

Viewpoint Q&A

Dr Taylor Willmott

Can you tell us about yourself and your current role?

My name is Dr. Taylor Willmott. I am a Lecturer in Marketing (Research) working within the Adelaide Business School at the University of Adelaide. With a focus on social impact, I engage in partnered research to tackle complex wicked problems such as climate change, violence, and chronic disease. The main project I am working on currently is an Australian Research Council funded [Discovery Project](#) titled "Collective Engagement Towards Social Purpose." This project aims to advance knowledge on how leaders can cultivate a shared commitment among a group of individuals toward a common social cause that benefits the broader community and their environment.

As part of this project, we have produced a six part [podcast series](#) in collaboration with the contentgroup's [The GovComms Insititute](#). All episodes are available to download on preferred streaming platforms (e.g. Apple, Spotify, Amazon, and Stitcher). I also lead several other basic and applied research programs focused on improving [social marketing theory](#) and practice through a transdisciplinary lens. Some of my notable scientific contributions include the ten social marketing theory development goals, [the TITE four-step theory](#) application process, one of the [first empirical validations of the COM-B model](#) across two behavioural contexts, and the [MATE taxonomy](#) of participatory design (access the online MATE tool [here](#)).

My recent projects have worked with industry and government partners to address issues related to consumer voice in aged care, food waste in insititutional settings, consumer adoption of circularity practices, and consumer responses to corporate social responsibility initiatives.



What attracted you to social marketing?

My first introduction to social marketing was in my Honours year. Prior to this, I had never heard of social marketing (cue the common misunderstandings – Is it social media marketing? Social advertising? Health promotion via mass media?). I majored in economics and marketing in my undergraduate studies. Both majors focused heavily on understanding and applying key theories and principles to increase economic returns for organisations with little attention paid to the social implications of pursuing profit over purpose. Although marketing has contributed to a number of the negative issues society faces today, my honours project allowed me to clearly see how marketing could be applied for good. After graduating with first class honours, I went on to complete my PhD and Postdoctoral Fellowship in social marketing. I am fascinated by human behaviour (why do we do what we do) and am intrinsically motivated to make a difference through my chosen vocation. The interdisciplinary nature and wide applicability of social marketing is what has kept me passionately engaged in the field for the past eight years. I have worked projects tackling obesity and chronic disease, population ageing, youth sexual violence and abuse, binge drinking, alcohol-fuelled violence



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and illicit drug use, smoking cessation, energy use, food waste, waterway pollution, coral bleaching, and more. The complexity and diversity of problems social marketers tackle is astonishing!

What are the most satisfying parts of your work as a social marketing researcher?

Far and away the most satisfying parts of my job are engaging with government, industry, and community partners to deliver research with real and meaningful impact. I have been fortunate to work on a number of partnered projects that have supported change at multiple levels including policy and legislative reforms, alterations to environments and infrastructure improvements, as well as positive psychosocial changes. My strongest source of inspiration for research comes from getting outside of the office, creating connections, and learning from those working in the field and those with real lived experience of the problems we are seeking to solve. Delivering impact beyond the academy continues to grow in importance for universities, funders, and broader society. I believe social marketing researchers can lead the way in working with partners to deliver more impactful research outcomes. My personal mission is to educate and empower social marketing practitioners, policy makers, and citizens alike to find new ways to work together in the interests of society and the planet.

Can you share with us a project that you are worked on that went particularly well?

From 2020-2021, I was a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at Social Marketing @ Griffith. During this time, I worked on a project funded by the Queensland Government's Department of Justice and Attorney General (DJAG). This project focused on the prevention of youth sexual violence and abuse, and aimed to co-design two community-led action plans focused on promoting safe and respectful relationships among young people (aged 12-25 years). I was the Co-Design Lead for the Toowoomba community-led action plan. As part of a whole-of-community approach, we engaged more than 300 members of the local community including young people, parents and guardians, teachers, psychologists, counsellors,

and youth workers. Partnerships were critical to the success of this project. Our team spent dedicated time building connections with local partners to ensure we were able to reach and engage diverse groups in a youth-led co-design process. Key partners included Civic Assist, Awakening Cultural Ways, Multicultural Australia, Police Citizens Youth Clubs, and Red Cross. You can read our report from this project [online](#). You can also watch our keynote address at the Change 2021 Conference [here](#) where we share key findings and lessons learned from the project. Outcomes from this project have led to further funds being invested at a community-level and supported more opportunities for local organisations to lead initiatives focused on improving the safety of young people. You can read more [here](#).

In your opinion, what are the biggest challenges faced by social marketers and/or social marketing today?

The competitive funding environment is probably one of our biggest challenges. Scarce funding for research is an increasingly widespread problem across the higher education and not-for-profit sectors. Social marketers have historically not "marketed" themselves well when compared to other behaviour change approaches such as behavioural economics. I think this is partially a result of our discipline's preoccupation with defining the concept of "social marketing" and creating new sub-disciplines to address shortcomings. The Behavioural Insights Team (BIT) (formerly known as "The Nudge Unit"), for example, have been able to capitalise on an ever increasing appetite for effective behavioural and social change approaches with a simple and well communicated offering. The BIT have become globally known for their EAST framework and the "nudge" approach to changing behaviours. While altering choice architectures is an important tool in the behaviour change toolkit, social marketing offers a more holistic approach to behaviour and social change that focuses on voluntary exchange and creating value for stakeholders. There are challenges related to ethicality and the question of free choice; however, social marketers are guided by a set of ethical principles



(see the newly released Social Marketing Statement of Ethics approved by the iSMA board).

Finally, what tips do you have for other social marketing researchers?

My top 3 tips are 1) leverage the power of collaboration, 2) build critical reflexivity into your research and practice, and 3) step outside your primary field.

My first tip is for social marketing researchers to leverage the power of collaboration by working with those who complement and challenge their current skill set. Based on my own experience, collaborative projects which lean on the expertise of a diverse range of stakeholders have the greatest potential for impact.

My second tip is for social marketing researchers to build critical reflexivity into their research and practice. I have found that taking the time for some critical introspection helps to identify theoretical and practical "blind spots."

My third tip for social marketing researchers is to step outside of their primary field to learn from other disciplines. Social marketing has been criticised for creating an "echo chamber of homogenous perspectives" and while my view may not be so critical, I do believe that social marketers should step outside of their primary field of research more often in order to learn from other disciplines and ultimately advance the field forward.

