). Nigeria is a multi-ethnic society with its culture shaped by these ethnic groups. The country is therefore described as culturally diverse, the diversity being manifested in the way the people of different ethnic groups dress, their language, art, traditional practices and values and norms. The country has been divided into six geopolitical zones, which fall along the lines of the major ethnic groups. Thus, rather than national culture, this study examined subculture influences on the ethical decision-making process of accounting professionals in Nigeria. An earlier study by Goodwin and Goodwin (1999) found some differences in responses to ethical issues based on ethnic origin. Ogunleye (2015) also found subculture and the ethical perception and disposition of accountants in Nigeria to correlate significantly.

The influence of conscience on the EDM process is another variable that has received very little research attention in business ethics studies. In fact, among all the personal variables, conscience has been missing in the list. One reason for this could be the problem of measurement. In the reviews of O'Fallon and Butterfield (2005), Craft (2013) and Lehnert *et al.* (2015), no study was found on conscience and EDM. Conscience is a faculty of the spirit of humans, which outside human reasoning, is linked with the metaphysical aspect of human existence. It is a spontaneous, and direct in judgment (Nee, 1968). According to Vélez (2013), an individual's moral conscience makes practical judgments founded on binding objective moral norms, and so, for this reason each person is bound to obey his/her conscience. Some psychologists have argued that moral values are strictly human inventions and are relative from society to society throughout time, and throughout the world (Panza & Potthast, 2010). However, Kohlberg's CMD theory contradicts this idea. At stage six of the CMD theory, Kohlberg argued with respect to the universality of ethical principles, that morality is defined by the decision of conscience in accord with self-chosen ethical principles appealing to logical comprehensiveness, universality, and consistency, which are abstract and ethical (Kohlberg, 1973; Weber, 1991). This thus suggests that, besides other variables, an individual's conscience plays a vital role in his/her EDM process.

As regards peer influence, Razzaque and Hwee (2002) found no significant association between peers and EDM process. However, Westerman, Beekun, Stedham, and Yamamura (2007) found that peers exerted a stronger influence than national culture on an individual's ethical decision outcomes. Similarly, Flynn and Wiltermuth (2010) found that peers and social groups have an impact on EDM in that people were ineffective at determining the number of people who agreed with their ethical choices and tended to fall victim to a false consensus bias, which, in turn, affected their level of ethical decision-making. Largely, there are limited empirical evidence regarding the association between peers and ethical decision-making (O'Fallon & Butterfield, 2005); with the few studies providing inconsistent findings (Craft, 2013). Therefore, there is a need for more empirical research on peer influence and the ethical decision-making process of accounting professionals.

In summary, as noted from the review of prior business and accounting ethics literature, there are indications that personal characteristics affect the ethical decision-making process of business and accounting professionals, although some results were mixed and inconsistent, and some somewhat complex and inconclusive. Besides, some of the personal characteristics have received little research attention. Examining some of these personal characteristics in this study would add new empirical evidence to the body of business and accounting ethics literature. Thus, the study's proposed relationship between the ethical decision-making process of accounting professionals in Nigeria and their personal characteristics is demonstrated in Figure 1 and formulated in the following hypothesis:

Ho: there is no significant difference in the ethical decision-making process of accounting professionals in Nigeria based on their personal characteristics.

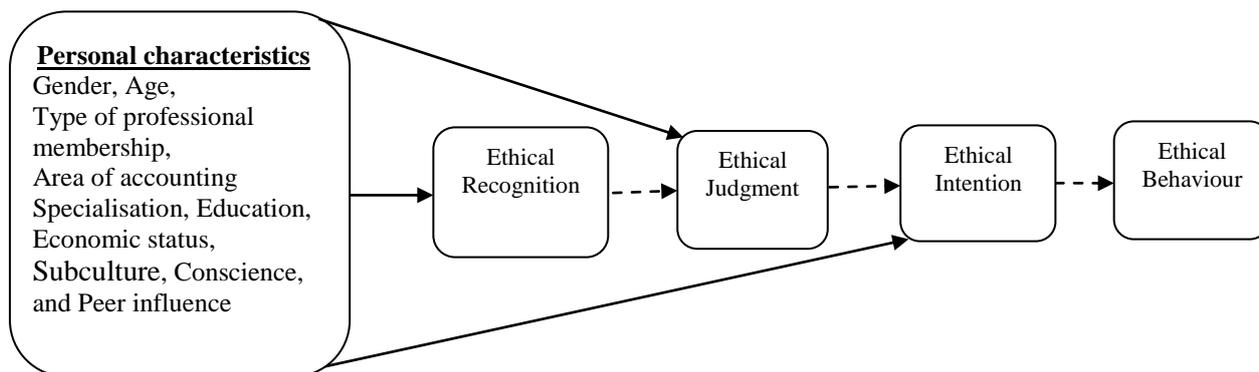


Figure 1: Personal Characteristics and Ethical Decision-Making Process

Source: Authors' conceptualisation, 2017

As displayed in the Figure, among the personal characteristics studied, types of professional membership, area of accounting specialisation, economic status, subculture, conscience, and peer influence were the new additions to extant literature. This study focused on the influence of each of the personal variables on each of the stages of ethical recognition, judgment, and intention in the Rest's model. It however did not examine the relationship among the stages in the Rest's EDM model as shown in dotted arrows.

### 3. Research Data and Methods

Primary data were collected through a cross-sectional survey from accounting professionals who are members of the two oldest and foremost professional accounting bodies in Nigeria, the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Nigeria (ICAN) and the Associations of National Accountants of Nigeria (ANAN) (IFAC, 2017). As at the time of this study, the population of ICAN professional members was 41,774 (ICAN, 2017), while that of ANAN was 20,049 (ANAN, 2017), giving a population of 61,823 accounting professionals.

Yamane's (1967) formula for determining sample size was used to determine the sample size of 397 for the study and a weighted average method based on the population of each accounting body was used to determine the sample for each accounting body. Accordingly, 268 ICAN and 129 ANAN members were randomly surveyed using a structured questionnaire. Three hundred and fifty two (352) (88.66%) copies were filled and returned (ICAN: 237 & ANAN: 115), while 329 (82.87%) copies were found usable for analysis (ICAN: 224 & ANAN: 105). This response rate was considered satisfactory because, on the average, in business ethics studies the response rate has been found to range from about 21% to 80% (Bampton & Cowton, 2013; Musbah *et al.* 2016).

Prior empirical ethics studies provided measures for the variables under study. Three pre-tested vignettes of ethical problems were adopted from Flory *et al.* (1992) and one vignette was developed specifically for the study, which concerned different ethical issues commonly found at the workplace.

The first vignette included issues of approving a questionable expense report, and the second vignette included issues of manipulating company books. The third vignette was on issues of creative accounting practices, while the fourth was on issues of extending questionable credit. As suggested by Mitchell and Jolley (2007) and Kothari and Garg (2014), the instrument was scrutinised by a panel of experts, whose critiques of the draft questionnaire aided the final version of the instrument. A pilot study was also conducted to pre-test the questionnaire, and feedback comments and suggestions were used to revise the questionnaire.

### 3.1 Variable Measurements

The questionnaire was designed to collect data on the respondents' personal characteristics, namely gender, age, types of professional membership, education, area of accounting specialisation, economic status, subculture (measured by geo-political zone origin), conscience, and peer influence. As to the EDM stages – ethical recognition (sensitivity), judgment, and intention, the respondents were asked to indicate their agreement on a 5-point Likert scale {from 'strongly agree' (5) to 'strongly disagree' (1)}. No multiple item measure was used in this study, only a single-item scale was used to measure each stage of ethical decision-making process; thus, there was no need to compute the Cronbach coefficient alpha (see Musbah *et al.*, 2016).

As in prior studies, ethical sensitivity was measured by asking the respondents whether the situation in each vignette included an ethical issue. Ethical judgment was measured by asking the respondents whether they agreed with the decision of the decision maker in each vignette, while ethical intention was measured by asking the respondents if they were the decision maker in each vignette, whether they would make the same decision (Singhapakdi *et al.* 1996; Musbah *et al.*, 2016). A score equal or above the average of 3 for ethical recognition and judgment signify high ethical sensitivity and judgment, while that of ethical intention signifies high tendency to engage in an unethical decision.

### 3.2 Data Analysis Method

Descriptive statistical analysis was performed on data collected to present a summary of the personal characteristics of the respondents and to provide general description of the stages of EDM based on their personal characteristics. The inferential statistical analysis was performed at a 0.05 level of significance on the data collected. Specifically, Wilcoxon rank-sum test and Mann–Whitney test were performed to test for differences in the EDM process based on the respondents' personal characteristics for two categories variables, while Kruskal–Wallis test was performed to test for differences in the EDM process for variables with more than two categories. These tests are the non-parametric equivalent of the independent samples t-test and One-way ANOVA test (Field, 2009). These were used in order to overcome the shortcomings of earlier studies, which generally used independent samples t-test, ANOVA, and multiple regression analysis even without satisfying the assumptions to justify their use (Musbah, 2010; Craft, 2013).

## 4. Results and Discussions

### 4.1 Descriptive Statistics

The summary of the respondents' personal characteristics is presented in Table 1. From the Table, there were more male {237(72%)} respondents than females {92(28%)}. This however is a reflection of the general gender demography in Nigeria (see National Bureau of Statistics, NBS, 2014). On the age grouping, 34(10.4%) of the respondents are less than 30 years, 131(39.8%) falls within 30 and 39 years, 110(33.4%) are within 40 to 50 years, and 44(13.4%) are aged 50 and above. This simply suggests that 241(77.2%) respondents are within the active age group of 30 to 50 years.

**Table 1: Respondents Personal Characteristics**

		Frequency	%
Gender:	Female	92	28.0
	Male	237	72.0
	<b>Total</b>	<b>329</b>	<b>100</b>
Age Bracket:	< 30 years	34	10.4
	30-< 40 years	131	39.8
	40 - 50 years	110	33.4
	> 50 years	44	13.4
	<b>Total</b>	<b>319*</b>	<b>100</b>

Types of Professional Membership:	ICAN	224	68.1
	ANAN	105	31.9
	<b>Total</b>	<b>329</b>	<b>100</b>
Education:	First Degree (B.Sc., HND)	191	58.1
	Master Degree (M.Sc., MBA)	132	40.1
	Ph.D. (or Equivalent)	6	1.8
	<b>Total</b>	<b>329</b>	<b>100</b>
Area of accounting specialisation:	Financial/Reporting accounting	130	39.5
	Management accounting	48	14.6
	Auditing	58	17.6
	Taxation	53	16.1
	Forensic accounting	4	1.3
	Others	36	10.9
	<b>Total</b>	<b>329</b>	<b>100</b>
Economic Status:	Low income earners	81	24.6
	Middle income earners	156	47.4
	High income earners	89	27.1
	<b>Total</b>	<b>326*</b>	<b>100</b>
Subculture:	North-West	13	4.0
	South-West	169	51.3
	North-East	20	6.1
	South-East	40	12.2
	North-Central	46	14.0
	South-South	35	10.6
	<b>Total</b>	<b>323*</b>	<b>100</b>
Conscience Influence:	Very large extent	149	45.3
	Large extent	148	45.0
	Some extent	28	8.5
	Little extent or not at all	3	0.9
	<b>Total</b>	<b>328*</b>	<b>100</b>
Peer Influence:	Very large extent	14	4.3
	Large extent	42	12.8
	Some extent	189	57.4
	Little extent	32	9.7
	Very little extent	35	10.6
	Not at all	15	4.6
	<b>Total</b>	<b>327*</b>	<b>100</b>

\*Missing values

Source: Research Survey (2017)

As to types of professional membership, 224(68.1%) are members of the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Nigeria (ICAN) and 105(31.9%) members of the Association of National Accountants of Nigeria (ANAN). With respect to the educational attainment of the respondents, 191(58.1%) are first-degree holders (B.Sc., HND), 132(40.1%) are second-degree holders (M.Sc., MBA), and 6(1.8%) are Ph.D. (or Equivalent) holders. This simply indicates that the respondents are a group of learned and exposed individuals. Regarding the respondents area of accounting specialisation, 130(39.5%) are specialized in financial accounting/reporting, 48(14.6%) in management accounting, 58(17.6%) in auditing, 53(16.1%) in taxation, 4(1.3%) in forensic accounting, and 36(10.9%) in other areas.

Concerning the economic status of the respondents, 81(24.6%) are low-income earners, 156(47.4%) are middle-income earners, and 89(27.1%) are high-income earners. About 13(4.0%) of the respondents are from the North-West, 169(51.3%) from the South-West, 20(6.1%) from the North-East, 40(12.2%) from the South-East, 46(14.0%) from the North-Central, and 35(10.6%) from the South-South. This simply suggests that accounting professionals from each geo-political zone were fully represented in the survey. As to the influence of conscience, 297(90.3%) respondents acknowledged that their conscience largely influence their decision-making, 28(8.5%) acknowledged that their conscience influence their decision-making ‘to some extent,’ while 3(0.9%) respondents indicated that their conscience has little or no influence on their decision-making.

Finally, regarding peer influence, 56(17.1%) agreed that their decision-making is influenced largely by peers, 189(57.4%) acknowledged that, ‘to some extent,’ their decision-making is influenced by peers, while 82(24.9%) indicated that their decision-making is little influenced by peers. Generally, the respondents’ demographic composition presented in Table 1 largely validates their responses to the topical issues raised in the questionnaire. That is, the data obtained for this study were obtained from individuals qualified to respond adequately to the questionnaire items with in-depth knowledge and intelligibility.

#### 4.1.1 Personal Characteristics and Ethical Sensitivity

From each of the four vignettes, the respondents’ ability to recognise ethical problems (ethical sensitivity) were assessed based on their personal characteristics. Table 2 displays the results of the descriptive analysis. From the Table, it could be seen that male accounting professionals recognised the ethical issues in vignettes 1, 3, and 4 better than their female counterparts, while in vignette 2, female accounting professionals recognised the ethical issues better than the males. The Table also shows that accounting professionals above 50 years recognised the ethical issues in vignette 1 better, and those within 30 to 39 years recognised the ethical issues in vignettes 2 and 3 better, while accounting professionals less than 30 years recognised the ethical issues in vignette 4 better than the other respondents.

**Table 2: Personal Characteristics and Ethical Sensitivity**

		VIGNETTES			
		V1 M(SD)	V2 M(SD)	V3 M(SD)	V4 M(SD)
<b>Gender</b>	Female	4.45(.747)	4.61(.592)	4.55(.732)	4.11(.977)
	Male	4.58(.637)	4.54(.820)	4.59(.734)	4.24(.973)
<b>Age</b>	< 30 years	4.38(.853)	4.62(.493)	4.38(.888)	4.35(.734)
	30 - < 40 years	4.59(.689)	4.64(.765)	4.63(.727)	4.20(.972)
	40 – 50 years	4.51(.632)	4.51(.739)	4.61(.705)	4.31(.926)
	> 50 years	4.61(.538)	4.43(.925)	4.57(.695)	3.91(1.20)
<b>Types of Professional Membership</b>	ICAN	4.66(.511)	4.66(.600)	4.68(.608)	4.25(.956)
	ANAN	4.30(.876)	4.35(1.00)	4.36(.911)	4.10(1.01)
<b>Education</b>	First degree (B.Sc., HND)	4.47(.745)	4.49(.826)	4.50(.781)	4.15(.953)
	Second degree (M.Sc., MBA)	4.64(.540)	4.65(.665)	4.69(.655)	4.27(1.01)
	Third degree (Ph.D.)	4.83(.408)	4.83(.408)	4.83(.408)	4.50(.837)
<b>Area of Accounting Specialisation</b>	Financial accounting	4.58(.633)	4.55(.808)	4.61(.710)	4.22(.940)
	Management accounting	4.48(.850)	4.52(.743)	4.48(.743)	4.21(.922)
	Auditing	4.53(.655)	4.64(.742)	4.55(.820)	4.26(1.00)
	Taxation	4.51(.724)	4.49(.823)	4.55(.798)	4.02(1.10)
	Forensic accounting	4.75(.500)	4.25(.957)	4.75(.500)	3.75(1.89)
	Others	4.56(.504)	4.69(.525)	4.49(.577)	4.39(.803)

<b>Economic Status</b>	Low-income earner	4.43(.774)	4.46(.936)	4.41(.919)	4.11(.935)
	Middle income earner	4.55(.694)	4.53(.766)	4.60(.679)	4.12(1.07)
	High income earner	4.63(.509)	4.70(.552)	4.70(.611)	4.42(.795)
<b>Subculture</b>	North-West	4.38(.650)	4.23(1.17)	4.08(1.32)	4.31(.751)
	South-West	4.58(.660)	4.59(.677)	4.66(.682)	4.25(.988)
	North-East	4.70(.571)	4.40(1.20)	4.70(.571)	4.15(1.04)
	South-East	4.43(.594)	4.60(.632)	4.58(.549)	4.35(.700)
	North-Central	4.43(.720)	4.50(.913)	4.46(.780)	4.00(1.20)
	South-South	4.57(.815)	4.69(.718)	4.54(.780)	4.03(1.07)
<b>Conscience</b>	To a very large extent	4.62(.577)	4.64(.736)	4.70(.610)	4.18(1.07)
	To a large extent	4.55(.693)	4.58(.700)	4.55(.777)	4.28(.887)
	To some extent	4.21(.876)	4.14(.970)	4.18(.905)	4.00(.861)
	To a little extent	4.00(.000)	4.00(.000)	4.00(.000)	4.00(.000)
	To a very little extent	4.00(.000)	4.00(.000)	4.00(.000)	4.00(.000)
	Not at all	3.00(.000)	1.00(.000)	3.00(.000)	2.00(.000)
<b>Peer Influence</b>	To a very large extent	4.07(.829)	4.29(1.07)	4.36(.745)	4.29(1.07)
	To a large extent	4.43(.831)	4.43(1.04)	4.45(.803)	3.95(1.15)
	To some extent	4.59(.609)	4.59(.691)	4.60(.674)	4.22(.936)
	To a little extent	4.47(.842)	4.53(.842)	4.66(.827)	4.03(.936)
	To a very little extent	4.49(.562)	4.60(.651)	4.66(.765)	4.40(.881)
	Not at all	5.00(.000)	4.87(.352)	4.67(.900)	4.47(1.06)

Total (N) = 329; Ethical sensitivity M(SD) = 4.54(.671); Scale: Max. = 5; Min. = 1

Source: Research Survey 2017

With reference to types of professional membership, ICAN members recognised the ethical issues in vignettes 1, 2, 3, and 4 better than ANAN members did. Likewise, accounting professionals with Ph.D. degree recognised the ethical issues in vignettes 1, 2, 3, and 4 better than those with first and second degrees. In addition, based on areas of accounting specialisation, forensic accountants recognised the ethical issues in vignettes 1 and 3 better, while auditors and others recognised the ethical issues in vignettes 2 and 4 better than those in the other areas of accounting specialisation.

Table 2 further shows that high-income earners recognised the ethical issues in vignettes 1, 2, 3, and 4 better than low and middle-income earners. Also, accounting professionals from the North-East recognised the ethical issues in vignettes 1 and 3 better, and those from the South-South recognised the ethical issues in vignette 2 better, while those from the South-East recognised the ethical issues in vignette 4 better than those from other geo-political zones. In addition, accounting professionals who are influenced largely by conscience recognised the ethical issues in vignettes 1, 2, 3, and 4 better than those who are influenced a little or not by conscience. Finally, accounting professionals who are influenced a little or not by peers recognised the ethical issues in vignettes 1, 2, 3, and 4 better than those largely influenced by peers.

#### 4.1.2 Personal Characteristics and Ethical Judgment

From each of the four vignettes, the respondents' ability to make ethical judgment was assessed based on their personal characteristics. Table 3 displays the results of the descriptive analysis. From the Table, it could be seen that male accounting professionals made better ethical judgments in vignettes 1 and 4, while female accounting professionals made better ethical judgments in vignettes 2 and 3 than the males. In addition, accounting professionals above 50 years made better ethical judgments in vignettes 1 and 4, while those within 30 to 50 years made better ethical judgments in vignettes 2 and 3 than the others. It could also be seen that ICAN members made better ethical judgments in vignettes 1, 2, 3, and 4 than ANAN members. Similarly, accounting professionals with Ph.D. degree made better ethical judgments in vignettes 1, 2, and 3, while those with second degree (M.Sc., MBA) made better ethical judgment in vignette 4 than the others.

Furthermore, auditors made better ethical judgment in vignette 1, and taxation experts and others made better ethical judgment in vignette 2, while forensic accountants made better ethical judgments in vignettes 3 and 4 than the others. Equally, high-income earners made better ethical judgments in vignettes 1, 2, 3, and 4 than low and middle-income earners. Likewise, accounting professionals from the North-East made better ethical judgments in vignettes 1 and 3, while those from the South-South, South-West, and North-West made better ethical judgments in vignettes 2 and 4.

**Table 3: Personal Characteristics and Ethical Judgment**

		<b>VIGNETTES</b>			
		V1	V2	V3	V4
		M(SD)	M(SD)	M(SD)	M(SD)
<b>Gender</b>	Female	4.35(.654)	3.99(1.01)	3.88(1.03)	3.73(1.05)
	Male	4.39(.727)	3.96(1.14)	3.85(1.06)	3.80(1.05)
<b>Age</b>	< 30 years	4.24(.654)	3.85(1.06)	3.68(1.25)	3.53(1.16)
	30 - < 40 years	4.36(.745)	3.99(1.16)	3.84(1.05)	3.67(1.05)
	40 – 50 years	4.42(.698)	3.99(1.20)	3.93(.955)	3.90(1.03)
	> 50 years	4.48(.590)	3.93(1.02)	3.84(1.08)	4.00(.940)
<b>Types of Professional Membership</b>	ICAN	4.43(.653)	4.05(1.07)	3.87(1.04)	3.82(1.07)
	ANAN	4.29(.805)	3.80(1.16)	3.84(1.07)	3.70(1.01)
<b>Education</b>	First degree (B.Sc., HND)	4.31(.706)	4.01(1.03)	3.80(1.05)	3.69(1.04)
	Second degree (M.Sc., MBA)	4.48(.704)	3.90(1.20)	3.92(1.06)	3.91(1.04)
	Third degree (Ph.D.)	4.50(.548)	4.17(.983)	4.33(.816)	3.67(1.37)
<b>Area of Accounting Specialisation</b>	Financial accounting	4.35(.680)	3.83(1.14)	3.82(1.03)	3.64(1.09)
	Management accounting	4.38(.733)	4.06(.976)	4.10(1.02)	3.96(1.01)
	Auditing	4.54(.600)	3.98(1.12)	3.88(1.03)	3.83(1.05)
	Taxation	4.45(.667)	4.08(1.07)	3.51(1.17)	3.83(1.05)
	Forensic accounting	3.75(1.89)	4.00(1.41)	4.50(.577)	4.00(1.41)
	Others	4.19(.749)	4.17(1.13)	4.08(.906)	3.86(.931)
<b>Economic Status:</b>	Low-income earner	4.27(.822)	3.91(1.18)	3.70(1.05)	3.53(1.11)
	Middle income earner	4.36(.681)	3.85(1.09)	3.76(1.08)	3.79(1.06)
	High income earner	4.50(.625)	4.20(1.02)	4.16(.940)	3.98(.941)
<b>Subculture</b>	North-West	4.31(.630)	4.00(.853)	3.69(1.03)	3.69(.855)
	South-West	4.40(.775)	4.02(1.10)	3.82(1.06)	3.85(1.09)
	North-East	4.55(.510)	3.80(1.47)	4.15(.988)	3.65(1.23)
	South-East	4.38(.540)	3.95(.986)	3.90(1.03)	3.63(1.03)
	North-Central	4.30(.662)	3.80(1.13)	3.74(1.02)	3.65(.924)
	South-South	4.31(.758)	4.00(1.14)	4.06(1.03)	3.83(1.04)
<b>Conscience</b>	To a very large extent	4.48(.674)	3.99(1.17)	3.92(1.09)	3.87(1.14)
	To a large extent	4.32(.731)	4.05(.999)	3.76(1.07)	3.74(.978)
	To some extent	4.18(.723)	3.64(.989)	3.96(.744)	3.59(.844)
	To a little extent	4.00(.000)	1.00(.000)	4.00(.000)	3.00(.000)
	To a very little extent	4.00(.000)	1.00(.000)	4.00(.000)	2.00(.000)
	Not at all	4.00(.000)	3.00(.000)	4.00(.000)	3.00(.000)
<b>Peer Influence</b>	To a very large extent	4.36(.633)	3.77(1.01)	3.43(1.02)	3.36(1.15)
	To a large extent	4.33(.786)	3.81(1.15)	3.74(.964)	3.79(.898)
	To some extent	4.38(.725)	4.11(1.01)	3.96(1.05)	3.80(1.05)

To a little extent	4.44(.564)	3.84(1.05)	3.63(1.07)	3.53(1.02)
To a very little extent	4.37(.731)	3.77(1.40)	3.91(1.07)	3.80(1.23)
Not at all	4.47(.640)	3.60(1.45)	3.87(.990)	4.40(.828)

Total (N) = 329; Ethical Judgment M(SD) = 4.54(.671); Scale: Max. = 5; Min. = 1

Source: Research Survey 2017

Table 3 also shows that accounting professionals who are influenced largely by conscience made better ethical judgments in vignettes 1, 2, and 4, while those influenced a little or not by conscience made better ethical judgment in vignette 3. Finally, accounting professionals who are influenced a little or not by peers made better ethical judgments in vignettes 1 and 4, while those influenced by peers to some extent made better ethical judgments in vignettes 2 and 3 than the others.

#### 4.1.3 Personal Characteristics and Ethical Intention

From each of the four vignettes, the respondents' intentions to make unethical decisions were assessed based on their personal characteristics, and the results of the descriptive analysis are displayed in Table 4. From the Table, it could be seen that male accounting professionals would less likely make unethical decisions in vignettes 1 and 4, while female accounting professionals would less likely make unethical decisions in vignettes 2 and 3. Also, accounting professionals above 50 years would less likely make unethical decisions in vignettes 1, 2, 3, and 4 compared to those below 50 years. Likewise, ICAN members would less likely make unethical decisions in vignettes 1, 2, 3, and 4 compared to ANAN members. In addition, accounting professionals with second degree (M.Sc., MBA) would less likely make unethical decisions in vignettes 1 and 4, while those with Ph.D. degree would less likely make unethical decisions in vignettes 2 and 3. Regarding areas of accounting specialisation, forensic accountants would less likely make unethical decisions in vignettes 1, 2, 3, and 4 compared to those in other areas of accounting specialisation.

Table 4 also shows that high-income earners would less likely make unethical decisions in vignettes 1, 2, 3, and 4 compared to low and middle income earners. Accounting professionals from the North-East would less likely make unethical decisions in vignettes 1 and 2, those from the North-Central would less likely make unethical decision in vignette 3, while those from the South-West would less likely make unethical decision in vignette 4 compared to the others. In addition, accounting professionals who are influenced a little by conscience would less likely make unethical decisions in vignettes 1, 2, 3, and 4 compared to those largely influenced by conscience. Finally, accounting professionals influenced a little or not by peers would less likely make unethical decisions in vignettes 1, 3, and 4, while those who are influenced to some extent by peers would less likely make unethical decision in vignette 2.

**Table 4: Personal Characteristics and Ethical Intention**

		VIGNETTES			
		V1	V2	V3	V4
		M(SD)	M(SD)	M(SD)	M(SD)
<b>Gender</b>	Female	2.04(1.06)	2.18(1.15)	2.38(1.19)	2.41(1.15)
	Male	1.97(1.11)	2.20(1.21)	2.44(1.19)	2.30(1.17)
<b>Age</b>	< 30 years	2.42(1.28)	2.45(1.12)	2.50(1.29)	2.64(1.17)
	30 - < 40 years	2.02(1.11)	2.17(1.21)	2.47(1.21)	2.40(1.19)
	40 – 50 years	1.88(1.01)	2.14(1.14)	2.35(1.12)	2.25(1.16)
	> 50 years	1.80(1.05)	2.09(1.22)	2.27(1.17)	2.00(.964)
<b>Types of Professional Membership</b>	ICAN	1.87(1.04)	2.04(1.14)	2.39(1.22)	2.20(1.12)
	ANAN	2.25(1.17)	2.51(1.24)	2.50(1.13)	2.62(1.22)
<b>Education</b>	First degree (B.Sc., HND)	2.14(1.13)	2.25(1.17)	2.46(1.17)	2.44(1.14)
	Second degree (M.Sc., MBA)	1.77(1.01)	2.12(1.23)	2.40(1.22)	2.16(1.15)
	Third degree (Ph.D.)	2.17(1.17)	2.00(1.20)	1.83(1.17)	2.67(1.86)
<b>Area of Accounting Specialisation</b>	Financial accounting	2.09(1.15)	2.29(1.18)	2.44(1.13)	2.38(1.17)
	Management accounting	2.04(1.07)	2.11(1.22)	2.23(1.13)	2.06(1.06)
	Auditing	1.88(1.16)	2.28(1.30)	2.52(1.30)	2.36(1.25)
	Taxation	1.91(1.02)	2.09(1.17)	2.60(1.21)	2.34(1.09)
	Forensic accounting	1.25(.500)	2.00(1.41)	1.25(.500)	1.75(1.50)
	Others	1.97(1.03)	2.00(1.07)	2.36(1.22)	2.53(1.21)
<b>Economic Status:</b>	Low-income earner	2.18(1.27)	2.35(1.20)	2.63(1.16)	2.60(1.20)
	Middle income earner	2.05(1.06)	2.31(1.22)	2.54(1.20)	2.37(1.16)
	High income earner	1.74(.972)	1.88(1.09)	2.04(1.13)	2.03(1.08)
<b>Subculture</b>	North-West	2.50(1.38)	2.54(1.56)	2.85(1.35)	2.92(1.26)
	South-West	1.91(1.10)	2.09(1.15)	2.46(1.20)	2.18(1.14)
	North-East	1.55(.945)	2.00(1.05)	2.35(1.35)	2.30(1.13)
	South-East	2.28(1.06)	2.45(1.30)	2.60(1.26)	2.55(1.13)
	North-Central	2.07(1.12)	2.37(1.32)	2.17(.996)	2.58(1.27)
	South-South	2.09(1.07)	2.20(1.05)	2.26(1.12)	2.29(1.10)
<b>Conscience</b>	To a very large extent	1.74(.927)	2.01(1.18)	2.26(1.22)	2.26(1.25)
	To a large extent	2.19(1.21)	2.29(1.20)	2.57(1.17)	2.34(1.07)
	To some extent	2.21(1.03)	2.71(1.01)	2.57(.959)	2.71(1.18)
	To a little extent	1.00(.000)	1.00(.000)	4.00(.000)	3.00(.000)
	To a very little extent	4.00(.000)	1.00(.000)	1.00(.000)	2.00(.000)
	Not at all	3.00(.000)	4.00(.000)	3.00(.000)	2.00(.000)
<b>Peer Influence</b>	To a very large extent	2.31(1.32)	2.36(1.15)	2.57(1.02)	2.57(.852)
	To a large extent	2.31(1.35)	2.60(1.36)	2.48(1.22)	2.36(1.14)
	To some extent	1.96(1.08)	2.04(1.14)	2.38(1.20)	2.33(1.21)
	To a little extent	1.81(.821)	2.31(1.09)	2.59(1.04)	2.34(1.00)
	To a very little extent	1.94(1.14)	2.20(1.21)	2.37(1.33)	2.37(1.31)
	Not at all	1.67(.724)	2.53(1.46)	2.40(1.06)	1.87(.915)

Total (N) = 329; Ethical Intention M(SD) = 4.54(.671); Scale: Max. = 5; Min. = 1

Source: Research Survey 2017

#### 4.2 Test of Hypotheses

To test the hypothesis formulated to achieve the objectives of this paper, Wilcoxon rank-sum and Mann–Whitney tests were performed to test for differences in ethical decision-making for two categories variables, while Kruskal–Wallis test was performed to test for differences in ethical decision-making for variables with more than two categories. These statistics were performed for

three of the four stages of Rest’s ethical decision-making model – ethical recognition, ethical judgment, and ethical intention, and the results are presented in the subsequent subsections.

#### 4.2.1 Differences in Ethical Recognition

Ethical recognition (sensitivity) is the ability of an individual to identify whether a situation involves an ethical problem or not. In this study, the four vignettes used in assessing the respondents’ ethical sensitivity all contain ethical problems. The results of the Wilcoxon rank-sum and Mann–Whitney, and Kruskal–Wallis tests of differences in ethical sensitivity are presented in Table 5.

**Table 5: Wilcoxon rank-sum and Mann–Whitney, and Kruskal–Wallis tests (Ethical Sensitivity)**

	V1	V2	V3	V4
<b>Test/Variables</b>				
<u>Wilcoxon rank-sum and Mann–Whitney (Z)</u>				
Gender	-1.78	-.20	-.74	-1.36
Types of Professional membership	-3.84**	-3.53**	-2.55*	-1.44
<u>Kruskal–Wallis test (<math>\chi^2</math>)</u>				
Age	3.47	6.24	3.99	4.15
Education	5.39	4.42	7.94*	3.17
Area of Accounting Specialisation	1.08	2.96	2.79	2.90
Economic status	2.36	2.75	5.15	5.90
Subculture	7.96	3.48	7.88	3.55
Conscience	13.83*	18.91**	20.55**	6.77
Peer influence	18.27**	4.51	6.85	7.70

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$

Source: SPSS output, 2017

From Table 5, in each vignette, the Wilcoxon rank-sum and Mann–Whitney tests show no significant difference in ethical sensitivity based on gender (V1 – V4:  $p > .05$ ). However ethical sensitivity differs significantly along types of professional membership in vignettes 1, 2, and 3 (V1 – V3:  $p < .05$ ), while no significant difference in ethical sensitivity is seen in vignette 4 based on types of professional membership (V4:  $p > .05$ ). Furthermore, from the Table, in each vignette, the Kruskal–Wallis test shows no significant difference in ethical sensitivity based on age grouping (V1 – V4:  $p > .05$ ). Similarly, while no significant difference in ethical sensitivity is seen along educational level in vignettes 1, 2, and 4 (V1, V2, and V4:  $p > .05$ ), ethical sensitivity differs significantly in vignette 3 based on education (V3:  $p < .05$ ).

Furthermore, Table 5 shows no significant difference in ethical sensitivity in each vignette based on area of accounting specialisation (V1 – V4:  $p > .05$ ), economic status (V1 – V4:  $p > .05$ ), and subculture (V1 – V4:  $p > .05$ ). However, ethical sensitivity differs significantly along conscience in vignettes 1, 2, and 3 (V1:  $p < .05$ ; V2 – V3:  $p < .01$ ), while no significant difference in ethical sensitivity is seen in vignette 4 based on conscience (V4:  $p > .05$ ). Finally, from the Table, while ethical sensitivity differs significantly in vignette 1 based on peer influence (V1:  $p < .01$ ), no significant difference in ethical sensitivity is seen in vignettes 2, 3, and 4 (V2 – V4:  $p > .05$ ).

#### 4.2.2 Differences in Ethical Judgment

Ethical judgment is the ability of an individual to determine the ethically appropriate course of action among potential alternatives. In this study, the four vignettes used in assessing the respondents’

ethical judgments all have alternative courses of action. The results of the Wilcoxon rank-sum and Mann–Whitney, and Kruskal–Wallis tests of differences in ethical judgment are presented in Table 6.

**Table 6: Wilcoxon rank-sum and Mann–Whitney, and Kruskal–Wallis tests (Ethical Judgment)**

	V1	V2	V3	V4
<b>Test/Variables</b>				
<u>Wilcoxon rank-sum and Mann–Whitney (Z)</u>				
Gender	-0.96	-0.24	-0.16	-0.59
Types of Professional membership	-1.28	-1.90	-0.04	-1.19
<u>Kruskal–Wallis test (<math>\chi^2</math>)</u>				
Age	3.48	1.53	.63	6.50
Education	7.03*	.31	2.46	3.85
Area of Accounting Specialisation	6.90	5.32	11.44*	4.56
Economic status	3.82	7.49*	10.67**	7.21*
Subculture	3.65	2.45	4.72	3.91
Conscience	9.43	12.56*	2.19	8.39
Peer influence	.35	6.52	7.80	10.31

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$

Source: SPSS output, 2017

As displayed in Table 6, in each vignette, the Wilcoxon rank-sum and Mann–Whitney tests show no significant difference in ethical judgment based on gender (V1 – V4:  $p > .05$ ) and types of professional membership (V1 – V4:  $p > .05$ ). Also, in each vignette, the Kruskal-Wallis test shows no significant difference in ethical judgment based on age grouping (V1 – V4:  $p > .05$ ). Ethical judgment differs significantly in vignette 1 based on educational level (V1:  $p < .05$ ), while no significant difference in ethical judgment is seen in vignettes 2, 3, and 4 (V2 – V4:  $p > .05$ ). Similarly, while no significant difference in ethical judgment is seen based on area of accounting specialisation in vignettes 1, 2, and 4 (V1, V2, and V4:  $p > .05$ ), ethical judgment differs significantly in vignette 3 (V3:  $p < .05$ ).

Furthermore, from the Table, while no significant difference in ethical judgment is seen in vignette 1 based on economic status (V1:  $p > .05$ ), ethical judgment differs significantly in vignettes 2, 3, and 4 (V2 and V4:  $p < .05$ ; V3:  $p < .01$ ). Also, no significant difference in ethical judgment is seen in each vignette based on subculture (V1 – V4:  $p > .05$ ) and peer influence (V1 – V4:  $p > .05$ ). Finally, while no significant difference in ethical judgment is seen in vignettes 1, 3, and 4 based on conscience (V1, V3 – V4:  $p > .05$ ), ethical judgment differs significantly in vignette 2 (V2:  $p < .05$ ).

#### 4.2.3 Differences in Ethical Intention

Ethical intention is the subjective probability that a given behavioural alternative will be performed. In this study, the four vignettes used in assessing the respondents' ethical intentions all have expressions of unethical decisions. The results of the Wilcoxon rank-sum and Mann–Whitney, and Kruskal–Wallis tests of differences in ethical intention are presented in Table 7.

**Table 7: Wilcoxon rank-sum and Mann–Whitney, and Kruskal–Wallis tests (Ethical Intention)**

	V1	V2	V3	V4
<b><u>Test/Variables</u></b>				
<b><u>Wilcoxon rank-sum and Mann–Whitney (Z)</u></b>				
Gender	-0.90	-0.06	-0.37	-0.93
Types of Professional membership	-2.98**	-3.37**	-0.96	-2.91**
<b><u>Kruskal–Wallis test (<math>\chi^2</math>)</u></b>				
Age	6.73	3.21	1.05	6.70
Education	10.97**	1.71	1.98	5.48
Area of Accounting Specialisation	4.81	3.05	7.26	5.36
Economic status	7.25*	10.42**	13.69**	10.50**
Subculture	12.26*	4.35	4.78	9.92
Conscience	17.69**	18.05**	10.61	5.23
Peer influence	3.81	8.87	2.06	3.75

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$

Source: SPSS output, 2017

From Table 7, in each vignette, the Wilcoxon rank-sum and Mann–Whitney tests show no significant difference in ethical intention based on gender (V1 – V4:  $p > .05$ ). However, ethical intention differs significantly along types of professional membership in vignettes 1, 2, and 4 (V1 – V2, and V4:  $p < .01$ ), while no significant difference in ethical intention is seen in vignette 3 based on types of professional membership (V3:  $p > .05$ ). Also, in each vignette, the Kruskal-Wallis test shows no significant difference in ethical intention based on age grouping (V1 – V4:  $p > .05$ ), area of accounting specialisation (V1 – V4:  $p > .05$ ), and peer influence (V1 – V4:  $p > .05$ ).

Furthermore, while ethical intention differs significantly in vignette 1 based on educational level (V1:  $p < .01$ ), no significant difference in ethical intention is seen in vignettes 2, 3, and 4 based on educational level (V2 – V4:  $p > .05$ ). Also, in each vignette, ethical intention differs significantly based on economic status (V1:  $p < .05$ ; V2 – V4:  $p < .01$ ). In addition, while ethical intention differs significantly in vignette 1 based on subculture (V1:  $p < .05$ ), no significant difference is seen in ethical intention in vignettes 2, 3, and 4 (V2 – V4:  $p > .05$ ). Finally, ethical intention differs significantly in vignettes 1 and 2 based on conscience (V1 and V2:  $p < .01$ ), while no significant difference in ethical intention is seen in vignettes 3 and 4 (V3 and V4:  $p > .05$ ).

In summary, based on the results of the Wilcoxon rank-sum and Mann–Whitney, and Kruskal–Wallis tests for the three stages of ethical decision-making examined in this study, the null hypothesis, which states that there is no significant difference in the ethical decision-making process of accounting professionals in Nigeria based on their personal characteristics, is rejected. That is, apart from gender and age variables, the other variables (types of professional membership, education, area of accounting specialisation, economic status, subculture, conscience, and peer influence) in some ways show significant influence in the ethical decision-making process of accounting professionals in Nigeria.

### 4.3 Discussions

Based on gender, while male accounting professionals appear to be more ethically predisposed in decision-making than their female counterparts, no significant difference is found in the ethical decision-making process of accounting professionals in the four vignettes between the two genders. That is, male and female accounting professionals do not differ in their ethical decision-making process. These findings agree with Ajibolade *et al* (2014) and Musbah *et al.* (2016), who found no significant difference in ethical judgment and intention based on gender, but noted that male

accountants are more ethically predisposed than their female counterparts. The findings however contradict Becker and Ulstad (2007) and Ogunleye (2015), who found female to be more ethically predisposed than male. One reason for the non-significant difference in the ethical decision-making process of accounting professionals based on gender could be as suggested by the structural theory, which holds that male and female will not significantly differ in values on account of certain common factors such as work-related background and rewards system in the workplace (Musbah *et al.*, 2016). In general, these findings agree with O'Fallon and Butterfield (2005) and Craft (2013), who after reviewing over one hundred empirical studies related to gender and ethical decision-making, concluded that gender has no statistically significant influence on ethical decision-making.

Likewise, accounting professionals within ages 30 to 39 years appear to be more ethically sensitive, and those above 50 years are more ethically predisposed in judgment and decision-making. These findings in some ways agree with Kohlberg's theory of moral development, where it is expected that as an accounting professional grows older, he/she tends to be more ethically predisposed in judgment and decision-making (Kohlberg, 1973). The findings however indicate no significant difference in the ethical decision-making process based on age, which agree with Marques and Azevedo-Pereira (2009), who found no significant differences in ethical judgments between older and younger accountants. In addition, while the findings slightly agree with Ogunleye (2015) on age influence, they disagree on the negative effect of aging on ethical decision-making.

The findings also indicated that the ethical decision-making process of accounting professionals differs significantly along types of professional membership. Members of the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Nigeria (ICAN) appear to be more ethically predisposed than members of the Association of National Accountants of Nigeria (ANAN). These findings contradicted Ogunleye (2015), who found no support for a positive impact of professional qualification on accountants' ethical perception and disposition in Nigeria. The evidence provided in this study supports the argument that the ethical decision-making of accounting professional can be enhanced through professional membership, since these professional accounting bodies regularly expose their members to training, seminars, and conferences on contemporary ethical issues. This position agrees with the review of Craft (2013), who reported that professionals are more ethically inclined than non-professionals.

In addition, the study provided limited statistical support to suggest that the ethical decision-making process of accounting professionals differs based on educational attainment. These findings agree with Musbah *et al.* (2016), who found a slightly significant association between academic qualifications and ethical decision-making among Libyan management accountants. There was also statistical evidence that suggests that accounting professionals with a second degree or a Ph.D. degree are more ethically sensitive, and predisposed in judgment and decision-making. These findings provided some support for academic training or ethics education, which could enhance ethical recognition or sensitivity. Besides, Kohlberg's theory of cognitive moral development (Kohlberg, 1973) in some ways suggests a positive influence of education on moral judgment.

Similarly, in some ways, areas of accounting specialisation could possibly affect the ethical decision-making process of accounting professionals. As reported in the descriptive statistics, auditors appear to be more ethically sensitive, management accountants appear to be more ethically predisposed in judgments, while forensic accountants appear to be more ethically disposed in decision-making. Generally, while empirical evidence relating area of specialisation with ethical decision-making is sparse (O'Fallon & Butterfield, 2005; Craft, 2013), this study found slightly significant difference in the ethical decision-making process of accounting professionals based on areas of accounting specialisation. Possibly, this study may be among the few studies to have empirically investigated the association between area of specialisation and ethical decision-making process. This is because majority of business ethics studies are limited to a particular area of specialisation. Further empirical studies are therefore required to substantiate these findings.

Furthermore, the ethical decision-making process of accounting professionals differs significantly based on their economic status or income level, with high-income earners being more ethically sensitive, and predisposed in judgment and decision-making. There is strong statistical support for a positive influence of economic status in the ethical decision-making process of accounting professionals in Nigeria. These findings are consistent with Tang and Chiu (2003), who found high income to have no association with unethical behaviour. Choudhury *et al.* (2012) however revealed no significant association between income and ethical decision-making among business students. In general, the findings support the argument that unethical decision-making among accounting professional can be minimised if they are well remunerated. This is because; one way or the other, compromising ethical stance may have a relationship with inadequate pay package. This conclusion is based on Kohlberg's argument at the pre-conventional level of morality, where punishment and reward are associated with morality (see Kohlberg, 1973).

Also, in a very limited way, subculture could possibly influence an accounting professional's ethical decision-making process. As reported in the descriptive statistics, accounting professionals from the North-East are more ethically sensitive, and ethically predisposed in judgment and decision-making. These findings partially agree with Ogunleye (2015), who found significant association between subculture and ethical perception and disposition of accountants in Nigeria. Generally, while there is relatively scarce empirical evidence relating subculture with ethical decision-making among accounting professionals, the results from the few studies have been inconsistent (O'Fallon & Butterfield, 2005; Craft, 2013). Future empirical investigation may provide more evidence to establish a consensus position on the association between subculture and ethical decision-making.

The ethical decision-making process of accounting professionals also differs significantly based on conscience influence. Generally, there is sparse empirical evidence on the influence of conscience on the ethical decision-making process of accounting professionals in business ethics literature (O'Fallon & Butterfield, 2005; Craft, 2013). However, from studies outside business clime, it has been largely established that conscience is a major navigator guiding ethical values. Thilly (1900) found that certain feelings and impulses surround the idea of a deed and lead individuals to make judgments. The findings agree with Lyons (2009), who found that conscience is the inner voice of special moral illumination and of incontrovertible moral authority, which reveals itself inwardly and unavoidably in consciousness and warns us to do good and avoid evil, and condemns us when we fail. It could be argued that Kohlberg's universal ethical principles at stage six of the theory of cognitive moral development may be linked to an active conscience that ought to guide the conduct of every individual irrespective of societal norms or legal laws (see Kohlberg, 1973). Furthermore, the findings indicated that accounting professionals influenced by conscience in decision-making are more ethically sensitive and predisposed in ethical judgment and decision-making.

Finally, the findings suggest that in a very limited way the ethical sensitivity of accounting professionals differs based on the influence of peers, and that accounting professionals who are influenced a little or not by peers are more ethically sensitive and predisposed in ethical judgment and decision-making. These findings agree partially with Razzaque and Hwee (2002) who found no significant association between peer and ethical decision-making and partially with Flynn and Wiltermuth (2010) who found that peers and social groups have an impact on ethical decision-making. Generally, there is limited empirical evidence regarding the association between peer and ethical decision-making (O'Fallon & Butterfield, 2005). The few studies available have been inconsistent in their findings (Craft, 2013).

## **5 Conclusion**

This study examined differences in the ethical decision-making process of accounting professionals in Nigeria based on personal characteristics. The study concludes that types of professional membership would contribute significantly in enhancing an accounting professional's ethical decision-making process. Also, the income level or economic status of an accounting professional

would significantly affect his/her decision-making process on ethical issues. Equally, the conscience of an accounting professional is a significant influencer of his/her ethical decision-making process; especially, when the impulses of the conscience are followed. Furthermore, the educational attainment and area of accounting specialisation of an accounting professional, and peer influence would have little effect on his/her ethical decision-making process, while the gender and age of an accounting professional would really not affect his/her ethical decision-making process.

### **Implications for practice and theory**

This study has been able to provide empirical evidence on the differences in ethical decision-making process of accounting professionals based on personal characteristics. It has also added to the few accounting ethics literature in developing countries by focusing on accounting professionals in Nigeria, which has lacked sufficient research evidence despite the prevalence of unethical accounting practices in corporate Nigeria. The evidence presented in this study in the context of Nigeria provides support for Kohlberg's cognitive moral development theory. It also provides evidence to suggest that the ethical decision-making process of accounting professionals in Nigeria can be enhanced by interventions in personal characteristics. For example, negotiating a good pay package for an accounting professional could motivate and influence his/her ethical decision-making process.

One major implication of this study is that it will draw the attention of professional accounting bodies in Nigeria to re-examine their stance on ethical issues relating to the profession. The findings on conscience influence on the ethical decision-making process of accounting professionals could possibly add to theory of moral development.

### **5.1 Limitation and Future research**

Like many business ethics studies, this study has its own limitations. First, non-parametric tests were performed to make inferences, which have a way of limiting the generalisation of the findings of the study. Perhaps, the test of hypothesis may differ if a parametric test like independent sample t-test or one-way ANOVA test was used. Also, given the fact that accounting ethics literature is sparse in Nigeria, there were limited studies to compare the results of this study. Finally, there are other personal variables that were not examined in this study, which could add new empirical evidence to the business ethics literature if examined. Thus, more research efforts are needed in the area of accounting ethics in Nigeria. Hitherto, there is still a dearth of empirical evidence on accounting ethics studies in Nigeria. In addition, future studies should be conducted using more advanced methodologies to provide empirical explanation on the effect of these variables on the ethical decision-making process of accounting professionals. This study recommends that an experimental research may be adopted in future research.

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