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Current Themes in Social Marketing Research: Text-mining the past five years

Abstract

Social Marketing has advanced rapidly from its beginnings almost 40 years ago. This paper takes a look at the current themes in published social marketing research, by using text-mining to analyze articles published in the past five years, and discusses the areas for future research, especially the need for published social marketing research to expand from mostly health-related application to other areas.

1. Introduction

Almost 40 years after Kotler (1971) introduced the term “Social Marketing” the area has gained much momentum, in fact, social marketing has become a buzz word particularly in the area of public health and is habitually recommended and applied by governments and quangos. In fact, in the UK, the Department of Health recommended the wider use of social marketing principles in its white paper “Choosing Health” (Department of Health, 2004). But social marketing has also branched out into other areas: Again in the UK, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (defra) followed the example set by the Department of Health in 2008 by recommending wider use of social marketing interventions for environmental issues, such as recycling and energy saving. In other countries, social marketing has been equally successful in attracting wide attention in public health, nutrition and physical activity promotion and has widely demonstrated its effectiveness (Gordon, Mc Dermontt et al, 2006).

There is also an increasing amount of academic work and case studies being published regularly in various journals, including the area’s dedicated academic journal, *Social Marketing Quarterly*. With the area steadily evolving, and an increase of academic output, it is time to take stock as to what are the dominant themes discussed in current academic discourse and to reflect on what a future research agenda may focus on.

2. Text-mining & Methodology

In order to get an overview over what the current research output looks like, the author used text-mining software to get a better understanding. Text-mining is ideally suited to extract concepts out of large amounts of text for a meaningful analysis. It has been used in a wide variety of settings, ranging from biomedical applications to marketing and emotional/sentiment research where a lot of data needs to be analyzed in order to extract core concepts. Text-mining achieves this, by applying techniques from information retrieval (such as Google), natural language processing, including speech tagging and grammatical analysis, information extraction, such as term extraction and named-entity recognition and data mining techniques, such as pattern identification (JISC, 2008).

As text sources, a literature search was undertaken using the EBSCO Business Source Complete database, which provides access to more than 1,300 journals (EBSCO, 2009). All articles published in the past 5 years, i.e. published between August 2004 and August 2009 were selected. This resulted in 395 articles being found. The author first screened all articles in order to eliminate articles relating to other uses of the term “social marketing”, mostly social media optimization and corporate social responsibility. After the initial screening, 272 articles were selected for analysis.

The analysis was then carried out using the TerMine text-mining software developed by the National Centre for text-mining (Nactem) in the UK (Frantzi, Ananiadou and Mima, 2000), which is available as an online tool from nactem.ac.uk. The abstracts of the selected articles were used in the analysis to keep the amount of text relevant and manageable. The complete table of the top 100 terms and concepts used can be found in Table 1, together with their c-values, or the relative importance of the terms in the overall body of text analyzed.

[Table 1 about here]

3. Findings & Discussion

Unsurprisingly given the wide application of social marketing in health-related interventions, most of the published research seemed to be related to health, and public health in particular (ranked 2nd), closely followed by health care (ranked 6th) and health promotion (rank 12). More specifically, published research reflected major public health concerns such as smoking and tobacco (23rd), increasing physical activity (31st), alcohol prevention (50th), breast cancer (48th) and somewhat surprisingly highly ranked organ donations (27th). Interestingly, sexual health, which played a major role in social marketing in the past is just outside the “top 100”, ranked 102nd, with a c-score of 5.75.

Much of the published research was considering social marketing strategies (ranked 8th and 11th). This is possibly reflecting the fairly large amount of mostly practice oriented material being published, with very few academic papers looking more widely at the theoretical underpinning of social marketing. In fact, while there are many anecdotal references to various theoretical models, especially the Theory of Reasoned Action/Theory of Planned Behavior as a major social marketing tool, a heavy reliance on the TRA/TPB is not confirmed by the text-mining data. The only theoretical framework to emerge was Protection Motivation Theory, which was also fairly lowly ranked at rank 71. Related to the Protection Motivation Theory, though ranked higher, thus indicating a more substantial reflection in the body of text analyzed is the concept of fear appeals (45th). This seems reflective of the overall impression that much of the published work seems to focus on testing tactical interventions and techniques, including testing differently framed messages. It also is reflective of an ongoing discussion about the suitability of fear appeals in general, which traditionally have been used heavily in health promotion and social marketing messages.

What is disappointing is that only very few of the journal papers extend beyond the field of health and related areas. While calls for more social marketing-based interventions has been heard from various other areas, journal publications still lag behind. For example, more environmental behavior is not included in the list, despite the increasing call by governments, for example, as previously mentioned by defra in the UK. Equally, crime prevention, another area that has been identified as a potential area for social marketing-led interventions is not included in the list, despite, for example, the Australian government making a strong case for more it (Homel & Carroll, 2009). Other areas not included include community participation and engagement, for example voting and volunteering and community cohesion as well as financial planning. In all these areas, there is a substantial amount of practical work being done, which is unfortunately not reflected in the main stream academic publications. However, it would surely be desirable to see more peer-reviewed articles exploring how social marketing can be successfully used in those areas.

Another area which is absent, and thus may provide potential for further leading edge publications is the area of social marketing across cultures and involving diverse target groups, including socially disadvantaged and challenging target groups.

A text-mining analysis which is based on past papers is, of course, constrained by looking at the past and therefore providing a snapshot of what was, rather than what will be. This is particularly true as the analysis does not include material currently under review for future publication or currently being produced. However, despite this limitation, the analysis provided here is hoped to be useful for shaping the debate about future research and publications in the social marketing field, and hopefully engage current scholars in more actively pursuing the widening of the research agenda beyond the area of health and into other areas of application of social marketing theory.

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Table 1: Full list of C-Score Values & Terms

Term	C-Value Score
1social marketing	688.05
2public health	98.23
3social marketing campaign	49.63
4social policy	38.10
5public sector marketing	26.94
6health care	26.30
7social marketing program	24.36
8marketing strategy	23.50
9social change	23.00
10social marketer	23.00
11social marketing strategy	22.77
12health promotion	19.13
13voluntary sector marketing	19.02
14united states	17.20
15commercial marketing	16.00
16social responsibility	16.00
17social marketing conference	15.85
18health communication	15.54
19social marketing approach	14.85
20marketing research	14.33
21medical care	14.26
22health care service	14.25
23tobacco consumption	14.00
24disease control	13.00
25new york	13.00
26health service	12.78
27organ donation	12.00
28welfare fund	12.00
29corporate social responsibility	11.68
30social marketing framework	11.68
31physical activity	11.67
32consumer behavior	11.09
33public health programs	11.09
34social marketing principle	11.09
35social marketing process	11.09
36behavior change	11.00
37marketing management	11.00
38public sector	11.00
39american marketing association	10.09
40public health communication	10.09
41sustainable development	9.80
42vocational rehabilitation	9.50
43occupational safety	9.33
44brand identification	9.00
45fear appeal	9.00
46health education	8.67
47social issue	8.56
48breast cancer	8.50
49fair trade	8.50

50	alcohol consumption	8.00
51	great britain	8.00
52	new zealand	8.00
53	social problem	8.00
54	social science	8.00
55	tobacco product merchant wholesaler	8.00
56	nonprofit organization	7.92
57	public opinion polling	7.92
58	advertising campaign	7.50
59	private sector	7.00
60	smoking cessation	7.00
61	target audience	7.00
62	young consumer	7.00
63	national youth anti-drug media campaign	6.97
64	effective social marketing	6.92
65	social change group	6.92
66	social marketing intervention	6.92
67	social marketing message	6.92
68	social marketing research	6.92
69	european union	6.60
70	health insurance	6.44
71	protection motivation theory	6.34
72	public health management	6.34
73	social marketing effort	6.34
74	social marketing theory	6.34
75	social service	6.34
76	vocational rehabilitation service	6.34
77	advertising material distribution service	6.00
78	business research	6.00
79	cancer research uk centre	6.00
80	disease prevention	6.00
81	european social dialogue process	6.00
82	family service	6.00
83	florida prevention research center	6.00
84	formative research	6.00
85	integrating social marketing into routine public health practice	6.00
86	internet resource	6.00
87	market research	6.00
88	marketing practice	6.00
89	new york state department	6.00
90	oklahoma health sciences center	6.00
91	other tobacco product manufacturing	6.00
92	practical implication	6.00
93	primary health care service	6.00
94	public health administration	6.00
95	service learning	6.00
96	service quality	6.00
97	social advocacy organizations	6.00
98	tobacco industry manipulation campaign	6.00
99	young people	6.00
100	web site	5.82

