The political role of government-sponsored social marketing campaigns

Effi Raftopoulou
Keele University, Keele, UK, and
Margaret K. Hogg
Lancaster University, Lancaster, UK

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the political functions of government-sponsored social marketing campaigns aimed at changing citizens' behaviour and to argue for the reconsideration of the boundaries between political, public sector and social marketing.

Design/methodology/approach – Critical discourse analysis of print advertisements and promotional material of a government-sponsored social marketing campaign is used.

Findings – The paper identifies the discursive ways in which the campaign influences the public’s views of social issues and actors and discusses the role of such campaigns in the redefinition of the relationship between the citizen and the state.

Originality/value – The paper contributes to critical perspectives on the wider impact of social marketing activities on democracy by demonstrating the political impact function and effects of campaigns run by governments.

Keywords Advertising, Government, Sponsorship, Sales campaigns

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

In this paper we seek first, to challenge the boundaries between social, public sector and political marketing by drawing on a wide range of literature in order to open up the debates on this topic; and second, to contribute to critical perspectives on the wider impact of government social marketing campaigns. We do this by providing a critically informed analysis of a "social" marketing advertising campaign (in the third part of our paper) which illustrates the political character of social marketing as outlined in the first and second parts of our article. Our position in the two theoretical parts of the paper derives from earlier arguments that social marketing campaigns fall under the umbrella of political marketing, as, essentially, they influence the relationship between the citizen and the state (O'Shaughnessy, 1996). In our paper we concentrate on social marketing campaigns run by governments (also referred to as public sector marketing campaigns) and argue that such campaigns should be considered as belonging to the field of political marketing. We support our argument through a critical analysis of a social advertising campaign in the third, empirical part of our article.

Our paper falls into three parts. We begin first, by exploring the various definitions of political marketing, as our aim is to locate social marketing campaigns run by governments in this field. We then define the focus of this study – which lies at the
intersection of the fields of public sector and social marketing – and we explore the overlaps and common characteristics of these two fields. Second, the paper synthesises literature from social and public sector marketing and identifies existing literature on the political dimensions of the application of marketing in these fields. Therefore, this second section examines the political facets of government-sponsored social marketing campaigns, which are aimed at changing citizens’ behaviour. At this point we set out the arguments for broadening the traditional interpretation of political marketing. The inclusion of the government’s social marketing campaigns within the field of political marketing invites broader questions about their political impact, function and effects. Although such issues have been discussed to a limited extent in the literature, discussion of the political role of social marketing campaigns has been relatively neglected (Johansen, 2005). Third and finally, we demonstrate through an empirically-based worked example the political functions of a government-sponsored social marketing campaign. We briefly report a case study of a social marketing campaign run by the Department for Work and Pensions (hereafter DWP), to illustrate how the UK government campaign constructs the responsible citizen. We applied discourse analysis to the visual and textual aspects of the advertising messages used in the campaign and identified ways in which different views of citizenship, responsibility and benefit fraud were deployed to reach and appeal to a variety of audiences (public, policy makers and political actors). In this way, we demonstrate first how social marketing can be used as a political tool to tackle a social problem in ways which are ideologically informed, and second, the wider implications of such campaigns in shaping political actors in particular ways.

**Political, public sector and social marketing: boundaries and overlaps of the fields**

We begin this paper by exploring existing definitions of political marketing followed by a discussion of the scope and boundaries of public sector and social marketing in relation to political marketing. In this way, we aim to locate government-sponsored social marketing campaigns in relation to these three fields.

The diversity of definitions of political marketing renders the focus and the scope of the field rather unclear (Henneberg, 2002; Lock and Harris, 1996; Scammell, 1995), despite some significant developments in the application of the concept. A considerable part of the political marketing literature examines political marketing as the use of marketing by political parties, particularly in relation to pre-election campaigns (see also Lock and Harris, 1996). However, other writers argue that contemporary political marketing should not be perceived as a short-term tool, mainly focused on information gathering prior to elections, but rather, as a long-term, strategic process (Smith and Hirst, 2001). From this perspective, the primary aim of political marketing activities is seen to be to “enable political parties and voters to make the most appropriate and satisfactory decisions” (O’Cass, 1996, p. 48). However, this perspective is also rather narrow as it limits the use of political marketing to political parties. A much broader view is offered by Henneberg (2004, p. 226) who suggests that political marketing is about “facilitating the societal process of political exchange”. Henneberg’s perspective can also encompass a wider number of political actors besides political parties and voters, thus reflecting the intricate nature of the field of politics. A wider perception of...
political marketing would therefore broadly involve the “marketing of politics” (O’Shaughnessy, 2002, p. 1082) and would relate to various organisations and individuals within the political sphere.

The ambiguity of the definitions for political marketing discussed above is also mirrored in the fields of social and public sector marketing. As Webster (1975) points out, much of the confusion surrounding the definitions of the various marketing sub-fields can be attributed to the fact that some of these definitions are based on the type of organisation adopting marketing (i.e. a political party or the public sector organisation); whereas other definitions focus on product types (e.g. political ideas or policies) and these are not necessarily mutually exclusive. In the next subsection we explore further the overlaps between the fields of public sector and social marketing in order to locate the focus of the study and then we discuss their overlaps with the field of political marketing.

The public sector and the use of social marketing

Marketing has been increasingly used by governments and public sector organisations – not only for the promotion of particular services (e.g. the provision of a free flu jab or promotion of public transport) – but also for the promotion of voluntary behaviour change (e.g. campaigns against racism or gun crime). The use of marketing tools and techniques by governments is seen as a natural development of the general adoption of private-sector-based approaches in the organisation of public services, often referred to as “new public management” (Cousins, 1990; Kearsey and Varey, 1998; Laing, 2003; Pollitt, 1993; Walsh, 1991). This introduction of market rationalities and tools into public management issues has been defended on the basis that it improves efficiency and focuses more on people’s needs. Although the umbrella term for this field of marketing application is “public sector marketing”, when referring to voluntary behaviour change for the benefit of the individual or society as a whole, the term “social marketing” is seen as more appropriate (Grier and Bryant, 2005).

Public sector marketing thus refers to any marketing activity undertaken by organisations in the public sector, including the provision of services and social marketing (Fox and Kotler, 1980). Social marketing can be considered as a type of public sector marketing, when used by public organisations to promote particular social objectives (Buurma, 2001). Expanding on this, a more or less accepted definition of social marketing as “the adaptation of commercial marketing technologies to programs designed to influence the voluntary behaviour of target audiences to improve their personal welfare and that of the society of which they are a part” (Andreasen, 1994, p. 110) would incorporate a number of public sector marketing efforts. The social marketing literature in general also includes public sector marketing campaigns as an integral part of its literature (e.g. Andreasen, 1997; Buchanan et al., 1994; Hastings and Saren, 2003).

Political facets of public sector marketing campaigns

A number of marketing campaigns run by public sector organisations or governments concern highly contested political issues or policies. Some examples include a recent Spanish campaign against immigration (Elkin, 2007); a US campaign promoting American values to Muslim people (Klein, 2002); or the “WorkChoices” campaign in
Australia run by the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations that promoted major reforms to the workplace relations’ system, prior to introducing legislation to parliament (Young, 2007). At the same time, government spending on marketing campaigns has also been increasing in many countries. The UK government, for example, has consistently been one of the biggest spenders on advertising in recent years (Hastings, 2007). As a result, public sector marketing campaigns have become political events and elements of the political sphere.

Many authors argue that public sector marketing and political marketing are closely related, if not overlapping, fields. Ryan (2001) argues that any engagement between governments and citizens is essentially political, whilst Collins and Butler (2003) also point to the essential interdependency of the public sector and political forces and suggest that many public sector marketing efforts are intended to affect the behaviour of citizens in relation to important activities (such as taxation and laws) which are politically defined. In addition, the definition of political marketing discussed earlier could embrace public sector marketing, given that our citizen engagement with the public sector might be seen as political exchange.

**Political facets of social marketing**

Social marketing has essentially political underpinnings because its main focus is ultimately social welfare (Lazer and Kelly, 1973), which is also the primary concern of politics (Walsh, 1994). As Rothchild (1999) argues, social marketing is a tool for public behaviour management and this fundamentally involves political decisions. Nevertheless, social marketing campaigns are often seen as non-political. This is partly because the various definitions of social marketing emphasise the lack of benefit to the organisation undertaking the campaign and also because of the implicit assumption that public servants are not political actors (Collins and Butler, 2003). Arguably though, in social marketing campaigns run by governments, the organisations benefit through the contribution of the public towards their goals and objectives. Therefore, marketing in this context extends far beyond services to reach core operations of government including the very nature of government itself (Walsh, 1994), for example through the promotion of particular policies or initiatives (such as campaigns for the encouragement of voting).

In addition to this, as Lock and Harris (1996, p. 21) suggest, political marketing is about the “exchanges between political entities and their environments and among themselves”. In social marketing campaigns run by governments or public sector organisations (i.e. political entities), the government is no longer an impartial, external party within the process of exchange but instead plays the role of the initiator. Thus, governments often make use of marketing communications in championing particular initiatives (e.g. breastfeeding) as well in promoting their effectiveness to the public (Deacon and Golding, 1991).

Such campaigns in social marketing can arguably be seen as elements of the “permanent campaign” (Blumenthal, 1982; Sparrow and Turner, 2001, Palmer, 2002), i.e. the methods used to sustain the government in office combined with the efforts used either to convince the public of the deliverability of public policies (Butler and Collins, 1999) or to persuade them of how a particular policy contributes to the government’s aims (Buurma, 2001). O’Shaughnessy (2001) argues that, in this way,
political marketing extends far beyond the tools used to attain power; it becomes
government, it becomes part of a party’s effort to demonstrate its ability to govern
(Harrop, 1990) and sustain power (Lock and Harris, 1996).

The preceding discussion demonstrates that there are significant overlaps between
the fields of political marketing, public sector marketing and social marketing. Nevertheless, the argument here is not that the three terms could be replaced by one
all-encompassing term; instead, we argue that the distinctions between the three fields
should be recognised as being rather blurred, particularly in the case of
government-sponsored marketing campaigns.

The political nature of social marketing campaigns run by governments raises
further concerns with regards to their legitimacy as well as their effects. Although
existing literature has examined political effects broadly in relation to public sector
marketing, only limited studies have focused specifically on social marketing
campaigns. The following section provides a brief overview of the debates to date.

Public sector and social marketing: concerns over their political role and
functions
A number of writers have expressed concerns about the use of marketing in these
contexts (Andreasen, 1997; Bloom and Novelli, 1981; Brenkert, 2002). Most of these
concerns relate to practical difficulties in applications. However, a number of authors
also examine some of the broader effects of using marketing in non-commercial sectors.
We focus next on literature that specifically examines the political effects of public
sector and social marketing.

Exchange in the context of the public sphere
One of the most important issues raised when marketing is applied beyond the
commercial sphere relates to the concept of “exchange”. This is often perceived as
problematic, as it is seen to undermine the altruistic nature of organisations running
such campaigns (Hastings and Saren, 2003). As Buurma (2001) argues, in the
promotion of public policy to citizens, the latter are asked to reciprocate for public
goods through contributing to the government’s objectives, which are not always
altruistic. Rather, government objectives are likely to be politically charged and
ideologically informed because they are defined through political processes and
interactions, as well as through the influence of a large number of parties (Palmer,
2002).

In addition, using a marketing approach means that people are only invited to
change their behaviour as long as the right information is “packaged” in a way that
appeals to their own interests (rather than altruistic motives) (Buchanan et al., 1994). In
this way, social marketing brings market rationalities into the public sphere, and
replaces public debate. The use of marketing in this context is seen to alter the
relationship between governments and citizens, redefining citizens as consumers
(Collins and Butler, 2003; Ryan, 2001). Walsh (1991) further argues that the public
sector has significantly different character, conditions and tasks compared with
consumer and business markets, and that the relationship between the participants in
the consumer or business marketplace is different from that between the citizen and the
public sphere. Thus, the relationship between state and citizen cannot be based on
property rights and exchange, as it involves social goods and unequal power relations. The governing values of the public sector are also shaped by political principles rather than economic ones (Graham, 1994).

Ryan (2001) further argues that the re-conceptualisation of the relationship between the citizen and the public sector through “exchange” disregards the extent of political engagement and participation of the citizen in the public policy process; discounts the collective responsibilities of government; assumes the presence of competition in public service delivery when there is none; and oversimplifies the rather complicated relationship between a government and its citizens. Also, the principles of efficiency and effectiveness that regulate markets are seen as inappropriate for the public sector, which should be governed by justice and democratic control (Collins and Butler, 2003), and these need to be achieved, in turn, through essential political dialogue between the state and the citizen (Walsh, 1994).

**Power issues and the use of marketing in the public realm**

In addition to the concerns raised about the inappropriateness of marketing due to the different nature of the public sphere, authors have also criticised social and public sector marketing for reinforcing particular power issues. First of all, social marketing has been accused of holding the individual responsible for behaviour change, instead of looking at institutional or societal factors that determine his or her behaviour (Brenkert, 2002; Faden, 1987; McLeroy et al., 1987). This appeal to individual behavioural change is seen to avoid certain ethical, moral and political problems, such as the issue of structural change (Peattie and Peattie, 2003; Salmon, 1989). Moreover, through the mediated nature of marketing, conflicts are avoided, as there is less involvement, less resistance and fewer counterarguments by the public and the citizen body (O’Shaughnessy, 1996).

Jones (1982) further argues that the process by which one group of people seeks to cause change in other groups of people, in directions preferred by the first group, is essentially a political activity, involving the attempt to mobilise power and influence particular behaviour. MacFadyen and Hastings (2000, cited in Peattie and Peattie, 2003) also question who decides what behaviours need to change; on what basis; what means they use to achieve change; and where is the accountability for their actions? Macfadyen et al. (1999) suggest that improving citizens’ quality of life is a contested cause (also Andreasen, 1997). Taking a more extreme stance, O’Shaughnessy (1996) argues that social marketing campaigns are often run by powerful groups, such as the government itself, claiming to represent a unitary public interest.

The first two parts of this paper summarise the main areas of concern in relation to the political effects and functions of public sector and social marketing as discussed in existing literature. Following our earlier argument that social marketing campaigns run by governments could be considered as falling under the umbrella of political marketing, our aim is to further explore the political effects and functions of such campaigns. In order to achieve this, in the third part of our paper we critically analyse a government campaign and explore its effects in shaping views about political actors and political issues. We begin by outlining the campaign selected for our empirical study and then describe the method of analysis.
The campaign against fraud: overview of the material

This study investigates a social marketing campaign aimed at combating benefit fraud, commissioned by the DWP, UK. The DWP identified the main aims of this campaign to be to reinforce honest behaviour, to create a climate of intolerance towards benefit fraud and to undermine the social acceptability of benefit fraud. The campaign was also intended to warn fraudsters that those committing benefit fraud would be caught and punished (DWP, 2005). The problem of benefit fraud is identified in the campaign as a social problem with individual repercussions that citizens are called on to help overcome.

Our analysis concentrates on the advertising material and the web sites used between 2000 and 2005. Although the marketing campaign consists of a number of different elements (e.g. the free hotline, the web site), the print advertisements comprise a very prominent and visible element. In addition, advertisements are often sites of ideological struggle (Fairclough, 1989) and thus very relevant material for the analysis of the broader effects of government campaigns. Their format (pictures combined with text) also renders the advertisements suitable for the method of analysis selected.

The print advertisements comprise the main body of material that we examined. There were approximately 44 advertisements in total (although several were repeated in slightly different formats over the years). Two of the advertisements used in the campaign can be seen in Figures 1 and 2.

We also analysed additional material such as the campaign’s web sites, press releases, press cuttings and discussions in parliament (Hansard) in order to enrich our understanding of the context within which the DWP campaign took place.

Method of analysis

The printed advertisements were studied as “crafted texts” (Stern, 1996; Stern and Schröeder, 1994) using an interpretative framework where social meanings emerge (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1990). Although research within the interpretative tradition recognises that a focus on the advertising text can give insights into the ideological effects of advertising (Kates and Shaw-Garlock, 1999), much of the research focuses on either consumer readings of the advertising text (Hirschman and Thompson, 1997; Ritson and Elliott, 1999; Scott, 1994) or on the producers’ meanings within the creative process (Hackley, 2002; Soar, 2000). Although it is recognised here that an advertisement’s reading is shaped but not determined, by the text itself, a number of scholars argue for a more detailed theoretical insight into the ways in which advertising works to create meaning and the development of relevant analytic techniques (Scott, 1994; Stern and Holbrook, 1994; Stern and Schröder, 1994). Informed readings of ads are seen to be particularly useful for exploratory purposes (Brown et al., 1999) whilst rigorous textual and linguistic analysis can supplement the interpretivist tradition through better understanding of the conventions drawn upon in interpretation (Proctor et al., 2002).

Our method of analysis considers the various ways in which the visual pictures worked together with their respective written texts in the advertisements. This approach allowed us also to examine the different ways in which a reader interacts with both the textual and pictorial elements of the adverts (Hasan, 1996; Myers, 1994; Yin Yuen, 2004, cited in Young, 2007). Our framework of analysis builds on the...
principles of Critical Discourse Analysis (hereafter CDA), which is a form of discourse analysis that focuses particularly on the relationships between discourse, power and ideology (Fairclough, 1989; Fairclough, 1995; Wodak and Meyer, 2001). It is also a method of analysis that invites reflection not just on the ethical, but also on the broader political and social, functions of adverts (Pearce, 1997, 1999), and is therefore particularly relevant for the aim of this study.

Each advert was studied along three dimensions:

1. Detailed textual analysis, drawing from the field of linguistics, where the primary concern is with the “texturing” effects of texts (Fairclough, 1992b; Halliday and Hasan, 1990);

2. Micro-sociological, interpretative tradition, which explores the processes that relate to the production and consumption of the text; and
(3) Macro-sociological analysis of social practice, which firstly, explores the social practices as the context within which the interactions (between the reader and the adverts) take place; and secondly, considers the relation of the text to the existing social order (Fairclough, 1992a).

In brief, the framework of analysis is presented in Figure 3.

In the next section, whilst drawing on elements from stages 1-2 of the analysis to demonstrate the move from the textual to the macro-level of analysis, we focus mainly on stages 3-6 of the analysis of the material. We begin by identifying the “texturing effects” of the adverts (stage 3), i.e. the ways in which the texts work to represent social identities (e.g. the identity of the fraudster or that of the good citizen); social values (e.g. what makes a good citizen); social relations (e.g. the relationship between the government and the fraudster); and different worldviews (e.g. particular perspectives.
on welfare provision). At the same time, we identify the discourses, genres and styles (stage 4)[1] that underpin this process of construction and representation within the adverts. We then move to an examination of social advertising within the broader social context (stage 5), focusing particularly on its ideological functions, i.e. the ways in which social advertising works to sustain and create taken-for-granted viewpoints in relation to social issues.

Constructing social identities, relations, social values and worldviews

The different adverts and promotional web sites from the DWP campaign all depict the social actors’ identities (i.e. fraudsters, citizens, the DWP) in similar and consistent ways. On the one hand, fraudsters are generally associated with negative social values through the use of expressive vocabulary (e.g. “cheats”, “fraudulently”, “dishonestly”, “guilty”) and through reference to illegitimate behaviour (e.g. stealing the “taxpayers’ money”). Through the last phrase in particular, the text presupposes that the fraudsters harm the individual taxpayer, i.e. the law-abiding citizen, through their actions.

Furthermore, the identity of the fraudsters is created in opposition to that of citizens in a number of ways. For example, “you” is usually used to refer generally to fraudsters whilst the citizens are referred to usually as “they” or “people”. In addition, visual elements like the use of indirect angles, long shots and lack of visual contact create a sense of distance between the viewer (citizen) and the fraudster. The fraudsters are also set apart from the rest of the public through the use of a white spotlight that encircles them in the pictures. This spotlight, which resembles a target, works to single out the fraudster from the rest of the participants, as well as to represent them as the target of the campaign.

In addition to this, the adverts create a sense of unity between the government and the viewer. This is achieved through the angle of the photograph, i.e. the viewer always looks at the scene-taking place from the same perspective as the producer of the photograph. In addition, the web site texts use “we” to refer to the government and the
viewer with statements like “together we can beat”, “cost us more than £2 billion in stolen benefits” and “money that could be much better spent on our schools” thus referring to common goals and values. Through this presupposition of common values and goals the normative recommendations of the campaign i.e. that the act of reporting a fraudster assists in the enhancement of common welfare (for example, through allocating the money to more worthwhile causes) is supported. Thus, the discourse of citizenship is drawn upon to unite the government with the public through a common perspective, as well as through common aims and values.

The campaign’s web sites contain even more detailed classification of the various parties. For example, in the 2000 and 2003 promotional web sites there is reference to “those who are entitled to it (welfare benefit)”, “those who need it most” and the “right people” to refer to valid benefit claimants as opposed to benefit fraudsters who are referred to as the “wrong people”. Furthermore, there is reference to “taxpayers’ money”, “your money”, “public money”, “right money”, “wrong money”, “money from people who need it most” and “stolen benefits”. Thus, “money” is used as a differentiating principle between different social actors. In addition, these phrases classify various social actors (fraudsters, citizens, valid claimants) in terms of entitlement and need. Thus, the text draws on the prevailing discourse of welfare to differentiate between different social actors.

At the same time, the DWP’s social identity was portrayed as effective, dynamic and associated with formal authority. Through the use of multiple synonyms (e.g. “surveillance”, “watch”, “follow up”, “more investigative powers”, “we can talk to employers”, “check out the information you give us”) the advertising text puts emphasis on the DWP’s authority to check information and pursue fraudsters. Therefore, the social relations between social groups (i.e. the fraudsters and the government) are determined through the discourse of authority.

Similarly, the use of synonyms like “we’re on to you”, “we know”, “find out” and “spotted” points to the knowledge relationship of the DWP, and presumes their effectiveness in the pursuit of fraudsters. A sense of inescapability is also reinforced through the use of phrases such as “just a phone call away” or “whichever way you turn we’re on to you” which presuppose that it is only a matter of time before fraudsters are caught. Therefore, the relation between the government and fraudsters is also characterised through constant surveillance and pursuit.

Finally, the text works in a number of ways to presuppose a particular reality in relation to the social issue of benefit fraud. The use of a “slice of life” photograph, the diversity of colours, as well as the detailed context, all point to a strong claim to reality on behalf of the producer of the advert. This is also achieved through grammatical choices, such as the extensive use of declarative sentences, which also points to claims to truth on the part of the speaker.

Discussion

The infiltration of commercial practices

The text draws on a combination of economic discourses (i.e. effectiveness) and political discourses (i.e. welfare, citizenship), which is a prominent and characteristic feature of neo-liberalism (Fairclough, 2002). Similarly, the style used in the adverts to depict the “governmental organisation” indicates a move away from the rigid, formal
portrayal of organisations as distant bodies and indicates a more modern and less formal organisation in direct touch with the public (e.g. through the use of informal language), which is also a feature of neo-liberalism.

This particular combination of discourses and styles is associated with the new relationship between government and management that is denoted by the rise of “new public management”, and marked by a shift from policy and administration to management (Considine, 2001; Fairclough, 2002). In addition, this combination of discourses and styles is an indication of the “marketisation of democracy”, i.e. the infiltration of commercial practices into the realm of the political (Peters, 2001). For example, the promotional material of the campaign makes reference to “public money”, “customers” and “targets”, along with the increased emphasis on “effectiveness” in relation to the representation of the identity of the government and the DWP, which can all be seen as manifestations of the influence of the “new public management” in language. In particular the discourse of effectiveness can also be associated with an effort to convince the public of the deliverability of particular policies (see also Butler and Collins, 1999).

Similarly, the reference to “money” as a means of differentiating amongst the various participants discussed above, is also an indication of the predominance of the logic of the economy in the political discourse (Fairclough, 2002). Consequently, the advertisements, as well as the promotional web sites of the campaign, work to reproduce and sustain the existing predominant political ideology, through the adoption and transfer of the language and logic of the realm of commerce into the realm of the political.

Furthermore, as the analysis of the “Benefit Fraud” campaign shows, benefit fraudsters are represented in a particular way, through their association with an offence. The campaign depicts, for example, some of them taking up seasonal or occasional employment; others as receiving cash-in-hand; and others failing to declare the true number of people living at an address. The campaign thus defines their actions as criminal actions that harm the public. In addition to this, the identity of fraudsters is constructed in opposition to citizens and to honest benefit claimants who are really in need, through a variety of semiotic elements.

These representations are based on, and help reproduce, the particular view of welfare and thus sustain particular ideologies (i.e. neo-liberalism) and power relations between welfare subjects and the state. To be more precise, the existing perspective of welfare is based on a focus on “welfare to work”, where an individual has to satisfy a range of criteria in order to receive benefits, including for example attending job interviews and, on some occasions, accepting positions of employment. Different types of employment, such as voluntary employment or housework, do not always result in income (although they contribute to social welfare) and are, therefore, not encouraged (Carmel and Papadopoulos, 2003). In addition, alternative viewpoints in relation to employment (such as the belief in the right not to work) are marginalised and excluded from welfare provision.

Within the current perspective on welfare, the rules of entitlement are assumed to be universally accepted and this results in particular constitutions of welfare subjects, which often allow limited space for alternative discourses (Penna and O’Brien, 1996). This is achieved in the adverts through a number of elements discussed above (e.g. use
of declarative sentences, subordinate clauses, “slice-of-life” photographs). It is argued here therefore, that the campaign plays a political role, as it both supports and reproduces dominant political ideologies (i.e. neo-liberalism), and works to discursively regulate welfare subjects (Taylor, 1998). Therefore, this social marketing campaign can no longer be perceived as a politically neutral act.

Shaping citizens’ participation

The “Benefit Fraud” campaign appeals to the public to report fraudsters, on the basis of fraudsters’ non-conformity with the rules of welfare provision. The campaign calls on citizenship because it appeals to citizens’ participation in the solution of the social problem, through the act of reporting benefit fraud. This appeal to citizenship is more explicit where there is reference to the “common good” (e.g. through the phrase “money that could be much better spent on our schools and hospitals”) and to other values associated with citizenship, such as “fairness” and “social acceptance”. Through the construction of common values, citizenship, in turn, constructs and supports values and norms about what is right or wrong, fair or unfair, socially acceptable or not. These common values are taken for granted in social marketing campaigns (for example through presuppositions or the use of declarations as mentioned above) as they form the basis on which the appeal is made.

The discourse of citizenship can be seen as an ideological discourse that establishes the distinction between citizens and non-citizens, or between those citizens who do or those who do not fulfil their obligations to society, as in this case of benefit fraud (Van Dijk, 1995). Citizenship can be seen as a practice of inclusion and exclusion of political agents from a political community (Walker, 2002).

The appeal made to citizens to contribute to the solution of a social issue can also be related to a shift towards a neo-liberal logic and mode of governing, which implies an increased sense of individual responsibility. Thus, as Rose (1996) suggests, citizens are encouraged to self-regulate their behaviour and to become self-sufficient. The idea of citizenship is central both to self-regulation and to the regulation of others, as it becomes a means to empower and also to normalise the subject through the containment of political practices (Cruickshank, 1999; Nyers, 2004). As discussed earlier, citizenship entails a set of shared values and norms that regulate the behaviour of individuals (for example public participation and care for the common good). Social marketing campaigns, through an appeal to these taken-for-granted values, can be considered to “frame” the behaviour of citizens. The “Benefit Fraud” campaign, for example, through the construction of benefit fraud as an offence that affects “all of us” (web site June 2003) calls for citizen participation through reporting a fraudster. In this way, the campaign backgrounds all other solutions to the problem of fraud (for example the avoidance of error in the calculation of benefits).

In addition, the advertisements create a sense of inescapability and surveillance, e.g. the pictures usually convey the sense that someone is watching the scene without being watched, whilst the text also refers to surveillance and the investigation of the actions of fraudsters. This brings about an effect of “permanent and conscious visibility” (Foucault, 1977, p. 201) causing the individual to govern his/ her own behaviour. Thus, the adverts, through creating and reproducing the values and norms
of engagement with the welfare system, work to regulate the behaviour of welfare subjects.

Consequently, the campaign’s political functions discussed here are twofold: first, the campaign constitutes one of the tools that governments employ to persuade citizens to contribute to their aims and, second, it works to promote the government’s actions by back-grounding all other solutions to the particular social issue and by presenting the government as effective and dynamic.

Marginalising different perspectives
Another element that points to the infiltration of managerial practices into government is the combination of genres. To be more precise, the advertisements combine the advertising genre with the public service announcement genre, whilst the web sites combine the promotional web site genre with the party political genre and the public policy genre. In this way, political genres are interwoven with commercial ones. As Fairclough (2000) notes, the shift from the “political” to the “commercial” is an indication of a change in the genre of government and is seen to have an effect on the nature of public participation through avoiding or excluding political dialogue. Thus, social marketing is one of the new communication media that is replacing other forms of communications and political debates (Fairclough, 2002). In the specific case of the “Benefit Fraud” campaign, the advertisements construct a specific type of participation in the public sphere, i.e. reporting a fraudster, excluding all other possibilities for alternative perspectives or forms of participation in the social issue promoted. If the public sphere is understood as all the spaces and forms of dialogue where people engage as citizens with the issues, social marketing campaigns can be seen to confine and repress the public sphere through restricting dialogue on social issues to the realm of advertising communications. In this campaign, the only means indicated for the public to respond to the campaign is through reporting a fraudster (or through providing feedback on the campaign itself). This provides the public and the fraudsters with limited ability to express their views and engage in political debate. In addition, the producers of the advert define the content and the basis of communication. The lack of other “voices” is further accentuated through the large number of categorical assertions and the presuppositions identified in the advertisements.

As a consequence, social marketing can work to marginalise particular viewpoints and sustain and reproduce existing power relations (see also Jones, 1982; Wallack et al., 1993). As shown in the previous paragraph, the “benefit fraud” campaign takes for granted the existing welfare system and excludes other voices that could challenge this perception. Relevant arguments that debate the decline of citizenship participation have been discussed in the field of political marketing but have not yet been raised in the field of social marketing. For example, political marketing has been accused of being responsible for the declining participation in politics and for encouraging a “self-centred” approach to politics (Dermondy and Scullion, 2001, Scammell, 1995). It is shown through the analysis of this campaign how social marketing campaigns work to restrict political participation as well as to limit the opportunities for alternative perspectives to emerge.
Conclusion

Our study has examined the ways in which the benefit fraud advertisements construct and represent social identities, relations, values and worldviews. Using an interpretative framework which drew on CDA, we analysed the ways in which benefit fraudsters, the general public, the DWP and the viewer are embodied in the advertisements, as well as how the relations amongst the different groups are depicted. The aim of this analysis was to identify the political functions of this social marketing campaign.

We have demonstrated that the neo-liberal social order underpins the discursive construction of the issue of benefit fraud through the advertisements examined; and we have shown the ways in which language, as well as pictures, construct and support a particular perspective of the issue of welfare benefit fraud though presupposing particular perceptions firstly of welfare, and secondly of the role of the welfare state (e.g. welfare-to-work). This process conceals the socially constructed nature of welfare provision and stabilises the meaning of welfare, thus excluding all other views and voices. Therefore, our first argument is that social marketing campaigns have important political functions because they do not only raise issues through promoting politically defined activities to citizens, but they also work to produce and sustain a particular political ideology through the exclusion of dialogue.

In relation to this last point, we have also shown the ways in which the campaign works to discursively frame citizens’ participation in the solution of the social issue. The appeal to citizenship is rather characteristic of social marketing efforts, particularly in cases where there is no clear or significant benefit from the behaviour change suggested (e.g. in recycling campaigns). We argue that the discourse of citizenship works in a normalising, homogenising and marginalising manner to support the regulation of welfare subjects. It is suggested here that citizenship is central to a neo-liberal mode of governing, based on self-regulation and the regulation of others. Thus, the second important political function of social marketing campaigns run by governments is that they constitute part of the tools of governance. Such campaigns not only aim to convince citizens of the deliverability of particular policies but also work to create social norms through endorsing particular social behaviours whilst condemning others. Further to this, we have shown how the advertising genre restricts political dialogue, as it is, primarily a one-way form of communication. In this way, the government becomes the sole arbiter of specific social norms and values and, notably, this is done through a medium that deters dialogue. This raises significant issues, as alternative perspectives on political issues are excluded. We also question the appropriateness of marketing tools for the promotion of social issues (see also O’Shaughnessy, 2001). In this way, we revisit debates surrounding the appropriateness of marketing tools for the promotion of social issues and types of behaviour (Andreasen, 1997; Hastings, 2003; Jones, 1982; Walsh, 1991) and we broaden the concerns regarding the implications and effects of the use of these marketing communication tools.

It is shown, through the example of the “benefit fraud” advertising campaign, that social marketing by governments construct and reflect social issues in particular ways, which are politically informed and predisposed. We have also argued that such campaigns work as tools of governance to reproduce dominant
political perspectives. Despite the issues raised in this paper, the significant contribution of social marketing campaigns in the solution of social problems and in the improvement of wellbeing (e.g. Ansolabhere and Iyengar, 1995, Hastings and Saren, 2003, Hastings and Haywood, 1994) should not be discounted. Following Fairclough (1993, p. 142), who argues that a “critical awareness of language and discursive practices is a prerequisite for democratic citizenship”, we also argue for a better awareness of the political dimensions of social marketing campaigns run by governments as they play a significant role in our engagement with the public sphere as citizens.

Limitations and further research
Analysis in the present paper is based on an in-depth reading of only one advertising campaign. Although the analysis of textual (in its broad sense) material alone is uncommon in marketing research, this type of analysis is rather typical in socio-linguistic research and in particular CDA. Further to this, we focus on one advertising campaign, rather than the full range of marketing activities of the organisation. As discussed earlier, advertisements are significant sites for ideological struggle, which was the particular focus of the present paper, and they often constitute a significant and rather visible element of marketing campaigns. Their format was also conducive to the type of analysis selected (i.e. CDA). Also, as Jaworski and Coupland (1999) note, in-depth, single case analyses are entirely appropriate in discourse analytic research.

The aim of the paper is neither to provide an objective, impartial reading nor to offer a generalisable analysis. Rather, in line with most discourse analytic studies, the aim is to explain first, how certain meanings become more possible than others; and second, what can be said or written in a particular context (Cheek, 2004). We acknowledge that the analysis is highly dependent on the researchers’ outlook on the specific phenomena, and therefore issues of selectivity, partiality and prejudice in the readings of texts are unavoidable (Taylor, 2001). Further to this, the delineation of the relevant context for the interaction was also a loosely defined task, dependent on the researcher’s theoretical choice of the domain under study (Phillips and Jørgensen, 2002). Different readings of these advertisements (perhaps by the intended audiences) would enrich the study by providing additional valuable insights into the wider discourses that relate to this discursive event.

The main aim of the study was, however to examine the political effects of such campaigns, through destabilising particular conventions and taken-for-granted assumptions that support such campaigns as altruistic, neutral and free of political bias. In this way, the study advocates reconfiguration of the field of political marketing first, to allow for reconsideration and reassessment of such campaigns within the field of political marketing; and second, to allow for more extensive and in depth consideration of the political role of social marketing campaigns. This, in turn, invites the examination of a number of specific issues, e.g. the construction of the identity of the citizen through social marketing campaigns; the representation of various social groups through such campaigns; the nature of the relationship between citizens and the state and how this is shaped; and the implications for citizen’s participation and engagement with social issues.
1. Genres refer to particular ways of using language with a particular social practice, “diverse ways of acting, of producing social life, in a semiotic mode” (Chiapello and Fairclough, 2002, p. 193). Discourses are practices that signify “a domain of knowledge or experience from a particular perspective” (Fairclough, 1992a, p. 215) and styles refer to the constitution of identities through discourse and can be defined as “the discoursal aspect of ways of being” (Fairclough, 2003, p. 159), i.e. the sort of identity projected in the text by the author.

References


Further reading


About the authors
Effi Raftopoulou is currently a lecturer in Marketing at Keele University. Her research interests relate to two principal subject areas, the field of marketing communications (in particular advertising) and the field of discourse analysis. In particular she is concerned with the broader functions and role of marketing communications from an ideological perspective. In addition to this, she is interested in multi-semiotic analysis within discourse analysis and its potential contribution to the study of adverts. One of the areas that she has looked at relates to social/government advertising. Effi Raftopoulou is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: mna35@mngt.keele.ac.uk

Margaret K. Hogg holds the Chair of Consumer Behaviour and Marketing in the Department of Marketing at Lancaster University Management School. Before joining LUMS in May 2004, she was Reader in Consumer Behaviour at Manchester School of Management, UMIST. Her main research interests include identity, self and consumption, particularly distastes, negative symbolic consumption and the undesired self; and evolving notions of the self among women as mothers (e.g. new mothers; empty nesters). Her work has appeared in refereed journals including Consumption, Markets and Culture, Journal of Marketing Management; European Journal of Marketing and International Journal of Advertising.