What Causes Social Marketing Programmes to Fail? A Qualitative Study

Abstract

Background: This paper addresses the key factors that cause social marketing programmes (typically consisting of discrete programmes or interventions, but also including broader-scale initiatives) to fail. It argues that understanding these failures offers greater insight to researchers and practitioners than publications solely focused on successes.

Focus: Our paper discusses the causes of the failure of social marketing programmes, an area that has largely been ignored in extant research.

Research Question: What causes social marketing programmes to fail?

Importance: As the majority of practitioner-oriented social marketing research focuses on how to develop a successful programme, we identify a tendency to ignore failed programmes. We suggest that both researchers and practitioners can arguably learn more useful lessons from failures rather than successes. Thus, this paper contributes to social marketing literature by exploring the key causes of social marketing failures.

Methods: We conducted ten semi-structured interviews with social marketing practitioners recruited using a purposive sampling technique.

Results: We identify four elements responsible for the failure of social marketing programmes, each centred around the planning and implementation stage. Firstly, formative research at the earliest stages of programme planning is often neglected, resulting in a limited understanding of the target audience. Relatedly, extant research is frequently overlooked during this early planning stage, and this failure to use available social marketing theory and frameworks can result in programme performing poorly. Thirdly, for a programme to be successful, it must be congruent with the goals of the wider environment and infrastructure within which it is situated; adopting too narrow a focus can also result in a limited impact or programme failure. Lastly, we found a common issue relating of stakeholder mismanagement, specifically around issues of power imbalance and mismanaged expectations resulting in social marketing programme failing to launch. Researchers and practitioners must acknowledge that social marketing programmes do indeed fail but recognise that in these failings lies insight into how to enhance future practice.

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Recommendations: We suggest that more attention is required from social marketing practitioners during the early design stage into understanding the target audience in detail. We suggest drawing upon extant social marketing frameworks and research to inform the planning and development of social marketing programmes. We demonstrate how implementing these changes in the earliest stages of programme designs would reduce the chance of programme failure. Further, we suggest that adopting a more systems-level approach or critical approach would additionally benefit programme outcomes.

Limitations: A relatively small sample size could be considered a limitation of the study. Similarly, our focus on practitioner insights may limit the scope of the findings. Future research could advance the current findings by incorporating the views of a broader range of stakeholders, including the target audience themselves. We also suggest future research consider integrating the analysis of failure into the social marketing process to encourage practitioner reflection and inform and improve future practice.

Keywords: Social Marketing, Failure Factors, Mistakes, Research, Programme

Introduction

Social marketing is a diverse and evolving discipline that is well-positioned to drive social change (Dibb, 2014; French & Gordon, 2020; Gordon, Russell-Bennett, & Lefebvre, 2016; Lee & Kotler, 2020). As a discipline that is now a half-century old, it is arguably entering a new phase of advancement and professionalisation (Deshpande, 2019; Kassirer et al., 2019; Lee, 2020). However, a significant gap within the discipline's advancement is its transparency and critical reflection regarding social marketing programmes that do not achieve their desired outcomes (Cook et al., 2020). Failures do occur but the reasons behind these failures are rarely explored, and examples of unsuccessful programmes are infrequently reported (Wymer, 2015). This is regrettable, considering the value of reflection, and learning from failure to ultimately drive success (McArdle, 2015; Dayton, 2020).

Recently, Cook et al. (2020) identified the most common mistakes made by social marketers, where mistakes were defined as "*any error that is made by a social marketer during the planning, intervention or evaluation stages of their programs that may influence the success of the program*" (p.13). However, Cook et al.'s (2020) analysis does not offer an insight into error factors that become the reasons for social marketing programmes' failures, highlighting an

important research gap. Our research seeks to overcome this gap with the specific aim to evaluate what causes failures in social marketing practice. We define failure within the context of social marketing as an outcome-based condition in which the behaviour change goals are not achieved during the timeframe of the reported intervention. To explore failures and to consider the ways in which these failures can be more effectively discussed within social marketing scholarship, we conducted ten in-depth interviews with social marketing practitioners. Our primary goal was to answer the following research question: What factors lead to the failure of social marketing interventions?

Absence of 'failure' in social marketing scholarship

Social marketing can be defined as an approach "*to influence behaviours that benefit individuals and communities for the greater social good*" (French, 2013, p.1). It applies the same tools and techniques from commercial marketing, to change people's behaviour for the better. Now a well-established subsect of the marketing discipline, with its own textbooks, journals and conferences, social marketing is being applied to help tackle a wide range of issues from drug and alcohol misuse to diet and mental wellbeing. Since its origins, social marketing has come a long way. When Wiebe (1951) first posed the question "*Why can't you sell brotherhood like you sell soap?*" (p.679) he ignited the debate as to whether good behaviours could be 'sold' in the same fashion as selling products. In a subsequent paper (Kotler & Zaltman, 1971, p.3) termed the phrase "social marketing" in proposing a method to influence the acceptability of ideas across society. Marketing, which had traditionally been reserved for the promotion of consumption, was beginning to be adapted for public health issues (Kotler & Levy, 1969).

Since this time, social marketing has evolved dramatically. Where behaviour change was once the 'bottom line' (Andreasen, 2002; Lefebvre, 2011), there is now a broader intent of engendering 'social good' (Kassirer et al., 2019). Despite this expansion, Andreasen's (2002) benchmark criteria arguably remain the standard by which social marketing programmes are defined and evaluated. It dominates social marketing literature. The six elements of these criteria are behaviour change, consumer research, segmentation and targeting, marketing mix, exchange, and competition. The criteria have been shown to be effective in differentiating social marketing from other approaches, driving programme development, and serving as criteria for systematic reviews (Firestone et al., 2017). Through ongoing scholarship and practice, the criteria have been updated and expanded (French & Blair-Stevens, 2006), which

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has only served to strengthen them (French & Russell-Bennett, 2015). Further, three regional associations of the field published a global consensus definition of social marketing, including social marketing key principles, concepts and techniques (ISMA et al., 2017). However, as we reach 50 years of the field, there is now a need to look back, be reflective, and examine what causes failures to arise.

Multiple systematic reviews, critical appraisals and meta-analyses have demonstrated the utility and effectiveness of social marketing approaches within a wide range of contexts, (Akbar et al., 2020; Buyucek, Kubacki, Rundle-Thiele, & Pang, 2016; Firestone, Rowe, Modi, & Sievers, 2017; Flaherty, Domegan, Duane, Brychkov, & Anand, 2020; French & Evans, 2018; Green, Crawford, Williamson, & Dewan, 2019; MacDonald, Cairns, Angus, & Stead, 2012; Stead, Gordon, Angus, & McDermott, 2007; Truong, 2014). Yet each of these examines success factors and neglect the crucial element of failures. Critique within the social marketing domain is strikingly scant. Instead, the dominant concern tends to be one around the need to extend social marketing efforts from the individual level, beyond to the environmental level (French & Gordon, 2015; Hastings & Donovan, 2002; Langford & Panter-Brick, 2013; Wallack, 2002). Scholars have long called for social marketing to move beyond the individual-facing interventions (downstream), and expand into policy development (upstream) (Hastings et al., 2000; Wallack et al., 1993; Wymer, 2011). However, there is also a need to continuously examine social marketing practice, and to explore what can be done to enhance its effectiveness as a behaviour change tool.

To situate our exploration of failure factors within social marketing, we must first examine the context of evolution in social marketing scholarship. Gordon & Gurrieri (2014) identify three paradigms in social marketing scholarship, *i.e.* traditionalist, social ecologist, and critical social marketing paradigms. They argue that there remains a predominance of the traditionalist paradigm, where scholars favour exploring social marketing case studies and ideas that adhere to traditional frameworks and *"easily digestible formulas"* (p.262). Traditionalist social marketers continue to focus upon avoiding mistakes rather than reporting failures, which relates to the lack of critical reflection that Gordon & Gurrieri (2014) argue has led to an underdeveloped and narrow subdiscipline. In line with this traditionalist perspective, an examination of social marketing literature reveals very little scholarly research explicitly focused upon examples of programme failure or on linkages between mistakes and failures in conceptualisation, implementation, and practice. There does not yet appear to be a realised

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research agenda in this area. Rather, discourse typically focuses on widely accepted desirable features of social marketing practice. In order to differentiate the field from other approaches to behaviour change and to avoid mistakes going forward, we must incorporate mistakes and reflection into our discussion.

Gurrieri & Gordon (2014) highlight the burgeoning critical social marketing literature that reflects critically on social marketing theory and practice. However, this tends to focus on theoretical limitations of social marketing (Spotswood et al., 2017), unintended consequences (Gurrieri et al., 2013) or the political context of social marketing for and by governments (Raftopoulou & Hogg, 2010). There is only minimal social marketing literature that specifically seeks to identify issues which act as barriers to a programme's success. For example, Cook et al. (2020) recently identified mistakes commonly made when implementing social marketing behaviour change programmes. Of these, the mistake cited most often was "inadequate research," followed by "poor strategy development," and "ad-hoc approaches to programmes." Two cross-cutting themes overlay these categories: external influences and the social marketer's own preconceptions. Cook et al. (2020) characterise external influences as those factors the social marketer does not have control over, such as budgets and timelines, or the interests and agendas of stakeholders. Preconceptions take the form of preconceived notions and assumptions made by social marketers that influence how they design and implement their programmes.

While Cook et al. 's (2020) findings contribute an important milestone for the field by recognising common mistakes made by social marketers, the paper stands alone within the critical social marketing turn. Furthermore, Cook et al. 's (2020) useful emphasis on identifying mistakes does not extend to a discussion about the importance of reporting failure; it is clear this represents an important research priority. Our study seeks to contribute to this agenda by further exploring failures in social marketing and to consider the ways that social marketing failures can be effectively reported. We contribute to the contemporary discussion regarding the exploration and documentation of failure factors. We recognise that this is critical for the development of the field and invite practitioners to learn from efforts that were unsuccessful (Gordon, 2018).

Absence of failure in academic and practitioner publishing

Before exploring the concept of failure within social marketing interventions, we find it instructive to examine the concept more broadly. Simply put, results that might be defined as' failure 'do not readily appear in the literature. Indeed, little has changed since Rosenthal noted a *"file drawer problem"* (1979, p.638) in both academic and practitioner settings, whereby scientific studies that find statistically nonsignificant results are rarely published. This publication bias favouring strong results over null results has been documented in multiple disciplines including the social and biomedical sciences (Franco et al., 2014), and occurs because researchers perceive their findings as having *"no publication potential"* (Franco et al., 2014, p.1504). (For academics, a publish or perish mentality prevails (Abbott et al., 2010; Rawat & Meena, 2014). This practice of publication bias, which is perpetuated by the academic publishing community and its incentive-driven systems (Smaldino & McElreath, 2016), effectively masks null results that could have otherwise proved insightful for other streams of research. Practitioner-based research yielding nonsignificant results maybe even less likely to be published in a peer-reviewed setting, since published practitioner-led research is arguably less prevalent, to begin with (Mlinarić et al., 2017). The disproportionate publication output between academics and practitioners is due to constraints associated with the practitioner landscape, such as accessibility, capacity, costs, and funder expectations (Gordon et al., 2016; Parsons et al., 2017; Veríssimo et al., 2018). Therefore, we approach this research topic through reflection on an already-constrained academic and practitioner landscape that neither encourages nor rewards the dissemination of research documenting failed interventions.

Methods

Social marketers with a minimum of five years' experience in the field, as well as specific experience in planning, designing and implementing at least one social marketing intervention were eligible to take part in the study. Using these pre-defined inclusion criteria (Crossman, 2017), a purposive sampling technique was adopted in order to ensure the population participating in the study held the desired characteristics (Bloor & Wood, 2016; Etikan, 2016). This study was approved by the ethics committee of the University of Derby, UK.

Initial contact with the priority population was made at four social marketing conferences – The UK Social Marketing Conference at Queen Mary University of London (September 2017), the Academy of Marketing Conference, University of Stirling, Scotland (July 2018), the

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European Social Marketing Conference, Antwerp, Belgium (September 2018) and the World Social Marketing Conference, Edinburgh, Scotland (June 2019). These conferences attract a range of practitioner and academic audiences. Following the conferences, a formal invitation to take part in the study was sent via emails and/or LinkedIn to 24 carefully selected candidate participants. As a result, ten social marketing experts volunteered to participate. These participants, from across the globe, are leaders in the field of social marketing. They collectively carry over 150 years of experience in social marketing as academics and/or practitioners and share approximately 400 publications between them. The respondents' profiles are provided below, Table 1. They are well placed to reflect on experiences of mistakes, failure, and reporting failure during the process of sharing social marketing practice.

Table 1 Respondents' Profile

Respondents	Experience	Location
R1	Experience in commercial marketing and health communication with more than five years of experience as an academic and practitioner in social marketing.	USA
R2	Thirty years of experience in social marketing as an academic and practitioner	USA
R3	Seven years of experience as a social marketing practitioner	Belgium
R4	Full time academic with twenty years of experience in social marketing	Australia
R5	Experience in health marketing communication and the use of emotions in social marketing interventions with a minimum of five years of experience in social marketing	UK
R6	Twenty years of experience as an academic and practitioner in social marketing, public health, public policy, governmental agencies, and national bodies	UK
R7	Fifteen years of experience in social marketing as a practitioner with experience in the environmental field	USA
R8	Ten years of experience as a practitioner in social marketing, public health, immigration, and transport	UK
R9	Twenty-five years of experience as an academic/practitioner in social marketing/public health	Israel
R10	Thirty years of experience in social marketing as an academic and practitioner	Australia

The semi-structured interviews were carried out via Skype and WhatsApp (audio/video). Both of these digital platforms have been cited as valuable means of collecting qualitative data considering their feasibility in obtaining in-depth interviews internationally, (Iacono et al., 2016; Gon & Rawekar, 2017; Gulacti et al., 2016). The practitioners were each asked to discuss their experience of social marketing programmes that had failed, *i.e.* the programmes had not

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managed to achieve the intended behaviour change levels they had set out to achieve. Hence the main topics discussed during the interviews related to the identification of factors that underpinned failures of social marketing interventions, either conveyed as the first-hand experience or as broader observations seen as representative of the field (Flick et al., 2018). An interview guide was used to aid the experts during the interview to focus their responses, Table 2. The discussions included an expansive range of interventions which had taken place in a variety of settings, including programmes to reduce speeding, to increase the uptake of health insurance, to reduce salt intake, to curb teenage pregnancies, to reduce environmental waste, to improve diets, to abstain from drugs, and to act in more gender-neutral ways.

Table 2 Interview guide discussion areas

Domain	Assessment	Sample questions
Background in social marketing	Experience in social marketing either as practitioner or academic	Can you give an overview of your experience in social marketing?
Failed social marketing intervention	Self-defined social marketing intervention based on experts' experience in the field	Can you identify a social marketing intervention that failed in your experience?
Reasons for failure	An outcome-based condition in which the behaviour change goals are not achieved during the timeframe of the reported intervention	Can you explain why this intervention failed? What were the key reasons for failure?
Use of theory/model	Planning framework that guides on planning, designing and implementing the intervention	Was a planning model or theory used to design, plan and implement the intervention?

Data Analysis

A software package, QSR NVivo12, was used to support thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The thematic analysis involves identifying key themes within datasets (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). Interviews were first transcribed verbatim to form a dataset of approximately 4000 words all in answer to the main research objectives. The transcripts of the interviews were sent to the respondents for their review in order to reduce potential bias. The raw data were then coded. This involved deconstructing the data into smaller chunks, typically sentences or paragraphs, and assigning a code to each. Once all the data had been coded, the researchers were then able to group the codes under thematic headings. Of interest were the recurring

themes and the relationships between these themes that emerged from the data. The research team then analysed identified excerpts of the interview transcripts in order to validate the thematic analysis.

Results and Discussion

Analysis of participant reflections identified four primary factors which lead to the failure of social marketing programmes. These failures appear to be sown early in the social marketing design process, and each result in poor, limited or failed programme outcomes.

1. Lack of Formative Research resulting in Ineffective Targeting and Limited Impact

A lack of formative research was referred to most often as the primary cause of social marketing programmes performing poorly. This is consistent with Cook et al. 's (2020) finding that 'inadequate research' was perceived to be the most common mistake made by social marketers. More specifically, this mistake refers to a failure to fully grasp what drives consumer behaviour, or as one interviewee put it *"Our programme failed because we didn't fully understand our audience"* (Respondent 1), missing a focus on priority audience failing to fully understand the product that the audience needed to change behaviour. The formative research, or lack thereof, is not related to any particular social problem. That is, it was not that the designers of a programme targeting diet, for example, had failed to explore factors which affect diet in enough detail. Instead, the segments most at risk were often neglected prior to a programme being launched, meaning their particular barriers and motivations were not adequately understood. This is supported by the views of Respondent 2, for example:

> *"I think the biggest problem is that a lot of, so-called, experts don't take time to actually listen to the audience that you're trying to help. They either skip the formative research step, or they do it, but then they bring their own bias and perceptions to the data and make assumptions about what the causes of the problem, and also what the solutions are"* (Respondent 2).

Respondent 9 highlighted similar views while talking about the Anti-Drug Programme targeting young people:

> *"So rather than really understanding the kids who are at highest risk, and developing messaging and imagery that addresses those kids, it was more, kind of, a general*

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push to all youth things like that just did not appeal to these higher-risk kids who were doing drugs. And so, it made using drugs cool rather than uncool."

Respondent 6 also discussed the impact of the lack of formative research on social marketing programmes:

"*People didn't understand it, didn't make the connections. Some smart ad-person came up with the idea of salt and slugs, being middle class as they are, and persuaded the Food Standards Agency to spend their money, our money, on this programme without segmenting it properly"* (Respondent 6).

The omission of formative research can have devastating consequences on a programme's success. Even high-quality, expensive programmes run the risk of failing if the central message fails to resonate with the intended target audience. As the extracts above reveal, the reason for this omission tends to be a result of 'experts' thinking they know best and managing programmes in a top-down fashion. Yet assuming what will work, prior to researching the context, competition, and everyday lives of the target audience are completely at odds with the raison d'être of social marketing. Indeed the use of consumer insight is widely accepted to be a core concept of social marketing (Tapp & Spotswood, 2013), and neglecting its use is fraught with issues. As Lefebvre (2011) underscores, the consumer-centric approach that social marketing purports is not only a distinguishing characteristic, but it is the primary reason why the practice is so readily embraced by health professionals seeking to accomplish behaviour change. Thus, we should be alarmed by the discovery that social marketing programmes often lack formative research, as this may support criticism that social marketing is simply an opportunity for do-gooders to categorise behaviours as good or bad and provide ill-considered remedies (Chriss, 2015), or to facilitate neo-liberal government goals to achieve population self-governance (Raftopoulou & Hogg, 2010). Instead, the process should always be research-driven, developing programmes that put understandings about citizens' everyday lives at the heart of planning, design, and development.

Respondent 2 added that programmes designed with limited formative research often lack impact:

"*So, there are programmes with high production values that look nice, but they don't have any impact, because they haven't really tailored the messages to what the*

audience wants and needs. So, I think that's the biggest problem that I see in our field over and over again".

Respondent 10 agrees with the problem of low impact, and in the context of anti-racism and domestic violence programmes in the UK, added that an additional problem was potential detrimental consequences of poorly researched programmes: *"Lots of programmes don't work and even worse, in the areas of racism and violence, they can be, or actually are, counterproductive because of lack of research".* This only serves to strengthen the call for mandatory formative research.

Programmes that unintentionally increase the appeal of drugs to certain groups of children, or create counterproductive results, can be avoided with more rigorous formative research. The unintended consequences of social marketing programmes is an issue that has been highlighted as important by critical and reflexive social marketing scholars (Gordon & Gurrieri, 2014; Wymer, 2015; Soraghan, Thomson and Ensor, 2016), and the comments from industry experts here suggest that one route to negate such impacts would be, at a very minimum, to strive for a more rigorous understanding of the target audience (Andreasen, 2002; French, 2017).

Our findings suggest that the issue of limited formative research is pervasive, despite the dearth of commentary in academic scholarship. Expert interviewees acknowledged that when it comes to the practice of social marketing, there seems to exist an inability to recognise the importance of primary research and that this is an issue which runs deep across the sector. Despite the fact that conducting a limited amount of formative research appears to be a widespread issue, few of our participants offered an explanation as to why this is the case. The need to develop more bottom-up, consumer-led participatory approaches going forward has been made (French & Gordon, 2020) and our findings add to this call. Programmes would be less likely to fail if more rigorous preliminary research were conducted. In addition, formative research, or the lack thereof it, was discussed as being a common mistake made by social marketers, yet there is scant mention of this within the scholarship. Thus, our findings speak to the need, not just for formative research to be conducted, but for an open discussion about where and when it is neglected.

2. Failing to Use Frameworks effectively resulting in Poor Implementation

Another factor identified as crucial in avoiding social marketing failures was the appropriate use of frameworks or theories to underpin their design. This applies to both the initial concept of a programme as well as the implementation and evaluation – each stage will perform better, the experts explained, if a structured framework is adhered to. Again, these findings echo Cook et al. (2020), where "poor strategy development" and "ad hoc approaches to programs" were cited among the top three most common mistakes made by social marketers. The extract below from respondent 4 suggests that social marketers can be selective over when and how to follow a social marketing framework. Instead, what appears to happen in poor-performing programmes is that certain aspects of a framework are used while other sections are ignored, leading to a restricted, narrow interpretation of social marketing that can, for example, emphasise communications over a fuller marketing mix:

> *"I am very confident in saying that when you follow the SM planning process, you are more likely to succeed than you are not. Only those are the ones that should be called social marketing – when they involved most of the benchmarks of a social marketing planning process. When they do not, they tend to fail. Communication-only programmes tend to fail most of the time because they lack consumer orientation; they lack exchange offered; they lack improving the barriers – the benefits to a framework. I think there are far more initiatives that fail, and they fail because of poor planning processes"* (Respondent 4).

In line with this comment, Respondent 6 highlighted that during a health promotion programme, the social marketing team *"... didn't use a planning framework! Basically, it was a promotional programme aimed at the general public and without having a proper behavioural framework; with no result."* Again, the default here was to reduce social marketing to promotion only. Similarly, but without specifying the particular way the programme failed, Respondent 8 described a programme with the aim to reduce teenage pregnancies that were *"a case of social marketing bombing really"*. They that the planning team were initially *"fully into the concept... but they had to be dragged kicking and screaming through the process, and so in the end when they got an opportunity not to follow it, they took it."* Likewise, an educational and community outreach programme was described as failing in general terms *"because it didn't follow a community-based social marketing framework and didn't make behavioural selection"* (Respondent 7).

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A common thread in the data, which is echoed above, is that neglecting to use a social marketing framework during the design process was both simultaneously shocking to our participant experts, and yet common practice. Evidently, social marketing practitioners commonly bring assumptions and biases to the programme design process, and the use of a structured framework would help to prevent this. Failing to use frameworks resulted in a poor planning process and an inability to maximise the potential of the marketing mix. The ineffective use of frameworks identified here points toward the need for more reflection upon how social marketing programmes are managed and implemented, what steps are skipped and what compromises are reached as a result. Many tools for planning social marketing programmes are available, Andreasen's (2002) benchmark criteria, Weinreich's (2010) social marketing planning process, Lee & Kotler's (2011) planning model, STELa model by European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (French & Apfel, 2015), Robinson-Maynard et al. (2013) criteria, French & Russell-Bennett's (2015) Hierarchical Model of Social Marketing and yet, none of these addresses the critical issue of self-reflection. Our failing to critical reflection is constraining the growth of the discipline. To ensure social marketing is considered a reliable and worthy instrument for social change, we must incorporate an element of reflection into both our practice and our scholarship. Failures are not commonly reported upon in social marketing scholarship (Wymer, 2015), and one way to amend this would be to ensure our guiding frameworks include the need for reflective practice.

3. *Adopting a Narrow Focus resulting in the Wider Context being Neglected and the Programme's Impact being limited*

Several participants reflected on the limitations of social marketing programmes that have a myopic downstream focus. In the extract below, Respondent 3 explains that if the infrastructure which conditions a behaviour is not targeted for change in conjunction with the behaviour itself, then social marketing is only able to 'do so much' to combat key social problems:

> *"If you are trying to change the behaviour but not the environment or infrastructure –it will be very difficult. We are just the marketing department. In government, you have different departments, such as the social issue department, the health department and we are the marketing department. So, if you start with a behaviour change/SM programme, you may have very little impact"* (Respondent 3).

In line with numerous scholars who have critiqued the downstream, behaviouralist tendencies of social marketing (Lefebvre, 2012), Respondent 3 raises the issue that social marketing is likely to fail if the wider social structures and socio-cultural practices that shape everyday behaviours are ignored. In ignoring these, behaviour change programmes become less effective. Moreover, they can be criticised for placing the onus upon the individual to 'change their behaviour', despite the lack of agency or control an individual may possess over this behaviour (Gordon & Gurrieri, 2014).

Ignoring the broader context in which a behaviour sits can also threaten the success of a campaign in terms of misjudging how it will be received by the wider public. Respondent 5 explains how a high-profile national charity "*found themselves at the centre of this body-shaming social media frenzy!"* A lack of understanding of public opinion resulted in this anti-obesity campaign being seen to add pressure towards an already stigmatised behaviour.

> *"The programme was less effective than it should have been because of the way in which it was received. It wasn't really thought through properly, how people were going to receive that, and that resulted in a massive backlash. So for me, this highlights how social marketers not only have to take into consideration how immediate consumers of the message will react but also if there's going to be wider societal responses or reactions"* (Respondent 5).

The discussion with Respondent 5 exemplifies how social marketing programmes today still struggle to achieve impact against a backdrop of social and environmental factors which condition people's everyday lives in a myriad of ways. It is for this reason that the critique of programmes which are individually-focused social marketing has been growing for some time now (Crawshaw, 2013; Niblett, 2005; Scott & Higgins, 2012), with most recent calls advocating a more systems-led approach (Carvalho & Mazzon, 2020; Domegan et al., 2016; Flaherty et al., 2020; Truong et al., 2019a), or drawing on ideas from practice theory or assemblage theory (Gordon & Gurrieri, 2014; Spotswood et al., 2017).

Currently, there are few established frameworks available to guide social marketers to contribute to social change programmes that acknowledge and seek to tackle wider socio-cultural and systemic forces, though innovative approaches such as practice theory (Spotswood et al., 2017), and macro and systems social marketing (Flaherty et al., 2020; Truong et al., 2019) have been emerging and gaining recognition. Frameworks that exist are, by and large,

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individually focused, drawing on theories predominantly situated within the psycho-social sciences (Truong, 2014). These findings support those of commentators arguing for the need for innovation in social marketing's theory base (Rundle-Thiele et al., 2019), and particularly those who underscore the need for more attention by social marketers towards the influence of external factors driving behaviour (Cook et al., 2020). Particularly, we argue, there is a need for theoretical conceptualisations and frameworks that help social marketers understand how they can add value in sustainable, societal level change programmes. In order to drive the innovation required for social marketing to find its place in broader social change programmes and policies, a critical and reflexive research agenda is necessary (Gordon, 2018). Reflecting on the failures of social marketing to tackle ingrained and persistent practices (Meier et al., 2018), corporate practices that drive and protect social problems (Hastings, 2013) or the entanglement of policymaking with citizens daily life, will ultimately result in a social marketing field with greater impact (Gordon, 2011).

4. Mismanaging Stakeholders and Power Imbalances resulting in Poor Programme Delivery

Managing the expectations and commitment of key programme stakeholders was touched upon by several participants as an important failure factor, specifically in relation to the power imbalances that can arise as a result of such relationships. As Respondent 8 explains in the extract below, without the right commitment from the relevant stakeholders, a programme of social change may not gain the momentum required to even launch adequately.

> *"And I don't think the group as a whole was… actually shared the same perspective on what they wanted to happen. So, we maybe never got enough commitment to the specific goal, and using the process was a bit of a struggle"* (Respondent 8).

Respondent 8 stresses that social marketers need not only acquire the right team of stakeholders, but they must share a common vision of how the programme will run or it can become a 'struggle'. As social marketing is used to address a growing range of complex issues, there are often numerous bodies involved or concerned with the running of a programme. This appears to create two distinct issues: Sourcing and acquiring the interest of those groups but also then managing their expectations as to what can be achieved by the programme. Respondent 8 continues, while reflecting on a sexual health programme which ran in the UK:

"I'm not sure, reflecting back, that really everyone bought into the process that was going to be necessary to use social marketing properly. I think they wanted to get into some action more quickly than perhaps they anticipated. I think they, definitely wanted it to do more than it was capable of" (Respondent 8).

For Respondent 8, it appears that the key stakeholders were more concerned with speed in deploying a programme, rather than working together to develop a programme of systemic social change using social marketing approaches. Other participants had similar reflections, noting that expectations must be managed with regards to the fluctuating environment in which we live. In the example below, Respondent 7 discusses how in working with a community group to encourage fitness at the workplace, tensions arose from the outset in terms of 'selecting a behaviour':

"So their rationale behind why social marketing works is because of this very specific behavioural selection aspect that happens at the front end. And so their argument is this other one didn't work because they didn't pick the right behaviour" (Respondent 7).

This incident provides some insight into how those working in social marketing still perceive the first step to involve selecting a behaviour rather than engaging in research to ascertain which behaviours are the best placed to be targeted in the context of their competition and reasons for persistence.

Respondent 3 discusses how the infrastructure around a speed-reducing programme resulted in drivers adopting the complete opposite behaviour than had been intended. This unexpected change to the environment caused those involved in the programme to feel nervous and insignificant, which further added to stakeholder pressures.

"For example, there was a lot of road work and roadblocks, and people get nervous in the streets because to catch up time, people started speeding, and this was an infrastructure issue. If you are trying to change the behaviour, but if the environment or infrastructure is an issue, it will be very difficult. We are the marketing department, in government, you have different departments, such as social issue department, health department, and we are [just] a marketing department" (Respondent 3).

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Social marketing scholarship does not characteristically include reflections on programme failures from mismanaged power relations that can prevent a programme from succeeding. Our findings emphasise that these problems are common and can have a significant impact on the way a social marketing programme proceeds. Indeed, participatory approaches involving co-design with key stakeholders are ideal but need to be implemented with care and can readily backfire. Similarly, working with policy-level stakeholders and partners can create environments for genuine social change, but the language and culture barriers can create conflict and form a barrier to interdisciplinary (Spotswood & Warren, 2017). Although recent literature has sought to further acknowledge and solidify the role and importance of partners in broadscale social marketing (Duane & Domegan, 2019; Niblett, 2005) there remains a need to reflect on the limitations and indeed failings of social marketing programmes that showcase difficulties in managing partner relationships rather than continue to emphasise the theoretical possibilities of adhering to best practice. Social marketing can learn considerable lessons from this critical self-reflection.

A critique of social marketing

It could be argued that an overarching critique offered by the respondents of this study appears to be one which calls in to question whether the interventions described and discussed can be called social marketing. In highlighting a lack of formative research, a lack of frameworks, and neglect for the wider social constructs, participants may be describing pseudo social marketing rather than programmes that adhere to Andreasen's (2002) criteria or align with the consensus definition and core concepts (ISMA et al., 2017). Rather than seeking solely to ring fence the approach, the issue with poorly constructed social marketing, or pseudo social marketing, is how it relates to the causes of failure. The experts, with over 150 years' experience collectively, each selected a case to discuss which they *understood* to represent social marketing in practice, so they can be understood as representing the ideals of practice (notwithstanding the non-representative sample). Thus, rather than shunning such findings as 'not social marketing', we illuminate how pseudo social marketing continues to thwart the evolution of social marketing. That is, the way social marketing elements are cherry-picked to fit an intervention creates limitations to programme efficacy. A gulf, therefore, remains between social marketing in practice and social marketing in principle, and it is imperative that social marketing scholars are critical when presenting and discussing social marketing practice in papers and conferences.

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Conclusion

In this paper, we have explored how experienced social marketing professionals understand the key failure factors that cause social marketing programme failings. Our findings suggest social marketing failures can commonly be attributed to four key areas: (i) lack of formative research in the early stages of programme planning leading to ineffective targeting and limited impact, (ii) failure to adopt and apply relevant social marketing frameworks, resulting in poor implementation, (iii) adopting a narrow focus resulting in the wider context being neglected and the programme's impact being limited, and (iv) mismanaging stakeholders and power imbalances resulting in poor programme delivery. We argue that the failure of social marketing scholarship to critically reflect on the pervasiveness and significance of such failings may continue to limit the scope and acceptance of social marketing as an important tool for social change. Rather, social marketing scholarship tends to be tied to traditional frameworks that work well to identify the boundaries of social marketing practice but do not offer a framework for inclusion of progressive critical reflection about the process, theory or management; reflexive praxis (Verissimo, 2019). Drawing on calls for innovation (Rundle-Thiele et al., 2019) and aligning with the critical social marketing paradigm (Gordon, 2018), we seek to highlight the benefits of reflecting on social marketing failures and to argue that focusing solely on social marketing successes does not sufficiently inform future research and practice.

This paper represents a new contribution to the knowledge base by identifying those factors that cause failure in social marketing. This contribution identifies a need to develop a framework for reflexive critique about how and why social marketing fails, and how we conceptualise and discuss success. Therefore, we call for the development of structured criteria for social marketing programmes that can be applied throughout the research, design, implementation, and evaluation phases of programmes. These criteria can then support research on both social marketing success *and* failure and importantly, inform future social marketing practice. As one of the few papers which directly addresses why social marketing fails rather than succeeds, we highlight the dearth of this discussion within the social marketing community. Currently, there is little to no language of failure. Social marketers rarely communicate why programmes are unsuccessful and what causes this to happen. It will greatly benefit the field if more publications address this issue at the practitioner level. We also call

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for more academic-practitioner collaboration to advance this research agenda. We should be able to fathom the idea that social marketing efforts not only fail but can have long-lasting unintended consequence upon society, and to unpack what these are, we must start by being critical of our own practices (Tadajewski & Brownlie, 2008).

The language of social marketing more broadly, also warrants attention. We have referred to a consensus definition of social marketing (ISMA et al., 2017) and Andreasen's (2002) benchmark criteria. However, interviewee responses suggest a deviation from social marketing research rhetoric in the interpretation of exactly what constitutes social marketing. This paper, therefore, demonstrates the urgency for the social marketing field in uniting research and practice by continuously critiquing reported social marketing, reflecting on best practice and clarifying key terminology.

Future research agenda

As an exploratory study seeking to understand the reasons why social marketing programmes fail, our findings focus on the actions at the planning and implementation stages which result in failure. Our small sample size (n=10) could be deemed a limitation of the study, though this is consistent with qualitative research which results in rich and detailed data and more in-depth insights (Patton, 2002; Welch & Patton, 1992) and we argue that the saturation point was reached during these interviews (Guest et al., 2006), thus mitigating this limitation. Conducting further interviews would be an interesting avenue for future research to reinforce our findings and also uncover any additional causes for failure, which may be identified by considering other social marketing contexts.

Furthermore, we suggest that as our research focused on practitioner insights, this could be extended by considering these factors in conjunction with failures from a priority audience perspective to understand the relationship between the two. More specifically, future research could explore if the way in which social marketing programme failures are understood by practitioners mirrors the reasoning of those individuals actually exposed to the programme. A combination of practitioner and priority audience insight would further inform social marketing research, and in turn, help in the development of the upstream and systems-level criteria previously alluded to.

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Our findings also indicate the lack of clarity in identifying the barriers researchers and practitioners face when highlighting social marketing failures. We have shown that considerable effort is spent quantifying and metricising social marketing success, and we have argued the merits of focusing also on failures. As such, we suggest incorporating the analysis of social marketing failures into the implementation and evaluation process to encourage practitioners to integrate this into their programme management. Not only would this redefine the appraisal of social marketing practice, but means practitioners benefit from a clear understanding of both successes and failures. Overcoming the negative implications associated with analysing, and indeed admitting, failure is also an area for future consideration. Recognising the relevance of understanding and learning from programme failure and fostering a process which allows for this would support practitioners in learning from such mistakes in the future as decisions would inevitably be evidence-driven.

Finally, it is necessary to address the fact that our findings highlighted the pervasive confusion about what does and does not constitute social marketing practice while revealing the fuzzy boundaries between ill-defined and often-overlapping approaches considered outside of but adjacent to social marketing. We acknowledge that this is to be expected for any discipline that finds itself in the midst of a broadening and deepening of its scope and practice as it gains in popularity and applicability. In order for the discipline to maintain its rigour and effectiveness, we recommend that more and better efforts be made to define the boundaries of social marketing and explicate professional standards of practice.

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