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Journal article

A critical overview of social marketing in Asia

Pang, Bo, Deshpande, Sameer A., Nguyen, Tuyet-Mai, Kim, Jeawon, Almosa, Yara A., Arif, Amna, Arli, Denni, Bakpayev, Marat, Erdogan, Bayram Zafer, Fujihira, Haruka, Gallage, H. P. Samanthika, Kadir, Mohammad A., Ong Lai Teik, Derek, Satawedin, Patama, Weinreich, Nedra Kline and Yousef, Murooj

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published as:

Pang, B., Deshpande, S. A., Nguyen, T.-M., Kim, J., Almosa, Y. A., Arif, A., Arli, D., Bakpayev, M., Erdogan, B. Z., Fujihira, H., Samanthika Gallage, H. P., Kadir, M. A., Ong Lai Teik, D., Satawedin, P., Weinreich, N. K. and Yousef, M. (2021). A critical overview of social marketing in Asia. *Social Marketing Quarterly*, 27(4), pp. 302-323.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/15245004211053847>

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A Critical Overview of Social Marketing in Asia

Abstract

Background: Social marketing has been used in Asia to combat various social issues (Deshpande & Lee, 2013). However, our understanding of social marketing awareness, adaptation, and achievement in Asian countries is limited.

The focus of the Article: An historical overview of social marketing developments in Asia.

Importance to the Social Marketing Field: This paper is one of the first attempts to integrate social marketing theory and practice in Asia to understand its strengths and weaknesses and to provide a recommendation to enhance the adoption and effectiveness of social marketing program design, implementation, and evaluation to generate social and behavioral change.

Design/methodology/approach: The authors representing 18 Asian countries searched for social marketing growth and trends in prominence, conceptual developments, social issues and solutions, and effectiveness in English and local language literature. This paper describes themes by highlighting examples of initiatives.

Findings: Our analysis reveals a broad spectrum of social marketing practices in Asia, focusing traditionally on managing overpopulation and preventing communicable diseases and, more recently, non-communicable diseases and climate action. The practice also revealed close integration with policies, overreliance on the government sector, lack of robust research studies, theorizing, documentation, training, and community involvement, and challenges presented by cultural factors and the confusion of understanding the term.

Recommendations for research or practice: The study recommends establishing the Asian Social Marketing Association and Asian Social Marketing Institute, adopt a Total Market Approach, improve documentation, clarify the boundaries of social marketing, enhance the effectiveness of strategies by embracing research, involving the beneficiary communities and by learning from others.

Up to five keywords: Asia, social marketing history, culture, governance, documentation, training

Introduction

Over seven decades, social marketing has addressed health, the environment, and other social issues as a behaviour change field. Numerous systematic literature reviews (Firestone, Rowe, Modi, & Sievers, 2017; Kim, Rundle-Thiele, & Knox, 2019; Kubacki, Rundle-Thiele, Pang, & Buyucek, 2015; Sewak, Kim, Rundle-Thiele, & Deshpande, 2021; Stead, Gordon, Angus, & McDermott, 2007) have investigated social marketing effectiveness. They also highlight the lack of non-Western cases (Truong & Dang, 2017) and those published in languages other than English. According to Truong and Dang (2017), the unique challenges posed by the Asian situation requires tailored solutions. In other words, a critical review of social marketing in Asia can add valuable insights to the existing social marketing knowledge. This paper responds to these gaps by critically reviewing the development and trends of social marketing in Asia and advancing social marketing theory and practice that suits Asia's situation.

Asia is a large, populous, and diverse geographic, cultural, and demographic entity (Murphey & Stapleton, 2019). Consequentially, the social issues in Asia include a diverse range across countries, including overpopulation, lack of equity, poverty, literacy, food safety, and communicable and non-communicable diseases. The social issues that Asia experiences today are a consequence of its mainly conservative and unique culture (Wood, 2016), the aftermath of decolonization (McCloud, 2018), and the rapid economic growth and globalization in recent years (Crane, 2002). The solutions to tackle social issues require complex considerations from geographic, religious, linguistic, ethnic, and political perspectives (Yip, 2005). In response, the use of social marketing is old and yet emerging in Asia (Cheng, Kotler, & Lee, 2011).

Several individual articles and books (Deshpande, Bhanot, & Maknikar, 2015; Deshpande & Lee, 2013; Escobar & Deshpande, 2019) have been published on social marketing efforts in Asia, all of which present individual case studies. Similarly, researchers

have proposed approaches as the diffusion of innovation theory (Rogers, Singhal, & Quinlan, 2014) and culture-centered approaches in India and Singapore (Dutta, 2015) or proposed approaches unique to the Global South (Dados & Connell, 2012) that potentially apply to the social marketing framework. However, no previous output has synthesized Asia-wide literature. The book edited by Nguyen and Rowley (2015) examines ethics and social marketing in Asia (B. Nguyen & Rowley, 2015). However, the authors focus more on ethical conduct in marketing practices and fairness management and less on social marketing. More recently, Hay and her colleagues (2020) compared social marketing cases studies in the Asia-Pacific region and highlighted innovative social marketing methods in underdeveloped and developing countries (Hay, Eagle, & Bhati, 2020); however, they ignored social marketing literature published in languages other than English.

In sum, this paper critically demonstrates the development and trends of social marketing in Asia. Our research focuses on investigating the quality of social marketing strategies regarding implementation, effectiveness, innovation, and documentation. Additionally, this paper comments on the strengths and weaknesses of social marketing in Asia and recommends improving social marketing practice, research, and teaching. We believe this is a timely piece for social marketing academics, practitioners, governments, NGOs, CSR departments, and policymakers from Asia, other developing countries, and under-developed regions of developed countries. The insights and lessons by reviewing what Asia has done, innovated, and achieved have wider applications in other cultural and geographic contexts and will be relevant in and outside Asia.

Method

Eighteen Asian countries and territories, accounting for 76.7% of the population, were included in the study. They represent all major countries and territories (Japan, South Korea, Malaysia,

Thailand, Vietnam, China, Taiwan, Indonesia, Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Palestine, Kazakhstan, and Turkey) and regions of Asia (North and Central Asia, East and North-East Asia, West Asia, and South Asia). Information was extracted from multiple sources, including scientific literature such as journal papers, conference papers, book chapters, and grey literature such as newspapers, government reports, websites, and university courses. In addition, both English and local language materials were examined to cover a comprehensive scope of knowledge. A total of 83 pieces of information were finally collated, including 12 book chapters, two conference papers, 39 journal papers, 9 NGO reports, four government reports, 12 campaign materials/websites, and five news pieces. Sixteen social marketing experts representing each country enriched with their lived experiences and cultural sensitivity contributed to their critical commentary. Please note that two authors contributed to two countries each due to the countries' cultural and linguistic similarities. For each country, the authors individually collected information on the following topics:

- Major social problems,
- Prominent social marketing initiatives,
- Leading social marketing agencies that design behavior change initiatives, design social and behavior change initiatives, conduct research, and those who fund such efforts,
- Prominent academic and non-academic research outputs published over the past 50 years, and
- Training opportunities for students and managers.

Based on these analyses, each author commented on the following topics:

- The overall state of social marketing in their home country, and
- Strengths and weaknesses observed in practice, research, and teaching.

The first two authors then synthesized the findings and thematically analyzed each commentary using an inductive approach. In each commentary, a code was assigned to every emergent thought, which was combined into larger categories or themes.

Results

Using the thematic analysis method across the 83 pieces of information, we arrived at 11 themes and seven recommendations, which we present in detail. We further categorised our themes and recommendations in four broad steps of the social marketing planning process (defining the social problem, drawing insights through research, designing an effective strategy, and implementing the initiative). See Table 1.

TABLE 1 about here

Population and communicable diseases

As Asian countries decolonized from the European and Japanese powers, massive social development projects were undertaken. To achieve social objectives, social marketing was considered an essential tool. As a result, social marketing practice was born in India, Asia, and the world, in the late 1950s to address overpopulation (Deshpande & Lee, 2013). Nirodh condom and Mala-D pill were among the first social brands launched at a national level. Similarly, family planning through contraceptive promotion was the topic of initial social marketing initiatives in several Asian countries. From the 1990s, condoms were promoted for triple purposes of family planning promotion, HIV/AIDS prevention, and STI prevention. Most attempts witnessed consistent participation of foreign funding agencies working with national

and local governments. Foreign funding agencies, both public and private, played an important role to fund and professionalize social change. Aid was provided by the governments of the ex-colonies and other Western powers of the U.K., U.S., France, Germany, Sweden, Canada, Japan, and Spain. Private funders included Packard Foundation and Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

In India, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare played an active role, while in Bangladesh, the Social Marketing Company, a private enterprise, was heavily involved. The Thai experiment witnessed the creativity of Mr Mechai Viravaidya, popularly called the Condom King (Deshpande, 2016).

Eventually, by the 1990s, when most of Asia embraced globalization and liberalization policies, designing, implementing, and evaluating family planning was outsourced to private social marketing agencies, such as Population Services International, DKT International, and Marie Stopes International. In larger countries such as India, one witnessed domestic production of condoms, subsidy on procuring and distributing condoms, and presence of local private social marketing agencies such as Hindustan Latex Family Planning Promotion Trust and Parivar Seva Sanstha.

As projects varied, so did the results. For example, Bangladesh and Thailand delivered impressive results on reducing family size, while the Indian experiment fell short of expectations.

Asia also witnessed a social marketing focus on several other infectious diseases such as HIV/AIDS (condom promotion and counseling) and malaria (bed nets and hygiene), public health challenges of cholera and polio (via vaccination), and issues related to the low-income countries, such as literacy (schools), malnutrition (micronutrients), hygiene (hand hygiene, sanitary napkins, and toilet construction), and institutional delivery (safe delivery services at subsidized clinics).

Non-communicable diseases arrive while the traditional ones persist.

Government and foreign funding agency actions coupled with a liberalized and globalized Asia in the post-cold-war-era witnessed a dramatic improvement in the three dimensions of the Human Development Index: health, education, and standard of living. Social marketing initiatives played a critical role in all dimensions. In turn, the improved developmental factors also enhanced the effectiveness of social marketing strategies. For example, as the education level in Asia has multiplied, evidenced by the increase in literacy rates by 30% (UNESCO, 2017), the success of social marketing improved too. With the higher education level, more people in Asia have paid more attention to social marketing practice and heightened concern about health, environment, and sustainable development (Murphey & Stapleton, 2019). This facilitates the ‘talkability’ of interventions in the community and their behavior change effort. For example, in Indonesia, handwashing marketing initiatives in 2013 had health messages reaching 10 million people and increased awareness of handwashing and handwashing practice with soap from 45% to 85% and 35% to 56%, respectively (Brennan et al., 2013).

Over the years, as Asian economies grew, absolute poverty reduced, and wealth accumulated. However, human development improvement also resulted in rising economic inequality, higher aspirations, increased consumption of goods and services, and lifestyle changes. Today, Asian countries face both challenges (the old ones and the emerging, the infectious and the non-infectious), thus doubling the burden and providing more opportunities for social marketing strategies to intervene. For example, today, India suffers from overpopulation, poverty, maternal and infant mortality, malaria, and HIV/AIDS, along with the newer challenges of cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, obesity, water and air pollution, and road safety. Similarly, China in recent years has suffered from complex social issues such as a low

birth rate (the aftershock of the extended one-child policy) and substance abuse, including alcohol, tobacco, and other illegal drugs. We highlight similar examples from other countries.

In Vietnam, the problem of food safety has, in recent years, become the source of high anxiety, exaggerated by media as they highlight food safety incidents. Public health is at risk when animals and seafood such as prawns (T. Nguyen, 2018) selling in the markets often contain banned chemicals to look fresh and big artificially (Nguyen-Viet, Tuyet-Hanh, Unger, Dang-Xuan, & Grace, 2017).

A prominent public health and environmental challenge witnessed across Asia is littering; many anti-littering social marketing initiatives have been conducted. For example, Saudi Arabia has witnessed several effective anti-littering initiatives in its largest cities of Riyadh (the “Parks without waste” initiative) and Jeddah (AlShahry, 2012; Masrahi, 2010). Despite these programs, littering has continued to worsen (Abuzinada, 2005; El-Juhany, 2009; Taribmagazen, 2014). A recent study shows that environmental factors have a more substantial impact on littering behavior than individual factors (Al-Mosa, Parkinson, & Rundle-Thiele, 2017). While awareness is a first step in finding a solution to the littering problem, an integrated approach is required, including the participation of family, school, community, and the municipality (Abuzinada, 2005).

Policy integration

A typical feature of social marketing in Asia is the public sector’s dominance and its close relationship with policy. This stems from the fact that the leading players in Asia’s social marketing initiatives are government and governmental agencies. Therefore, social marketing is often integrated with governmental policies and likely contributes to its success. For example, one of the most significant regulatory instruments was China’s one-child policy to address overpopulation challenges and associated with many social marketing initiatives (Feng, Cai, &

Gu, 2013; Whyte, Feng, & Cai, 2015). Thanks to the Chinese government's political structure, these policies have been efficiently implemented during 1980 - 2010, resulting in a decline in population growth to 0.4% (World Bank, 2020).

Another example is the success of the Asia Injury Prevention Foundation (AIPF) effort to encourage Vietnamese to wear motorbike helmets. Consequently, in 2014, 89% of all Vietnamese wore helmets when travelling on motorbikes (Asia Injury Prevention Foundation, 2015). Reports reflect a drop in road accidents, road deaths and road injuries from 2012 to 2013 by 5.19% and 9.4%, respectively. The success of these social marketing initiatives was supported by regulatory and public education strategies promoted through mainstream media.

Overreliance on the government

Apart from a few social marketing agencies, as noted above, that focus on family planning, HIV/AIDS prevention, and maternal and child health issues, there is a lack of social marketing companies or entrepreneurs interested in funding or designing social marketing initiatives in Asia. Asian government and governmental agencies are the dominant players in social marketing practice and financing. The overreliance on the government results in limitations such as delays, less than desirable strategies, governance inefficiency, or a forced alignment with the public policy. For example, in Israel, one roadblock is that all government-funded initiatives must move through the government advertising office - Israel Government Advertising Agency (LAPAM) which is not social marketing-driven. Similarly, Turkey's initiatives are generally government-led and more likely to be part of a public policy than an independent social marketing initiative.

The government alone is unable to tackle social issues effectively. In recent years, not-for-profit organizations or international development agencies have been called to fill this gap; examples include the World University Service of Canada in Sri Lanka or World Development

Foundation, World Wildlife Foundation, Yeşilist-Greenist, Ekoiq, Wheat Association, and Sustainability Academy in Turkey.

Organizations in Jordan (Jordan Social Marketing Centre, King Hussein Cancer Foundation, and the Royal Scientific Society) regularly guide or fund social marketing initiatives. However, they are still in an infancy stage and are not financially solid or influential. They operate under strict regulations surrounding formations, funding, reporting, and operational decision-making. These measures force organizations to close, face legal consequences, and experience detention of staff in severe cases. Regulations disempower these organizations.

Lack of robust formative research and outcome evaluation studies

Substantial efforts are observed in implementing the projects; however, formative research to understand the audience and inform the initiative is inadequate in Asian social marketing initiatives. Lower emphasis on gaining audience insights and behavioral determinants occurs probably because of reliance on coercive power such as policy and regulations and information-driven initiatives and inadequate understanding of the social marketing process. Exceptions include the COMMUNICATE (COMMUNItY-wide Initiative To promote Exercise) multi-strategic community-wide initiative aimed to promote physical activity among middle-aged and older populations (Masamitsu Kamada et al., 2018; Masamitsu Kamada et al., 2015; Masamitsu Kamada et al., 2013; M. Kamada, Kitayuguchi, Inoue, & Shiwaku, 2012), and *Share Your Value* community-based initiative that promotes organ donation registration in Kyoto (Uryuhara, 2018).

Similarly, the effectiveness of social marketing initiatives could be better measured. Initiatives designed and funded by Western agencies tend to adopt better evaluation approaches. Unfortunately, evaluation studies financed and implemented by domestic government and non-

profit organizations are either non-existent or simple (post-only designs). They measure inappropriate indicators (for example, condom promotion activities are measured based on condoms distributed instead of condoms used). We highlight two more examples.

In 2002, Beterem (“Beforehand” in Hebrew; a non-profit organization in Israel) launched a multi-faceted program designed to reduce injuries and injury severity in road crashes among children in Israel and increase child passenger safety and restraints (Falk, Orr, & Calif, 2017). The initiative’s development and implementation incorporated many social marketing principles. In addition to capacity building among professionals, parent education, legislation and increased enforcement, the initiative went beyond promotional methods to increase the use of booster seats for older children. They changed the product by redesigning the booster seat fabric to be more appealing to older children. The program increased the availability of booster seats in toy stores, drugstores, and hardware stores. In addition to media-based promotion directed at parents, they provided economic incentives of 30 per cent discounts on child safety seats and booster seats during the initiative period. Such a well-considered program, however, did not document or report outcome evaluation findings.

In Vietnam, the quality of the social marketing strategy is good, but the evaluation that seeks social change needs to be enhanced (Truong & Dang, 2017). For example, while social issues such as food safety have become urgent, interventions are often conducted with preliminary evaluation. As a result, social marketing initiatives are usually operated without knowing their effectiveness and the lessons needed to improve in the future.

Confusion of social marketing

Like the rest of the world, confusion on the definition of social marketing exists in Asia. Since most initiatives are executed or implemented by governmental entities or NGOs, social marketing is frequently confused with social communication, public policy announcement and

promotion, and legislation. For example, in Korea, a heavy focus on information education is observed in social marketing strategy. This indicates a lack of application of ‘behavior change’, which is the heart of social marketing. Advertisements are the most prevalent form of social marketing initiatives (B. Nguyen & Rowley, 2015). An increase in awareness of the problem is the key outcome pursued by the government and non-government organizations (e.g., the Korean Health Promotion Foundation).

Similarly, in Turkey, where social marketing initiatives are mainly communication initiatives aiming to increase awareness, these messages run on mass media without a media plan and reflect insufficiency in segmentation, targeting, and positioning. Moreover, these messages are developed on the preferences of initiative managers rather than in-depth research (Umut & Velioglu, 2016). In countries like India, social marketing is perceived as a tool to promote condoms and contraceptives due to historical accounts.

On the other hand, in Saudi Arabia, social marketing is mistaken as social media marketing and corporate social responsibility (CSR). Most Saudi initiatives identified that targeted behavior change were educational or social media initiatives. However, none mentioned social marketing, although they used some of Andreasen’s six benchmark criteria (Andreasen, 2002), especially those implemented by the government with big budgets. This was also observed in social marketing initiatives that address social, health and environmental problems, but they are not classified as such (Z Hossain, F Sultana, M Amin, & Y Siddiqua, 2013; Khizindar, 2012; Masrahi, 2010).

Similarly, the authors observed several efforts using social marketing techniques to promote breastfeeding and reduce littering. However, organizers did not classify these efforts as a social marketing initiative or under-documented the relevant steps, limiting the current review of social marketing status in South Korea, Vietnam, China, and Japan.

Social marketing is not a well-known concept in Japan. However, interestingly, some companies adopt this framework similar to the idea of corporate social marketing (Kotler, Hessekiel, & Lee, 2012) and focus more on how corporations integrate social marketing concepts into their business rather than individual change (Hidaka & Mizukoshi, 2018). According to the Japan Business Federation (2017), 40% of 167 corporations reported developing their CSR plans according to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). For example, Toyota aims to achieve SDGs through its three main CSR activity areas, including CSR management and environmental and social initiatives. Similarly, Honda has been operating a range of CSR activities in the environment, safety, quality, human resources, supply chain and social contribution areas (Honda, 2021). Some corporations proposed unique CSR activities that enhanced the company's strengths, such as Nintendo's gamification programs, Kikkoman's soy sauce food education, and Shueisha's Slam Dunk scholarship. During the COVID-19 pandemic, some corporations took actions to help, such as Sharp's face mask production using their factories.

A strong role of corporate social marketing is also observed in India, where the 2014 Companies Act has made it mandatory for the companies above a threshold level of sales and net profit to donate 2% of their profit to CSR initiatives (Nangia, 2021).

Lack of theorizing

A significant weakness of the Asian social marketing sector is inadequate theorizing of the use, implementation, and evaluation of social marketing initiatives specific to the local experiences. While social change scholars have argued for a focus on research from a global south perspective (Nyundo, Eagle, & Whittaker, 2021) and more community-driven and culture-centered (Dutta, 2015), such theoretical approaches are absent from the social marketing sector.

Social marketing is culturally bounded; therefore, the historical and cultural reservoir of Asian heritage must be considered in research and practice. However, scholarly work in social marketing usually replicates previous Western theories and frameworks without being sensitive to the Asian context. For example, in Pakistan, societal barriers such as conservative values significantly impact the practice of healthy behavior (Shafiq et al., 2008). Similarly, a significant challenge faced by social marketers while designing their initiatives in Turkey is to consider the extended family of the target audience; for example, for women to adopt contraceptive methods, it is essential to convince husbands, mothers-in-law, and other in-laws. Unfortunately, scholars fail to address such unique features when theorizing for Asian societies to enhance social marketing practice.

Cultural, political, and religious factors

As Asians observe a high level of collectivism and power distance (Hofstede, 2007), such cultural factors need to be considered when designing social marketing initiatives. Asians respect authority and emphasize community welfare over individual benefits, especially in China, Singapore, South Korea, and Japan. In such countries, the masses adopt behaviors promoted by government initiatives. However, in countries like India (Kar, 2019) and across Asia (Rose-Ackerman, 2004), where governance quality is poor and less respected, a reverse phenomenon is observed as government initiatives fail to execute their interventions despite strong research and strategies. Other manifestations of hierarchy, such as patriarchy, create barriers to social marketing success. For example, in India, where women cannot exercise their reproductive rights, men underutilize condoms during sexual interactions (Iyer, 2020).

Additionally, the complexity of social issues is intertwined with political and religious factors in Asia, which should be considered when designing social marketing initiatives. For example, the attitudes of Palestinians towards Israeli society and vice versa are a result of

certain beliefs, values, emotions and perceptions. One issue is the formation of negative stereotypes towards each other (Darweish, 2010), which hinders the acceptance of messages promoting harmony and social cohesion.

Implementing without community involvement

Given the nature of social problems, Asian social marketing initiatives typically target vulnerable demographics of high risk, low-income groups (Agha, 2000) who more likely reflect misconceptions, fallacies, and myths about health (Qureshi & Shaikh, 2006). The funding agencies and social change managers often represent the upper class and highly educated professionals. To overcome this class gap, managers must utilize a community-based focus to design and implement social marketing programs and foster sustainable behavior (McKenzie-Mohr, 2000). In community-based social marketing programs, initiatives uncover and remove the barriers inhibiting people from engaging in the desired behavior (Hastings, MacFadyen, & Anderson, 2000). One scenario would be to set up health promotion committees composed of local people at the village level to encourage an open dialogue, develop a sense of trust, and reduce myths.

For example, since 2008, Save the Children in Bangladesh have introduced 100 drop-in centers and ten outreach offices in 51 districts and provided essential services to approximately 28,600 female sex workers (FSW). Services included behavioral change education, free condoms, STI and general health service and effective referral services, including voluntary counselling and testing and maternal and child health services. As a result, FSWs received 28 million condoms for free and purchased 37 million condoms through social marketing. As a result, condom use increased from 66.7% to 95.5% from 2008 to 2012. A hallmark of this initiative was the close involvement of FSWs to inform the initiative's design and development (Z. Hossain, F. Sultana, M. Amin, & Y. Siddiqua, 2013).

However, community involvement in Asian social marketing practice is rare.

Lack of reporting and dissemination

Asian social marketing practice suffers from inadequate reporting and dissemination, creating a façade that social marketing initiatives are lacking. Although considerable social marketing interventions addressing complex issues have been undertaken in Asia over the past 70-odd years, we have very little to show on paper. The limited extent of documentation is produced in English by Western behavior change agencies operating in Asia and domestic agencies supported by Western funding agencies. Work documented in non-English Asian languages is often neglected.

Several factors cause poor reporting standards. First, the domestic funding agencies typically do not expect the initiatives to be documented. Second, social marketing initiatives tend to be short-term, not extending beyond a six-month horizon; the short-term horizon leaves managers limited time to write. As interventions end, the social change managers' attention drifts to another intervention or another organization or department, and the institutional knowledge is lost. Finally, lack of skills to document due to insufficient training also contributes to inadequate reporting and dissemination.

Lack of training

There is no full-fledged social marketing graduate or executive program offering training in audience research, marketing mix methods, segmentation, exchange, and formative and evaluation research. Training is also lacking in how to document initiatives and present those experiences in conferences. Lack of training potentially results in fewer initiatives with a comprehensive social marketing approach.

Discussion and recommendations

By demonstrating the development and the trends of social marketing in Asia, we highlighted significant strengths and weaknesses and a few examples. Compared with other regions of the world, particularly the West, where social marketing is more developed and advanced, social marketing practices in Asia display a long and rich history addressing various social problems targeting diverse audience groups with several strategies. We observed a continued dominance of public policies and education. Within the social marketing sector, government organizations are more active than non-profits; the corporate sector plays a minor role in social marketing. Additionally, the strategies are weak on research insights, designed with inadequate community participation, and supported by less-than-desirable theorizing and documentation. The social change managers suffer from insufficient training and confuse social marketing with contraceptive promotion, green marketing, CSR, and social media marketing. We recommend several ideas to promote and utilize social marketing theory and practice in Asia to ensure a positive future. For a summary of these recommendations, please see Table 1.

Asian Social Marketing Association

An essential and significant step to popularize and professionalize social marketing in Asia is to form an association, “Asian Social Marketing Association” (ASMA), similar to regional associations in other parts of the world, such as the National Social Marketing Council in the U.K., the European Social Marketing Association, Social Marketing Association of North America, the Australian Association of Social Marketing, and the newly established Latin American Social Marketing Association. Furthermore, to capture the size and diversity of geographies and cultures, ASMA could be represented with four subdivisions: a) North and Central Asia, b) East and North-East Asia, c) West Asia, and d) South Asia.

The primary objectives of ASMA would be to bring together academics and professionals to “market” social marketing to funders, policymakers, and students. This would occur through committees, working groups, digital presence, media presence, and reports. Creating a social marketing professional association would help establish standards, facilitate training of new professionals, encourage research, expand the opportunities, and demonstrate effectiveness. An association’s essential benefit would be offering a common forum to various scholars and practitioners working independently to collaborate. For example, in Saudi Arabia, many organizations have played a vital role in changing individual behavior, such as Chair Prince Naif bin Abdulaziz of Moral Values, Ministry of Health, Saudi Social Responsibility Network and General Authority for Meteorology and Environmental Protection. ASMA would facilitate their interaction and establish partnerships.

The establishment of ASMA will also help lobby for localized support of academics and practitioners in countries like China, Turkey, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, and South Korea. In recent years, strict censorship and control over media channels have restricted the effect of social change. ASMA can represent the sector, enhance its strength, and help improve reach and effectiveness.

Additionally, it is worth noting that the International Social Marketing Association (iSMA, <https://isocialmarketing.org/>) has worked extensively with other regional social marketing associations to connect social marketing academics and practitioners. ASMA and iSMA can agree to cooperate and offer Asian scholars and practitioners’ opportunities to exchange ideas with scholars and practitioners in other regions.

Asian Social Marketing Institute

ASMA could also help establish a center or a standalone educational institution (Asian Social Marketing Institute, ASMI) to train students, accredit professionals with executive

education, and foster research among scholars. ASMI would be an important addition to the centers existing in the Western world, such as the Institute for Social Marketing and Health (University of Stirling), Social Marketing @ Griffith (Griffith University), and the World Health Organization Collaborating Center on Social Marketing and Social Change (College of Public Health, University of South Florida).

ASMI could be funded by the government or a foundation where degrees and short-term courses are offered; the training opportunities would supply professionals to the industry. A collaboration between ASMI faculty and social marketing agencies would create projects designed by students for credit to enhance their understanding of social marketing concepts and practice and their differences with commercial marketing (Szablewska & Kubacki, 2019). It can also be tied to student projects in their final year of courses and thesis (in action research). Additionally, scholars will produce new knowledge unique to Asian conditions, improve documentation quality, and help reduce confusion between social marketing and other terms; they would also collaborate with practitioners to capture insights from social marketing initiatives. Considering the complicated issues with the design, implementation, and evaluation of the social marketing initiatives in Asia, collaborative works can enhance efficiency and effectiveness.

The Total Market Approach¹

Governments alone cannot solve all social problems. Other stakeholders need to contribute too. To ensure the participation of multiple players, the sector with ASMA could embrace and promote the Total Market Approach.

¹ A multifactorial strategy that considers multiple solutions to address a social issue. For example, social change agents consider legislation, education, and marketing approaches to target diverse audience members with the help of several organizations with various skillsets to prevent HIV/AIDS. (<https://www.shopsplusproject.org/tma>)

The Total Market Approach could be considered a manifestation of the socio-ecological model that proposes several stakeholders' involvement. ASMA should work with national government organizations and social marketing agencies to devise country-level strategies. We provide an example of how a national team could develop a long-term multi-stakeholder plan that includes adopting several tools. See Table 2 for such an example.

TABLE 2 about here

In the table, we have segmented the downstream groups into six categories based on income class and area. We have also separately noted the upstream audiences, such as policymakers and corporate leaders. As exemplars, we have reflected upon three sets of social problems: environment-related (e.g., plastic overuse and vehicle pollution), non-communicable health-related diseases (NCDs) (e.g., diabetes and cardiovascular diseases), and population/communicable health-related diseases (CDs) (e.g., overpopulation and malaria). Concerning these challenges, we envision five social change approaches: communication-only, regulatory, social marketing, traditional commercial marketing, and commercial marketing with a Bottom of the Pyramid focus² (Prahalad, 2012). The transition from social marketing to commercial marketing is indicated with an arrow.

We now explain the social change rationale for each segment, starting with downstream approaches. First, educational and regulatory strategies would be applied to all segments and for all social issues. Their relevance has more to do with the segment's motivation and ability than its income (Rothschild, 1999). Second, we propose that the commercial sector caters to

² Bottom of Pyramid: a strategy where the corporations treat the poor, primarily residing in the traditionally underdeveloped and developing countries, as a viable consumer base and create products and services to attract this population (<https://www.strategy-business.com/article/11518>). Given the volume of the poor in the world, the authors consider BOP as a profitable strategy.

affluent segments (urban and rural) to address all problems as the affluent can purchase products and services at their commercial price. Third, traditional commercial marketing would also apply to the urban middle-class segment when addressing environmental and NCDs, but only after the market has attracted sufficient target individuals through social marketing support. In other words, social marketing would be tasked to create a market with public funds. Once the market has enough buyers, it can be handed over to the commercial marketing sector to make it independent and sustainable. Thus, the market for population and CDs is ready for the urban middle-class, and commercial marketers can target them subsequently.

Commercial marketers could see urban poor and rural-middle-class as an attractive market by offering BOP products and services. However, similar to urban-middle, they would address environment and NCD problems after social marketers have laid the foundation. At the same time, they can get down to business immediately to address CDs through their BOP products. Finally, for the rural poor, social marketing would remain the more appropriate toolkit.

To clarify what we mean by social change downstream strategy for each stakeholder, we provide examples in Table 3. We recommend that the focal organization in the country invite marketers who produce and distribute these products and services and organizations that legislate and communicate to deliver these activities.

TABLE 3 about here

The strategy noted in the upstream section of Table 2 would be consistent with executing the downstream strategy. For example, if commercial marketers are expected to promote plastic-free products to the urban rich, the same marketers would be expected to convince upstream stakeholders to create favorable policies and spaces. Furthermore, for

segments where social marketing plays a key role, they would also conduct upstream marketing. Finally, when commercial marketers take over the responsibility once social marketers create the downstream market, the commercial marketers would also conduct upstream marketing.

Improving documentation

ASMI can encourage better documentation among scholars and students working within the institute, other centers across Asia, and managers in social marketing agencies. The outputs would be case studies, theory-driven research pieces, textbooks, and policy reports. In addition, a push for better documentation would increase the number and quality of reports, domestic and international publications and conference presentations in English and local languages.

The effort to document would also reveal the history and uniqueness of Asian cultures embedded in a social marketing initiative design in the current and future initiatives.

Textbooks on social marketing in local languages written by social marketing academics would encourage the delivery of courses in numerous institutes. Significant training opportunities exist for managers who work in various industries, such as health promotion and environmental conservation, to learn and utilize social marketing techniques in their daily jobs. Better documentation would encourage the delivery of masterclasses and executive education programs.

Clarifying the definition of social marketing

The confusion in the definition of social marketing is strongly felt in Asia. This confusion can be reduced by introducing social marketing courses at institutions and universities. Textbooks on social marketing and professionally trained social marketing lecturers are also needed to facilitate successful course delivery. In addition, scholars,

practitioners, and stakeholders in Asia should consider their mission to advocate the correct usage and labelling of social marketing efforts.

Enhancing the role of research and beneficiary communities

The social marketing sector in Asia needs to embrace robust formative research as an essential activity before developing a strategy and implementing social marketing initiatives. More focus should be put on the micro-level behavioral change strategies drawn from consumer insights and behavioral determinants rather than relying on coercive power such as policy and regulations, which are the common approaches in Asia. In a systematic review of initiatives conducted worldwide, authors found formative research a critical social marketing benchmark to promoting an active lifestyle among adults (Xia, Deshpande, & Bonates, 2016). Well-conducted formative research will inform behavior change strategies to influence audience behavior effectively.

Additionally, this study recommends ongoing evaluation research to measure social marketing initiatives' effectiveness, primarily by governmental organizations. Multi-level social marketing initiatives need to be designed to evaluate complex, large-scale initiatives. ASMI would create a social marketing formative research and evaluation guide to ensure that researchers and practitioners accurately follow these steps.

ASMA and ASMI would promote the importance of involving the beneficiary communities in their behavior change initiatives through training. They could also encourage funding agencies to embrace this approach to design and deliver behavior change strategies.

Learning from others

Finally, the study proposes that the social marketing professionals in Asia could broaden their knowledge, ideas, and strategies by learning successes from other initiatives and

sectors. For example, in the West, obesity prevention professionals can learn from the anti-tobacco industry. Similarly, the sector can learn from family planning promotion, HIV/AIDS prevention, and polio prevention successes in Asia. Other areas where Asia shows strong identities are those based on religion and nationalism. It is worth considering whether social marketing professionals can learn from these ideas to better society.

Second, the social marketing sector can learn from commercial branding successes, especially Ali Baba, Tata, Unilever, Toyota, and Samsung and create partnerships with them. The study especially acknowledges the corporate sector's *Bottom of the Pyramid* efforts, such as launching the cheapest car globally, Tata Nano or selling shampoo in a sachet rather than in a bottle to make a good quality product accessible to the masses. Third, the sector could learn from unique enterprises such as dabbawallas, the lunch delivery system in Mumbai known for its efficiency and accuracy and from social change giants such as Mahatma Gandhi, Mother Theresa, or Dalai Lama on what principles they employed to strategize and mobilize millions to achieve their cause.

Limitations and future research

The social marketing literature presented in this paper is not exhaustive. Many more academic and grey literature outputs have been published in Asia. However, the literature adequately captures the strengths and limitations. The other major limitation of this study is its scope. As the paper comments on several countries, the synthesis is inevitably generalized rather than specific. Therefore, particular discussions and appraisals of social marketing practices and development in each Asian country are scant. The authors acknowledge the complexity and heterogeneity within the Asian context, and therefore more in-depth understanding and discussion on individual countries are warranted in future research.

Table 1: Summary

	The social marketing planning process			
	Defining the social problem	Drawing insights through research	Designing an effective strategy	Implementing the initiative
Literature Findings				
Focus on population and communicable diseases	✓			
Non-communicable diseases arrive while the traditional ones persist.	✓			
Policy integration			✓	
Overreliance on the government			✓	
Lack of robust formative research and outcome evaluation studies		✓		
Confusion of social marketing			✓	
Lack of theorizing		✓		
Emphasis on cultural, political, and religious factors		✓		
Implementing without community involvement				✓
Lack of reporting and dissemination				✓
Lack of training				✓
Recommendations				
Formation of the Asian Social Marketing Association	✓	✓	✓	✓
Formation of the Asian Social Marketing Institute	✓	✓	✓	
The Total Market Approach		✓	✓	✓
Improving documentation				✓
Clarifying the definition of social marketing			✓	

Enhancing the role of research and beneficiary communities		✓		
Learning from others	✓	✓	✓	✓

Table 2: Country-Level Total Market Approach

Groups	Environment		Health: Non-communicable diseases		Health: Population/Communicable diseases	
	Upstream	Downstream	Upstream	Downstream	Upstream	Downstream
Examples of social problems	1. Plastic overuse 2. Vehicle pollution		1. Diabetes 2. Cardiovascular diseases		1. Overpopulation 2. Malaria	
Urban rich	Commercial Marketing	Law ¹ , Education ² , Commercial Marketing	Commercial Marketing	Law, Education, Commercial Marketing	Commercial Marketing	Law, Education, Commercial Marketing
Urban middle	Social Marketing → Commercial Marketing	Law, Education, Social Marketing → Law, Education, Commercial Marketing	Social Marketing → Commercial Marketing	Law, Education, Social Marketing → Law, Education, Commercial Marketing	Commercial Marketing	Law, Education, Commercial Marketing
Urban poor	Social Marketing → Commercial Marketing	Law, Education or communication-only, Social Marketing → Law, Education, Commercial Marketing (BOP ³)	Social Marketing	Law, Education, Social Marketing → Law, Education, Commercial Marketing (BOP)	Social Marketing	Law, Education, Commercial Marketing (BOP)
Rural rich	Commercial Marketing	Law, Education, Commercial Marketing	Commercial Marketing	Law, Education, Commercial Marketing	Commercial Marketing	Law, Education, Commercial Marketing
Rural middle	Social Marketing → Commercial Marketing	Law, Education, Social Marketing → Law, Education, Commercial Marketing (BOP)	Social Marketing	Law, Education, Social Marketing → Law, Education, Commercial Marketing (BOP)	Social Marketing	Law, Education, Commercial Marketing (BOP)

Rural poor	Social Marketing	Law, Education, Social Marketing	Social Marketing	Law, Education, Social Marketing	Social Marketing	Law, Education, Social Marketing
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¹Law: Legal or regulatory

²Education or communication-only

³BOP: Bottom of the Pyramid

Table 3. Downstream Social Change Initiative Examples

Social issue	Traditional Commercial Marketing	Social Marketing	Education/ Communication-only	Legal/ Regulatory
Plastic overuse	Plastic-free products	Provision of free cloth bags	PSAs on the importance of reduced plastic use	Ban of plastic bags
Vehicle pollution	Fuel-efficient vehicles	Provision of improved public transit; reduced transit cost	PSAs on the importance of reduced vehicle use	Restriction on vehicle use, parking fees, vehicle tax, fuel tax
Diabetes	Healthy food restaurants	Provision of subsidized fruits and vegetables	PSAs on the importance of a healthy lifestyle (healthy food, mental health, active lifestyle)	Tax on cola, oily foods
Cardiovascular diseases	Gyms	Provision of bike and walk paths; attractive public parks	PSAs on the importance of a healthy lifestyle (healthy food, mental health, active lifestyle)	Mandatory healthy food outlets in food malls
Overpopulation	A commercial offering of contraceptives (condoms, pills, etc.)	A subsidized offering of contraceptives (condoms, pills, etc.)	PSAs on birth spacing and family planning.	Incentives in health and education to smaller size families.
Malaria	A commercial offering of malaria bednets, mosquito repellents.	A subsidized offering of malaria bednets, mosquito repellents.	PSAs on maintaining a clean neighborhood.	Penalties to construction companies for failing to maintain a clean neighborhood.

Note: BOP products and services would be lower-value versions of traditional commercial marketing offers.

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