
Guest editorial: Introduction to the 50th anniversary special issue

Guest editorial

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2021 marks 50 years since Philip Kotler and Gerald Zaltman threw down the challenge that marketing techniques can be used for positive social change. Their publication “Social marketing: An approach to planned social change” in the *Journal of Marketing* is often credited as the birth of this field and the hundreds of other scholars who took up their call. Despite some challenges and setbacks, social marketing strives to be a means to achieve a better world for the planet’s 7.6 billion people. This collection is intended to honour the 50th anniversary of this important publication as a milestone in our field. This issue is our chance to not only to reflect on our history but also to look forward to what the field can be.

As a field, we have stood on the shoulders of not only Phil Kotler and Gerry Zaltman but also many others who came before. This issue is dedicated to them as well as the newer scholars who will move us forward. We asked well-known scholars inside and outside social marketing to contribute. This special issue also called on new and emerging scholars to reflect on where we have been, what challenges we have faced, where we currently are and where social marketing should be headed in the future. We sought a wide range of contributions, both shorter and longer, opinion-based, theoretical, and even empirical to provide a better understanding of the field itself. To quote from Maya Angelou:

I have great respect for the past. If you don’t know where you’ve come from, you don’t know where you’re going. I have respect for the past, but I’m a person of the moment. I’m here, and I do my best to be completely centered at the place I’m at, then I go forward to the next place.

To help us understand where we have been and where we are going, the *Journal of Social Marketing* is proud to present this special issue on the topic of looking back and looking forward.

The field of social marketing

One of the main challenges that have faced the field is recognition of social marketing as an area worthy of focus. Other related fields, such as health education, have a longer history, often reflected in specialities in both public health education and the practice of public health departments. Over the years, we can see many efforts where social marketers and even public health professionals attempted to build awareness of the marketing approach to their fields (Grier and Bryant, 2005; Lefebvre and Flora, 1988; Ling *et al.*, 1992; Walsh *et al.*, 1993). Just looking back at these efforts to “introduce” the field of social marketing to public health from 1988 to 2005, or even now, it is apparently that we have not “stuck,” and this suggests that our self-marketing efforts have generally failed (Andreasen, 2006). So, despite some important efforts to differentiate social marketing from other means for social change (Rothschild, 1999), I am concerned that our impact has been limited.

Although social marketing is often applied to the issue of public health, its relevance is much broader to a whole range of human behaviour. This includes not only public health-related topics such as disease prevention, drug abuse prevention, food choice, and physical activity, but wider issues such as environmental protection, including power, water, and wildlife, as well as issues such as organ donation and political participation.

A very important recent development that I believe is limiting the contribution is possible confusion with social media marketing. Some evidence suggests that for the



mainstream media and general public, the term “social marketing” is more typically associated with social media marketing (Basil, 2012). As someone who teaches a course on “social marketing” I am sure that many of the *Journal of Social Marketing* readers also have experienced many students who are expecting a class on social media marketing. One possible strategy would be to change the name of the field to something like “social change marketing”. Although there have been some calls to change our name (Wood, 2012), these efforts have not gone very far, likely largely a result of the fear of giving up what we have already achieved as well as some level of inertia.

On the positive side, over the past 50 years, we have certainly had many successes. In terms of academic research, the field has shown an impact, including the establishment of the journals *Social Marketing Quarterly* and this *Journal of Social Marketing*. As a result, there has been considerable growth in academic publications, as witnessed in a study in this special issue by Arturo Molina-Collado and his colleagues entitled “Examining 50 years of social marketing through a bibliometric and science mapping analysis.” In addition, more and more universities are including courses in social marketing (Kelly, 2009, 2013), and this has resulted in the publication of several academic textbooks on social marketing (Andreasen, 1995, 2001; Donovan and Henley, 2003; Grier and Bryant, 2005; Hastings, 2007; Kotler and Lee, 2008; McKenzie-Mohr and Smith, 1999).

The journal of social marketing’s role

The *Journal of Social Marketing* was established in 2010 and published its first issue in 2011. The description of the journal is “The *Journal of Social Marketing* publishes research that develops and integrates marketing concepts with other approaches to influence behaviour that benefits individuals and communities for the greater social good”. The journal seeks to balance theoretical knowledge with practice. Its focus is to help us understand the theory behind influencing people’s behaviour as well as developing a deeper understanding of the practical aspects of how we can succeed and fail in these efforts.

Over the past 11 years the journal has published 36 issues and more than 400 articles. This significant contribution should not go unnoticed when we examine our progress. The contribution is not only in terms of the number of pages but important theoretical and practical understanding of what we can accomplish by applying commercial marketing approaches to important social problems.

Overview of the special issue

A total of 17 manuscripts were submitted to the special issue. The corresponding authors were from around the world, including Bulgaria, Brazil, China, India, Ireland, Lebanon, New Zealand, Pakistan, Portugal, South Africa, Spain, the UK and the USA. This reflects the international breadth of the field of social marketing. The topics that were raised were also as varied – from historical looks at what has been published in the field

I am thankful for the authors who submitted their work to the reviewers that reviewed these manuscripts and provided helpful suggestions to the authors. As a result, four manuscripts survived the rigorous review process and the revisions that were required:

- Arturo Molina-Collado, Jessica Salgado Sequeiros, Mar Gómez-Rico and Debra Basil. Examining 50 years of social marketing through a bibliometric and science mapping analysis.
- Erik Cateriano-Arévalo, Saud Alrakhayes, Liz Foote, Tamanna Hussain, Krystle Lai, and Lucy Nyundo. Social marketing at 50: towards an epistemological expansion of the discipline to embrace diversity. A viewpoint.

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- Ann-Marie Kennedy, Ekant Veer and Joya Kemper. Social Marketing AS Pedagogy. Guest editorial
 - Fiona Harris. Social Marketing: Ready to help revolutionise marketing education.

I encourage you to read these contributions to understand how far we have come, think about where we are headed, and think about your own role in this important endeavour.

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