

## **Unethical practices in the interactive sales environment: A framework and agenda for future research**

### **Purpose**

Sales persons operate in the flux of various ethical interests since they have interaction with both internal and external actors of the firm having different ethical interests. They do not operate alone but are vulnerable to various influences from the firm's internal and external stakeholders in the sales environment. However, past research is mainly from organizational perspective focusing on individual and organizational factors. Therefore, exploring unethical practices of all key stakeholders involved in the sales environment could provide valuable theoretical and practical insights. Thus, the main objective this review paper is to provide an overview of key unethical practices of all relevant key stakeholders involved in the macro sales environment.

### **Methodology**

Using EBSCO business source complete data base, we find 103 relevant peer reviewed articles published in 28 scholarly business journals from the beginning to June 2013. We used systematic mapping and content analysis method to analyze the selected studies with respect to publication characteristics, research design, findings and results related to key unethical practices of all relevant stakeholders involved in the sales environment.

### **Findings**

The review shows that unethical practices of sales person have been the center of attention in the research of sales ethics. Along with sales person, we identified four key stakeholders (management, coworkers, customers and competitors) involved in the sales environment whose unethical practices have been considered relevant for sales person's own ethical behavior. Most of the studies dealt with sales person-driven unethical practices in relation to management/ firm and customers. By reviewing existing knowledge, we propose a contextual and interactive framework to understand macro ethical sales environment.

### **Limitations**

Our search database and key words criteria may miss some of the important studies.

### **Theoretical implications**

The review synthesizes knowledge of major unethical practices of salesperson vis-à-vis key stakeholders involved in sales environment. Taking a contextual, holistic and interactive perspective to salesperson's ethical behavior, the study offers an alternative view to the mainstream positive ethical decision making studies which mainly focus on individual and organizational factors. The review and proposed framework opens up interactive and contextual view on sales persons' behavior. By doing so, it helps in understanding the macro interactive environment in which sales persons behave. Our framework also provides better understanding of traditional positive ethical decision making models by complementing their perspective to sales ethics. The review also identifies several research gaps in the domain and proposes avenues for future research.

### **Practical implications**

We identify a number of unethical practices related to the key stakeholders involved in the selling process. With this knowledge, the firms may try to minimize unethical practices related to sales person, management and coworkers in their respective firms. External stakeholders are beyond the control of firms. However, we argue that better knowledge about their unethical practices may help firms to minimize their impacts through modified role of organizational factors in a more effective way. Our review can help both sales academics and practitioners to develop better questionnaires and to design different ethical scenarios for sales ethics' education, training and research.

## 1.0- Introduction

Sales ethics research is continuously expanding both in terms of volume and importance (Ferrell et al., 2007). At this level of accomplishment, the field needs assessment of existing research in order to create understanding of the past and to give directions for future research. Past reviews of McClaren (2013; 2000) can enhance our understanding about the role of individual and organizational factors on ethical decision making of sales force. However, selling demands interaction with several internal and external stakeholders (Laczniak & Murphy, 1993). They do not operate alone but are vulnerable to various influences from the firm's internal and external stakeholders in the sales environment (Murphy et al., 2005). Therefore, exploring unethical practices of all key stakeholders involved in the sales environment could provide valuable theoretical and practical insights. The main purpose of this review is to offer an overview of unethical practices of key stakeholders involved in the macro sales environment. Based upon our findings, we will propose a theoretical framework to understand macro ethical sales environment which provides contextual and interactive approach to salesperson ethical behavior. We argue that the framework can also provide a better understanding of sales person's ethical decision making as it takes the context of decision making more broadly into account.

The paper is structured in the following way. First, we describe the methodology of our systematic review and present a quantitative overview of publication characteristics in the domain. Second, the findings related to unethical practices of key stakeholders have been reported. As a synthesis of the results, we propose a theoretical framework of ethical environment in sales. At the end, we identify a number of avenues for future research and conclude with some theoretical and practical implications of our study.

## 2.0- Methodology

The study applies a 'systematic mapping review' approach and step-by-step procedure for a systematic review (see Booth et al., 2012). Using 'EBSCO business source complete' data base, we searched all peer reviewed articles published in business journals from the beginning to June 2013. We selected the relevant key words and searched them in the title, abstract, key words and subject title of the article. Article screening at each stage is depicted in table 1.

**Table 1: Articles screening at each stage**

Total entries found in the key word search	1228
Articles found after removing duplicate entries	321
Articles qualified after reading the abstract	84
Articles qualified after secondary search criteria	19
<b>Total articles selected for review (84+19)</b>	<b>103</b>

We read the title and abstract of each article to make sure of its relevance with our research aim. If relevance was not clear, we also reviewed the introduction, aims, findings or even full article to ensure that the study was fully or at least partially dealing with any unethical practice related to any stakeholder involved in the sales environment. Through this screening we ended up with 84 articles which were related to our research aim. Realizing the potential limitations of key word search, we followed the advice of researchers to use secondary search criteria (see Mustak et al., 2013; Tarí, 2011). For this purpose, we looked for the reference lists of selected studies. By adopting primary and secondary search criteria, we finally selected 103 (84+19) scholarly articles for further examination (see complete list of 103 studies in appendix 3). We expect that this sample is enough to provide an overall picture of unethical behavior of key stakeholders involved in the sales environment.

We read all the articles and extracted data related to the publication characteristics and research design, and scrutinized the main findings focusing on unethical practices of stakeholders. We

employed content analysis as a method (see Weber, 1990) at this stage. Using spread sheets, we drafted key statistics related to the publication and research design characteristics. Then, we found different themes and subthemes related to unethical practices. The systematic inspection and treatment of actual contents of articles helped us to know about unethical practices of relevant stakeholders involved in the sales environment and to design a framework to understand sales ethical environment. We found some handbooks (e.g. Booth et al., 2012; Gough et al., 2012) and some past reviews (e.g. Vaaland et al., 2008; Williams & Plouffe, 2007; Nill & Schibrowsky, 2007) very helpful in designing the methodology and analyzing the findings.

### 3.0- Key findings

#### 3.1- Quantitative overview of publication characteristics

Key characteristics of publications and their research design are shown in the figures (see appendix 1 and 2).

#### 3.2- Unethical practices of key stakeholders in the sales environment

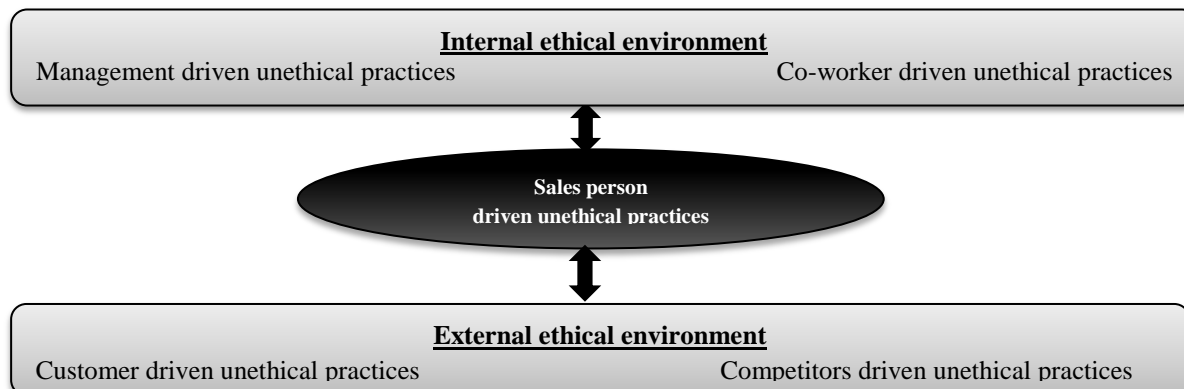
The review reveals that unethical practices in the sales environment have been examined in two main ways: sales person-driven unethical practices directed towards stakeholders; and stakeholders-driven unethical practices directed towards the sales person. We report the findings accordingly.

**Table 2: key unethical practices of stakeholders in the sales environment**

Salesperson driven unethical practices towards stakeholders	Studies found	Stakeholders driven unethical practices towards sales force	Studies found
<u><b>Towards firm</b></u>		<u><b>Management driven</b></u>	
Codes and policies violation	29	Misusing reward and incentives	18
Misusing company resources	26	Disciplinary action/ punishment	13
Misusing confidential information	15	Code of ethics implementation	8
Misusing Company Time	11	Discrimination (e.g. quota, sex)	7
Unauthorized discount	8	Putting undue selling pressure	5
Ignoring negative history of customer	5	lack of ethics training	4
Dummy sales	3	Lack of leadership support	3
Unethically join competitors firm	3		
Quitting job on a short notice	2		
<u><b>Towards Co-workers</b></u>		<u><b>Co-workers driven</b></u>	
Taking credits of others' work	11	Taking credits of others' work	11
Passing blames to colleagues	5	Passing blames to colleagues	5
<u><b>Towards Customers</b></u>		<u><b>Customers driven</b></u>	
Offering bribes & Gifts	22	Asking & expecting gifts, favors & bribes	5
Exaggeration/ overpromising	19	Exaggeration	3
Special Treatment/ Discrimination	16	Sexual harassment	3
Suggesting wrong products	12	Discrimination	2
Lack of product knowledge	9	Facilitate backdoor selling	1
Withholding Information	9	Lack of respect/ insult	1
Miss representation	8		
Late response	6		
Misuse confidential information	6		
Flattery & buttering	5		
Backdoor selling	2		
Forcing Samples on Buyer	2		
<u><b>Towards Competitors</b></u>		<u><b>Competitors driven</b></u>	
Stealing leads & clients of competitors	5	Stealing leads & customers	5
Defamation	4	Defamation	4
Spying	3	Spying	3

### 3.3- A framework to understand ethical environment in sales

Sales force is the center of attention in the reviewed articles and unethical practices in the sales environment mainly revolve around sales person and their interaction with key stakeholders such as management, colleagues, customers and competitors. Unethical practices are not always sales person driven but they may also key stakeholder driven. The review provides a holistic view to the structure of ethical environment in sales and the key interactions within it.



**Figure 1: A framework to understand macro ethical sales environment**

Sales persons work in two different types of internal and external ethical environments. The internal ethical environment is the firm’s own environment which has received much research attention and been labeled as ethical environment, ethical culture, or ethical climate (see McClaren, 2013; 2000; Fournier et al., 2010; Schwepker & Hartline, 2005). The internal ethical environment can be seen as a set of values, norms, and artifacts shared by actors within the firm to behave in ethical or unethical way (e.g. Maignan & Ferrell, 2004). The internal ethical environment is mainly influenced by organizational factors such as supervision, management, rewards, punishment, codes, policies, training and leadership (McClaren, 2013). Moreover, sales organizations also develop subcultures comprised of its members’ perceptions about ethical values and accepted behavior, and encouraged by firm employees (Schwepker & Good, 2007). Management and co-workers are the significant actors within the organization who can influence the ethical decision making and behavior of sales persons (Ferrell et al., 2007).

The internal ethical environment of the firm alone cannot guarantee ethical behavior of sales people. Sales persons are geographically dispersed and work most of the time outside the organization. They are comparatively more independent in their work than many other employee groups and operate under less supervision. Even, if management successfully establishes a strong ethical climate within the organization, sales persons are directly or indirectly affected by external stakeholders which may lead towards unethical behavior of salesforce (Seevers et al., 2007). The unethical practices and behavior of customers and competitors towards sales persons may encourage them to behave in an unethical way.

Due to the boundary spanning role, sales persons are influenced by both the internal and external stakeholders of the firm. Therefore, ethical decisions are guided through key actors in both internal and external environment. If the key actors support, encourage and perform unethical practices, they provide opportunities to sales person for misconduct. Even if individual factors influenced the ethical decision making of sales force, social interaction with key stakeholders may change the dynamics and provide alternatives (Ferrell et al., 2007). Therefore, a holistic view focusing on unethical practices of sales person vis-à-vis key stakeholders in both internal and external ethical environments can provide a better understanding of sales person ethical behavior and the structure of ethical environment in sales. Monitoring unethical behavior and practices of all key stakeholders involved in the sales

process may importantly influence the ethical environment and help in controlling unethical behavior of sales force.

The framework represents a synthesis of the results of sales ethics research, but with a new angle focusing on unethical behavior practices and the interactive sales environment. Sales ethics researchers have proposed several conceptual models of ethical decision making (see Wotruba, 1990; McClaren, 2000; Ferrell et al., 2007) mainly based upon individual and organizational factors. However, they also explain the interactive and behavioral role of key stakeholders in the sales. For example, Wotruba (1990: 31) in his 'ethical decision/action process' (EDAP) model explains the role of key stakeholders e.g. peers, superiors, customers, competitors. He calls these stakeholders as situational moderators who can affect ethical decision making of a sales person. The social network perspective of Seevers et al. (2007) also covers the interactive aspects and roles of key actors on sales person's ethical behavior.

#### **4.0- Directions for future research**

**4.1- Need for a holistic perspective:** Some theoretical and conceptual studies have tried to offer more comprehensive models (e.g. Ferrell et al., 2007; Wotruba, 1990). However, the overall picture of empirical research is scattered rather than holistic. In practice, a wide variety of ethical issues, their unstructured nature, several complex and interrelated variables make the ethical decision making and behavior very complex for sales persons (Ferrell et. al., 2007). Due to these reasons, focusing on a single or few specific variables cannot capture the depth and complexity of ethical behavior (Liedtka, 1992). We suggest that future empirical studies should take on a holistic and macro view by combining internal and external sales environment, and thereby offer new insights and rich understanding about unethical behavior of sales people.

**4.2- Need for a genuine sales person perspective:** Most of the studies examine sales person driven unethical practices towards the firm and customers. Sales person behavior is looked from the organization's point of view and viewed to affect to the organization level outcomes, for instance to financial gain, customer satisfaction, trust, or loyalty. We could only find a few studies which were related to customer driven unethical practices towards the sales person (e.g. Inks et al., 2004; Gegez et al., 2005). The prevailing research agenda puts a heavy burden on an individual sales person, who should behave ethically and maintain a high personal modal, irrespective of how other actors in the sales environment behave towards the sales person. It thus seems that the sales person's own perspective to ethical issues has been neglected in sales ethics research. Studies investigating customer, competitor and co-worker driven unethical practices towards a sales person would make an important contribution to the field.

**4.3- Need for an extended stakeholder perspective:** Some important stakeholders such as society as a whole, NGOs and pressure groups, sales unions, and governmental policy makers are missing in past research. We argue that sales person driven unethical practices towards those stakeholders and vice versa may also exist. For example, sales persons selling cow meat in India may face ethical pressures from the part of the society and religious groups. Or, expatriate sales persons on foreign task may face ethical issues from society, religious groups and government.

**4.4- Need for a more varied methodological perspective:** Methodological issues have received very little attention in sales ethics research. We call for more creativity and variety in use of methods and better disclosure of methodological details. 97% empirical studies were quantitative aimed at testing of hypotheses. Such a heavy reliance on quantitative surveys, hypothetical scenarios and close ended questionnaires for more than 30 years is something exceptional. Close ended questionnaires without conducting pilot studies or hypothetical scenarios predefined by the researcher create a risk of strong research bias towards the world

view of researchers. Methodological issues are also linked to theory development; rich understanding of unethical practices and behavior is not possible without understanding the social context in which sales persons behave. Given that sales ethics is a social phenomenon it should be explored with a variety of methodological lenses particularly through qualitative designs in real life settings and through respondent-defined scenarios.

**4.5- Need for culturally and geographically extended research:** Ethical behavior is also culturally specific. However, reviewed empirical studies heavily relied on American samples. We suggest that studies in future should pay attention to diversified samples of European and Asian countries. Unethical behavior in sales are more common in developing countries (Jacobs et al., 2001) and exploring them in the natural settings of these countries can provide valuable theoretical insights. Moreover, cross cultural studies can also provide better understanding about unethical behavior in sales.

### **6.0- Limitations**

Obviously, our review also has some limitations. First, we have only used EBSCO data base. Although it is the largest database, other databases e.g. ProQuest, Science Direct could have helped in finding more studies. Second, our article search criteria has some limitations e.g. keywords search may miss some of the important studies. We argue that our secondary search criteria somewhat lessens the impacts of these deficiencies.

### **7.0- Theoretical implications**

The review synthesizes knowledge of major unethical practices of salesperson vis-à-vis key stakeholders involved in sales environment. Taking a holistic, contextual and interactive perspective, the study offers an alternative view to the mainstream of ethical decision making studies which mainly focus on individual and organizational factors. The review and proposed framework opens up a broader, contextual view on sales persons' behavior, and by doing so it helps in understanding the macro interactive environment in which sales persons behave. Our framework also provides better understanding of traditional positive ethical decision making models (e.g. Ferrell et al., 2007; Wotruba, 1990) complementing their perspective to sales ethics. Past empirical work on individual and organizational factors cannot fully tap the effects of external ethical environment on sales person behavior. Yet, it is obvious that unethical practices of external stakeholders like customers and competitors play an important role in the ethical decision making and subsequently behavior of sales person. By critically reviewing and analyzing existing knowledge, our study also identified several research gaps in the domain and proposed avenues for future research. We would like to see future research to address the identified gaps and broaden the perspectives on ethical behavior in the sales profession.

### **8.0- Practical implications**

This review also offers applicable knowledge for selling organizations. It provides knowledge that facilitates the controlling of unethical practices in the sales. The review identifies a number of unethical practices related to the key stakeholders involved in selling process. With this knowledge, the firms may try to minimize unethical practices related to sales person, management and coworkers in their respective firms. External stakeholders such as customers and competitors are beyond the control of firms. However, we argue that better knowledge about their unethical behavior may help firms to minimize their impacts through modified role of organizational factors (e.g. management, supervision, training, codes, policies, rewards, and punishment) in a more effective way. The wide range of unethical behaviors identified in the review can help both sales academics and practitioners to develop better questionnaires and to design different ethical scenarios for sales ethics' education, training and research.

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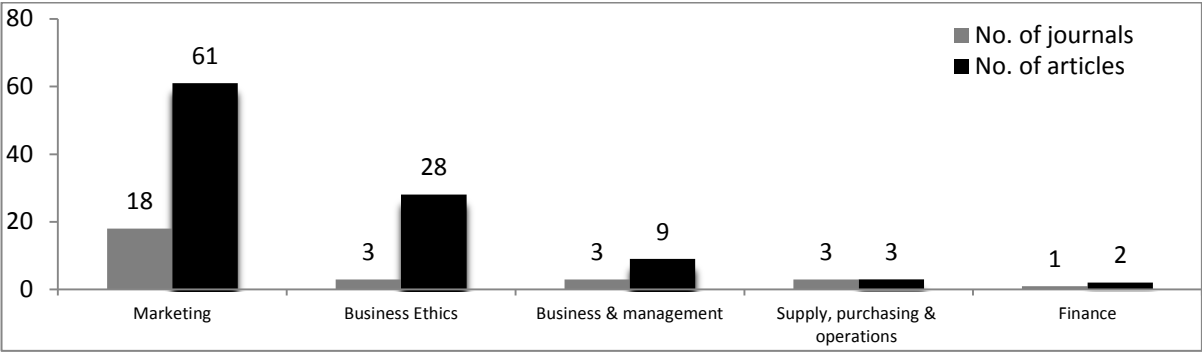
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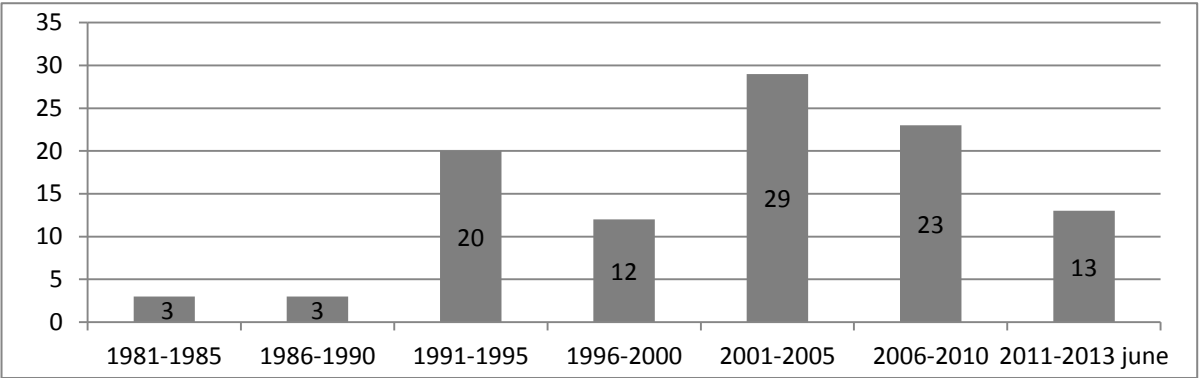
**Appendix1: Publication characteristics**

<b>No</b>	<b>Journal name</b>	<b>Acronym</b>	<b>Article count</b>
1	Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management	JPSSM	34
2	Journal of Business Ethics	JBE	25
3	Journal of Business Research	JBR	7
4	Marketing Management Journal	MMJ	7
5	Business Ethics Quarterly	BEQ	2
6	European Journal of Marketing	EJM	2
7	Journal of Financial Service Professionals	JFSP	2
8	Journal of Marketing Education	JME	2
9	Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science	JAMS	2
10	Service Industries Journal	SIJ	2
11	American Business Review	ABR	1
12	Health Marketing Quarterly	HMQ	1
13	International Marketing Review	IMR	1
14	Journal of Operations Management	JOM	1
15	Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing	JBIM	1
16	Journal of Euro marketing	JEM	1
17	Journal of Global Marketing	JGM	1
18	Journal of Leadership, Accountability & Ethics	JLAE	1
19	Journal of Marketing	JM	1
20	Journal of Marketing Management	JMM	1
21	Journal of Marketing Research	JMR	1
22	Journal of Promotion Management	JPM	1
23	Journal of Purchasing & Material Management	JPMM	1
24	Journal of Retailing	JR	1
25	Journal of Services Marketing	JSM	1
26	Organization Science	OS	1
27	Purchasing and Supply Management	PSM	1
28	Sales & Marketing Management	SMM	1
<b>Total</b>			<b>103</b>

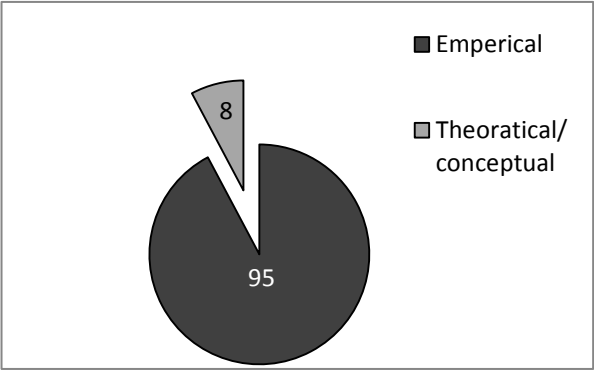
**Appendix 2: Research design characteristics of publications**



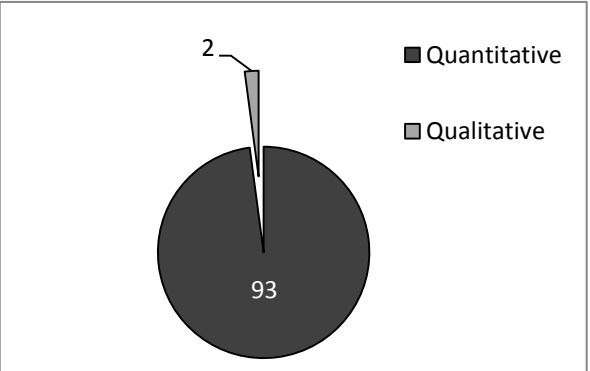
*Figure 1: Number of publications by business discipline*



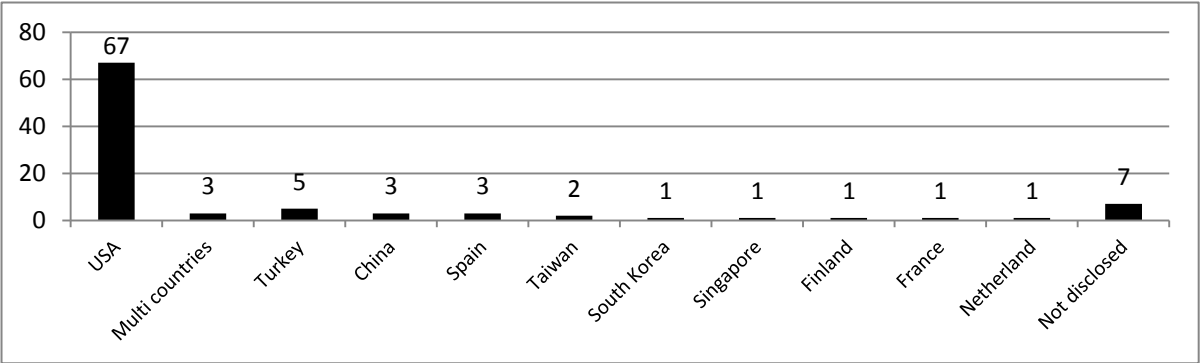
*Figure 2: Number of articles from 1981–2013*



*Figure 3: Types of study*



*Figure 4: Methodology in empirical studies*



*Figure 5: Geographical distribution of samples*

### **Appendix 3: List of 103 studies included in the review**

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