

Effectiveness of Social Marketing Interventions in Health Promotion: A Narrative Review with Implications for Low- and Middle-Income Countries

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ABSTRACT

Background

Public health challenges are becoming increasingly complex, and there is a growing need for approaches that extend beyond traditional health education. Social marketing has gained attention as a practical framework that applies marketing principles to encourage voluntary behaviour change and improve population health, particularly in low- and middle-income settings.

Methods

This study adopted a narrative review approach to synthesise evidence from peer-reviewed studies, theoretical perspectives, and global health reports. Sources were selected based on their relevance and contribution to understanding how social marketing is applied in health promotion practice.

Results

The findings indicate that social marketing interventions can positively influence health-related behaviour, particularly when they are guided by behavioural theory and informed by a strong understanding of the target population. Evidence from Ghana highlights the value of community-based approaches that combine service delivery with behaviour change strategies.

Conclusion

Overall, social marketing offers a flexible and practical approach to health promotion. Its impact is greatest when interventions are tailored to local contexts, guided by theory, and supported by effective policies and community engagement.

Keywords

Behavioural change; community health; Ghana; health promotion; public health; social marketing.

BACKGROUND

Health promotion is now widely recognised as extending beyond simply encouraging individuals to adopt healthier lifestyles. Increasingly, it is understood as a broader effort to address the social, economic, and

environmental factors that shape health outcomes. As these challenges become more complex, there is growing recognition that traditional health education alone is insufficient.

Within this context, social marketing has emerged as a useful and increasingly popular approach. By drawing on marketing principles, it focuses on understanding people's needs, motivations, and everyday realities and then designing interventions that make healthier choices more attractive and achievable (French & Gordon, 2021; Gordon, 2021). Unlike more traditional approaches, which often prioritise information delivery, social marketing places behaviour change at the centre of its strategy.

At the same time, different approaches to health promotion continue to provide important insights into how behaviour change can be achieved. Behavioural approaches tend to focus on individual decision-making and personal responsibility, whereas broader strategies place greater emphasis on empowerment, community participation, and structural change. Each perspective offers valuable contributions, and in practice, health promotion interventions are often most effective when these approaches are integrated to address both individual behaviours and the wider social determinants of health (Tones & Green, 2018; World Health Organisation, 2023).

Despite the growing use of social marketing in public health, there remains a need for a clearer understanding of the conditions under which these interventions are most effective, particularly in low- and middle-income countries where resources are often limited. This study, therefore, aims to synthesise existing evidence on the effectiveness of social marketing in health promotion, with particular attention to its relevance and applicability in resource-constrained settings.

METHODS

Study Design

This study employed a narrative review design to examine the effectiveness of social marketing interventions in health promotion, with particular emphasis on implications for low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). A narrative review approach was considered appropriate because it allows for the integration of diverse forms of evidence, including empirical studies, theoretical literature, policy documents, and programme reports. Unlike systematic reviews, which focus on narrowly defined research questions and strict methodological criteria, narrative reviews are useful for exploring broader conceptual and practical issues in emerging or multidisciplinary fields.

The review aimed to synthesise current knowledge on the application of social marketing principles in health promotion, identify common characteristics of successful interventions, and examine the relevance of these approaches in resource-constrained settings such as Ghana.

Search Strategy

A comprehensive literature search was conducted using major academic databases and institutional repositories, including PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and the World Health Organisation (WHO) database. Additional sources were identified through reference list screening and manual searches of key public health journals.

The search strategy combined keywords and Boolean operators related to social marketing and health promotion. Common search terms included:

- “Social marketing”
- “Health promotion”
- “Behaviour change”
- “Public health interventions”

- “Community health”
- “Low- and middle-income countries”
- “Ghana health promotion”
- “Health communication”

Searches focused primarily on literature published in the English language between 2010 and 2025 to ensure relevance to contemporary public health practice, although earlier foundational studies and seminal theoretical works were also included where necessary.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Literature was selected based on its relevance to the objectives of this review. Studies and reports were included if they:

Inclusion Criteria

1. Focused on social marketing interventions in health promotion;
2. Examined behaviour change strategies related to public health outcomes;
3. Included evidence from community-based, national, or international health programmes;
4. Discussed theoretical frameworks or practical applications of social marketing; or
5. Provided insights relevant to Low and Middle Income Countries (LMIC) settings.

Sources were excluded if they:

Exclusion Criteria

1. Focused exclusively on commercial marketing without a health promotion component;
2. Lacked sufficient methodological or conceptual detail;
3. Were not available in English; or
4. Were opinion pieces without supporting evidence.

Data Extraction and Synthesis

Relevant studies and documents were reviewed in full, and key information was extracted manually using a matrix-type table. Extracted information included:

- Study objectives;
- Type of intervention;
- Target population;
- Behavioural theories or frameworks used;
- Communication and engagement strategies;
- Reported outcomes; and
- Implications for health promotion practice.

The findings were analysed thematically. Key themes emerging from the literature included the effectiveness of social marketing interventions, determinants of successful implementation, behavioural theory integration, community engagement, digital health communication, and challenges affecting intervention sustainability.

Particular attention was given to identifying patterns across studies and understanding how interventions were adapted to different cultural and socioeconomic contexts.

Quality Considerations

Although a formal quality appraisal tool was not applied, preference was given to peer-reviewed studies, recognised theoretical frameworks, and reports from reputable organisations such as the WHO and established public health institutions. The review sought to balance foundational literature with more recent evidence to provide both historical context and contemporary relevance.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was not required for this study because it involved the review and synthesis of already published literature and did not include human participants, confidential data, or primary data collection.

Limitations of the Methodology

As a narrative review, this study is inherently subject to certain limitations. The absence of a formal systematic review protocol means that selection bias may have occurred during the identification and interpretation of relevant literature. Additionally, the heterogeneity of interventions, study designs, and outcome measures made direct comparison difficult. Nevertheless, the narrative approach provided flexibility to explore theoretical, contextual, and practical dimensions of social marketing in health promotion across diverse settings.

RESULTS

Effectiveness of Social Marketing Interventions

Social marketing interventions have demonstrated the ability to support positive changes in behaviour across a wide range of health areas. These include disease prevention, physical activity, substance use reduction, maternal and child health, and healthcare service utilisation. Although the extent of impact varies, the overall evidence suggests that social marketing can contribute meaningfully to improved health outcomes.

Key Components of Successful Interventions

A consistent finding across the literature is that successful interventions tend to share several key features. They are often grounded in behavioural theory, informed by a strong understanding of the target audience, and delivered through a combination of communication strategies and supportive services.

Rather than relying on a single approach, these interventions typically combine multiple elements such as community engagement, service accessibility, and targeted messaging (Kubacki et al., 2015; Stead et al., 2021). This integrated approach helps address both the motivation and the practical ability required for individuals to adopt healthier behaviours.

Audience segmentation, stakeholder involvement, and culturally appropriate communication also emerge as important determinants of success. Interventions that recognise local beliefs, values, and social norms are generally more effective than those based solely on generic health messages.

Application in the Ghanaian Health System

In Ghana, social marketing principles have been applied within a range of public health initiatives. One notable example is the Community-based Health Planning and Services (CHPS) programme, which aims to bring healthcare services closer to communities (Nyonator et al., 2020).

By working directly with communities and building trust, CHPS has improved access to healthcare and encouraged more positive health behaviours. The programme demonstrates how social marketing approaches can be adapted to local contexts and integrated into existing health systems. Community participation, trust-building, and culturally sensitive engagement have contributed significantly to its effectiveness.

Other health initiatives in Ghana, including campaigns promoting immunisation, malaria prevention, family planning, and maternal health, have also incorporated social marketing principles to encourage behaviour change and improve service uptake.

DISCUSSION

This review highlights the increasing importance of social marketing as a practical and adaptable approach to health promotion, especially in settings where health challenges are complex and resources are often limited. One of its major strengths is its ability to connect theory with practice, offering strategies that are both evidence-informed and grounded in real-world contexts.

Health behaviour is influenced by a wide range of factors, including personal beliefs, social norms, economic conditions, and environmental influences (Glanz et al., 2015; Michie et al., 2011). Social marketing is particularly well-suited to addressing this complexity because it encourages a deeper understanding of these influences and supports the design of interventions that reflect people's lived experiences.

The findings further suggest that social marketing interventions are most effective when they form part of a broader, integrated approach to health promotion. Interventions that combine communication strategies with accessible services, community engagement, and supportive public policies tend to have a more sustained impact. This supports the argument that individuals are more likely to change their behaviour when they possess both the motivation and the practical opportunity to act.

In the Ghanaian context, programmes such as CHPS demonstrate how these principles can be successfully applied in practice. By embedding services within communities and focusing on trust, participation, and accessibility, such initiatives create environments where behaviour change is more likely to be sustained over time.

Despite these strengths, several challenges remain. Limited financial and human resources can restrict the scale and sustainability of interventions, while sociocultural factors may influence how health messages are interpreted and received. In addition, there remains a need for stronger and more consistent evaluation frameworks to better understand the long-term effectiveness of social marketing interventions.

Looking ahead, digital technologies offer important opportunities to expand the reach and effectiveness of social marketing interventions (Carins & Rundle-Thiele, 2020; Truong, 2023). Social media platforms, mobile health technologies, and digital communication strategies can enhance audience engagement and provide more tailored health information. However, it is important to ensure that digital approaches remain inclusive and do not widen existing inequalities, particularly among populations with limited access to technology.

More broadly, there is growing recognition that health promotion efforts must address the wider social and structural determinants of health. In this regard, social marketing can play a valuable role, especially when combined with policies and interventions that seek to reduce inequalities and strengthen healthcare systems.

Strengths and Limitations

This review draws together a broad range of literature to provide a comprehensive overview of social marketing in health promotion. By integrating theoretical and practical perspectives, it contributes to a clearer understanding of how social marketing interventions function across diverse contexts.

However, as a narrative review, this study does not include a formal assessment of study quality and may therefore be subject to selection bias. The diversity of interventions and outcome measures across studies also

makes direct comparison difficult. Furthermore, much of the available evidence originates from high-income settings, highlighting the need for additional research in low- and middle-income countries.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings suggest that policymakers and practitioners should consider social marketing as part of a broader strategy for health promotion (Gordon, 2021; WHO, 2023). Interventions should be grounded in behavioural theory, informed by local context, and supported by strong evaluation frameworks.

There is also a need for greater investment in interventions that address both individual behaviours and broader structural factors influencing health outcomes. Strengthening partnerships between governments, communities, healthcare institutions, and civil society organisations may further improve the effectiveness and sustainability of health promotion initiatives.

In low- and middle-income countries, integrating social marketing principles into existing primary healthcare systems may provide a cost-effective means of improving public health outcomes and increasing community engagement.

CONCLUSION

Social marketing provides a practical and adaptable framework for addressing complex public health challenges by combining behavioural theories with real-world intervention strategies. The most effective interventions are those that are theory-driven, context-specific, and supported by strong policies and health system structures.

Looking ahead, there is a clear need to strengthen evaluation methods, improve alignment between interventions and policy, and pay greater attention to the broader social and structural determinants of health. At the same time, digital technologies present significant opportunities to enhance the reach and effectiveness of health promotion efforts, especially when combined with community-based approaches.

Overall, social marketing has considerable potential to contribute to more equitable, sustainable, and responsive health promotion strategies in both high-income and low- and middle-income settings.

Declarations

Author Contributions

Alex Darteh Afrifa: Conceptualisation, literature review, methodology, writing—original draft, supervision, review and editing.

James Kojo Prah: Methodology, critical review, supervision, and editing.

Jeffrey Agyemang Afrifa: Literature review, data synthesis, writing, and editing.

Patricia Assabil: Literature review, manuscript review, and editing.

Benjamin Nyane: Data interpretation, manuscript review, and editing.

Joyce Eshun: Literature review, manuscript preparation, and proofreading.

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