

The prevalence of emotional and rational tone in social advertising appeals

Beatriz Casais^{a,*}  and Aline Costa Pereira^b 

^a*School of Economics and Management, University of Minho, Braga, Portugal and CICS.NOVA-UMinho, Braga, Portugal, and*

^b*School of Economics and Management, University of Minho, Braga, Portugal*

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to analyse the prevalence of emotional and rational appeals in social advertising campaigns. There are studies about the effectiveness of these tones of appeals in social marketing, but there is no evidence about their prevalent use in social advertisements.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors conducted a content analysis of forty social advertisements promoting attitudes and behaviours regarding social causes. The selected ads were in video format and were extracted from the YouTube channels of Portuguese governmental and non-governmental organisations. The ads were coded according to the characteristics of each tone of appeals and classified as emotional, rational or a mix of both.

Findings – The authors classified 25 social ads as rational appeals, 8 as emotional and 7 as a mix of both appeals. The results of the research show that social marketers have preference for the use of rational tone in social advertising campaigns.

Originality/value – This study shows that there is a disruption between theory and practice in social marketing, considering the higher prevalence of rational appeals in contexts where theory recommends emotional appeals for higher effectiveness. This evidence is surprising, considering a previous study that evidenced a higher use of emotional appeals in advertising connected to social causes than in commercial advertisements. This paper focus on how practice may disrupt theory and explores possible reasons for the phenomenon.

Keywords Emotional appeals, Rational appeals, Appeals tone, Informational appeals, Social advertisement, Social marketing appeals

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Social marketing includes several techniques to promote attitude and behaviour change (Spotswood, French, Tapp, & Stead, 2012) for the common social good (Carvalho & Mazzon, 2015). Although being considered a topic that goes beyond the simple framework of the



marketing mix applied to social issues, including also capability, opportunity and motivational conditions (Tapp & Spotswood, 2013), communication is indeed an important social marketing tool, as a way to persuade citizens to adopt social change (Wood, 2008) by providing information via relevant thinking arguments of recommendation, and/or by appealing emotionally to adopting a desired social behaviour (Lee et al., 2015). Among the communication techniques, social advertising has been highly used in mass media to persuade citizens to change behaviours with societal focus, although sometimes reactive to the context where it is applied (Casais & Proença, 2018).

Social advertising campaigns are made of appeals whose tone promotes a predisposition or reason to behaviour change. Based on the appeals used in the advertisements, the target audience pays more or less attention to the ad and its message and develops different responses to the given social recommendation (Helmig & Thaler, 2010). One of the aspects that makes social advertising campaigns more effective in persuading the target audience to abandon risky behaviours or adopt desired behaviours is the tone of the appeals used (Nicolini, Cassia, & Bellotto, 2017). Social advertising appeals may use an emotional or a rational tone (Noble, Pomeroy, & Johnson, 2014). Emotional advertising appeals convey messages that persuade the target audience through affective stimuli, appealing to emotions, independently of their positive or negative direction. Rational appeals, also called informational advertising appeals, are designed to persuade the target audience through rational thought processes (McKay-Nesbitt, Manchanda, Smith, & Huhmann, 2011; Taute, McQuitty, & Sautter, 2011).

The dichotomy between rational and emotional advertising appeals is a classic topic of research, recruiting the comprehension of psychological theories to understand consumer response to advertising appeals (Petty, Cacioppo, & Schumann, 1983; Ruiz & Sicilia, 2004). Extensive research on the effectiveness of emotional and rational advertising appeals, both in commercial (McKay-Nesbitt et al., 2011) and social advertisements (Flora & Maibach, 1990; Stevens, 2018), evidenced that context, social topics and target audiences are moderators or mediators of the effectiveness of such appeals (Noble et al., 2014).

However, besides the research of social marketing effectiveness, it is important to understand how social marketing is conducted in practice, to provide a better translation of theory into practice and infer theory based on practical knowledge (Levit & Cismaru, 2020). Indeed, there is a lack of knowledge about the prevalence of emotional and rational appeals in social advertising, resulting in a dearth of research on how social marketing theory regarding the effectiveness of emotional and rational appeals is translated into the practical use of such appeals.

Previous literature states that emotional appeals tend to be used more in social advertising campaigns than in commercial advertisements, which tend to persuade more intensively via information appeals (Sciulli & Bebkko, 2005). However, other studies have already analysed the use of the tones of appeals in social advertising, discussing their use by social topic or organisational source. This study seeks to analyse the prevalence of emotional versus rational tones in social advertising campaigns, focused on a variety of social topics, to understand whether, in practice, these campaigns follow the existing theoretical recommendations about the effectiveness of using them. Bridging this gap of knowledge may allow a deep discussion about the relationship between theory and practice in social marketing, as recommended in the literature (Levit & Cismaru, 2020), as well as a reflection on how social marketers decide the copy strategy of a social ad, particularly regarding the tone used. This topic of research allows social marketing researchers to understand the trends in social marketing practice, contributing to theoretical building in this field,

particularly whether theory and practice walk side by side in social marketing, or on the other hand, there is a gap between theory and practice.

2. Literature review

2.1 Social advertising appeals

Social advertising is a communication technique of social marketing (Lefebvre, 2011), which aims to promote behaviour change through communication campaigns broadcasted in the media to improve individual and collective health, the environment and other societal issues (Casais & Proença, 2018).

The ad design and the way the message is developed and communicated have a strong influence on the public's attitude when paying attention, listening and remembering the advertisement (McKay-Nesbitt et al., 2011). Social advertising has different outcomes in attitude, intention and behaviour, based on different message framing – the focus, the positive or negative direction, the time horizon, the content of the message, or the tone of the appeal (Helmig & Thaler, 2010). Appeals are used in social advertising to convince the public to encourage the adoption of a new behaviour that brings individual or collective benefits (Noble et al., 2014). The tone of the appeal may be rational or emotional (Helmig & Thaler, 2010), and these appeals work differently on different target audiences (McKay-Nesbitt et al., 2011), depending on how the benefits, encouragements or cognitive reasons are processed. Some people are more impacted by emotions (Aaker, Stayman, & Hagerty, 1986) and some draw on cognition and argumentative thinking when processing the ad (Cacioppo & Petty, 1982).

The effectiveness of emotional and rational appeals is connected with psychological and persuasion theories, which explain that persuasion is mediated by psychological moods (Rosselli, Skelly, & Mackie, 1995). Social cognitive theory assumes that context affects the way individuals process the message and their perceived self-efficacy to change (Bandura, 1986; R. Wood & Bandura, 1989). The elaboration likelihood model explains that attitude change depends on stimuli, such as the merit and quality of the information provided (Cacioppo & Petty, 1984). According to this theory, when the elaboration of likelihood is high, under the central route, it means that there is a motivation to engage in a recommendation via the relevant reasoning of its cognitive arguments (Cacioppo & Petty, 1982; Petty et al., 1983). On the other hand, when the peripheral route is emphasized, involvement and attitude towards the stimuli and the attractiveness of the message source have higher influence in persuasion, recruiting emotional appeals. Different targets respond differently to these two tones of appeal in social advertisement (Noble et al., 2014).

Campaigns with rational tone of appeal are designed to provide information and facts without emotions, and persuade the target audience through appeals to reasoning and reason. Rational or informational advertising appeals seek to reach the target audience's intellect by transmitting a series of logical information relevant to them and making a direct presentation of the facts to appeal to reason, thinking and awareness, without any kind of emotion present in the message (Flora & Maibach, 1990). Rational advertising appeals present information that is immediately important to the target audience and data that they accept as true. The provision of information about the problem and the presentation of solutions is the main characteristic of the informational/rational tone on advertisements (Helmig & Thaler, 2010).

In turn, campaigns with the emotional tone of appeal transmit messages that persuade the target audience through appeals to emotions (Helmig & Thaler, 2010; McKay-Nesbitt et al., 2011). Emotional appeals in social advertising are also used to persuade society as a whole to adopt behaviour that favours social and individual well-being (Brennan & Binney, 2010) by

conveying emotions by stimulating positive effects, such as enthusiasm or negative effects, such as fear and regret. Emotional advertising appeals can be positive or negative, depending on the orientation that is intended to be given to the target audience's behaviours (Casais & Proença, 2015). Negative appeals explore emotions of perceived threat and fear to elicit guilt and shame (Awagu & Basil, 2016; Gomes & Casais, 2018; Pounders, Lee, & Royne, 2018), and positive appeals explore incentives related to the benefits of behaviour change (Buyucek, Knox, & Rundle-Thiele, 2019). These emotions, both positive and negative, are stimulated through the characteristics of the advertisement, such as tone of voice, colours, music and images (Bulbul & Menon, 2010).

The characteristics of both rational appeals and emotional appeals are identified in social advertising and both are used to increase the target audience's response levels (Helmig & Thaler, 2010). However, little is known about the role and function of advertising appeals in social messages, apart from what happens in commercial advertising, where the role of appeals has already been extensively studied (Noble et al., 2014).

2.2 The effectiveness of emotional and rational appeals in social marketing

The existing literature on the effectiveness of emotional and rational advertising appeals focuses essentially on consumption products. When the advertised product has a high relevance for the consumer, rational appeals show higher effectiveness, while emotional appeals work better for products with low relevance for the consumer (Gong & Cummins, 2020; Teichert, Hardeck, Liu, & Trivedi, 2018). Emotional appeals are reported as more effective by some authors (Taute et al., 2011; Teichert et al., 2018), leading to significant viewer engagement (Stevens, 2018), but the information conveyed by the messages is more influential when the target audience are older adults, because they react more positively when exposed to rational and informational appeals (McKay-Nesbitt et al., 2011). There is also evidence that, in general, campaigns with a mix of emotional and rational/informational tone can generate more effective attitudes than when these appeals are used separately (Ruiz & Sicilia, 2004). This perspective is shared in the case of sustainable marketing, considering the heterogeneity of consumers (Kim, Jeon, & Lee, 2020).

Emotional and rational appeals are used in social marketing to persuade citizens to modify or adopt a desired behaviour. The correct tone of the call for the message to be effective may vary depending on the type of target audience (Kim et al., 2020), the context, and the social topic to be promoted – self-help/helping others and social promotion/disease prevention (Helmig & Thaler, 2010). These decisions are related with the regulatory focus theory and the health belief model, two theories that inform, respectively, about the levels of motivation to change and severity of the cause (Rosenstock, 1974), as well as the targets' promotion or prevention profile (Higgins, 1998).

Emotional appeals are reported as more effective (Parkinson, Russell-Bennett, & Previte, 2018), particularly in the case of children (Nicolini et al., 2017). Appeals aimed at producing threat and fear are very popular in social marketing (Brennan & Binney, 2010) and provoke reactions, both positive and negative (Gomes & Casais, 2018). However, some studies suggest concerns with these emotional appeals, because if the target audiences find the threat of the message to be unrealistic or exaggerated, the source organisation may suffer a loss of credibility (Hastings, Stead, & Webb, 2004). Particularly in the case of governmental organisations, negative consequences may arise at the political level. For environmental prevention, namely to promote recycling, the use of negative or positive humour combined with messages focusing on avoiding the unwanted consequences or obtaining benefits is more effective in promoting change or adoption of attitudes by the target audience (Sar & Anghelcev, 2013).

3. Methodology

There are studies on the effectiveness of using emotional and rational appeals in social marketing, but little is known about the prevalence of these tones in social advertising messages. This study intends to identify how social marketing strategists are using tone appeal and whether they follow the theoretical recommendations based on the evidences regarding the effectiveness of emotional and rational appeals.

The authors analysed social marketing advertising in Portugal broadcasted in the form of video advertisements on television or on the Internet. The authors extracted the data from YouTube channels of governmental and non-governmental organisations dedicated to social issues. YouTube is a free video sharing service, ideal for submitting marketing ads that promote beneficial and pro-social behaviours and which has achieved rapid growth in terms of popularity and the number of individual and business users in recent years (Paek, Kim, & Hove, 2010). It is proven that many researchers have already used YouTube to collect data through coding systems for academic research (Kousha, Thelwall, & Abdoli, 2012).

Meta-analysis of the literature on social marketing shows that the most addressed social challenges are cancer, AIDS, overpopulation, drug/alcohol/tobacco consumption, abuse of women, road safety, child safety, blood donation, public health and behaviours that increase the risk of heart disease (Wakefield, Loken, & Hornik, 2010). Based on this evidence, the authors searched on YouTube social advertising developed in Portugal regarding the following themes: Tobacco consumption; Blood donation; AIDS prevention; Environment Protection, Cancer Screening and Prevention; Public Health (general health issues); Child safety; Road safety; Domestic violence.

To proceed with the collection of videos, the authors examined the YouTube channels of one Portuguese Governmental Agency and one Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) for each topic. The criteria to choose the NGO was the greatest number of views on its own Youtube channel. It was found that there is not an NGO with a YouTube channel and videos on blood donation, and there is not a governmental agency with a YouTube channel for environmental protection videos. This fact is reflected in data collection about these topics.

Data selection considered the period between 2013 and 2017. The authors collected all the social ads in video format available in the YouTube channels of the selected organisations in the mentioned period. A total of 40 videos were collected for content analysis. Table 1 shows the number of videos collected according to social marketing topic and identifies the source type:– governmental organisation (GO) or Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO).

The content analysis of the forty videos collected had as main objective the understanding of the prevalence of emotional and rational tones of appeal in social advertising campaigns. Following the assumptions about the process of content analysis (Bardin, 1997), the authors conducted a pre-analysis of the data collected, explored the videos by identifying in their content the categories of analysis defined for the research, coded the references by categories and proceeded to the interpretation of the results obtained. Nvivo software was used to the content analysis process. Each video from the database was analysed and encoded through a category coding system derived from the characteristics of emotional and rational/informational appeals presented throughout the literature review. The rational tone was coded when it was identified logical information appealing to reasoning, with presentation of facts and raising awareness for a concrete solution (Flora & Maibach, 1990). For example, rational tones were considered when cognitive arguments were used, such as information on the number of deaths of a certain disease, or the incidence or prevalence of a certain social problem. The presentation of facts illustrated with numbers appeals to cognition about the vulnerability or severity of the

| Social marketing topic | Source | No. of ads | Prevalence of emotional and rational tone |
|------------------------|-----------------|------------|---|
| Tobacco | DGS (GO) | 3 | |
| | PULMONALE (NGO) | 3 | |
| Blood donation | IPST (GO) | 3 | |
| AIDS | DGS (GO) | 1 | |
| | Abraço (NGO) | 1 | |
| Environment | SPV (NGO) | 3 | |
| Cancer | DGS (GO) | 2 | |
| | LPCC (NGO) | 3 | |
| Health promotion | DGS (GO) | 3 | |
| | FPC (NGO) | 2 | |
| Child safety | GNR (GO) | 1 | |
| | APSI (NGO) | 3 | |
| Road safety | GNR (GO) | 3 | |
| | ANSR (NGO) | 3 | |
| Domestic violence | CIG (GO) | 3 | |
| | APAV (NGO) | 3 | |
| <i>Total</i> | | 40 | |

Source: Authors

Table 1.
Database by topic and source

social issue by cognitive arguments. The emotional tone were coded whenever the ad conveyed positive emotions connected to happiness, humour, love pride and hope or negative emotions such as sadness, discomfort, fear, perceived threat, guilt or blame (Casais & Proença, 2015). Incentives for behaviour change via emotional cues to active self-efficacy and the quality of life achieved by adopting the desired changes are examples of emotional tones, as well as the disincentives to maintain undesirable behaviours by scaring or threatening citizens with the dangerous consequences of such anti-social behaviours (Boudewyns, Turner, & Paquin, 2013; Dickinson-Delaporte & Holmes, 2011). These emotions, both positive and negative, may take the form of not only narratives or slogans but also music, symbols and characters and scenes (Casais & Proença, 2015). The categories of analysis created are expressed in Table 2: emotional appeals encompass happiness, comfort, enthusiasm, humour, affectivity, empathy, love, hope, relief, pride, sadness, discomfort, fear, undesired consequences, guilt, worry regret, anger, distress and frustration; rational appeals comprise the categories of analysis where the coded references involve logical information, intellectual appeal, appeals to reasoning, presentation of facts, awareness and presentation of solutions.

Some advertisements presented stimuli of both emotional and rational appeals. In cases where most of the categories identified belonged to emotional appeals and only one category, or none, belonged to rational/informational appeals, it was considered that it was a video where the emotional tone prevailed. In cases where most of the categories identified belonged to rational/informational appeals and only one category, or none, belonged to emotional appeals, it was considered that it was a video where the rational/informational tone prevailed. Finally, in cases where two or more categories of each appeal were identified, it was considered to be a video with a mix prevalence of the two tones.

To validate the coding process of the videos, the intercoder reliability process was used with six independent coders. This process is used to measure the reliability of qualitative data and the quality of classification obtained through independent coders, as the researcher's analysis inevitably ends up being characterised by a certain subjectivity

| Tone | Categories of analysis | No. of references coded | |
|---|---------------------------|-------------------------|----|
| Positive emotional | Happiness | 0 | |
| | Comfort | 0 | |
| | Enthusiasm | 5 | |
| | Humour | 1 | |
| | Affectivity | 2 | |
| | Empathy | 1 | |
| | Love | 0 | |
| | Hope | 1 | |
| | Relief | 0 | |
| | Pride | 0 | |
| | Negative emotional | Sadness | 13 |
| | | Discomfort | 8 |
| | | Fear | 8 |
| | | Undesired consequences | 13 |
| Guilt | | 7 | |
| Worry | | 14 | |
| Regret | | 1 | |
| Anger | | 6 | |
| Affliction | | 11 | |
| Frustration | | 11 | |
| <i>Total emotional references coded</i> | | 102 | |
| Rational | Logical information | 29 | |
| | Intellectual appeal | 11 | |
| | Appeals to reasoning | 21 | |
| | Presentation of facts | 16 | |
| | Awareness | 29 | |
| | Presentation of solutions | 21 | |
| <i>Total rational references coded</i> | | 127 | |
| <i>Total references coded</i> | | 229 | |

Table 2.
Categories of
analysis and number
of references coded in
emotional and
rational appeals

Source: Authors

(Rust & Cooil, 1994). Of the 40 videos encoded in the content analysis, a selection of 9 videos was made (22.5% of the total videos analysed) with different topics. The six coders recruited reacted in terms of the tone of appeals identified. The aim was to later compare the results with the coding performed in the content analysis by the authors. A 100% validation would require that the authors' 54 encodings corresponded to the researcher's encodings (9 videos × 6 encoders = 54 encodings). In this case, a correspondence of 98.15% was obtained between the analysis of the independent coders and the research authors, representing a high reliability of the coding process. The disagreements found were solved via a discussion between the coders and the code was then readjusted according to the result of that discussion. Figure 1 shows in brief the process of data analysis.

4. Results

After analysing the 40 social advertisements of Portuguese governmental and non-governmental organisations found on YouTube channels, the authors coded 229 references categories of analysis classified as emotional and rational tones of appeal. Table 2 shows the classification process of rational/informational and emotional appeals by categories of analysis.

After coding the references, the authors classified each social advertisement as emotional or rational, based on the number of emotional and rational codifications. When most of the references identified had been coded in categories belonging to emotional appeals and only one reference, or none, had been coded in a category belonging to informational appeals, the advertisement was classified as an emotional one. When most of the categories identified belonged to rational appeals and only one coded reference, or none, belonged to emotional appeals, the advertisement was classified as a rational one. And, finally, videos with references coded in two or more categories of each appeal were considered to have a mixed prevalence.

The results show that social advertisements in Portugal tend to use more appeals with rational tone. Among the 40 videos analysed, 25 were highly identified with categories belonging to the rational/informational tone and so were classified as rational appeals. Eight videos were classified as emotional tone, while the remaining seven videos were classified as a mix of the two tones in the same ad. This analysis allows to realise that social marketing strategists in Portugal avoid stimulating emotions and attach special importance to sharing information both through text and narrations, or even through sharing opinions about the topics. The categories of analysis with higher prevalence were, respectively, logic information, awareness, the presentation of solutions, appeals to reasoning and the direct presentation of facts. These results suggest that Portuguese institutions that practise social marketing prefer to disseminate campaigns with rational tones that in the literature review were defended by some authors as more effective when the target audience is an older age group (McKay-Nesbitt et al., 2011). However, these results contradict a previous study conducted that analysed printed advertisements and found that social advertisements resorted more frequently to emotional appeals than rational appeals, contrarily to what happens in commercial advertising (Sciulli & Bebko, 2005).

After the classification of social ads as emotional and rational appeals, the authors analysed that prevalence by social issue. Given the importance of segmentation in social marketing, (French & Russell-Bennett, 2015; Wettstein & Suggs, 2016), target audiences may be identified when analysing the results by social cause. The goal is to understand whether the use of different tones of appeal are in line with the theoretical recommendations presented in the literature – for example, regarding regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1998; Keller, 2006).

In topics related to health and disease prevention, such as the fight against tobacco consumption, the prevention of HIV/AIDS or the prevention of cancer and public health risks, whose main target audiences tend to be younger citizens, the governmental organisations have always chosen to use rational appeals through the presentation of information about the topics, raising awareness of the seriousness of problems and presenting solutions towards adopting attitudes of individual and collective health. In these areas, the theory states that emotional appeals should be used, especially negative ones, because when it is intended to influence behaviour linked to disease prevention, the use of messages supported by negative emotion is more effective (Dickinson-Delaporte & Holmes, 2011). The environmental prevention ads were all classified as rational appeal, excepting one with emotional tone. However, theory also promotes the effectiveness of emotional appeals in green advertising (Hartmann, Apaolaza, D'Souza, Barrutia, & Echebarria, 2014;

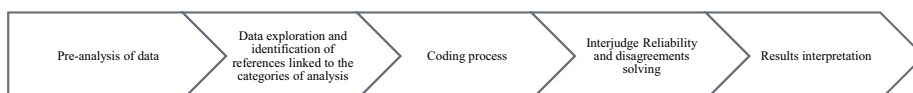


Figure 1.
Process of data analysis

Shin, Ki, & Griffin, 2017). Only the road safety videos were all classified as emotional appeals, in which categories of negative emotions were particularly identified – sadness, discomfort, fear, undesirability guilt, concern, anger, distress and frustration – through the presentation of shocking images that illustrated the negative consequences of unsafe driving. This analysis allows understanding that in almost all topics the use of the rational tone prevails, although in the governmental road safety videos the emotional tone and the mixed tone are more prevalent, and in the road safety videos from NGOs, only the emotional tone prevails. This analysis allows the authors to realise that the campaigns on road safety are in line with what the theory recommends, but the health-related video campaigns do not follow theoretical recommendations, as issues related with safety, protection and responsibility are more effective via the use of to negative emotional appeals, such as fear, worry and anger (Keller, 2006). Finally, in the social ads aimed at voluntary blood donation, the three videos analysed were classified with rational tone. In this case, the literature recommends that as it is an issue in which the target audience will voluntarily help others and thus obtain a certain social promotion, people who seek promotion are more sensitive to positive emotions, such as joy, love and affection (Crowe & Higgins, 1997). Therefore, it appears that voluntary blood donation campaigns are also not in agreement with the theoretical recommendations.

Analysing data by source organisation, 19 videos belong to governmental organisations, with 15 classified as informational/rational tone, while only 2 were classified as emotional tone appeal and another 2 as mixed tone. It was also possible to analyse in the same way the prevalence of tone appeal in the videos developed by NGOs. Among 21 campaigns, 10 were classified as rational tone, 6 as emotional tone appeal and 5 as mixed tone appeal.

5. Discussion

The results express a clear disruption of social marketing practice with theory considering the choice of tone of appeal in the copy strategy of social advertisements. Considering the importance of the theory of practice (Bourdieu, 1990), this study starts off a reflection on the decision-making process of social marketing practitioners regarding the creativity of social ads. Particularly, the discussion should focus on whether the choice of social marketing appeals is part of the art strategy and creativity or on theoretical effectiveness provided from academic literature. This is a relevant topic considering recent literature that inquires whether social marketing theory is applied by social marketing practice (Levit & Cismaru, 2020). Further, there is a need of adapting theory to evidences showed by practitioners and identify the challenges of including theoretical evidences in the practice of social marketing.

One possible reason for the use of rational appeals in cases where emotional appeals appear to be more effective according to previous studies may be the results of social advertising pre-tests, which may eventually suggest the use or effectiveness of rational appeals. Another possible reason may be precisely the absence of pre-tests and a misalignment between social practices and social marketing theory, or even the effects of value co-creation in social marketing (Domegan, Collins, Stead, McHugh, & Hughes, 2013), considering the feedback given by citizens, namely, on digital platforms, to prior campaigns. The reasons why theoretical evidences are not identified in the practice of social marketing deserves further exploratory research.

6. Conclusions

This paper concludes that social advertising campaigns in Portugal have a preference for the use of rational tone appeals via the presentation of logical information, appealing to intellect and reason, direct presentation of facts, awareness and presentation of solutions.

Only eight out of the forty analysed campaigns were classified as emotional appeals. Contrary to what is recommended by previous studies on social marketing effectiveness, in the videos related to health, the presentation of information about diseases, the dangerous consequences of non-prevention and solutions for seeking help and prevention was continuously identified, which are cases where theory recommends the use of emotional appeals as being more effective, particularly when causing negative emotions such as fear or perceived threat. It is also concluded that health prevention campaigns differentiate the use of tone by age of the target audience. As almost the totality of the videos analysed were classified as rational tone, this tone appeals may be more effective in the case of the oldest audiences, when considering the academic evidence to date. As there is a dearth of knowledge of how social marketing is conducted in practice, this study provides a contribution to social marketing literature, showing that practitioners may prefer rational appeals rather than emotional appeals. This paves the way for future research on the contexts that might favour the use of such appeals and the motivations to prefer rational than emotional appeals.

7. Implications and practical recommendations

This paper calls for a reflection on the disruption between theory and practice in social marketing. Failure to follow the theoretical recommendations could result in the ineffectiveness of social marketing campaigns. In this sense, this paper does not argue that the analysed social advertising campaigns in Portugal were ineffective, but rather that they do not follow what previous studies consider to be the most effective tone of appeal by target audience and type of social issue. These results call for the analysis of the effectiveness of such campaigns, which may eventually suggest alternative arguments favouring the use of rational appeals. Following the principles of social marketing control, social marketers should consistently evaluate the effectiveness of campaigns to find whether the prevalence of informational/rational appeals is being effective in promoting attitude and behavioural change.

8. Limitations and future research

This study considers only Portuguese campaigns and the theory available is made of studies conducted in different contexts. For a wider theoretical contribution, in the future, it would be important to analyse the prevalence of emotional and informational/rational tones of appeal in social marketing campaigns around the world, to understand whether there is a worldwide disagreement between theory and practice, and the effects of culture in the disruption evidenced.

In future research, the results of pre-tests should also be analysed to find whether the results of pre-tests lead to the tone of appeals chosen. Finally, further exploratory research should be conducted to ascertain the decision process about the tone of appeals used in social advertisements and whether it is based on theoretical evidences or managerial decisions.

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***Corresponding author**

Beatriz Casais can be contacted at: bcasais@eeg.uminho.pt

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