

# **ETHICAL PERCEPTIONS OF SOCIAL MARKETING CAMPAIGNS: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY ON TURKISH CONSUMERS**

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## **Abstract:**

The aim of this study is to determine how consumers perceive social marketing campaigns ethically and their perceptual differences by demographic features. In this study conducted in the province of Konya on 391 bank customers, the following findings were reached: Consumers mostly emphasize that social marketing campaigns are the intensive advertisement areas for the companies which focus on increasing the sales and far from marketing social thoughts. In addition, the consumers' ethical perceptions show significant differences in terms of education, income and gender. In the study, in order to increase the effectiveness and strengthen the ethical constructions of the future campaigns, it is suggested that target group's/society's demographic features and social expectations should be determined and campaigns should be designed and implemented accordingly.

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**Keywords:** Social Marketing, Ethics, Marketing Campaigns, Turkey

## **Introduction**

In today's global competitive environment, economic, environmental and especially social problems may have results that affect the success of companies. The companies which take actions for the solution of these problems seize the opportunity to operate effectively.

Environmental conditions, especially like fierce competition environment, globalization, and public awareness are making companies become social establishments and directing them to the efforts which create social benefit. Much beyond the aims of increasing sales/profit and satisfying customers, social marketing is an approach which is used for advocating the benefit of society and creating and strengthening a positive image in the society. With this end in view, in social marketing, companies develop, implement, and control marketing programs to make a target group embrace an idea, a problem, or an application with social content. Works which serve to the solution of some problems like protection of natural environment, well-being, and poverty elimination can be given examples of the programs developed in the scope of social marketing. In addition, aims like changing social values or informing society are covered by social marketing (Andreasen 1997; Bloom and Novelli 1981; Celsi and Olson 1988; Kotler and Andreasen, 1996; Bayraktaroğlu and Ilter 2007).

Social marketing is a marketing philosophy based on “social responsibility” concept. Social responsibility is legal and moral responsibility in terms of the appropriateness of companies’ actions and activities’ impact on the society to society’s norms (Tek 1990). Managers’ and companies’ decision making in accordance with social responsibility and their formation of marketing activities according to society’s assumptions constitute the ethical aspect of the topic. In respect to their pragmatic aspect, it can be assumed that social marketing applications, in essence, are ethical and take form in the direction of society’s assumptions. However, social marketing activities may have various ethical problems both in planning and application. For instance, there are critical approaches which claim that, in social marketing campaigns, it is used by companies to misuse society’s goodwill and benevolent feelings for advertising and selling rather than creating social benefit or benefit for target group. In the literature reviews done, so many theoretical studies on social marketing and ethics were found (Smith 2000; Eagle 2009; Lush *et.al.* 1980; Torlak 2007; Andreasan and Kirby 2001). However, it was discovered that the studies which research the overall ethical perception (Lush *et al.* 1980) of social marketing campaigns are quite limited in number. For this reason, this study may fill this gap in the literature. In this context, the topic of the study is to determine the way consumers generally perceive social marketing campaigns ethically and examine the opinion differences by demographics.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Social Marketing Phenomenon**

Social marketing is defined as the analysis, planning, implementing, and evaluation of designed programs to influence the target group’s behavior arose on voluntary basis in order

to enhance the well-being of individuals and society by using conventional marketing methods (Bright 2000). Social marketing is a process that contains the acceptance of a new behavior, rejection of a potentially undesirable behavior, making changes in an existing behavior, and quitting an undesirable former behavior of target groups (Kotler and Lee 2008).

The principles and techniques of social marketing consider the social benefit in general and target customers' benefit in particular. Social marketing is usually interested in the subjects of public health, environmental protection, prevention of damages, and enabling the improvement of society (Cheng *et. al.* 2011). In addition, Development Goals signed in the year of 2000 by Turkey within the framework of United Nations Development Program can be considered within the scope of social marketing subjects. Goals to be reached by 2015 were listed as eliminating extreme poverty and hunger, providing basic education for everybody, encouraging gender equality and providing empowerment for women, decreasing child mortality, improving maternal health, fighting HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases, providing environmental sustainability, and establishing a global partnership for development. It could be stated that subjects of social marketing campaigns conducted in Turkey within the scope of these goals are mostly chosen among the subjects related to education, health, and environment (Gürgen 2008).

Social marketing cannot be expected to solve every sort of social problem. Social marketing practices can be successful as long as they lead to establish behavioral changes that are healthy and beneficial to society, effective use of the programs put into action and/or enhancement of the satisfaction of the individual related to services and programs put into action (Weinreich 1999). The quality of social marketing and the structure of the market (like critical issues, invisible benefits, the case of benefits belonging to third party, and insufficient demand) are important factors that complicate social marketing activities (Bayraktaroğlu and Iltter 2007). For these reasons, in social marketing, considering marketing ethics is as essential for credibility and behavioral change as designing and managing an effective marketing system.

### **Ethical Issues on Social Marketing**

The concepts of social marketing and ethics are opposites. The reason for this is the general opinion that social marketing is ethical in nature, because social marketing is based on favorable thoughts and activities that intend to enhance the development of individuals or society but not the practitioners. Although social marketing has the potential of creating great benefit for target group or society, it also has the potential of harming. The reason for this is the inclusion of critical issues in social marketing subjects and the misuse of marketing

technologies or determination of undesirable program goals and content (Smith 2000; Andreasan 1994).

Deciding what is ethical in social marketing (as in marketing in general) is rarely simple. In most cases, there is not a definitive right and wrong; for example, it is often the case that we are dealing with controversial products or sensitive behaviours (e.g., contraceptives and central practices) and/or two principles which are seen to be "right" by different groups are in conflict (e.g., pro-life versus pro-choice). Further, it is a well recognised fact in social marketing that what we are often dealing with is a trade-off between individual and community good (e.g., the right of the individual to smoke a cigarette, which is currently a legal product, versus the right of others to be protected from passive smoking) (Jones and Hall 2006).

Social marketing is a marketing approach and make use of marketing principle practices. Ethical violations done in conventional marketing may be encountered in social marketing as well, and in addition to this, problems specific to social marketing are experienced (Smith 2000). Marketing ethics is the behavioral standards, values and principles followed by marketers (Özdemir 2009) and it is based on three different evaluations (Tevruz 2007; Ural 2003):

- 1) Consumer Features:** According to modern marketing concept, the examination of consumers' wants and needs, segmentation of the market based on shared needs and responding the consumers' needs by reaching different marketing components based on this segmentation enable the company gain competitive advantage. However, segmentation of the market into target groups may bring ethical problems as well.
- 2) Product and Service Features:** Subjects such as the ability of marketing communication elements to inform the consumer about the benefits and harm of the product, the information of consumer about product usage, product reliability, whether the product package gives sufficient information, and imitations are among the issues to be underlined.
- 3) Marketing Strategies:** Marketing strategies are the efforts of companies to reach the customers. Market strategy of the company is in a wide range ranging from marketing communication to pricing, and distribution channel. Improper selling tactics like terrorizing/frightening customer, misinforming, hiding information, and bribery in personal selling which is a part of marketing communication mean that that sale is evaluated as unethical. Similarly, pricing in a way that eliminates competition, charging

different prices to different customers for the same product are among unethical behavior.

A central ethical consideration for social marketers is the ethics of using fear to motivate behaviour change. In other words, in social marketing campaigns are typically used an organized set of communication efforts based on fear and anxiety for changing behaviours. Fear-inducing communication (such as advertising), which is less common in commercial marketing vanities in social marketing, has been argued to: compromise the 'manipulee's' ability to make a rational and free choice; exploit a particular vulnerability (e.g., young, ill or addicted consumers); and potentially create unnecessary consumer anxiety (Hastings *et al.*, 2003; Jones and Hall 2006). Briefly, the major points that can make problems in social marketing campaigns in terms of marketing ethics are listed below (Torlak 2007; Eagle 2009; Smith 2000):

- Not stating the social product or the subject of social marketing campaign clearly, or image building efforts under the guise of a social marketing campaign,
- Use of messages related to social marketing programs or campaigns as nothing further than slogans, their lacking of content,
- Changing social marketing programs into the promotion of a specific group, while emphasizing some of the groups which supports social marketing programs hiding or ignoring the other ones,
- Hidden efforts of selling under the guise of social marketing program,
- Racial, gender, region, and belief discrimination in social marketing programs,
- Exaggeration of the costs of social marketing programs,
- Potentially creating unnecessary consumer anxiety and fear,
- Misinforming and/or hiding information.

## **Research Method**

### **The Aim, Model and Hypotheses of the Research**

The aim of this research is to determine ethical perceptions of social marketing campaigns of the consumers in Konya (in Turkey) and their perceptual differences by demographics. Research model was designed for these purposes and the model is illustrated in Figure 1:

**H<sub>1</sub>:** There is a significant difference between education and the way in which social marketing campaigns are perceived.

**H<sub>2</sub>:** There is a significant difference between income and the way in which social marketing campaigns are perceived.

**H<sub>3</sub>:** There is a significant difference between gender and the way in which social marketing campaigns are perceived.

**H<sub>4</sub>:** There is a significant difference between marital status and the way in which social marketing campaigns are perceived.

**H<sub>5</sub>:** There is a significant difference between age and the way in which social marketing campaigns are perceived.

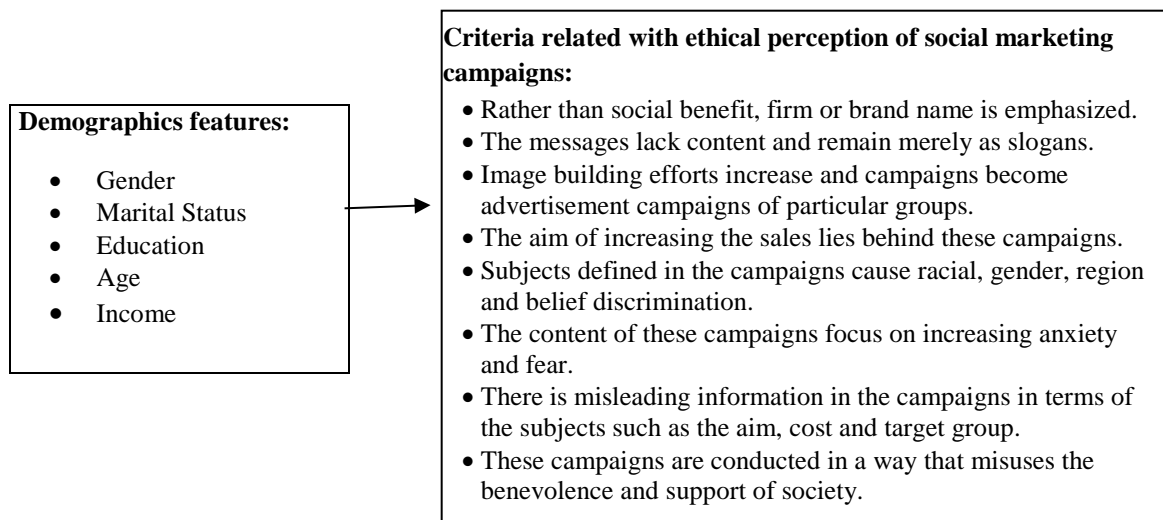


Figure 1. Research Model

### Data Collection, Sampling and Analysis Methods

A questionnaire was developed for the research in order to determine how the consumers evaluate social marketing campaigns ethically and their perceptual differences by demographics. Especially Torlak (2007) and the studies on ethics in social marketing (Smith 2000; Eagle 2009; Lush *et.al.* 1980; Andreasan and Kirby 2001; Jones and Hall 2006; Hastings *et al.*, 2003; Weinrech 2007) were used for the development of the questionnaire. The questionnaire consists of multiple choice and five point Likert (1: definitely disagree, 2: disagree, 3: neither agree nor disagree, 4: agree, 5: definitely agree) scale questions.

When the universe population of the research is one million or more, 384 as sample size with 0,95 reliability is considered to be sufficient (Sekeran 1992). The population in Konya who are likely to be considered as the target group of social marketing campaigns is 1316438 (TUIK 2011). For this reason, the study was conducted using easily sampling method and a survey was implemented to the Bank customers in Konya. Questionnaires were distributed to 550 customers who had been waiting in the queue during the dates 20-24 April 2012, 159 were rejected and 391 were collected (Refer to note, pp.12). Sample size was

considered to be sufficient to make generalizations to the province of Konya. Response rate of the questionnaires was 71%. Demographics of the respondents were illustrated in Table 1.

SPSS 16.0 for Windows was used for the evaluation of questionnaire forms. Arithmetic means and frequency distributions were used in order to measure overall ethical perception of social marketing. One Way ANOVA analysis was used in order to determine the differences between the way of ethical perception of social marketing campaigns and demographics while Scheffe test and arithmetic means were used to interpret the differences. This value was calculated as 0,796 via Cronbach's Alpha ( $\alpha$ ) reliability analysis. A reliability coefficient greater than 0.70 confirms that the scale used in the study is reliable (Hair et al., 2006).

Table 1. Demographics Characteristics

<b>Demographics</b>					
<b>Gender</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>%</b>
Female	152	38,9	18-25	149	38,1
Male	239	61,1	26-35	110	28,1
			36-45	68	17,4
			46 and older	64	16,4
<b>Marital Status</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Income</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>%</b>
Single	193	49,4	1000 TL and lower	147	37,6
Married	198	50,6	1001- 2000 TL	127	32,5
<b>Education</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>%</b>	2001 TL and higher	117	29,9
Primary School	29	7,4			
High School	66	16,9			
Associate's Degree	32	8,2			
Bachelor's Degree	223	57,0			
Postgraduate	41	10,5			
<b>Total</b>	<b>391</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>391</b>	<b>100</b>

## Findings

### Findings on The Ethical Perceptions of Social Marketing Campaigns

How is social marketing perceived ethically in general? The possible answers to this question were listed in Table 2. Based on arithmetic means, it can be stated that responders agreed with the statements in social marketing campaigns related to the following ethical problems: the aim of conducting social marketing campaigns is to increase the sales (3,73); they become advertisement campaigns of large companies because social marketing subjects cover the majority of society or important/major groups (3,63); rather than social benefit, firm/brand title is emphasized in the campaigns (3,56) and the messages sent in the campaigns lack content and remain merely as slogans (3,45). These data are similar to those findings reached in the research conducted to learn whether the society makes a distinction between "Ethics of social ideas" and "Ethics of The Marketing Social Ideas" (Lush *et al.* 1980). In other words, they do not distinguish social ideas from the marketing techniques

used in the promotion of these ideas. As a result of this, social advertisements are considered as social marketing applications and Andreasen (1994) urges that this is a threat to the development and application of social marketing discipline. Social marketing is a total collection of much wider range of activities than just the organization and use of mass communication campaigns (Bayraktaroğlu and İltter 2007).

Table 2. Ethical Perceptual Way of Social Marketing Campaigns

Thoughts	Mean	Definitely disagree		Disagree		Neither Agree Nor Disagree		Agree		Definitely Agree	
		F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
Rather than social benefit, firm or brand name is emphasized in social marketing campaigns.	3,56	49	12,6	38	9,7	66	16,9	122	40,1	116	29,7
The messages in these campaigns lack content and remain merely as slogans.	3,45	28	7,2	55	14,1	98	25,1	132	33,8	78	19,9
Image building efforts increase and campaigns become advertisement campaigns of particular groups.	3,63	17	4,3	44	11,3	91	23,3	155	39,6	84	21,5
The aim of increasing the sales lies behind these campaigns.	3,73	20	5,1	41	10,5	86	22,0	121	30,9	123	31,5
Subjects defined in the campaigns cause racial, gender, region and belief discrimination.	2,59	95	24,3	88	22,5	123	31,5	54	13,8	31	7,9
The content of these campaigns focus on increasing anxiety and fear.	3,25	30	7,7	69	17,6	123	31,5	112	28,6	57	14,6
There is misleading information in the campaigns in terms of the subjects such as the aim, cost and target group.	3,20	41	10,5	64	16,4	118	30,2	113	28,9	55	14,1
These campaigns are conducted in a way that misuses the benevolence and support of society.	3,08	51	13,0	74	18,9	116	29,7	91	23,3	59	15,1

According to frequency distribution (percentages of agreement-strong agreement in total), 70% of the respondents agreed with the statements “Rather than social benefit, firm or brand title is emphasized in campaigns”, 62% with “the main aim of conducting social marketing campaigns is to increase the sales”, 61% with “social marketing campaigns become advertisement campaigns”, and 54% with “the messages given in the campaigns lack content and remain merely as slogans”. Similarly, 43% of the respondents agreed “The content of these campaigns focus on increasing anxiety and fear” and 43% with the opinion that states there is misleading information in social campaigns in terms of the subjects such as the aim and target group. In addition, 47% of the respondents disagreed with the statement “Subjects defined in social campaigns cause racial, gender, region and belief discrimination”.



In summary, respondents think that social marketing campaigns do not cause discrimination in the society.

### Findings on The Distribution of Ethical Perceptions of Social Marketing by Demographic Features

ANOVA analysis was used to determine whether the level of ethical perception of social marketing campaigns differs significantly by demographics. In the result of the analysis, H<sub>1</sub>, H<sub>2</sub>, and H<sub>3</sub> hypotheses were confirmed while H<sub>4</sub> and H<sub>5</sub> hypotheses were rejected.

#### Level of Education

ANOVA test was applied to determine whether there are significant differences in the level of ethical perception of social marketing campaigns by educational level. As shown in Table 3, the statement of “Rather than social benefit, firm or brand name is emphasized in social marketing campaigns.” differs significantly between groups. In this case, H<sub>1</sub> hypothesis was confirmed (F: 4,84; p<0,05). Consumers consider the campaigns as a marketing method in terms of the structure of the market and ideas handled in social marketing and they think the brand title is of prime importance rather than the benefit offered.

As can be seen in Table 4, according to the results of Scheffe analysis, the main reason for this difference is the distance between the arithmetic means of the responses of high school graduates and university/college (bachelor’s level) graduates. While high school graduates responded as “neither agree nor disagree” to the statement that rather than social benefit, social marketing campaigns are based on making people embrace the brand name/title, college/university graduates disagreed with this statement. Consumers with higher educational level perceived the content and application way of social marketing activities more ethically problematic.

Table 3. The level of Ethical Perception of Social Marketing Campaigns by Educational level.

Thoughts	Primary School		High School		Associate’s Degree		Bachelor’s Degree		Postgraduate		One Way ANOVA	
	Mean	S.D	Mean	S.D	Mean	S.D	Mean	S.D	Mean	S.D	F	Sig (p)
Rather than social benefit, firm or brand name is emphasized in social marketing campaigns.	3,42	1,27	2,94	1,52	3,50	1,57	3,74	1,20	3,71	1,40	4,84	0,001

Table 4. Scheffe Analysis

Shefee	Level of Education		Mean difference	Std. Error	Sig (p)
	High School	Primary School		-,543	,292
Associate's Degree			-,560	,283	,418
Bachelor's Degree			<b>-,796</b>	<b>,184</b>	<b>,001</b>
Postgraduate			-,767	,261	,073

### Income level

H<sub>2</sub> hypothesis was confirmed with ANOVA analysis. In other words, a significant difference was found between income level and the ethical perception of social marketing campaigns. As can be seen in Table 5, ethical perception of social marketing by income level differs at two points. Since social marketing activities are in the interest of all parties in the society, the problem of its usage for image building and as advertisement area show significant difference between groups (F: 3,32; p<0,05). Scheffe analysis shows that the reason for this difference is the difference between the income groups of 1000 and lower and 1001-2000. It can be stated that the group of 1000 and lower agreed with the opinion that social marketing efforts are used for image building and as advertisement tool, while the people in the group of 1001-2000 were neutral about this opinion. Similarly, the idea that social marketing campaigns are conducted in a way that misuses the benevolence and support of the society differs significantly between groups (F: 5,63; p<0,05). According to Scheffe analysis results illustrated in Table 6, the reason for this difference is caused by the difference between the groups of 1000 and lower and the other income groups. The people in lower income groups gave importance to the campaign subjects and disagreed with this idea.

Table 5. Ethical Perception Level of Social Marketing Campaigns by Income Level.

Thoughts	1000 and lower		1001-2000		2001 and higher		One Way Anova	
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	Mean.	S.D.	F	Sig(p)
Image building efforts increase and campaigns become advertisement campaigns of particular groups.	3,78	0,10	3,42	1,11	3,62	1,10	3,32	,037
These campaigns are conducted in a way that misuses the benevolence and support of society.	2,44	1,19	3,22	1,25	3,27	1,24	5,63	0,004

Table 6. Scheffee Analysis

Thoughts	Income Level		Mean difference	Std. Error	Sig (p)
	1000 and lower	1001-2000			
Image building efforts increase and campaigns become advertisement campaigns of particular groups.	1000 and lower	1001-2000	,333	,129	,037
These campaigns are conducted in a way that misuses the benevolence and support of society.	1000 and lower	1001-2000	-,418	,148	,022
		2001 and higher	-,452	,152	,014

### Gender

H<sub>3</sub> hypothesis was confirmed with ANOVA analysis. There is a significant difference between the ethical perception level of social marketing campaigns and gender (F: 5,78; p<0,05;). As can be seen in Table 7, this difference appears in the statement of “Rather than social benefit, firm or brand title is emphasized in social marketing”. When arithmetic means are examined, it can be seen that female participants strongly agreed and male participants agreed with this statement. Therefore, it can be stated that women were more critical of these campaigns than men. This situation can be considered while choosing social marketing subjects and planning and implementing campaigns.

Table 7. Ethical Perception Level of Social Marketing Campaigns by Gender

Thoughts	Female		Male		One Way Anova	
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	F	Sig(p)
Rather than social benefit, firm or brand name is emphasized in social marketing campaigns.	3,76	1,21	3,43	1,41	5,78	0,001

### Results And Discussion

Social marketing campaigns are conducted based on sensitive issues which interest the majority of society. The mistakes made in marketing campaigns that are to be realized in such a structure may cause negative results for firm and brand. These mistakes occur during the planning and implementation phases of campaigns. Especially some ethical mistakes made during implementation phase which are contradictory to the essence of social marketing philosophy may result in loss of image. The cases of emphasizing the brand/firm name although the point to be emphasized in social marketing should be the social idea, campaigns’

inclusion of the subjects which are not interested by the majority of the society, and the misuse of society's benevolent feelings in campaigns can be given examples of this situation. Possible ethical problems should be determined and campaigns should be organized accordingly in order that social marketing campaigns can be successful and create positive behavioral change based on the emphasized social idea.

The following findings were reached in the research conducted to determine consumers' ethical evaluation of social marketing campaigns, and the differences of ethical evaluation of campaigns by demographics:

- Consumers consider social marketing campaigns as the marketing efforts focused on increasing the sales rather than social benefit, and they state that these campaigns become image building efforts and advertisement campaigns of a particular group of companies. In summary, social marketing campaigns are perceived as a way of companies to reach their marketing goals rather than focusing on behavioral change based on social benefit.
- Consumers with higher level of education (Associate's, bachelor's and postgraduate degrees) perceive the content and the way of application of social marketing activities as more ethically problematic. These consumers agree with the idea that social marketing campaigns are works done to enforce brand name rather than providing social benefit.
- There is a significant difference in the ethical perception of social marketing campaigns between income groups. This difference was caused by lower income group (1000 TL or lower). When compared with middle income group (1001-2000), consumers in lower income groups agreed in such a higher level with the critique which states that the companies' image building efforts increase and it is used as the advertisement field for particular groups because these campaigns interest the society. It can also be stated that, unlike the other income groups, consumers in lower income groups did not agree with the idea "opinions and thoughts with no merit take place in these campaigns in a way to misuse the benevolence and support of society". In other words, it can be stated that although consumers in lower income group do not make any distinction between advertisements and social marketing campaigns, they find the subjects, content, and messages emphasized in these campaigns more important and ethical than the other groups do. In summary, consumers in lower income groups think that companies organize social marketing campaigns on the subjects that are very

beneficial to society and use these activities for the purposes of intensive efforts of advertising and image building.

- Female consumers agree with the idea “rather than social benefit, firm/brand name is emphasized in social marketing campaigns” in quite a higher level when compared to male consumers. In summary, female consumers consider social marketing campaigns more social benefit-lacking marketing oriented than males do. In summary, the differences between the females and males affect the ethical perception of social marketing. For this reason, by taking this structure of the majority of society or target group of the campaigns into account, attention should be paid to campaigns’ inclusion of messages that eliminate perceptual differences.

With these data in hand, ethical problems should be eliminated from the campaign by taking the structural and demographic features of target group into account while organizing social marketing campaigns. Consumers’ opinions on the issues like campaign subject, content, the message to be emphasized, the treatment way of the subject, and activities to be done could be asked. In addition, subject, the frequency of organizing, and message to be given in the campaigns to be organized should be examined carefully in terms of ethics, and campaigns should be organized accordingly. Attention should be paid to generally emphasized ethical problems by, and rather than brand name, especially benefits of embracing social idea and behavioral change in this direction should be emphasized, campaigns on subjects considered unimportant by the society should not be organized, and it should be avoided to organize campaigns on subjects and in a frequency that misuse the feelings of society. A major problem faced in implementation is that the messages are unconvincing and remain merely as slogans. Campaign messages should include the benefits that will be brought by actions taken on this subject to the individual and in broader sense to the society, and these messages should be guiding for the target group. It will enhance the society’s trust in the company to be consistent with messages given, i.e. a company which does “what it has promised”, during the campaign.

#### **Limitations and future research;**

The most important limitation of the study is that there are a very limited number of applied researches on the ethics in social marketing although there is plenty of theoretical source. For this reason, the questionnaire was developed based on the data obtained from the literature. Moreover, the research was conducted in the province of Konya. Thus, the research results cannot be generalized.

In future research, it can be researched how specific social marketing activities are perceived in terms of ethics and the relationship between ethical perceptions and culture, and also be researched the effect on consumers of companies' social marketing activities despite the ethical problems faced in social marketing.

*Note: The questionnaire used in this study were applied same the sampling with the following study: Akdoğan M.Ş, Çoban S. and Öztürk, R (2012). "Consumer Evaluations towards Social Marketing Campaigns in the Media: An Application In Konya". Erciyes University, Journal of Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences. July- December (2012).*

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