

Addressing food waste with a socio-cultural approach to social marketing

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Abstract

Purpose – The paper aims to elucidate the potential of a socio-cultural approach to social marketing. Drawing on a practice-theoretical understanding of change, the paper discusses how a socio-cultural approach can inform social marketing and enhance the possibilities of the field to address complex, multifaceted issues that require changes beyond the individual.

Design/methodology/approach – While the paper is conceptual in nature, it uses an illustrative example of food waste as the basis for an investigation of what a socio-cultural approach, rooted in practice-theoretical understanding of change, means for social marketing.

Findings – The paper is conceptual in nature but highlights new opportunities for social marketing connected to a socio-cultural approach foregrounding practice changes. The paper introduces potential roles that social marketers can adopt to initiate and support practice changes in the context of food waste.

Practical implications – The paper emphasises the importance of focussing on the socio-culture and practices connected to the issue in question, both when scoping for insight and when developing the ways to address it.

Originality/value – By integrating a practice-theoretical understanding of change, social marketing and food waste literature, the paper offers novel insights about the potential of adopting a socio-cultural approach to social marketing. The paper discusses a socio-cultural approach to social marketing in context, emphasising the roles social marketers can play in practice changes.

Keywords Social marketing theory, Socio-cultural approach, Social change, Strategic social marketing, Sustainable food, Sustainability, Practice theories, Sustainable food consumption

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

Theory plays a central role in social marketing, guiding the understanding about reality, consumers and how (social) change occurs. Traditionally, social marketing has adopted the assumption of a rational individual who acts upon cognitions (Brennan *et al.*, 2014). This type of approach has been referred to as the “traditionalist” paradigm within social marketing (Gordon and Gurrieri, 2014), where traditional marketing models such as 4Ps have been favoured. This paradigm has been the central target of the criticism coming both from outside (Bakan, 2016) and inside the field (Lefebvre, 2012; Spotswood *et al.*, 2012), highlighting the inadequate effect of individual behaviour changes in reaching substantial social change. During its existence, the social marketing field has, however, expanded its



scope, and researchers have broadened the field with more critical reflections upon the prevailing understandings and assumptions within the discipline (Dibb, 2014; Domegan *et al.*, 2016; Gordon *et al.*, 2016; Gordon and Gurrieri, 2014; Spotswood *et al.*, 2012). This expansion of the scope can be seen in the emergence of the social ecologist and critical social marketing paradigms within the social marketing field (Gordon and Gurrieri, 2014).

Currently, we live in a world full of very complex, even wicked problems. These types of wicked problems are not only difficult to solve but also to define, as they include multiple dimensions and are connected to multiple stakeholders with varying agendas (Rittel and Webber, 1973). Here, as a discipline focussed on accelerating change towards a better future, social marketing has an important while highly challenging mission (Gordon *et al.*, 2016). To be able to address multifaceted, complex issues, social marketing has been broadened with approaches such as systems-based models of social marketing (Collins *et al.*, 2010; Domegan *et al.*, 2016), upstream social marketing (Gordon, 2013a), social movement theory (Gurrieri *et al.*, 2018) and macro-social marketing (Kennedy, 2016), to mention a few. While these are different types of approaches to social marketing, all have challenged the view of an individual consumer's mind as a black box that needs altering and instead view the pursuit of change on a different, broader level.

This paper focusses on the potential of a socio-cultural approach to social marketing. This refers to the use of theories specifically focussed on the social and cultural, and this way the paper extends the research efforts initiated by social marketing researchers (Spotswood and Tapp, 2013; Spotswood *et al.*, 2017; Spotswood *et al.*, 2021). The socio-cultural approach adopted in this paper is grounded in a practice-theoretical understanding of the organisation of everyday life (Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki, 2016; Warde, 2005). Practice theories propose that the social world is constructed through routinised, socially and culturally shared ways of doings and sayings that consist of different interconnected elements (Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki, 2016). These include, for instance, everyday practices of eating a meal, cleaning and commuting, which are carried out in a similar routine-like way. In line with practice-theoretical thinking, individuals are seen as "carriers or hosts of a practice" (Shove *et al.*, 2012, p. 7) rather than putting their agency into the centre stage. The utilisation of practice theories has gained momentum, especially in the sustainability sector, where issues need urgent actions and the current approaches seem inadequate in addressing the mundane, routine-like actions deeply rooted in the social and cultural conventions (Spurling *et al.*, 2013; Strengers and Maller, 2015; Vihalemm *et al.*, 2015; Watson, 2017; Watson *et al.*, 2020). Using practices as the main unit of focus and the primary location for change lifts the pressure from the shoulders of individuals as sole drivers for change (Spotswood and Tapp, 2013; Spotswood *et al.*, 2017; Welch, 2016), as the social change is ultimately considered to arise from practice changes (Warde, 2005; Welch, 2016). From a social marketing perspective, the initiatives aiming for some sort of change should thus be directed at transforming practices instead of individual behaviours.

The purpose of this paper is to strengthen social marketing's contribution to social change. Continuing and extending the conceptual work started by Spotswood *et al.* (2017) and Spotswood *et al.* (2021), this paper elaborates how change occurs from a practice-theoretical perspective, what this type of approach means for social marketing and what kinds of roles social marketers can adopt in practice changes. In line with the critical stream within social marketing (Gordon, 2018), the purpose of the paper is, thus, to broaden the field's scope and enhance its possibilities to foster social change by utilising a theoretical lens that could help with overcoming some challenges within the field. This type of endeavour to expand social marketing to achieve broader results has been called for in earlier literature (Dibb, 2014; Gordon, 2013b; Lefebvre, 2012).

Although conceptual in nature, this paper uses food waste as a case through which a socio-cultural approach to social marketing is illustrated. While food waste has gained some interest among social marketing researchers (Hodgkins *et al.*, 2019; Kim *et al.*, 2019; Pearson and Perera, 2018), these studies have not specifically focussed on the topic as a socio-cultural phenomenon. Research on food waste campaigns have indicated that existing food waste campaigns and programmes are still heavily focussed on capacity building through information sharing (Aschemann-Witzel *et al.*, 2017), thus following the traditionalist approach of social marketing by focussing on cognitive aspects. The illustrative example presented in this paper aims to highlight the importance of understanding food waste as a socio-cultural phenomenon and draws its notions on socio-culturally inclined food waste research with a practice-theoretical lens (Evans, 2012; Närvänen *et al.*, 2018). With the help of the illustrative case of food waste, the paper also provides concrete examples of the roles social marketers can take when initiating changes in practices.

The structure of this paper is informed by the work of Jaakkola (2020) and MacInnis (2011), who discussed the role of conceptual developments in the field of marketing. First, the theoretical approach of the research is defined. To guide the introduction of a socio-cultural approach to social marketing, the paper uses a practice-theoretical lens, which works as a “method theory” (Jaakkola, 2020) that is used to amend the social marketing approaches. Then, with the help of an illustrative case example of food waste, the paper discusses what kind of revising (MacInnis, 2011) in the field of social marketing this type of approach requires. The paper places significant attention on justifying practices as the main level of analysis (Jaakkola, 2020). Furthermore, it is discussed what this type of shift in the focus means for social marketing, especially when scoping insight about the issue and developing social marketing actions (Spotswood *et al.*, 2017). The paper concludes with a discussion of the main contributions this research has for theory and practice.

Defining a socio-cultural approach to social marketing

The theoretical approach adopted in this paper highlights the importance of the social and cultural context when addressing behaviours and change. The field of marketing and consumer research has experienced a growing interest in studying phenomena from a socio-cultural perspective (Arnould and Thompson, 2005; Fitchett and Caruana, 2015; Moisander and Valtonen, 2006). In the social marketing field, however, socio-cultural approaches are still rather uncommon. Although social marketing has not neglected the social and cultural context, aspects connected to the socio-cultural context (e.g. social class) have been regarded as factors influencing consumers’ behaviours, rather than being studied or focussed on as such (Spotswood and Tapp, 2013). In the approach adopted in this paper, the role of socio-culture is seen differently: as constantly produced, reproduced, negotiated and contested among market actors (Hall, 1997). Thus, the members of a socio-culture are not only influenced by their surroundings but also constantly produce, represent and shape it through their actions. During recent years, different types of social and cultural theoretical models and approaches have been adopted in social marketing, highlighting their potential to strengthen the rigour and relevance of the field (Spotswood *et al.*, 2017; Spotswood and Tapp, 2013). Studies have, for instance, highlighted the social norms of motorcycle speeding behaviour (Duong and Parker, 2018) and discourses of alcohol consumption (Fry, 2011).

While cultural theories all grasp action and social order by “highlighting the significance of shared and collective symbolic structures of knowledge”, there are varying understandings about the “social” and the “cultural” in different forms of cultural theories (Reckwitz, 2002, pp. 245-246). (Reckwitz, 2002). The theoretical lens in this paper is based on practice-theoretical thinking, which considers that “human activity is primarily the

performance of social practices” (Welch, 2016, p. 237). While practice theories are plural, they all challenge the idea of the sovereign individual and share an understanding of social order and action taking place through social practices (Schatzki, 2002; Warde, 2016). A practice can be described as a routinised way of doings and sayings, consisting of elements that are connected to each other (Shove *et al.*, 2012; Warde, 2016). They are considered normal, socially accepted ways of life that are enacted in everyday activities (Shove *et al.*, 2012). Thus, for instance, consumers do not make a rational decision to have lunch at work with colleagues at the work cafeteria around noon, but it is rather a practice that is just carried out like that. Adopting a flat ontology (Schatzki, 2016), practice theories locate the social in the practices, and thus do not emphasise either agency or structure over each other (Reckwitz, 2002). Thus, a practice is the central unit of analysis (Welch, 2016). Individual market actors are, however, seen as important carriers or hosts of practices (Schatzki, 2002).

While practice theories can be used to understand and analyse everyday life as “it is”, they also provide an interesting account of change. Change is an inherent part of practices, and different mechanisms contribute to these changes (Watson, 2017). Shove *et al.* (2012) provide probably the most extensive theoretical conceptualisation of practice changes. They introduce practices consisting of elements of materials, meanings and competence and present how changes to these elements can lead to changes in the practices (Shove *et al.*, 2012). For instance, introduction of new technological appliance (material) may change practices of storing food (Shove and Southerton, 2000). In their policy intervention-focussed approach, Spurling *et al.* (2013) build upon this perspective of practice change and refer to it as “recrafting practices”. They also present “substituting practices” and “changing how practices interlock” as other fruitful framings for practice change (Spurling *et al.*, 2013). These practice-based framings, to be used as a tool to shift the focus of policy interventions on everyday practices instead of individual behaviours, have guided the sustainability change approaches recommended for policy but have not yet been elaborated further in social marketing.

It has been suggested that adopting a practice-theoretical lens provides not only new information about the issue in need of change but also novel targets for programmes and interventions (Welch, 2016). Thus, when applied to social marketing, the primary focus on change should thus be on changing practices, as “sources of changed behaviour lie in the development of practices themselves” (Warde, 2005, p. 140). During recent years, researchers have emphasised the potential of practice-theoretical approaches at the policy level (Hampton and Adams, 2018; Spurling *et al.*, 2013; Watson *et al.*, 2020). Furthermore, researchers have elaborated the possibilities of practice-theoretical approaches with various interventions in different contexts – for instance, in energy consumption (Gordon *et al.*, 2018b), commuting (Cass and Faulconbridge, 2016) and health (Maller, 2015). While still downplayed in social marketing research, some steps have already been taken to implement practice-theoretical thinking into the field. There are examples of studies that have mainly contributed to offering new types of insight about, for instance, green consumption for social marketing (Beatson *et al.*, 2020). However, more concrete ways to target practices in different contexts have also been elaborated; the most significant of which is the framework presented by Spotswood *et al.* (2017), which integrates practice theories and the social marketing planning process model (French *et al.*, 2010). Furthermore, Spotswood *et al.* (2021) have elaborated the ways how practice theories can disrupt social marketing. This paper joins this research path and continues the discussion of the potential of practice-theoretical understanding in social marketing.

Connecting and differentiating from other social marketing approaches

The socio-cultural approach adopted in the paper should be regarded as a theoretical perspective on understanding the organisation of everyday life and change. The approach can be considered as joining the critical stream within social marketing. Earlier characterised as a stream of literature focussing on the harmful effects of commercial marketing (Gordon, 2011), the current critical social marketing has started to address issues about and within social marketing (Gordon *et al.*, 2018a). For instance, deeper reflections upon the field's ontological, epistemological and methodological perspectives (Gordon and Gurrieri, 2014; Gurrieri *et al.*, 2013) as well as the use of a broader set of theories, have been called for to realise the field's full potential to enable social change and social good (Dibb, 2014).

The emphasis on the socio-culture in general, and practices in detail, differentiates this paper's approach from some of the other broader established approaches within social marketing. However, it is important to note that the socio-cultural approach adopted in this paper has some connections to, for instance, macro-social marketing and socio-ecological social marketing. For instance, macro-social marketing builds upon the idea that reality has different layers, and shaping the social context of behaviour is crucial when aiming for change (Kennedy, 2016). Similar to the macro-marketing understanding of reality, the social ecology framework highlights the importance of understanding the different systems and layers – including the macrosystem, exosystem, mesosystem and microsystem – influencing behaviours; it assumes they are in hierarchical relation to each other, and that changes in the “higher” system are likely to create broader changes (Collins *et al.*, 2010). While this paper shares a similar view on the need to address change beyond the individual, the main difference is that a socio-cultural approach grounded in practice-theoretical thinking locates the social within the practices and, in this sense, only focusses on one “level”. Thus, the ontologies of these approaches are substantially different. However, from a more pragmatic viewpoint, there are ways how practice-theoretical thinking could potentially open up opportunities for macro-social marketing and socio-ecological approach. As stated by Kennedy (2016), many paths are open for creating this macro-social change, and here a socio-cultural approach could be regarded as one potential avenue. On a similar note, Gordon *et al.* (2018a, 2018b) discuss that while, for instance, a social marketing programme might adopt a socio-ecological model for its overall structure; it is likely that other theories are needed to guide understanding and actions on different levels, as one single theory is seldom enough to give guidance on multiple levels. For instance, in their study on energy efficiency, Gordon *et al.* (2018a, 2018b) approached domestic energy use with a practice-theoretical lens, although the overall perspective of the study was system-based.

Wicked problem of food waste: challenges from the social marketing perspective

Currently, there is no question about the unsustainability of the levels of food waste. It has been estimated that approximately one-third of food is wasted throughout the food chain (FAO, 2019). The biggest portion of food waste is created in the later parts of the food chain, in households, and the problem seems to be similar across countries with different income levels, although earlier narratives regarded household food waste mainly as a problem of more affluent countries (UNEP, 2021). What makes household food waste, especially problematic from the sustainability perspective, is its position at the end of the food chain; thus, the resources (e.g. water, land, nutrients) used at the earlier points end up in the waste bin. In recent years, international institutions, governments and the public have faced the unsustainability of the food waste situation, and it is addressed in several national and

international sustainability agendas, such as in the United Nations' Sustainability Development Goals, and has been the subject of an increasing amount of research in different fields.

Food waste and marketing can be considered as having an uneasy relationship. At least part of the food waste problem can be traced back to marketing (Aschemann-Witzel *et al.*, 2015), boosting the excessive purchase of food products, leading to food ending up as waste. Yet food waste offers a great opportunity for marketing field to demonstrate its managerial, public policy and societal relevance, and in the recent years, the topic has gained momentum among marketing and consumer researchers (Porpino, 2016). Recent food waste studies published in the marketing field have, for instance, studied the ways in which existing campaigns have approached the topic so far (Sutinen, 2020), elaborated how different stakeholders are held responsible for the issue (Mesiranta *et al.*, 2021) and examined how consumer movements can shift the marketplace (Gollnhofer, 2017; Gollnhofer *et al.*, 2019).

The number of studies around the topic of food waste has exponentially grown during recent years (Giordano and Franco, 2021). However, the topic has only recently drawn attention in social marketing studies. Furthermore, while several initiatives and campaigns have been established around the issue, only few of them identify as social marketing (Kim *et al.*, 2020a). In social marketing research, the topic has been approached from different perspectives. In their review, Kim *et al.* (2020a) focussed on best practices for food waste campaigns and reviewed food waste initiatives on the basis of social marketing principles, suggesting that those including the most components, such as targeting and marketing mix, are more likely to succeed. Based on a social marketing campaign pilot intervention grounded in the benchmark criteria, Kim *et al.* (2020a, 2020b) have illustrated the potential efficacy of social marketing in reducing food waste. Suggestions directed at practitioners for communication have also been studied and introduced by Pearson and Perera (2018). Similarly focussing on communication, Septianto *et al.* (2020) have proposed effective ways to frame food waste in social advertising messages. Effort has been made to understand consumers' perspectives on food waste campaigns (Kim *et al.*, 2020b). Furthermore, stakeholder inclusion has been introduced as a potential strategy to broaden food waste social marketing, calling for future research to approach the topic "with theories that extend understanding further beyond the individual or recognises the individual operating within a system involving a multitude of actors" (Hodgkins *et al.*, 2019, p. 283).

While the existing social marketing studies focussing on food waste have taken important steps to seize the potential of social marketing for solving this severe sustainability concern, they do lack a critical reflection about the overall compatibility of the social marketing approach with a sustainability problem of food waste. When addressing food waste through social marketing, there are several concerns that need to be acknowledged and thought through. First, food waste can be considered a *wicked problem* (Närvänen *et al.*, 2020), which refers a problem that is multifaceted and complex, and can be understood in different ways, making it hard to solve (Rittel and Webber, 1973; Närvänen *et al.*, 2020). In the context of social marketing, it has been argued that the multidimensional nature of sustainability issues is very open to misinterpretation, potentially causing misguided social marketing approaches, focussing on only certain aspects of the issue (Beachcroft-Shaw and Ellis, 2019). With a similar perspective, Carvalho and Mazzon (2019) argue that due to its tendency to use a rather narrow theory base, social marketing might be able to achieve results and solve some small parts of the problem but fail to tackle the cause itself. While households are often presented as the biggest contributors to the food waste problem, the problem has its roots in the wider food system (Närvänen *et al.*, 2020). Thus, social marketing only focussing on individual consumers, framing them as the responsible

ones and the main drivers of change (Mesiranta *et al.*, 2021), might miss the opportunity to address the issue on a wider level.

Furthermore, food waste is a good example of a concern raised by Spotswood *et al.* (2012) about social marketing *balancing between societal and individual needs*, providing no clear solution for what to do when these are not aligned. Social marketing can be considered to have a dual purpose, aiming to increase well-being and social good for both individuals and society at large. The latter purpose of social marketing, contributing to societal well-being, has been largely based on the idea that enhancing individual consumers' well-being will eventually lead to enhanced societal well-being as an increased number of consumers adopt individual behaviour changes (Andreasen, 2002). This idea, however, becomes contested in situations where tackling societal issues is not directly connected to individual well-being, which is also the case when considering food waste: wasting less food does not directly enhance the well-being of individual consumers who should be making changes in their behaviour but is still crucial for the society at large. This also connects to a concern for the suitability of the concept of *conscious exchange*, grounded upon the calculation of costs and benefits and leading to voluntary behaviour change. The concept of "exchange" has had a central role in social marketing throughout the field's existence and is still a key principle of social marketing (Tapp and Rundle-Thiele, 2016). When covering topics such as smoking cessation, the concept of exchange has worked as a valuable tool for identifying and communicating the benefits of behaviour change. When reaching for sustainability changes such as reducing food waste, the adaptation of the concept becomes more difficult. For instance, some food waste campaigns foster food waste reduction by emphasising, for instance, the benefit of saving money (Sutinen, 2020). Focussing on one specific benefit might, however, over-simplify a complex problem and overlook other important dimensions of it. In sustainability related concerns, the gained benefit is often very abstract or even over-generational: the change is needed to ensure the well-being of the environment or future generations to come. Spotswood *et al.* (2012) presented this type of situation, where the informed exchange is very unclear, largely problematic from a social marketing perspective. Concerning food waste, overt emphasis on conscious exchange restricts social marketing's potential to address the issue.

As the described concerns show, addressing food waste through social marketing is not a straightforward task. Instead, there are several concerns that should be reflected. These include reflections on how to address the complexity of the issue, how to balance between individual well-being and societal well-being and how to deal with the blurry or even impossible "conscious exchange". While all these concerns mirror the issues related to the individual-focussed behavioural theories widely adopted in the traditionalist paradigm of social marketing, a profound shift in the overall social marketing approach is needed to tackle these concerns. Here, one potential avenue is a practice-theoretically based socio-cultural approach, which allows for addressing food waste as an issue arising from practices, not from individual behaviours. This shift in the focus, however, requires some changes in the social marketing planning process. Extending the work done by Spotswood *et al.* (2017) suggesting a multi-phased process planning outline for practice-based social marketing, the following sections discuss what adopting a socio-cultural approach based in practice theories means for the phases of scoping and developing in the context of food waste.

Scoping the problem at a socio-cultural level: understanding food waste with a practice lens

Individual consumers have often been blamed for the food waste problem (Evans, 2012), being mentioned as the main contributors of food waste in statistics. The situation has a

resemblance with wider issue of consumer responsabilisation emphasised by the neoliberal ideology (Giesler and Veresiu, 2014). The tendency of focussing on individual consumers is also evidenced in food waste campaigns, most of which share an emphasis on individuals, for instance through awareness-raising campaigns (Aschemann-Witzel *et al.*, 2017; Sutinen, 2020). In addition to this type of cognitive approach, food waste initiatives have also adopted emotional approaches as well as conative approaches such as nudging (Sutinen, 2020). However, the everyday life of households and consumers goes beyond individual choices of deciding whether to waste or not. Regarding this, a growing group of researchers have highlighted the importance of addressing the food waste issue from the socio-cultural perspective (Blichfeldt *et al.*, 2015; de Carmo Stangherlin *et al.*, 2020; Närvänen *et al.*, 2018).

Practice-theoretical understanding provides a way for studying food waste not arising from the individual consumer behaviours nor from the social structures, but from between them; from everyday practices. A practice-theoretical lens to food waste has been utilised to identify practices causing household food waste (Evans, 2012). The findings included themes such as “feeding the family”, “eating properly”, “the materiality of ‘proper’ food and its intersections with the socio-temporal demands of everyday life” and “anxieties surrounding food safety and storage” (Evans, 2012). Similarly, Southerton and Yates (2015) have attempted to understand food waste from a practice-theoretical angle and focussed on the “normal” practices of eating. Furthermore, Blichfeldt *et al.* (2015) present the practice of “objectifying edibility”, meaning relying on external cues such as “best before” dates, connected to food waste.

In addition to understanding how food waste is generated in practices, practice-theoretical food waste studies have also offered insight into how food waste is reduced in practices. For instance, through a mobile ethnographical approach, Sirola *et al.* (2019) studied the practices of consumers reporting low levels of food waste and identified different elements interlinked with practices of planning, grocery shopping, cooking, eating and handling surplus food. Temporality-related dimensions have also been elaborated, presenting food waste reduction as “dancing with potential food waste” through practices organising temporality, namely, scheduling, pausing, stretching and synchronising (Mattila *et al.*, 2019). In their research, Blichfeldt *et al.* (2015) identify “internalization of edibility” (trusting one’s own senses when assessing food) at the other end of the continuum, connected to reducing food waste.

From a practice perspective, there are no clear practices of food waste generation or reduction. Instead, there are plenty of everyday practices connected to higher or lower amounts of food waste production. Thus, studies focussing on eating and food practices also provide important insight about practices connected to food waste. Warde (2016) has done extensive work on elaborating eating as a special form of consumption and emphasises the perks of approaching eating with a practice-theoretical lens to acknowledge its rash, habitual and even unconscious nature. Warde (2016) also highlights the importance of understanding eating occasions as well as what is on a menu, both of which are also connected to food waste. Halkier (2017, p. 148), on the other hand, has elaborated on the normalisation of convenience food, highlighting the practice of eating convenience food in Denmark as “culturally expectable, but less clearly socially acceptable”. This connects to food waste, as the eating of convenience food often leads to less food waste compared to food made from scratch (Hertz and Halkier, 2017).

Developing a socio-cultural approach to social marketing: social marketers’ role in practice changes towards less food waste

While research has elaborated how a practice lens could inform policymakers (Spurling *et al.*, 2013; Vihalemm *et al.*, 2015; Watson *et al.*, 2020; Welch, 2016), not much attention has

been placed on elaborating social marketing's role in fostering practice changes (for exception, see [Spotswood et al., 2021](#)). When designing change initiatives and programmes with a socio-cultural focus, the "unit" of change is located in the socio-culture – in practices ([Spurling et al., 2013](#); [Vihalemm et al., 2015](#); [Welch, 2016](#)). In line with this, [Spotswood et al. \(2017, p. 165\)](#) suggest that "the particular tactics for change would be developed within the practice context and be based on understandings about the ways practices change". Thus, in its stance on how practices change, paper builds upon the understanding of practice change conceptualised by [Shove et al. \(2012\)](#) and developed further by [Spurling et al. \(2013\)](#) in policy intervention context.

In the context of food waste, the most fundamental principle is that social marketers should aim at changing food waste-related practices instead of changing individual consumers, which are usually considered the main agents in behaviour change models (for more elaboration on the differences between behaviours and practices, [Vihalemm et al., 2015](#)), to waste less. Based on practice-theoretical understanding, social marketing should be seen as embedded in the system of practices rather than as an external force ([Vihalemm et al., 2015](#)). Within the system of practices, social marketers may adopt different types of roles through which they can initiate and support practice changes toward less food waste. In the following, three potential roles for social marketers are presented "shapers of practices reducing food waste", "normalisers of practices reducing food waste" and "re-organisers of practice bundles connected to food waste". All these roles are based on existing theorisations on practice changes and exemplified through practice-focussed food waste studies.

Social marketers as shapers of practices producing food waste

First, based on the idea of recrafting practices ([Shove et al., 2012](#); [Spurling et al., 2013](#)), social marketers can adopt a role of "shapers of practices producing food waste". Here, the focus is on changing the practices known to be producing food waste through shaping the elements of meanings, competences and materials constituting them ([Shove et al., 2012](#)). According to [Southerton and Welch \(2015\)](#), the key to effective interventions is to address many elements of practices at once. The focus is different compared to, for instance, education that emphasises solely competences or information-sharing initiatives that focus on the practice element of meaning ([Welch, 2016](#)).

As shapers of practices producing food waste, social marketers should take into account all elements of practices known to be producing food waste and build upon insight about them ([Figure 1](#)). In earlier research, high levels of food waste have been connected to the meanings of affection ([Porpino et al., 2016](#)) and "good provider identity" ([Graham-Rowe et al., 2014](#)). To shape these types of socio-cultural meanings, social marketing programmes could focus on contesting the assumption of a "good provider" as someone who purchases a lot

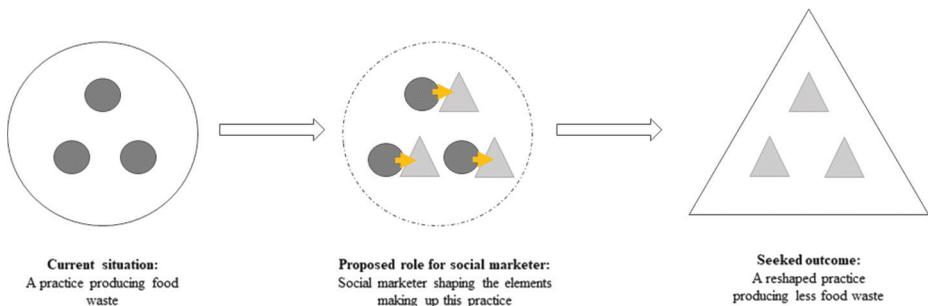


Figure 1.
Social marketers as shapers of practices producing food waste

of food for the family and highlight the positive meanings of leftover cooking by connecting this with meanings of, for instance, care and ethical example setting (Lehtokunnas *et al.*, 2020). At the same time, social marketers should make sure that there are adequate competences for the practice changes. For instance, food waste has been connected with difficulties in re-using leftover ingredients in new meals (Evans, 2012). Here, social marketers could focus on elevating leftover-cooking skills through, for instance, providing a recipe bank for typical leftovers at home. Furthermore, material elements need to be addressed. For instance, containers and aluminium wraps utilised for storing food are connected to procrastination practices leading to wasted food (Blichfeldt *et al.*, 2015). In terms of this, social marketers could support better use of them and/or support switching them into transparent ones.

Social marketers as normalisers of practices reducing food waste

Second, extending the framings of recrafting practices and substituting practices (Spurling *et al.*, 2013), another proposed role for social marketers is that of “normalisers of practices reducing food waste”. Here, instead of focussing on shaping the practices leading to higher level of food waste, the emphasis is put on supporting those practices that are connected to lower levels of food waste, by normalising them (for more research on practice normalisation processes, Gollnhofer, 2017). As a desired outcome, a food waste reducing practice that used to be uncommon would become more “normal”, and eventually substitute the practices producing food waste.

When adopting this role, as Figure 2 illustrates, social marketers should build upon insight about the practices that reduce (or even avoid) food waste and focus on elevating and supporting the elements within them. Like in the previously described role, social marketers should take into account all three elements of the practices but instead of shaping them, the purpose in this role is to make these elements more visible, salient and accessible. For instance, to normalise leftover cooking from earlier days’ scrapes, social marketers should address meanings, competences and materials making up this practice. Social marketers could emphasise positive socio-cultural meanings, such as creativity, aesthetics and ethics in connection to leftover cooking (Närvänen *et al.*, 2018). Furthermore, a competence highly relevant to the avoidance of food waste, the ability to assess the edibility through looking, smelling and eating (Blichfeldt *et al.*, 2015) is something that social marketers could aim to foster, for instance, through workshops or in co-operation with educational institutes. The focus should also be on the materials, such as certain appliances, such as blender, freezer and toaster, which often have central role in food waste reduction (Närvänen *et al.*, 2013). Regarding this, social marketers may make the food waste reducing procedures related to the use of a kitchen appliance more salient.

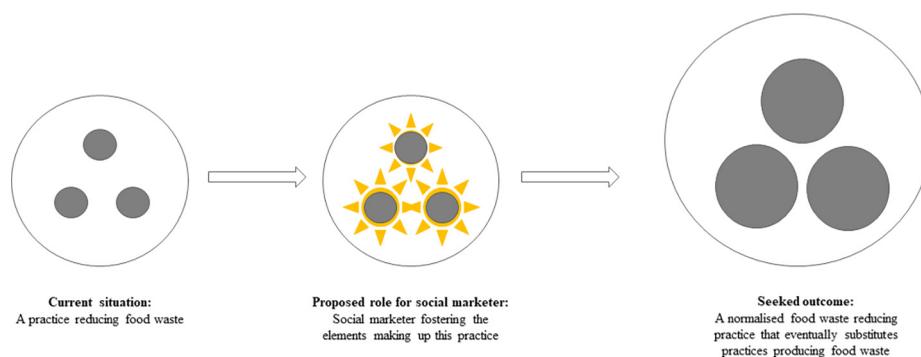
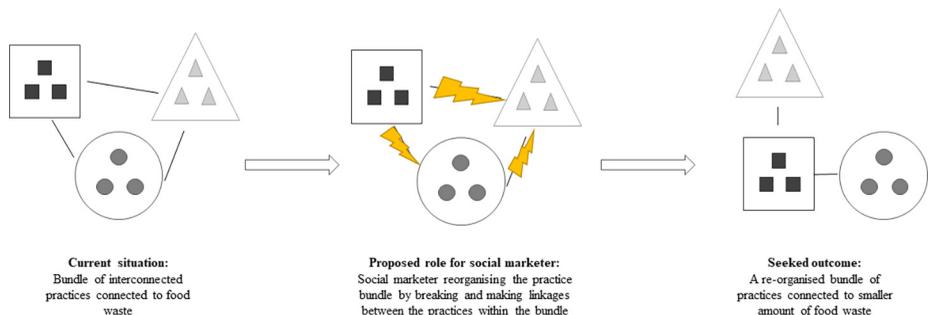


Figure 2.
Social marketers as normalisers of practices reducing food waste

Social marketers as re-organisers of practice bundles connected to food waste

The third potential role, grounded in the framing of changing the interlocks between different practices (Spurling *et al.*, 2013), is that of “re-organisers of practice bundles connected to food waste”. In this role, the attention is put on fact that practices connected to food waste occur as bundles and are performed through certain temporalities and sequences (Mattila *et al.*, 2019; Vihalemm *et al.*, 2015). This role takes a step away from the elements within the practices and instead focusses on the linkages between different practices all connected to food waste (Spurling *et al.*, 2013; Watson, 2017).

Figure 3.
Social marketers as re-organisers of practice bundles connected to food waste



As depicted in Figure 3, here social marketers attempt to initiate practice changes by re-organising the linkages between the practices that are directly or indirectly connected to food waste. Adopting this role requires a holistic understanding on the different bundles of practices around food waste and the ways how they are shaped by each other. Temporalities are especially important when assessing food waste that can be seen as a consequence of the mismatch between foodstuffs’ inevitable decay and rhythms and schedules of everyday life (Evans, 2012). In this role, social marketers should aim to disrupt these mismatches by, for instance, building upon the Mattila *et al.*’s (2019) elaboration on the practice bundles of scheduling, pausing, stretching and synchronising as ways to order temporality in food waste reduction. Social marketers could, for instance, focus on the bundle of scheduling, with an attempt to avoid food waste through focussing on re-organisation of the planning for purchases and meal plans and regularising shopping trips. In line with this, food waste is a matter connected to sequences of food-related practices or moments of action (Watson *et al.*, 2020). These include, for instance, planning, grocery shopping, cooking, eating and handling surplus food (Sirola *et al.*, 2019). To re-organise the sequences of interconnected practices, social marketers need to break some of the existing linkages and to create new ones between the practices. This might mean social marketer aiming to reduce household food waste might focus on, for instance, changing grocery shopping practices.

Discussion

This study aimed to illustrate the potential of a socio-cultural approach in social marketing using the illustrative case of food waste. Grounded in practice-theoretical thinking, the paper presented social marketers’ potential roles in changing the socio-culture through steering practices. Extending and going beyond the work of Spotswood *et al.* (2017) introducing practice-theoretical ideas into the social marketing domain, the paper proposes three concrete roles social marketers could adopt when initiating practice changes towards less food waste. Based on studies explaining practice change (Shove *et al.*, 2012; Spurling *et al.*, 2013;

Vihalemm *et al.*, 2015), these roles include “social marketers as shapers of practices producing food waste”, “social marketers as normalisers of practices reducing food waste” and “social marketers as re-organisers of practice bundles connected to food waste”.

Although this paper’s main scope was limited to the case of food waste, it argues that a socio-cultural approach has a lot to offer to social marketing, especially when addressing sustainability issues. Social marketing’s main purpose is to foster social good in the world (Kotler and Lee, 2008), covering both individual and societal well-being. Issues related to sustainability can be seen as falling to the latter. Although there are many examples of social marketing addressing sustainability-related issues, such as energy consumption (Gordon *et al.*, 2018b) and recycling (Haldeman and Turner, 2009), researchers have also brought up the inefficacy of social marketing when tackling sustainability issues and called for more effective ways to approach the topic (Peattie and Peattie, 2009). Especially the use of cognitive theories of behaviour when addressing sustainability matters is challenged by the broadly researched attitude-behaviour gap (Boulstridge and Carrigan, 2000). Furthermore, the assumption of relying on the idea that small changes in individual actions will eventually lead to large scale social changes has been challenged (Peattie and Peattie, 2009; Watson, 2017). Thus, being satisfied with merely achieving changes in individual actions is not adequate. Instead, sustainability demands fundamental changes to practices (Watson, 2017).

It is undeniable that sustainability-related concerns need urgent attention from researchers, and therefore, some radical shifts in thinking need to be considered within social marketing research and practice; here, a socio-cultural approach offers a potential avenue. Especially when grounded in practice-theoretical thinking, and taking practices as the main unit of focus, the approach takes the heavy burden off the shoulders of individual consumers as the main contributors and responsible solvers of the problem. Many researchers have suggested the practice-theoretical lens as highly useful in sustainability-related concerns, and especially with these issues, it also provides great potential for social marketing.

Theoretical contributions

This paper’s contributions are threefold. First, the paper contributes to the emerging discussion on the potential of socio-cultural approaches and especially practice-theoretical thinking in social marketing (Beatson *et al.*, 2020; Spotswood and Tapp, 2013; Spotswood *et al.*, 2017; Spotswood *et al.*, 2021). It discusses the basic assumptions and premises of this type of approach, the most significant being the idea of social change arising from changes in practices rather than changes in individual consumers’ behaviours. It is proposed that this type of shift in the unit of focus opens new ways for social marketing to foster social change (Lefebvre, 2012). Using the case of food waste as an illustrative example, the paper presents how this approach could enhance social marketing addressing a sustainability concern. The discussion presented in this paper extends the research efforts begun by Spotswood *et al.* (2017) in introducing the planning process framework, by diving deeper into the precise ways the practice-theoretical approach could inform social marketers’ role in initiating change, especially in the scoping and developing phases. The discussion presented in this paper contributes to the overall evolvement of socio-cultural approaches to social marketing, highlighting the importance of social marketing in understanding and shaping the socio-culture, as it is rather than treating it solely as one of the external factors influencing consumers’ behaviour. This type of approach can also be regarded as contributing to critical social marketing urging social marketing to be more reflexive

(Gordon and Gurrieri, 2014) and to critically analyse and develop the theories and concepts within the field (Dibb, 2014; Gordon, 2018).

Furthermore, the paper addresses the already established discussion on the uneasy relationship between social marketing and sustainability and the concerns related to social marketing for sustainability (Peattie and Peattie, 2009). Food waste, as a wicked problem, presents a good example of a sustainability issue that is difficult to tackle through, for instance, relying on individual-focussed theories. When viewed from social marketing perspective, the case includes concerns related to the complexity of the problem, the non-alignment of individual and societal well-being within sustainability and the unclear conscious exchange. All these issues are relevant for social marketing researchers to think about and reflect upon when addressing any type of sustainability issue. With an increasing number of sustainability issues arising and the urgency in tackling them, it is important for social marketing to be open to all types of possible approaches to create change. Although some of the change approaches might, for example, misalign with the considered principles of social marketing, they may hold great potential. In this sense, this paper continues the similar pragmatic stance on social marketing that has been represented as a strength of the field (Gordon, 2011; Spotswood *et al.*, 2012).

Last, the paper contributes to food waste research by opening new avenues to solve the issue of food waste (Närvänen *et al.*, 2020). Using food waste as an illustrative example, the paper has shown how a socio-cultural approach can be applied to social marketing in addressing food waste, thus making the practice-theoretical understanding more practicable (Sahakian and Wilhite, 2014). While food waste has gained some interest in social marketing research, a socio-cultural approach has remained outside the scope of published articles. As discussed in the paper, there already is a large amount of socio-cultural insight about food waste already available in the literature that could also be used in social marketing. The paper encourages transdisciplinary approaches and urges social marketing to fully unravel what is already known about the socio-cultural context of food waste.

This paper represents insight into the possibilities of socio-cultural approach for social marketing. Although presented here from the perspective of possibilities, there is no doubt that the practice-theoretical lens also includes challenges and limitations. While this paper proposed three potential roles for social marketers in practice change, it must be noted that there are also other ways to conceptualise practice changes as well as other opportunities to incorporate practice-theoretical ideas of change into social marketing. Despite the inherent limitations, it is hoped that the discussion presented in this paper will inspire both scholarly research and social marketing practice in developing social marketing that would better acknowledge the socio-cultural sphere.

Practical implications for social marketers

This paper has sought to present the potential of a socio-cultural approach in social marketing. Although the paper focussed on the case of food waste, the possibilities of a socio-cultural approach go beyond it. As the discussion in the paper shows, shifting the focus to practices opens up many new opportunities for social marketers to focus their attention and to reframe their own role in change. It is clear that it might sometimes be difficult to detect the practices connected to a certain societal problem (Spotswood *et al.*, 2017). However, as this paper's example of food waste tried to make explicit, there usually is a good deal of existing research and insight where to start from. Furthermore, it is hoped that the concrete suggestions of the social marketers' roles in practice changes can inspire practitioners in various contexts.

When addressing issues related to sustainability problems such as food waste, it is very important for social marketers to thoroughly reflect upon the phenomenon in question and critically consider the “location” of the problem. In a traditionalist paradigm, issues are often regarded as rooted in individual cognition. However, this study has aimed to argue that this is not the only possible viewpoint. Instead, elaborating the issues from a socio-cultural approach can offer new insights about the issue in question and open new avenues for social marketing (Welch, 2016). This applies to many problems of social marketing interest, as the studies have shown; for instance, leisure time activity can be regarded as connected to social class (Spotswood and Tapp, 2013), and adolescent drinking has ties to a broader drinking culture (Tran *et al.*, 2019). With any case, this type of critical evaluation about one’s own perspective and implicit understandings should be done at the very beginning of any social marketing programme or initiative.

In addition to inspiring social marketing practitioners to implement more socio-culture-focussed initiatives, the paper also has an important note for all social marketers, even when relying on more individual-focussed theories of change. Social marketers need to understand that they are powerful actors within the socio-cultural context, and the responsibilities connected to this power should be acknowledged. Social marketers are not external forces but instead embedded in the society and the complex system of practices (Vihalemm *et al.*, 2015). Thus, although the aim of the programme would not be to transform social practices, social marketers are strongly encouraged to carefully consider their own choices of words, tone and approach so that they do not unintentionally, for instance, strengthen unnecessary or even harmful socio-cultural meanings connected to the issue in question (Gurrieri *et al.*, 2013).

Conclusion

This paper aimed to discuss and show how a practice-theoretical lens can inform social marketing and strengthen the socio-culturally inclined research in the field. Due to the complexity of today’s problems and social marketing’s duty to pursue change towards a better future, the existing boundaries and set principles of social marketing should not stand in the way of creating change. To reach its ultimate goal of increasing well-being and social good in the world, the social marketing field needs to stay open to different theories of human behaviour and social change. Through the case of food waste, this paper has illustrated a socio-cultural approach to social marketing, grounded in a practice-theoretical understanding of change, as a promising avenue to address these kinds of complex issues. By adopting this approach, social marketing can play a bigger role in socio-cultural change. This effort can also be interpreted as a way of going back to the very roots of the field and putting the emphasis on the “social” in social marketing (Brennan *et al.*, 2014; Lefebvre, 2012).

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