

*Full Length Research Paper*

# Using the online environment as a strategic tool in social communication campaigns: A case study regarding school dropout prevention programs in Romania

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**This study focuses on the influence of four attributes of website credibility, trust, expertise, design and promotion, on consumers' perception regarding online dropout prevention campaigns. Using a total sample of 296 subjects, the study develops a multiple regression model to test the availability of families, with medium to high incomes, to financially sustain poor children in Romania to attend school. Moreover, the study describes the effects of online credibility on persuasion and action, emphasizing the direct influence of a dropout prevention campaign on consumer. The results show the relationships between (a) online credibility and trust, expertise, design and promotion, (b) online credibility and persuasion, and (c) online credibility and action. In addition, online credibility was found to have a positive influence on consumers' behavior regarding dropout prevention programs. The findings provide further support in acknowledging the importance of the online environment in fundraising activities.**

**Key words:** Online environment, social campaigns, internet strategy, dropout prevention programs, credibility.

## INTRODUCTION

Many organizations have implemented initiatives to address factors associated with dropping out (Shaul, 2004). Whether we talk about non-profit organizations engaged in educational programs or private companies willing to act responsibly, their goal is a common one: to help improve people's lives by promoting responsible behavior in society (Serban, 2011). Among the years, numerous case studies proved that ongoing international support can sustain and develop Romanian nonprofit organizations (Johnson et al., 1993). Thus, it was identified a typology of relationship between third sector organizations and the public sector (Gidron et al., 1992) and progress was made in many domains.

The emergence of the internet as a flexible, interactive

and dynamic communication tool opened up new opportunities for social organizations to promote programs among consumers. Orientation to the online environment has created prerequisites for a faster and more efficient communication in e-fundraising (Duhe, 2007), and the relative anonymity of communication in the internet (Granitz and Ward, 1996) has increased interactivity and relationship with consumers.

For social marketing organizations, it represents a valuable tool in promoting social behavior, encouraging consumer involvement in areas such as education, health or the environment. New forms of communication platforms also allowed the emergence of online social networks which changed the way that information is transmitted from the company to consumers and among consumers themselves (Alam and Khalifa, 2009). Credibility has become a key aspect of communication (Duhe, 2007), like the persuasion of the presented information. In this context, the importance of social

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programs has increased dramatically, becoming today, a key issue in increasing or decreasing the likelihood of a particular behaviour (Rothschild, 1999). Though researchers consider most online social marketing activities successful, they do recognize that there is a lack of behavioural impacts in addressing social problems (Abroms et al., 2008). According to the Marketing Science Institute, an important research priority for 2010 to 2012 is the use of marketing information to identify opportunities for profitable growth. Thus, social issues shaping market practice are an important priority in influencing organizations' decisions about environmental sustainability and consumer privacy (Marketing Science Institute, 2010). As regards the online environment, the institute emphasizes the need for identifying the opportunities enabled by technology, encouraging research methods that convert technologies and provide value to customers (Hashim and Siraj, 2010).

Few studies address the problem of integrating social marketing activities in the online environment. One is the recent Ph.D. thesis of Brian Cugelman which focuses on website factors that determine behavioural change (Cugelman, 2010). Articles also offer reliable research regarding online social marketing campaigns (Wantland et al., 2004; Lin and Hullman, 2005; Gurau, 2005; An et al., 2006; Winett et al., 2007; Swartz et al., 2006, Cugelman et al., 2011).

However, research focusing on the impact of educational programs in the online environment is yet to be discovered. Education has become one of the greatest resource consumers and one of the greatest industries in all economies, regardless of the level of development (Baciu and Asandului, 2009). Current education in Romania, as elsewhere in the world, is struggling for social balance and post-materialist values under the pressure of globalization (Popenici and Tat, 2008).

Unfortunately, education in Romania has not reached a significant level of value and appreciation, causing issues regarding school integration and dropout. Studies show that, once leaving school, a pupil, including Romanians, rarely expects to return (Roberts-Schweitze et al., 2006).

Understanding how dropout prevention programs are related to online credibility is a key focus in the activity of social organizations. Thereby, through the conducted study, the article aims to emphasize the advantages of online fundraising (Ciconte and Jacob, 2008) and to encourage community involvement for sustaining families with precarious financial situations. Unlike corporate social responsibility, which activities increased in recent years, social organizations aim to raise funds for solely the beneficial of the pupils and their families, the financial objectives having a secondary role (Grigore, 2011). Therefore, the study considers what specific factors influence website credibility and the type of practices it should be adopted. Thus, the article investigates the relationship between online credibility and trust,

expertise, design and promotion, and, on the other hand, develops linear regressions between online credibility and two factors: persuasion and action.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### Research framework

As we enter the information century with ever-increasing needs for computer literacy, rates of school dropouts and illiteracy are growing (Szelényi, 2002). There are many different approaches to dropout prevention, and they are often used in combination to better address consumers' needs. Prior research in preventing school dropout focused on the relationships between personal characteristics and educational attainment (Duncan et al., 1972; Mare, 1980; McLanahan, 1985). Other research focused on theories of dropping out (Finn, 1989) and the influence of external factors on educational attainment (Datcher, 1982; Crane, 1991; Brooks-Gunn et al., 1993).

According to Finn (1989), the problem of dropping out can be explained through two models: the frustration-self-esteem model and the participation-identification model. The first model considers that poor school performance determines a negative self-view and leads students to oppose school as the context responsible for their impairment (Dynarski and Gleason, 2002). On the other hand, the participation-identification model states that those students that do not participate in school activities come to feel marginalized and so decide to leave school.

Other studies focused less on schools and more on the community (Vartanian and Gleason, 1999). Using a variety of data sources and methods, a number of studies concluded that growing up in a "bad" neighborhood can affect the educational attainment of young residents (Corcoran et al., University of Michigan, United States, personal communication; Clark, 1992).

In Romania, dropping out of school is easy. Most students dropping out have either financial problems or lack the value of school in general. Though it's a rarely debated subject, dropping out is a widespread phenomenon which should be considered a priority for all those involved in education: politicians, decision makers, parents, teachers and students (UNICEF Romania, 2009).

In the last years, the evolution of the dropout rates in the compulsory Romanian education system shows an ascendant trend (Popenici and Tat, 2008). This calls for a reconsideration of the school curricula so as to meet the educational needs of all categories of children (Calin and Dumitrana, 2001). School dropout is considered to be a cause of low educational achievement due to work undertaken or other situation (poverty, family crises, there being no school nearby etc.) (Pantea, 2009). Moreover, by dropping out, the individual's chances of finding a job decreases considerably, as well as his possibilities to

integrate into the society (Moroney and Krysik, 1998). Poverty affects children's prospects, both of attending school and performing well (Ringold, 2000). Because of poverty, many of these children are exploited through hard work or are abandoned (Musick, 1995).

Thereby, the role of education in the development of these children becomes crucial and fundraising through online means can contribute to solving this important social issue. In the last 20 years, many Romanian associations, political parties, foundations and the Church, have started to take a greater interest in educational issues (Georgescu, 1997). Moreover, participation by Romanian teachers and educationalists in Socrates programs is an encouraging sign of progress (Crawford and Foster, 2000).

In order to integrate children in schools, government must build dropout prevention into all existing and newly created programs (Schargel and Smink, 2001). Social programs that prevent dropout represent a wake-up call for a society and should be maintained through constant funding. They aim primarily to raise awareness of the population concerning the seriousness of this social problem and, secondly, to integrate deprived children into schools (Neisser, 1986).

Newer research has increasingly taken into account the continuity of emotional connectedness between parents and children (Flockton et al., 2000). This is due both to non-destructive nature of this relationship and its resistance over time. Establishing communication in a family with limited financial possibilities is accomplished at a lower level; survival issues often prevent the formation of a connection between parents and children (Edelman and Mandle, 2005). The social programs focused on educational issues aim to integrate the children in schools and in the society, helping them in facing problems and understanding their behavior in each stage of their development. Ultimately, school-parent relationship should be worked out through direct communication between parents, community members and the school (Grant and Sleeter, 2007).

According to the statistics provided by the Ministry of Education, Research and Innovation in "The Report on the Status of the National Education System", regarding the dropout rate in the last years, Romania has a very high value rate of early school leavers (19.2%). Thus, compared to other EU countries, Romania ranks worse than other countries such as Slovenia (4.3%), Poland (5%) and Czech Republic (5.5%).

Whether aimed at improving students' school results or improving the material situation of deprived families, the dropout prevention programs are a basic tool in solving this social issue. The Ministry of Education, Research and Innovation in Romania has initiated some important public dropout prevention programs in the last years, among which we can mention: "Second Chance", "School after school" or "Functional literacy". These programs aimed to increase school enrollment, highlight the values

of education and provide material and financial support to pupils who were considering dropping school. The results show that a total of 1500 students have benefited through these programs, of which 1000 students in the "School after school" programs and 500 students in the programs "Second Chance" and "Functional literacy."

In Romania, another organization which periodically launches dropout prevention programs is UNICEF. This organization encourages school enrolment through awareness and fundraising campaigns, using the money raised in order to mobilize action at the local level. According to the 2010 UNICEF newsletter "Every child must go to school", the aim of UNICEF campaigns is to put basic education at the heart of the drive for social inclusion, justice and equal opportunity for all pupils.

Year 2010 and the beginning of 2011 have witnessed a large number of dropout prevention activities. National and international nonprofit organizations, social associations and foundations have joined private companies trying to develop programs more attractive to consumers. Romania needs these initiatives to respond to social problems that arise, thus the activities of social organizations have to be always encouraged and supported.

Unfortunately, little progress has been made as regards the influence of online environment on addressing school dropout. The number of social organizations using this means of promotion is still very small, though the potential of online environment is very high. This paper will be addressing this issue. Thus, the study explores the influence of online credibility on determining persuasion and action, emphasizing, at the same time, the relationships between online credibility, trust, expertise, design and promotion. Therefore, this research paper would like to bring clarity in the domain of online social campaigns, describing the specific factors which influence Romanian consumer behavior.

### **Online credibility**

Research shows that some groups can be easily reached online (Peattie, 2007). A variety of models have been proposed in the interpersonal relationship literature (Levinger, 1983). They prove that the internet offers a valuable channel to engage in social communication campaigns, not only for its speed, but also for its flexibility and dynamism.

Credibility is a very important component in the process of online communication. It is a process according to a website whose content is valid (Cugelman, 2009). According to Ohanian (1990), the credibility of the sender designates positive influence on the receiver's characteristics of the communicated message. Because the persuasiveness of a message depends largely on the credibility of the source, in communication with the target segments, messages should not only have the power of

persuasion, but must also be credible, which means to have value for the consumer (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986).

Studies carried out by DeSarbo and Harshmann (1985) show that there are three factors that contribute to the credibility of the source. These factors, also presented by Ohanian (1990), must be found in any social marketing program, determining the success of any online campaign. These factors are: trust, expertise and attractiveness (design). The purpose of these credibility factors is to support social organizations to communicate in the online environment in an easier and more efficient way (Cugelman et al., 2009). Based on these arguments, the following hypotheses were developed:

H<sub>1</sub>: Trust will be positively related to online credibility.

H<sub>2</sub>: Expertise will be positively related to online credibility.

H<sub>3</sub>: Design will be positively related to online credibility.

H<sub>4</sub>: Promotion will be positively related to online credibility.

### **Trust**

The first factor is trust. Trust is considered to be an important factor on the internet, as, it is the lack of trust, not the technological restrictions that usually constrain an online program (Keen, 1997). According to Hovland (1953), trust determines the validity of communications and is characterized by the following attributes: honesty, sincerity and addiction. In the online environment, trust refers to the collection of information received as being honest, without intending to manipulate (Ohanian, 1990). Many studies discussed the problem of achieving trust in the online environment (Straub, 1994; Karahanna and Straub, 1999; Kumar and Benbasat, 2002; Gefen and Straub, 2003). An important aspect in achieving trust online is determined by social presence (Hassanein and Head, 2007). Social presence determines positive influence and creates a warm and trustful environment.

Throughout the years, researchers have proposed different models of online trust (Ambrose and Johnson, 1998; Roy et al., 2001; McKnight et al., 2002; Koufaris and Hampton-Sosa, 2004).

In achieving online trust, the consumers must develop emotional, enduring relationships with both the online environment and other members, based on shared interests and reciprocity (Brown et al., 2007). The large volume of existing online information determines social organizations to comply with factors such as expertise, design and promotion, in order to attract consumers' interest.

### **Expertise**

The second factor, expertise, is characterized by attributes such as: qualified professional, expert. Expertise in the online environment expresses the need

for consumers to receive relevant, clear and quality information from the professionals of the considered area. Since the overall quality of a website will influence the traffic and level of business (Liebmann, 2000), expertise is one of the elements that should be taken into consideration for successful marketing campaigns. One way to promote expertise and the social campaign is to write expert articles and submit them to relevant online publications in the field (Stan, 2010).

### **Design**

The last factor, attractiveness, is defined by the following variables: similarity, familiarity and sympathy (Erdogan, 1999). However, other research has described design as being characterized by elements like: interactivity, navigation, and functionality (Benckendorff and Black, 2000).

Design, the equivalent of attractiveness from the Ohanian model, describes the ability of the website to attract through the colors, pictures, text or graphics. According to recent studies, positive perceptions of website design are important to e-satisfaction assessments (Szymanski and Hise, 2000). Moreover, Yoon (2002) tested the relationship between website design, security, trust and satisfaction, and found that trust is related to security, while ease of navigation is tied to satisfaction. This suggests that satisfaction deserves further investigation related to various design features of website (Cyr et al., 2005).

### **Promotion**

This paper considers being necessary to include a new variable in the expression of source credibility. This is promotion, or the ability of the social program to undertake information activities as varied as possible. A good promotion may cause consumers to respond to popular demands and generate popularity. Promotion alone does not always work (Kotler, 1979). Therefore, promotion activities must be characterized by attributes like: information, communication and networking.

The promotion in the online environment appeared as a result of low level access to social programs with virtual component. As the most popular media are promoted offline, many social programs on the market are turning to traditional media - messaging, video ads, blogs or forums to arise consumer interest. Online promotion is a new component of the social programs media plan. In the online environment, promotion is done by specialized websites, discussion groups and newsletters. Thus, the credibility of social programs increases.

Online promotion role is to support communication in the offline but also to support consumers in accessing the needed information (Carmody, 2004). Simultaneous action of four factors: trust, expertise, design and



**Figure 1.** Conceptual model of online credibility in dropout prevention campaigns.

promotion express the online credibility.

Once the consumer credibility has been gained, the social program will move to new stages: persuasion and action.

### Persuasion

Some social marketing research aims at understanding the variables that influence the persuasiveness of social marketing communications (Wymer, 2010). Persuasion reflects the persuasiveness of the presented information or the consumer confidence in the advice given in online environment. This directly depends on the degree of consumer interest for the issue considered, so, no matter how persuasive the text is, the consumer will react only when he considers that it could help solve the social problem in question. For the most part, people (a) do not like to think that they have been persuaded and (b) often cannot recognize what persuades them (Pratkanis and Turner, 2006). Therefore, it seems logical that, once the consumer has gained insight of a certain social issue, it will affect his decision to support a dropout prevention initiative.

Based on the statements above, the following hypothesis will be tested:

H<sub>5</sub>: Online credibility will be positively related to persuasion.

### Action

Social marketing, viewed as a social leadership approach, involves deliberate use of influence and persuasion to move a target market towards a specific course of action (Dann, 2010). Also called the “feedback”, the action is an important part of the social program design (Montana and Charnov, 2008) and it requires not only positive, but also a strong motivation from the individual to support the specific social cause. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

H<sub>6</sub>: Online credibility will be positively related to action.

### The research model

Based on past theories and models presented in the literature review, a structural model of online credibility in dropout prevention campaigns was developed. The model includes both leading factors: trust, expertise, design and promotion, as well as result factors: persuasion and action (Figure 1).

### METHODOLOGY

Social marketing interventions in the online environment generally offer complex blends of various theories and factors that are not easily analysed or clearly described by one line of thought (Cugelman, 2010).

The methodology proposed in this research is intended to address issues regarding data collection and procedures. Data is collected through a series of structured interviews designed to systematically capture the embedded customers’ perceptions regarding dropout prevention campaigns. The data derived from these interviews are then used to determine the range of values that each consumer considers when supporting a social cause. Procedures serve as an input to the specific relationship model of the online credibility. The output not online provides information for the data analysis phase, but also expresses the variance of the distribution in targeted population.

### Sample and procedures

According to the Central Europe Top 500 Ranking Report issued by Deloitte in 2010, only 33 domestic companies in Romania are included in the ranking of the top 500 largest companies in Central Europe. As the current study focuses mainly on employees with medium to high incomes, the survey included top Romanian companies with headquarters in Bucharest. Therefore, a total number of 22 companies were considered in the survey. The final sample consisted of five private companies coming from four different economic sectors: telecommunications, retail, production and energy. These companies were: (1) Orange, (2) Vodafone, (3) Carrefour, (4) Coca-Cola, and (5) Petrom. The sample was chosen for two reasons. First, these companies are large and have many employees, and, secondly, it can offer a reliable perspective over the chosen subject. In deciding the final sample, it was considered the number of employees for each of the five companies: Orange – 2900 employees, Vodafone – 2400 employees, Carrefour – 7000 employees, Coca-Cola – 2100 employees and Petrom – 22630 employees.

The study recruited a total number of 296 respondents, though more than 500 questionnaires were administered. Moreover, some respondents were eliminated on grounds of not having answered all questions or not having passed the filter questions. Thus, the overall response rate was 59.2%.

In achieving the research, a questionnaire was used with questions based on the proposed model components: credibility, promotion, trust, expertise, design, persuasion and action. The questionnaires were left in charge of a person in the companies, whose role was to distribute and convince them to complete them. Characteristics of the sample show that respondents' age is between 25 and 55 years with an average of 32 years. Most respondents are married with children (81%) and, have a monthly individual income around 500 to 1000 euro (78%).

To ensure the relevance of the data obtained, two filter questions were applied. The first regarded the income, as the study addressed a particular category of employees and tested their availability to financially sustain poor children to attend school. The second question regarded basic knowledge about social marketing campaigns, whether they are familiar with these social initiatives and if whether they ever visited a website that fights social problems like: smoking, road accidents or educational issues. The questionnaire also included demographic questions regarding respondents' age, sex, marital status and occupation.

### Measurements

All question items in the survey questionnaire were measured using a semantic differential scale with five levels: very unfavorable, unfavorable, undecided, favorable, very favorable. The semantic differential scale is a bipolar rating scale, which has the advantage that the scale points don't need to be semantically identified (Brace, 2008).

### Trust

Trust was measured using the following items: 1) how do you feel about the information provided by the social organizations in the online environment in terms of confidence? 2) What is your opinion regarding the connection between the user and the dropout prevention causes? 3) How do you feel about the security of your donation, as regards its final destination? To test the internal consistency reliability for trust, the  $\alpha$ -Cronbach value was analyzed. Thus, we can say that trust is reported to have a high reliability of measurement ( $\alpha = 0.799$ ), since the value obtained is above the minimum recommended by DeVellis (2003) of 0.7.

### Expertise

As regards expertise, the following items were described: 1) what is your opinion regarding the professionalism of the information provided by the social organizations in the online environment? 2) How do you feel about the social cause being well documented (for example, statistics, reports)? 3) What is your opinion regarding the capabilities of the personnel working in these campaigns? In terms of reliability, the  $\alpha$ -Cronbach value was 0.79, which points to a high reliability of measurement for expertise.

### Design

Another variable analyzed was design. The following items were defined: 1) what do you think about the website being easy to use and browse through? 2) How do you feel about the attractive

elements of the website (for example, figures, photos, videos)? 3) What is your opinion regarding the ability of the website to address a certain public (ex. parents)? Internal consistency reliability for design was 0.776, indicating a high reliability of measurement for design.

### Promotion

The variable promotion was defined by the following items: 1) what is your opinion regarding the utility of the online promotional tools in dropout prevention campaigns? 2) How do you feel about the promotional tools in terms of connection to the cause? 3) What do you think about online promotional tools as being as important as traditional promotional tools to the certain cause? The value returned for internal consistency reliability was  $\alpha$ -Cronbach = 0.847, which indicates a high reliability of measurement.

### Online credibility

As regards online credibility, the following items were defined: 1) how do you find the overall online credibility of a dropout prevention website? 2) What is your opinion regarding the ability of a website to address a social issue like school dropout? 3) How do you feel about a traditional social campaign having an online component? In terms of reliability, the  $\alpha$ -Cronbach value was 0.871, which points to a high reliability of measurement for online credibility.

### Persuasion

The variable persuasion was defined by the following items: 1) what is your opinion regarding the ability of a website to persuade consumers to donate for this social cause? 2) How motivated do you find yourself to donate for a dropout prevention campaign? 3) How do you feel about the importance of an online component of a traditional campaign in persuading people to donate? Internal consistency reliability for persuasion was 0.877, indicating a high reliability of measurement for design.

### Action

The last variable analyzed was action. The following items were defined: 1) how do you feel about donating to this social cause? 2) What influence do you think the number of current donors has on your decision to donate? 3) What is your opinion regarding the donation online in comparison to traditional donation means (for example, phone, bank transfer, etc.)? The value returned for internal consistency reliability was  $\alpha$ -Cronbach = 0.89, which indicates a high reliability of measurement.

## RESULTS

Prior to the hypotheses testing, the goodness of measurement was checked by analyzing the content validity, reliability and construct validity of the considered scale. Moreover, for determining content validity, the questions and the correspondence between them, these were first tested by academics in the field, to insure clarity and relevance. Specialists in marketing improved the questions structure in order to reflect the measuring scale. Thus, the research could provide accurate results

**Table 1.** Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) and Bartlett's test results.

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy		0.797
Bartlett's test of sphericity	Approx. chi-square	254.745
	Df	10
	Sig.	0.000

**Table 2.** Descriptive statistics of online credibility, trust, expertise, design and promotion.

Variable	Mean	Standard deviation	Minimum value	Maximum value
Online credibility	3.7973	0.96486	2.00	5.00
Trust	3.7568	0.88845	2.00	5.00
Expertise	3.6216	0.97507	1.00	5.00
Design	3.4865	0.96859	2.00	5.00
Promotion	3.5000	0.89519	1.00	5.00

for testing online credibility in dropout prevention programs.

With the collected data, two types of analysis using statistical software were carried out. First, it was applied the factor analysis, using SPSS software program to identify the key problems, explaining the major impediments in the model. Second, based on the theory of structural equation model (Kline and Rex, 2010), the paper developed a multiple regression model and two linear regression models. The QMS E-views software package was used for interpreting the results.

The initial reliability test on the scale items ensured appropriateness of the data (Cronbach's alpha exceeded 0.776). Other assessments of suitability of the data for factor analysis also support the condition (Muzaffar et al., 2009). For instance, Nunnally (1978) recommended a 10 to 1 ratio, that is, 10 cases for each item to be factor analyzed. In our case, the sample size of 296 subjects satisfies the minimum requirement of 210 cases, since there are 21 items.

Other two major statistical measures, generated by SPSS, also support the appropriateness of factor analysis: Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) test and Bartlett's test of sphericity (Table 1). Since the value returned by Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) test is higher than 0.6 and Bartlett's test of sphericity is significant, we can say that the factor analysis was successful.

Both in SPSS and in E-views, the scales used described the intensity of connections between the considered variables using a proportional scale from 1 to 5, where 1 - very poorly represented, 5 - very well represented.

In analyzing the data from E-views, there were considered two types of variables: independent and dependent. Independent variables were found in questions concerning the proposed model components:

promotion, trust, expertise, design, persuasion and action, and the dependent variable regarded the overall credibility of the online campaign.

The process aims to validate the following sentences: determine the correlations between variables that show values greater than 0.5; demonstrate the relationship between online credibility, persuasion and action; determine the level of significance (Sig.) for the variables considered and validate the ones which show values of 0.000.

Examination of the descriptive statistics of the model (Table 2) shows that all variables have similar values for the indicators chosen. Since the values for mean are close to 4, we can say that most respondents have a rather favorable opinion regarding the importance of trust, expertise, design, promotion and online credibility in prevention dropout campaigns. The high values of standard deviation indicate that the data are spread over a large range of values (Singh, 2010). The minimum values are normal and express customers' disagreement with the statement considered. Maximum values express respondents' agreement with certain aspects.

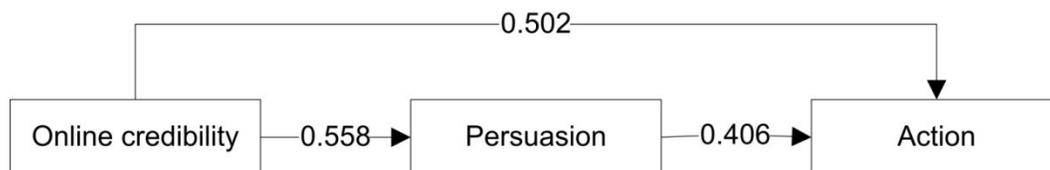
In order to test the first hypothesis, we used a Pearson correlation statistic. Therefore, we analyzed the relationship between each of the following variables: trust, expertise, design, promotion and online credibility, as well as the dependency relationship between all independent variables considered and online credibility. Preliminary analyses revealed no violation of the assumptions of normality, linearity and homoskedasticity. As regards the hypothesis of multicollinearity, Tabachnick and Fidell (2001) demonstrate that this only appears when the variables are highly correlated, above 0.9. Since, in our model, all correlations are smaller than 0.9, we can say there is no multicollinearity. Hence, the model is robust. However, it is worth mentioning that the high

**Table 3.** Simple correlations between online credibility, trust, expertise, design and promotion.

No.	Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1	Online credibility	1.000	0.851	0.889	0.892	0.867
2	Trust	0.851	1.000	0.745	0.754	0.753
3	Expertise	0.889	0.745	1.000	0.767	0.762
4	Design	0.892	0.754	0.767	1.000	0.732
5	Promotion	0.867	0.753	0.762	0.732	1.000

**Table 4.** Relationship between online credibility and trust, expertise, design and promotion.

R	R <sup>2</sup>	Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	S.E. of estimate	F	Sig.
0.881	0.776	0.768	0.349	122.036	0.000

**Figure 2.** Variance model for online credibility, persuasion and action.**Table 5.** Simple correlations between online credibility, persuasion and action.

No.	Variable	1	2	3
1	Online credibility	1.000	0.864	0.864
2	Persuasion	0.864	1.000	0.798
3	Action	0.842	0.798	1.000

value of  $R^2$  points out that about 85% of the variation of online credibility is explained by the six determinant factors of the model.

Thus, Table 3 shows that between trust, expertise, design, promotion and online credibility there is a positive correlation (for example, in the relationship between online credibility and trust,  $r = 0.851$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). This indicates that consumers respond favorably to dropout prevention campaigns. The first hypothesis was also tested through multiple regression analysis (Table 4). Results confirmed that the independent variables: trust, expertise, design and promotion explain 77.6% of the variance ( $R^2$ ) in online credibility, which is a highly significant value. Moreover, the F-value is very high, 122.036, and the significance level is very low, 0.000. Therefore, we can say that trust, expertise, design and promotion are positively related to online credibility.

The analysis also expressed the correlation statistics between online credibility, persuasion and action (Table 5). Preliminary analyses revealed no violation of the

assumptions of normality, linearity, homoskedasticity and multicollinearity. The values obtained express a positive correlation between them (for example, in the relationship between online credibility and persuasion,  $r = 0.864$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Figure 2 emphasizes the connections between these variables as regards the variance ( $R^2$ ).

In order to test the relationship between online credibility and persuasion, a linear regression model (Table 6) was developed. The result suggests that persuasion significantly explains 55.8% of the variance ( $R^2$ ) in online credibility. The value of F-statistic is very high, 90.896, and the probability is 0.000. This means that the model is valid and the second hypothesis is sustained.

In testing the third hypothesis, it was found that 50.2% of the variance ( $R^2$ ) in action has been significantly explained by online credibility, as shown by the F-statistic value of 72.601 ( $p < 0.000$ ) (Table 7). Thus, we can say that online credibility is positively related to action.

Following the verification of the 3 hypotheses, we can

**Table 6.** Relationship between online credibility and persuasion.

R	R <sup>2</sup>	Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	S.E. of estimate	F	Sig.
0.747	0.558	0.552	0.646	90.896	0.000

**Table 7.** Relationship between online credibility and action.

R	R <sup>2</sup>	Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	S.E. of estimate	F	Sig.
0.709	0.502	0.495	0.685	72.601	0.000

say that the regression models proposed are considered valid. Therefore, the hypotheses are consistent with the seven variables considered: online credibility, promotion, trust, expertise, design, persuasion and action. Social organizations and public agencies can use these findings to better address the society's needs, improving the communication with consumers and the social programs efficiency.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Dropout represents a national concern and poses a significant challenge for schools and educational communities working with youth at risk for school failure. The findings of this study largely support the hypothesized relationships. Online environment can be successfully used in dropout prevention campaigns, as the results regarding trust, expertise, design and promotion scored very high values. The quantitative study shows that the greater the credibility of an online social cause, the easier will be for the social organizations to communicate with their target audiences. This finding is consistent with Peattie (2007), who stated that some groups can be easily reached online. Moreover, credibility factors can support social organizations to communicate in the online environment as argued by Cugelman et al. (2009). Although these results have not previously been described in other studies from social marketing approach, the findings are consistent with the studies carried out by DeSarbo and Harshmann (1985), who acknowledge the importance of trust, expertise and attractiveness (design) in determining the success of an online campaign. As regards promotion, this can be an important factor in generating popularity of a campaign. This finding is consistent with Carmody (2004), who stated that the role of online promotion is to support communication in the offline but also to support consumers in accessing the needed information. The need of association between trust, expertise, design and promotion comes as a confirmation for Kotler's statement (1979), which says that promotion alone doesn't always work.

In addition, the purpose of the study is to show the effects of online credibility on consumer persuasion and action. This was done by analyzing the existing theories in these fields and understanding the influence of these variables on social marketing communications. Thus, there is a significant potential in driving persuasion and action through online credibility, as persuasion positively affects the decision to support a dropout prevention initiative, while, action moves the target audience towards a specific cause. The findings showed that persuasion and action may be important variables in influencing the attitudes of employees towards fundraising activities. The idea is sustained by Montana and Charnov (2008), who define them as an important part of the social program design.

The findings also show that research in the area of online social marketing will have the potential to contribute to an improved understanding of consumers' needs and social problems within a community. The high levels obtained can result in improved consideration of the online environment as well as a good communication between the social organizations and the consumers. Thus, in an ever changing society, nonprofit organizations and their dropout prevention programs have important potential impacts on targeted population. In fact, they not only affect the willingness of employees to donate, but they also affect the extent to which the employees remain loyal to the activities initiated by social organizations.

Though the research follows the results obtained by Ohanian (1990) in the offline context, the main contribution of this study resides in the integration of the Ohanian elements in the online environment, describing the effects of dropout prevention campaigns on the future decision to action of the consumer. Furthermore, the study confirmed that the higher the sample analyzed, the more favorable will become the results obtained. Thus, in general, integrating actions to prevent dropout in the online environment represents an opportunity for the initiators of social programs to address a large number of social problems. Moreover, the study increases the importance of the online environment in the process of raising funds for dropout prevention causes.

## LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The findings resulted from the research have some limitations. One is the fact that the article has a sample group mostly composed by employees from the private sector. As perceptions differ from one social category to another, so do school values. Thus, perceptions of educational needs are viewed differently by people from urban environment, who have higher access to education, than by people in rural areas, who barely graduate primary or secondary education system. However, the research aimed to investigate this specific group in order to assure a better accuracy of the results.

Sample size can limit, in the way, the statistical process and the quality of the results. But, as more and more employees will participate in this survey, a sufficient sample size will accumulate and determine more interpretable statistics. Another issue in this research is the limited number of dropout prevention programs in Romania. The involvement of social organizations in this problem is still very low, and statistics regarding this issue are becoming worrying.

Future research could focus on the relationship between nonprofit organizations and other stakeholders. Therefore, nonprofit organizations could increase partnerships with public agencies and private companies in order to address social problems in a more efficient way. Private companies' resources combined with nonprofit organizations experience can capitalize into larger campaigns, reaching more population and raising more funds for deprived families. Also, by offering materials and educational resources to poor pupils and families, the population will encourage a responsible behavior in the society and an equal treatment for all pupils, no matter their social background.

Future research could also consider other variables that impact the credibility of online dropout prevention programs in the online environment. Such variables could be: quality of the message, the image of the social organization, the experience of the social organization in developing online campaigns, etc. Subsequent research can also be used to evaluate more precisely, the effect of such programs on the consumers.

Implications from the study are relevant to several areas that impact educational progress. These areas include school improvement, promotion of educational values, improved evaluation systems and relevant program curriculum offerings.

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