



RAUSP Management Journal

ISSN: 2531-0488

rausp@usp.br

Universidade de São Paulo

Brasil

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Guest editorial: Disruptive social marketing dystopia, disconnection and disruption
RAUSP Management Journal, vol. 56, núm. 3, 2021, Julio-Septiembre, pp. 262-265
Universidade de São Paulo
São Paulo, Brasil

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Guest editorial: Disruptive social marketing dystopia, disconnection and disruption

We are honored to be acting as Guest Editors of this special edition of *RAUSP Management Journal*, which features some social marketing papers for the first time in a Brazilian academic publication.

The call for papers emphasized that we live in an age of three Ds: dystopia, disconnection and disruption.

Dystopia has been defining the 21st century as we witness an explosive combination of old and new challenges that have the potential to push the social fabric to the breaking point. Climate emergency is the ultimate threat to humanity. However, there are also challenges such as social, ethnic and gender inequalities, health-related problems, economic stagnation, unemployment and employability, social security, food safety, geopolitical conflicts, nuclear arms race and digital disruption, among others. We also live in the so-called economy of attention, which is perhaps more aptly described as the economy of impatience. People's attention span seems to be shortening because of an avalanche of stimuli and a plethora of digital players competing for busy minds.

Disconnection is another hallmark of the current *Zeitgeist*. Ours is an era of ideological ghettos and fragmented narratives. Denial of serious problems, such as climate change or anti-vaccination movements, have become commonplace within social bubbles. Meanwhile, large segments of people congregate in groups who are increasingly disconnected from each other, each one seeing the world through incommensurate lenses. The political arena, in turn, has been losing legitimacy as the prime system for addressing social conflict.

COVID-19 epitomized what we can expect in this century. As several forces of disruption loom on the horizon, there is a need of fresh thinking in disciplines concerned with social problems, including, of course, social marketing. It is the high time of letting go formulaic approach developed in the 20th century.

It is true that the tension between the current complex social problems and the traditional, formulaic tools usually found in the discipline's repertoire has been acknowledged in recent years though (Lefebvre, 2012). It is also true that social marketing has been incorporating complexity thinking (Raciti, Mulcahy, & Dahl, 2020) and broader theoretical lenses (Evans & French, 2019; Rundle-Thiele et al., 2019). Several studies have started using system dynamics and other methods (Domegan et al., 2016; Saunders & Truong, 2019) that advance the comprehension of how social problems evolve over time and how social marketing can be more effective.



New findings and novel developments in other disciplines also exacerbate this essential tension in social marketing. For instance, why bother using old theories of behavior change, such as the theory of planned behavior, to design programs in contexts of poverty when randomized control trials, assembled by economists, show cash transfers as a much more cost-effective tool in alleviating poverty in broad regions of a country (Banerjee & Duflo, 2011)? Why insist on branding programs to encourage recycling as a means to fighting climate change if evidence suggests recycling may lead to overconsumption (Catlin & Wang, 2012), worsening the underlying problem? In addition, there is growing evidence that famous campaigns promoted under the social marketing umbrella may lead to worse social outcomes, such as the promotion of low-fat milk consumption (Vanderhout et al., 2020).

If the discipline still lacks critical thinking, on the other hand, its unique strengths include a relentless focus on the perspectives of priority groups and the incorporation of their voices and viewpoints in the design of social programs. Many conventional programs fail because they follow top-down approaches and incorporate blind faith in financial incentives. They often do not take into account what is a staple in social marketing: understanding the perceived barriers and benefits from the perspective of potential adopters.

The discipline, thus, has valuable assets that can be a platform for a major overhaul in its conceptual repertoire. Especially because the challenges in this century cannot be tackled with incremental changes. They require novel, transdisciplinary ways of thinking, including the need to defy the boundaries of siloed academic knowledge. Most social problems are not contrived artefacts with defined contours. Rather, they are messy issues with multilayered forces of causation.

The hint comes both from system thinker Donella Meadows, who suggested we should follow the system wherever it leads (Meadows, 2002), and from Philip Kotler, the cofounder of social marketing, who regretted not calling the discipline social *cause* marketing (Kotler, 2017).

We need more, and we hope this edition will shed light on the pressing issues highlighted above. Hence, this special issue of *RAUSP Management Journal* presents fresh and creative thinking that advances theory, research and practice in social marketing. The authors responded to our call by bringing new approaches and different lenses, as we briefly review below.

The paper by Akbar, Ndupu, French and Lawson presents the consumer research, segmentation, design, implementation, evaluation and sustainability) framework, which integrates behavior maintenance, ethical perspectives and feedback mechanisms. One of its laudable contributions is the emphasis on citizen orientation and co-creation. Another relevant contribution is the proposed stage of sustainability, which avoids the common curse of elusive short-term victories. In addition, the proposition of feedback mechanisms adds a learning dimension that helps in correcting course and making prompt adjustments to ongoing programs.

The paper by Casais and Pereira analyzes the prevalence of emotional and rational appeals in social advertising campaigns in Portugal, finding the prevalence of a rational tone in most pieces, which contrasts with theoretical recommendations for most of the causes they analyzed. How can one expect people to drive safely, for instance, by appealing only to cold arguments? The paper shines light on an issue often overlooked in the discipline: how actual social actors try to develop behavior change campaigns in real contexts. The gap between theory and practice uncovered by the authors deserves further investigation, as it has the potential to convey the wrong image of social marketing while hindering the development of efficacious interventions.

The paper by Baptista, Alves and Pinho discusses social support as a mechanism to induce long-term behavior change. From involving diverse stakeholders to harnessing existing networks of personal and supportive relationships, there is ample room to use social support to strengthen social marketing programs. As the authors aptly assert, people take part in those networks to engage in exchanges that have a myriad of meanings. Therefore, we can expect a multiplicative effect of social support when used to advance societal well-being.

The paper by Gonsales proposes the use of social marketing to mitigate low attendance in museums, a sad consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic. The application of the discipline in such an important context is very welcome because, as the author correctly argues, social marketing is still too focused on health issues, and marketing continues to face resistance in the museum ecosystem. The paper presents several suggestions to increase attendance in museums from downstream interventions to midstream and upstream tactics consubstantiated in a neat and comprehensive framework. Interestingly, it calls attention to the so-called superstar museums, which epitomize what (social) marketing can do for cultural activities and could be used as models for more traditional venues. Finally, the paper contributes to a new outlook on the exchange that occurs in museums by emphasizing the co-created experiences that take place in such places. This often-overlooked characteristic of exchanges that occur in any market contexts can help in redesigning the behavioral proposition associated with cultural activities while also helping in melting the resistance to marketing concepts within that ecosystem.

The paper by Spotswood, Wiltshire, Spear and Makris explores a practice-oriented theoretical framing, using an interdisciplinary lens to study how physical activity can emerge from a school's everyday routines. The authors make an important contribution by proposing the focus on existent unstructured practices in lieu of behavior change induced by discrete campaigns or programs, helping in advancing social marketing away from traditional individualistic approaches. The lens contributes in analyzing the diverse set of practices in schools, their interconnections and their potential role in shaping fluid and nuanced interventions, avoiding the traps of linear models. Hence, practices and cultural meanings may be decisive in their contribution to the enactment of behaviors. In the end, increasing physical activity may be more of a question of exploring the myriad of practices that are already occurring – an often-overlooked issue in behavior change interventions in this field.

The paper by Santos, Lopes, Dias, Andrade, Matos and Veiga uses service-dominant logic to advance the study of mindfulness, a much-needed subject in the realm of social marketing. The authors conducted an experiment to test the effect of an intervention promoting mindfulness practices. The paper has significant practical consequences, as it illuminates a possible alternative to reduce stress and produce other beneficial outcomes, something that is valuable in the present context of disruption. Moreover, the use of Facebook as a virtual venue to conduct experiments opens interesting avenues for future experiments using social marketing and related disciplines as theoretical guides.

The paper by Garçon and Nassif sought to identify the intention of Brazilian university students to undertake social entrepreneurship, according to a scale developed to measure individual social entrepreneurial orientation. The scale proved to be a strong predictor of the adoption of a constellation of behaviors, which includes the search for opportunities, innovation and a commitment to social change.

Finally, this edition celebrates an updated version of the “Index of Portuguese Language and Portuguese Speaking Authors Focused on Social Marketing” (this publication is available in <http://rausp.usp.br/2021/06/24/index/>). Created in 2019 by Santos and Mazzon, it presents a collection of 268 entries spanning diverse themes and methods and makes a

powerful statement about the disciplines evolution in the Portuguese-speaking countries, mainly Portugal and Brazil. Guest editorial

In summary, we hope the readers enjoy this special edition on social marketing as an encouragement to further research in the field, which can benefit from disruptive thinking and actual contributions to address the challenges of the 21st century.

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