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Materialism, social stratification, and ethics: evidence from SME owners in China

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Abstract

Purpose

The study of business ethics has seldom shed light on small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) despite their theoretical and practical significance. Drawing from strain perspective, the purpose of this paper is to address this insufficiency and investigate SME owners’ ethical attitudes toward money-related deviances.

Design/methodology/approach

Based on a large sample of 741 Chinese SMEs, an OLS regression analysis was employed to test associated hypotheses. The robustness of results was additionally checked.

Findings

The results suggest that for stratification variables, education level is positively related to ethical attitudes, whereas household income level is surprisingly negatively associated with ethical attitudes; for materialism facets, success and happiness exert a negative impact on ethical attitudes as hypothesized, but centrality has no associated impact.

Research limitations/implications

This study has examined both structural and motivational sources of personal strains on the ethical attitude of SME owners, while the characteristics of these strains could be explored in the future studies.

Originality/value

Keywords

- Entrepreneurs
- SMEs
- Motivation

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