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A personal perspective on why social impact matters

Social Purpose Organisations (SPOs) and Social Marketing are the forefront of a societal shift in our collective desire to live better, to cause less damage to our planet and to leave fewer people behind in our quest for progress. Against the challenging backdrop of the rise in cost of living, war and the pandemic globally, it is through innovative thinking and disruptive practices that SPOs and Social Marketing can help to improve people's health and wellbeing, protect our planet through improving air quality, water quality and biodiversity and deliver social justice. Consumers want organisations to play a bigger role in tackling these complex issues as distrust in government's ability to make a difference continue to rise. The growing momentum behind an ambition to live in a sustainable way, underpinned by the UN Sustainable Development Goals, uniquely offers SPOs and Social Marketing an opportunity to drive innovation and creativity. This was the rationale driving this Special Issue on "Delivering Impact for Social Good". With the opportunity to write an editorial piece to introduce the Special Issue our team wanted to do something different. So, we are not going to summarise the excellent papers within this issue; their abstracts are clear and will signpost you to the research most relevant to your work and interests. What we will do is reflect personally, as individuals, on what motivates us to contribute to social impact knowledge and practice – and where we see the field going. In a small way, we want to raise our voices to encourage others.

Dr. Sarah-Louise Mitchell, research area Co-Lead for marketing, Oxford Brookes Business School

I wanted to develop a special issue on social impact for three reasons. With their 2022 paper, "A Call for Impact", *European Journal of Marketing* (EJM) editors Debbie Keeling and Greg Marshall shared a desire for EJM to see more research addressing societal problems, sharing learning of the process of engaging stakeholders and delivering tangible measurable results. Their paper heralded the launch of a new EJM paper format, the impact paper, which departs from a focus on literature review and instead places greater emphasis on stakeholder engagement and deliverables measuring change. The need is great. At the time of writing, there remains considerable confusion and overclaim on impact. In the UK, where I am currently based, we look forward to the next Research Excellence Framework (REF) round with its upweighted emphasis on impact case studies for example. Consequently, Universities including my own have developed comprehensive pipelines to ensure impact is effectively mapped, measured and recorded. There have also been recent papers where senior journal editors have come together to reinforce the desire to measure the broader impact of research studies. There is valuable discussion of ensuring academic research is disseminated in a way that other audiences can hope to understand – and then measuring whether these audiences did anything as a result. Do not get me wrong, much of this is important work – stimulating new thinking that can reach into the future.

But it is not the same thing as projects that set out to achieve societal change. These start with a societal problem and then bring a team of knowledgeable stakeholders together, including academics, to try and fix it, or at the very least better understand it so it can be fixed in the future. The societal outputs and outcomes emerge from the social change project itself, not just the writing up for research dissemination. This distinction matters and is something we need to be very clear about. It is through bringing together people who think differently, people with different skills and experiences, people with different motivations and commitment that the messy business of achieving real change is made possible. That is something I find incredibly motivating and rewarding.

Secondly, this social issue connects directly to my background in marketing practice. After 20 years working in senior marketing roles across retail, consumer goods and latterly non-profit organisations, it became obvious how many unanswered questions there were in the non-profit sector specifically and society generally. I was incredibly fortunate to be fully funded for my PhD so I could start on this journey – exploring the role brands play in the choice of charity by volunteers. All my subsequent research works directly with charities to try and support them to help others. The SI team all have this in common, direct first-hand experience of working in and with practice. That informs our work every day.

Finally, I hoped this SI would provide a springboard for future work from a broader researcher community. Already, this SI team has come together to deliver an in-person workshop for local charities, for free, putting into practice Sharyn's lifetime of social impact experience. I look forward to seeing quality impact papers in EJM because of this work but also efforts to build capacity through other forums such as the Academy of Marketing and World Social Marketing conferences. I call on funding bodies to further support this work. It is not pure academic research in the traditional sense. It is messy, it involves multiple partners, the final output is rarely known at the start – but the problems in society are all around us. That is where we can all work to make a change that matters, where we can have an impact.

Professor Sharyn Rundle-Thiele, practising social marketer and social scientist, Griffith University, Australia

I was trained in Business. Over a decade I completed three degrees. My business and specialised training taught me a lot about how to win market share. Winning market share is quite simple. All you need to do is sell more, to more people, on more occasions. To understand how to grow market share I was trained to read people's behaviour and to talk to people to learn why they do what they do. A further learning that I took to heart was to think outside of the box and try new ways of doing things. These were all important keys to achieving growth. In addition to achieving growth through innovation and/or winning market share, business training encouraged identification of efficiency gains. This training served me well. A career highlight as a commercial operator was taking a new variant of fresh orange juice national. The unique selling proposition for this brand was it stayed fresher for longer extending shelf life by 30%, which inevitably would mean less food waste.

The brand was later acquired by another juice company, which 24 months later was acquired by Coca-Cola. The technology and know-how behind that juice would be embedded in all fresh orange juice today.

After completing all my training, I decided that I wanted to be a “social marketer.” As I embarked on this challenge, I encountered terms such as “outcomes” and “impact.” These were entirely foreign to me. I had not been trained to understand whether my business practices were good or bad for people’s health or detrimental to the wellbeing of yet others. Nor had I been trained to understand whether my business actions were harmful to the environment. I had to learn this, and fast. Since 2010 I’ve had the good fortune to work across a range of social, health and environmental challenges and I’ve learned a lot. Today I advocate that all business training should include outcome and impact evaluation. Anything less is “window dressing.” Businesses should employ public health and environmental scientist experts in any corporate social responsibility, workplace health and safety or sustainability capacity and all governance boards should include social, health and environmental experts. It’s time we got real and asked more of marketing and business practice.

If you have ever attended a public health congress, you’d understand that the term “marketing” is a dirty word. Our very success is viewed by many from different training backgrounds as harmful and there is good reason for this. Business and marketing can do better. This is the heart that I brought when I was invited to work with a very talented team of UK researchers who together are behind this European Journal of Marketing special issue on social impact. Our task was to identify papers that delivered impact or were well down the path to achieving social impact. It’s been quite a journey. We identified a great range of research partnerships that demonstrate how marketing academics can work in partnership to deliver social, health and environmental changes for the better. Learning that one program received funding because their great work is now published in this special issue and supporting my fellow guest editors to learn more about social impact have been highlights for me.

The path to impact is not easy. Disentangling the ideas described within impact pathways for the uninitiated is even harder. It’s a journey I’ve been on with Associate Professor Julia Carins, Social Marketing @ Griffith for more than a decade and one that I will maintain until I retire. If you’ve read this far, I ask that you grant me one wish. Consider impact, and how you can move your research agenda or marketing effort to support delivery of positive outcomes and impact. Our planet, the billions of people inhabiting this Earth and the many creatures whose very existence is under threat urgently need you. Marketing and research can catalyse change. Know that I am here to help. I’m happy to teach more people what impact is (and is not) and to help people to align their efforts along the impact pathway. Don’t ever hesitate to reach out.

Dr. Zoe Lee, reader in marketing, Cardiff Business School

There are many myths regarding what constitutes social impact. As academics, we often encounter discussions about impact, particularly in the context of the REF. For those conducting research in social marketing, the focus tends to be on how research can influence and change people's attitudes, perceptions and behaviours. This focus is essential, yet it is only one dimension of social impact. In my experience working with non-profit organisations, I have observed that the perspective on impact can differ significantly. Nonprofit practitioners often equate impact with storytelling. This narrative approach involves creating compelling stories that illustrate how funding has improved the lives of vulnerable populations such as the elderly, children and refugees, or contributed to the preservation of biodiversity and specific animal species. These stories are crucial for demonstrating the human and environmental benefits of their work. Additionally, effective storytelling can cut through the noise and resonate with various audiences ensuring that the message is both compelling and memorable.

However, while these narratives are impactful, deciding which story to focus on can be challenging when everything feels urgent. This is where balancing internal capability with external's perception is important. Effective branding practices, often overlooked, can bridge the gap between public perception and a charity's actual work. Like other social enterprises, charities must now consider the financial return on social impact (ROI) in their storytelling. For instance, consider a charity dedicated to delaying the onset of dementia. Quantifying the community's cost benefits is vital. This requires a proactive approach: tracking specific investments and funds allocated to various activities and measuring the resulting outcomes and behavioural changes. Adopting a financial perspective on social impact compels a different way of thinking. This approach requires a shift in mindset from merely measuring changes in awareness, attitudes and behaviours to also considering the cost savings for the community. This shift is not only about proving the worth of social initiatives but also about demonstrating their sustainability and economic efficiency. Therefore, we must rethink and refocus social impact by blending qualitative narratives with quantitative financial European Journal of Marketing 1679 assessments. This comprehensive approach not only enhances our understanding of social initiatives but also strengthens their justification and sustainability in a world with limited resources and a high demand for accountability.

Dr. Fran Hyde, associate professor in marketing, University of Suffolk

As a T(teaching) track academic and charity trustee I thought I knew all about "impact" because in academia we talk a lot about "Impact case studies" for REF and as trustees we work hard to ensure that the organisations we support are having an impact in their communities. Impact is also extremely important for my university which, as one of the newest universities in the UK, has been founded with a mission of making an impact locally and having a positive impact on the local economy. As the value and contribution of universities in the UK is under increased scrutiny, I suspect that this is a path many more

higher education institutions will be taking over the next few years. So, in my own small way working with local charities, bringing real world problems into my classes and developing authentic assessments I thought I was doing well. But that was before I met Sharyn, and her mission to encourage organisations to “get real about their social impact” and hear her urge academics to think long and hard about whether what they are doing is really “moving the dial”. I paused and realised I was doing and seeing a lot of activities and outputs, few outcomes and very little impact.

Working with Sharyn, Sarah and Zoe on this special issue; writing our own paper, reviewing the submissions, finding reviewers who understood how to provide feedback on impact papers and working with the authors on their submissions has been an illuminating process. So, for me this project has been an opportunity to focus down on the practice of getting to impact and thinking hard about how outcomes and impact within the difficult setting of End-of-Life Care which has been a very difficult and at times quite frustrating task! The good news is that as I have understood more about the pathways to social impact and changed my approach and way of working, I am getting excited. I can see that my involvement in this special issue has begun to enable me to construct a far more compelling argument, which in my roles as a trustee and an academic will ultimately help secure funding for projects and charities. Watching other T track academics and early careers researchers develop their understanding of impact, and then their papers, is dare I claim, for me an excellent outcome of this special issue.

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