

The power of marketing : From addiction promotion to social change

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Abstract

This study examines how marketing activities can promote and mitigate addictive behaviours, focusing on the socio-economic consequences and the role of non-profit organisations specialised in addiction treatment. Despite the growing evidence that promotional strategies for products such as tobacco, alcohol, fast food, gambling, and digital platforms contribute to the escalation of addiction, marketing can also serve as a powerful tool for public health messaging and behaviour change. Drawing on ESG (Environmental, Social and Governance) perspectives, we integrate a social capital perspective to explore how nonprofit organisations can use marketing techniques to trigger positive social impact. Methodologically, the research employs a bibliometric analysis of existing literature on marketing-induced dependencies and social marketing interventions, followed by a case study review of nonprofit dependency management centres. Preliminary insights suggest that while aggressive marketing of addictive products undermines social welfare and imposes significant economic costs—particularly on health and social services—targeted social marketing campaigns can promote healthier consumer behaviour and support sustainable community development. The implications also extend to policy, corporate strategy and stakeholder engagement. By exploring the tension between marketing’s ability to harm and heal, this research will promote a holistic, evidence-based approach to addiction prevention and treatment, and ultimately guide policymakers, practitioners and academics towards more socially responsible and effective marketing practices.

Subject Classification: 90B60.

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Introduction

The proliferation of addictive substances and behaviours presents a critical challenge for modern societies, as such behaviours often result in both individual and collective harm. Marketing strategies used to promote alcohol, tobacco, fast food, gambling, and digital platforms are well-documented contributors to rising addiction rates [1]. However, the same marketing tools that drive consumption can also be repurposed to support health promotion and addiction prevention [2].

Social marketing, which promotes the public good over commercial interests, plays a pivotal role in reducing addictive behaviours and fostering healthier lifestyles [3]. When embedded in the social pillar of ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) frameworks, social marketing also intersects with broader social value creation, especially in the nonprofit sector. Targeted campaigns, community engagement, and stakeholder education are vital components of sustainable addiction interventions [4].

The urgency of addressing addiction is reflected in the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which promote mental health and the prevention of harmful substance use as global priorities [5]. In this context, nonprofit organisations (NPOs) are uniquely positioned to utilise marketing strategies for positive behavioural change.

Research Gap

While there is a large literature on the negative impact of marketing on addictive behaviour, fewer studies have examined how non-profit organisations can use marketing in socially constructive ways. There is limited integration of ESG frameworks and behavioural theories in the literature on addiction-related social marketing. In addition, much of the research continues to focus on alcohol, ignoring the growing importance of digital and gambling-related addictions. Moreover, much of the research focuses on the exclusive application of certain theories, ignoring the possibility of combining them.

Research Questions

This study explores how nonprofit organisations can leverage marketing strategies to mitigate addiction, examining the role of the social pillar of ESG in guiding socially responsible marketing practices. It also investigates how stakeholder involvement can enhance the effectiveness of

social marketing campaigns and to what extent bibliometric patterns reveal dominant themes, key authors, and geographic trends in addiction-related social marketing research. Therefore, the following research questions will be addressed:

What do bibliometric analyses reveal about the main thematic areas, leading authors and geographical foci of social marketing research on addiction prevention and treatment?

To what extent does the combined use of different marketing theories contribute to increasing the effectiveness of social marketing programmes implemented by non-profit organisations?

Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, placing strong emphasis on bibliometric analysis to map the existing landscape of addiction-related social marketing literature. The analysis is conducted using VOSviewer software and is based on data extracted from the Scopus database. To identify publications at the intersection of marketing, social value, and addiction-related topics, the bibliometric search string combined multiple keyword groups, structured with Boolean operators. Key domains targeted included terms such as “marketing,” “marketing-induced addiction,” and “social marketing”; addiction-related keywords like “addiction,” “alcohol,” “tobacco,” “fast food,” “gambling,” and “digital addiction”; as well as broader themes including “nonprofit organizations,” “stakeholder engagement,” “public health messaging,” “social value,” “healthcare costs,” “corporate social responsibility,” and “ESG.” The search was limited to subject categories such as Business, Management and Accounting; Social Sciences; and Economics, Econometrics and Finance. Covering the period from 1976 to 2025, the search yielded 6,770 relevant publications, collectively accounting for over 171,000 citations. Exclusion criteria were applied to omit non-English publications, conference papers without peer review, and studies not directly related to behavioural change or addiction treatment. The analysis was carried out across three dimensions: keywords (with a minimum of 25 occurrences per item), authors (with at least 5 publications and 100 citations), and countries (with a minimum of 50 publications and 100 citations). For each dimension, cluster visualisations and relationship mappings were generated using VOSviewer.

Theoretical Framework

To understand how social marketing can influence behavioural change in addiction contexts, it is essential to explore foundational behavioural theories that offer critical insights into human decision-making. Two key models stand out in this regard. The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), developed by Ajzen [6], posits that behavioural intentions are determined by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control. In the context of addiction, TPB provides a valuable lens through which to understand how marketing can shape individual beliefs and intentions regarding substance use. Complementing this, the Stages of Change Model—also known as the Transtheoretical Model, introduced by Prochaska and DiClemente [7]—outlines five stages of behavioural change: precontemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, and maintenance. Social marketing interventions that align with these stages can tailor their messages to an individual's specific readiness to change. Together, these frameworks deepen the understanding of how marketing tools can be harnessed not only to stimulate consumption but also to support addiction prevention and recovery. Their integration into social marketing campaigns enables more targeted, theory-driven strategies that enhance the effectiveness of such initiatives.

Bibliometric overview

Presentation of the <i>terms</i> and results provided to VOSviewer for keywords, authors and countries	
Filtering condition for keywords	A minimum of 25 words per publication.
The number of most relevant keywords matching the criterion according to VOSviewer	188 keywords
Period related to the number of keywords corresponding to the condition	2006-2022
Number of clusters formed from keywords	4 clusters
<i>Screening criteria for authors</i>	<i>Minimum 5 publications per author and minimum 100 references per author.</i>
Number of most relevant authors meeting this criterion according to VOSviewer	14 authors

Period linked to the number of authors meeting the condition	2010-2020
Number of clusters of authors	5 clusters
Screening criterion for countries	Minimum 50 publications per country and minimum 100 references per country.
Number of most relevant countries matching this criterion according to VOSviewer	34 countries
Period linked to the number of countries meeting the condition	2015-2021
Number of clusters formed in countries	5 clusters

Table 3

Source: own editing based on Scopus query and VOSviewer results

Cluster naming - keywords	Item number	Occurrence	Average occurrence
1. Non-profit organisations and social responsibility	126	7 001	55,6
2. Health and social science research	42	819	19,5
3. Social and health impacts	18	672	37,3
4. Digital environment and social media	2	79	39,5
Total	188	8 571	151,9

Table 2.b

Source: own editing based on VOSviewer results

Cluster naming - authors	Item number	Number of documents	Average document rate	Citation	Average citation rate
1. Marketing and consumer behaviour experts	4	31	7,8	1 098	274,5
2. Social marketing and sustainability experts	4	57	14,3	1 004	251,0

3. Behavioural research and health marketing experts	2	21	10,5	222	111,0
4. Eastern European and strategic marketing researchers	2	21	10,5	367	183,5
5. Innovation and services marketing experts	2	16	8,0	296	148,0
Total	14	146	51,0	2 987	968,0

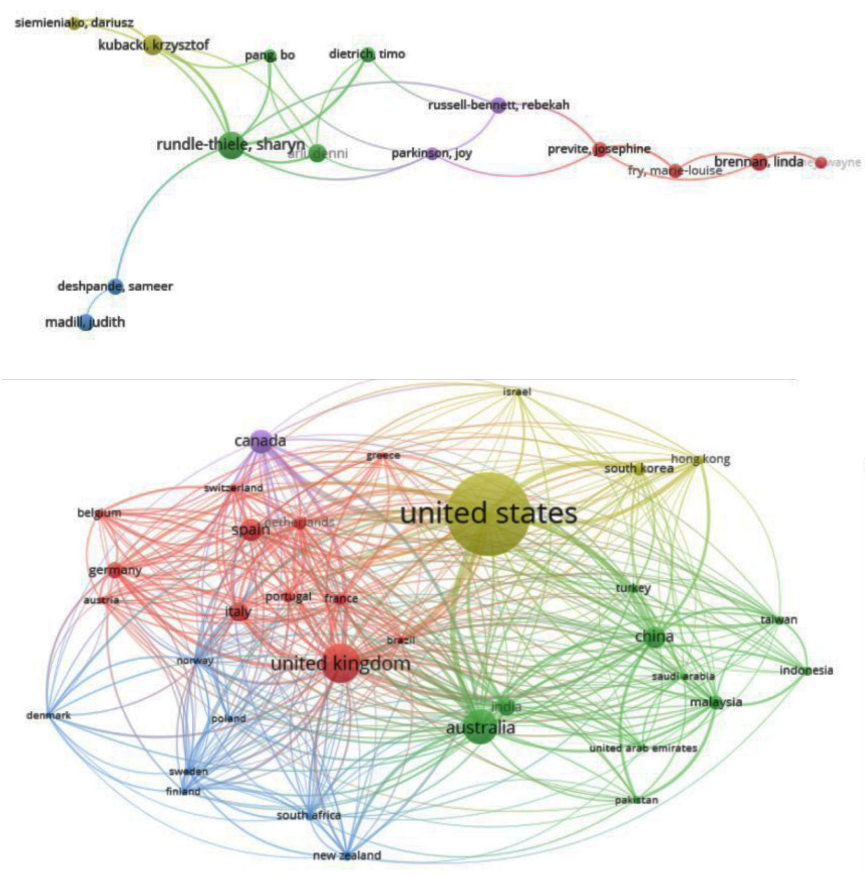


Table 2.c

Source: own editing based on VOSviewer results

Cluster name - countries	Item number	Number of documents	Average document rate	Citation	Average citation rate
1. European emerging middle and developed countries	12	2 430	202,5	81 949	6 829,1
2. East Asia and emerging countries	10	1 880	188,0	43 596	4 359,6
3. Growing research centres in the North and Africa	7	512	73,1	16 120	2 302,9
4. A mixed research network - emerging and developed countries	4	2 563	640,8	87 632	21 908,0
5. Canada as a leading country	1	369	369,0	13 392	13 392,0
Total	34	7 754	1 473,4	242 689	48 791,5

Table 3

Source: own editing based on Scopus query and VOSviewer results

Authors	Title	Year	Type	Cited by	Keywords
Brennan L.; Binney W.; Parker L.; Aleti T.; Nguyen D.	Social marketing and behaviour change: models, theory and applications	2014	Book	74	

Brennan L.; Previte J.; Fry M.-L.	Social marketing's consumer myopia: Applying a behavioural ecological model to address wicked problems	2016	Article	133	Behavioural ecological systems; Consumer myopia; Meso-marketing approach; Relational logic; Social marketing*(2)
Buyucek N.; Kubacki K.; Rundle-Thiele S.; Pang B.	A systematic review of stakeholder involvement in social marketing interventions	2016	Article	60	Alcohol*(2); Intervention; Social marketing*(2); Stakeholder theory*(1); Systematic literature review*(1)
Fry M.-L.	Countering consumption in a culture of intoxication	2010	Article	35	Alcohol*(2); Anti- consumption; Non-drinkers; Responsible drinking; Social marketing*(2)
Rundle-Thiele S.; Schuster L.; Dietrich T.; Russell- Bennett R.; Drennan J.; Leo C.; Connor J.P.	Maintaining or changing a drinking behaviour? GOKA's short- term outcomes	2015	Article	39	Adolescents*(2); Alcohol; Binge drinking; Edutainment; Online games; Randomised control trial; Social marketing*(2)
* Keywords marked with an asterisk correspond to the main keywords grouped in clusters. The marked number indicates the cluster number.					

Highlighting the most relevant articles/case studies

The second pillar of ESG (Environmental, Social, Governance), „Social“, encompasses the idea of sustainable development, which focuses on the representation and promotion of social values and the improvement of the social environment. The pillar includes aspects dealing with health conditions, freedom, education and work environments, and the provision of adequate conditions for people, which also include addressing alcohol-related problems [5]. The prevalence of alcohol dependence is an extremely common problem worldwide. The average per capita consumption of alcohol in the 146 countries of the planet in 2024 was 5.92 litres, and 30 of the 146 countries had an average alcohol consumption of more than 10 litres per capita in the year [8]. The path to alcoholism itself can have many personal and social causes, as well as negative consequences, especially for health, which have been confirmed by numerous studies [4]. Statistics show that reducing alcohol consumption at a societal level and preventing alcohol dependence is a major challenge worldwide.

Points 3.4 and 3.5 of the United Nations' Transforming our World 2030 Sustainable Development Framework, adopted in 2015, identify a planet-wide focus on promoting mental health and well-being and promoting prevention and treatment of addictive substance use that is harmful to health. In , points 4 and 12.8 of the Framework provide for the promotion of public awareness and the development of education to ensure that everyone has access to appropriate information. These steps can have a positive impact on preventing the development of addictions [5]. As a consequence, the prevention of the development of alcoholism and its risks and complications is a particularly important aspect of social advocacy. Education and the provision of the necessary information can be an appropriate method for disseminating information and raising awareness among stakeholders. Marketing, as a field of research and as a tool for information, can be optimal both for communicating social values and for promoting the prevention and treatment of alcohol-related addictions

The 2014 book by Brennan et al. [9] provides a detailed overview of the topic of social marketing in terms of behaviour change models. Their research focuses on establishing the main goal of social marketing, which is to prioritise the achievement of ‚social good‘ over commercial gain. Their research suggests that in some cases it is more useful to combine the key theories used in social marketing and behaviour change, rather than applying them exclusively, as the combination may lead to more positive

outcomes for achieving the social ,good'. Another influential literature is the systematic literature review conducted by Buyucek et al. [3] between 2000 and 2015, which concluded that stakeholder consideration is essential and that involving them in the planning, implementation and evaluation phases can significantly improve marketing outcomes in social marketing activities. Their observations found that stakeholder theory can provide good guidance for marketing activities in order to achieve sustainable programmes, but that results are optimal if this is done widely through formative research and evaluation. These two literatures highlight that combining marketing theories and broad stakeholder engagement can optimise the prevention of excessive alcohol consumption. These observations may be particularly useful for non-profit organisations that are primarily concerned with achieving ,social good' as opposed to commercial gain. The stakeholder claim is supported by further experiments published by Rundle-Thiele et al. [2]. Through their experiment, they investigated how to describe the knowledge of teenagers (average age 14) about alcohol and binge drinking. Their research used a controlled experimental design to evaluate a social marketing program (Game On - Learn about Alcohol; GOKA) using a simple, controlled, randomized design. The results showed significant improvements in adolescents' knowledge of alcohol and binge drinking compared to the control group, while maintaining subjective norms, instrumental attitudes and intentions. This suggests that even a single programme in the experiment can positively change adolescents' knowledge about alcohol consumption and perceptions of recreational and leisure activities, while maintaining subjective opinions. This finding demonstrates the beneficial impact of marketing on society, and specifically on young people.

As the bibliometric analysis reveals, Australia is very advanced in terms of the study of this topic. In this context, it is worth noting Fry's [1] article exploring the relationship between prioritising long-term cultural change and the avoidance of social problems associated with alcohol consumption in Australia, with the aim of developing an understanding of the consumer culture of sober drinking among young adults. Furthermore, the research will explore young adults' self-generated alternative identities and their stories of responsible alcohol consumption using a narrative theory approach. And its results conclude that practical measures mainly include warnings about alcohol use and restrictions on consumption guidelines. She also observed that although values of responsible drinking are shared among young people, individual strategies differ, suggesting different forms of resistance and the existence of micro-subcultures. Based

on these findings, he concludes that the analysis of such discourses could be key to developing more sustainable and healthier drinking habits, and that the findings from these dialogues could be incorporated into programmes aimed at improving drinking habits. Also from the direction of social marketing thinking, the 2016 article by Brennan, Previte, and Fry [10] examines social behavioural ecosystems (BEM), which describes the application of a conceptual framework to assess the context of social change in alcohol. Based on design, methodology and approach, the BEM ecosystem (BEM) emphasizes the reactive nature of behavior change, taking into account the layers (macro, exo, meso, micro) that influence actors. Its main scope of application is focused on promoting the interaction of social marketing solutions between market actors. The main message of the paper is to emphasise the systems thinking of social marketing and to motivate the development of multidimensional models and social programmes.

The literature review of the selected literature shows that the publications examined the impact of social marketing from different perspectives, yet several correlations can be observed in the conclusions and results. The broad involvement of stakeholders, the establishment of cooperation between them, and the systems approach to planning and implementation can influence social marketing activities in a positive direction. These observations can be particularly useful for the choice of strategy for NPOs, especially if the strategy is preceded by an exploration of the attitudes of stakeholders and sub-groups. In addition to these findings, it is worth advocating for the widest possible application of these findings to prevent the development of alcohol dependence and to optimise the treatment programmes offered to people suffering from dependence.

While much of the literature reviewed focuses on alcohol addiction, emerging research also highlights the increasing prevalence of other forms of addiction, such as gambling and digital dependency. These behavioural issues share common psychological mechanisms and socio-environmental triggers, and thus many of the findings in alcohol-focused studies are transferable. Marketing interventions that have proven effective in addressing alcohol misuse can be adapted to tackle these newer challenges, particularly when digital environments themselves contribute to the addictive patterns.

Summary

After reviewing the literature, we therefore conclude that the main objective of implementing optimal social marketing programmes for the prevention and treatment of alcohol dependence is to increase the information interface and to provide accurate and effective information. Key aspects include identifying the stakeholders in advance, involving them in a well-developed marketing strategy based on a methodology incorporating several marketing theories, and encouraging cooperation between them. We therefore propose to take these definitions and steps into account, as they can significantly increase the effectiveness of marketing strategies to prevent or cure addiction, including alcohol, gambling and digital addiction. In addition, we suggest further exploring the areas of alcohol, tobacco, gambling and digital addiction by combining the methodologies identified.

Annex:

Database	Scopus
Keywords	„marketing“ OR „marketing-induced addiction“ OR „marketing and addiction“ OR „marketing strategies“ OR „consumer behaviour“ OR „advertising impact“ OR „social marketing“ AND „social value“ OR „socioeconomic impact“ OR „public health“ OR „healthcare costs“ OR „social services“ or „corporate social responsibility“ OR „stakeholder engagement“ OR „ESG“ AND „nonprofit“ OR „nonprofit organizations“ OR „addiction treatment“ OR „public health messaging“ AND „addiction“ OR „tobacco“ OR „alcohol“ OR „fast food“ OR „gambling“ OR „digital addiction“ OR „nonprofit organizations“ OR „addiction treatment“ OR „public health messaging“
Subject limitation	Business, Management and Accounting; Social Sciences; Economics, Econometrics and Finance
Period	1976-2025
Results	6,770 publications
Total number of citations	171.731 citation

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