



Effectiveness of Social Marketing Communication Strategies Amid COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to examine the effectiveness of different social marketing communication strategies and evaluate their appropriateness to situational needs amid COVID-19 pandemic. In-Depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants using the Zoom video conferencing tool to investigate the effectiveness of three wearing mask campaign developed by i) health service, ii) celebrity musicians and iii) business company pertaining to the COVID-19 pandemic in Turkey. The findings suggest that during predicaments such as outbreaks, social marketing campaigns with a fear factor are effective to encourage communities to behave appropriately. Direct messages giving clear information about the crises and its risks are effective to change individuals' behaviour. Besides, a congruence between the message and the source has a great impact on the effectiveness of a health-related campaign during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This study was conducted during the lockdown in COVID-19. To measure individual real-time feeling and thoughts, semi-structured in-depth interview method with open-ended questions was used. Therefore, findings of this study may help government, institutions and companies to provide more effective campaigns during extraordinary times like it is in the case with coronavirus pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19; Social marketing; Communication effects; Public health

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 has evolved into a pandemic in a short time. It's a droplet infection and was quickly understood that preventing the spread of the virus is crucial. Extensive and quick behavior change is required to reduce transmission of the COVID-19 virus [1]. Social distancing, staying at home, wearing face mask in public and frequent hand washing are some of these precautions [2]. In the early stages of the COVID-19 epidemic and pandemic, a number of medical professionals, medical authorities, governments and the World Health Organization (WHO), have focused on the lack of the effectiveness of wearing masks. There seem to have been two common reasons for reluctance to wear face masks. One is a genuine lack of knowledge regarding their effectiveness, and another is the fear in many countries that there were insufficient amount of masks for medical staff. Unfortunately, in only a few countries mask use was encouraged from the start of the pandemic by the governments, despite long standing evidence of their effectiveness.

By April 2020, most authorities have changed their advice to recommend or even compel citizens to wear face masks in public.

WHO updated its mask guidance on June 5, 2020 according to the new guidance, the general public should wear masks where there is widespread transmission and when there is no physical distancing, such as on public transport, in department stores or in other confined or crowded environments.

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a massive health-related campaign to slow spread of the virus by promoting voluntary behavior change. Many social marketing challenges were revealed by governments, health services, celebrities and businesses. Some of them focus on providing information about the risks of COVID-19, raising apprehension and persuading the community to wear face masks. Some prefer fun-oriented social marketing to encourage community to wear mask. They try to use creative methods to optimize the prospect of inducing the desired behavior. For example, some car brands released separated logo in their campaigns to promote the importance of social distancing during COVID-19 pandemic. Besides, in order to encourage every section of the population to wear mask, various groups and establishments created slogans and campaigns. New media such as YouTube, Instagram and Facebook are used as well as traditional media, such as TV and radio.

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For social marketing providers the effectiveness of their designed campaign is important and a great challenge due to complexity of the concerns they want to address. To create an effective social marketing, designers try to attract audience's attention more. For this reason, they use emotion as an effective method to draw attention [3]. Health-related campaigns use emotion, especially negative ones to change attitude and behaviour [4]. Previous research about commercial marketing communication has shown congruence between the characteristics of the message source and product increase in the effectiveness of the product marketing messages [5]. Other research in social marketing communication is consistent with this line of work, suggesting congruence between message source and message content.

The purpose of the current study is to assess the effectiveness of social marketing challenges during a pandemic. Since health-related campaigns are the most important tools for disease prevention in a precarious situation, our aim in this study is to show what kind of communication strategies would be more effective to encourage the community to change behaviour. Since the nature of the source on message effectiveness is known, we tried to find the effect of the congruence between message source and message content. Our research contributes to health-related social marketing endeavors by providing guidance for providers of campaigns to offer more effective methods.

Theoretical framework

Since social marketing was revealed by Kotler and Zaltman in 1971, there have been many types of research showing that social marketing is a powerful and influential tool which, if harness correctly, can make social awareness and behaviour change for the benefit of individuals and communities. Social marketing focuses on behaviour change using marketing principles and its aim is improving Welfare [6].

There are four approaches that social marketers should coordinate to achieve the realization of behaviours:

- A legal approach: In this approach laws, sanctions and prohibitions are used.
- A technological approach: This approach is based on technological improvement and innovations that can be helpful for behaviour change.
- An economic approach: Reducing the cost of realization of behaviour change or increasing the price to avoid undesired behaviour is useful methods in this approach.
- An informational approach: In this approach persuasive information such as fear-appeal messages, warning labels are used to convince target audience to change behaviour.

There are four major strategies that social marketers follow to define the goals of program, understanding target audience behaviour and changes in attitudes and knowledge: Reinforcement, induction, rationalization and confrontation strategies. Social marketing has been used in education, public health and environment areas since 1971, when it was defined for first time [7]. Even though social marketing is used for various concerns of society, it is greatly used to address public health issues. There are two categories of internal causes of public health problems: ignorance and motivation. In the case of ignorance, health-related communication campaigns are developed to provide accurate and relevant information related to the public health problem. Sometimes there is a lack of sufficient

motivation to change behaviour or lifestyle, so the goal of social marketing messages is motivating individuals to make changes, beneficial to themselves or their loved ones [8]. Health-related social marketing not only could be used to influence individual health behaviours but also changing attitudes of policy makers and stakeholders who influence the genuine environment for health [9]. Social marketing can be applied upstream as well as downstream. Its goal could be changing the behaviour of retailers, organizations, and legislators [10].

The feasibility of social marketing techniques was illustrated in relation to items such as: promoting physical activity the cession of smoking sexually transmitted disease prevention, engaging in appropriate preventive behaviours for bird flu and maintain social distancing amid COVID-19 pandemic [11]. There are several studies regarding health promotion in other areas of health where the effectiveness of social marketing was not confirmed.

The most effective tools to reduce morbidity and mortality from pandemic caused by the transmission of the virus are basic hygiene and self-protection behaviours. Social marketing initiatives address three of the categories of behaviour change:

- Accept a new behaviour-encourage individuals to wear face masks
- Thwart a potential behaviour-discourage individuals from close contact with each other and maintain social distancing.
- Modify a current behaviour-encourage people to wash their hands for at least 20 seconds with soap and water more frequently.

For most of social marketing challenges we need to benefit from a breakdown of strategies to target the priority population, but for the pandemic cases, it is important to target the entire population [12].

The six stages of social marketing are: Plan a strategy according to behavioural and psychological theories; selecting communication channel and materials based on the needed behavioural change and knowing the target audience; developing and pretesting; implementation of the campaign; evaluate effectiveness; feedback to refine a program. As mentioned planning a strategy is the first stage and using theories, models is very helpful for designing a successful campaign [13].

Evaluation is one of the important steps of planning a social marketing strategy seeking to measure the effectiveness of the campaign. The effectiveness of a social marketing program is defined as the extent to which a campaign achieves its intended aims. Effectiveness is relative. Studies compare programs based on their result to change individual behaviour and evaluate which program was the most effective [14].

Some systematic reviews of studies show health campaigns as effective relating to public health. Social marketing has been effective in alerting about physical activity, increasing knowledge of communities about HIV and prevention behaviour. "Sun Smart" is a cancer prevention campaign in Australia that is effective. In some cases, however, social marketing interventions are ineffective. For example, campaign against obesity has not been comparatively effective because the increase in individual obesity is caused by food industry marketing.

The most important reason for deploying emotional strategy in public health is its critical effect on behaviour change [15]. Fear is a negative emotion symptomized by emotive avoidance in relation to certain stimuli. Fear Appeal communication is used in attempts

to change behaviour by persuading or influencing through the threat of danger or harm from what could happen in the short term. Despite some adverse inclusion of fear, it is useful to reduce the engagement in risky behaviours. Low level of anxiety caused by fear makes children to consume a lower level of alcohol. The relationship between fear and disease prevention behaviour is not straightforward [16].

There are many studies that illustrate fear language in health-related social marketing communication is effective in order to motivate people to change behaviour. Nevertheless, there are several research show that negatively framed message in social marketing interventions has weak effect on behaviour change. Positive smoking cessation has better effect for communication with smokers [17]. According to Ahorsu et al., one characteristic feature of COVID-19 pandemic is fear. Fear is a negative emotion, but it may cause emotive avoidance in relation to specific stimuli. Even though fear has negative wellbeing implications, messages with a sensible level of fear could encourage behavior change that increases engagement in avoidance risky behaviours [18]. Fear emotional factor of being at risk of COVID-19 virus infection does engage a person in hand washing and social distancing [19]. According to Harper et al., fear of COVID-19 virus engage community to improve hand hygiene and social distancing as culturally and governmentally recommended public health behaviour amid the COVID-19 pandemic. The health-related communication contains a scary message regarding COVID-19 and prosocial message focused on response efficacy (emphasize on group working) and internal efficacy (emphasize on success of individual action to prevent spread of COVID-19 virus), are equally effective at boosting willingness on behaviour change [20].

Even though there are few studies showing that it could be more effective to have no congruence between source and message, there are many studies that shows there should be congruence between the characteristics of message source and the product which is promoted. Promoting a product by an expert endorser (i.e., athlete) who is related to the product (i.e., energy bar) is more effective for brand attitude. It means perceived expertise of the communication source is one of important congruence factor [21]. For social marketing messages, the importance of congruence between message and message source is higher because in health-related campaign when the source of message is a health organization or scientific authority, the persuasiveness of this communication message is much higher. When a health organization was disclosed as the message source, a work-frame message is more effective than fun-framed message to influence behaviour change [22].

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative semi-structured in-depth interview method was conducted with 40 participants from diverse geographical areas in Turkey. For data collecting convenience sampling method applied in this research. For sampling, network of researchers was used [23]. We reached some participants and these participants introduced other volunteers to us. Participants were aged between 19 and 65 years (20 males, 20 females). Seven participants have high school diploma. Fifteen participants received bachelor's degree and other participant's degrees are of master status or above. Marital status of 21 participants is single and 19 participants are married. The experiment was conducted within three weeks in June 2020 and we used Zoom video conferencing apparatus. All video of interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis and interpretation [24].

Procedure

In this study, every interview lasted approximately 25 minutes. Every participant participated in a Zoom video conference and the procedure was carefully explained to each volunteer prior to showing the videos. They were asked to report their age, gender, level of education and marital status. Later three videos were shown to participants in a randomized sequence to reduce the likelihood of order effects influencing the validity of collected data. After watching videos, participants were asked to explain their opinion about the campaigns. Later they were asked 7 question: (a) Have you ever watched any of these videos? If you have, was it on TV or Social Media? (b) Which one of these videos attracts your attention? Why? (c) Which one of these videos creates awareness about wearing mask during the pandemic? Why? (d) Which one of these videos do you share with others in your social circles if you want to create awareness about wearing face mask during the COVID-19 pandemic? (e) Do you remember the brand of the business company that developed one of the campaigns? (f) Do you find these campaigns memorable? (g) Do you find these campaigns persuasive?

Stimulus materials

Three social marketing initiatives regarding wearing mask during the COVID-19 pandemic broadcast on TV and social media were selected. The content of these videos is about the advantages of wearing face masks to prevent the spread of COVID-19 virus.

The first campaign developed by The Ministry of Health of Turkey and is a public service announcement. The length of this video is 26 seconds and one authorized expert who wears a face mask explains the difficulties of wearing masks for personnel in hospitals [25]. He attempts to motivate the community to wear masks by appealing to their emotions. The background noise is heartbeat sound similar to what you would hear in a ICUs and it shows the complex problems of infected patients in hospital. At the end, the medical expert says that we will overcome the coronavirus by wearing masks (Figure 1).

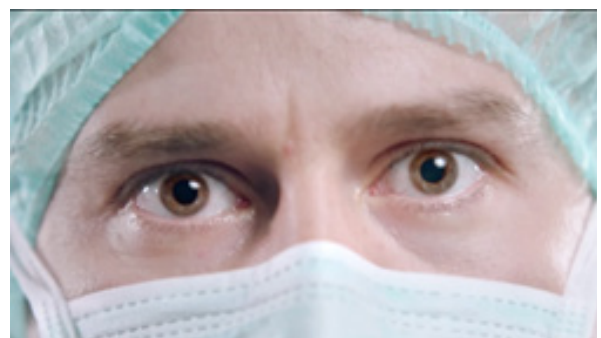


Figure 1: A shot from The Ministry of Health campaign video.

The second video was developed by a famous pop music group in Turkey. They have been popular music group members to many Turkish people for more than 35 years. They used one of their songs with revised lyrics to send their messages during the Covid-19 pandemic. The message of the song is encouraging people to wear a mask everywhere. They try to explain that if we wear face masks and keep social distancing these difficult days will soon come to an end. The video duration is 46 seconds (Figure 2).



Figure 2: A shot from the celebrity's campaign.

The third video developed was by a famous jewellery company in Turkey who had modified one of their old ring advertisements to convey aptly the new message. They try to convey the message that wearing a face mask during the pandemic is more important than wearing a ring in wedding party. Their message is trying to remind people that during the COVID-19 pandemic it is better to postpone events such as weddings because health is more important. The message is: "The ring will be worn eventually, so it is better to wear your face mask now". The video length is 6 seconds (Figure 3).

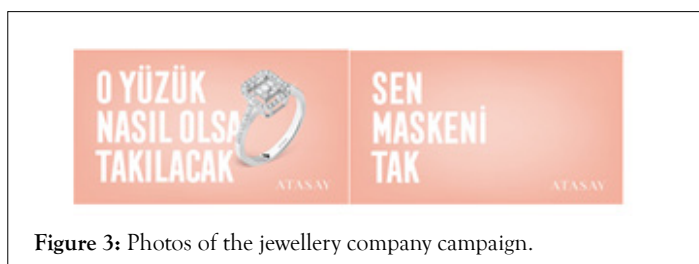


Figure 3: Photos of the jewellery company campaign.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Of the 40 participants in this study, twelve participants had not seen any of the three campaigns selected for this study. Twenty participants had seen the public service announcement created by the ministry of health. Seventeen participants had seen the Musician Group campaign and just ten participants had previously seen the campaign developed by the jewellery company. Almost 78.5% of the participant who had seen the videos before reported that they had seen these videos on TV, and 21.4% on social media. Most of the participants who had never seen these videos said that they did not watch TV [26]. Therefore, they believed if these campaign

videos are played on social media more than TV, it would be more effective to encourage the community to wear masks to prevent the virus spreading.

The opinion of the participants about the most effective campaign to attract attention and create awareness is reported in Table 1. The participants were asked to choose just one of the videos in these two questions.

As illustrated in Table 1 the first campaign attracts the attention of participants and creates more awareness than other two campaigns. Participants identified that the sound of heartbeat in the video's background and the doctor's face with his nervous eyes caused them to pay attention to his words when telling of the benefit of wearing face mask even when it is not comfortable. Participants reported that a doctor's message appeals to their emotions and is a motivator for voluntary face mask wearing. Most of the participants indicate that showing the worse results of the COVID-19 virus infection in this kind of social marketing campaign is more effective to change behaviour, as shown in the following quote:

- Showing the patient in a hospital ICU room who has difficulties breathing and the fear factor, persuade our community to wear face mask (participant 36).
- Twelve participants indicate that the campaign of the musicians' group was more useful to attract attention because they found it fun whilst the participant who found the first campaign more effective believe that fun-framed social marketing campaigns are not suitable for a perilous situation such as a virus outbreak.
- Participants indicated there was a lack of knowledge about the advantages of wearing face masks the second and third videos. Therefore, participants found these two campaigns less useful to create awareness. They illustrated it in the following quote:
 - In the musician's group campaign, the singers do not explain why we need to wear mask and just say 'wear your mask' many times (participant 5).
 - 23 Participants prefer to share the first video on their social media to bring to the attention of their friends and family. Eight participants preferred the second campaign and none of the participants preferred the sharing of the third campaign.
 - Participants expressed their opinion about memorability and persuasiveness of the campaigns in Table 2. Participants were asked to answer their opinion about every video in these two questions.

Table 1: Participant's opinion about attention attraction and awareness creation of campaigns.

Item	The number of participants who found one of the campaign videos the most effective to attract attention (%)	The number of participants who found one of the campaign videos the most effective to create awareness (%)
1 The campaign of Ministry of Health	65	77.5
2 The campaign of musicians' group	30	20
3 The campaign of jewellery company	5	2.5

Table 2: Participant's opinion about memorability and persuasiveness of campaigns.

	Item	The number of participants who found campaigns memorable (%)	The number of participants who found campaigns persuasive (%)
1	The campaign of Ministry of Health	80	90
2	The campaign of the musicians' group	85	40
3	The campaign of jewellery company	67,5	20

As illustrated in Table 2, participants believe that all three campaigns are memorable but the campaign from the Ministry of Health is the most persuasive [27]. Participants indicated that since these campaigns should encourage people to wear masks and save us from a serious disease then if advertised by a trustworthy physician the credibility would be substantial. Participants believe that direct messages from the health-related authoritative one are more effective to persuade them to wear face masks, as shown by the following quote:

If face mask wearing is really crucial amid the Covid-19 pandemic we would like to get this message from a health minister (participant 29) 82.5% of participants recalled the name of the jewellery company even if they did not find this campaign more persuasive. They remembered the brand name even though they watched it for first time in this study. Most of participants expressed their negative feelings about the jewellery company campaign and found it irritating. They believe this company used this situation to carry out a commercial advertisement while people were dying of this virus [28,29].

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study show that the fear factor emotion and anxiety have a functional role for keeping the public safe during the COVID-19 pandemic because it is effective encouraging public health-promotion behaviours. Harper et al., also found that the most important predictor of community behaviour change (e.g., hands washing, social distancing) is fear of being infected by the COVID-19 virus. Unlike previous research that showed some campaigns during the bird flu epidemic that used the fear factor which was regarded as too heavy and could cause panic, but in our study we found that campaigns showing the terrific result of the COVID-19 infection motivated the public to engage in the preventive actions like wearing face mask. The current research shows that during risky periods such as outbreaks, the fear appeal is found to be more effective in creating awareness and knowledge about health crises. It appears from the result of this study that the fear factor could be a strong motivator for positive public health behaviour change.

This finding of our study suggests that the effectiveness of the campaign will be higher if its message was direct and honest, providing clear clarification about the message of the campaign from an accepted authority figure, and this is confirmed by previous research about preventative behaviour during the avian flu pandemic. Our study yielded that congruence between the social marketing message and the source, enhances the effectiveness of the message communication in health-related campaigns. Previous study shows that for risky health-related campaigns like HIV prevention advertisement on TV, the extent of campaigns provided

by the government is more than those developed by NGOs. We observe that in a social marketing intervention planned to prevent disease by behavioural change, the credibility of a message provided by a health expert is more effective than a message given by celebrities or business companies. A message from a scientifically authoritative source may increase the persuasiveness of a campaign if the messages are related to a serious issue such as personal health and disease during an outbreak.

Even though the result of our study shows that the effectiveness of health-related campaigns developed by business companies is very low, it seems that developing such social advertisements are useful for brand recall since most of our participants remember the brand name of the company although they did not find the message effective.

Generally, health related campaigns, specifically public health announcements are broadcasted on TV. However, our research suggests that using social media such as YouTube, Instagram and Twitter as communication channels for social marketing campaigns have greater effect on reaching the whole population rather than TV broadcasts as the young generation follow the social media more than they watch TV.

The findings in this study have elements of containment for assisting government and health-related social marketers to develop more effective and precise public health campaigns in the context of the global pandemic.

LIMITATIONS

Previous research showed that the cultural orientation is one of the important variables in effectiveness of fear appeal in health-related campaigns. As we conducted this research in Turkey, the effect of cultural difference was not considered. Future research might be a study involving a number of countries in order to examine the effect of using fear appeal in social marketing between people with different characteristics and lifestyles.

We conducted this research during the COVID-19 pandemic lock down period; therefore, we used the Zoom Video conferencing apparatus. We tried to recognize the facial expressions of participant by using the saved videos of Zoom apparatus to understand their emotion responses during the viewing of the campaigns. If there is a possibility to undertake a face-to-face interview using various techniques of neuromarketing research such as GSR which could be more effective to understand the participants' emotions.

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