

Developing a framework for unethical consumer behaviour: a qualitative study in two countries

Framework for unethical consumer behaviour

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper examines factors that lead consumers to engage in unethical consumer behaviour (UECB) to develop a framework for understanding this phenomenon.

Design/methodology/approach – The study data were collected using the qualitative approach by conducting personal interviews with 27 marketers in two Arab countries, Libya and Syria.

Findings – The findings indicate that previous models of UECB are applicable to Arab consumers. However, the effects of the examined factors on UECB adoption are influenced by the local environment. Also, the paper explored some newly factors that clearly affect UECB.

Practical implications – This study provides a model of UECB for Arab consumers to help companies to understand Arab consumers' behaviour. This model determines the influencing factors on this behaviour that companies can use to build their marketing strategies directed at the Libyan and Syrian markets during the reconstruction phase. Moreover, the research results help companies avoid and control UECB.

Originality/value – Almost all studies of UECB have been conducted in Western countries; the present study attempts to address this gap in the ethical decision-making literature, as well as marketing literature, and examine the UECB in Arab countries. Furthermore, previous studies of UECB mostly look at one typical form of UECB; this study provides a broader contribution to the literature on UECB by using a set of scenarios; shoplifting, software piracy and pilfering from hotel rooms.

Keywords Ethics, Shoplifting, Software piracy, Pilfering, Theory of planned behaviour, Qualitative research
Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Unethical consumer behaviour (UECB) is one of the critically neglected areas of consumer behaviour (Dootson *et al.*, 2022). Although, there are some studies focussed on UECB aimed at developing an understanding of the consumer predispositions to make such behaviour (Dootson *et al.*, 2022; Fukukawa, 2002; Fukukawa *et al.*, 2007; Shaw and Clarke, 1999; Tonglet, 2002). Furthermore, the result of these studies cannot be generalized as consumer predispositions for such behaviours differ from one environment to another (Dootson *et al.*, 2022). These differences reflect cultural, economic, legal and social variables (Al-Khatib *et al.*, 2005; Fukukawa *et al.*, 2007). UECB is defined as “behaviour in exchange settings which

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violates the generally accepted norms of conduct in such situations and which is therefore held in disrepute by marketers and most consumers.” (Fullerton and Punj, 1993; Lugosi, 2019).

The theory of planned behaviour (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991) can be considered an appropriate initial theoretical framework to guide UECB studies (Chang, 1998; Fukukawa, 2002; King *et al.*, 2007; Potdar *et al.*, 2017; Shaw *et al.*, 2000; Shoham *et al.*, 2008) as it identifies the various factors which influence the intention to perform UECB (Fukukawa *et al.*, 2007; Korgaonkar *et al.*, 2020). Given this and to better understand the UECB phenomenon in the Arab region, the current study set out to develop an advanced model of UECB for the Arabic consumer based on TPB (Ajzen, 1991) and the developed model of (Fukukawa *et al.*, 2007) to determine the influences and motivating factors on UECB and rank these factors based on their strength of influence in the Arab consumers UECB adoption. The factors that were included in this conceptual framework (Figure 1) are divided into three groups based on their origins; firstly, a group was derived from the literature (attitudes, demographic characteristics, social and cultural factors). Secondly, a group was derived from the literature and developed in this study by adding two elements (consumer perceptions of unfairness and the degree of perceived behavioural control). Finally, a new factor somewhat neglected in previous UECB models and studies has been included (e.g. availability/necessity).

2. Research problem

The research problem can be summarised in the following research questions: first, what factors lead some Arab consumers to engage in UECB? Second, what types of UECB form in the Arab region? Third, are there similarities or differences between these factors and factors reported in previous studies outside the Arab region? And fourth, how the political turmoil and wars in the Arab world influence consumers to adopt unethical behaviours like shoplifting?

The contribution of this paper is two-fold, theoretical and practical. Theoretically, only a few studies concerning UECB have been conducted in the Arab region (Dabil, 2009); epically after 2011 since the Arab countries have been affected by the political turmoil, violence and wars, where essential shifts have happened in social, economic, political and legal circumstances. These shifts are expected to create changes in consumer behaviour; thus, the current study will contribute to the consumer behaviour literature by examining the multiple dimensions affecting the UECB among Arab consumers and the methods of control of this behaviour.

Practically, UECB can impose serious financial, physical and psychological problems upon marketing institutions, employees and consumers (Aloysius *et al.*, 2019; Fullerton and Punj, 1993; Korgaonkar *et al.*, 2020; Wilson *et al.*, 2022). Also, it causes social costs, such as

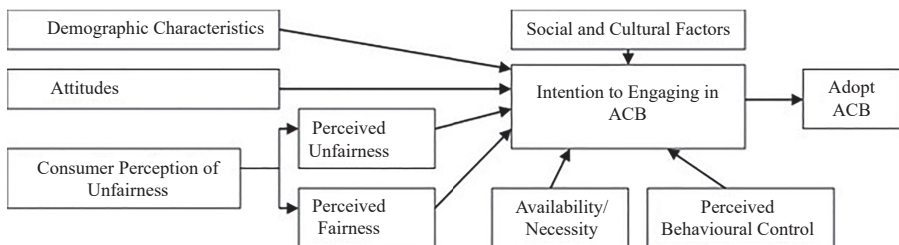


Figure 1. Conceptual framework for consumer unethical behaviour, adapted from TPB

Source(s): (Ajzen, 1991)

costs to the criminal justice system, tax losses, violence and disruption (de Boissieu and Urien, 2022; Fullerton and Punj, 1993). Such serious implications go with the reality that when international companies enter emerging markets like Arab markets, it will not be easy to select suitable UECB treatment methods. In addition, to date, we can confidently say that almost all of the previous UECB studies have been conducted in non-Arab countries. In addition, most prevention and control methods have been examined and developed based on consumer behaviours in non-Arab countries. With this, the current study, through understanding the UECB in the Arab region, will try to bridge this gap and figure out *how companies can apply some control and prevention practices to control UECB and reduce its negative effect?*

3. Literature review

3.1 Theory of planned behaviour (TPB)

The TPB (Ajzen, 1991) can be considered an appropriate initial theoretical framework to guide ethical consumer studies as it has been widely and directly applied to investigate various issues in consumer ethics (Liu *et al.*, 2020; Wang *et al.*, 2022). For example, it was used to study consumer environmental behaviour (Djafarova and Foots, 2022) and software piracy (Ahadiat *et al.*, 2021; Kuo and Hsu, 2001), and ethics in the medical profession (Zhong *et al.*, 2022). Additionally, many studies have adopted TBP as an initial framework to investigate ethical consumer behaviour (Lee *et al.*, 2018; Singh *et al.*, 2021; Sun, 2020). Furthermore, TPB embraces the common factors that have been either discussed and/or examined by these studies (Fukukawa *et al.*, 2007). TPB has also been used to investigate various consumer ethical behaviours and has been applied as an ethical decision-making model. This model captures the various influencing factors of UECB and explains their influence on performance intention. TPB has suggested that the intention to perform each behaviour can be predicted with high accuracy, based on attitudes towards the behaviour, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control. Kuo and Hsu (2001) used the theory of planned behaviour (TPB) to develop an ethical computer self-efficacy scale to predict software piracy.

The theory provides a general model of voluntary human behaviour, since it considers behaviour as a direct function of intention. The theory suggests that behavioural intention to perform behaviour is influenced by three dimensions: a person's attitude, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control (Ajzen, 2020). A person's attitude towards behaviour reflects his/her evaluation of it, as well as the likelihood of engaging in it. It can also refer to the level an individual engages in that behaviour (Fukukawa, 2002). The subjective norm concerns the extent to which other people important to a respondent approve or disapprove of the behaviour (Djafarova and Foots, 2022). Perceived behavioural control refers to the behaviours' ease or difficulty (Ajzen, 2020).

3.2 Unethical consumer behaviour (UECB)

A wide range of terms and definitions have been developed to describe UECB concepts (Dootson *et al.*, 2022). One of the first definitions of this behaviour was created by Mills and Bonoma (1979), referring to UECB as "Deviant Consumer Behaviour" and this in turn points to "behaviour in a retail store that society considers inappropriate or in conflict with a previously accepted social norm. The second definition conducted by Fullerton and Punj (1993), is "behaviour in exchange settings which violates the generally accepted norms of conduct in such situations and which is therefore held in disrepute by marketers and by most consumers. In this definition, Fullerton and Punj implied that UECB covers one or more of these actions: destroying companies' property, ill-treatment, threatening and the physical and

psychological nuisance of other clients and workers. Whereas (Fullerton and Punj, 1993) used the expression “Consumer Misbehaviour” as an equivalent of UECB, the term “Consumer Misbehaviour” has also been adopted by other studies for example (Albers-Miller, 1999; Bhattacharjee and Purohit, 2021; Rummelshagen and Benkenstein, 2019; Shambare *et al.*, 2022; Smyczek *et al.*, 2020; Tonglet, 2002). The current study will adopt the term “Unethical Consumer Behaviour” because it comes with the most comprehensive definition of this kind of behaviour and it has been successfully examined in service and industrial sectors (Fukukawa *et al.*, 2007).

3.3 Determinants of unethical consumer behaviour (UECB) model

According to the literature, UECB is influenced and motivated by demographic characteristics, attitudes, and consumer perceptions of unfairness. This conceptual framework we test in the current study (Figure 1) suggests that UECB is one form of consumer response to firm performance. To take a closer look at these determinants and to tackle the link between them and UECB, we will explain it in more detail in the following subparagraphs.

3.3.1 Demographic characteristics. Many previous studies show that there is a clear effect of demographic characteristics on adopting some forms of UECB such as gender (Delbos and Currie, 2019; Gibbens and Prince, 1962; Ribeiro *et al.*, 2020) and age (Agnihotri and Bhattacharya, 2019; Babin and Griffin, 1995; Cox *et al.*, 1990). However, these factors are not included in previous UECB models and theories (Ajzen, 1991; Fukukawa, 2002). In addition, demographic characteristics have been confirmed as factors influencing consumer behaviour in general (Kotler and Keller, 2011; Leischnig and Woodside, 2019).

3.3.2 Attitudes. According to Ajzen and Fishbein, the attitude towards behaviour is defined as “a person’s general feeling of favourableness or unfavourableness for that behaviour (Ajzen and Fishbein, 1977). In this study, the attitude has been measured on multi-item scales with the endpoint to the variables such as good-bad, wise-foolish (Chang, 1998) and the outcome to an actor, suppliers and other consumers (Agnihotri and Bhattacharya, 2019; Fukukawa *et al.*, 2007).

3.3.3 Consumer perceived unfairness. From the perspective of Equity Theory (Cheng *et al.*, 2020), Some UECB studies found that the consumer can decide to engage in UECB as a punishment for a company’s unfairness in order to restore equity (Fukukawa *et al.*, 2007; Zourrig and Park, 2019). Back to the dimensions of justice, the current study has examined the three perspectives of distributive justice, equity need and equality (Colquitt, 2001). Moving to procedural justice (Nagin and Telep, 2020); Leventhal *et al.* (1980) found that consistency, accuracy, free from bias, correctability, ethicality and representativeness can be used to evaluate procedural justice (Leventhal *et al.*, 1980; Nagin and Telep, 2020). These factors have been integrated into the measurements of this study, except representativeness as it is not applicable to the consumer. Thibaut and Walker (1975) also mentioned two criteria for judging procedural justice: process control (such as the ability to voice one’s views and arguments during a procedure) and decision control (like the ability to influence the actual outcome itself). These two criteria have also been included in the measurements (Röhl, 2019). The last dimension represented by interactional justice can be examined in two groups (Bacile *et al.*, 2018; Colquitt, 2001; Shapiro *et al.*, 1994). These groups are interpersonal justice which includes respect and propriety, and informational justice, which provides justification and truthfulness. In the current study, propriety will not be examined as it is not applicable to the consumer.

3.3.4 Availability/necessity. Not only do perceptions of unfairness cause the adoption of UECB, but consumers who perceive fairness may also adopt UECB. UECB adoption is due to other factors such as availability and necessity (Ju and Lee, 2020) which refer to the potential

for the consumer to behave conventionally and obey ethical norms. For example, there is a severe shortage of the original editions of software programs in the Libyan and Syrian markets; accordingly, software piracy would be an unavoidable option for some consumers. Thus availability/necessity here refers to the extent to which a consumer is forced to act in a certain way out of necessity (Feil *et al.*, 2020).

3.3.5 Degree of perceived behavioural control. Goles *et al.* (2008) found that awareness of the law significantly reduced a favourable attitude towards software piracy. In this study, the degree of perceived behavioural control has been evaluated on four levels: control level in exchanging places (e.g. store and hotel) (Chang, 1998), awareness of the law (Goles *et al.*, 2008), the possibility of law avoidance (Hardeck *et al.*, 2021) and the existence of opportunities to act unethically (Fukukawa *et al.*, 2007; Tonglet, 2002).

3.3.6 Social and cultural factors. The constructs of the “subjective norm” in TPB is narrow (Miniard and Cohen, 1981). Therefore, Klobas and Clyde (2000) proposed broadening it into social influence. Thus, social influence has been used in this study instead of “subjective norm” (Agnihotri and Bhattacharya, 2019). Religion is considered a fundamental determinant of culture which significantly influences consumer unethical perceptions (Agag and Colmekcioglu, 2020; Babakus *et al.*, 2004). However, this variable has been largely ignored in the literature (Cornwell *et al.*, 2005). Therefore, the influence of religion on UECB (Singh *et al.*, 2021) adoption has been examined in this study. Other cultural factors like the power distance effect and customs and traditions play a significant role in the consumers’ behaviour.

3.4 Libya and Syria as an Arab countries

Two Arab countries, Libya and Syria as the representative of the two main areas of the Arab world and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) were selected to discover the UECB among Arab consumers. In recent years, both countries faced many political, economic and social issues and problems, which affected the traditional consumption pattern and drove many consumers to be involved in UECB activities.

After more than 10 years of the Syrian war, the conflict in Syria continues to take a significant toll on the lives of the Syrian people and the Syrian economy. In 2022, the World Bank concluded that the conflict destroyed about one-third of Syria’s housing stock and half of its health and education facilities. According to The World Bank (2022), a cumulative total of \$226 billion in GDP was lost due to the conflict from 2011 to 2016. The situation is not much different in the case of Libya, whereas UNSMIL estimates that at least 400,000 Libyans have been internally displaced by the war since 2011, while a further 150,000 people. These facts and trends underscore the need to explore more about the changes in consumption patterns and how these circumstances may lead the Arab consumers, especially in countries that faced major disruptions like Libya and Syria, to engage in unusual behaviours like shoplifting or at least justify doing it.

4. Methodology and research design

4.1 The selected scenarios of consumer theft as a form of UECB

Although UECB takes many forms, the current study focuses on *theft behaviour*, which has been examined in the current study through three scenarios: *shoplifting, stealing from hotel rooms and software piracy*.

4.2 Philosophy and approach

This study has adopted a positivist philosophical position since the conceptual framework is based on an adapted revision of the theory of planned behaviour TPB (Ajzen, 1991) and the

research aims to test if this theory applies to Arab consumers' unethical behaviour. As a result of its ability to explore and gain in-depth information, the qualitative interview has been widely accepted by social science researchers as a form of inquiry (Merriam, 1998) and used to collect data through a sample of 27 Libyan and Syrian marketers (14 interviews in Libya and 13 interviews in Syria) and were interviewed face-to-face in a semi-structured format in Arabic. Table 1 provides demographic and business participants' information. The interviewees only included four females, one in Libya and three in Syria. Most of the marketers who participated in the study interviews had sufficient experience, which gave them a piece of good knowledge about this kind of unethical behaviour.

4.3 Reliability and validity

One way of assessing reliability in qualitative research is peer review. The role of this evaluation is defined as "an individual who keeps the researcher honest; asks a hard question about methods, meanings, and interpretations; and provides the researcher with an opportunity for catharsis by sympathetically listening to the research's feelings" (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). This study conducted this peer review by asking academic experts familiar with the research topic to evaluate the interview questions. Some questions were modified based on this evaluation.

In addition, the researcher can "become part of the study in qualitative research where he/she reflects both his/her values and interests as well as the nature of the phenomenon" (Crane, 1999). Reliability of qualitative research can therefore be achieved by tracing the research process stage by stage. The researcher should clarify the theoretical development so that it

Gender	Line of business	Job title	Countries of interviewees	Period of experience
Male	Small Grocery Shop	Seller	Libya	7 years
Female	Small Grocery Shop	Shop Owner	Syria	18 years
Male	Small Grocery Shop	Shop Owner	Libya	20 years
Male	Medium Grocery Store	Shop Owner	Syria	23 years
Male	Medium Grocery Store	Shop Owner	Syria	18 years
Male	Medium Grocery Store	Shop Owner	Libya	10 years
Male	Medium Grocery Store	Store Manager	Syria	6 years
Male	Supermarket	Supermarkets Manager	Libya	9 years
Female	Supermarket	Floor Manager	Syria	4 years
Male	Supermarket	Supermarkets Manager	Libya	8 years
Male	Small Computer Store	Seller	Syria	6 years
Male	Small Computer Store	Technician and Seller	Syria	5 years
Male	Small Computer Store	Seller	Libya	6 years
Male	Small Computer Store	Technician and Seller	Syria	3 years
Male	Small Computer Store	Store Owner	Libya	1½ year
Male	Small Computer Store	Technician and Seller	Libya	7 years
Male	Small Computer Store	Store Owner	Syria	4 years
Male	Medium Computer Store	Sales Manager	Libya	4 years
Female	Medium Computer Store	Store Owner	Syria	6 years
Male	Medium Computer Store	Technician and Seller	Libya	10 years
Male	Medium Computer Store	Accountant	Libya	12 years
Male	Public – 3 Stars Hotel	Rooms Manager	Syria	24 years
Male	Public – 4 Stars Hotel	Hospitality Unit Manager	Libya	18 years
Male	Private – 4 Stars Hotel	Reception Manager	Syria	9 years
Female	Private – 4 Stars Hotel	Reception Manager	Syria	6 years
Male	Private – 4 Stars Hotel	Floors Manager	Libya	2 years
Male	Public – 5 Stars Hotel	Rooms Manager	Libya	8 years

Table 1.
Description of the used sample

can be understood and followed by fellow researchers (Fukukawa *et al.*, 2007). Creswell and Poth (2016) also suggests that in qualitative research reliability is enhanced if the researcher makes detailed field notes and discusses these in relation to their findings. Therefore, the data collection procedures and analysis in this study were recorded in detail and as precisely as possible in the next sections.

The second aspect of the data validation instrument is validity. Validity is defined as the “extent to which an instrument measures what is claimed to measure” (Punch, 2013). Several types of assessment validity are suggested in the social research literature, and the classifications of these types are various (Burns and Burns, 2008; Churchill and Iacobucci, 2006). Selecting the validation methods should depend on the research situation as there is no foolproof technique (Punch, 2013). Our study adopted “face validity” also known as content validity (Churchill and Iacobucci, 2006) as a validation method, this type of validity focuses on whether the measure adequately represents the entire concept that is the focus of attention. As consensus among the literature is used to determine this type of validity (Nardi, 2018) a comprehensive literature review was conducted in order to design the current research measurements. Also, face validity is determined in our study by asking experts in the field to act as judges to determine whether or not the measure seems to reflect the concept concerned (Bell *et al.*, 2022).

In more detail, the acknowledged experts in the research area from Libya, the UK and the USA were provided with an overview of the research, which included the research problems, questions, aims, methodology and design, as well as the research’s conceptual framework. With this overview, the researcher sent an evaluation form which the experts completed. The reviewers were asked to evaluate the measurements in relation to their representativeness of the research aim, the measures’ ability to capture the research constructs, and the measures’ representativeness of the research constructs. The reviewers were asked to review three aspects of the interview questions: the quality of comprehension, how well it captures the information and how well it represents the research aim. Also, the experts were asked to make suggestions for improvement in the interview questions.

4.4 Fieldwork setting, interview design and sampling

The data of this study were collected from two cities, Damascus, the Syrian city and Benghazi, the Libyan city. The English version of the interview schedule is included in [appendix](#). The units of analysis in this phase are individual “marketers” who were identified as the person in each grocery store, computer store or hotel who was the most qualified to provide the required information. A convenience sample was selected using snowball sampling techniques. After 27 interviews (10 in grocery stores, 11 in computer stores and 6 in hotels), no new themes were generated. With the data now saturated, no more interviews were conducted (Bloor and Wood, 2006).

5. Data analysis and results

Data analysis documented two main topics: first, how Arab marketers identify and perceive the UECB created and adapted by consumers. Second, the effecting and motivation factors influencing and motivating UECB adoption between Arab customers. It is necessary to remark that these cases were closely related between Libya and Syria and were directly and obviously linked with the political turmoil and economic environment under this turmoil. Several sub-topics were also recognized and examined in this part for each of these two main topics.

5.1 Perspectives and statements of UECB

The interviewees covered three sectors, retail business, hotels and software shops, shoplifting, pilfering from hotels and software piracy. Whereas most of the known consumer theft

techniques suit the broad class of consumer theft presented in the literature, Arab consumers do utilize particular ways and methods in using this form of UECEB.

5.1.1 Shoplifting. Shoplifting is not restricted to robbing products from a shop; consumers use various shoplifting techniques. For instance, some consumers change product prices at a lower price (Fukukawa *et al.*, 2007; Wirtz, 2016) and “borrowing of products” or “cancellation the deal” (Fukukawa *et al.*, 2007). They show that shoplifting was popular in all the studied shops. Nevertheless, some shoplifting techniques used by Libyan and Syrian consumers varied somewhat from those recognized in the literature. These differences can be attached to economic and social circumstances. For instance, contrary to the Western countries where big companies dominate business, in most Arab countries, there are no large retail chains and similarly in the hospitality sector. Hence, owner-managers create their rules rather than obey corporation rules. One of the shoplifting techniques adopted by Libyan consumers was described by one of the interviewees in this case:

One of the buyers used to calculate the prices and tell me the cost. When I reviewed it, I found it was the correct cost. After replicating this many times and winning my trust, every time this buyer came to the shop, he intentionally decreased the sum by LYD 4 -or LYD 9 (approximately 3–7 US Dollars).

A marketer from Syria proclaimed that even the big and heavy items may get stole and provided this story:

Two women came to the supermarket and asked for some goods. These goods were present at the bottom (under the main table), so the seller bowed for a few minutes, and when he raised his head, he did not find the two women; after that, it was found that the two women stole a large box of canned Mortadella, and fled.

Another instance of shoplifting techniques is when shoplifters replace the brand with another brand, which may be a copycat brand or have a lower price. This shoplifting technique is comparable to price label switching for a lower price (Fukukawa *et al.*, 2007; Wirtz, 2016). The following example was provided by one of the interviewees from Syria as an illustration of this approach:

There are some fake brands in the marketplace; some customers order the foreign commodity, and while the seller is busy bringing it or bringing another commodity that the customer or someone with him has requested, after which the customer replaces the original product with a counterfeit one with the same name, shape and packaging, difficult to detect. Then the customer leaves without buying the piece, on the pretext that it is expensive.

5.1.2 Pilfering from hotel. The study findings indicated that pilfering was popular in all the sampled hotels. That is consistent with the previous studies' findings (Gill *et al.*, 2002; Pratt, 2022). Like many cases in the grocery store, the thefts included light and easy-to-carry items such as towels, a teapot, a coffee pot, spoons, forks and other items that could easily be stolen. Libyan hotel owner adds that towels were very high on the index of taken room things. Though hotel guests stole some oversized items like TVs. the following example provided by the Syrian hotel manager supports and intersects with the proclamation of the Libyan hotel owner.

Someday, after a TV set malfunctioned in one of the hotel rooms, it was taken for repair and discovered that the interior parts were stolen from the heart of the TV Obviously, the thief had reinstalled it undoubtedly that there is something taken from this TV, the hotel owner said.

Both hotel managers in Syria and Libya agree that avoidance of payment is a daily problem with hotel customers; some of them used strange ways to do that, as we can see from this Syrian case.

The customer left some items in the room to suggest to the hotel management that he would return them shortly, but he didn't return them, and upon examining these things, it turns out that they are old, frayed items that are not needed.

Consumers also use another circuitous route to avoid paying the whole cost; a Syrian marketer declared the following:

Some customers are trying to defraud the hotel by not registering the entire people who come with it, registering its name only, and not declaring the rest in order to reduce the amount that must be paid to each person.

The important point here is that the small stolen items were not considered a problem by almost all interviewees in the two countries.

5.1.3 Software piracy. Two previous scenarios clearly show marketers are annoying and do not accept this kind of behaviour. Interestingly, in both Arab countries, Libya and Syria, software piracy is not considered theft behaviour, unlike it, is perceived as acceptable and justified by most marketers. Therefore, some of them showed surprise at the interview questions. One of the interviewees from Libya asked:

Why do you ask about this behaviour? Do you think it is forbidden?

Another Libyan interviewee shares the same opinion about considering software piracy as misbehaviour. Moreover, he gave an exceptional reason for choosing such behaviour. He stated:

I don't think software piracy is incorrect behaviour. Nevertheless, software corporations are accountable for the extensive nature of this behaviour in Libya. They do not have any office in Libya; they should understand that we require their software in our market. They do not care about our needs. Consequently, we haven't any other choice?

The entire absence of any appearance of software corporations in Libya is perceived as giving an essential explanation for this behaviour. Accordingly, this behaviour was not viewed as misbehaviour by marketers. Besides, they did not acknowledge that a fundamental law in Libya could be applied to software piracy. Almost all the software marketers believed that once the consumer had obtained the software, they had a license to do anything with it. One marketer stated:

This kind of behaviour may produce a decline in our store profits. Nevertheless, when the consumer purchases software that implies it has become his or hers, so they have a license to copy it.

In Syria, the situation is not very different; one of the sellers interviewed, confirms this by saying:

Pirated software is useful for college students because it saves them a lot of financial burdens that many cannot afford. Not all students have the ability to purchase the original copy of this or that program, and at the same time, they cannot dispense with it, so if the original copy of the "Office" program – as the seller says – is \$70.

One of the sellers interviewed in Syria explains the reason for doing this kind of behaviour by the imbalance between average per capita income and global prices for these programs, and he says the following.

Economic sanctions prevented us from purchasing the original programs and selling them, so now you can see in the software market the increasing movement of buying and selling pirated software.

The owners of stores specializing in selling software in Syria intersect with the opinion of marketers in Libya, where they refuse to consider this behaviour illegal.

I refuse to talk about software piracy as bad behaviour, because we provide an excellent service to many customers and make these programs available with fit prices, the shop owner says.

5.2 UECB motivating and influencing factors (testing the conceptual framework)

The collected data were rich, and the interviewees' narratives revealed some new motivating and influencing factors. In parallel, the study findings continued to explore some unique

alternative UECB controlling and preventative practices used by the Arab marketers which are considered socially acceptable.

5.2.1 *Political turmoil and economic implications.* The result of this study showed clearly that the political turmoil significantly affects the adoption of the UECB among Arab consumers. This turmoil in many Arab countries, especially in Libya and Syria, caused many changes in the social fabric. In addition, watching and hearing the daily violent news causes cold emotions or indifference; this kind of feeling is generated by comparing the UECB forms (e.g. shoplifting from the grocery store) with some recent horrible news. Syrian lady said to the seller we interviewed in Damascus after he noticed her when theft a shampoo bottle from his shop:

Many people are died and injured every week, and you are caring about a small shampoo bottle; it is a shame; you should forgive me and give it to me as help since you have not died yet in this war.

All the marketers we interviewed with them in Libya and Syria agree that this kind of misbehaviour increased in recent years because of the war; a marketer from Libya stated that *after the war started, a new social class emerged that did not exist before the war; this category of consumers began practicing these behaviours without any moral or legal deterrent.*

This political turmoil created many economic changes such as an economic downturn, loss of employment, increased product prices, and a significant decrease in the purchasing power of local currencies; all of these factors were pointed to as the main cause of the increase in UECB adoption in the Arab countries. A grocery shop owner from Syria said in the interview:

The circumstances of the war and the economic outcomes are too bad. The external embargo inflicted on the country drives to increase in the prices of the products; also, inflation and cost of living, all these conditions have led to increased unethical behaviours in the last years.

5.2.2 *Social and cultural factors.* According to marketers in all three scenarios, social and cultural factors have a substantial effect on two facets of UECB: how marketers deal with the problem and which segments of consumers engage in this behaviour. In the following lines, we will talk in more detail about these two facets.

5.2.2.1 *Social and cultural factors effect on controlling UECB.* In countries where is, where are still classified as conservative societies like Arab countries, it would not be possible to apply prevention and control techniques that are not compatible with prevailing cultural values. In the current study, although Libya and Syria seem to be liberal countries, religion, customs and traditions still have a strong effect on Libyans' and Syrians' behaviour. The clearest example of the role of prevailing cultural values in consumer behaviour is the way that store seller deals with women who make UECB. It is sensitive in Arab culture for male guards and/or sellers to be watching or checking female consumers. A store owner from Libya provided this example:

I noted a couple whose manner in moving around the shop made me suspicious that they aimed to shoplift. Therefore, I asked one of the assistants to watch them. When the man noticed that he complained angrily and said: "Your employee is behaving very rudely and unacceptably because he is looking at my wife."

Marketers avoid such situations because it might affect the store/hotel's reputation. Secondly, many shop interviewees said they would not arrest a female offender inside the shop because they feared that this offender would say that ". . . *I did not steal, but the seller tried to hide his attempt to molest me*". This can put the seller in serious difficulty.

In addition to limitations due to prevailing cultural values, social pressures and Arab cultural norms also limit marketers' reactions towards UECB offenders in the Arab world. These limitations are due to three factors: The first social and cultural factors are "high power

distance.”; thus, older people (e.g. over 45 years old) are respected. Hence, older consumers/guests were not watched or checked so closely by staff when they were shopping or staying at hotels, and clearly, this situation could provide an opportunity to engage in UECB. However, almost all interviewees said that many cases of consumer theft were conducted by a consumer/guest of older age (i.e. 45 years or above). The importance of family in Arab society applies to a second factor that limits marketers’ reactions towards UECB in the Arab world. Family links are much more rigid and highly emphasized in the Arab world compared to the West (Hammad *et al.*, 1999). Thus, marketers avoid reactions that can badly influence the consumer’s/guest’s family. The final social and cultural factor which limits marketers’ reactions towards UECB in the Arab world is the importance of maintaining a good social network. As Arabic society is a collectivist society (Hall and Herrington, 2010) when marketers have problems with their consumers, they prefer to solve the problem by using social channels first, like shaming or rebuking and the social network, by contacting the consumer’s family, friends, relatives or neighbours.

5.2.2.2 The effect of the social and cultural factors on UECB adoption. The limitations in UECB control and prevention practices evidenced above significantly affect the adoption of some forms of UECB. Additionally, the social evaluation of UECB also influences the level of adoption of this behaviour in society. This effect is illustrated by two points: increased UECB adoption by some consumer segments and increasing adoption of the more socially acceptable forms of UECB. First, an increase in UECB adoption by some consumer segments is due to the fact that a person’s age and gender can provide opportunities for some consumers to engage in UECB activities.

Secondly, the effect of social and cultural factors on UECB adoption is increasing the adoption of the more socially acceptable forms of UECB. Previous studies have found that the social evaluation of UECB differs based on its form (Fukukawa *et al.*, 2007). If there is a social acceptance of UECB, marketers may make excuses for the offenders and they will not apply strong controlling or preventative practices against it. For example, software piracy is socially acceptable in Libya and Syria, which affects the application of laws and creates an unwillingness to use deterrent regulations that govern software piracy. Although all of these social limitations, several Syrian marketers underestimated the social role in decreasing this bad behaviour; a hotel owner from Syria provided a reasonable explanation for it:

There is an increase in the cases of this behaviour, and who do this behaviour do not care about the opinion of the community or the religion rule, if they are caring, would never do anything like that.

5.2.3 *Demographic characteristics.* As discussed previously, almost all interviewees emphasized that UECB adoption by Libyan and Syrian consumers is strongly affected by age, gender and education. In addition, the war circumstances in recent years played a significant role in changing the demographic characteristic and population structure of the whole society.

5.2.4 *Perceptions of justice.* In addition to the above factors, perceptions of justice influence UECB adoption. For example, most marketers said that many consumers argue about the price, and others ask for additional special offers. Consumers also felt they should receive special treatment as they are loyal to one shop. Distributive justice is defined as “the perceived fairness of resources received” (Cropanzano *et al.*, 2001); consumer complaints about price reflect this justice dimension. While, asking for special treatment reflects the notion of interactional justice, as it is defined as the perceived fairness of the quality of interpersonal treatment during the enactment of procedures (Bies, 1986).

5.2.5 *Availability/necessity.* The results show that not only do perceptions of unfairness encourage the adoption of UECB, but consumers who perceive fairness may also adopt UECB. This adoption is also due to factors such as availability and opportunity. Availability here refers to the availability of normal consumer behaviour. For example, there is an intense

shortage of the original editions of software programs in the Libyan and Syrian markets. Therefore, the analysis shows that almost all the software in the Libyan and Syrian markets is copied. Thus, software piracy is not only adopted by consumers, but marketers also adopt it. However, the interviewees did not view software piracy as UECB.

5.2.6 Additional UECB motivating and influencing factors. Although [Fullerton and Punj \(1993\)](#) argued that the consumer is more prone to victimize large rather than small businesses, the results show that some consumers adopted UECB even when they had good relationships with the marketers. As marketers trusted consumers/guests with whom they have a good relationship, these consumers/guests were not watched or checked so closely by staff. This situation could provide a suitable opportunity to engage in UECB. However, the marketers believe there is a strong effect on the degree of perceived behaviour control in UECB adoption. For example, the interviewees said that using control tools in stores, such as cameras, has resulted in a decrease in shoplifting.

The interview results show that not only do the hypothesized factors affect UECB, but the marketers also introduced some unanticipated factors which they considered relevant. According to the marketers, both engagement in UECB and the behaviour form are affected by the consumer's companions, whether these companions are friends or members of the consumer's family. Furthermore, lost and damaged items usually increase in proportion to the increase in family group size. Additionally, there was an apparent effect of marketers' reactions towards UECB offenders on the adoption of this behaviour.

6. Discussion

6.1 Refined UECB model for Arab consumers based on the TPB model

This study initially developed a model of UECB among Arab consumers by taking a sample of two countries, Libya and Syria, based on the theory of TPB ([Ajzen, 1991](#)). However, the aim was to confirm and/or refine the model. This subsection presents the refined model of UECB by Arab consumers.

Ajzen's TPB ([Ajzen, 1991](#)) was initially enhanced through a process including two consecutive steps. The first step was to consider published modifications to TPB (e.g. [Shaw and Clarke, 1999](#); [Tonglet, 2002](#); [Fukukawa et al., 2007](#)) and add some factors that were somewhat neglected in previous studies. This step provided the UECB framework, which was examined in the current qualitative study. The second step of the TPB enhancing process was to use the results of our study further to develop a model of UECB for Arab consumers. This model included some new variables which were identified as influencing variables by marketers in Libya and Syria, such as accompanied consumers and relationships with marketers. The study consequently produced the UECB Model for Libyan and Syrian consumers, which is presented in [Figure 2](#) below. This model hypothesizes that UECB in Libya and Syria depends on five sets of influencing and motivating variables: variables related to the consumer, variables related to social and cultural factors, variables related to the organization, political turmoil and economic implications and consumer perceptions.

It is important to note here that the impact of the variables relating to social and cultural factors is not limited by the consumer's intention to adopt UECB, but it goes beyond that to influence many other variables such as consumers' and marketers' UECB evaluation and marketers' reactions towards an UECB offender. Because all the relationships between the consumer's intention to adopt UECB and IVs are influenced by social and cultural variables and the UECB type, this model proposes that both the social and cultural variables and the UECB type should frame the model as shown in [Figure 2](#). Although the initial UECB conceptualization was developed and enhanced, it is still in line with previous frameworks of UECB. The current model suggests that UECB may also be a consumer response to firm performance. If the consumer perceives unfairness, she/he might engage in UECB.

Additionally, the model proposes that consumers who perceive fairness could adopt UECB due to other factors such as social and personal considerations.

6.2 Findings

Although many studies attempt to develop a model of UECB (Shaw and Clarke, 1999; Tonglet, 2002; Fukukawa *et al.*, 2007), all of these studies are considered initial stages in a long process of theoretical development. The current study attempts to develop further the modified TPB (Ajzen, 1991) by adding some factors that were possibly neglected previously in the literature.

The findings of this study were broadly in line with previous studies which focussed on the effect of social and cultural influences on UECB evaluation and adoption (Al-Khatib *et al.*, 2005; Mitchell *et al.*, 2009; Rawwas *et al.*, 1998). However, the results show that the effects of factors that were included in previous frameworks (Chang, 1998; Fukukawa, 2002; King *et al.*, 2007; Shaw *et al.*, 2000; Shaw and Clarke, 1999; Shoham *et al.*, 2008) are different in Libya and Syria compared to their effects in other countries. UECB is thus a cross-cultural and international phenomenon but are that varies according to local conditions and circumstances.

In this context, the current study's findings show that the prevailing social norms in Libya and Syria, as two Arab societies, impose limitations on both marketers' reactions towards UECB offenders and the employed control and prevention practices to deter it. Instead, marketers use techniques such as social networks to control shoplifting; they also apply alternative methods to those of the western countries, which they find more socially acceptable but crucially align with cultural rules, such as reminding customers of religious teachings and shaming. In addition to factors reported in previous studies and confirmed in this study, the study revealed somewhat neglected variables that impact UECB, such as consumers being accompanied and dimensions of justice. This study, therefore, indicates that there are five factors, one or more of which might lead to the adoption of UECB among Arab consumers; these factors are:

- (1) Variables related to the consumer: demographic characteristics (gender, age and job), consumer's attitudes towards UECB, if the consumer is accompanied and their relationships with marketers

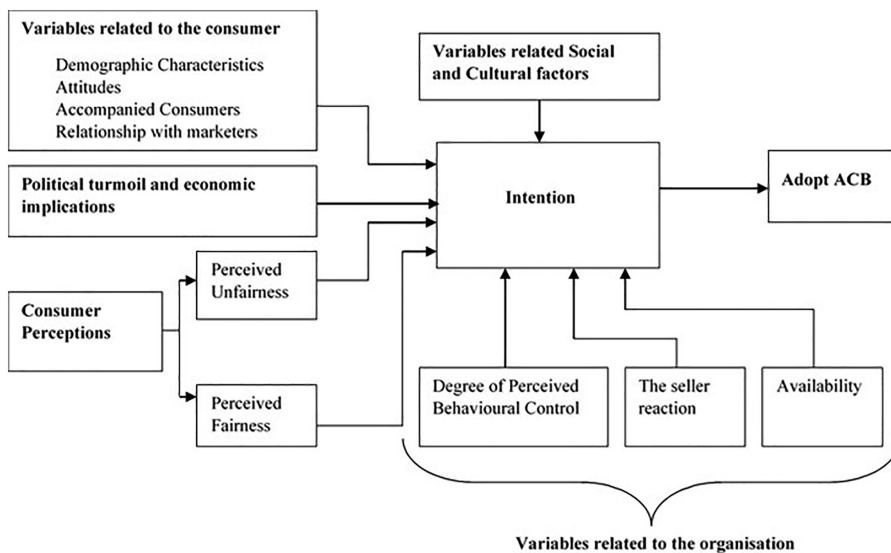


Figure 2. Developed Framework of UECB for Arab Consumers

- (2) Variables related to social and cultural factors: respect old age/females, social/peer pressure, social/peer shaming and approval and religion
- (3) Variables related to the organisation: degree of perceived behavioural control, availability/necessity and the marketers' reaction to UECB.
- (4) Consumer perceptions of justice, comprising: perceived fairness and perceived unfairness.
- (5) Political turmoil and economic implications.

In addition, the form of UECB, as the study indicated significant differences in the consumers' intention, evaluation, and attitudes between the scenarios (shoplifting, software piracy and hotel pilfering).

6.3 Social and cultural effects

The results showed that the consumer's social and cultural environment affect their willingness to adopt unethical behaviours; this result intersects with previous studies that addressed the factors that might lead consumers to involve in such unethical activities in the Arab area. For example, a study conducted by Sidani and his colleagues found that in Middle-Eastern culture (i.e. Lebanese culture), females were more sensitive than males to issues of ethical nature because of many cultural perspectives and customs (Sidani *et al.*, 2009). Another study by Sharif (2016) on affluent Qataris consumers suggested that consumers may be practicing ethical and materialistic consumption simultaneously due to the high levels of affluence. The effect of the cultural values on the consumers in Arab areas is also confirmed in the social commerce context; a recent study by (Al-Khatib *et al.*, 2005; Mitchell *et al.*, 2009; Rawwas *et al.*, 1998). Al-Omouh and his colleagues found that the impact of collectivism, masculinity and uncertainty avoidance cultural values of Arab consumers on their consumption behaviour, especially in social commerce (Al-Omouh *et al.*, 2022). It may be said without exaggeration that social and cultural values impact most individuals' decisions in Arab countries. With this, it is crucial for companies who want to control or mitigate unethical behaviour to take advantage of society's cultural rules and existing norms. For example, consumers involved in deviant behaviours might be less courageous to do that if they perceive that such action can bring shame to their family or tribe. In addition, providing advice and guidance is a common practice in Arab society as people respect the opinion of those who have authority in the community (i.e. power distance effect), such as the elders, the head of the household, celebrities, etc. Here we see the role of the opinion leaders in the community is significant in increasing awareness of the negative impact of aberrant behaviour on society's well-being and resource sustainability.

7. Managerial implication

With the remarkable changes in many political and economic aspects of Arab countries, it is hoped that the economic environment will progress towards international openness. However, due to economic sanctions, global companies do not know enough about Libyan and Syrian consumer behaviour. Therefore, the current study provides a more refined model of unethical behaviour among Arab consumers, particularly Libyan and Syrian consumers. This model determines the influencing factors on this behaviour which local and global organizations can use to build their marketing strategies directed at the Arab markets. Moreover, the research results could help these companies to avoid and control unethical behaviour. This study found that cultural contexts impose some limitations on marketers' reactions towards UECB offenders and the employed control and prevention practices to

deter them. Therefore, global companies that aim to enter the Libyan and Syrian markets should adapt their marketing activities according to their local circumstances. Designing market programs based on local consumers' specific needs can help companies increase market share and profitability.

Following an integrated set of legal and social proceedings to combat this immoral phenomenon will immunize companies operating or planning to work in Arab markets. Legal procedures are represented in not hesitating to report unethical behaviour that can be discovered through CCTV or direct observation. Negligence in following the legal actions on the pretext that the costs of this misbehaviour are not expensive will encourage those consumers to engage more in the aberrant behaviours. On the other hand, using social proceedings is critical to preventing unethical behaviours like shoplifting, software piracy, and hotel pilfering. As we mentioned above, Arabic culture and all the related societal norms largely govern the behaviour of individuals; companies can continue to build upon the solid cultural relationship between the individuals in the Arab countries to alleviate the negative impact of such behaviours. Early prevention is an essential factor for companies in eliminating this unethical behaviour; such prevention might take several forms, for example, holding workshops in cooperation with governmental and non-governmental organizations to raise consumer's awareness aimed at informing them about the negative impact of these unethical behaviours in country's economy, the well-being of individuals and corporate sustainability. A positive corporate image among the society members will also help companies refrain from providing an excuse to consumers to engage in aberrant behaviour. Social responsibility activities are very fundamental in this context to enhance corporate image.

As discussed previously, both marketers and consumers are, directly and indirectly, bearing the costs of UECB. Moreover, there are apparent weaknesses in the policies that regulate the relationships between marketers and consumers in Libya and Syria. Therefore, policymakers need to address UECB and its implications for all the related variables such as pricing, products and service quality and return of goods. However, these policies should be evaluated and revised in a manner that reduces and controls UECB without reducing consumers' basic rights.

8. Limitations and future research

This study focused on a very sensitive topic, so participants were briefed on the nature of the research and had the opportunity to refuse involvement or stop at any time they wanted. However, marketers were open and eager to talk about their experiences and instances of UECB in their stores/hotels.

As with nearly all consumer behaviour studies, the current study is limited by the sample and techniques used in the research. These limitations curb the extent to which the findings can be generalized but also, more helpfully, provide a useful guide for future studies. Future research should examine the revised framework and use larger samples covering other sectors, such as music piracy, riding free on public transportation, sneaking into movie theatres and using fraudulent forms of payment. This would explore wider factors influencing UECB adoption. Also, it would be useful to develop a fuller understanding based on the consumers' perspective by conducting further research to examine the revised framework using consumer surveys. This might enable the framework to deter and prevent UECB, thereby reducing its damaging impacts on businesses. Also, conducting further UECB research using larger samples covering other Arabic countries with different economic and legal environments, such as the countries that have activated copyright laws against software piracy (e.g. Egypt and UAE) would be beneficial.

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Further reading

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Appendix

The English version of the interview schedules

Consent form

Please read and confirm your consent to being interviewed for this project by initialing the appropriate box(es) and write your job title and date this form

1. I confirm that the purpose of the project has been explained to me, that I have been given information about it in writing, and that I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the research

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary, and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason and without any implications for my legal rights

4. I agree to take part in this project

The job title of interviewee	Date	Signature
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Name of researcher taking consent	Date	Signature
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Interview questions

- (1) What is your position in this shop/store/hotel?
- (2) How long have you been working for this grocery store/computer store/hotel in general?
- (3) Have you observed any behaviour by consumers in this shop/store/hotel that violates the generally accepted norms of conduct here?

- (4) If the answer is yes, what form/s of unacceptable behaviour are they? Why do you consider it unacceptable behaviour?
- (5) If there are any cases of shoplifting/piracy/pilfering, could you please describe them?
- (6) How often does this happen?
- (7) Do you have any record of this case(s)?
- (8) Which goods/items are more likely to be stolen/software more likely to be copied?
- (9) Can you describe the type of consumer who usually tends to engage in this behaviour? e.g, gender, age, accompanied consumers (alone, with friends and one of the family members), marital status [. . .] and so on.
- (10) Do you think that the consumers' beliefs about this behaviour (good, bad, forbidden or not/one of her/his rights, etc.) impact their engagement in it?
- (11) Do you think that the consumer might not engage in this behaviour if he/she believes that the behaviour could harm others, the shop/store/hotel or themselves?
- (12) Do you think that the consumer might engage in this behaviour if he/she believes that doing it would be high risk? For example, do you think using CCTV or shop guards, might limit this behaviour?
- (13) Do you think that the consumer acts like this as revenge, or because she/he has received an unfair outcome? For example, in relation to quality, quantity or price.
- (14) Do you think that the consumer acts like this as revenge, because she/he thinks your policies/procedures are unfair? For example, long queues, or serving other consumers first because of their relationship with the employee
- (15) Do you think that the consumer acts like this as revenge for bad treatment; for example, an absence of friendliness, sensitivity, interest and honesty?
- (16) Do you think that the social or cultural acceptance or rejection of this behaviour could influence the consumers who engage in it?
- (17) Is there a time(s), day(s), month(s) or period(s) when this behaviour is more likely to happen?
- (18) Why do you think this behaviour increased in these situations?
- (19) Do you apply any kind of deterring or controlling technique to stop this behaviour?

If the answer is Yes, the interviewees were asked the following questions.

- If you have deterring or controlling techniques, when did you introduce this?
 - Why did you particularly select this technique?
 - Do you think this technique is effective?
- (20) If the answer is No, do you know anybody applying deterring or controlling techniques in their shop//store/hotel?
 - (21) According to your information, is there any deterrent law to stop this behaviour?
 - If yes, can you tell me about it/them?
 - Do you think that this law is applied in this country?
 - (22) Do you think that the consumers know about the relevant laws?
 - (23) Do you think that there is any way/ways that the consumers can avoid this law?
 - If yes, could you give me some examples?
 - (24) From your opinion, what are the reasons that lead consumers to adopt this behaviour?
 - (25) Is there anything else you want to add about your experiences of consumer misbehaviour?

Exploring the current situation of software exchange in Libyan/Syrian market (used only in the interview with marketers in computer stores)

- (26) Do you sell any original software in your shop?
- (27) If the answer to the above question is yes, how much does it cost in comparison with the copied version?
- (28) What do you know about the availability of original software in the Libyan/Syrian market?
- (29) Is there demand for original software? By consumers or companies? How often does this happen?
- (30) Some consumers give software to their friends after they have installed it on their PC. How does such behaviour affect your work?

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