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Extended Abstract

Social Marketing and Its Moral Dimensions*

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Abstract

Social marketing applications have become a frequently used method for being able to positively influence social issues in the entire world. Campaigns sustained by using social marketing methods to solve social problems on issues like health and education are found in Turkey. Because of the bearing on large communities and being directed toward highly sensitive and critical issues, social marketing applications and the methods used within these applications are taken from different angles and criticized on points like their effectiveness, usefulness, and supervision. The moral dimension of social marketing is a topic that has been often debated in recent years. The purpose of this research is to evaluate attitudes toward the different dimensions of social marketing practices mainly over the moral dimension. Together with this it intends to detect whether or not these attitudes differ according to certain variables. According to our research findings, participants find social marketing useful for the community but are worried that moral issues could arise. For this reason they want social marketing to be more tightly controlled by the state. At the same time, participants who found social marketing problematic from the moral perspective were seen to have more negative attitudes toward the effectiveness of social marketing.

Keywords

Social marketing • Social marketing ethics • Marketing ethics • Social issues • Moral issues

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Social Marketing

Social marketing can be briefly defined as practices aimed at being able to contribute to solving social issues by using marketing techniques. In order to be able to understand exactly what social marketing is and how and why it occurs, one must first clearly understand what marketing is. Marketing can be defined as an exchange process that occurs among more than one person or organization. The goal of the marketing discipline is to establish specific methods by making determinations on how effectively and efficiently this process can be realized. [Bagozzi \(1975\)](#) identified that an element taking place at the heart of marketing is the “process of exchange.” As a result of this marketing feature, some marketing strategists see marketing as a concept not limited to the commercial sphere ([Bagozzi, 1975, 1978](#); [El-Ansary & Kramer, 1973](#); [Kotler & Levy, 1969](#)). In this sense, marketing is not only for commercial products, it is for everything that is subject to exchange. Even though marketing has gained such a broad meaning, the fact is that question marks and criticisms have been put forth on the point of its integrity from a scientific angle ([Luck, 1969](#)); this understanding is more common, and the marketing discipline has shown development in this direction, especially in recent years. [Wiebe \(1951\)](#), by asking “why can’t you sell the phenomenon of fellowship like soap?” prepared the groundwork of social marketing by revealing an idea directed at the applicability of marketing methods to social issues like fellowship.

In their articles where the concept of social marketing was first used, [Kotler and Zaltman \(1971, p. 5\)](#) defined social marketing as “the design, application, and control of programs created to influence the acceptability of social ideas by taking into account factors like product planning, pricing, communication, distribution, and marketing research.” [Andreasen \(1994\)](#) criticized this, saying the definition is problematic from certain angles. For example, is an insurance company with incentives toward seat belt usage or a beer company that campaigns for “responsible drinking” acceptable as social marketing? [Rangun and Karim \(1991\)](#) expressed the opinion that these types of activities cannot be included in social marketing because social change is the second objective here. On this point, [Andreasen \(1994, p. 110\)](#), for better distinguishing the social marketing from similar applications and having to include basic features of it, identified that “social marketing programs are designed using commercial marketing techniques to change the voluntary behavior of a specific target group in order to increase their own wealth and that of the community they live in.” The points that need to be emphasized in this definition are that social marketing’s single and ultimate goal is social welfare and that social marketing is aimed at influencing voluntary behavior. In order to understand social marketing correctly, seeing its differences from similar applications would be useful.

Comparing social marketing to commercial marketing. The subject of social marketing, as much as it has emerged as an extension of commercial marketing,

presents significant differences in terms of application areas and purpose. The main differences between social and commercial marketing are that: (a) Products sold in social marketing are ideas, attitudes, and behaviors, while products in commercial marketing consist of goods and services; (b) While the objective in commercial marketing is to provide a monetary gain, the goal in social marketing is that what is useful be obtained for society; (c) Compared to competitors being other vendors who face the same target group with similar products, competitors in social marketing are the target group itself or the groups that supply the exact opposite product to target group; (d) While the price a customer must pay should be worth the service offered in commercial marketing, social marketing has no such requirement; (e) *Demand* in social marketing is much more complicated and such a force to encounter; and (f) While demand is generally positive in commercial marketing, it is negative in social marketing (Andreasen & Drumwright, 2001; Eser & Özdoğan, 2006; Webster, 1975).

Comparing social marketing to societal marketing. The concept that social marketing is most confused with is societal marketing. Societal marketing predicts how an organization determines consumers' needs and wants and how it will later take the community's wellbeing into account while business meets these needs (McCull-Kennedy, Kiel, Lusch, & Lusch, 1994). For any business, satisfying consumers' wants and needs is ultimately directed at that business's goal to make a profit. In other words, social marketing covers how a business supervises social benefits at the same time it makes a profit, as well as how it performs its activities in this context. Social marketing, however, is the marketing techniques used in solving social issues. Its basic objective is not the interest of the practicing institution; the target is the welfare of the masses and society.

The Moral Dimensions of Social Marketing

Nowadays, social marketing applications have become a method often used to positively influence social issues all over the world. The moral dimension of social marketing, being parallel to this, has gained importance. Andreasen (1997, p. 4) stated the importance of this situation saying, "If one works towards solving social issues through social marketing, and perhaps it must be like this, we have to understand its moral dimensions, especially the moral issues that arise pertaining to itself." While some of the moral issues that can occur in social marketing are the continuance of those within the marketing discipline, other ones form from the issues that can arise as a result of this new practice, namely as a result of applying social marketing methods to a different area. On this point, the moral dimensions of marketing will be examined under two headings in the following chapters.

General Moral Issues for Marketing Practices

In much of the literature on social marketing, the moral concerns that come into question in marketing have been voiced. These generally cover basic moral concepts like justice, self-interest, manipulation, honesty, trust, and respect (Andreasen, 1995; Bloom & Novelli, 1981; Brenkert, 2002; Fox & Kotler, 1980; Rothschild, 2001). Social marketing's targeting of social problems, namely much more important and sensitive issues in terms of society, further increases the importance of all of these moral problems; social marketers' responsibilities are more serious compared to commercial marketers (Smith, 2000).

In a study based on social marketing, Smith (2001) specified the following moral standards are required for both commercial and social marketing: (a) tell the truth, (b) protect privacy, (c) do not be an example of inappropriate behavior, (d) do not defame, (e) be fair, (f) don't be prejudiced, and (g) protect children.

Moral Issues Specific to Social Marketing

Defining a social issue. What is a social issue and what can be handled as a social issue is a topic of debate by themselves. Many different theories exist within the discipline of sociology that attempt to define social issues. Functionalist theory, conflict theory, and structuralist theory are just a few of them. How social marketers define social problems in this sense is important not only in terms of what they see as a social problem but also in determining how social problems should be solved.

What is good for society. The goal of social marketing is to direct the behaviors that have been identified of individuals and groups to "the better" in terms of society. On this point, what is good for society comes across as an important question. Can marketers who show great success in the commercial arena be the most appropriate for designating what is good and be best suited to directing the target mass to this? For example, Donovan and Henley (2003), while identifying that social marketers with a strong commercial background usually have a teleological approach in terms of morals, advocate that individuals from the health sector will have a more deontological approach.

The implementer's identity. Which properties an organization that manages and directs social marketing processes should have and certain drawbacks of giving authority to these organizations is one of the headings debated in social marketing. Lacznik et al. (1979, p. 31) indicated how dangerous social marketing can be when in the hands of an organization with financial strength that wants to serve their own purposes, saying, "In spite of ideas being transferred much more efficiently using social marketing, those with money and marketing power can spread ideas that are not socially beneficial."

Intervention and control. One of the issues social marketing is also criticized for is that it can be used as a means of intervention or control against society by the state or other institutions. According to one research (Laczniak et al., 1979, p. 32), participants were concerned that “social marketing can be used as a tool of control by those with economically powerful.

Identifying the target group. Identifying the target audience carries some problems in social marketing. For example, In social issues that are perceived and responded negatively by society, by unconsciously or consciously the individual can deny of being to be part of the problem and can perceive being judged this way as a violation of rights. The criteria that selected target groups are determined according to also opens the way to debate. For example, by taking the limited resources into account, health-centered social marketing practices can choose individuals or groups who are easy to reach as the target, but the masses who live in hard-to-reach areas may have greater need of this practice and its services (French, Stevens, McVey, & Merritt, 2010).

Unintentionally affected groups. Social marketing applications target people and groups associated with the social issue in the direction of how the social issue is handled. However, many of the advertisements presented in written and visual media in the process of social marketing are seen and analyzed by every segment of society. As a result, some individuals or groups who are not in the potential target audience, who are not addressed by the organized program, can interpret the social message in different ways and produce undesired results.

Segmentation. Because the issue of social marketing has sensitive topics, including certain individuals or groups in specific compartments can be an undesirable situation for the target audience. The segmentation that are made include the possibility of stigmatize certain groups and/or dragging them into a disadvantaged and socially excluded position relative to other groups.

Results. Some issues about the results of social marketing can be stated as follows: (a) In terms of society, is a benefit really being obtained? (b) Have only certain groups obtained this benefit? (c) Was the outcome of social marketing formed in favor of certain interest groups? (d) Were harmful consequences revealed as a result of social marketing? (e) Did the benefit obtained from social marketing encounter the harmful consequences that emerged? (f) Can the same benefit be achieved more easily using different methods? (g) Can benefitting the majority be a valid reason for harming a minority group in society?

Unintended results. In terms of social marketing results, one point that needs paying attention to is the emergence of undesired results. The behavioral change

desired in a social marketing practice, together with the result of negative effects from the methods used while affecting this change or in the application process, may result in some undesired consequences. Nicotine, one of the most harmful substances contained in cigarettes, is known to be an appetite suppressant. Therefore, people who quit smoking can experience health issues related to excessive weight gain through excessive and irregular eating (French et al., 2010).

Method

The Aim and Significance of the Research

The main goal of the research is to determine participants' attitudes toward specific dimensions of social marketing, mainly its moral dimension, and to reveal whether or not these attitudes show any difference according to gender. At the same time, the scope of the research is to investigate whether or not participants' attitudes toward the moral dimension of social marketing reveal a difference in their attitudes toward other dimensions of social marketing.

This research is important because it is an empirical study on the moral dimension of social marketing. Studies in the literature are usually handled theoretically as a topic, or generally based on research performed on marketing ethics. At the same time, this research is an original study in terms of examining the relationships among the different dimensions of social marketing. Through this aspect of the research, analyzing the basic perceptions and approaches to social marketing practices is hoped to especially help social marketing practitioners be able to present the most proper mix of marketing.

Data Collection and Analysis

The sample of the research consists of 330 students chosen among the students in Kocaeli University's Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences using the convenience sampling method. As 13 of the 330 questionnaires that were applied were set aside because of not being suitable for use, the 317 that remained were used in the analyses.

In the scope of the research, a questionnaire form was prepared for collecting the required data. This questionnaire was formed in two sections. The first section has questions pertaining to the participants' demographic information. The second section uses a scale composed of 20 questions with the aim of measuring participants' attitudes toward social marketing. This scale was obtained as a result of adapting to social marketing the questions that Larkin (1977) had used to determine university students' attitudes toward advertising. The questions are designed as a 5-point Likert-type

scale for measuring participants' contribution levels to the expressions on the scale. The questions on the scale, which distinguished four factors in Larkin's study, were gathered under five distinct factors in the factor analysis results performed in this study.

Two analyses were basically performed in the process of analyzing the data. First, participants' general attitudes were determined by calculating the average of their responses toward each item on the scale. Afterwards, a common variable was formed for the expressions under each group that resulted from the factor analysis, and these variables' differences according to moral attitude were measured using the independent *t*-test through differences according to gender.

Findings and Suggestions

Participants were seen to consider social marketing to be an effective method in solving social issues. Social marketing was found to help solve social issues and be a positive approach in increasing the prosperity of society. At the same time, the contribution rate to expressions in the direction of social marketing being a waste of time and resources was low. In some studies on social marketing, the concern that social marketing would be ineffective and that resources would be wasted are among its most basic problems (Andreasen, 1995; Laczniak & Murphy, 1993; Murphy & Bloom, 1992). According to the results of the current research, participants have no such concerns toward social marketing. If one considers that the performed studies were in the periods when social marketing had just begun to spread, one can say the belief in social marketing's effectiveness was strengthened during this process. The role of the achievements obtained through social marketing practices in recent times is likely to have increased the confidence felt toward social marketing's effectiveness.

In spite of social marketing campaigns being considered effective, the quality of current applications is not considered sufficient. In particular, social marketing applications are desired to be more precise and realistic. This result can be understood in the framework of developments in marketing perceptions. Of these, while the product approach in commercial markets up to 50 years ago has been enough for us to be able to affect how we consider the products we produce rather than customers, companies these days with adapting marketing approach and who take their customers into account have started becoming successful. From this perspective, social marketing applications should also start off by accepting the target audience as people who are more responsible and aware. Social marketing campaigns should accordingly also reflect social issues more accurately and realistically, and they should give the target audience a more active role instead of undertaking psychological influence.

Another finding that draws attention in the scope of the research is in the direction of how participants want the people and institutions performing the social marketing

practices to be more tightly inspected by the government. Worries that participants' feel about the harm that social marketing can create appear to be the main reason for this want. According to another research result, the participants don't have a desire yet for government intervention, in spite of thinking that social marketers need to be accountable (Laczniak, Lusch, & Murhpy, 1979). In other words, this finding, although similar to previous studies in the direction of social marketers being supervised, reveals different results in the direction of it being performed by the state. Because the government's area of authority and intervention is a topic that varies from culture to culture as well as from ideology to ideology, having different outcomes within different population is a normal case. A structure is desired that supervises social marketing practitioners and holds them to account on the points that need to be emphasized. According to the research result in this case, in the situation where the state's necessary applications can be financed, having these applications be performed by government agencies or state-sponsored institutions would be more appropriate. Government control should be increased for for-profit organizations and regard for the society's interests should be provided through the entire social marketing practice.

The following results emerged when examining participants' attitudes towards social marketing campaigns in terms of gender. Accordingly, female participants generally found social marketing to be more positive than male participants. The female participants were seen to have greater beliefs that social marketing is an effective technique for solving social issues and that it would have positive results socially. At the same time and in terms of morals, female participants indicated finding social marketing to be less problematic. In this respect, social marketing campaigns should become more attractive for each group by examining the reasons for these different attitudes between men and women in future studies on social marketing.

In terms of social marketing's moral dimension, participants' attitudes were in a negative direction. The participants think that social marketing does not sufficiently reflect the truths and that the target audience is fed misleading and deceptive elements. These results are important in terms of complying with the theoretical literature that exists on the moral dimension of social marketing. Many studies have defined manipulation and honesty as the most important moral issues contained in social marketing (Andreasen, 1995; Fox & Kotler, 1980; Kotler & Zaltman, 1971; Murphy & Bloom, 1992). However, one finding specific to the current study shows the degree to which the moral dimension of social marketing has critical importance. According to this, people who find social marketing morally problematic at the same time see it as more ineffective and useless than other people do. Namely, the moral issues that exist in social marketing also negatively affect participants' attitudes toward other aspects of social marketing. At the same time, these people want social marketing

to be more tightly controlled. In other words, they have lower confidence in social marketing. From this angle, social marketers seem to need to minimize moral issues in order to be able to earn the trust of the community and be more effective.

Social marketing practices contain many moral issues that can occur, consciously or unconsciously. In order to prevent these moral issues that can arise in social marketing, the first thing that needs to be done is to examine social marketing theoretically and practically, and to clearly detect the possible moral issues. Social marketing, because of being an application of interest to many different disciplines such as psychology, marketing, and sociology, needs to be examined within the framework of all these different disciplines in order to be able to perform accurate detections. One important point for preventing moral issues or finding solutions is to also determine the local environment and conditions where the application will be implemented in the best way. Even the same moral issues can carry many different characteristics in different geographies. Therefore, sociological and psychological factors like the target group's beliefs, culture and lifestyle should be examined in the best way, and moral issues should be approached in this respect. Providing an accurate and effective moral teaching in the education system is also important. Classes, courses, and seminars that are done on morality will affect moral belief and behavior (Ferrell & Larry, 1985). As a result of this, individuals who are up to date will be more sensitive and knowledgeable on moral issues in this respect and be able to make better decisions.

Social marketing practitioners must be aware of the distinction between social marketing and commercial marketing through its many dimensions and that they have very different dynamics. One of the most important of these differences is the shape of the target group and the approach toward the target group. Practitioners need to understand in the best way the thoughts and concerns of the target group towards social marketing. Applications that are performed should have a responsive and satisfying quality. At the same time, they should have a transparent and accountable structure and provide the target audience with the trust and sincerity required.

The findings obtained in this study show the presence of moral and other concerns toward social marketing; they reveal a difference in terms of gender. At this point future researches on social marketing should focus on to determine the reasons behind these concerns against social marketing more specifically and try to explain the differences according to gender. To achieve these, more qualified and larger numbers of sample should be studied, more independent variables should be investigated, and experiments should be performed in light of the real cases.

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