



# Public marketing to face wicked problems: theoretical essay for conceptual model construction

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## Abstract

This study aims to raise evidence of how the domain of public marketing can be a wicked problem instrument to deal with. The evolution of public administration, from bureaucratic to New Public Governance, demonstrated a growing need for interaction between the State and society, which would not be possible without using marketing techniques applied to the public sector in order to communicate with the citizens and other stakeholders, despite the fear of using marketing strategies for public purposes. A literature review realized on wicked problems in political science and how marketing fields have adopted the concept for public marketing purposes. This research was deepened by designing a proposal for a conceptual model involving public marketing and the wicked problem. The essay enabled the development of a State action model, which involves three stages: analysis of the environment, communication with stakeholders and formulation of public policies. When this entire process takes place efficiently, it benefits the construction of public branding. The paper strives to analyze how the State can be the protagonist in facing wicked problems in society through the performance of public policies.

**Keywords** Public Administration · Public Marketing · Political Sciences · Wicked Problem

## 1 Introduction

The marketing system commonly becomes conservative of potentially negative behaviors in a society. Organizations, when planning their marketing strategies, seek to capture their consumers by expressing norms seen as legitimate and that reflect values and belief systems regardless of their quality (Kennedy, 2016). There is no lack of criticism aimed at marketing strategies that promote consumerism by

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delighting consumers (Heath & Heath, 2016). These are arguments that make marketing, among the other disciplines of administration, the most resistant in the public sector.

On the other hand, the effort to make the marketing concept viable for a non-private perspective in the theoretical or practical sphere is undeniable (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009; Zavattaro et al., 2021). One example is the conceptual shift attributed to marketing over time. The latest review by the American Marketing Association - AMA (2017) defines marketing as “set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large”, and reinforces the arguments put forward.

It is noteworthy that the use of marketing tools for public purposes is considered essential for the construction of political strategies, and a crucial element in the embedded identity in social relations (Marsh & Fawcett, 2011), and is even an important mechanism to overcome complex obstacles (Lees-Marshment, 2001; Silva & Minciotti, 2021).

Considering the political science field, the paper Dilemmas in a general theory of planning, by Rittel and Webber (1973), deals with the difficulty in guiding public policies to face wicked problems. For them, in a society based on scientific administration at the beginning of the 20th century, whose outputs were predictable, public policy management was equally measurable in terms of results. However, it had been seen the growth of heterogeneous minorities among themselves, each with one own interests and value systems (Rittel & Webber, 1973).

Studies linking wicked problems to marketing are typically used in the field of social or macrosocial marketing. The contexts are related to obesity (Kemper & Balantine, 2017), financial crisis (Duffy et al., 2017), climate change (Kemper & Balantine, 2019), among others. In a preliminary search, it was not possible to find a consistent volume of researches within the domain of public marketing, which represents a lacuna that should be filled up with regard to the State as a main agent to face complex problems (Head & Alford, 2015; Termeer et al., 2019).

Following this argument, the present paper intends, through a literature review, to uncover evidence of how the theoretical domain of public marketing can contribute to solving society's perverse problems in the performance of public policies. This proposal aims to contribute to first impressions and without exhausting the theme.

For organizational purposes, this paper was developed in 3 stages: in the first, we sought to understand the wicked problem within political science and how marketing fields have adopted the concept; second, the applications and purposes of public marketing were reviewed. Finally, we analyzed, interpreted, and proposed a conceptual model.

## 2 Wicked problem and marketing relationship

In the field of political science, researches have been revisited the wicked problem literature, considering the growth of the increasing complex reality. Papers have investigated several perverse contexts, such as mental health problems (Samuriwo & Hannigan, 2020), the Covid-19 pandemic (Radin, 2020), water governance

(Kirschke et al., 2019), among others. All these contexts shows advances in discussions about wicked problems (Head, 2018; Termeer et al., 2019), through which we seek to understand the governmental factors that make these problems especially difficult to be addressed by policy makers, public managers and/or policy scholars (Head & Alford, 2015).

Traditional politics prescribes, the unique decision-making, by elected politicians whom represents the popular will (Bresser-Pereira, 2005; Head & Alford, 2015). However, to deal with wicked problems, this centralized paradigm does not seem to be achieving success. Therefore, Head & Alford (2015) propose new strategies to obtain partial and provisional answers to the problem in the value of common understandings, although they cannot conclusively solve it, it already allows to point out courses of action that make more sense.

In this way, the literature has sought to highlight governance processes, in which public policy makers focus carefully and reflexively on the nature of wicked problems and with this seek to involve the experience and knowledge of multiple stakeholders (Head, 2018). Reinforcing that by ceasing to rely exclusively on public administrators, and increasingly engaged in political issues that they consider relevant, the citizen movement supports forms of active governance in facing the wicked problem, in contrast with traditional public policies (Roberts, 2004).

Deliberative democracy converges with the proposal for solving serious social problems (Raisio & Vartiainen, 2015; Roberts, 2004). This new political regime opens a normative space for the improvement of representative democracy, so that civil society becomes increasingly active in the decision-making process (Bresser-Pereira, 2005; Roberts, 2004) points out that citizen have the knowledge and ability to participate fully in political, technical and administrative decisions that affect their lives. In this respect, although direct citizen participation requires more time compared to representative participation, it is possible to offer meaningful dialogues and deliberations that used to prevent wicked problems from becoming crises in the future (Roberts, 2004).

In general, the field of marketing studies has used concepts of wicked problems from a social perspective (Domegan, 2008; Kennedy & Parsons, 2012), stating that most social marketing problems are, in fact, wicked problems (Kennedy et al., 2017). Social marketing consists of placing the individual with behavioral changes in the center of the process and orchestrating a wide network of relationships to achieve these goals (Domegan, 2008).

Kennedy et al. (2017) appoint the steps to discover the structure of the wicked problems system: identify the stakeholders involved and the social mechanisms that drive them, and finally, determine the role of each one and identify the narratives that drive their participation in these problems. Only understanding the values, competencies, and aspirations of those involved the social marketers can develop strategies to ensure correct policy management (Kennedy et al., 2017).

Considering that complex problems involve a large number of stakeholders with different levels of interconnecting factors, some authors consider that macrosocial marketing is the most appropriate intervention (Domegan, 2008; Kennedy, 2016). Macrosocial marketing is defined as the use of social marketing by those who control the social context influencing everyone else (Domegan, 2008); and may differ

from microsocial marketing in observing long-term social behavioral changes, rather than consisting of behavioral changes in individuals (Kennedy, 2016).

As examples, macrosocial marketing definitely used to reduce systematically the effectiveness of traditional marketing for the sales of electronic cigarettes, considered an offensive product (Kennedy & Parsons, 2012). Also to assess the case of obesity, involving members of the supply chain, consumers, media, citizens, and government to find ways to address and change imbalances in power and opinions among stakeholders (Kemper & Ballantine, 2017).

### 3 Marketing and public branding

The marketing applied to the public sector was driven by the universality vision of the discipline for all organizations (Kotler & Levy, 1969), fitting to the public administration objectives (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009; Zavattaro et al., 2021), although acceptance was considered low. The distrust of its main purpose is among the criticisms in the literature, because is considered associated with electoral advertising activity or the excesses of practices applied to income generation goals (Bouzas-Lorenzo, 2010).

However, the New Public Governance (NPG) model assumes a strong involvement of public management with its stakeholders (Raksnys et al., 2015). Known as public service marketing (Ribeiro & Oliveira, 2013; Silva, 2015), under discussion, that the commitments of the public sector also seek to meet the needs and expectations of citizens, which is why marketing strategies could be request (Silva & Minciotti, 2021). Thus, public marketing should aim public service management efficiency improvement as well to allow strategic, responsible and integrated public management, enhancing citizenship (Ribeiro & Oliveira, 2013; Silva, 2015).

Among the paths taken within marketing, branding stands out (Karens et al., 2016; Zavattaro et al., 2021), known as “symbolic construction consisting of a name, term, sign, symbol or design, or a combination of these, deliberately created to identify a phenomenon and differentiate it from similar phenomena adding meaning ” (Eshuis & Klijn, 2012, p.19). In other words, a brand signals to consumers where a product or service comes from and makes it identifiable. Therefore, branding is as a communication and image building strategy among target groups (Karens et al., 2016).

In the public sphere, branding aims to influence citizens’ associations with public organizations and services (Zavattaro et al., 2021; Leijerholt et al., 2019). With this, political leaders and public managers make lot attempts to launch new brands in order to influence public opinion and stakeholder perceptions (Eshuis & Klijn, 2012; Leijerholt et al., 2019; Zavattaro et al., 2021). This is why branding can merge with politics through products and services offered by the government; countries, states, cities and government departments; political parties; and public policies marked by specific organizations (Marsh & Fawcett, 2011), as it has been considered a governance strategy through the creation of images of public services and also adding value or meaning (Eshuis & Klijn, 2012).

For this reason, the marketing and branding concepts application in public administration is coming closer and closer (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009; Leijerholt et al., 2019; Silva & Minciotti, 2021; Zavattaro et al., 2021). However, there is still a need to develop a more critical research agenda on marketing, branding and less instrumental, allowing a more comprehensive questioning of the relationship between it and democracy for greater consolidation of this approach (Marsh & Fawcett, 2011).

Furthermore, Leijerholt et al. (2019) found theoretical gaps that consider the public sector unique conditions for brand principles implement, and that ask greater clarity and understanding of how the context affects the applicability and results of branding efforts. The branding process is expensive and time-consuming in terms of human and economic resources, so it is essential to ensure its foundations based on empirical evidence and scientifically valid models, which will help professionals to implement it successfully in public organizations (Leijerholt et al., 2019).

Despite this, it is possible to find examples in the literature of brands created by public policymakers and public managers (Ashworth & Kavaratzis, 2018; Eshuis & Klijn, 2012; Fay & Zavattaro, 2016; Stevens et al., 2021). In the context of the new coronavirus pandemic, for example, the implementation of brands can be a strategic instrument by many governments and political leaders to make their policies against Covid-19 more reliable and legitimate (Zavattaro et al., 2021).

Another example is also seen in Fay & Zavattaro (2016), when exploring organizational branding initiatives in 109 higher education institutions in the United States surveyed between 2006 and 2013, they found that 66 of them introduced branding initiatives since 2006. The authors suggest that organizations are more likely to adopt branding initiatives not only to correct potentially unstable images but, more importantly, to promote institutional successes through higher performance (Fay & Zavattaro, 2016).

Generally, Eshuis and Klijn (2012) distinguish five main brand objects that can be found in public governance processes: (i) tangible goods (such as the Øresund bridge connecting Denmark and Sweden), (ii) processes (elaboration of interactive policies, participatory projects, integrated environmental assessments), (iii) people (politicians like Silvio Berlusconi or Barack Obama), (iv) organizations (Tax Organizations, Tourism Offices) and (v) local (New York City through the 'I love NY' (Eshuis & Klijn, 2012).

In the last case, it is common to find marketing plans prepared by local authorities that aim to increase the attraction of investments or the number of visitors (Ashworth & Kavaratzis, 2018). For this, it is recommended that the brand involves the inclusion of relevant stakeholders, organizing opportunities for deliberation (Eshuis & Klijn, 2012; Karens et al., 2016; Stevens et al., 2021; Zavattaro et al., 2021). This occurrence is evidenced in a neighborhood of Rotterdam, Netherlands, which received the Rotterdam Makers District brand, where a survey revealed that local business owners are recognized as co-producers of the brand, which add their story to the brand message which is transmitted to the target audience (Stevens et al., 2021).

## 4 Model involving public marketing and wicked problem

The marketing is established and aligned in the Public Administration modernization with a focus on stakeholders (Bouzas-Lorenzo, 2010; Silva & Minciotti, 2021). Due to the public service discredit, the Managerial Public Administration proposes an objective-based administration with a focus on the citizen (Osborne & Gaebler, 1994). This model will achieve by the improvement in the performance and efficiency of public services by meeting the needs and expectations of society quantitatively and qualitatively (Ribeiro & Oliveira, 2013; Silva & Minciotti, 2021).

In the New Public Governance, they emphasize on the new paradigm of public administration science, pluralism, giving importance to the links between internal and external organizations (Xu et al., 2015). In this theory and practice the changes aim from public management to public governance, marketing has a new meaning, which was restricted to the common imitation of private sector applicability, but above all seeks to ensure that stakeholders have a voice for greater effectiveness of public policies. Thus, the implementation of simple and flexible mechanisms arising from tribal marketing is defended, in order to involve members of the communities participating in the co-creators of public governance, aiming to the provision of public services and the processes of mutual improvement of communication (Raksnys et al., 2015).

The quality public services provision is essential for the country's development and people's satisfaction (Oliveira et al., 2013; Silva & Minciotti, 2021). From this perspective, society has challenged the government systems capacities to prepare, coordinate and quickly mobilize resources to deal with wicked problems social problems (Head & Alford, 2015). Since Rittel & Webber (1973), the role of government and policy formulations has highlighted in dealing with complex issues that affect social well-being. However, with the general lack of trust in government institutions, it is essential for public managers to adopt the best available evidence and communicate the value of processes to deal with wicked problems (Head, 2018).

In this respect, this essay presents ways that seek to involve public marketing as an instrument to face wicked problems in society in the performance of public policies. Marketing can contribute as a field of knowledge to assist in providing quality public services (Oliveira et al., 2013; Silva & Minciotti, 2021). In addition, it can provide other principles of public administration - accountability, transparency and integrity - as prerequisites that sustain the public trust that delivers good governance outcomes (Armstrong, 2005). As a means, it is possible to seek actions that appeal to elements of benefit and social well-being, which can influence the knowledge and attitudes and behavior of individuals (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009).

Therefore, this paper adds value to the topic discussed, establishing a broader view of the State's relationship with its stakeholders for the construction of a public brand, especially considering the wicked problems that have been increasingly faced by governments today.

It is noteworthy that, in the literature consulted, there were no similar proposal identified in the field of marketing related to practices in public services to

deal with wicked problems. The ones that came closer were Wymer (2021) and Camillus (2008), but both were based on social marketing (Kennedy et al., 2017). Therefore, it represents a theoretical and practical advance.

The strategy involves, first stabilizes, the **Environmental Analysis**, to ensure the correct procedures for marketing efforts and performance (Proctor, 2007). When appropriating the perspectives of traditional marketing, the public manager must consider the environmental forces - demographic, economic, natural, technological, political and cultural - (Kotler & Armstrong, 2015), which influence or may influence the behavior of the wicked problem.

This analysis should be carried out on an ongoing basis, so that environmental changes are examined, strategic assumptions validated to see if it is necessary to change course, and the effects evaluated after the formulation of public policies. This path demands time and incessant effort from the organization, since every attempt to reverse a decision or correct undesirable consequences presents another set of wicked problems, which in turn are subject to the same dilemmas (Rittel & Webber, 1973).

Wicked problems are complex not only because they are technical in nature or involve many components or actors, but because stakeholders have different perceptions of their nature and solutions (Klijn & Koppenjan, 2014; Wymer, 2021) highlights, therefore, that this analysis is essential for enabling the identification of the main actors involved, in order to communicate with these individuals and manage their interests and interpretations about the problem.

The proposed model is show in Fig. 1.

As shown in Fig. 1, the second stage – **Stakeholders Communication** – aims to create a shared understanding of the problem and promote joint commitment to possible ways to solve it (Camillus, 2008). Therefore, the strategic adjustments

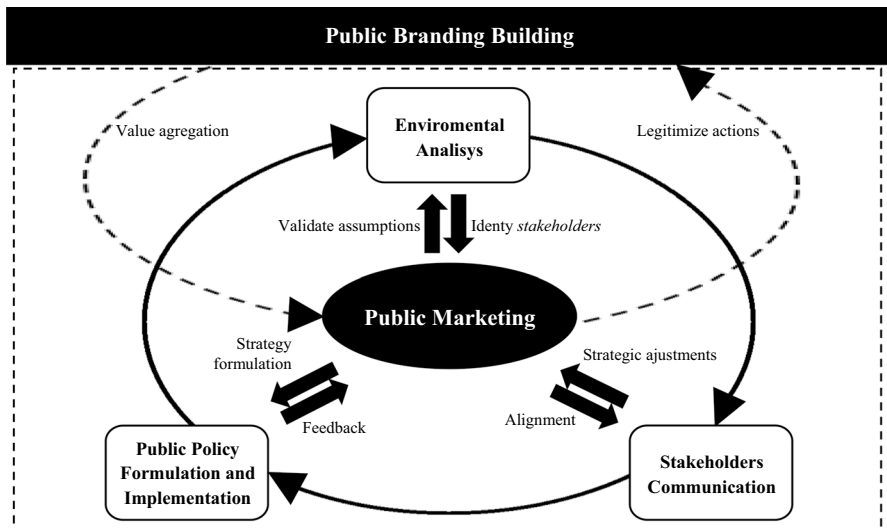


Fig. 1 Conceptual model involving public marketing and wicked problem

presented results from the first step to deal with wicked problems to the stakeholders this still can be modified, if necessary, through the articulation of their aspirations, competences and values about the problem. Here, it is in line with what is established in the New Public Governance, whose tendency is to emphasize the participation of citizens in governance issues (Xu et al., 2015), which can be done through the management and creation of spaces for fundamental dialogues to overcome social problems.

Stakeholders' engagement can increase public service effectiveness and contribute to a more democratic decision-making process way (Edelenbos et al., 2010). As Siqueira and Müller (2020) highlighted, stakeholders considered strategic resources intrinsic to organizations that guarantee benefits due to the ambiguity of their relationship with these individuals.

The process of implementing public policies by socioeconomic changes, public opinion and other factors makes it necessary to expand the unpredictable politics that structure the entire process that can be affected (Sabatier & Mazmanian, 1980). In this sense the third stage – **Public Policy Formulation and Implementation** – is the result of the continuous analysis of the environment and communication with stakeholders to overcome obstacles faced by citizens and, therefore, corresponds to one of the main tools of public marketing (Lees-Marshment, 2001). Emphasizing that the first cycle is the Formulation of Public Policy, when the construction of the brand is established, while the subsequent loops are the process of implementing the public policy. The analysis of the environment takes place both *ex-ante* and during the implementation of public policy, always in line with the strengthening of marketing and the public brand.

This proposal corroborates Souza (2006), who, by means of a literature review, synthesizes the main elements of the purpose of public policy, of which the following stand out: highlights the involvement among various actors and levels of decision, and subsequent processes after its decision; the scope and not limitation to laws and rules; the achievement of pre-established goals; and, although it has short-term impacts, it is a long-term policy.

Still as a characteristic of public policy (Souza, 2006), besides the definition of strategies resulting from the previous steps, the public manager must evaluate the results after its implementation. The positive results of the effects of deliberations on public service are derived from good governance, carrying the concept of cooperation and social participation (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2000; Kemper & Ballantine, 2017) already highlighted the relationship between institutions in trying to solve wicked problems through institutional change, since the public sector's failure to engage with other organizations can result in conflict and lack of political support.

Thus, the definition of strategies in the process of successful public policy implementation favors the **Public Branding Building**, influencing public opinion and stakeholder perceptions (Eshuis & Klijn, 2012; Leijerholt et al., 2019; Zavattaro et al., 2021) in the face of the quality of services provided. Marketing success is mostly measured in increased user awareness of service delivery and other performance measures (Proctor, 2007). As a scope of their outcomes, public organizations obtain greater social value through the pursuit of legitimacy and survival, consisting



of efforts to build/strengthen public branding (Leijerholt et al., 2019; Zavattaro et al., 2021) which consequently adds greater value in future public marketing actions.

Every public policy effort is not exclusively related to norms and their effectiveness (Ribeiro & Oliveira, 2013; Silva, 2015), but also, and perhaps mainly, to be recognized as legitimate by society, due to the fact that, many times, due to coordination and control difficulties, there is a possibility of decoupling (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Improving the public image can increase stakeholders' trust with the public sector, so that they motivate and attract individuals to governance processes (Karens et al., 2016; Leijerholt et al., 2019; Zavattaro et al., 2021), which makes it feasible to face new wicked problems.

All coordinated actions should be strengthened through the wide dissemination of their actions, both for the knowledge and engagement of the population in facing social problems, and for the purpose of transparency of the actions promoted in the political, economic, and social fields (Ribeiro & Oliveira, 2013). As a means, one can develop digital media strategies, for example, since they enable increased performance and perceived value of the public brand or public service offered (Eshuis & Klijn, 2012; Leijerholt et al., 2019; Zavattaro et al., 2021) as the discourse is conceived in communication channels. It is in this sense that the focus on communication with the public is seen as the greatest potential of marketing with public administration (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009; Silva & Minciotti, 2021; Zavattaro et al., 2021), as it enables public policy to have greater social acceptance in order to legitimize itself in its environment or else maintain its legitimacy by society.

## 5 Final considerations and research agenda

This essay was developed with the purpose of analyzing the possibilities of public marketing to face wicked problems, as one of the several organizational capabilities that public agencies have for effectiveness in the performance of public policies. It is argued that marketing, as a field of knowledge, is underutilized in the public area, and that this underutilization reduces the effectiveness of public policies, especially those that are considered wicked.

Thus, keeping the initial conceptualization of wicked problem by Rittel and Webber (1973), a conceptual model was developed with the purpose of suggesting the operationalization of public marketing to deal with complex problems. The advantage of the proposed model is the focus on stakeholders, pointed out by the literature as one of the mechanisms to solve problems of this nature. Reforms in public administration have been opening space for practical marketing. The New Public Governance has recognized stakeholder participation as a major differential, which suggests convergence between the disciplines and was captured by the proposed modeling.

Moreover, the search for strengthening public brands is growing, because the dialogue with stakeholders allows the management of conflicting interests and increases their awareness and support in facing wicked problems, which is only possible if the public administration is recognized as legitimate. In the private sector, branding has been fundamental to maintaining stakeholders' reputation and trust. The same path should be applied to public organizations, in order to

influence the perception of individuals by using brand principles, attaching greater social value to the provision of public services to guarantee/maintain legitimacy.

Although governmental communication is consolidated as an important mechanism of interaction with society, the unilateral paradigm of communication does not guarantee the necessary effectiveness to deal with complex problems, and is one of the main reasons why the distrustful use of marketing in the public sector needs to be overcome. Even the new paradigms of public administration make it preponderant that well-established interaction mechanisms be implemented for good governance, which is not possible without a clear strategic deliberation that lies within marketing.

Furthermore, it is important to highlight that, even in the absence of the intention to build a public marketing strategy, it is possible that isolated actions naturally arise public brands. In this case, the manager's risks falls back on not having guarantees that this possible brand will be consolidated by the stakeholders in the interest of the public administration.

This theoretical essay aims to uncover evidence of how the theoretical domain of public marketing can contribute to solving society's wicked problems in the performance of public policies based on linking two distinct approaches still little discussed in the literature: the wicked problem, within the political science field, and public marketing, which still suffers some resistance from researchers and practitioners. However, the readings reveal a huge research field agenda, either in theoretical or empirical studies.

Based on the proposed model, a proposal for further research would be to evaluate at what level public policies are aimed at interacting with stakeholders, and, therefore, making use of public marketing, even if the terminology is not adopted. New research can direct efforts towards understanding how public marketing can mediate relational tensions, resulting from conflicting situations arising from the diverse interests among stakeholders on the way to solving wicked problems.

Although conceptual branding has some robustness in the public sector, it still seems incipient for many public policies. Here, the conceptual model presented represents a possible path for building public branding through the resolution of wicked problems. However, the need for research to propose new alternatives for strengthening branding in public institutions also emerges.

As pointed out in this study, the public manager must evaluate the results after the implementation of public policies. The fact is that public policies have a long-term effect, so it seems interesting to resume communication with stakeholders at other times as a means to help measure the impacts. Research on how marketing strategies can open space to favor continuous relationships with the various stakeholders also seems promising.

Since the initial conceptualization of a wicked problem it has been shown that the way in which the problem is solved can result in undesirable consequences. No examples of undesirable consequences arising from trying to solve certain wicked problems have yet been evidenced in the literature. It is clear that the formulation and, especially, the implementation of public policies can present flaws, so it could be verified how the State acts with marketing at this moment in order to mitigate

the negative effects resulting from an inefficient public policy, so as to maintain its legitimacy.

Conversely, the public policy may be well conducted and achieve its established goals, but somehow, it is possible that it is not recognized by society. These cases instigate for studies on how public marketing can be better explored, in order to communicate to its stakeholders and society in general that the public policy is effective, since it mitigates the negative impacts resulting from wicked problems.

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