

# **Pro-Social Behaviour: An Exploratory Study Of Individuals Who Undertake Positive Social Behaviours**

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## **Abstract**

While much of the research within the social marketing domain focuses on negative or aberrant social issue behaviours, this study seeks to understand those individuals who voluntarily engage in pro-social behaviours - which in the context of this study is viewed as social issue exchange. Accordingly, this study examines the individual characteristics of involvement, perceived risk, age and gender and their relationships for individuals who voluntarily engage in pro-social behaviours. Data was gathered from a convenience sample of respondents across six social issues. The results indicate that higher social issue involvement is related to a lower perception of risk with engaging in a pro-social behaviour. Moreover, the results indicate that this relationship is most significant for older females.

## **Introduction**

Since its inception, the field of social marketing has offered an approach to addressing a wide range of social issues and associated behaviours and attempts to bring about social change. However, given the aim of social marketing is to change behaviours, much of social marketing literature tends to focus on behaviours that are negative (Andreasen, 1995) rather than positive. In view of this, this paper will focus on positive behaviours in an attempt to understand better individuals who actually engage in pro-social behaviours such as not speeding, not drinking alcohol to excess, donating blood, nominating oneself as an organ donor, practising safe sex and recycling. Furthermore, this paper explores and discusses the notion of exchange, in terms of those individuals who willingly engage in social issue exchanges, that is, practice pro-social behaviours.

## **Literature Review**

The concept of exchange has long been argued to be the core concept in marketing (Bagozzi, 1975; Houston and Gassenheimer, 1987; Hunt, 1983; Kotler, 1972), and although there has been debate whether the exchange concept can be extended to include social marketing (Foxall, 1989; Nine, 1994), it has been generally accepted that the exchange concept also resides in social marketing (Andreasen, 1995; Rothschild, 1999). However, notwithstanding the premise that a social marketing exchange occurs when the individual takes an action (Andreasen, 1995), the view taken here is that ultimately, any behavioural outcome is within the individual’s domain and according to Gould (1994) exchange in this context is intrapersonal or self-exchange as it is viewed from the consumer’s point of view. This idea links to Smith’s (1997) premise of exchange theory being central to the notion of individuals giving up one behaviour (that is negative) in exchange for another (that is positive). Furthermore, given the view that the ‘uniqueness’ of social marketing (in contrast to other social behaviour change approaches) is that it is customer driven (Andreasen, 2002),

underpins the necessity of understanding the target individual, and the factors that influence them in making behavioural choices.

This notion again places the focus on the individual, and the underlying reasons for them engaging in positive social issue behaviours. Accordingly, there may be that a range of factors that influence pro-social behaviours such as the individual's age and/or gender, their involvement in the social issue or the perceived risks associated with the exchange process. Although it is assumed that such factors are present for individuals who practice positive as well as negative social behaviours, in the context of this paper the focus is only on those individuals who practise pro-social behaviours, and thus, engage in social issue exchange.

However, given that people have views or opinions about social issues, discussion is warranted on involvement, which in the context of this study, is the degree of relevance or importance that social issues hold in people's lives. Thus, if a social issue matters to, or, is of concern to an individual, or they hold the issue to be important or significant in their lives - they are involved (O'Cass, 2000). Further, those individuals with higher involvement in a social issue are more likely to have a greater commitment to the issue (Sherif, Sherif and Nebergall, 1965) and have stronger opinions than those not involved (Harrell, 1979). Involvement has often been aligned with perceived risk in consumer behaviour and in the context of social issues, risk and involvement are pivotal issues, having potentially significant effects on compliance with social marketing campaigns. While the notion of risk and involvement is not new, in that such issues have been explored in a wide range of contexts including political marketing and voter behaviour (e.g. O'Cass and Pecotich, 2005) and product consumption (e.g. Chadhuri, 2000), its relevance to understanding pro-social behaviour has yet to be explored extensively.

Since Bauer (1960) introduced the concept of perceived risk to marketing it has been recognized as an important factor that influences consumer behaviour. Research has identified perceived risk as a multidimensional construct comprising various dimensions including - financial, performance, physical, psychological, social (Jacoby and Kaplan, 1972) and time (Roselius, 1971). However, given that risk is characterised in terms of how the individual *perceives it*, logically it would follow that the idea of perceived risk varies for individuals. This is because "at its core, risk is the possibility of loss" and the significance of, and uncertainty associated with those losses is inherently imprecise and subjective (Yates and Stone, 1992).

In all aspects of life, individuals make choices about behaviours. Whether it is choosing to buy a particular brand or product or practice a social issue behaviour, wherever there is a conflict of choice, an individual has to deal with uncertainty and the possibility of negative consequences - which may be characterised as risk. Within the context of social marketing, social marketers have to account for such risk, when influencing individuals to comply with social marketing campaigns. This is because the degree of risk perceived by the target consumer will have an influence on whether they undertake or reject the desired behaviour. Thus, in terms of the target individual, the notion or perception of risk may influence their compliance (or not) with the social marketing campaign. In view of this, it would seem that the perception of risk may play a pivotal role in individuals engaging in a social issue exchange. However, this notion is generally expressed in terms of those not using or in deciding to use for example, a product. The argument raised here is that those individuals who actually do use or engage in a social issue from a pro-social view will see little if any risk.

As such, social issue involved individuals are more likely to hold positive attitudes towards the issue and a greater intention to practise the positive social issue related behaviour (Griffin and O’Cass, 2004). If this is so, it may logically follow that those individuals who engage in social issue exchange are more likely to have a greater involvement in the related issue. Furthermore, those individuals with greater involvement in the social issue may perceive less risk in engaging in a social issue exchange. Thus,

H1: There will be a relationship between an individual’s involvement in a social issue and the perceived risk associated with engaging in a social issue exchange.

In addition to involvement and risk, demographic factors have been shown to be an important dimension in relation to social issue behaviours (Kotler and Roberto, 1989) and social marketing campaigns (Swenson and Wells, 1995). Considering these points, an individual’s gender and/or age may impact on their becoming involved in a social issue and the risk they perceive in engaging in a social issue exchange. For example, previous research within another (but similar) domain of intangible ‘issues’, indicated that gender had an influence on arts attendance (Gainer, 1993) and politics (O’Cass, 2002). Thus,

H2: There will be a relationship between an individual’s gender and their involvement in a social issue.

And

H3: There will be a relationship between an individual’s age and their involvement in a social issue.

It is also argued that an individual’s age is a determining factor in perceptions of risk associated with many social issue related behaviours. For example, it has been found that adolescents (more so than adults) tend to underestimate or disregard the risks associated with behaviours such as drug use, drinking alcohol and reckless driving (Cohn et al., (1995). If this is so, being younger may equate more with practicing aberrant social behaviours, and growing older may equate more with practicing pro-social behaviour. Thus, suggesting that older individuals may perceive less risk in engaging in a social issue exchange.

A number of researchers have found gender differences for perceived risk (Flynn, Slovic and Mertz, 1994; Riechard and Peterson, 1998), and indeed, it has been argued that males are more likely to take risks than females (Byrnes, Miller and Schafer, 1999; Weber, Blais and Betz, 2002). In fact, Byrnes et al., (1999) found that males took more risks even when it was obviously a “bad idea to take risks” (p.378). In the context of perceived risk and environmental issues, Riechard and Peterson (1998) found females reported significantly higher perceived risk scores for a range of environmental hazards than males. Given these finding, it seems that the manner in which evaluate the risk associated with engaging in a positive social issue behaviour, that is social issue exchange, may be related to some extent by their gender. Thus,

H4: There will be a relationship between an individual’s gender and the perceived risk associated with engaging in a social issue exchange.

And

H5: There will be a relationship between an individual’s age and the perceived risk associated with engaging in a social issue exchange.

## Research Method

This study is part of the exploratory phase of a larger study on the determinants of social issue exchange. A self-completed questionnaire was administered to a convenience sample, which was representative of the final population of interest (i.e. males and females over 18 years within the wider community). The data collection resulted in 61 useable surveys being gathered. Respondents' views were sought on a range of social issues (speeding, excessive alcohol consumption, blood donation, safe sex, water conservation, organ donation), as such, 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. 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 H1 to H5 correlations were calculated for each of the hypotheses and the results in Table 1 indicate there is significant negative relationship between involvement and perceived risk ( $r=-0.411$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) for H1; and involvement and gender ( $r=-0.392$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) for H2. There is also a significant negative correlation between perceived risk and age ( $r=-0.263$ ,  $p<0.05$ ) for H5. The results for H4 indicate there is a significant positive correlation between perceived risk and gender ( $r=0.329$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). However, there is no significant relationship between involvement and age for H3, which indicates that involvement and age are not significantly related in the context of pro-social behaviour.

**Table 1 – Correlation among variables**

Correlations	Mean	S.D.	PRISK	INVOLV
Perceived Risk (PRISK)	2.54	1.46		
Involvement (INVOLV)	5.61	1.33	-0.41**	
Age	32		-0.26*	0.20
Gender			0.33**	-0.39**

Note: \*  $p \leq .05$ ; \*\*  $p \leq .01$

## Discussion

The purpose of this paper has been to explore the relationship between individuals' involvement, demographic variables and the degree of risk they perceive in engaging in a pro-social behaviour, that is, a social issue exchange. This idea is bounded by the notion that the primary goal of social marketing is to influence a behaviour, thus, resulting in the individual engaging in a social marketing exchange. However, notwithstanding the influence of social marketing, ultimately, any behavioural outcome is within the individual's domain. As such, this paper approached exchange from the perspective of intrapersonal or self-exchange for the purpose of understanding why individuals engage in one social issue related behaviour, rather

than another. Moreover, the focus here has on understanding this idea from the perspective of those individuals who voluntarily engage in the positive or pro-social behaviours.

However, given that society faces a range of social issues that differ in complexity and importance, this paper has sought to understand if the relevance or importance that a social issue has in a person's life will be related to the risk they perceive in engaging in the positive social behaviour related to the issue. As indicated by the results in Table 1 it seems that those individuals who practice pro-social behaviours exhibit a high degree of involvement in a social issue. Moreover, such individuals also perceive little risk in engaging in a social issue exchange – that is, they do not perceive there is little to lose in engaging in the behavioural exchange.

From this it can be suggested that a greater involvement is associated with perceiving less risk in engaging in a social issue exchange. Thus, the more a social issue is meaningful, important or relevant in an individual's life the more likely they may be to exhibit the related pro-social behaviour. Further, it may also follow that the more one is involved in the issue the more one is likely to account for the possibility of negative consequences associated with *not* practicing the pro-social behaviour.

In addition, the results indicate that demographic variables may be a factor in relation to engaging in pro-social behaviours. For example, it seems that even though overall, respondents exhibit a high degree of involvement in a social issue and perceive little risk in engaging in a pro-social behaviour, it seems that this relationship is most significant for respondents who are female and older. This means that even though being younger and male does not preclude one from engaging in a pro-social behaviour, it does suggest that there is a lesser degree of involvement in the social issue as well a greater degree of uncertainty or possibility of negative consequences in doing so.

From a social marketing perspective, these findings may be problematic because it suggests that regardless of the influence of a social marketing campaign, the actual process of engaging in the social issue exchange may be dependent on the degree of perceived risk associated with that process. In addition, the manner in which the individual deals with that risk would seem to be determined to some extent by the importance and relevance of the social issue. However, as the focus of this paper has been on those individuals who voluntarily practise pro-social behaviours the results indicate that younger people may not exhibit the same pro-social tendencies as older people. If this is so, it may be that growing older, (more so than the influence of a social marketing campaign) is what leads individuals to engage in social issue exchanges.

The limitations of this study include the use of a convenience sample and a small number of respondents. However, as previously stated, this study is the exploratory phase of a larger study. Notwithstanding this, we believe the results offers some incremental knowledge because it has examined social issue related behaviours from a pro-social perspective rather than a negative perspective. Moreover, the results of the study offer some insights into these individuals in terms of involvement, perceived risk and demographic variables.

The key focus here has been on pro-social behaviour which is an under-researched area. The literature on social marketing is better advanced by focusing not only on those who undertake and engage in anti-social activity, but also by studying those who actually comply with the pro-social themes marketed by social marketers.

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