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STRATEGIC MARKETING COMMUNICATION AS A DRIVER OF PUBLIC TRUST AND SUPPORT FOR NON-PROFIT ORGANISATIONS IN SLOVAKIA**Mária Fuseková***University of Economics and Management in Bratislava, Slovak Republic**E-mail: fusekovamaria@gmail.com**Received 11 May 2026; accepted 25 July 2026; published 30 September 2026*

Abstract. The article examines the role of marketing management in the non-profit sector in the Slovak Republic, with particular attention to public trust, transparency, perceived social impact and willingness to support non-profit organisations. The topic is relevant because non-profit organisations increasingly operate in an environment where their social mission alone is insufficient to secure public support. They must also communicate their activities, results and use of resources in a clear, credible and strategically managed manner. The study is based on theoretical knowledge from non-profit marketing, relationship marketing, accountability, and digital communication, as well as empirical findings from a quantitative survey of the Slovak public. The research focuses on how the public perceives the social importance of non-profit organisations, how trust is formed, which communication deficits are most visible and which factors motivate support. The results show that non-profit organisations are generally perceived as socially important, but this positive perception is not automatically translated into high levels of trust. A significant part of the public remains uncertain or sceptical, especially when financial transparency and evidence of real social impact are not communicated sufficiently. The findings indicate that communication quality, transparent reporting and visible outcomes are among the key determinants of public trust and donor behaviour. The study also confirms that support for non-profit organisations is strongly connected with reputational factors. Trust, transparency, personal experience and convincing evidence of social impact are more influential than general awareness alone. Digital communication has become an important channel for visibility and stakeholder engagement. Still, it requires systematic planning, ethical use of data and consistency between messaging, mission, and real organisational performance. The article concludes that marketing management in the non-profit sector should not be reduced to promotion or occasional campaigns. It should be understood as a strategic system that connects mission, stakeholder relationships, accountability, communication planning and evaluation. Such an approach can strengthen public trust, improve fundraising potential and contribute to the long-term sustainability of non-profit organisations in the Slovak Republic.

Keywords: marketing management; digital communication; non-profit organizations; Slovak Republic; transparency; donor behaviour; public trust

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1. Introduction

The non-profit sector is an important component of modern democratic societies because it complements the public and private sectors in areas where social needs cannot be fully satisfied by market mechanisms or by public administration alone. In the Slovak Republic, non-profit organisations operate in the fields of social assistance, education, culture, health, environmental protection, community development, human rights, and humanitarian aid. Their primary purpose is not the distribution of profit, but the creation of public or mutual benefit. This specific mission gives non-profit organisations an important social role, but it also exposes them to high expectations regarding trust, transparency and accountability (Wymer, Becker & Boenigk, 2020).

The development of non-profit organisations in Slovakia after 1989 was closely connected with the transformation of civil society and the gradual creation of a legal and institutional framework for the third sector. The sector has become more differentiated and more professional, but it also faces stronger competition for financial resources, volunteers, media attention and public legitimacy. In this environment, marketing management can no longer be considered a secondary activity limited to promotion. It becomes a necessary part of organisational governance, relationship management and strategic communication.

The central problem addressed in this article is the gap between the generally recognised social importance of non-profit organisations and the lower level of concrete public trust. The public may accept the sector as socially useful, but remain uncertain about the transparency, credibility and effectiveness of individual organisations. For this reason, the quality of communication, the clarity of reporting and the ability to present concrete social impact become decisive factors of public support.

The article aims to analyse how marketing management and marketing communication influence public trust and willingness to support non-profit organisations in the Slovak Republic. The article first summarises theoretical approaches to non-profit marketing, transparency and digital communication. It then presents the research material and methods, interprets selected empirical findings and formulates managerial implications for non-profit organisations.

2. Theoretical Background

The application of marketing principles outside the commercial sector has been discussed since the expansion of the marketing concept proposed by Kotler and Levy (1969). Their argument that marketing is relevant for all organisations seeking to influence the attitudes and behaviour of target groups remains important for the non-profit sector. Non-profit organisations do not primarily aim to maximise profit; they aim to create social value, mobilise support and deliver services aligned with their mission. Nevertheless, they must identify stakeholders, understand their expectations, design value propositions, communicate effectively and evaluate results.

A specific feature of non-profit marketing is the dual character of its markets. The recipient of a service is often not identical with the person or institution that finances the activity. Donors, sponsors, public institutions, volunteers, beneficiaries, and the wider public may all be relevant stakeholders, but each expects different information and forms of value (Bekkers & Wiepking, 2011; Bhati & McDonnell, 2020). This makes marketing management more complex than in many commercial contexts (Yoon, 2024; Rundle-Thiele et al., 2024). The organisation has to communicate social mission and compassion to one group, efficiency and accountability to another group, and accessibility or service quality to beneficiaries (Perica & Sodan, 2025; Hersberger-Langloh, 2025).

Strategic marketing in the non-profit sector, therefore, requires more than occasional campaigns (Gartner et al., 2021; Elvira-Lorilla et al., 2024). It includes analysis of the internal and external environments, segmentation of stakeholders, selection of communication channels, formulation of messages, and evaluation of outcomes (Csapi & Sárícs, 2025). Andreasen and Kotler (2014), Werke and Bogale (2024), emphasise stakeholder-oriented thinking and systematic planning as conditions for achieving social goals. The same logic applies in the Slovak context, where many organisations operate with limited resources and must use communication carefully and efficiently.

Trust is one of the most important intangible assets of a non-profit organisation. Donors and volunteers usually have incomplete information about internal processes, financial decisions and the real impact of activities. For this reason, they rely on reputation, transparent reporting and communicative signals. Sargeant and Lee (2004) show that donor trust is closely related to relationship commitment and supportive behaviour. Later studies similarly

confirm that transparency and accountability influence willingness to give and the overall evaluation of charities (Hyndman & McConville, 2018; Becker, Boenigk & Willems, 2020; Dethier et al., 2024).

Transparency has both a formal and a communicative dimension. The formal dimension concerns annual reports, financial statements and project outputs. The communicative dimension concerns the ability to explain these data in a way that is understandable to the public. A formally available annual report may not build trust if stakeholders cannot easily interpret what the organisation achieved, how resources were used and why the activity mattered. Saxton and Guo (2011) and Tao et al. (2021), therefore, interpret online accountability as a communication practice rather than merely an administrative obligation.

Digital communication has changed the way non-profit organisations interact with stakeholders. Websites, social media, e-mail newsletters, online fundraising platforms and audiovisual content allow organisations to reach audiences at relatively low cost. Lovejoy and Saxton (2012), Krishen et al. (2021). Cipriano and Za (2024) show that social media enable non-profit organisations not only to inform, but also to build communities and stimulate action. Digital tools can strengthen transparency by enabling regular updates and easier report publication, but they can also create reputational risks when communication is inconsistent, unclear, or perceived as manipulative.

3. Research Aim

The main aim of the research is to analyse the relationship between marketing communication, transparency, public trust, and willingness to support non-profit organisations in the Slovak Republic. The article focuses on public perception because the reputation of non-profit organisations is shaped not only by their actual activities but also by how these activities are communicated, interpreted, and evaluated by stakeholders.

The research problem is based on the assumption that a socially beneficial mission does not automatically create trust. Trust must be continuously developed through credible communication, transparent reporting and visible evidence of impact. The research, therefore, connects the managerial perspective of non-profit organisations with the behavioural perspective of donors and the wider public.

Research question 1: How does the Slovak public perceive the social significance and trustworthiness of non-profit organisations?

Research question 2: How does the quality of marketing communication influence public trust and willingness to support non-profit organisations?

Research question 3: Which socio-demographic differences are relevant for communication strategy in the non-profit sector?

4. Materials and Methods

The empirical material of the study consists of a quantitative survey of the Slovak public's perceptions of non-profit organisations. The survey was conducted using the CAWI method. The analysed sample comprised 2,380 respondents aged 18 years or older. The sample was designed to reflect the basic socio-demographic characteristics of the population of the Slovak Republic, with a maximum modelled deviation of ± 1.5 percentage points.

The questionnaire included closed- and scale-based questions, particularly five-point Likert-type items measuring perceived social significance, trust, transparency, communication quality, and willingness to support non-profit organisations. The structure of the questionnaire enabled the linking of general attitudes toward the sector with more specific perceptions of marketing communication, social impact, financial transparency, and support behaviour.

The research material is interpreted as a framework for public perception, not as an audit of individual organisations. This distinction is important because the study captures respondents' stated attitudes and evaluations. However, these perceptions are directly relevant for marketing management because support decisions are influenced by perceived credibility, perceived impact and confidence in the responsible use of resources.

The analytical approach is primarily descriptive and interpretative. Percentages are used to identify dominant tendencies in respondents' attitudes, while interpretation links empirical findings to theoretical concepts of non-profit marketing, trust, transparency, accountability, and digital communication. The purpose is not only to describe individual values, but also to explain what the results mean for strategic marketing management in the non-profit sector.

5. Results

The results show that the non-profit sector has relatively strong social legitimacy in the Slovak Republic. A total of 62.9% of respondents consider non-profit organisations rather or very important for society, while 16.3% evaluate them as not important. This finding indicates that the public does not reject the existence of the third sector. On the contrary, many respondents recognise that non-profit organisations perform functions relevant to society and complement public institutions and commercial actors.

For marketing management, this is an important starting point. If the public already recognises the sector's general value, communication does not have to begin by proving that non-profit organisations are necessary. Instead, organisations need to demonstrate that a concrete organisation is credible, competent and effective. The perceived importance of the sector, therefore, represents potential rather than an automatic guarantee of support.

The level of trust is more problematic than the evaluation of social significance. Only 27.9% of respondents report that they either somewhat or fully trust non-profit organisations. By contrast, 39.7% state that they do not trust them at all, and 32.4% hold a neutral position. This creates a perception gap between the acknowledged social usefulness of non-profit organisations and the degree to which the public trusts their operation.

The neutral group is especially important from a managerial perspective. Respondents who neither trust nor distrust the sector may be open to persuasion if organisations provide better evidence of impact and clearer communication about finances. Strategic communication should therefore not focus only on convinced supporters, but also on undecided stakeholders who may become supporters if uncertainty is reduced.

Financial transparency was identified as one of the most visible communication deficits. At the same time, 59.6% of respondents stated that the quality of communication influences their trust in non-profit organisations. These findings are closely related. The public expects organisations not only to do socially beneficial work, but also to explain how money is used, what results are achieved and why support is meaningful.

More than half of respondents (54.9%) stated that they had supported a non-profit organisation in the past. The most common form was financial support, declared by 36.8% of respondents. This confirms that the relationship between the public and the non-profit sector is not only symbolic. A substantial part of the population has translated attitudes into behaviour.

The most important motivational factors for support were trust, declared by 60.7% of respondents, and transparency, declared by 55.8%. This result directly connects the communication and accountability dimensions of marketing management with support behaviour. Respondents do not support organisations only because the topic is emotionally attractive. They need to believe that the organisation is reliable and that resources will be used responsibly.

The research also shows that digital channels are highly visible. Social networks were identified as the most frequently perceived communication channel of non-profit organisations, followed by online media, television and radio, events and personal campaigns, and print. This confirms the importance of digital communication, but it also shows that the non-profit sector operates in a mixed communication environment in which online and offline tools should be combined strategically.

Respondents also identified what they most often miss in the communication of non-profit organisations. The most visible deficits were transparency of finances, real results, professionalism and human stories. These findings show that the public expects a combination of rational and emotional communication. Financial transparency and concrete outcomes are necessary for credibility, while human stories can help communicate the meaning and social value of activities.

The analysis indicates meaningful socio-demographic differences. With increasing age, scepticism toward non-profit organisations becomes stronger. Respondents aged 55 and older express negative attitudes more frequently than younger groups. Education is an important differentiating factor: respondents with higher education are more likely to evaluate the social impact of non-profit organisations positively and show lower levels of distrust. Gender differences are also relevant, as women more frequently evaluate the sector positively and are more likely to express financial support.

6. Discussion

The results are consistent with international literature on non-profit marketing and donor behaviour. The study confirms that public trust is a central condition for support and that it is formed through communication, transparency, and perceived social impact. The empirical findings also confirm the argument that non-profit marketing cannot be reduced to promotion. Promotion may increase visibility, but visibility alone does not solve the trust problem. An organisation may be visible and still not be trusted if its communication lacks clarity, evidence and accountability.

The perception gap identified in the Slovak data is especially important. The public recognises the social importance of non-profit organisations, but this recognition does not automatically lead to trust. This finding corresponds with research showing that accountability and transparency are decisive for the evaluation of charities (Ortega-Rodríguez et al., 2020; Rossi et al., 2024). It also suggests that non-profit organisations should not rely exclusively on moral appeals. They need to provide credible information about their work, finances and outcomes.

The results support the relevance of relationship marketing. Donors and volunteers are not anonymous sources of resources; they are stakeholders who need feedback, recognition and evidence that their participation has value. If communication is one-way and campaign-based, the relationship may remain weak. If communication is continuous, transparent and adapted to stakeholder expectations, it can build commitment. In this sense, marketing management contributes to the long-term stability of non-profit organisations.

The digital environment makes this relationship both easier and more demanding. Social media and websites allow fast communication, but they also increase expectations of immediacy and transparency. Organisations can no longer communicate only through annual reports or occasional press releases. The public expects updates, accessible explanations, authentic stories and simple ways to verify claims. Digital communication, therefore, needs governance, not improvisation. A professional digital strategy should define target groups, frequency, content types, publication responsibilities, and evaluation methods.

Another important implication concerns segmentation. The findings on age, education and gender show that the public is not homogeneous. Older respondents may require more formal credibility signals, clearer financial reporting and communication through channels they trust. Younger respondents may be more responsive to digital engagement, social media content and participatory formats. Donors may prioritise accountability and impact, while beneficiaries may need accessible, empathetic information. Effective marketing management should recognise these differences and adapt messages without compromising consistency of mission.

7. Managerial Implications

The first practical implication is the need to place trust at the centre of marketing strategy. Non-profit organisations should define how their communication builds trust before they design specific campaigns. This includes deciding which evidence of impact will be communicated, how financial transparency will be presented and how feedback will be provided to supporters. Trust should be managed as a long-term asset that can be strengthened or weakened by every communication decision.

The second implication is the need for transparent and understandable reporting. Annual reports, financial statements and project outputs should not be published only as formal documents. They should be translated into clear public communications, such as short summaries, infographics, donor letters, website updates, and social media posts, explaining what was achieved and how resources were used. Transparency becomes effective only when it is accessible and meaningful for the intended audience.

The third implication concerns communication planning. Organisations should prepare annual or semi-annual communication plans that align with their mission, fundraising cycles, project milestones, needs, and stakeholder expectations. Such plans should specify target groups, key messages, channels, timing and evaluation indicators. Even small organisations with limited resources can benefit from a simple but consistent plan, because it prevents communication from becoming random and reactive.

The fourth implication is the integration of digital tools. Websites should be treated as central credibility platforms where the public can find mission statements, projects, team information, reports, contact details and support options. Social media should be used not only for visibility, but also for community building and feedback. E-mail communication can support long-term donor relationships by providing regular and personalised information. Artificial intelligence and automation may support content organisation and the segmentation of feedback analysis, but their use must remain transparent, ethical, and under human control.

The fifth implication is evaluation. Non-profit organisations should measure not only the number of posts, followers, or website visits, but also indicators of trust and engagement. Useful measures may include donor retention, response rates, repeated support, feedback quality, perceived clarity of reports and stakeholder satisfaction. Evaluation should connect communication activities with organisational goals and should help managers decide which activities to strengthen, change or discontinue.

8. Conclusions

The article has shown that marketing management is a strategic necessity for non-profit organisations in the Slovak Republic. The empirical findings confirm that the public generally recognises the social importance of the non-profit sector, but trust remains more fragile. This creates a perception gap between the acknowledged usefulness of non-profit organisations and the degree to which the public trusts their operation. The gap is mainly connected with transparency, communication quality and the visibility of concrete social impact. The strongest conclusion is that trust does not arise automatically from a socially beneficial mission. It is built through long-term, transparent, consistent and credible communication. Organisations that communicate how they use resources, what results they achieve, and why their work matters are better positioned to secure support from

donors, volunteers, and the wider public. Marketing communication, therefore, has both reputational and economic significance because it influences willingness to support the organisation.

The results also indicate that non-profit organisations should work with segmented communication strategies. Different age, education and stakeholder groups have different expectations and different levels of trust. Effective marketing management should therefore combine a consistent mission with differentiated communication formats. Digital tools can support this process, but only if they are embedded in a clear strategy and used ethically.

In summary, the future development of the non-profit sector in Slovakia will depend not only on the quality of services and activities provided, but also on the ability of organisations to communicate their value transparently and professionally. Marketing management should be understood as an integrated system that connects mission, stakeholder relationships, accountability, digital communication, and evaluation. Such an approach can strengthen public trust, improve fundraising potential and contribute to the long-term sustainability of non-profit organisations.

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