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# Unethical Practices in Furniture Sales: Consumer Experiences and Recommendations for Responsible Business

## Neetične prakse u prodaji namještaja: iskustva potrošača i preporuke za odgovorno poslovanje

### ORIGINAL SCIENTIFIC PAPER

#### Izvorni znanstveni rad

Received – prispljelo: 1. 7. 2025.

Accepted – prihvaćeno: 18. 9. 2025.

UDK: 630\*88

<https://doi.org/10.5552/drwind.2025.0277>

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**ABSTRACT** • *Consumer satisfaction is closely tied to ethical business conduct, yet unethical sales practices remain prevalent in the furniture sector. This study, based on a survey conducted in Slovakia, identifies the most common unethical behaviours perceived by consumers – particularly misleading information about product quality and materials, unprofessional staff conduct, false discount claims, and refusal to accept legitimate complaints. The results indicate that these practices significantly affect consumer trust and satisfaction, especially among older or economically vulnerable groups. In response, the study recommends improving transparency in product communication, investing in staff training, and strengthening complaint resolution processes. These steps can enhance customer trust and build long-term loyalty in the furniture market. The research contributes to new empirical insights into consumer ethics, highlighting both systemic issues and actionable strategies for ethical improvement within the industry.*

**KEYWORDS:** *furniture industry; unethical practices; correlation analysis; cluster analysis*

**SAŽETAK** • *Zadovoljstvo potrošača usko je povezano s etičnim poslovnim ponašanjem poduzeća, no u sektoru prodaje namještaja i dalje prevladavaju neetične prodajne prakse. Ova je studija utemeljena na istraživanju provedenome u Slovačkoj i identificira najčešće neetične prakse koje potrošači percipiraju. To se osobito odnosi na obmanjujuće informacije o kvaliteti proizvoda i materijalima, neprofesionalno ponašanje zaposlenika, lažne popuste i neprihvatanje legitimnih i opravdanih pritužbi. Rezultati pokazuju da te prakse znatno utječu na povjerenje i zadovoljstvo potrošača, posebice starijih ili ekonomski ranjivih skupina potrošača. Kao odgovor na te probleme studija preporučuje povećanje transparentnosti u komunikaciji o proizvodima, veća ulaganja u obučavanje osoblja i u unapređenje procesa rješavanja pritužbi. Ti koraci mogu pridonijeti povećanju povjerenja kupaca i izgradnji dugoročne lojalnosti na tržištu namještaja. Istraživanje pridonosi novim empirijskim uvidima u etiku potrošača, ističući i sistemske probleme i praktične strategije za etična poboljšanja unutar industrije.*

**KLJUČNE RIJEČI:** *industrija namještaja; neetične prakse; korelacijska analiza; klasterska analiza*

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

### 1. UVOD

Ethics is a set of moral guidelines that influence the choices that individuals or groups make. Applying moral rights and wrongs, or norms of justice, to marketing decision-making, behaviour, and practice within the company is known as “practicing ethics in marketing.” A company may be expected to act in what it considers to be its own best interest in a market economy. Gaining a competitive edge is the goal of marketing. Businesses that cultivate this edge can meet the needs of their clients as well as their own needs (Sihem, 2013).

Business ethics refers to the moral principles that shape corporate behaviour toward consumers, stakeholders, and the wider society. In the retail sector, this is reflected in transparency, fairness, and respect for consumer rights. These ethical responsibilities extend to multiple actors—consumers, producers, employees, and investors—though their scope and nature differ across groups (Lütge and Uhl, 2021; Vieweg, 2021). Violations of these principles undermine customer trust and jeopardise long-term brand loyalty (Vitell and Muncy, 1992; Ferrell *et al.*, 2019; Tanveer *et al.*, 2021). By contrast, ethical marketing practices foster consumer confidence and loyalty while aligning business objectives with broader moral values (Kamila and Jasrotia, 2023; Kobiyh *et al.*, 2024).

In the past twenty years, firms have enhanced their competitiveness through internationalisation, more sophisticated marketing, and expanded sales operations. Nevertheless, the contemporary business environment is increasingly defined by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (Ameer and Halinen, 2019; Pomirleanu *et al.*, Townsend, 2022; Anand *et al.*, 2023). Unfortunately, in an effort to quickly enter the market, secure a strong position, and maximise profits, some companies engage in unethical or even illegal practices that harm both competition and consumer rights (Chavda and Deshpande, 2022). Although these strategies may yield short-term gains, they can seriously damage consumer trust and a company’s long-term reputation.

To address unethical business conduct, the European Union introduced a legal framework centred on Directive 2005/29/EC, which defines unfair commercial practices as aggressive or deceptive. Misleading marketing, including exaggerated claims, omission of key information, manipulated visuals, or fine print disclaimers is a typical example (Ahmed *et al.*, 2025). Such practices highlight the need for strong consumer protection and ethical business principles. While they may boost short-term sales, they ultimately erode consumer trust, damage brand reputation, and threaten long-term business stability. As a result, customer satisfaction has become a strategic priority, particularly in

sectors where unethical conduct can severely undermine not only satisfaction but the entire consumer experience (Mbonigaba *et al.*, 2024).

Unethical behaviour is encountered in virtually all areas of the market, and the furniture sector is no exception. Various forms of misleading customers occur in the sale of furniture, whether it be false claims about quality, origin of materials, environmental friendliness of products, or hidden charges and opaque terms and conditions.

An important area of many discussions is the questionable quality of the materials used to make the furniture and its durability. Many furniture companies prefer cheap and less durable materials to high-quality, environmentally responsible alternatives for the sole reason of maximizing profits. This limited thinking of companies has a negative impact not only on the environment (excessive carbon dioxide emissions, deforestation, huge amounts of waste) but also, of course, on the consumer, who, when investing in furniture, expects it to serve its purpose for a longer period of time (Friedrich, 2022).

In an era of growing environmental awareness, many furniture manufacturers have begun to present themselves as responsible and sustainable, labelling their products with various “green” certificates and slogans promising to be ethical and environmentally friendly. In recent years, greenwashing has emerged as a widespread trend in the corporate world. Large enterprises enthusiastically promote their environmental initiatives, yet in many cases, these efforts are little more than empty slogans and vague concepts (Huang *et al.*, 2022).

In this context, greenwashing has become a common practice where companies deliberately misrepresent the environmental or social impact of their products. It misleads consumers and damages the reputation of businesses genuinely committed to sustainability. Such practices erode public trust, encourage unsustainable consumption, and create unfair competition by disadvantaging transparent companies. Moreover, greenwashing slows progress toward a truly sustainable future by giving consumers a false sense of responsibility, reducing their motivation to demand real change and accountability (Ecobalanza.com, 2024).

Growing attention to ethical conduct in business is reflected in the increasing number of studies and surveys assessing how companies implement and maintain ethical standards. Previous research has addressed ethical issues in marketing, including sales practices, promotional activities, and product safety (Hermann, 2022; Martínez *et al.*, 2021) and several studies (Vitell and Muncy, 1992; Rallapalli *et al.*, 1994) have demonstrated that unethical practices can negatively influence customer satisfaction, purchase intentions, and long-term loyalty.

Despite growing academic interest in business ethics, the furniture retail sector remains underexplored in this regard. Most existing literature addresses ethical issues at a general level, without considering the specific dynamics of high-involvement purchases such as furniture, where expectations regarding durability, quality, and after-sale service are particularly high.

To address this gap, this study presents findings from an empirical survey conducted in Slovakia, which investigates the prevalence of unethical practices in the furniture retail industry and their perceived impact on customer satisfaction. Additionally, it examines how socio-demographic characteristics shape consumer perceptions and responses to unethical business conduct.

## 2 MATERIALS AND METHODS

### 2. MATERIJALI I METODE

The questionnaire was distributed primarily via social media, and participation in the survey was voluntary and anonymous. During the data collection period (February – April 2025), a total of 221 fully completed questionnaires were collected. As distribution was carried out in the manner described above, it is not possible to calculate the exact response rate for the questionnaires; instead, the study is based on the number of valid responses obtained within the specified time frame.

The questionnaire consisted of 19 questions. Four questions related to demographic data, allowing respondents to be categorised by gender, age, achieved education and economic status. The remaining 15 questions were aimed at these areas:

- Purchasing behaviour in the furniture sector (frequency and recency of furniture purchases, place of purchase, type of furniture purchased, influence of advertising on purchase decisions).
- Product quality and conformity with customer expectations (quality and transparency of information provided before purchase, compliance with delivery deadlines, consistency between the ordered and delivered product, identification of product deficiencies after purchase (technical, visual, functional)).
- Post-purchase service experience (frequency and reasons of complaints, outcome of complaint resolution (justified vs. unjustified claims), Perception and occurrence of unethical behaviour by furniture retailers, forms of unethical conduct (withholding information, deceptive practices), personal experiences with unethical sellers, consumers responses to unethical practices).

The research aimed to answer two research questions:

- To what extent is consumer education associated with the perception of unethical practices in retail?

- How does the perceived relevance of pre-purchase product information influence overall consumer satisfaction?

Regarding the research questions, the following hypotheses were formulated to test the relationships between the monitored factors and consumer experiences:

H1: There is a statistically significant relationship between consumer education and consumers' perception of unethical retail practices.

H2: There is a statistically significant relationship between the perceived relevance of pre-purchase product information and consumer satisfaction.

To explore relationships between selected variables, Pearson's correlation coefficient was used.

The Pearson correlation coefficient  $r$  is mathematically defined as follows (Salomão, 2024):

$$r = \frac{N \sum_{i=1}^n x_i y_i - \sum_{i=1}^n x_i \sum_{i=1}^n y_i}{\sqrt{N x_i^2 - (\sum x_i)^2} \sqrt{N y_i^2 - (\sum y_i)^2}} \quad (1)$$

Where:

$x$  and  $y$  denote the two variables being compared,

$N$  is the number of data points,

$\sum xy$  represents the sum of the product of paired values,

$\sum x^2$  and  $\sum y^2$  are the sums of squares for each variable.

It measures the strength and direction of the linear relationship between two variables, ranging from -1 to 1. Values close to 1 or -1 indicate a strong positive or negative correlation, respectively, while values near 0 suggest little to no linear dependence. Understanding this relationship is essential for correctly interpreting correlation results (Liao *et al.*, 2015). To clearly present and interpret these relationships across multiple variables simultaneously, a correlation matrix was constructed.

The correlation matrix displays the calculated Pearson coefficients between monitored variables, allowing for a clear overview of their relationships. Each cell indicates the strength and direction of the association between two variables. This method helps to identify relevant patterns and complements other statistical analyses used in the study (Wagavkar, 2024).

Subsequently, a hierarchical cluster analysis was chosen to analyse the data to identify groups of respondents with common features – either demographic or based on their experiences and attitudes towards unethical behaviour when buying furniture. This approach is particularly useful when examining multiple variables simultaneously, where simple pairwise comparisons are not sufficient (CodeSignal, 2025).

Cluster analysis is used to group observations into clusters according to their similarity. Similarity is measured based on responses to selected questions such as:

- the influence of advertising on the purchase,
- the presence of any shortcomings after the purchase,
- whether the respondent dealt with a complaint,

– and personal experience of unethical behaviour by the seller.

The Ward method is an agglomerative clustering approach that groups elements into a predefined number of clusters through a series of steps. Initially, each element is treated as its own separate cluster. Then, at each step, the algorithm merges the elements that are closest to one another based on a chosen distance metric. This process continues until all elements are grouped into clusters. The number of steps can range from 1, where all elements are combined into a single cluster to  $n$ , where each element remains in its own individual cluster. Once elements are grouped into a cluster, they cannot be split apart again. The method aims to determine the most appropriate number of clustering steps to form meaningful groupings (Aggarwal and Reddy, 2014; Eszergár-Kiss and Caesar, 2017).

This procedure helps to clearly structure respondent groups, potentially representing different types of consumers with varying perceptions and experiences of unethical behaviour in the context of furniture purchases. Such an approach provides valuable insights into which demographic groups are most exposed to unethical practices and will also help to identify typical patterns of behaviour or problem areas in the furniture sales sector.

Among several hierarchical clustering methods (e.g. single-linkage, complete-linkage, average-linkage), Ward's method was chosen because it is considered one of the most accurate. It aims to minimise the internal variability within each cluster, thus ensuring greater homogeneity of respondents within groups. According to Everitt *et al.* (2011) and Almeida *et al.*

(2007), Ward's method has the advantage of forming clusters of similar size and consistency but can be sensitive to the occurrence of outliers.

### 3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### 3. REZULTATI I RASPRAVA

A total of 221 questionnaires were correctly completed, and the data were subsequently analysed using selected methods of one-dimensional and multi-dimensional analysis.

Table 1 presents distribution of respondents by gender, age, education, and economic status (in the absolute as well as relative values).

Most respondents were women (67 %) aged 26 – 45 with a high school education and employed. This group presents a key market segment and is highly active in furniture purchases. Based on the characteristics of this key consumer segment, several patterns in purchasing behaviour have emerged.

- Consumers prefer bricks-and-mortar stores (61.5 %), but online sales are also growing in importance (38.5 %). This trend points to the need for the same level of consumer rights protection on both retail channels.
- Practical pieces of furniture (such as wardrobes and sofas) dominate, indicating that customers more often choose furniture with a high degree of utilisation. Marketing tools (mainly promotion) have limited influence on their purchasing decisions, personal experience and recommendations are decisive.
- A significant number of customers declared that they were correctly and sufficiently informed about the products and up to 90.5 % were satisfied with their

**Table 1** Sociodemographic structure of respondents  
**Tablica 1.** Sociodemografska struktura ispitanika

Variable <i>Varijabla</i>	Category <i>Kategorija</i>	Absolute value <i>Apsolutna vrijednost</i>	Relative value <i>Relativna vrijednost</i>
Gender <i>spol</i>	Female / ženski	148	67.0 %
	Male / muški	73	33.0 %
Age <i>dob</i>	to 25 years / godina	92	41.6 %
	26 – 45 years / godina	95	43.0 %
	46 – 60 years / godina	28	12.7 %
	over 61 years / godina	6	2.7 %
Education <i>obrazovanje</i>	Secondary education with school leaving exam <i>srednje obrazovanje sa završnim ispitom</i>	110	49.8 %
	Secondary education without school leaving exam <i>srednje obrazovanje bez završnog ispita</i>	23	10.4 %
	Tertiary education (1 <sup>st</sup> degree) <i>visoko obrazovanje (1. stupanj)</i>	60	27.1 %
	Tertiary education (2 <sup>nd</sup> degree) <i>visoko obrazovanje (2. stupanj)</i>	28	12.7 %
Economic status <i>ekonomski status</i>	Employed / zaposlen	116	52.5 %
	Student / student	78	35.3 %
	Maternity leave / na porodiljnom dopustu	11	5.0 %
	Unemployed / nezaposlen	8	3.6 %
	Retired / umirovljenik	8	3.6 %



**Figure 1** Most common unethical practices in furniture sales

**Slika 1.** Najčešće neetične prakse u prodaji namještaja

- purchase, indicating a generally positive experience – but not without exceptions.
- Despite the positive aspects, the incidence of unethical practices is significant and widespread. Figure 1 presents the most common misleading practices applied in selling furniture.

Although most consumers reported satisfaction with their furniture purchases, unethical practices remain common. The most frequent issue, reported by 36 respondents, is misleading or irrelevant product information, including false claims about quality, materials, and certifications, which erodes consumer trust. Unprofessional or rude staff behaviour is the second most cited problem, underscoring the importance of respectful customer service. Other concerns include misleading pricing, inaccurate descriptions, refusal to accept valid complaints, poor product knowledge, low-quality materials, and manipulative sales tactics. Overall, dishonest practices in furniture sales often involve poor service, lack of transparency, and false information, negatively affecting consumer experience and retailer reputation.

The following suggestions reflect the most frequently identified problems and aim to eliminate them:

- Adopt a binding code of conduct for furniture retailers to ensure honest and complete product information (origin, quality, features), developed jointly by industry and consumer organisations.
- Equal rules for online and offline sales must be ensured, including mandatory access to full product details and clear visualisations to allow easy product verification.
- Standardise the complaint process, requiring written justification for rejected claims and enabling appeals to an independent body (e.g. consumer ombudsman).

- Promote consumer education through campaigns on buyer rights, complaint procedures, and recognition of manipulative tactics.
- Create a simple online consumer guide with practical tips, available on official consumer and government websites.
- Establish a public rating system for furniture sellers based on customer satisfaction and complaint handling, with an option to award a trustmark to ethical retailers.

To further understand the correlation between the observed variables in which unethical traits occur and demographic characteristics, a correlation analysis was conducted. The relationships between the variables under study are shown within the correlation matrix (see Table 1).

The correlation analysis provided a deeper insight into the relationships among the monitored variables and made it possible to verify the extent to which the individual factors are related to each other. In Table 2, the colour of the coefficients indicates their statistical significance. Values shown in red represent correlations that are statistically significant at the 5 % level ( $p < 0.05$ ), whereas values in black denote correlations that are not statistically significant. This distinction helps to quickly identify which relationships among the variables are supported by the data and which may be due to random variation.

Weak to slightly negative relationships were observed among the demographic variables: age, gender, education, and economic situation. There is a moderate negative correlation between age and economic status ( $r = -0.283$ ), which may indicate that older respondents are more likely to be in a more difficult economic situation (e.g. retired). Similarly, the weak negative correlation between age and education

( $r = -0.148$ ) may reflect differences in access to education across generations.

The quality and relevance of information play a key role in how consumers perceive marketing practices – a lack of it is associated with perceptions of unethical behaviour and lower satisfaction. Thus, ethical marketing is not only morally right, but also practically effective in terms of trust and customer satisfaction.

The most significant positive correlations emerged among the variables related to purchase experience. The moderately strong correlation observed between the relevance of information during purchase and whether the product met expectations ( $r = 0.445$ ) confirms that good quality, accurate and transparent information contribute significantly to customer satisfaction. These results are further supported by the positive correlation between information relevance and the experience of unethical behaviour ( $r = 0.332$ ) as well as the handling of complaints ( $r = 0.232$ ). This means that inadequate or misleading information may lead to unmet expectations, which in turn creates the perception of unethical behaviour on the part of the retailer and a higher likelihood of a complaint.

Based on the correlation analysis, Hypothesis H1, which assumed a statistically significant relationship between consumers' education and the perceived likelihood of experiencing unethical retail practices, was not confirmed. The observed correlations between education and perceived unethical practices were weak and statistically insignificant, indicating that education level did not play a decisive role in shaping consumers' perception of unethical behaviour.

In contrast, Hypothesis H2 was confirmed. A moderate positive correlation ( $r = 0.445, p < 0.05$ ) was found between the perceived relevance of pre-purchase product information and consumer satisfaction. This result highlights the crucial role of transparent and accurate information in increasing customer satisfaction and reducing the perception of unethical practices in the furniture market.

These findings are consistent with previous research (e.g., Vitell and Muncy, 1992; Rallapalli *et al.*, 1994) that highlights the negative impact of unethical behaviour on consumer attitudes, satisfaction, and loyalty (Lim *et al.*, 2023). The correlations between the variables clearly indicate that the different aspects of the buying process are closely interrelated and form a complete picture of the customer's experience. The results thus underline the need for an ethical approach, transparent communication and an effective complaint handling system. In the future, we recommend that increased attention be paid to the individualisation of marketing communications by demographic segments

and that research into trust and perceptions of ethics in relation to long-term customer loyalty be deepened.

Cluster analysis using Ward's method and Euclidean distance metric was applied to analyse the relationship among a set of 10 variables related to socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents and chosen tools of marketing mix with unethical occurrence. The resulting dendrogram (see Figure 2) identifies several significant relationships among monitored variables that may indicate latent patterns in respondents' behaviour.

Cluster analysis reveals that demographic characteristics such as gender and economic situation of individuals play an important role in their furniture buying behaviour. These characteristics influence where customers buy (online vs. brick-and-mortar stores) and the extent to which they are influenced by marketing communications such as advertisements, discounts, and promotions. Women and men may have different preferences in terms of which sales outlets they prefer. Women may prefer brick-and-mortar stores more because of the ability to physically view the product, while men may prefer the convenience of online shopping. At the same time, customers with lower economic status may be more sensitive to promotions and discounts, while those with higher status may be more focused on other features related to the furniture, such as its design, quality or brand.

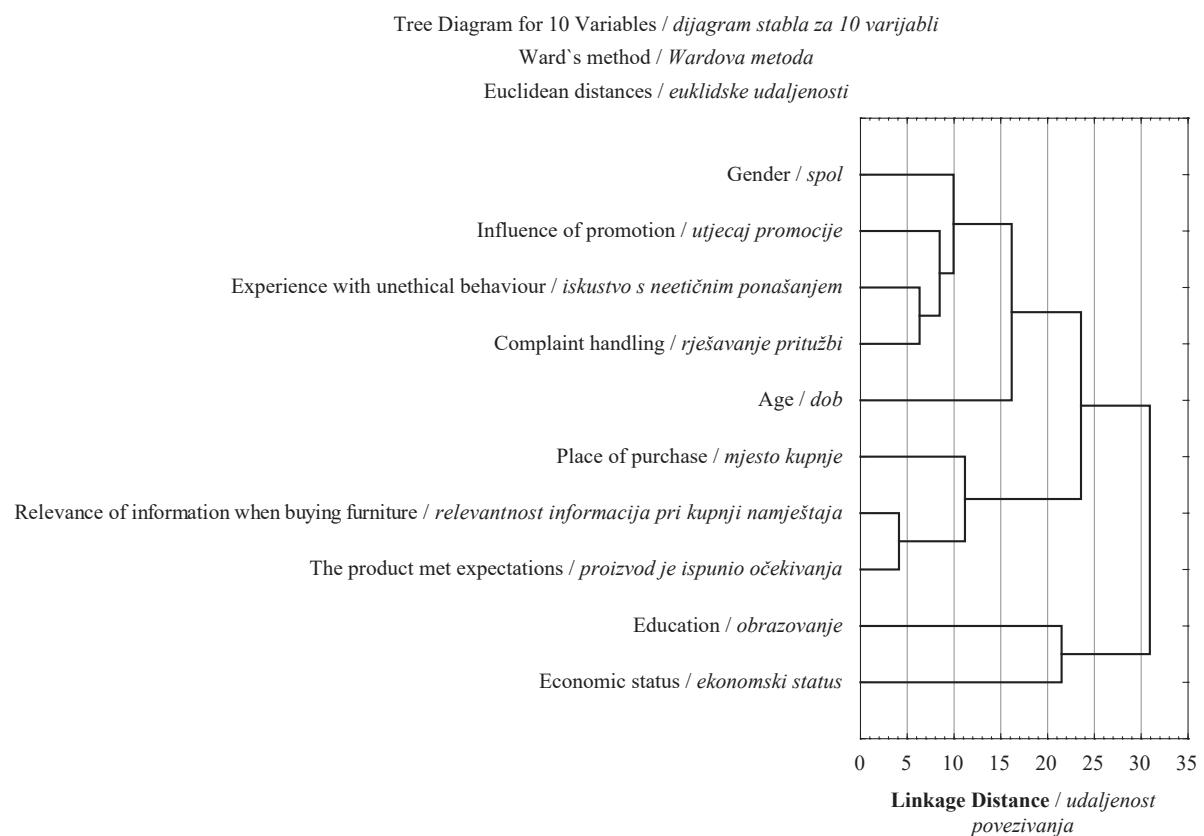
The grouping of these four variables therefore suggests that marketing strategies and business decisions should take these contexts into account. Advertising targeting, the choice of sales channels, or the type of communication should consider the demographic characteristics of the selected customer groups, as these factors influence their behaviour and decision-making.

The cluster analysis reveals a strong connection between the relevance of information at the point of purchase, fulfilment of product expectations, experiences of unethical behaviour, and complaint resolution. These factors together shape the overall customer experience and significantly affect satisfaction levels. When customers receive clear, accurate, and trustworthy information, the product is more likely to meet their expectations, reducing the risk of disappointment. Conversely, incomplete or misleading information can lead to dissatisfaction, complaints, and feelings of being deceived. An effective complaint resolution system plays a vital role in addressing these issues, helping to mitigate negative experiences and rebuild customer confidence.

Outside our survey, several other surveys have already been carried out. They have focused on consumer attitudes towards unethical practices, the identification of the factors that influence these attitudes, and their impact on consumer behaviour. Demographic variables

Table 2 Correlation matrix  
 Tabuľka 2. Korelačná matrícia

	Gender Spol	Age Dob	Education Obrazovanje	Economic status Ekonomicki status	Place of purchase Mjesto kupnje	Influence of promotion Ujedecaj promocije	Relevance of information when buying furniture Relevantnost informacija pri kupnji namještaja	The product met expectations Proizvod je ispunio očekivanja	Complaint handling Rješavanje pritužbi	Experience with unethical behaviour Iskustvo s neetičnim ponašanjem
<b>Gender / Spol</b>	1.000000	<b>-0.255953</b>	0.056041	0.100552	0.001521	0.055247	0.026542	0.034886	0.066432	0.101877
<b>Age / Dob</b>	<b>-0.255953</b>	1.000000	<b>-0.148193</b>	<b>-0.283125</b>	0.052032	-0.039635	0.024117	-0.013517	-0.056678	-0.015932
<b>Education / Obrazovanje</b>	0.056041	<b>-0.148193</b>	1.000000	0.117115	-0.018763	0.011001	0.010116	<b>0.150092</b>	-0.034691	-0.049065
<b>Economic status / Ekonomicki status</b>	0.100552	<b>-0.283125</b>	0.117115	1.000000	0.066283	-0.066606	-0.004824	0.020802	0.019969	-0.017395
<b>Place of purchase / Mjesto kupnje</b>	0.001521	0.052032	-0.018763	0.066283	1.000000	-0.011514	0.041412	0.034157	0.034563	0.057735
<b>Influence of promotion / Ujedecaj promocije</b>	0.055247	-0.039635	0.011001	-0.066606	-0.011514	1.000000	-0.078108	-0.024079	-0.115042	-0.045584
<b>Relevance of information when buying furniture / Relevantnost informacija pri kupnji namještaja</b>	0.026542	0.024117	0.010116	-0.004824	0.041412	-0.078108	1.000000	0.445360	<b>0.232379</b>	<b>0.331540</b>
<b>The product met expectations / Proizvod je ispunio očekivanja</b>	0.034886	-0.013517	<b>0.150092</b>	0.020802	0.034157	-0.024079	<b>0.445360</b>	1.000000	<b>0.173611</b>	<b>0.169031</b>
<b>Complaint handling / Rješavanje pritužbi</b>	0.066432	-0.056678	-0.034691	0.019969	0.034563	-0.115042	<b>0.232379</b>	<b>0.173611</b>	1.000000	<b>0.208941</b>
<b>Experience with unethical behaviour / Iskustvo s neetičnim ponašanjem</b>	0.101877	-0.015232	-0.049065	-0.017395	0.057735	-0.045584	<b>0.331540</b>	<b>0.169031</b>	<b>0.208941</b>	1.000000



**Figure 2** Cluster analysis of relationship of demographic variables and chosen tools of marketing mix with unethical occurrence

**Slika 2.** Klasterska analiza odnosa demografskih varijabli i odabranih alata marketinškog miksa s neetičnim pojavama

such as age, education, and income, along with personality traits, have been shown to significantly influence ethical judgments. At the same time, unethical marketing practices have been proved to have a negative impact on consumers' expectations, attitudes, satisfaction levels, and intention to continue purchasing, irrespective of whether the experience is personal or mediated (Vitell and Muncy, 1992, Rallapalli *et al.*, 1994).

Ingram *et al.* (2005) found that a strong consumer-brand relationship can lessen perceptions of minor unethical behaviour. However, as the severity of the wrongdoing increases, even loyal customers become less forgiving. The study emphasises the importance of ethical conduct, as perceived unethical behaviour can drive away loyal customers—posing a significant risk for firms, since retaining customers is generally less costly than acquiring new ones.

All these findings highlight the importance of ethical communication and customer-centric approaches in retail strategy. In each marketing mix tool, it is essential to meet the requirements of fairness, transparency, and responsiveness, which are important competitive advantages that companies can build on. Moreover, given the proven sensitivity of consumers to unethical behaviour, companies should integrate ethi-

cal guidelines not only in sales but also in internal corporate culture and training.

The present study is subject to several limitations. First, the research sample focuses on consumer experiences with furniture purchases in Slovakia, which restricts the generalisability of the findings to other cultural or regulatory contexts. Second, the collected data reflect consumers' subjective perceptions of retailer behaviour and product quality rather than objective measures. Third, the method of data collection may have influenced the composition of the sample, which might not fully represent the demographic diversity of the consumer population. In particular, the online format of the survey may have excluded individuals with limited internet access or lower digital literacy, especially among older respondents. Future studies should therefore consider alternative sampling strategies to enhance representativeness and improve the robustness of the findings.

## 4 CONCLUSIONS

### 4. ZAKLJUČAK

The furniture industry is currently facing increasing criticism from both consumers and experts, primarily due to unethical business practices. Among the

most frequently mentioned are the sale of low-quality products, withholding information about the materials used, deliberately shortening product lifespan, and insufficient communication regarding complaint procedures. While these practices may contribute to increased profits in the short term, they contradict the principles of sustainable business and indicate the absence of a responsible business model. A sustainable business model should not be understood solely as an environmentally friendly production process but, above all, as a comprehensive and transparent approach to customers, based on ethics, quality, trust, and efficient resource management.

In the context of the furniture industry, implementing these principles would not only emphasise product durability and promote the reuse of materials through circular design but also maintain open communication about the origin of raw materials, production conditions, and environmental impacts. Linking sustainability with the business model thus represents not only a tool for eliminating unethical practices but also a potential means to build a competitive advantage based on customer-perceived value – not only through price but also through the moral and ecological aspects of the product.

Based on the results of the cluster analysis carried out, several recommendations for improving current practices can be identified. Particularly significant is the discovered relationship between consumer gender and their responsiveness to marketing messages, suggesting that targeted, personalised marketing campaigns may be more effective. However, personalisation must be carried out in accordance with ethical standards—the communication with customers should be transparent, respectful, and inclusive, without any manipulative or discriminatory elements. Only in this way can trust be strengthened and stable, and long-term consumer relationships be established.

Among the tested hypotheses, the relevance of pre-purchase information showed the strongest statistical relationship with customer satisfaction, indicating its central role in shaping consumer experiences. This relationship highlights the need to enhance transparency and professionalism throughout the entire sales process. It is therefore recommended to consistently build an ethical approach to customers at all stages of the sale to minimise the occurrence of unethical or misleading practices.

Finally, it is essential to invest in a high-quality customer service system and efficient complaint handling. The ability to respond promptly and fairly to customer dissatisfaction plays a decisive role in maintaining trust and preventing damage to the company's reputation. From a long-term perspective, an ethical and sustainable approach to business thus represents

not only a moral obligation but also a strategic advantage that can significantly influence brand perception and customer loyalty.

### Acknowledgements – Zahvala

The scientific paper was developed within the project VEGA 1/0513/25 Business model of innovations based on the principle of sustainability and VEGA 1/0494/22 Comparative Advantages of the Wood Based Sector under the Growing Influence of the Green Economy Principles.

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