Towards a Midrange Theory for Social Marketing Effectiveness

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Summary

Social marketing plays an important role as societies are facing diverse social problems. Due to the financial crisis and increasing violence through terrorism, societies are getting more and more vulnerable and social problems are increasing. Therefore, scientific findings on social marketing effectiveness are particularly interesting as they contribute to the reduction of social problems. A rigorously elaborated structured review on social marketing effectiveness covering two aspects – a so far neglected focus on interdisciplinary social marketing topics and the diversity of applied methodologies – and leading to a midrange theory of social marketing effectiveness, which can be relied on for further research as well as interventions, is needed. Accordingly, this paper aims to contribute to the derivation of a midrange theory on social marketing effectiveness.

Background and objectives

While sociologists already focused on "social marketing" in the 1950s (Wiebe 1951), the marketing perspective of social issues has been taken into consideration since the late 1960s due to the debate on broadening the concept of marketing (Kotler and Levy 1969). As social marketing deals with diverse campaigns and intervention on individual and social change in diverse fields, a multitude of scholarly literature can be found in health research, psychology, sociology and marketing. From a marketing perspective, in recent times an emphasis is put on the effectiveness of particular campaigns, which indeed is the most important aspect of social marketing in order to derive managerial implications that can be used in diverse contexts of social change. Only recently, first attempts have been made to review existing findings on effectiveness. Nevertheless, these scientific contributions are restricted as researchers did not strictly focus on applied methodologies nor did they include findings from both practical campaigns and, simultaneously, tested conceptual models. Methodologically elaborated reviews are content-wise restricted to health interventions (Gordon et al. 2006; Stead et al. 2007), e.g. anti-violence, pro-tolerance or pro-environment campaigns are neglected. No interdisciplinary approach has been taken to elaborate a complete overview on the fragmented field of social marketing effectiveness. Therefore, our research objectives are threefold:

1) To provide a brief overview of different research streams in the social marketing field in order to thoroughly classify research on the effectiveness.

2) To present a systematic review on methodologies applied to assess the effectiveness of social marketing including interventions as well as tested conceptual models.

3) To derive a midrange theory out of the systematic review on effectiveness in order to generate implications for further interventions as well as academic research and to develop an instructive research agenda enhancing scientific progress.

Methodological approach and preliminary results

First, a structured review of papers dealing with social marketing, i.e. containing "social marketing", "prevention" or "campaign" in the full text, published in scholarly journals of the nonprofit research community journals as well as in top and well ranked marketing journals, was completed. Additionally, journals in the field of health, psychology and sociology, that are
highly ranked or were declared as relevant to the research field by consulted experts, were screened by using the same full text research words. Thus, an interdisciplinary research approach was applied. Furthermore, an unstructured search focusing on papers and books cited in the articles identified firstly was conducted. These research steps led to the identification of 327 articles dealing with social marketing in a broader sense.

To systemize these results, the articles were categorized into three research streams that are illustrated by Figure 1.

![Figure 1: Research streams in social marketing](image)

Conceptual work has been conducted by focusing on what social marketing is or is not, e.g. compared to social movements (Douglas 2008) or education (Rothschild 1999), on definitions, development (e.g. Andreasen 2003), and the social marketing process (e.g. Wymer 2004). 121 articles followed this conceptual approach.

Researchers also analyzed the application of marketing tools to the social marketing context and applied a descriptive approach using single case studies without focusing on outcome or impact (e.g. Madill and Abele 2007; Meyrick 2007; Newton-Ward 2007; Lavack et al. 2008). The descriptive approach was found in 49 articles.

The third research field contains papers dealing with social marketing effectiveness. Thereby, this paper adopts a new approach by taking into consideration the evaluation of the effectiveness of certain campaigns and interventions (e.g. El-Ansary and Kramer Jr. 1973; Lord 1994; Darrow and Biersteker 2008) as well as the testing of hypotheses and conceptually developed models (e.g. Griffin and O’Cass 2004). Thus, 157 articles dealing with aspects relevant for the effectiveness of social marketing could be identified.

The work on this paper is in progress and the next step to be taken is a systemization of these articles taking the following aspects into consideration: Besides the different social marketing subjects, a focus will be put on underlying theories (e.g. Health Belief Model, Theory of Reasoned Action), the type of dependent variables (cognition or emotions, intentions and obvious behaviour change) measured as social marketing outcome, their influencing determinants, mediators and moderators as well as applied methods (e.g. experiment, field study).

The authors aim to focus their systematic review (Tranfield et al. 2003) on the deduction of a midrange theory (Merton 1967) that in future can be supported by further data from other research settings in order to contribute to a more general theory of social marketing effectiveness (Eisenhardt and Bourgeois III 1988; Brodie et al. 2009). Due to the fact, that a fragmented but considerable amount of research on the effectiveness of social marketing exists, the development of a midrange theory out of the systematic review seems to be challenging but providing a high contribution to research in this field.

References


