

- **Paper title**

Using Social Marketing to promote water conservation: A moral perspective

- **Broad research area:**

Marketing

- **Purpose of the paper:**

To explore how framing water conservation as a morally significant issue in social marketing interventions could encourage people to reduce their water consumption.

- **Theoretical background**

Water is the most vital resource on the planet and it has no substitute (DEFRA, 2018). Nonetheless, the escalating demand on water resources is common in different parts of the world (Willis et al., 2010) and there is a great gap between water supply and demand (Jorgensen et al., 2009). According to a recent report published by the United Nations (2019), almost four billion people experience severe water scarcity.

Generally, there are two approaches to manage water resources; supply-side and demand-side strategies. According to Kanta and Berglund (2015), supply-side strategies aim to expand water sources, while demand side strategies' aim to achieve reductions in the demand on available water supply. However, supply-side strategies have been criticized because of the enormous economic as well as environmental costs (Perren and Yang, 2015). On the other hand, such costs are avoided in demand management measures which aim to reduce water consumption rather than exploit additional water supply (Willis et al., 2011). Consequently, demand-side has emerged as an essential water management approach to secure future water needs (Russell and Fielding, 2010). Moreover, there has been a "growing consensus" that decreasing water demand would be a "more sustainable" tool than supply-side measures to balance between supply and demand (Inman and Jeffrey, 2006). Therefore, conserving water resources has become essential for sustainable management of available water supplies (Dolnicar et al., 2012) and water conservation has become a priority worldwide (Perren and Yang, 2015). Accordingly, this study focus on promoting water conservation behaviour using social marketing interventions. Green et al. (2019) emphasises the significance of incorporating social marketing into conservation programs to address environmental threats. There are calls for marketers to address water shortages –as one of the major environmental issues, by developing social marketing interventions to change audiences' behaviours (Kotler, 2011). However, in the context of households' water consumption, Lowe and Lowe (2015) argued that social marketing concepts are still not widely applied.

Water can be considered as a "public good" (Johnson and Handmer, 2002). Russell and Fielding (2010) argue that water is a "collective resource" which is negatively affected by individuals overuse for their own personal purposes and self-interest. In addition, they argued that this could be considered a "tragedy of commons" case (Hardin, 1986) which refers to the situation in which a "*shared resource is depleted through motives of self-interest*" (Jorgensen et al. 2009, p. 229). It is argued that a situation is considered to be "morally relevant" when

one's self-interest and the interest of others conflict each other (Kaiser et al. 2005) or if a person's actions, when freely performed, have consequences on others, either harm or benefit (Jones, 1991). Therefore, sustainable behaviours are strongly driven by moral considerations not only self-interest, because their impact affects the individual as well as others (Rex et al., 2015). Thus, in this study it is suggested that water conservation is a moral issue and therefore could be explained and promoted from a moral perspective. Hence, this study aims to examine if social marketing interventions could promote water conservation by emphasizing the morality of the issue.

Moral motives are stated to be important for pro-environmental behaviour (Gatersleben et al. 2019). Previous studies have indicated that intentions based on the "moral correctness" of the behaviour have great motivational force (Godin and Sheeran, 2005). Since in this study the view of water conservation as a moral issue is advocated, the impact of a moral construct called moral intensity will be examined. Moral intensity is a construct developed by Jones (1991) who extended the ethical decision making model of Rest (1983) to explain the ethical decision making process in business context. Moral intensity reflects the "perceived moral significance" of a certain issue (Barnett, 2001) and represents the characteristics of a moral issue (Culiberg, 2014). Nevertheless, Jones's model has not been commonly used in the consumer setting – neither in the context of pro-environmental consumer behaviour specifically (Culiberg and Bajde 2013) nor in social marketing interventions. Therefore, this study aims to explore how social marketing can utilize moral intensity to promote PEBs which is a gap that requires further investigation.

Jones (1991) stated that moral intensity is essential in recognition of moral issues and thus, may have a role in activating the feeling of moral obligation (i.e. personal norm) to behave in a certain way. However, the relationship between moral intensity and personal norm has not been studied before, although perceptions of moral significance of an issue may seem as a factor that could affect personal moral obligation towards such issue. According to Norm Activation Theory (NAT) by Schwartz (1977), personal norms have to be "activated" before they become salient to influence behaviour. Therefore, this study suggests that moral intensity could activate personal norms to engage in water conservation behaviour by emphasizing the significance of the issue.

▪ **Methodology**

This study is still in progress. It is proposed that an experimental design could be used to manipulate the moral intensity of water conservation under different intervention scenarios and examine how it might activate personal norms and eventually, affect the effectiveness of social marketing interventions.

▪ **Main findings**

- **Potential contribution**

In general, previous research on water conservation is insufficient relative to other PEBs such as energy consumption and recycling. Furthermore, although PEB has been acknowledged as a moral issue few studies examine the link between morals and PEB. It was stated that researchers overlook the moral aspects of PEB (Culiberg, 2014). Moreover, there is lack of studies that attempt to expand theories such as NAT by adding a moral construct such as moral intensity, as a factor that may activate personal norms. Furthermore, there are lack of social marketing interventions that utilized NAT variables. Therefore, this study can contribute to social marketing theory by extending the theoretical foundation that inform social marketers to design more effective interventions.

- **3-5 key words**

Social Marketing, Pro-environmental behaviour, water conservation, ethical decision making