

Corporate Social Marketing within Health Apps: Assessing the Presence and Integration of Benchmark Criteria

Governmental and non-profit entities have traditionally led social marketing. Academics that support an integrated approach to social marketing have increasingly acknowledged the involvement of for-profit organizations, as social marketing requires “all the help it can get” to tackle wicked problems. As a response, corporate social marketing (CSM) has emerged as an extension of social marketing encompassing all corporate-led interventions that address social issues. Although researchers recognize CSM’s potential to address wicked problems, few studies examine its effectiveness.

Researchers and practitioners employ the social marketing benchmark criteria (SMBC) – customer orientation, behavior, theory, insight, exchange, competition, segmentation, and methods mix – to define social marketing interventions and evaluate their effectiveness. CSM applies similar benchmark criteria as government-funded or non-profit-led social marketing interventions.

This study explores how SMBCs manifest in the implementation of CSM interventions within mobile apps and assesses the extent to which social marketers integrate these criteria in the CSM context. This research adopts obesity as a methodological context, using apps targeting eating habits and/or physical activity as the focus to investigate broader theoretical implications.

We employed a keyword-based search on the Google Play Store to gather health apps targeting eating habits and/or physical activity, resulting in twenty-six health apps based on the keywords “calorie counter” and “activity tracker”. We then conducted a content analysis against the SMBCs using all publicly available information from the websites of the selected apps and their pages on the Google Play Store and Apple App Store.

To assess the presence and extent of integration of the SMBC within health apps, we developed a checklist based on prior literature on SMBC in the context of government-funded and non-profit-led social marketing interventions. We formulated five questions for each of the eight criteria, resulting in a 40-question checklist. To determine the presence of a criterion, at least one question must be answered “yes” (absence implies that all questions are answered “no”). We assessed the extent of integration as follows: “not integrated” (0 “yes”), “partially integrated” (1 to 4 “yes”), and “fully integrated” (5 “yes”). A lack of information regarding a criterion results in a “no” response, meaning that the absence of a criterion may indicate either its non-application or simply a lack of reported information on its application.

We uncovered that the only criteria with full integration are behavior and methods mix, as health apps primarily drive behavior change by employing the 4Ps. Conversely, theory stands out as the sole criterion with non-integration, as many interventions do not explicitly reference or apply theory. Overall, we observed partial integration for most benchmark criteria (5 out of 8), reflecting a selective application of social marketing principles within these interventions and the challenges social marketers face in fully embracing theoretical underpinnings.

Keywords: Corporate Social Marketing; Health Apps.

Natália Lemos [ID 10974]

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