



Strategic Partnerships in Social Marketing: A Qualitative Study of NGOs-Company Collaborations in Practices for Child Welfare in Türkiye

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Abstract: This study examines social marketing practices conducted in the field of child welfare and aims to understand the factors influencing the participation of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in these practices and the associated benefits and challenges within the Turkish context. Social marketing practices in Türkiye are often carried out in areas that intersect with corporate social responsibility (CSR) practices, particularly in the context of cooperation between non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and companies. In this sense, the study evaluates social marketing strategies and practices that aim to produce social benefits through voluntary behavior change, rather than simply creating visibility for a social problem or enhancing the corporate image. Using a qualitative descriptive design method, in-depth interviews were conducted with 17 NGO managers who had participated in social marketing practices focused on child welfare. The findings reveal that company-NGO collaborations provide operational convenience, financial resources, and visibility to NGOs, while supporting corporate reputation and conferring social legitimacy to companies. However, in addition to mutual benefits, these collaborations sometimes create power asymmetries and lead to ethical and structural problems such as the instrumentalization of children and mission drift. The study argues that social marketing practices should be designed in line with ethical principles and shared goals in order to be sustainable and have a social impact.

Keywords: Social Marketing, Non-Governmental Organizations, Companies, Child Welfare

1. Introduction

The acceleration of neoliberal policies in the late twentieth century led to the restructuring and shrinking of the welfare state (Evers & Laville, 2004). In this process, civil society organizations became increasingly important in most Western countries, and many of the services previously provided by the government were transferred to the civil society sector (Salamon & Anheier, 1996). With this transformation, NGOs took on greater responsibility for supporting people and society, and forging partnerships with government and corporations. In addition, with globalization, the role that corporations have undertaken has gone beyond simply making profits. Corporations have been faced with the obligation to respond to the social, environmental, and ecological problems of society in line with their expanding structures, the international standards they must comply with, and their sense of responsibility (Carroll, 1991; Doh & Guay, 2006). In this sense, in today's world where social problems are becoming increasingly complex and public resources are insufficient, it has become necessary to seek solutions to social problems through a multi-stakeholder structure. One of the areas where this transformation is most clearly observed is in social marketing strategies that set their primary goal as public benefit and are based on behavioral change (Andreasen, 2002; Andreasen, 2006). Although social marketing practices are associated with state-based initiatives in the literature, the number of practices shaped through collaborations between non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the private sector is also increasing today (Bianchi et al., 2021). These collaborations, which are mostly positioned within the discourse of corporate social responsibility (CSR), have transformed into strategic partnerships based on shared value creation and behavioral change, rather than raising awareness of social problems or conducting one-way interventions. At this point, it is essential to distinguish between standard Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and social marketing within the framework of multi-sectoral partnerships. While CSR often focuses on enhancing

corporate image, brand reputation, or philanthropic contributions, social marketing is fundamentally defined by its primary goal of achieving voluntary behavior change for social good (Andreasen, 2002; Skouloudis et al., 2015). In the context of child welfare, the collaborations examined in this study go beyond simple financial aid or image-oriented promotion. These initiatives are classified as social marketing because their strategic intent is to influence social norms and individual behaviors—such as encouraging preventive health screenings for children or mitigating digital violence—rather than merely fulfilling a corporate responsibility mandate. In this approach, social marketing promotes a positive social behavior. Thus, the primary value created through these partnerships is the long-term well-being of children and the broader benefit to society. On the other hand, there are many reasons for the increasing interest in NGO-company collaborations. For companies, these offer the legitimacy, advocacy capacity, or contextual knowledge that NGOs possess at the local level; for NGOs, they can provide financial resources, logistical infrastructure, and media access (Doh & Guay, 2006; Hulme, 2013; Mitchell, 2014). This rapprochement between NGOs and companies provides great opportunities for effective and sustainable solutions to social issues, as such partnerships gain strategic importance in areas where the state cannot address social problems alone and where public resources are limited (Kotler & Lee, 2008; Lee & Kotler, 2011). The ability of NGOs to integrate trust-based relationships at the local level into practices, combined with the operational capacity of companies, has enabled the emergence of effective, sustainable, and visible social marketing strategies (Donovan & Henley, 2003).

In contexts such as Türkiye, where public financing for child welfare services is limited and fragmented, NGOs play a critical role in both service delivery and advocacy (Aslan & Tuncay, 2023a). In such contexts, social marketing practices not only promote behavioral change, but also serve as a tool for creating public awareness, mobilizing support, and increasing institutional visibility (Andreasen, 2006). However, the social marketing literature has largely ignored the experiences of NGOs participating in these practices, focusing mainly on individual-level behavioral outcomes or the motivations of companies. This limits our understanding of how social marketing works in the field; how practices are designed, negotiated, and implemented; and how NGOs cope with the opportunities and limitations of CSR partnerships.

This study aims to fill this gap and examines the experiences of NGO managers who have participated in CSR-oriented social marketing practices in the field of child welfare in Türkiye. The primary objective is to identify the drivers of NGO involvement and to critically analyze the gains and operational difficulties emerging from these multi-sectoral partnerships. The research, conducted using a qualitative descriptive design, seeks answers to the following two main questions: (1) What are the factors that affect NGOs' participation in social marketing practices? and (2) What are the benefits and challenges of these partnerships for NGOs?

By focusing on the experiences of NGO actors, this study provides both theoretical and practical contributions regarding the conditions required for social marketing practices to produce ethically sound and socially effective outcomes. As such, it enables us to gain a more holistic understanding of the impact of multi-sectoral partnerships on the design, implementation, and governance of social marketing processes, especially in sensitive areas such as child welfare.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Social marketing: Conceptual framework

The concept of social marketing was first introduced by Kotler and Zaltman (1971) and is based on how commercial marketing techniques can be used for social transformation. In this context, social marketing refers not only to the sale of products or services, but also to a strategic approach that prioritizes the public good and aims to produce solutions to social problems. Andreasen (2006) defines this concept as follows: "The application of commercial marketing technologies to the analysis, planning, execution, and evaluation of programs designed to influence the voluntary behavior of target audiences in order to improve their personal welfare and that of their society" (p. 7). This definition emphasizes the goal of improving the well-being of both individuals and society through voluntary behavior change. Donovan and Henley (2003) extend this definition and argue that social marketing can be based not only on voluntarism, but also on limiting an individual's behavioral space through legal sanctions (e.g., drunk driving) or regulations (e.g., smoking bans). They also note that in some cases the individual's right to choose can be guided by direct interventions (e.g., government restrictions

on trans-fat-containing foods). This broadened perspective reveals that social marketing is a multi-layered strategy that is not limited to individual preferences but also affects social structures, policy arrangements, and public administration. In this respect, social marketing offers a comprehensive field of application that prioritizes social good and aims at behavioral and structural transformation in areas such as health, environmental sustainability, security, education, and social justice (Grier & Bryant, 2005; Lefebvre, 2013). While these practices serve diverse sectors, their implementation in sensitive areas requires a specialized focus on the role of non-governmental actors and the specific ethical frameworks governing them.

2.2. The role of NGOs in social marketing

Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) are local, national, or international non-profit entities that address social problems in line with specific objectives and are composed of volunteer members of civil society (Cordery et al., 2019). NGOs work not only independently but also adopt a multi-sectoral approach by collaborating with foreign aid organizations, private companies, local governments, and community-based associations of various sizes (Hulme, 2013). NGOs also have the ability to directly observe the needs and expectations of target groups (Banks & Hulme, 2012). In this way, they can strengthen the trust-based relationships with society through their field experience. This allows NGOs' social marketing practices to be carried out on a socially legitimate basis, not just a technical one. The legal and institutional framework of civil society in Türkiye is built upon a dual structure primarily defined by the Law on Associations (No. 5253) and the Law on Foundations (No. 5737). Although Law No. 5253, which came into effect in 2004, relatively eased state tutelage over civil society and paved the way for international collaborations, the delicate balance between the freedom of association and oversight mechanisms directly affects the operational processes of NGOs working in sensitive areas such as child welfare (Zihnioğlu, 2013). Obtaining the status of an association working for the public interest or a tax-exempt foundation are the fundamental elements determining the resource development capacity of these institutions. However, the rigid bureaucratic criteria for obtaining these statuses, coupled with the strict auditing processes carried out by the Directorate General for Relations with Civil Society, render the NGO ecosystem in Türkiye more state-centric and compliance-oriented, distinguishing it from Western models (Akboğa, 2017).

The increasing complexity of multidimensional social problems at the global level has complicated the factors that determine the health and well-being of many disadvantaged groups and, more generally, of entire societies at the macro level. This process has therefore limited the ability of any single organization to solve problems and manage seemingly complex issues on its own (Haski-Leventhal, 2018). In this context, NGOs working in the field of child welfare have been providing continuous services to help children build strong community relationships and improve their overall well-being (Kamerman et al., 2009). Especially in activities targeting disadvantaged and vulnerable groups, collaboration with NGOs increases both the authenticity and accuracy of the targeted representation, as well as the sensitivity of the activities carried out.

In social marketing, understanding people's thoughts and attitudes is crucial for identifying their motivations and barriers to behavior change. Social marketing practices aim to deliver effective messages that inspire positive changes in people's behavior (Par & Polat, 2024). NGOs, through their experience in the field and their ties with independent organizations, local governments, and various aid associations, enable these practices to be conducted on a legitimate and ethical basis (Aboramadan, 2018). The effective and successful implementation of social marketing strategies is not just a matter of constructing the content accurately or achieving behavioral goals. It is closely related to who carries out the practices, based on which values, and how they are implemented in other words, whether they align with ethical, cultural, and social contexts. NGOs, as one of the main institutions that ensure this alignment, enable practices to be carried out with a participatory and rights-based approach. Especially in sensitive areas such as child welfare, they ensure that children are recognized not only as a target group but also as individuals with rights, and that the activities conducted not only raise awareness but also serve an empowering function (Aslan & Tuncay, 2023b). The presence of NGOs in this process becomes important as a balancing force that prevents the instrumentalization of children.

2.3. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and NGO collaborations

One of the most important factors in increasing the social impact of social marketing strategies is the participation of the private sector in the process. This participation is mostly realized within the framework of corporate social responsibility (CSR) policies. CSR refers to actions taken to provide social benefits beyond a company's direct interests or legal obligations, based on the idea that businesses are also responsible to shareholders, employees, suppliers, society, and the environment (Doh & Guay, 2006; Skouloudis et al., 2015). Moreover, CSR is of strategic importance for businesses as it contributes to outcomes such as brand image, consumer trust, consumer loyalty, and brand reputation. On the other hand, De la Cuesta and Valor (2003, p. 11) define CSR as “the acknowledgment and integration of social and environmental concerns into corporate operations, thereby giving rise to business practices that address these concerns and shape relationships with partners” and argue that different interest groups (stakeholders) involved in these activities can create more value for society. NGOs, as one of these stakeholders, engage in fundraising for social causes through a variety of strategies such as individual donations, access to public resources, and collaboration with the private sector. From a financial sustainability perspective, corporate donations—one of the most significant revenue streams for child welfare NGOs in Türkiye—are regulated by the *donation and aid deduction* provisions in the Income Tax Law (No. 193) and the Corporate Tax Law (No. 5520). Although the tax-deductibility of contributions made under Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) projects increases private sector interest in the field of childcare, these supports often remain limited to short-term, project-based aid rather than building a sustainable system (Aras & Crowther, 2009). This situation results in a financially fragile structure for Turkish civil society, where NGOs function more as entities filling regulatory gaps rather than rational service providers (Okcebe, 2023). Furthermore, in the Turkish administrative system where the state remains the primary authority in child protection services, NGOs can only be integrated into the system through specific protocols, typically through collaborations with the Ministry of Family and Social Services (Başar, 2023). In this context, collaborations between a business and an NGO for a social cause—aiming to produce mutual benefits—are defined as CSR initiatives and strengthen marketing actions, especially at the relational level (Bianchi et al., 2021). However, the structure of such partnerships may not always be equitable or sustainable due to power imbalances and differing expectations between the parties. For NGOs, such partnerships with businesses present both opportunities and risks.

CSR practices can help NGOs reach a wider audience and facilitate their access to financial resources. However, this situation may pave the way for mission drift, dependency, and ethical breakdowns (Brinkerhoff & Brinkerhoff, 2004). Resource Dependency Theory (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978), which focuses on the relationship between NGOs' increasing dependence on external funding sources and their decision-making processes, provides an explanatory theoretical framework for a deeper understanding of this bidirectional structure. According to this theory, when an organization obtains most of its critical resources—such as financing—from the external environment, these resources may come under the control of their providers (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003). In this context, while some scholars view resource dependence as a pragmatic response that trades autonomy for organizational growth and survival (Hafsi & Thomas, 2005), others argue that resource asymmetry can undermine independent decision-making in the long run by encouraging organizational subordination (Brinkerhoff & Brinkerhoff, 2004; Mitchell, 2014). Such collaborations are particularly vulnerable in areas that require high ethical sensitivity, such as child welfare. In some practices, representations of children may be overdramatized or instrumentalized by presenting them as “objects of aid” to increase emotional impact. This blurs the ethical boundaries of social marketing practices and may lead corporate actors to instrumentalize social good solely for image gain. Therefore, the real social benefit of social marketing practices carried out within the framework of CSR depends not only on the sharing of resources, but also on a governance approach based on shared values, transparency, and accountability.

2.4. Social marketing practices and ethics in child welfare

Addressing child welfare in social marketing practices requires special consideration in terms of both strategic impact and ethical responsibility (Eagle, 2008). While children are one of the groups in need of social protection, they are also easily instrumentalized through media representations and practice content (Durgeç, 2020; Goddard & Saunders, 2000). However, in fields such as child welfare, where

ethical responsibility is of utmost importance, the role of social marketing has become increasingly controversial (Young et al., 1999; Johnson et al., 2007). This is due to the fact that in social marketing practices, the focus on children may sometimes result in them being represented not only as a “target audience,” but also as instrumentalized figures used to enhance emotional impact. For this reason, in social marketing practices involving children, it is critically important not only to achieve the desired behavioral change but also to consider how children are represented and with what ethical principles they are protected. In particular, dramatic visuals, representations of helplessness, or passive discourses of need—which are used to create emotional impact—can lead to a form of communication in which children are perceived as objects rather than subjects (Gevorgyan & Manucharova, 2012; Durgeç, 2020). It is therefore essential that social marketing activities be designed not merely as content or strategy development efforts, but also within an ethical framework and with a strong sense of social responsibility (Johnson et al., 2007). A key factor in the success of social marketing lies not only in the intended behavior change itself, but also in the values through which this change is presented and the actors by whom it is delivered.

Based on this, social marketing practices need to be reconstructed not only at the message level but also at the level of underlying values. Moreover, viewing children not merely as a target audience but as individuals with rights necessitates the design of practices that consider children’s participation, right to representation, and developmental needs. Therefore, while social marketing serves to protect social values, it must also achieve behavioral change within an ethical framework. In addition, while NGOs provide the ethical assurance of this process, private sector actors must also operate with the same level of sensitivity, allowing CSR strategies to reflect genuine responsibility rather than mere visibility (Bianchi et al., 2021; Skouloudis et al., 2015). In the Turkish context, it can be assumed that social marketing practices related to child welfare are largely carried out through NGO initiatives. The main reason for this is the limited public resources and the fragmented nature of institutional structures. On the other hand, challenges are observed regarding the sustainability of social marketing practices within collaborations with the private sector. In this context, for social marketing strategies in the field of child welfare to have a truly protective, inclusive, and transformative impact, they must be implemented with an understanding that maintains ethical balance among institutions such as the state, NGOs, and businesses.

2.5. Research gaps and contributions

Although the social marketing literature has expanded in recent years, there is a dearth of studies that focus on the experiences of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) involved in this field (Kim et al., 2025; Florence et al., 2022). Most existing studies focus on practice strategies or behavioral changes at the individual level, often overlooking NGOs’ institutional decision-making processes, their relationships with the private sector, and the ethical and structural challenges these collaborations entail. This creates a significant knowledge gap regarding the field realities of social marketing practices, especially in developing countries such as Türkiye.

This study aims to understand the experiences of managers involved in child welfare practices within the social marketing framework specifically focusing on the relational and structural dynamics of NGO-private sector collaborations. Adopting a qualitative descriptive approach, the research aims to address the aforementioned research questions by exploring the drivers of NGO involvement and the multidimensional outcomes of their collaborations with the private sector. In this respect, the study not only addresses theoretical gaps in the literature but also offers practical suggestions for developing social marketing practices with more balanced, transparent, and child-centered structures.

3. Research Methodology

This study was conducted to examine the field-based experiences and institutional perspectives of non-governmental organization (NGO) managers working in the field of child welfare regarding social marketing practices carried out in collaboration with the private sector. To this end, a qualitative descriptive design was chosen to provide a comprehensive summary of perspectives based on participants’ field observations and individual experiences. This approach enables participants to describe their experiences in their own words and illuminates the strategic and ethical elements underlying these experiences. (Patton, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2016). By focusing on the ‘how’ and ‘why’ of NGO-company interactions, this design provides a suitable framework for addressing the

previously stated research questions regarding the drivers and outcomes of these collaborations. It allows for an in-depth analysis of the role of NGOs in social marketing practices, how they are involved in this process, and how these collaborations are translated into institutional practices at local and national levels.

3.1. Sample

The sample selection for the study was based on purposive sampling. The sample was drawn from nine national-level NGOs across Türkiye that are actively engaged in social marketing activities in the field of child welfare. These organizations were specifically selected based on their established institutional structures and professional management teams, ensuring that the participants possessed significant experience in negotiating and managing strategic collaborations with the private sector. The main reason for this selection was that it included seventeen managers representing different levels of experience, educational backgrounds, and organizational roles. Hence, the selection of respondents from diverse backgrounds maximized representational diversity and provided a rich and contextually relevant sample from a developing country perspective. In addition, the sample size of seventeen managers prioritized depth of insight over breadth of coverage, which is appropriate in a qualitative research context. During the data collection process, the researchers monitored the emergence of recurring patterns to ensure data saturation. It was observed that informational redundancy was achieved by the 15th interview, as no substantially new themes or perspectives regarding NGO-company collaborations emerged in the subsequent two interviews. Consequently, the final sample of seventeen participants was deemed sufficient to reach theoretical saturation, ensuring a comprehensive and robust representation of the dynamics within the Turkish context. This approach ensured that the findings reflected a broad perspective on social marketing practices in child welfare. The diversity of the sample (in terms of participants' age, management experience, and educational background) supported a comprehensive understanding of social marketing dynamics in Türkiye and enhanced both the representativeness and depth of the study despite the modest sample size.

Fourteen of the seventeen participants were women. Their ages ranged from 25 to 59 years, their management experience ranged from 5 to 38 years, and their educational backgrounds ranged from a high school diploma to a PhD degree. This diversity allowed us to examine potential differences in perspectives related to age, experience and educational level. Detailed information on each participant's role, educational background and years of experience is provided in Appendix 1 (Table 1), while maintaining confidentiality.

3.2. Instruments and procedure

In this study, a semi-structured, in-depth interview method was used, which is particularly suitable for qualitative descriptive research. This method creates opportunities for researchers to explore interactions with participants in order to investigate their perspectives, experiences, and institutional observations. The researcher used a semi-structured interview format in the study to ask participants: "What significant difficulties does your NGO encounter when implementing social marketing initiatives with companies?" "What conditions motivate you to engage in social marketing practices?" and "What factors attract you to collaborate with companies in the context of social marketing practices?" These interview questions outlined specific details of participants' experiences and observations regarding social marketing processes.

The interview guide was reviewed by an external researcher specializing in marketing and by an academic. This joint review helped ensure that the guide was appropriate for the research context and objectives. The interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. In addition, audio recordings were made with the participants' consent. The recordings were transcribed verbatim, and pseudonyms such as Mngr1 and Mngr2 were assigned to protect confidentiality and anonymity. Finally, informed consent was obtained from all participants, and they were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage. Transcripts and notes were stored on an encrypted hard drive accessible only to the research team.

3.3. Analysis

Thematic analysis (TA) was conducted following the six-phase framework outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), which offers a structured yet flexible approach to identifying, analyzing, and interpreting

patterns of meaning within the dataset. The analysis adopted an inductive approach, where themes were derived directly from the data rather than fitting into a pre-existing coding frame. The codes were collated, categorised into potential themes and reviewed against the entire data set to ensure that the identified themes represent the extracts. The analysis process followed a systematic and iterative path through the following stages:

Phase 1: Familiarization with the data: The researchers worked with the raw data by transcribing the audio recordings and reading the transcripts repeatedly. This phase allowed them to develop a comprehensive understanding of the scope and depth of the data while noting initial observations and recurring patterns.

- *Phase 2: Generating initial codes:* Meaningful features across the dataset were systematically identified through line-by-line coding. Codes acted as descriptive or interpretive markers to simplify complex data into analyzable units related to the research question.
- *Phase 3: Searching for themes:* Researchers began grouping similar codes into broader patterns or candidate themes. This phase involved exploring how different codes interact and relate to the research focus.
- *Phase 4: Reviewing potential themes:* Candidate themes were evaluated for internal coherence (data within the theme fits together) and external distinctiveness (themes are clearly separate). Themes were refined, merged, or discarded to ensure an accurate representation of the entire dataset.
- *Phase 5: Defining and naming themes:* The researchers refined the core meaning of each theme and assigned concise, evocative names. Detailed thematic summaries were developed, supported by illustrative data extracts to enhance clarity and depth.
- *Phase 6: Writing the report:* The findings were synthesized into a coherent and compelling narrative. This final stage integrated thematic analysis with analytic commentary and linked the results back to the existing literature.

MAXQDA 2020 software was utilized for systematic data management and to facilitate the visualization of connections between themes. To ensure methodological rigor, researchers cross-checked their thematic analyses to reduce personal bias. Member checking was employed, allowing participants to validate whether the themes accurately reflected their experiences. Finally, the research findings received further validation through the triangulation of data with published academic literature, ensuring the analysis was grounded in empirical evidence while utilizing existing theoretical frameworks as interpretive lenses.

3.4. The ethical aspect of the study

Ethical approval for this article was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Social and Humanities Sciences at Ankara Yıldırım Beyazıt University at its meeting held on February 8, 2022, pursuant to Committee Approval No. 2.

4. Results

The following section presents the results from the non-governmental organizations' perspectives and focuses on the two key research questions: (1) What are the factors affecting the participation of NGOs in social marketing practices' collaborations? (2) What are the benefits and challenges of social marketing practices' in terms of NGOs' role in child welfare? Data analysis of interview responses revealed five primary themes that are described under the specified sub-sections: (a) Strategic Alignment and Shared Values; (b) The Role of Digital Channels in Building NGOs' Power; (c) Mutual Value Exchange; (d) Organizational Benefits of Social Practices; and (e) Ethical and Operational Challenges of Partnerships.

4.1. Strategic alignment and shared values

Social marketing practice results directly link to reaching the target audience while establishing clear harmonious goals and values between institutional practice actors. The thematic analysis of the interviews indicates that NGO managers have a positive attitude towards such collaborations and that projects based on common social goals are more sustainable and effective. Social-benefiting

partnerships enhance the success rates of multi-stakeholder practices focused on child welfare issues. *It is important for us to work with companies that prioritize social issues and do not put profit first. These companies are especially valuable to organizations like ours that work with children. When there is a common goal, it is easier to move forward. (Mngr2)*

The managers also highlighted by participants that companies operating at the international level adopt more systematic and ethical approaches in their relations with NGOs due to their corporate structure. However, the fact that social benefit brings about a change in behavior was expressed as one of the key points of success.

If we have common goals, things move very fast, and the decision-making process becomes much smoother. We adapt more easily, especially with global companies that already have experience in social marketing practices and understand the value of long-term partnerships. (Mngr1)

In fact, it is not just the budget or visibility that matters to us. In the projects we collaborate with, for example, encouraging children to go for regular health checks. If we can focus on this, I think both the company's perception of social benefit increases and our impact in the field increases. (Mngr3)

In summary, the alignment of shared values and social missions between sectors emerges as a foundational driver for NGO participation, directly addressing the first research question regarding the motivations behind social marketing partnerships.

4.2. The role of digital channels in building NGOs' power

Social media platforms and digital media channels give NGOs an important strategic benefit as described by the participants. Numerous interview respondents indicated that traditional media limitations enable them to use social media platforms successfully for gaining more prominence and directly shaping public viewpoints. In this context, digitalization not only generates awareness, but also increases corporate transparency and encourages companies to more openly demonstrate their social responsibility.

In the past, no one used to hear our voices. Now, thanks to social media, we are visible; if there is something wrong, the public reacts immediately. This makes companies more careful. (Mngr11)

Digital platforms have become an important tool for NGOs with limited budgets. Participants emphasized that, unlike companies with large advertising budgets, having access to the reach of social media with limited budgets creates a level playing field for NGOs.

We don't have an advertising budget, but we are present in digital spaces, and we use social media actively to raise awareness. Companies are now taking this visibility seriously and recognizing that our online presence can influence public perception and enhance the credibility of the practices we are involved in. (Mngr7)

Digital channels actually allow us to avoid the costs associated with traditional media; this works out well for us because we're able to maintain our visibility without depleting our project budgets. (Mngr14)

In one of our social media practices, we tried to raise awareness about digital violence against children. People not only shared the practice, they started asking us questions about it. Our number of notifications increased and we received feedback from families. Maybe we would not have been able to touch so many people without social media. (Mngr6)

This theme demonstrates how digital tools serve as strategic assets for NGOs to balance power dynamics, providing a clear answer to the research objective focused on the technological drivers of social marketing effectiveness.

4.3. Mutual value exchange

Participants highlighted that NGO-company collaboration creates mutual value for both parties. It was also emphasized that this collaboration goes beyond financial contributions due to the strategic partnerships it establishes. Therefore, participants noted that social marketing practices not only

enhance a company's corporate reputation but also enable NGOs to use these practices to enhance their social legitimacy, expand their influence, and reach broader audiences.

However, it was emphasized that these benefits should not only be based on economic, but also on long-term impacts to generate social benefits.

The private sector has resources, and we have the capacity to create social impact in society. When the strengths of these two entities are strategically combined, the results are often more effective than what either party could achieve alone. Looking at our goal, we can say that it is to develop effective and sustainable projects that address urgent social issues in some way. (Mngr8)

We once highlighted child labor in a practice. Afterwards, a few local companies contacted us and published something public, a commitment that they don't employ children. Even this small change was important. (Mngr17)

Mngr5 emphasized that the exchange is not purely transactional: "We provide companies with a meaningful environment for their CSR goals. In return, we gain the stability needed to plan long-term projects."

The mutual benefit framework is not limited to project outputs, but also allows for a balance between the social reputation of companies and the sustainability of NGOs. Such collaborations increase both the viability and visibility of social marketing practices in the field. They strengthen the public image of companies by allowing them to fulfill their social responsibility agendas, while simultaneously providing NGOs with the strategic support needed for sustainability. In summary, this theme illustrates the strategic 'give-and-take' dynamics between sectors, directly addressing the relational drivers of social marketing partnerships.

4.4. Organizational benefits of social practices

Interviews show that social marketing practices carried out in the context of private sector partnerships provide NGOs with significant contributions not only financially but also in terms of organizational development. Three main areas of contribution were highlighted by participants: Cost reduction, increased public awareness, and collaboration success.

4.4.1. Cost reduction and donation support

NGO managers emphasized that social marketing projects incur significant costs in terms of planning and logistics; sponsorships provided by the private sector alleviate this burden to a great extent.

If we were to run the projects only with our own resources, we could reach very few children. But with the support of the private sector, we increase the number significantly. (Mngr14)

Regarding financial planning, Mngr3 said: "When a company covers the costs of certain items, such as logistics and supplies, we can refocus our own resources directly on children's services."

4.4.2. Enhancing community awareness

Participants noted that these practices put child welfare issues on the public agenda and give NGOs greater social visibility.

Volunteering and participation in NGOs is still very limited in society. But thanks to social practices, we are attracting public attention and child welfare issues are being discussed more. (Mngr12)

Our aim was not only to implement a project but also to raise social awareness. For example, we tried to increase the level of knowledge by providing training on children's rights to families in the program. At the end of the training, most of the participants said that they had heard the concept of "private space" for the first time. This is an important achievement for us. (Mngr15)

4.4.3. Operational capacity and collaboration success

The interviews emphasized that successful practices benefit the whole society, not just companies or NGOs. These structures, which are established within the framework of common goals, increase inter-institutional trust and produce more holistic solutions to social problems.

These collaborations enable us as NGOs to strengthen our operational capacity and mission-driven outreach. Most importantly, these synergies lead to more effective and targeted interventions in child

welfare. They also generate tangible benefits for children as primary beneficiaries. (Mngr4)

While public institutions often face bureaucratic delays, Mngr15 observed that private sector collaborations allow for faster decision-making, enabling the NGO to reach children much more rapidly. These synergies lead to more effective and targeted interventions in child welfare. This theme reveals that social marketing is a multidimensional tool that supports the long-term capacity building of NGOs. Ultimately, these organizational gains demonstrate how social marketing serves as a tool for NGO capacity building and internal sustainability.

4.5. Ethical and operational challenges of partnerships

While NGO managers' accounts acknowledge that social marketing practices offer many opportunities through partnerships with the private sector, these processes also bring with them various ethical and operational tensions. These tensions often relate to incompatibility between the goals of organizations, instrumental approaches, financial dependency and the emergence of structures that threaten the autonomy of NGOs.

We realized that a company could present a child as a 'symbol of hope' in a project, but we didn't allow it. Instead, we tried to create the message with a different story together, because our aim was not emotional exploitation, but to raise awareness among children to believe that they can make a social difference (Mngr16).

4.5.1. Trust relationship and instrumentalization anxiety

Within the scope of the study, participants stated that companies sometimes approach social marketing practices solely to gain visibility and brand reputation. This situation can raise the issue of companies using children as "visual elements" in order to create an emotional impact on an emotional society. This raises various ethical issues. As Mngr10 points out, *"Sometimes companies insist on using children with Down syndrome because they think they will attract more attention. This really bothers us because they are treating the child as an advertising object."*

The research findings indicate that NGOs do not merely remain passive in the face of such ethical risks; instead, they engage in an active negotiation process to protect the dignity of the child. For instance, Mngr16 stated that the first thing that comes to the minds of corporate partners to increase campaign impact is the use of dramatized or 'pity-based' imagery. He explained that when a company suggests portraying a child in a dark setting, crying, or as a helpless 'object of aid' to maximize emotional impact, they intervene by proposing alternative visual narratives that focus on the child's empowerment and autonomy. These alternatives may include showing the child achieving a goal at school or playing with friends. In short, it is about being empowerment-based.

4.5.2. Profit oriented approaches and goal dissonance

Companies' approach to practices may be based on commercial interests. This can therefore lead to conflicts in terms of achieving social benefits. Participants emphasized that this leads to a focus on quantity rather than quality in projects. This goal dissonance often manifests as a conflict between corporate expectations for quick results and the NGO's focus on sustainable impact. Mngr13 pointed out that while companies prioritize immediate and measurable outputs for their reports, NGOs must negotiate to keep the focus on the qualitative improvements in children's lives, which often require more time than a standard project cycle allows.

Companies always look at quantity; how many people participated, how visible we were... But we care about how children are affected. (Mngr13)

4.5.3. Financial dependence and autonomy risk

The dependence of civil society organizations on corporate financial support provided by companies may expose NGOs to the risk of becoming dependent on companies over time. This situation may weaken the advocacy role of civil society organizations and restrict their strategic decision-making processes. Mngr9 expressed this as follows: *"Some companies come to us with very large budgets. Then it seems like they are the ones deciding everything. We find it difficult to maintain our stance."*

Resource reliance creates a persistent psychological and operational burden on NGO leadership.

Mngr13 described this power shift and the resulting erosion of autonomy: *“Sometimes I wonder if we are really the ones managing the project. Since the budget is in their hands, you end up being the one who implements their vision... Sometimes, since they cannot look at [the issues] as sensitively as we do, things can get difficult. It becomes almost impossible for us to say no to their suggestions; it wears us out.”*

If we let a single corporate partner fund our core activities, it gets harder to speak up or challenge their decisions down the road when things don't align with our mission. (Mngr10)

These ethical and operational tensions highlight how financial asymmetry can lead to mission drift a structural consequence explained by RDT, where NGOs may trade their autonomy for financial survival.

4.5.4. Making tax incentives a priority

Participants noted that some companies engage in social marketing activities solely for financial incentives such as tax breaks. They also stated that this situation overshadows common goals such as social benefit. Mngr9 explained, *“They do it, but they do it for tax breaks. They don't do it for the children; they do it for the cost advantage.”*

4.5.5. Reputational risks for NGOs

Some managers have stated that they have established partnerships with NGOs due to their companies' past unethical practices or negative image. They have also emphasized that this situation could have a negative impact on the public image of NGOs. The potential for reputational damage necessitates a rigorous vetting process before entering a partnership. Mngr1 explained that their organization performs careful background checks on potential corporate partners to ensure that the company's past ethical record does not conflict with the NGO's core values or diminish the hard-earned trust of their donors. As Mngr5 shared, *“If companies present project proposals that are inconsistent with the core values that NGOs prioritize, serious issues may arise. We do not participate in activities where children's interests are not a priority.”*

To conclude, these ethical and operational tensions highlight the inherent risks of instrumentalization in child welfare, providing critical insights into the ethical boundaries and challenges investigated in the study's second research objective.

5. Discussion

Today, NGO-business collaborations have gained strategic importance in the design and implementation of social marketing practices. This study presents in-depth findings on NGO-company collaborations in social marketing practices conducted in the field of child welfare, which is considered a vulnerable and sensitive area in Türkiye. The findings, shaped by a qualitative descriptive approach, reveal that NGO-company collaborations have a multi-dimensional structure. The analysis results indicate that collaborations between NGOs and private sector actors offer significant opportunities in terms of access to resources, visibility, and capacity building, but also highlight ethical and structural challenges that actors must be address within these structures in the context of social marketing theory.

When we examine the factors underlying the success of social marketing practices in light of the analysis results, our study emphasizes the importance of strategic alignment between the goals and values of the parties involved—beyond the content of the message—. The NGO managers interviewed stated that when companies prioritize social issues and do not act solely for profit, collaborations become sustainable and yield more effective outcomes. In this context, shared values and a clearly defined common purpose emerge as essential conditions for achieving long-term behavioral change, which is the fundamental goal of social marketing. Hayden and Deng (2013) link the success of social marketing practices to the joint definition of measurable and realistic goals between the parties. The absence of such goals in NGO-company collaborations can blur the common purpose and result in visibility-focused practices rather than those aimed at behavioral change. In this sense, the alignment between NGOs and companies becomes even more crucial in child welfare practices, where ethical sensitivity is high and requires a rights-based approach to children's representation.

Another finding that emerged from the study is the widespread use of mass communication tools and social media in modern societies, and the leverage this gives NGOs in publicizing social marketing practices. NGOs often need not only volunteers to carry out CSR or social marketing initiatives and deliver services, but also access to mass media and public support to promote their activities and

conduct advocacy (Yaziji, 2004; Özdemir, 2012). For NGOs with limited budgets, digitization serves as a valuable tool. Moreover, mass communication and social media provide a platform for individuals and communities with similar ideas to connect and foster coordination among them (Wilson & Peterson, 2002). The interviews show that NGOs' ability to influence public opinion and ensure companies act within ethical frameworks through digital platforms represents a valuable shift in power dynamics. In this regard, the capacity of NGOs to amplify their voice and communicate more effectively with the public via digital tools is aligned with the participatory spirit of social marketing. However, a critical evaluation of this digital power reveals a potential *visibility trap*. While digital channels provide NGOs with a strategic platform to balance power dynamics, the sustainability of this power remains a point of contention (Jensen & Meisenbach, 2015; Uldam, 2018). According to Albu (2023), as NGOs strive to maintain their presence in the digital environment, they may face increasing pressure to produce viral and algorithm-friendly content to satisfy the visibility expectations of their corporate partners. This dynamic carries the risk of shifting the strategic focus from long-term, substantive social change to short-term digital engagement metrics (Blum & Uldam, 2025). Consequently, the digital power defined by participants may become fragile if it forces NGOs into a cycle of constant content production and if being visible overshadows the foundational mission of child welfare advocacy.

Another important dimension that participants frequently emphasized is mutual value creation. While NGOs benefit from corporate partnerships in terms of financial support, access to logistical resources, and outreach to a broader audience, companies gain corporate reputation, enhanced consumer trust, and social legitimacy. However, participants stressed that actors should not ground solely in economic motives. We perceive that practices that prioritize social impact over promotional returns produce more authentic results. This finding aligns with Porter and Kramer's (2011) "Creating Shared Value" approach. According to this perspective, when companies go beyond conventional social responsibility projects and restructure their business models to address social problems, they can simultaneously increase social benefits and protect their economic interests. In this context, the study highlights that strategic orientation should frame mutual gain aimed at achieving measurable social outcomes.

The study also underscores the organizational benefits of social marketing practices. NGO managers stated that partnerships with companies help reduce operational costs and expand donor networks. Given the fragmented structure of public funding for child welfare in the Turkish context, such partnerships play a critical role in boosting advocacy capacity and enhancing NGOs' public visibility. Similarly, Verissimo and colleagues (2018) found that social marketing practices enhance cost-effectiveness and strengthen strategic capacity, particularly for organizations with limited resources.

In addition to these advantages, the study's findings also reveal a number of ethical and operational concerns associated with social marketing. Participants reported that some companies demanded imagery that instrumentalized children to enhance visibility, thereby undermining rights-based representations. Instances such as the use of children with disabilities in campaigns solely because they "attract attention" point to the objectification of vulnerable groups—a concern that the social marketing literature frequently raises (Jackson, 2020; Grigoryan, 2019). These findings underline the importance of designing practices within ethical frameworks that ensure NGOs represent children as rights-bearing individuals rather than passive objects of aid.

Our study identifies resource dependency as a significant risk. Based on Pfeffer and Salancik's (1978) Resource Dependency Theory, an NGO's increased reliance on corporate resources may threaten its autonomy. As interviews revealed, heavy financial reliance on corporate partners can intensify corporate influence over practice content. The financial power that companies hold in CSR and social marketing partnerships can cause NGOs to become overly dependent on corporate agendas (Allen, 2003; Haski-Leventhal et al., 2010). This dependency allows companies to steer decision-making unilaterally, potentially compromising NGOs' mission (Galiano-Coronil et al., 2024). Such power asymmetries can diminish NGOs' advocacy role and shift the focus of initiatives from social transformation to corporate branding. These dynamics pose a threat to the sustainability and legitimacy of social marketing efforts.

Another issue that participants highlighted is the lack of corporate understanding regarding NGOs' approach to social marketing. Some companies mistakenly believe that generating publicity and awareness through CSR equates to fulfilling their responsibility, without acknowledging the need for long-term transformation or behavioral impact. Today, maximizing profit is no longer the

sole objective for companies (Mayer, 2021); we expect organizations to interact with society and incorporate environmental and social values into their operations to ensure long-term corporate sustainability (Capece & Costa, 2013; Hastings & Angus, 2011; Lee & Kotler, 2011). Companies that lack this awareness tend to implement superficial strategies, overlooking the deeper strategic intent of social marketing. For social marketing to fulfill its transformative potential, practitioners must ground practices in stakeholder engagement and include rigorous, outcome-based evaluation.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the implementation of social marketing practices in the field of child welfare through NGO–company collaborations, aiming to understand the dynamics of such multi-stakeholder processes within the Turkish context. Our findings reveal that social marketing is a comprehensive endeavor involving multiple interconnected dimensions, such as strategic alignment, ethical sensitivity, mutual value creation, and organizational capacity building. From the perspective of NGOs, we found that social marketing practices conducted in collaboration with companies were found to offer significant benefits beyond financial support, including increased public visibility, enhanced advocacy capacity, and heightened social awareness. However, participants strongly emphasized the necessity of conducting these practices within an ethical framework.

Nevertheless, some practice experiences revealed that companies prioritized promotional goals over social impact, children were instrumentalized as emotional elements, and corporate actors exercised considerable influence over decision-making processes—thereby blurring the ethical boundaries of social marketing. We evaluate this situation as a disadvantageous outcome when viewed through the lens of children’s rights and the intended behavioral change objectives of such practices. The study not only fills a gap in the literature in this area but also offers recommendations for establishing social marketing practices on a balanced, transparent, and rights-based foundation. The findings, grounded in participants’ experiences, suggest that actors can achieve the effectiveness and legitimacy of social marketing can be achieved through ethical values, shared objectives, and a governance approach that acknowledges and actively addresses power asymmetries.

In this framework, this study proposes two specific governance mechanisms to protect child rights and organizational integrity. First, the establishment of Joint Ethical Committees comprising representatives from both the NGO’s child protection units and marketing departments to ensure campaign materials align with rights-based representation rather than pity-based narratives. Second, the involvement of independent child rights organizations as external auditors to ensure that resource dependency does not lead to mission drift or the erosion of ethical standards. These structural safeguards provide a practical roadmap for maintaining the ethical boundaries of social marketing while fostering sustainable collaborations.

Article Information Form

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Appendix 1

Table 1

Participants' Abbreviation, Gender, Age, Education, and Experience

The Number of Participants	Abbreviation	Gender	Age	Education	Years of Professional Experience in the Field of Civil Society	City
1	Mngr 1	Female	27	Bachelor	5	İstanbul
2	Mngr 2	Female	26	Bachelor	5	Ankara
3	Mngr 3	Female	53	Master	31	Ankara
4	Mngr 4	Female	28	Master	5	Ankara
5	Mngr 5	Female	56	Bachelor	7	Ankara
6	Mngr 6	Female	51	Bachelor	18	İstanbul
7	Mngr 7	Female	43	Bachelor	18	İstanbul
8	Mngr 8	Female	33	Master	8	İstanbul
9	Mngr 9	Female	30	Bachelor	6	Ankara
10	Mngr 10	Female	31	Bachelor	10	İstanbul
11	Mngr 11	Male	25	Bachelor	6	Ankara
12	Mngr 12	Male	35	Bachelor	10	İstanbul
13	Mngr 13	Female	40	Bachelor	15	İstanbul
14	Mngr 14	Female	30	Bachelor	5	İstanbul
15	Mngr 15	Female	38	Master	12	İstanbul
16	Mngr 16	Male	59	PhD	38	Ankara
17	Mngr 17	Female	40	Master	15	İstanbul