Consumers' Future Considerations: An Assessment of Risk and Involvement in Social Issues

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Abstract

The growing social issues facing many societies, raises serious questions about how best to address them. One such approach that has been heavily relied on over many years has been social marketing. However, questions still remain about how best to understand individual and their compliance or non-compliance with social marketing messages and campaigns. This study focuses on an examination of three individual characteristics (involvement, perceived risk and consideration of future consequences) and their relationships and differences across those who comply with the pro-social behaviour being marketed. The results indicate that higher involvement and lower perceived risk were significant predictors of pro-social behaviour.

Keywords: Social Marketing, Involvement, Perceived Risk, Future Consequences

Introduction

Many societies today are faced with a diversity of social issues that governments, non-profit organizations and concerned citizens are attempting to address. Current strategies used to solve many of these social issues utilize education (informing and/or persuading), law (compliance) and social marketing (offering incentives and/or reinforcements (Rothschild, 1999). However, of the three strategies, social marketing is unique because it attempts to address a social problem by producing a desired response from the target individual (Kotler, 1972) by inviting voluntary exchange (Rothschild, 1999). Nevertheless, social marketing operates with the knowledge that giving up the behaviour may be seen as an opportunity cost for the individual. This being the case, social marketing attempts to find ways to increase the rate of exchange between what the individual would receive and what they would give up in freely adopting the behaviour (Kotler, 1972).

Literature Review

Apart from its commercial focus, marketing is argued to contribute to society by addressing socially important behaviours and the ensuing problems associated with those behaviours. This notion rests on the premise of exchange, and may depend on an individual's perception of the benefits offered by the social marketer versus the costs of giving up the behaviour. Andreasen (1993) maintains that unless an individual can be convinced that they will derive personal benefits from the behaviour (e.g. donating blood, conserving water) they will not contemplate action. Thus, only those individuals who perceive personal benefits may voluntarily engage in a social marketing exchange. Conversely, individuals may avoid a

social marketing exchange if they perceive a high personal cost associated with these behaviours. In addition, given that social marketing campaigns express benefits and costs in terms of society (e.g. water and environment), as well as the individual (e.g. drinking to excess and health), there may be some people who unwillingly engage in a social marketing exchange (e.g. conserve water) because they perceive the benefits to society to be greater than the personal costs (e.g. time, inconvenience) to themselves. This raises an important point for social marketing to address, because the trade off between benefits and costs can be viewed on two levels – those pertaining to society and those pertaining to the individual. McKenzie-Mohr et al., (1995) suggests that the development of effective social marketing campaigns is reliant upon the identification of variables that differentiate between individuals who practise the behaviours and those who do not. Accordingly, it may be that a range of factors are related to individuals participating in pro-social behaviours, such as the individual's involvement in the social issue, the risk they perceive in the social issue related behaviour, and the extent to which they consider the future when undertaking their current behaviour. Importantly, it would seem that these factors are present for those individuals who practise responsible behaviour (engaging in a social marketing exchange), and those that do not practise responsible behaviour (avoiding a social marketing exchange). This being the case, it would seem there is a need to consider the role played by such variables, and their function in terms of participating in social marketing exchanges.

Drawing together many of the diverse approaches to involvement, it is suggested here that it may not matter what the object is (e.g. products or social issues), as long as it is deemed personally relevant, important and interesting to the individual – they are involved. In the context of this study, involvement is defined as the extent to which the issue is of personal importance (Petty and Cacioppo, 1979), thus, if the issue is a focal point in the individual's life, they are involved (O'Cass, 2000). From a social marketer's perspective of persuading people to engage in positive social behaviours, involvement would be viewed in a pro context of an individual's positive involvement in the related social issue. For example, an individual who is involved in the social issue of organ donation may be more likely to have agreed to be an organ donor, than one who is not involved. If this is so, it may logically follow that involved individuals perceive less risk in the related behaviour, than those less involved.

Bauer (1960) introduced the concept of risk to the marketing literature when he proposed the notion of "perceived risk". He argued that any action taken by a consumer involves risk which produces consequences that cannot be anticipated with absolute certainty, and some of which are likely to be unpleasant. Extending this concept Roselius (1971) identified time as an important component of risk and Jacoby and Kaplan (1972) identified five types of risk comprising financial, performance, physical, psychological and social. Historically perceived risk in the marketing literature has been concerned with purchase behaviour, (eg. Bettman, 1973; Dowling and Staelin, 1994; Taylor, 1974) however, recent studies have examined perceived risk in a range of social issues (Morris, Swasy and Mazis, 1994; Nonis *et al.*, 1996; Raghubir and Menon, 1998; Rindfleisch and Crockett, 1999). Andreasen (1995) alludes to the notion that perceived risk is present in the exchange process because the consumer is saying "I am going to give up some things (endure negative outcomes such as lost time, lost money, a decline in peace of mind) in order to get some things I value (enjoy positive outcomes such as a better life for my kid, less worry for me, praise from my neighbours)" (p.154). This notion also seems to be set within the context of future consequences.

The consequences of many social issue related behaviours may not be seen for many years (e.g. drinking to excess – health problems; conserving water – improved environment), thus,

it is logical to expect that the behavioural outcomes based on such decisions may be determined to some extent by a an individual's time orientation. The manner in which people view time is seen to be a valid and reliable individual difference (Strathman et al., 1994; Zimbardo and Boyd, 1999) and research has shown that an individual's time orientation has a significant influence on behaviour (Zimbardo and Boyd, 1999). Based on the premise that there are differences across individuals in how they consider distant outcomes in deciding their current behaviour, Strathman et al., (1994) proposed a measure they called the consideration of future consequences (CFC). Research has demonstrated that individuals high in CFC are more likely to practise health and environmental behaviours (Strathman et al., 1994; Lindsay and Strathman, 1997) suggesting such individuals are concerned with longterm consequences – both negative and positive. Further, given that many socially important behaviours are seen to involve risk (e.g. drinking to excess, unsafe sex) the manner in which people consider the consequences of their current behaviours, may also influence the degree of risk they perceive is associated with the behaviour. As such, individuals high in CFC, may be more likely to take into consideration the risk associated with these behaviours, than those individuals low in CFC. Based on the preceding discussion, this study proposes the following research questions:

- RQ1: To what extent are individuals with greater issue involvement more likely to perceive lower risk in engaging in a positive social behaviour.
- RQ2: To what extent are individuals who perceive lower risk in engaging in a positive social behaviour have a greater consideration of future consequences.
- RQ3: To what extent are those with higher consideration of future consequences more involved in the social issue.
- RQ4: To what extent is there a difference in Issue Involvement, Risk and Future Considerations between pro-social behaviours and anti-social behaviours.

Research Method

This study forms part of an exploratory phase of a larger study whose main purpose is to answer a broad research question: 'What are the characteristics that drive individuals to engage in or avoid social marketing exchanges'. A feature of this study was to seek respondents' views on a range of social issues (speeding, excessive alcohol consumption, blood donation, safe sex, water conservation, organ donation). A self-completed questionnaire was administered to a convenience sample of respondents representative of population of interest (i.e. males and females over 18 years within the wider community), which resulted in 61 useable surveys being completed. Initially, respondents were requested to select one social issue and answer the questionnaire accordingly. Items to measure involvement in a social issue were adapted from a 5-item measure provided by Mittal (1995). The five items for involvement tapped the degree the issue is important, matters to, mean a lot, significant and is of concern to respondents. Perceived risk was measured via 5 items using existing measures of perceived risk as a point of reference (Chaudhuri, 1998; Jacoby and Kaplan, 1972; Roselius, 1971; Stone and Gronhaug, 1993). The five items for risk tapped the degree that respondents see physical risk, financial risk, emotion risk, social risk, and time risk. Consideration of future consequences was measured via 5 items adapted from the Strathman et al., (1994) measure. The five items for consideration of future consequences tapped the degree that respondents satisfy immediate concerns, look for immediate outcomes, and convenience. A seven-point Likert scale format was utilized for the study. The ages of the respondents ranged from 18 to 75 (mean age = 32) with approximately half under 26.

To examine RQ1 to RQ3 Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated for each of the first three research questions and Table 1 illustrates a significant negative correlation between involvement and perceived risk (r=-0.411, p<0.01) for RQ1. However, no such correlations were found for the relationship between CFC with perceived risk (RQ2) and involvement (RQ3). That is, CFC and risk, and CFC involvement were not significantly related.

Table 1 – Correlation among variables

Correlations	Mean	S.D.	CFC	PRISK	INVOLV
Future Consequences (CFC)	4.695	1.368	1.000		_
Perceived Risk (PRISK	2.541	1.466	-0.047	1.00	
Involvement (INVOLV)	5.613	1.331	-0.082	-0.411**	1.00

Note: * $p \le .05$; ** $p \le .01$; *** $p \le .001$

The relationship between individual characteristics in engaging in social issues and socially desirable behaviour (RQ4) was investigated by testing the significance of the mean differences between those who engaged in the pro-social behaviour being encouraged in the social marketing campaign and those who did not practice the pro-social behaviour. The results in Table 2 show that the mean differences between the two groups were high and significant for perceived risk (t_{59} =-4.793, p<0.001) and involvement (t_{59} =-3.537, p=0.001).

Table 2 – Individual Characteristics and Socially Desirable Behaviour

	Socially Desira	able Behaviour (Means)	Mean Difference
	Pro-social	Anti-social	_
CFC	4.716	4.600	0.1160
PRISK***	2.180	4.182	-2.0018
INVOLV***	5.872	4.436	1.4356

Note: *p\le 0.05; **p\le 0.01; ***p\le 0.001

However, no significant evidence was found for the differences in the mean CFC between associated and non-associated groups (t_{59} =0.253, p>0.05). That is, individuals who behave the same as associated socially desirable behaviour seem to be characterized by more involvement and low risk perceived in social issues. It is also noted that on CFC there is no differentiation between the two groups.

In order to provide a precise determination of variables (individual characteristics) correlated with particular group membership (pro-social v. anti-social) discriminant analysis was conducted (Chandra & Menezes, 2001; Hair *et al.*, 1998; Johnson, 1998; Keng *et al.*, 1995; Khan *et al.*, 1995; Kim & Jogaratnam, 2003; Mitchell, 1994; Soriano *et al.*, 2001;). That is, the pro-social/anti-social dichotomy served as the grouping variable and the discriminating variables entered in the discriminating function equation were the CFC, perceived risk, and involement. Whilst Q4 has been answered by the t-tests it was considered valuable to examine the predictive ability of Issue Involvement, Risk and Future Consideration to predict prosocial versus antis-social behaviour in social marketing campaigns. Table 3 gives the main statistics for the discriminant analysis. The results are reported for the 61 cases with no missing data on any of the variables. The computed function was statistically significant (Wilks's Lambda =0.670; Chi-square=23.008; df=3; p<0.001) in separating the two groups.

However, only two discriminating variables (perceived risk and involvement) were significant predictors of group membership. Table 3 also reveals how well the derived discriminant function classified the cases into their respective groups. Against the proportional chance criteria (C_{pro}) of 0.50 and the fair chance criteria (C_{fair}) of 0.50, the function correctly classified 85 per cent of the cases, which gives a significant improvement over chance. Table 3 indicates that perceived risk is assessed as the strongest predictor of whether or not an individual behaves the same as the associated socially desirable behaviour (DL=0.890, p<0.001). That is, individuals who perceived engaging in social issues at lower risk also behave the same as the associated socially desirable behaviour. Conversely, individuals who perceived social issues more risky tend to behave in their own manners regardless socially desirable behaviour. Giving involvement a lower priority is associated with a big difference between actual behaviours and socially desirable ones (DL=-0.656, p=0.001). Finally, it was noted that CFC was not a discriminator of the social behaviour groups. That is, it appears that CFC is independent of how much associated between actual social and desirable social behaviours of individuals.

Table 3 – Discriminant Analysis of Two Social Desirable Behaviour Groups

Discriminant Variables	Discriminant Loadings	Significance p <
PRISK***	0.890	0.000
INVOLV***	-0.656	0.001
CFC	-0.047	0.801

^{*}p\le 0.05; **p\le 0.01; ***p\le 0.001

Discussion

As indicated at the outset of the paper, current strategies used to solve many social issues utilize education, law and social marketing as means of encouraging pro-social behaviours. However, social marketing is unique because it seeks to address a social problem (issue) by producing a desired response from individuals through a voluntary exchange. Nonetheless, social marketing operates largely with the knowledge that giving up the behaviour may be seen as an opportunity cost for the individual and that this is often a barrier to change. In this context, it is suggested that social marketing is reliant upon the identification of variables that differentiate between individuals who practise the social issue related behaviours, and those who do not. Accordingly, we argued that a range of factors may be related to individuals participating in pro-social behaviours, such as, the individual's involvement in the social issue, the risk they perceive in the social issue related behaviour, and the extent to which they consider the future when undertaking their current behaviour. The result indicate that those individuals who deem the social issue as being important or personally relevant are more likely to participate in the pro-social behaviour, and thus, engage in a social marketing exchange. In a similar manner, there is the notion that perceived risk may be present in the exchange process because the consumer is saying "not only what are the costs" but also "what are the uncertainties and harm that can happen to me". We also thought that this notion seemed to be set within the context of future consequences. However, this was not the case. The consequences of many social issue related behaviours may not be seen for many years (e.g. drinking to excess – health problems; conserving water – improved environment), thus, it is logical to expect that the behavioural outcomes based on such decisions may be determined to some extent by a an individual's time orientation.

The limitations of this study include the use of a convenience sample and the small number of respondents, however, it should be noted that this is the exploratory research phase of a larger study. Overall, given the nature of the study and the findings we see some incremental knowledge being offered on role of individual characteristics in relation to social issues and the related behaviours. This being the case, there appears to be much value in pursuing this avenue in future research.

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