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Title: Refocusing marketing effort to support net-positive social impact

Article Classification: Original Article

Article Category: Conceptual Paper

Structured Abstract:

Purpose - Social impact research remains in its infancy. The purpose of the paper is to build on Keeling and Marshall's (2022) 'Call for impact' paper and develop a comprehensive Social Impact Pathway framework. The aim is to encourage marketing researchers, nonprofits, and corporations to pursue impactful work that is valued, planned, monitored, and evaluated.

Design/approach - The conceptual paper explores the complexities of estimating social impact drawing from a range of illustrative cases.

Findings - The paper identifies a lack of clarity in the understanding and application of impact and presents a pathway aimed at increasing focus on social impact across future work to deliver the net-positive changes that are needed to reverse biodiversity decline, climate change, and social and health inequalities that continue to be persist and be experienced by so many planet-wide.

Originality - This paper aims to encourage marketing researchers to engage in social change projects, rather than solely disseminating academic findings. Emphasising the importance of an outside-in approach, this paper highlights the necessity of showcasing accumulated outcomes to demonstrate impact. The paper contributes a pathway forward to encourage and support increased utilisation of the framework in future marketing research.

Practical implications - Mapping and measuring social impact pathways are concerted efforts directing understanding towards identifying the activities that are contributing to the delivery

of outputs that can achieve intended outcomes. The measurement of impact directs investment towards activities that ensure net-positive gains are achieved.

Social implications - Ever growing social inequities, health disparities, loss of biodiversity, and environmental degradation occur when practices are left unchecked. A focus on impact avoids greenwashing practices, ensuring that an understanding of what has changed because of our work is transparently reported.

Keywords Impact, Net positive, Impact framework, Social value, Social impact pathway, Non-profit organisations, Research outcomes, Social purpose.

Refocusing marketing effort to support net-positive social impact

Background

The purpose of this paper is to encourage marketing academics to contribute to social change programs to ensure their work makes a positive difference in the world. It builds upon the call for research to support and encourage 'Better Marketing for a Better World' (Chandy *et al.*, 2021). For the marketing researcher and practitioner alike, this is an opportunity to make a difference, and to counter some of the criticisms that the marketing profession attracts - including unethical marketing practices, immoral behaviours, and excessive commercial gains (Lim *et al.*, 2023; Delistavrou *et al.*, 2020; Ingram *et al.*, 2005). Additionally, global challenges such as climate change, biodiversity, environmental degradation, social and health inequities, poverty, and violence (treasury.gov.au, 2023; gov.uk, 2013) compound the urgency of the matter. In response, there is a need for a new way of conducting impactful research. The current paper specifically focuses on a societal change approach that is distinct from the recent hype and confusion around impact research.

A new Social Impact Pathway is described to support marketing researchers and practitioners who seek to undertake societal change projects, illustrated through best-practice examples. Our aim is to help ensure we aren't talking from an abstract viewpoint that is disconnected from practice. We understand that defining any impact is challenging and a contribution of this paper is to contribute effort that aims to support a path forward. Our motivation is to show how clear links can be demonstrated to confidently explain the cost savings for communities that are funding social, health and environmental work. As a community, it is important we make sure that we are seeing a return for all time and funds invested. Transparent impact estimation efforts are urgently needed if we are to turn the tide on fundamental world challenges.

Through anchoring efforts in one or more of the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDG), academic energy and expertise can be focused on making a net-positive impact. By increasing transparency, we can all learn how impact is achieved. This is very timely given that greenwashing will no longer be tolerated in some jurisdictions (e.g., Europe). These legislative moves recognise that for too long we have been avoiding the types of activities and efforts that are truly needed to achieve the outcomes and lasting impact that our society urgently needs.

This paper explicitly builds upon the impact innovation efforts led by Debbie Keeling and Greg Marshall (2022), which included a new article format for the European Journal of Marketing (EJM) that was launched in 2022. The EJM impact paper was specifically designed to allow collaborators to showcase how their research has already achieved, or can be expected to achieve, impact. Keeling and Marshall (2022) encouraged researchers to share their social change process and reflect on the realities and complexities of delivering impact, including dealing with the unexpected and often changing nature of impact. Keeling and Marshall (2022) outlined five key pillars for social impact work: problem generation and identifying the impact to be achieved, working with stakeholders, the (co-) creation and learning process, impact outcomes, and the ethics of impact. We note that an organising framework was not provided.

This paper begins by defining what we mean by social impact and identifies how this understanding is distinct to other perspectives on impact. The Social Impact Pathway is then described and illustrated using case studies. The paper provides insights into current progress in impact measurement all of which provide opportunities for future research, which are detailed in a research agenda.

Definition of social impact

Social impact estimations or value calculations disentangle the various efforts of the many organisations aiming to tackle society's most wicked problems by delivering clear understanding of what has occurred (or not) because of cumulative effort to address a specific issue. Impact is the portion of the total outcome that happened because of the activity of the venture, above and beyond what would have happened anyway (Clark and Rosenzweig, 2004). Wainwright (2002) notes that impact is any change resulting from an activity, project, or organisation. Different terms used to describe social impact include social value, social return, social return on investment, and social accounting. Considering the different domains in which social impact is studied (e.g., education, health care, sustainability, and poverty), comparisons remain challenging in the absence of mapped impact pathways that explain how impact arises through cumulative actions and outputs (Izzo, 2013).

The Research Excellence Framework (REF) in the UK defines impact as '*an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia*' (UKRI, 2024). There are three considerations for marketing academics at work. First, does the project/study specifically address a societal problem, anchored in the UN SDGs. The REF's definition asks academics to take an outside-in view. Exercises such as the REF aim to focus consideration on whether research is delivering a measurable benefit economically, environmentally, or socially. For individual marketing academics this requires them to ask, "Did the academic research go on to make an impact on society, for example resulting in a change in government policy or practices or direct delivery of an intended and positive change to systems, structures or individual behaviours?". The San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (sfidora.org, 2012) called for a reappraisal of the way in which we evaluate our research calling for us to assess the consequences of research [afterwards]. These distinctions are clearly represented in a 2024 multi-authored editorial entitled 'Real impact: Challenges and opportunities in bridging the gap between research and

practice – Making a difference in industry, policy, and society’ (Dwivedi *et al.*, 2024). The authors call for ‘*evaluation of tangible impact **from** academic research*’ [emphasis added] (p.1) and remind us of the conventional perspective that ‘*the impact of academic research can be measured using quantitative methods such as policy change references*’ (p.1). Dwivedi *et al.* (2024) identify the need to disseminate findings of research in an accessible way, arguing ‘*Research outcomes should lead to larger good in terms of superior products, practices, services, policies or any other positive change in the societal ecosystem*’ (p.41). However, despite guidance from the authors that impact should be considered at the start of a research project rather than being bolted-on at the end, it can be argued that fundamentally this is not currently occurring at the scale needed as practices obfuscate with ideas such as impact factors aiming to quantify possible influence of journal publications, which cannot be mixed with the delivery of social impact.

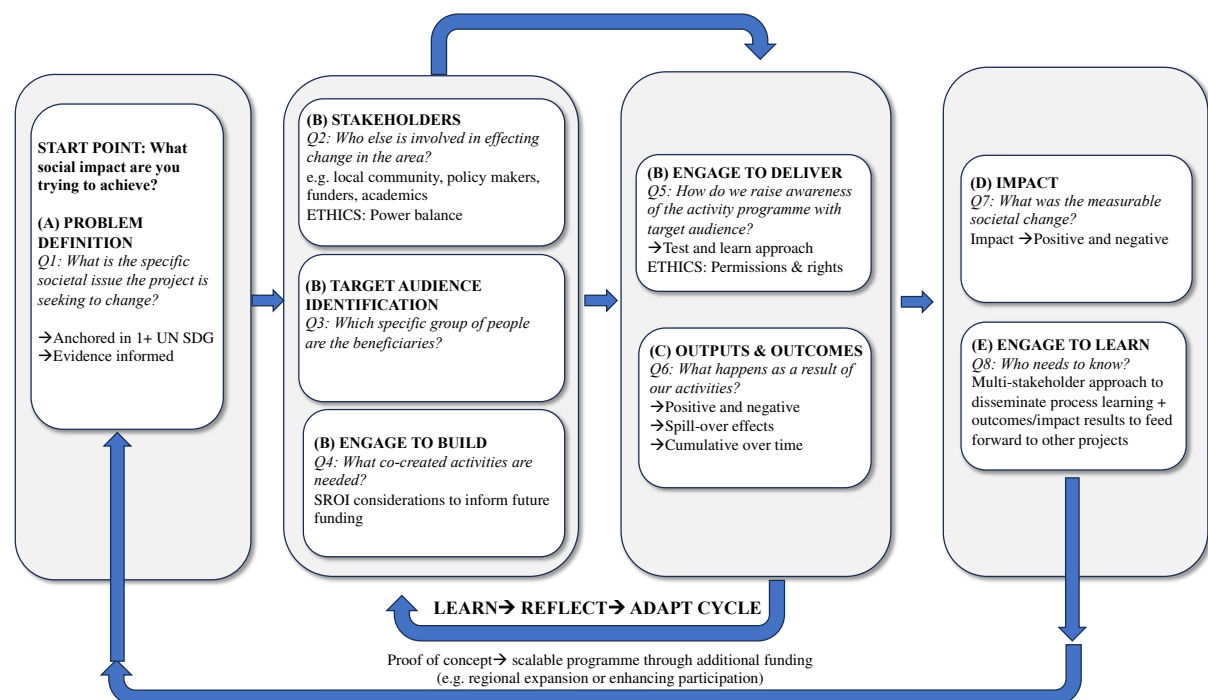
The delivery of intended, positive social impact which we present in this paper, involves marketing academics collaborating with a variety of stakeholders who are involved in delivering programs, products, or services capable of driving positive social change. Any subsequent research publications record the societal outcomes of the project and share learnings from the process undertaken, but the publications are not in, and of themselves, the end goal. Attempting to solve a societal problem is the purpose, and that is something that we find extremely motivating and believe is something other marketing researchers should jump to be part of.

Social impact mapping

To move forward, we need to consider impact as a pathway. Understanding the impact pathway is the result of a mapping process. Mapping demonstrates how inputs are directed into activities and observable outputs capable of achieving intended outcomes. Social impact mapping can

directly inform estimations of return on investment. Impact pathways have also been referred to as impact value chains or program logic models by evaluation researchers. Clark and Rosenzweig's (2004) Impact Value Chain contains inputs, activities, outputs, and outcomes. Clark and Rosenzweig (2004) state that impact is the outcome changes minus what would have happened anyway. We note this model is also presented in the recent paper by Dwivedi *et al.* (2024). To gain a full appreciation of impact, an understanding of how outcome evaluations are performed is recommended. An outcomes lens ensures that discourse and narrative is grounded in practice and avoids conceptual, abstract thinking which doesn't reflect reality. Quantitative outcome evaluations ensure that an understanding of who changes, when, where, and how is built.

Figure 1: Social Impact Pathway



Many scholars may dismiss impact mapping and assessment on the grounds these are management tools facilitating organisational learning, reinforcing missions that are used to

attract additional funding (Pathak and Dattani, 2014). Yet, evidenced approaches demonstrating the cumulative actions arising to achieve positive societal changes are needed if we are to understand how to build impact from the very start. It is vital that we know which outputs achieve the intended outcomes when people engage with programs, products, or services. This understanding is required so that we know which activities we can turn off, which outputs are not delivering outcomes, and which organisational practices are delivering net negative consequences for people and the planet. This practice is not unfamiliar to health practitioners, ecologists, and other professions aiming to provide social support, deliver health, and/or environment outcomes. Understanding outcomes achieved is important as it directs considerations to the consequences that arise from the activities that professionals, community members, and organisations perform, delivering the transparency needed for accountability that can more reliably inform governance models and ensure that net positive gains are resulting from each organisation's activity. By bringing transparency, impact assessments enable us to gain a shared understanding of which organisations are delivering good, and which are contributing harm by perpetuating or furthering social and health inequities and environmental damage.

It is important to note that impact encompasses intended and unintended effects, negative as well as positive, and long-term as well as short-term. We observe that many authors assume that impacts are positive changes for society, yet negative changes can and do result from organisational activities and our profession would benefit from including ideas like unintended consequences into practice. It is for this reason that the Learn-Reflect-Adapt cycle is a crucial part of the mapping process (illustrated in Figure 1). Reflection on any unforeseen negative impacts, spill-over effects of the activity onto other activities or stakeholder groups, and/or identification (and remedy) of any ethical issues such as power imbalances between stakeholders is key. Indeed, ensuring over-representation of disadvantaged groups is one way

to minimise this risk. On a positive note, this reflective test and learn cycle is also a means to provide proof of concept to attract future funding to expand a program either to widen impact geographically or deepen the participation, and therefore impact, in the original area.

A) Problem identification: Societal change anchored in UN Sustainable Development Goals

When considering Keeling and Marshall's (2022) pillars, the first important aspect is the identification of the problem and the desired impact. As an example, research on social impact in non-profit organisations typically follows an inside-out approach, focusing on organisational identity, capabilities, leadership, structure, and relationships (Keith *et al.*, 2022; Lee and Davies, 2021), rather than an outside-in approach, emphasising the perspective of beneficiaries (Benjamin *et al.*, 2023). This is surprising as non-profit organisations, as higher-purpose natives, possess valuable insider knowledge and a deep understanding of the specific issues they aim to address such as poverty and the empowerment of marginalised or underrepresented groups (Lee *et al.*, 2023; Mirzaei *et al.*, 2021). Benjamin *et al.* (2023) argue that involving beneficiaries from the beginning is crucial in ensuring the success of social impact initiatives, shifting the focus from how the program helps beneficiaries to actively involving them in the impact journey and mapping. This inclusive approach has the potential to yield both intended and unintended consequences, highlighting the importance of carefully navigating the involvement of beneficiaries throughout the process. In the non-profit context, this is particularly important as the funders (individual donors, foundations, service commissioners) are not the beneficiaries and, in the absence of impact pathway models, the need to ensure time and funds invested are maximising outcomes can be lost.

An illustration of a non-profit organisation attempting to realign their practices to better achieve their intended outcomes can be seen in SCOPE, a national disability charity in the UK. SCOPE underwent a rebranding exercise with the aim of addressing disability inequality and

shifting from being a mere service provider to becoming an advocate and campaigner, as demonstrated by their Gamechanger project (Dufour, 2020). Through reframing the problem and redefining its mission, SCOPE sought to create a strong community comprising both disabled and non-disabled individuals, harnessing collective power to challenge attitudes and injustice. By involving beneficiaries, SCOPE recognised that disabled individuals had difficulty understanding the organisation's role in the modern world, as it was primarily associated with historical work related to children with cerebral palsy. This led to questioning its relevance. The strategic shift also signalled and reinforced the transition from a medical model of disability, focusing on individual impairments, to a social model that identifies societal barriers (Dufour, 2020).

With over 13 million disabled people in the UK, representing approximately 1 in 5 individuals (Kirk-Wade, 2022), SCOPE's efforts are now more clearly aligned to the pathway to impact, anchored in UN SDG#10 aiming to reduce inequalities. The organization supported over 3.5 million people, an increase of 1 million from the previous year (SCOPE, 2022). This allowed SCOPE to concentrate on two key areas: addressing inequality issues in employment and building narratives within the community, particularly for families with disabled children. In families with disabled children, the Gamechanger project expanded the reach of various services such as 'Navigate,' a national mentoring program that offers online emotional support to parents and carers of disabled children. Feedback from parents revealed that 85% experienced improved well-being, and 74% reported feeling more resilient after utilizing the service (SCOPE, 2022). These efforts could demonstrate impact delivered by SCOPE if clear links between accumulated wellbeing and resilience could be attributed to reductions in health or social service provision (Kaplan, 2020) delivering cost savings to communities.

B) Stakeholder collaboration: Co-creation of activity and outcome measures

The second pillar to generating social impact is recognising the importance of collaboration with various stakeholders to maximise their impact (Keeling and Marshall, 2022). For any enterprise, the involvement of multi-stakeholders such as funders, beneficiaries, communities, and government, each with their own criteria for assessing impact effectiveness (Kanter and Summers, 1987; Keith *et al.*, 2022) takes effort to disentangle. When multiple stakeholders are involved, data is needed to ensure any claim or attributions for each stakeholder's activities and outputs is clearly linked to observed outcomes. Strong relationships are also needed to ensure a collaborative rather than competitive approach occurs. Additionally, it is important to note that learning processes stemming from collaboration and co-creation can lead to the discovery of unintended changes (Keeling and Marshall, 2022). In such situations, multi-stakeholders must exhibit courage to explore new directions that could deliver net positive outcomes. However, funders, whether individuals or government entities, increasingly expect social change programmes to deliver outcomes and impact. Given the inherent complexities, managers with transparent impact agendas might hesitate to allocate resources towards certain social programs, especially when servicing marginalised groups, which may be perceived as less attractive to future funders due to lower social return on investments. For example, some beneficiaries, such as children, may be more favourably perceived given demonstration of impact is calculated across a longer lifetime span compared to the aged. Moreover, children and animals might be more appealing for future funding opportunities, given their potential for compelling storytelling (Mitchell and Clark, 2021). These biases often make marketing managers more cautious when attempting to communicate impact and performance to funders.

Rundle-Thiele *et al.* (2019) summarise how stakeholders and community were involved in the initial co-design resulting in Leave It – a dog training program that teaches dog owners and dog trainers how to teach their dog to avoid wildlife. This work contributes to SDG#15 – life on land. A variety of stakeholders helped the marketing team to identify new approaches

that could be trialled. Specifically, conservation experts were critical in teaching the marketing team that wildlife aversion could be taught to dogs and dog trainers made it clear that it takes four weeks to teach dog owners how to achieve new behaviours in their dogs. Noting that impact cannot always be directly assessed (see Ebrahim and Rangan, 2014) the proof-of-concept trial was first run in one local government area in 2017 demonstrating that wildlife aversion could be achieved through a repeated measure outcome evaluation which considered dogs abilities before and after completion of the 4-week program (David *et al.*, 2019). Leave It training sessions were sold to dog owners in the local area who went on to complete a 4-week training program (Rundle-Thiele *et al.*, 2022). Following the initial pilot program success, a change in focus was undertaken and in the subsequent 2½ years the marketing team delivered a train the trainer program city-wide. After 3½ years koala hospital data demonstrated impact of the initiative which was one of a kind. Leave It delivered a 40% reduction in koala deaths from dog attacks (Harris *et al.*, 2022) which gave Queensland Government the confidence to refer specifically to Leave It as one of 38 actions in the 2020-2025 Koala Conservation Strategy (Queensland Government, 2020).

Today, stakeholders who were first approached in 2016 continue to work with the marketing team. The train the trainer model continues. Recently, the Leave It App launched a module on barking responding to dog owner and animal management feedback about the most common dog owner challenges and source of council complaints. The barking module teaches dog owners about prevention of four different types of barking. As of January 2024 more than 1,700 dog owners have downloaded the App. Partnerships are being created across 12 local government areas. The first trial of a marketing campaign aimed at raising awareness for the dog training App was completed in June 2024. This campaign featured signs at every dog park in the local council area. QR code tracking indicates that 89 dog owners went to App download page. Materials raising awareness for the free dog training App are now included in

annual registration materials sent by council. The awareness campaign was supported by a two-week online dog training challenge. Survey data demonstrated that 73% of participants had either trained their dogs themselves, had basic training, only attended puppy pre-school or had no training, hence showing the need for further training initiatives such as Leave It within the community. Finally, a targeted social media campaign advertising the App was used. More than 100,000 people were reached and campaign tracking demonstrated that 10.2 App downloads were occurring daily. Leave It requires the support of the dog training and dog owning community. The marketing team are not dog training or wildlife conservation experts, and the establishment and maintenance of stakeholder relationships are critical to program success. Thousands of stakeholders, including community, are involved in this multi-year project led by a team of marketing researchers across the Southeast Queensland corner.

C) Tracking outcomes: Understanding what counts.

Keeling and Marshall (2022) argue that what we are missing is '*wider, especially non-academic, impact ... brought about, particularly over the medium and long term, and for whom that impact was valuable*' (p.2513). The importance of tracking to bring about complex outcomes is illustrated through the palliative care context and a current failure in this system to capture the unique and various contributions of different stakeholders such as hospitals, residential care homes, charities, and social enterprises (the actors). This failure severely impacts the ability to make attributions needed to estimate the social return on investment for each actor involved in palliative care. Furthermore, this system does not generate performance indicators in end-of-life care to understand which forms of palliative care are the most impactful.

As an individual enters the final phase of their life, getting '*the care and support they need, when they need it*' (Hospice UK, 2023) is, according to the World Health Organisation

(WHO), only available to 14% of patients globally who need this specialist form of holistic treatment, known as palliative care (WHO, 2023). To achieve UN SDG#3, working towards universal health coverage through improving health and wellbeing, the WHO states that all countries will need to strengthen their palliative care services to address the needs of the 40 million people globally who are estimated to need palliative care each year (ibid). For this situation to change those working in this sector need to understand which forms of palliative care are the most impactful. The 'Die Well' work of the UK's Suffolk and North East Essex Integrated Care System demonstrates an approach to address the challenge of tracking a range of activities to achieve the outcome of an individual experiencing 'a good death' (Borgstrom, 2016), and the impact of this on those around them.

The intended impacts of palliative care are improved quality of life for a dying person through a form of practice which focuses treatment on managing symptoms, offering emotional, spiritual, and psychological support, and practical care (Marie Curie, 2023). The social value of palliative care is a lasting impact for those who are important to the individual who is at the end of their life making this form of care so significant and valuable in improving community health and wellbeing (Radbrunch *et al.*, 2020; NICE, 2023). Significant and sustainable progression in planning for the provision of more palliative care in England, which is considered a global leader in this form of health care, is expected to come through the intervention of recent policy. The Health and Care Act 2022 implies a legal duty which in practice can be seen by stakeholders such as an Integrated Care Board as guidance to commission palliative care services and to '*meet the reasonable requirements of the people for whom it has responsibility*' (Legislation.gov.uk, 2023). A further challenge to secure outcomes can be seen in a recent critical literature review on palliative care policy where Whitelaw *et al.* (2022) concluded that whilst policy was '*a necessary condition, in itself, it will probably not be sufficient to bring about significant and sustainable change*' (2022, p.895). Applying the

Social Impact Pathway requires that the detailed activities and outputs that determine outcomes achieved for patients, carers, and families need to be tracked but with this form of care delivered locally by a health ecosystem (Sudbury-Riley and Hunter Jones, 2021) comprising many stakeholders; tracking and recording can be somewhat inconsistent. A further complication is deaths in England are currently recorded by place of occurrence (Nuffield Trust, 2023) and benchmarking from measuring the quality and outcomes of care experienced by the dying person and those important to them is taken during the last admission leading to death. So tracking is complicated by issues in the sector relating to consistent terminology and methodology (Jordan *et al.*, 2020) and a system which currently lacks a consistent way to record the constituent parts of end-of-life care in England.

Bringing together the full spectrum of partners (or the entire ecosystem) responsible for planning and delivering health and care across North East Essex, Ipswich, East Suffolk and West Suffolk, the Suffolk and North East Essex Integrated Care System (ICS) aims *‘to ensure shared leadership and joint action to improve the health and wellbeing of the one million people who live locally’* (SNEEICS.org.uk, 2024a). Combining the National Health Service, local authorities, social care providers, voluntary and community organisations, social enterprises; the key stakeholders in a population approach to the collective ambition to enable people in North East Essex and Suffolk to *‘Die Well – for myself and those close to me as I reach the end of my life’* (SNEEICS.org.uk, 2024b). Described as an outcome-based approach using indicators which are tracked and aligned to an outcome.

For the two hospices within this Integrated Care System tracking appropriate activities has meant developing and hosting an Electronic Palliative Care Coordination System EPaCCS. EPaCCS aims to record and share the care preferences of people identified as likely to be in the last year of their lives enabling the outcome of *‘the right care, in the right place, by the right*

person, at the right time' (Public Health England, 2014:6) or some of what is considered to constitute a 'good death' (Borgstrom and Walter, 2015). For the marketing teams within the hospices this has meant carefully promoting EPACCS to a wide range of healthcare professionals to ensure participation and information sharing as well as to individuals to encourage the necessary sign. After six years of leading a system to elicit and record people's preferences for care during their last twelve months, mapping ten outcomes, at the time of writing this paper the future of the collaboration and associated funding provided to hospices to lead this work and address the gaps in understanding of 'what counts' in palliative care is now at risk.

D) Measuring the impact: Net-positive change over time

Impact arises from the accumulation of outcomes. As noted by Ebrahim and Rangan (2014), it is not always appropriate for an organisation to measure impact. The impact pathway serves as a reminder that intended outcomes first need to be realised and they need outcomes to stack up. For organisations failing to deliver positive intended outcomes further reflection is needed resulting in changes to practice ensuring outcomes start stacking up. Once outcomes are stacking up attempts to measure impact should be made to understand if the outcomes achieved are indeed delivering a lasting effect. Each description of impact reflects the accumulation of the positive and intended outcomes that arise when individuals interact with an organisation's outputs (e.g. events, websites, call services). Utilisation of outcome evaluation allows teams to see how many people have changed, if change has occurred as intended, and to assess rates of change. Impact pathways will be unique within any one description of impact. Consider the following social example. Civic Assist, a charity based in Toowoomba¹, a regional Australian

¹ For detail on Civic Assist see their website - <https://civicassist.org.au/>

city, engages with people aged 12-24 years 5,000 times each year. Where appropriate, Civic Assist staff and volunteers provide referrals connecting individuals to specialised support such as health, counselling, housing, and more. An impact assessment, which first requires an understanding of the actions people take following the 5,000 interactions, may explain how reductions in violence occurring on Friday and Saturday nights in the city area are achieved through the services provided by Civic Assist (UN SDG#16 promoting peaceful and inclusive societies). To assess the impact of their programs Civic Assist may illustrate the cost savings to the community from changes observed from implementation of Street Crew.

E) Engage to learn: Sharing results to showcase best practice

Public dissemination of the outcomes, impact, and especially the process of social impact projects feeds forward delivering information that investors and decision makers need to decide which activities are worthy of funding. Crucially, it also ensures the stakeholders who engage resources in bringing about change for beneficiaries also benefit from their participation, increasing the chances of the project being extended, repeated, or energy being invested into a new social problem. This is particularly pertinent for commercial organisations investing in corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs. Hildebrand *et al.* (2011) identify employees as one of four key stakeholder groups to play a primary role in shaping how companies manage their societal impact. Waples and Brachle (2020) argue that CSR programs are an important element in attracting the best young talent, a cohort who care deeply about the environment and societal injustices (Narayanan, 2022; Tyson *et al.*, 2011). Put simply, people want to work for companies that take responsibility for their place in the world (De Silva and De Silva Lokuwaduge, 2021).

Programs that are perceived as a bolt-on, where the story of the relationship between non-profit/social marketing activities and the companies are not viewed as authentic and meaningful, risk accusations of greenwashing (Vollero *et al.*, 2016). Bromley and Powell (2012) identify this as an example of decoupling between policy and practice, with two potential forms. The first is where CSR policies are communicated well but not implemented fully. By failing to communicate the net positive these efforts lack credibility. The second is where the CSR programs are not effectively implemented and so lack impact. An additional consideration is when CSR programs are used to offset damaging corporate practices. Corporate practices that degrade the environment, negatively impact biodiversity, or lower people's health and wellbeing cannot continue to go unchecked. Corporations delivering net negative overall through harmful business practices, while communicating a net positive CSR, need to be identified if we are to turn the tide on the wicked problems our world faces.

Social media posts by both customers and activists rapidly identify any discrepancies between corporate words and deeds, which has a moderating effect on claims of internal business practice (e.g., gender pay gaps, diversity recruitment policies) as well as external programs for environmental and social good. This 'calling out' culture reaches all stakeholder groups and has stimulated a significant body of research. Pope and Wæraas (2016) note that calling out is less prevalent in relation to CSR programs than environmental claims on internal business practices. Indeed, the anticipated EU Green Claims Law (Nelson, 2023) will require companies to justify green claims about their products within ten days or face 'effective, proportionate, and dissuasive penalties'. Transparency of reporting key metrics by the companies themselves alleviates employee and shareholder pressure (Weber, 2008) given that what gets measured gets done.

A strong example of a people programme (internal) that also resonates with customers (external) is family-run retailer Timpsons. Twelve percent of Timpson employees either have

a criminal record or are directly recruited from custody, across their 2,000 stores. The company spends £500,000 each year training these ex-offenders. The underpinning motivation is that ex-offenders who find steady jobs within 6 months of leaving prison are nine percentage points less likely to reoffend (Gov.uk, 2023). Action on this issue, given the 14 million people in the UK alone with a criminal record, resonates with UN SDG#8 to promote inclusive and sustainable economic growth, employment, and decent work for all. Re-offending costs the UK £18 billion a year. The impact of this strategy is not just on the individuals offered a second chance but also the company who finds ex-offenders are loyal, hardworking and resilient as well as being cheaper to hire through this recruitment channel. Another outcome for the company has been being invited to work with the UK Government on rolling out Employment Advisory Boards across 90 prisons to ensure prisoners have access to job opportunities when they get out (Gov.uk, 2023). However, there is also considerable evidence that any external activity, such as a CSR program, needs to make sense to a second key stakeholder group - their customers; it needs to fit (Gistri *et al.*, 2019; Bigné, 2012). For customers, the link between social responsibility and perceptions of brand image/corporate image is well established in literature and practice. Iglesias *et al.* (2020) showed that CSR *'influences customer loyalty both directly and indirectly through co-creation and customer trust'* (p.151). Islam *et al.* (2021) find that CSR activities are *'significantly and positively associated with corporate reputation, customer satisfaction, and customer trust'* (p.123). Xie *et al.* (2019) goes beyond the rational models to explain the role of moral emotions, such as awe and gratitude, and positive attitude in the relationship between CSR programs and customer brand advocacy. Özturan and Grinstein (2022) argue that marketing departments play a key role in ensuring CSR programs resonate with customers and can add value to the role of the department within the broader organisation.

The path forward

The urgent need to turn the tide on fundamental world challenges is recognised and there is no doubt that some effort is underway. For example, growth in third party monitoring and reporting, such as FTSE4Good, Dow Jones Sustainability Index, Thomson Reuters ESG ratings, the Calvert Social Index and lastly CSR Hub, an annual UK index that examines the extent to which responsible business practices are embedded within corporate strategy and operations, are examples of approaches aimed at improving transparency (Parguel *et al.*, 2011). Stakeholder Performance Appraisal processes are another example of approaches that aim to extend performance considerations beyond mere profit considerations to ensure that people and planet are placed at the forefront of performance assessments (Murphy *et al.*, 2005). Popular ratios such as the Social Return on Investment (Zappalà and Lyons, 2009) communicate cost savings to communities. For stakeholders such as customers, employees, and shareholders who value corporate social responsibility and performance, some metrics already exist on which to form judgements about the efficacy and authenticity of activity. The challenge remains whether what is measured is social impact and/or whether impacts are net positive. Barnett *et al.* (2020) reviewed 6,254 articles addressing CSR performance published in the last 50 years. They found the articles overwhelmingly focused on financial performance rather than social impact. The authors cite Margolis and Walsh (2003):

‘Although the financial effects of corporate social performance have been extensively studied, little is known about any other consequences of corporate social initiatives.’
(p.289)

However, they did identify a few studies that addressed outcomes such as green innovations (Lampikoski *et al.*, 2014) and social innovations (Mithani, 2017).

Missing from their findings was evidence of social impact rather than specific outcomes, a focus on specific stakeholder groups rather than wider society. Barnett *et al.* (2020)

identify two areas for development. The first is a four-point basis for effective evaluation of social impact: containing a base-line comparison, a control group, randomized assignment of participant to the CSR program and/or the organisations overall practices and, finally, a counterfactual assessment (that is understanding what would have happened to the participants if the CSR program or overall organisations activities had not taken place). Secondly, the authors identify a key weakness in current design of social impact assessments, namely a reliance on large, secondary datasets. They propose an alternative approach that develops appropriate measures based on the specific impacts that it seeks to evaluate, labelled small data, and consider the unit of analysis needs to be the beneficiaries, not the company, including at a community level. This transition enables a true determination of net-positive to be made and asks corporations to place, people, and planet at the forefront of all decision making while identifying a profitable approach.

This paper extends beyond Keeling and Marshall's (2022) social impact pillars, contributing a concrete approach that aims to orient marketing research and practice towards transparent reporting of social impact. Moving forward, research that takes an outside-in approach, emphasising the perspective of beneficiaries (Benjamin *et al.*, 2023) is recommended to lift the fog. When we consider the world's greatest challenges, time is running out. Rates of land-clearing, biodiversity loss, mental and chronic health, and violence continue to grow unabated. This is concerning given there are finite limits and most, if not all, are preventable. Outside-in approaches that describe changes for beneficiaries through outputs arising from the activities that organisations invest human time and money into can illuminate how net positive change is delivered. This offers an important opportunity for marketing academics to contribute to, and be part of, the solution, rather than simply reporting the results.

Impact can be negative as well as positive. Greenwashing practices provide a veneer for organisations to hide behind suggesting that positive actions are being taken when close

inspection would clearly suggest otherwise. One example is single use plastic recycling, which would have many citizens believing packaging placed into recycling streams is being recovered when in fact this is not the case. Reports indicate that 16% of single use plastics were recycled in Australia in 2021, far short of 70% targets set at the time (Packaging Insights, 2023). These statistics suggest all product manufacturers supplying goods using single use plastic should focus activities on the reduction, or removal of, single use plastic from supply distribution chains to be judged net positive. A further example lies in other environmental claims involving tree planting. Close examination of some programs indicates that many tree plantings are failing to deliver on environmental targets. For example, mono-culture tree plantings (e.g., pine forests) which financiers and organisations are using to report on carbon targets are threatening biodiversity (Aguirre-Gutiérrez *et al.*, 2023). Both marketing researchers and practitioners need to consider negative consequences arising from the goods, services and ideas they are responsible for. Moving forward, more responsibility needs to be placed on marketing professionals. Codes of conduct and professional standards need to be updated, adding the competencies needed to improve the accountability of the marketing profession if the world's most complex problems are to be solved and trust in our profession is to be regained.

Social impact has largely not been well mapped or understood. More work is urgently needed to bring the knowledge, expertise, and evidence of how to map and measure social impact. The addition of outcome evaluation skills is needed in the marketing profession along with an understanding of appropriate trial methodologies that can be used to deliver the definitive evidence needed for impact attributions. Marketers need to avoid assumptions and ensure work is grounded in evidence to be able to transparently report net positive changes arising from their work. Approaches that extend return on investment beyond financial considerations are needed to clearly convey the net positive benefits delivered by organisations.

A commitment from the marketing profession to deliver net positive will greatly help to regain marketing's reputation as a force capable of delivering good.

Moving forward, marketing scholars need to shift research focus to an outside-in approach, emphasising the perspective of beneficiaries (Benjamin, 2021). Inside out approaches fail to deliver the market-oriented approach that underpins marketing practice. Philosophically, the marketing function aims to be beneficiary, consumer or customer focussed. Involving beneficiaries throughout the entire process, shifts focus from how nonprofits are helping beneficiaries, or how commercial organisations are delivering value to stakeholders, to a balanced consideration of the consequences both positive and negative, short and long-term accumulating from organisational activities. This outside in perspective requires a transdisciplinary approach given marketers are not health, social justice or environmental experts.

To achieve net-positive impact in marketing, it is essential to grasp the challenges at different levels throughout various stages of the mapping process (see Figure 1). We carefully reflect each key within the Social Impact Pathway framework, outlining directions for future research.

Table 1: Future research opportunities

Themes	Current state of research	Research questions
A. Problem identification (Q1)	Phenomenon-driven (derived from practice/policy) and aim at closing the gap between social marketing theory and practice policy. Typically, follow UN SDGs and adopt the narrow inside-out approach. Authors used a variety of research methods, data collection instruments, with case studies and interviews, sometimes combined with secondary data. Lack of concrete quantification.	How to build a shared vision on the intervention scope especially from an outside in approach? What are the specific situations facing beneficiaries to focus on? How do collective actors think and feel about the issue and barriers? What have they tried in the past? What worked? What failed? How to design and support intervention initiatives that bring researchers and stakeholders together? What types of ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ data would be useful to collect to enable change? What are the new variables and relationships to build theoretical insights?
B. Stakeholder collaboration (Q2, Q3, Q4, Q5)	A shift from academic driven to multiple-actor approach. The need for a highly participatory approach.	How to strengthen multi-stakeholder capacity; and liaise with public policy? How to work with community, businesses and NGOs? Decide on what changes that matter. Collaboratively choose changes that they want to bring about (motivation) Which actors would do what differently? (e.g., motivation, capacity, contexts, obstacles, opportunities) How can new strategies overcome obstacles? What are the desirable and appropriate intervention strategies?
C. Tracking outputs and outcomes (Q6)	The tension between short vs long term approach to interventions. Ethics of impact.	How to consolidate outcomes and establish causal links about the explicit assumption? How to translate impact pathway into intervention action plan? What are the moral dimensions of decision making and implementation processes to promote responsible and positive contribution to society?
D. Measuring impact (Q7)	The impact is a result of the cumulative actions and outputs, encompassing the engagements between organisations and individuals, along with the subsequent changes that transpire after these interactions.	How to support the cumulative action and outputs in order to scale up? And how can efforts be sustained over time? How to enable wider impact process and interactions; and achieve the intended and unintended global dialogue and partnership?
E. Engaging to learn (Q8)	Building on engagement and reflective approach; focus on long-term impact processes.	What are the most effective communication tools, such as storytelling? How can an interactive and reflexive process be sustained to maintain consistency in research interventions? What are potential new research questions that could enhance the impact process? In what ways can the continuous development of new insights, innovation, and change processes be facilitated? When navigating complexity, how should the researcher's role be reconsidered and questioned from an ethical perspective?

Conclusion

This paper extends the five pillars of impact recommended by Keeling and Marshall (2022) by providing a comprehensive framework that can be applied to map organisational activities to improve transparency and direct organisational efforts to the delivery of net positive. We anticipate that the Social Impact Pathway framework will be helpful in guiding marketing researchers and practitioners with an interest in net positive social impact. Moreover, we expect this framework to emphasise the necessary capabilities for addressing measurement challenges. These challenges involve both the integration of an outside-in approach, incorporating beneficiaries and experts from other disciplines into the entire project lifecycle from design to end-of-product life. Collective efforts are also needed to address the world's most complex problems.

To achieve this, it is essential to untangle the role of each organisation and carefully consider how impact arises from cumulative outcomes flowing from any organisation's activities. The marketing profession needs to take a proactive stance, necessitating a revision of Training approaches and codes of conduct. These revisions should encompass the competencies needed to deliver net-positive impact. These must also emphasise cross-sector collaborations to bridge knowledge gaps between sectors. Comprehensive approaches needed to address the challenges faced by our most vulnerable populations and the environment should be integrated into marketing's core functions. Furthermore, marketing academics need to actively engage in social change projects instead of solely focusing on publishing results. Sharing insights on the process, challenges and the net-positive change mechanism enables other projects to learn and build upon those experiences. This shift also empowers researchers to make a concrete positive difference in the world.

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