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## Faculty of Business Economics

Master of Management

### **Master's thesis**

***Positive changes in consumer behaviour by social factors in light of social marketing campaigns on social media***

**Anastasiia Urzabkhtina**

Thesis presented in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Management, specialization International Marketing Strategy

### **SUPERVISOR :**

Prof. dr. Allard VAN RIEL



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**Disclaimer**

This master thesis was written during the COVID-19 crisis in 2020-2021. This global health crisis might have had an impact on the (writing) process, the research activities and the research results that are at the basis of this thesis.

## **Acknowledgement**

This is probably going to be one of the last works in my academic life, which started six years ago at the Plekhanov Russian University of Economics in Moscow, Russia. If somebody then told me about me completing a master's degree in another country and another language, I would not have believed them. I want to think that the journey that I have had, not only in the academic sense but also in personal growth, will help me in the future endeavours.

When I first applied for the Master of Management, I knew that I wanted to learn more about marketing, various strategies and dive deeper into digital and growth marketing specifically. So, I wanted to research something that really interests me. With the beginning of the pandemic, I started to notice various patterns on social media regarding social marketing and decided that I would like to investigate that even further in my dissertation. This interest of mine resulted in this Master Dissertation, which I hope you will find insightful and interesting.

I would like to express my most profound appreciation to the supervisor of this master dissertation, Professor Allard Van Riel, for his continuous support, remarks, comments and ideas, which he shared with me. It was especially important in the times of the COVID-19 pandemic when we were not able to meet in person and could only exchange emails discussing the study or meet online. Moreover, I would like to thank him for being the person, who introduced me to marketing, business management and market research at the beginning of my master's study program, and whose enthusiasm for what he is doing motivated me to stay on the course and get more practical experience in various fields.

Above ground, I am extremely grateful to my family, whose support was everything I needed, whose encouragement kept me going through the hard times in these past six years. This is especially true for my dear sister, who motivated and helped me even being 3 thousand km away. Moreover, I would like to say thank you to my friends and colleagues whom I have had an absolute pleasure to know, work with and learn from.

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## **Executive summary**

This master dissertation talks about positive changes in consumer behaviour caused by social factors in light of social marketing campaigns on social media. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit the world back in 2020, many organizations and governments started implementing new corona-related social marketing campaigns to promote social distancing, quarantining and other lockdown measures. In this study, we defined social marketing as promoting well-being and saving lives by harnessing the power of markets and marketing (French et al., 2012). However, the question was: how was it done during the COVID-19 pandemic? In order to target as many people as possible to ensure the constant spread of information, marketers chose to use social media platforms as one of the channels for social marketing. This led to famous "Stay home. Stay safe" campaigns or "Thank you, doctors" movements. Moreover, many companies and governments used influencers, bloggers and celebrities, which we name in this study comparative reference groups, to relay the intended message. The core question, therefore, laid in the role of comparative reference groups in the effectiveness of social marketing campaigns on social media.

Prior research discusses how social media and social marketing could be used to increase health awareness directly. However, not that many studies have been conducted investigating the moderation effects of neither social media nor reference groups. By moderation or interaction effects, we mean the impact of, e.g., perceived credibility of influencers or bloggers on the effectiveness of social marketing campaigns aimed at increasing health awareness. Because of the knowledge gap as well as interest in investigating the direct and moderating effects, it was decided to conduct the present research to try and understand whether social media usage actually contributes to not only an increase in health awareness directly but also to the effectiveness of social marketing campaigns on health awareness. The same can be said about the credibility of comparative reference groups and the effect of perceived credibility.

After conducting a literature review of over 50 various articles on social marketing, social media usefulness, comparative reference groups and their credibility, it was decided to conduct a survey for the empirical part of this study. The survey was distributed using a snowball method and was posted on social media, more specifically Vkontakte (Russian social media platform), WhatsApp, Facebook and Instagram. After collecting enough responses, the data analysis was conducted by using the software package SPSS.

When looking at the results of this research, it can be said that people do perceive social marketing as valuable, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, it was found that social marketing campaigns' perceived value has a significant positive effect on the increase in health awareness. This indicates that the more people think of social marketing as a valuable activity, the more their health awareness grows, which is undoubtedly an essential finding for social marketers. This also allowed us to go deeper into the factors that influence the mentioned relationship and investigate the influence of social media usefulness and comparative reference groups credibility.

First of all, in this study, social media were discussed, and the author concluded that since social media are considered consumer-friendly, interactive and useful, they could be turned into a promising social marketing channel (Huang et al., 2019). For the purpose of the research, the

focus was on how perceived usefulness influences both the increase in health awareness and the effectiveness of social marketing campaigns on the increase in health awareness. When looking at the results, perceived usefulness does play a crucial role in both of these cases. Social media have a positive direct effect on health awareness and its increase while, contradictory to the previous studies, it has a negative effect on the effectiveness of social marketing campaigns aimed at the increase in health awareness. This means that the perceived usefulness of social media leads to a significantly higher increase in health awareness on its own while at the same time leading to the considerably lower effectiveness of social marketing campaigns aimed at health awareness. However, it is believed that the latter finding was partially influenced by a relatively small sample size since it is somewhat contradicting. With a bigger sample size, it might become positive.

The other moderation factor that was introduced and investigated was the perceived credibility of comparative reference groups. To fully grasp the meaning of credibility, it was decided to combine perceived trustworthiness and expertise of the source as well as perceived message credibility. So, it means that influencers and bloggers are perceived as credible if they are trustworthy, have enough knowledge or expertise on the subject and if their message is authentic and believable. After conducting the empirical research, the direct effect of perceived credibility was found to be significant and positive, which means that the more the target audience perceived the influencer as credible, the higher their health awareness would be. However, that cannot be said about the interaction effect. This leads to another finding of this study, in particular, the fact that the perceived credibility of comparative reference groups does not influence the effectiveness of social marketing campaigns on health awareness.

With all said, how can this study's results be useful to marketers all over the world? First of all, one of the most important findings was the fact that social marketing does indeed influence the increase in health awareness during the COVID-19 pandemic, which is quite beneficial for social marketers since they should know that their proposed campaigns and activities could be used for increasing the awareness around COVID-19 measures as well as ongoing vaccination campaigns. This finding can not only be related to the pandemic but also to other causes worth mentioning, such as e.g., substance abuse, mental health, smoking. Furthermore, since social marketing has become such an important topic over the course of the last year, various companies and governmental agencies should take advantage of social marketing techniques to not only promote the main message but also sometimes improve brand reputation and turn people to more innovative services to improve the whole healthcare system.

Moreover, based on the findings about the usefulness of social media, it can be said that various social media platforms can and should be used to increase health awareness. For instance, how it was done by Instagram or Facebook, when they provided the information about COVID-19 symptoms, thus increasing health awareness without using social marketing techniques. People do perceive said platforms as useful for getting new information, confirmation and saving time; therefore, it can be an interesting takeaway for the managers and developers as well.

Another interesting managerial implication that can be discussed based on the findings lies in the effect of comparison reference groups on health awareness. As mentioned before, there was no significant moderation effect. Thus, influencers or celebrities do not influence the effectiveness of



social marketing campaigns on health awareness. However, they do affect the increase directly. What is the takeaway from this? First of all, social marketers might try enlisting help from a specific group of influencers, such as famous doctors, heads of medical research or other people who are experienced enough and have enough knowledge to talk about the matter. The same can be said about having a good reputation among not only colleagues but also the target audience of the campaign. This recommendation was explicitly based on the probable stigma around influencers and their credibility and the results of the survey, which pointed out that expertise and good reputation of comparative reference groups were of utmost importance to the respondents. This might make the effect of perceived credibility on the social marketing campaigns' effectiveness significant enough.

With the information gathered from not only literature study but also quantitative research, it can be concluded that social marketing is a powerful tool, which can and should be used to promote health awareness and health itself all over the globe. Moreover, marketers should use social media platforms to enhance the increase of health awareness and social marketing campaigns since we believe that this study's findings regarding social media can be improved by having a bigger sample size. Using social media can be quite beneficial, and the same can be said about comparative reference groups. Even though usual influencers do not impact the social marketing effectiveness, it is believed that if chosen correctly, using mentioned recommendations, influencers and celebrities might make the social marketing campaign stand out even more, thus leading to a higher increase in health awareness. By adopting managerial implications and recommendations of this research, the social marketing aimed at the increase in health awareness can become more prominent and have better results at the end of the campaign.

## **Introduction**

Nowadays, the importance of social media should not be underestimated. In order to understand the reasons behind that statement, it is vital to try and define what social media are in the modern world. They are described as Internet-based applications, which empower people to exchange opinions, which makes the possible power of these applications grow with each year (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). It was especially the case during 2020 when people were forced to stay at home and communicate using various social media platforms. By social media platforms, this dissertation does not mean any digital platform, which exists on the Internet. Social media platforms can, however, be multiple things: blogs, apps, social networking sites and even games. However, for the purpose of this research, social networking sites will be described as social media platforms (Harvey, 2014).

Why is it important to understand what social media are and how they can be defined? The reason lies in recent events, which showed how social media consumers' behaviour was in one way or another affected by social marketing campaigns developed by different countries. Regarding 'social marketing', this dissertation will use the most common definition, which was introduced by Kotler and Zaltman (1971, p.5) where it is described as "the design, implementation and management of programs designed to impact the acceptability of social causes and to include product planning, pricing, communication, distribution and marketing research". In many countries, 2020 and the pandemic, which took the world hostage was a turning point in realising that social media can be and should be used for social marketing since "interaction on a large scale became easier for individuals than ever before" (Harvey, 2014, p.1158). For that reason, the most used marketing channels for those campaigns were social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook or Tik Tok.

These observations led to the present research, based on the following idea: "social media encourage people to interact with each other, and the content that is shared becomes more democratized" (Drury, 2008, p. 275). Would this mean that when a social marketing campaign's content is distributed via social media, it more effectively influences people and has a more extensive reach? Not only that but it is also known that people "can look up information on behavioural change themselves on any social media platform" if they want or need to (Dibb & Carrigan, 2013, pp. 1391). Does that make social marketing campaigns reach even further and make the possibility of change in an individual's behaviour bigger? This led to the idea of investigating the possible influence of people on social media who are able to distribute the necessary content to their audience. So, it was decided to look into the topic of reference groups, which are defined by Schiffman et al. (2014) as social role models that affect consumer behaviour, and how they can influence the effectiveness of the social marketing campaign on the consumer behaviour. Moreover, to make sure that the most relevant reference groups are used as a basis of the research, it was decided to look into the comparative reference groups who, as a part of reference groups, represent influencers, bloggers and celebrities: people with whom social media users want to compare themselves and compete. They have become even more relevant since the beginning of 2020, when they had more extensive coverage due to people being on social media more and more with each day.

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic spread to the whole world, and it was and still is a big challenge for marketers. At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, social marketing has been used to change behaviour and ensure the acceptance and support of the populace towards COVID-19 measures such as wearing masks, sanitising, social distancing and other local measures like lockdowns and curfews. That is why, for the purpose of this study, consumer behaviour will be looked at from the point of health awareness e.g., increased hygiene maintenance, wearing masks, following social distancing rules and other COVID-19 measures. In studies about health and prevention communications (Odigbo, 2016; Oti et al., 2016), the importance and efficiency of social campaigns have been shown to be acceptable. So, because social marketing encourages the populace to take on and change their behaviour to one which is considered beneficial to society (Ricordeau et al., 2003), the importance and relevance of social marketing grew exponentially in just a few months. Thus, this study will mainly focus on the relationship between social marketing and the changes in consumer behaviour, to be exact, the increase in health awareness, and whether using social media and reference groups can affect the said relationship.

### **Economic and social motivation**

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, social marketing has been one of the most used marketing techniques in the world because it was used everywhere and by everyone: be it ordinary users of social media, multinational corporations or local governments. However, the efficacy of these social marketing campaigns is yet to be determined as the pandemic is still in place. In some countries, like Australia or Korea, they were rolled out with the help of social media influencers and had a significant impact on not only consumer behaviour but also on the overall attitude towards the pandemic (Abidin et al., 2020). However, in other countries, the effectiveness of campaigns was seen to be small to non-existent because the strict measures imposed by the government seem to have more effect on the behaviour than any of the social marketing campaigns launched before. That is why one of the reasons for this research to be conducted is to try to understand the key reasons for the success or failure of social marketing campaigns on social media and possibly come up with recommendations for social marketers who will launch in the future social marketing campaigns on social media platforms. Moreover, it would also be interesting to see whether comparative reference groups have an influence on the effectiveness of social marketing campaigns in order to provide valuable insights for marketers and even ordinary organizations.

### **Academic motivation**

Social marketing is a topic that has been discussed for a very long time. However, notwithstanding the rise of social media platforms, there were not that many studies about the influence of said platforms on the effectiveness of social marketing campaigns (Huang et al., 2019; Drury, 2008; Mehmet et al., 2020). However, there are quite a few articles on social media marketing or social marketing that discuss both separately from each other (Clement et al., 2013; Odigbo, 2016; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Odigbo et al., 2016; Kotler & Zaltman, 1971; Lefebvre, 2012; Tuten & Solomon, 2016; Zhu & Chen, 2015).

Moreover, more and more articles have appeared since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic about how social media or social marketing were used or should be used, but almost none of them

discussed the relationship between both (Puri et al., 2020; Schillinger et al., 2020; Wong et al., 2021; Odigbo et al., 2020; Pritchard, 2020). Some researchers were discussing cases specifically about a specific country, e.g., Italy, Australia or China (Lovari, 2020; Abidin et al., 2020). Since this dissertation is also focusing on the mechanisms behind comparative reference groups influence on the increase in health awareness, the research has been done to find out whether proper research has been conducted on the reference groups to show the relationship between said influence and the relationship between social marketing and end consumer behaviour. However, the results were not promising as very few articles discussed the mentioned effect or the relationship was stronger between reference groups and health awareness than between social marketing and health awareness with an impact from comparison reference groups (Abidin et al., 2020; Mangyo & Park, 2011; Martin et al., 2013).

Since the gap in our understanding of the relationship between social marketing still exists, it would be insightful to research whether social media usage in social media campaigns actually contributes to the effectiveness of these social marketing campaigns and whether comparative reference groups positive effect on the changes in consumer behaviour. Thus, another purpose of this dissertation is to identify possible antecedents and possible causal relationships between variables, which are going to be introduced at a later point.

### **Problem statement**

Social marketing activities have increased exponentially over the last year all over the world. Even before its rise, it was a vital part of our life since everyone has seen a (part of a) social marketing campaign about anti-smoking or anti-alcohol consumption as well as campaigns about HIV/ AIDS or flu vaccinations. The use and effectiveness of social marketing have been thoroughly investigated; however, the effect of social media usage as a channel for social marketing is yet to be seen in the research since most of the dissertations were focusing on these entities separately. Nevertheless, the challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic has already sparked new interest in the relationship between social media and social marketing.

If social marketing is considered as an advertising strategy, which can influence consumer behaviour, it is vital to use and implement it effectively and efficiently. Especially since it is very easy to target the needed consumer segments by using social media platforms, not only businesses can use advertising for increasing their consumers' purchase intentions since the need for social change is becoming more and more popular amongst the populace. Governments and international organizations could also use it to tackle existing and future problems and try to change consumer behaviour to a more positive one, e.g., educate about various health problems or, if we talk about recent events, change consumer's perspective on COVID-19.

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, various governments and organization have rolled out social marketing campaigns and enlisted the help of local comparative reference groups, which can be defined as social factors influencing individuals or groups of individuals. A good example of the comparative reference group is an influencer on social media who not only influences their opinion on their audience but also helps brands to, e.g., increase purchase intentions. Moreover, during the pandemic, many influencers, bloggers and celebrities (who are also fine examples of comparative reference groups) have been asked to help with the promotion of social marketing

activities in various countries like Belgium, Russia, the US, Australia, China and many more. It can be easily seen how the comparative reference groups on social media influenced the efficiency of social marketing activities and initiated the change in consumer behaviour. However, it is vital to understand how social marketing campaigns should be conducted on social media and which variables have the most effect on the change in behaviour patterns. This research is, first of all, aimed at investigating the influence and mechanisms behind the changes in consumer behaviour by comparative reference groups in the light of social marketing campaigns on social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook during the COVID-19 pandemic. Secondly, to try and suggest some improvements to the social marketing on social media as well.

### **Research question**

In order to understand how social marketing campaigns can influence change in consumer behaviour, it is crucial to focus on several variables. This dissertation will not focus on consumer behaviour as a whole, but only on one of the types: health awareness, as it is closely related to the causes of social marketing as well as the context of this study. Moreover, at the moment, social media has become the most potent tool in distributing health-related information to all target audiences through various reference groups, which are active on social media. Thus, the main research question will be defined as follows:

RQ1: What is the role of social factors in the effectiveness of social marketing campaigns on social media?

This research aims to establish if there is a positive relationship between the perceived value of social marketing campaign and the increase in health awareness influenced by the perceived usefulness of social media platforms and the perceived credibility of comparative reference groups.

### **Sub questions**

As said before, the aim of this research is to find out if social factors, to be specific the credibility of comparative reference groups, can impact the effectiveness of social marketing campaigns. Thus, to make sure that this dissertation focuses on the most influential factors, it was decided to research comparative reference groups, which exist and thrive on social media as well. Moreover, since the dissertation will also focus on the credibility of said reference groups, it was decided to define credibility as a quality of being trustworthy and believable (Newell & Goldsmith, 2001). This means that both the source and the message should have the ability to be believed into and be trusted by the target audience. By researching the effect of comparative reference groups on the increase in health awareness and the possible change of it, it would be possible to see which group has the most influence in the matters related to the context of this dissertation: COVID-19 pandemic. Since the context of the dissertation is connected to one of the least researched topics on social media – social marketing, it was decided to test the influence of comparative reference groups credibility on the effect of social marketing activities on the end consumer behaviour. For the purpose of this research, credibility will be a key variable when talking about reference groups' influence. It will be defined as them being perceived to be trustworthy and expert or as also can be said competent in the field (Bhattacherjee & Sanford, 2006; Zogaj et al., 2020). Moreover, the message trustworthiness is also a key point in the credibility of mentioned reference groups. That

is why we also focus on it as a mechanism and reason behind the possible influence of this variable. Thus, the following research question has been formed:

RQ2: How does the credibility of comparative reference groups influence the relationship between the perceived value of the social marketing activities and increase in health awareness?

Moreover, since the study will focus on comparative reference groups on social media, it is critical to understand how the users feel about using social media in the first place. One of the reasons for that would be because it is not easy for users to get and accept all the information, which goes through various social media, especially on social media networks like Instagram or Facebook. Another reason would be that if social media are not useful to the users to get information from it, then it would not be a great tool for conducting social marketing campaigns in the health sphere. Thus, this research will also focus on the following research question:

RQ3: What is the effect of the perceived usefulness of social media platforms on the increase in health awareness after a social marketing campaign?

By researching these sub-questions, it will be possible to understand whether variables like perceived usefulness of social media platforms and perceived credibility of comparative reference groups can influence the relationship between social marketing activities and increase in health awareness.

### **Approach**

This master's dissertation will focus on finding out how exactly social factors, such as the credibility of comparative reference groups, which were guided by a social marketing campaign, affect the increase in health awareness. Based on that research, it will be possible to make managerial recommendations about how social marketing on social media can be improved in the future. In order to do that, firstly, it will be interesting to discuss the social cognitive approach, which describes the determinants and psychosocial mechanisms behind the influence of communication on ideas and actions. Then based on one of the models of the social cognitive theory, reference groups themselves would be researched and analysed because it is important to understand what influences consumers and how people view others (Martin et al., 2013). Moreover, the research on the influence of social media on the success of social marketing campaigns will be conducted. This will all be done by means of an online questionnaire with several blocks about social marketing value, the usefulness of social media platforms and reference groups credibility based on users' perception of the said entities.

## Literature review

### The concept of social marketing

In the research published by Kotler and Zaltman (1971, p.5), social marketing is described as “the design, implementation and management of programs designed to impact the acceptability of social causes and to include product planning, pricing, communication, distribution and marketing research”. However, the term “social marketing” has several different ways of defining it. Those definitions are written from multiple points of view and highlight other critical aspects of social marketing rather than the “change of individual behaviour for the purpose of social good”. Several explanations are most fitting for this thesis:

- “Social marketing is promoting well-being and saving lives by harnessing the power of markets and marketing”.
- Social marketing is used to establish and develop marketing systems that facilitate the well-being of consumers (French et al., 2012).

The fact that none of these examples has any mention of individuals, behaviours, or even social good is well-noted. For this master dissertation, the first definition that mentions the concept of “promoting well-being and saving lives” is of utmost interest due to the context of this thesis: social marketing during the COVID-19 pandemic. At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, social marketing has been used to change the behaviour and ensure the acceptance and support of the populace towards COVID-19 measures, such as wearing masks, sanitising, social distancing and other local measures like lockdowns and curfews. In studies about health and prevention communications (Odigbo, 2016; Oti et al., 2016), the relevance and effectiveness of those campaigns have been quite broadly demonstrated. Since social marketing encourages the populace to take on and change their behaviour to the one which is beneficial to society (Ricordeau et al., 2003), the relevance of social marketing grew exponentially in just a few months.

Today, social marketing campaigns are found in every part of the world since various countries try to implement social marketing activities to public health media coverage and increase the economic, technological development as well as improve the cultural environments. Social marketing develops and integrates commercial marketing concepts (awareness building, satisfying consumer’s needs and further maintaining long-term relationships) with other relevant approaches that benefit individuals and communities for the greater social good (Mehmet et al., 2020). It is centred on empowering, encouraging and supporting behavioural changes among target audiences (French, 2009). The benchmark of any social marketing campaign is to make it individual-focused, mainly embracing social media as a channel of communication (Thackeray et al., 2012). It has already been efficiently used in health areas concerning various causes: smoking, alcohol consumption, HIV or AIDS campaigns and even flu vaccination (Odigbo et al., 2020). All those campaigns were created to achieve desired changes in behavioural patterns among the populace (Odigbo et al., 2016). Hence, social marketing campaigns and knowledge was quickly adopted to enlighten people about the dangers of COVID-19, measures imposed by countries and world organisations, so that a more manageable and smoother acceptance of the rules can be reached

(Lee, 2020). However, the question is why social marketing campaigns were so quick to grow and why everyone was so eager to use these practices?

### **Social marketing mix**

In order to understand how social marketing works, which tools and mechanisms are behind the promotion of, e.g., health awareness or environmental consciousness, it is important to look into the marketing mix and how it may have changed to suit the needs of social marketing. Since its formal introduction by Kotler and Zaltman (1971), social marketing has mainly relied on overall marketing progenitors, which can be noticed in the majority of social marketing definitions. Interestingly, the value proposition of social marketing resembles the usual value proposition definition in marketing: the reasons how the specific type of behaviour and actions can add more value to the consumers' life or even solve a problem (French et al., 2012). The marketing mix in social marketing is defined as the same well-known four Ps: product, price, place and promotion as it is used in mainstream marketing. The dominance of this trend is probably connected to Kotler and Zaltman (1971) definition, which indirectly implements each component of the framework. However, scholars debate and critique the usage of the 4 Ps framework when talking about social marketing (Gordon, 2012; Hastings, 2007; Peattie and Peattie, 2003; Evans and Hastings, 2008; Tapp & Sportswood, 2013, pp.210-217). Even Philip Kotler, one of the leading promoters of the framework, has recognised the limitations that it brings to social marketing (Kotler, 2003).

Therefore, in order to analyse social marketing without limitations of a framework, which does not include the specific sides of this type of marketing, another one, proposed by Ross Gordon (2012), will be used for explanation of the social marketing mix in this dissertation. This model is greatly influenced by the model of 7Cs first introduced by Shizumu (Gordon, R., 2012) as well as by the ideas of Lauterbron (1990) and Dev and Schultz (2005). The framework proposed by Gordon (2012) was created in recognition of circumstances in which social marketing operates most of the time. It consists of 6 elements: circumstances, organisation and competition, cost, consumer, process, channels/strategies. Each part can be divided into several points, which fully explain the framework in total. In order to understand each point, it is vital to explain every single one of them and then focus on those parts of the framework, which are especially relevant to the topic of the dissertation.

First of all, the organization part can be described as mere goals, causes and objectives of the social marketing campaign as well as by the structure of the relationships between vital stakeholders. Thus, it covers the basic structure of the campaign and shows why the campaign was started in the first place. Competition, in its turn, is defined as competition for the desired behaviour. Simply put, the competition of social marketing is the alternate behaviour patterns to the one it tries to implement. So, if social marketing tries to promote anti-alcohol behaviour, then the competition to that would be alcohol substance abuse. In some cases, the competition can be pretty straightforward; however, it is not the case every single time. That is especially true for causes, which are in one way or another related to religious or political views. Another part of the framework would be costs, talking about them Gordon (2012) stated that only costs, which are associated with the change in consumer behaviour, e.g., social costs, opportunity costs, as well as costs related to the non-changed consumer behaviour, can be included under the "cost" part of the



framework. For the purpose of this dissertation, the costs do not play a vital role. However, it would be interesting to look into this point in further research. From the point of the consumer part of the framework, social marketing must be consumer-oriented since its primary goal is to change targeted individuals' behaviour patterns. It has to be all about the co-creation of value, which is essential for both the intended consumer and the social marketing campaign creator (s). Social marketing also must be based on previous research since it is a powerful tool to induce a positive change of behaviour. Social marketing campaigns with the wrong or low-researched message can harm the target audience, which can bring in indescribable consequences.

By process, the next part of the framework, Ross Gordon (2012) meant that behind social marketing, there must be a reason, a theory and a specific way of thinking such as relational and customer-oriented thinking. Social marketing also has to possess these characteristics: being holistic, strategic and co-created, as mentioned above. It is supposed to be value-driven as well, which is vital for the stakeholders and community engagement. In this dissertation, a social cognitive approach was taken as a theory behind the process of social marketing since it talks about how communication, e.g., social marketing campaign, can be influenced by social factors, which is of utmost interest to the researchers of this paper. The next part of the framework, circumstances, are defined as a social and structural environment in which the social marketing cause and campaign are going to be conducted. It can be influenced by the political agenda of the concrete country or political causes as well as by social norms, media and other external environmental factors. This dissertation will specifically focus on circumstances as it is vital to understand the ways of how society's behaviour can be changed and by what it can be influenced. The final part of the framework is social marketing channels and strategies. Inside of those 4Ps: product, price, place, and promotion, can be found as well as people, policy, advocacy and lobbying. Among the channels of social marketing, PR and media relations can be seen as well, which also plays a vital role for this dissertation since the focus will be on social marketing campaigns on social media.

This framework is vaster, more detailed and relevant than the well-known 4Ps of marketing that is why this research about social marketing will use it as a basis. As said above, focusing on circumstances, e.g., social environment in which social marketing campaign has been conducted as well as social marketing channels, is of most use for the research. The reasons behind that would be that the context of the dissertation is COVID-19 since it influenced the social environment and changed it to something absolutely new and not known before. The same can be said about the social marketing channels, to be specific, social media platforms, usage of which grew exponentially throughout the last year. However, it is also important to understand the mechanisms behind comparative reference group influence in order to see how they can influence the effectiveness of social marketing campaigns on social media. That is why it was decided to look into psychological theories, which can help to understand the reasons for the possible change in consumer behaviour.

## **Social Cognitive approach**

This master's dissertation is focused on, first of all, finding out whether comparative reference groups have any influence on the effectiveness of social marketing campaigns on social media platforms like Facebook or Instagram. However, in order to do that, it would be interesting to look behind the comparative reference groups and try to find out psychological reasons why reference groups might have such influence in the first place. After conducting a literature study on several psychological and psychosocial theories, it was decided to stick with the social cognitive approach, which was first rooted by Edwin B. Holt and Harold Chapman Brown (Holt, 1933). Canadian psychologist Albert Bandura then further expanded and explained this theory. In 2001, Bandura connected social cognitive theory to mass communication and analysed the diffusion of new behaviour through society (Bandura, 2001). He explained the social cognitive theory as "an agentic conceptual framework, which can be used to examine the determinants and psychosocial mechanisms through which symbolic communication affects ideas and actions" (Bandura, 2001, p. 265). This theory will be further elaborated on to investigate how consumer behaviour and actions can be changed with the use of social marketing campaigns on social media.

The importance of this approach for this dissertation lies in the mechanisms through which communication (e.g., social marketing campaign) can change an individual's behaviour. Individuals or groups of people can learn new behavioural patterns, adopt a new way of thinking and doing certain things, and most of the time they are influenced by people around them. Social learning often occurs either on purpose or unintentionally from models in the individual's surrounding. Individuals can also collect an immense amount of data about values, ways of thinking and standards of conduct from extensive modelling in the setting of mass media. In contrast to learning by doing, observational learning is different because even a single model, for example, an influencer on social media, can transmit new ways of thinking and behaving simultaneously to a vast amount of people in various regions of the country or even the world. New ideas, values, behaviour patterns and social practices can now quickly cover the whole world by using mass media and social media (Bandura, 1986). In order to further look into the observational learning and change of behaviour, it was decided to analyse the subfunctions and based on the findings, the subfunction, which is most relevant to the purpose of this dissertation, would be the one concerning motivational processes. For this master's dissertation, the performance of observationally learned behaviour is essential to see the results of social marketing campaigns. That is why the focus now will be on the motivational subfunction and performance itself. Three main types of incentive motivators, which can influence the performance of observationally acquired behaviour are: direct, vicarious and self-produced. People are inspired to change their behaviour by the potential advantages of those that are close to them. However, they are discouraged from pursuing patterns of behaviour that have proven to culminate in detrimental consequences. Personal standards of conduct provide a further form of incentive motivation.

Modelling, which can be connected to one of the types of incentive motivators, influences the implementation of new social practices and behaviour patterns in various ways. It informs people about new ways of thinking and acting by insightful demonstrations or explanations. Modelled, the advantages of new behaviour patterns speed up social dissemination, and as recognition of those

patterns grows, they attract more and more social support. As such, reference groups, which are considered one of the models, may lead people to, e.g., behave altruistically, volunteer their services or obey the covid-19 measures. The actions of models gain the ability to trigger and channel-specific behaviour patterns since they are strong indicators for observing individuals that similar behaviour to models' actions can yield positive results. Influential people, say, reference groups, pick up new ideas and pass them on to their followers through their influence. This process became even more manageable with the usage of social media such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter or Tik Tok.

However, the question is how models can influence, i.e., increase in health awareness? The usual reaction to health communication directed at altering health-inducing behaviours shows the influential role of people's beliefs in their capacity to produce the desired effect. Meyerowitz and Chaiken (1987) explored four alternate processes by which health communications, in this case, reference groups, could modify health habits: by the transmission of factual information, fear arousal, a shift in risk perception and the enhancement of perceived self-efficacy. They reported that health communications fostered a more straightforward implementation of preventive health practices, mainly through their effects on perceived self-efficacy. Beck and Lund (1981) have also found that preventive health and wellness practices are best supported by improving self-efficacy rather than by elevating fear. The higher the pre-existing perceived self-efficacy is, the more likely people are to follow patterns suggested by social media campaigns. So instead of attempting to intimidate people into healthier behaviour, models should inspire them by using special techniques and self-beliefs to make them exercise perceived personal control over their health behaviour. These findings are essential in terms of the context of this master dissertation. By focusing on one of the models of social cognitive theory: reference groups, it would be enlightening to see whether models can actually influence the change effectiveness of social marketing campaigns and what would be the reasons behind its influence.

### **Value of Social marketing**

However, the question at hand is how can the effectiveness of social marketing be tested in this dissertation? In order to answer that question, several variables have been validated to choose the one, which is the most relevant to this research. Thus, the perceived value concept has been chosen to describe how social marketing is related to the increase in health awareness. It would be of most interest to see how individuals differ in their views on social marketing and the difference between "what is received and what is given" (Cocosila & Igonor, 2012). Although value was usually associated with the concept of utility of a product or service in marketing, the most recent studies have shown that it can also be connected to several other disciplines. Thus, it was decided to use this concept in this research as well (Turel et al., 2007; Cocosila & Igonor, 2012). To deeper understand the concept, a literature review has been done, and it showed some of the most used types and components of perceived value to be following (Kim et al., 2007; Sheth et al., 1991; Cocosila & Igonor, 2012):

- Utilitarian, which means the perception of utility is correlated with the use or adaptation.
- Hedonic or emotional, which describes the state of mood which is linked to the use or adaptation.

There are various other components of the perceived value concept. However, for the purpose of this research, it was decided to use the utilitarian value because hedonic value cannot really be linked to the overall perceived value of the social marketing activities. Thus, it is vital to understand what a utilitarian value is. Overby and Lee (2016) stated that utilitarian value is basically a judgment of functional value: benefits that it imposes as well as sacrifices. It is a rather rational concept that is why when talking about social marketing it is most likely going to be connected to the rational explanation of why it is important. Thus, it is hypothesised that the target audience (in this case social media users) would perceive value of social marketing if adopting the behaviour imposed by the cause of a specific social marketing campaign is seen to help with accomplishment of getting information and being more aware of the health issues or measures that COVID-19 brings with it. This leads to a hypothesis, which will be the core of all relationships inside the causal framework:

H1: Perceived value of social marketing campaigns positively affects the increase in health awareness.

However, first of all, it is important to understand how social media can be connected to social marketing so that then the reference groups on various social media platforms can be discussed.

## **Social media**

In order to understand how social marketing on social media platforms can increase the health awareness, it was decided first to define social media and look into the ways how social marketing has been using social media as its channel before. Thus, this chapter will start by explaining what social media are and how they can be used for social good. Social media are described as Internet-based applications, which empower people to exchange opinions (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010). Social media - along with newspapers, magazines, billboards, radio, television and the Internet (Donovan & Henley, 2003) - are considered among the mass media communication channels. Still, they are distinct in that they encourage people to be actively engaged in the communication process and stay connected with others (Rainie et al., 2011). Mass media and social media have been described to be a vital source of social impact and a way to attract a vast number of individuals (Clement et al., 2013, p. 27).

In the past ten years, the influence of social media grew several times, and the usage of social media spread from individual users to even big companies worldwide. This is especially the case for social networking sites e.g., Facebook, Instagram or Tik Tok. They are used to be a channel of communication among individuals or to establish connections between companies and consumers. The reason why marketers often switch from traditional media to social media is because of the connection easiness, which social media provides. It allows companies to contact target audience, especially "digital natives", who had access to digital world and have strong computer skills since they use it on a daily basis (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008, p.346). Furthermore, social media is now not only the channel of communication between users but also a place for sharing and assimilating information on the Internet (Akrimi & Khemakhem, 2012). Social media (e.g., Facebook or Instagram) are shown as a vital source of communication, which enables the allocation of information to the target audience (Al-Dmour et al., 2020; Laranjo et al., 2014). Since one of the sub-questions of this dissertation is about the possible impact of social media on the effectiveness of social marketing, it would be interesting to look into the ways these two entities have been combined before and why it is important.

### **Social marketing on social media**

When social marketing is combined with digital marketing practices, effective social good can be achieved (Mehmet et al., 2020). While digital platforms have been used to provide information, training, supervision and clinical services, there has been limited work assessing the effectiveness of social media in health promotion and the systematic use of social media to promote specific behaviour in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic (Mehmet et al., 2020). However, some authors believe that a high impact social marketing campaign on social media would lead to a positive change in consumer behaviour. Thus, pointing out that social marketing is of importance to various organisations and causes because it is highly successful in fostering conversations and dialogues, encouraging knowledge transfer and strengthening relationships (Huang et al., 2019).

In social marketing, place as part of channels is not defined as the location of the business or the sales point of the product. Instead, it is where the targeted consumers get introduced to the advertising, which was created to change their point of view on the cause or even their behaviour. The growing importance and dispersion of various social media offer social marketers a possibility

to interact with users at the comfort of their personal space; be it home, work, schools or any other place where they can engage with the advertising. Thus, social media expands the area where social marketing campaign can reach the target audience from public places to their natural settings via using the Internet, which can be accessed from almost everywhere in the world (Bernhardt et al., 2012).

Moreover, it is not a secret that it has always been a challenge for marketers to come up with strategies and designs in advertising to build an efficient and appealing consumer relationship. In their engagement campaigns, various organisations have been thinking about how to incorporate social media channels to attract consumers and to create profitable marketing partnerships with those customers. This is not only something that works only for the overall marketing. Organisations, which use social marketing campaigns to promote their cause have also realised that social media can be a powerful tool in getting in touch with their target audience (Alalwan, 2018). Because of their high usability, consumer-friendliness, interactivity, and networking opportunities, social media technologies make it possible to transform the educational learning environment, turning it into a promising social marketing channel (Huang et al., 2019). Apart from this, since social media have become useful to the public, especially in the sense of gathering information regarding COVID-19, measures and other related topics from various perspectives, it is quite interesting to see how the users of social media perceive said platforms and whether they find them useful for getting the information. Thus, it was decided to also look into the perceived usefulness of social media and how it can influence the effectiveness of social marketing campaigns.

### **Social media usefulness**

Several researchers have stated that social media platforms (e.g., Instagram, YouTube, Facebook) are vital sources of information for various purposes: academic life, political discussions or even health campaigns (Clement et al., 2013; Wong et al., 2021; Huang et al., 2019). Thus, the importance of social media cannot be underestimated. So, in order to discuss whether social media is actually useful for the users, a concept of perceived usefulness is usually applied. Perceived usefulness as a concept was defined as part of the Technology Acceptance Model by Fred Davis (1989). He states that perceived usefulness is "a degree to which a person believes that using a particular system would enhance his or her job performance" (Davis, 1989, p. 332). However, there is another definition of the perceived usefulness of social media (PUSM), which is defined as the "extent to which social media user believes that using a particular social media site helps them accomplish their goal" (Izuagbe et al., 2019, p.395). With this in mind, PUSM, for the purpose of this study, would be about the extent to which social media users believe that using social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram would help them get more information about the COVID-19 virus, pandemic and measures. Thus, it means that social media should be first of all perceived as something useful to the users if social marketing campaign is to be conducted using this communication tool. This is especially important if social marketing campaign focuses on informing people about a specific topic, like it was done with COVID-19 social marketing campaigns, because if users of specific social media do not see the usefulness in getting information on it, then the prognosed reaction to the social marketing activities will not suffice. That is why it is interesting to

understand how it helps social marketing activities to increase health awareness and whether the perceived use of social media networks has a positive or negative effect on the said relationship. Summarizing the said above, it is possible to establish the following hypotheses:

H2: Perceived usefulness of social media networks has a significant positive effect on increase in health awareness.

H3: Perceived usefulness of social media networks has a significant positive effect on the relationship between perceived value of social marketing campaign and an increase in health awareness.

However, we do not only mean that perceived usefulness can impact the relationship between social marketing and the increase in health awareness or increase in health awareness itself. Based on the social cognitive approach, it was shown that one of the models has a very big influence on the possible change in consumer behaviour, which means it might influence whether health awareness increases after the social marketing campaign is done or not. Moreover, in order to understand how that model works, it seemed vital to, first of all, introduce reference groups on social media so that the mechanisms behind their influence can later be discusses as well.

## **Reference groups**

### **Reference groups on social media**

Reference groups were defined by Schiffman et al. (2014) as social role models that affect consumer behaviour. Scaraboto described them as either an individual or a collective that consumers use as a reference point in framing views, values and attitudes (Scaraboto et al., 2012). To define two vital types of relationships between individuals and groups, the reference group theory first suggested by Cooley (1983, p. 271) and later advanced by Hyman and other scholars (Hyman, 1942; Newcomb, 1957; Pilisuk, Hyman, & Singer, 1969, p. 118; Merton, 1968, pp.45-105; Hurado et al. 1994) is used in this dissertation. These two significant categories are known as "normative" and "comparative" reference groups.

Initially, people would be affected by individuals who are close to them in how they behave and what they do. These individuals can be members of family, friends and colleagues. Ultimately, these people's actions, attitudes and values will focus back on individuals and affect their activities, attitudes and values. These reference groups are generally referred to as normative reference groups, and their effect is high because of their presence in the daily life of the consumer and because they function as a guide to how people should behave (Dawson & Chatman, 2001). Comparative reference groups are defined as groups that give individuals a basis for comparison themselves or other groups. These groups are very influential in terms of the effect on individuals' behaviour and feelings. In a social media-driven society, usual comparative reference groups, which are defined as celebrities, heroes, people, whom consumers aspire to be like, are also growing due to the easiness of becoming an "influencer" on various social media like Instagram, Facebook, Twitter or TikTok.

Reference groups are still highly influential on consumer behaviour. However, now, thanks to the rising role of social media in our lives, the influence of online reference groups is rising every year. As more users become present online, the number of reference groups on social media has grown exponentially (ThoughtCo, 2017). Undoubtedly, the surge of consumer social media usage is transforming how individuals communicate with their reference groups. Consumer behaviour and sales through social media channels are now guided by influencers, celebrities, companies and even user accounts of friends and family members. As social media has become a vital part of our lives, it cannot be argued that social media reference groups have become a larger influencer since we place so much influence in our reference group, which are followed by individuals. Our user behaviour is becoming a representation of what we see on social media sites because of our association with reference groups and the influence of social media. That is why in this research the focus will be on the comparative reference groups rather than on the normative reference groups because they are more prone to have influence power on social media. Thus, influencers, bloggers or celebrities are more likely to be involved in social marketing activities than users' friends or family. However, not every influencer or celebrity is the same, some people are getting their fame spreading false information, others are famous for always seeking the truth and posting only reliable and credible content. So, what makes this or that influencer credible and how it can influence the effectiveness of social marketing campaign?



## **Credibility of reference groups on social media**

Social marketers often discuss which channels can be the best for their social campaign. In the world of social media, they often turn to comparative reference groups, to be exact influencers or celebrities to relay their message to the target audience. Since many brands have recognized the power of social media influence, many marketers in local and national governments turn their eye to transmitting the intended message through famous influencers or celebrities. This was also the case for the COVID-19 pandemic. When the media coverage of the pandemic started in Russia and Belgium, most of it was done online via digital newspapers or social media networks. As with everything on the Internet, it was done to fight the misinformation, which spread among the users in these countries. Once the situation became dire, both Russian and Belgian governments enlisted the help of comparative reference groups with an active presence on social media networks such as Instagram or Tik Tok influencers, celebrities and bloggers. It was done in order to promote the measures and public safety among the younger population of the country who are not as easy to reach with standard marketing channels as with social media. Another reason to roll out social marketing campaigns on social media was to ensure that the younger generation, who are "more susceptible to fake information", would get the accurate information about the health procedures and would not misinform their peers (Pritchard, 2020). Since the "info-demic" started out at the same time as the pandemic and many untrustworthy messages have appeared on the social media and Internet overall, it made many marketers be more judgemental on the credibility of the people they were relaying their message through (Pritchard, 2020). Thus, it is an important aim for this dissertation to understand how the credibility of influencers and celebrities on social media can influence the effectiveness of social marketing campaigns.

Credibility in social marketing can be perceived as two separate entities: the credibility of the message and the credibility of the source, which transmits the said message. Source credibility is extremely important if we want to explain why the content, which was shared by them, had the possibility of changing consumer behaviour (Hussain et al., 2020; Ohanian, 1991; Zogaj et al., 2020, p. 418). Many studies have treated credibility as one-dimensional or multi-dimensional entity (Wilson & Sherrell, 1993; Ohanian, 1991). However, for the purpose of this dissertation, the two-dimensional approach will be used as it serves the purpose of the research the best. In this approach, credibility's dimensions will be the perceived expertise of the source and perceived trustworthiness (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Ismagilova et al., 2020; Schouten et al., 2020; Zogaj et al., 2020). As such, source credibility is explained as the source, which is perceived to be trustworthy and expert in the field (Bhattacharjee & Sanford, 2006; Zogaj et al., 2020).

By researching how these dimensions influence the efficiency and success of social marketing campaign on social media, it will be possible to understand whether perceived trustworthiness and perceived competence of comparative reference groups have positive or negative effect on the said variable. It is of particular interest for future recommendations to gain knowledge about this topic to understand how to conduct effective social marketing campaigns on social media using comparative reference groups' influence. However, it is vital first to explain the dimensions of the source credibility. Perceived trustworthiness has been researched in prior studies, which examined its effect on various variables such as purchase intentions or consumer behaviour (Badrinarayanan

et al., 2014; Zhang et al., 2015; Dion et al., 1995; Zogaj et al., 2020; Hussain et al., 2020). Human beings are known to be social beings, which means that to us, truth always matter. According to Ohanian (1990), trust in something lies in the recipient's acceptance of the sender. He also stated that honesty, being dependable and reliable also plays an immense role in one's perceived trustworthiness. Thus, trustworthiness for this research would lay in the ability to depend and rely on the information from a particular sender as well as being sure that the sender is honest with the recipient. Another dimension of source credibility is perceived competence, which can also be named perceived expertise in the field. Perceived competence is about having the knowledge of the topic and an ability to be accurate in the chosen field for the posted content. In the study by Martensen et al. (2018), it was stated that observers perceived influencers on social media having expertise only if they have experience in that sphere, which means that they were supposed to work in that sphere for quite a long time. Even reputation, which usually would not be linked to expertise, was found to have a connection to it (Zhao et al., 2016). Thus, influencers and celebrities with higher reputations were found to be perceived as bigger experts rather than those with smaller reputation. Another interesting finding is that social media users are often inclined to agree with experts in the field rather than bystanders. Thus, influencers in his/her/their expertise category would have a much higher perceived expertise mark than those who are just talking about the specific issue without having much experience in that field. However, this also leads to a possibility of scrutiny from the side of the audience, especially around hard topics.

Another dimension of credibility would be message credibility, which is quite a common term used to describe how and whether recipients approve the message (Newell & Goldsmith, 2001). Of course, in the ideal situation, the message would be perceived positively rather than negatively but that depends on the individual who gets the message since he is the one who gets to measure the credibility for himself (Ohanian, 1990). According to Appelman and Sundar's research (2016) found that message credibility can be described as following adjectives: accurate, believable and authentic. In that case, the message credibility can depend on how believable, accurate or authentic the message is perceived by the recipient. Message credibility, of course, can be influenced by the sender, e.g., influencer, company or organization. If these sources are not perceived as credible by the recipient of the message, then the credibility of the message itself will also be less than prognosed. That is why in order to understand and demonstrate the credibility of comparison reference groups, it will be important to analyse both source and message credibility as dimensions, which build the credibility of reference groups. Thus, based on the information said above, the third and last hypothesis will be defined as:

H4: Perceived credibility of the comparative reference groups has a significant positive effect on increase in health awareness

H5: Perceived credibility of the comparative reference groups has a significant positive effect on the impact of social marketing campaigns on increase in health awareness.

Furthermore, it was decided to select a control variable, which will be defined as "place of residency" in order to find out if there are significant differences in the relationships depending on

the region. This means that the framework, which will be used for the hypotheses in this dissertation, will look as follows:

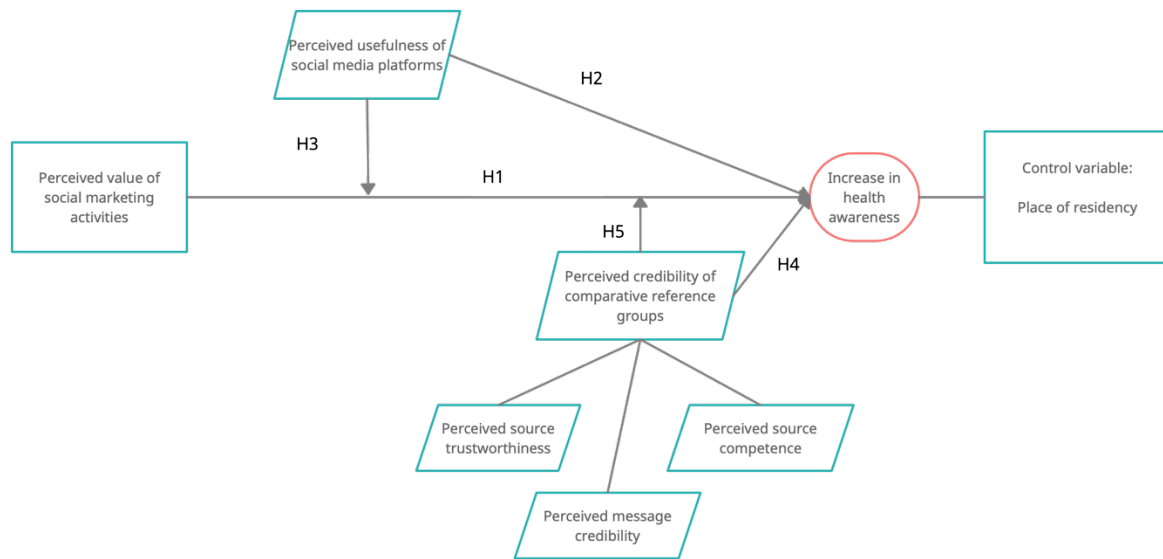


Figure 1. Conceptual framework

## **Method**

In order to understand how exactly social factors, such as the credibility of comparative reference groups, which were guided by a social marketing campaign, affect the increase in health awareness, a survey was conducted, and the collected data were analysed in order to test the hypotheses introduced above.

From the literature review it can be seen that even though there are multiple sources on separate topics such as social marketing, social media and comparative reference groups, the overall topic of this dissertation is still understudied. Hence this study aims to understand and research how comparison reference groups, as well as social media platforms, can influence the relationship between social marketing activities and increase in health awareness. In order to get a deeper understanding of all relationships and get more knowledge about this topic, various variables like perceived value of social marketing activities, perceived credibility of comparative reference groups, perceived source trustworthiness, perceived source competence, perceived message credibility and perceived usefulness of social media were used to analyse the impacts that they have on each other based on the conceptual framework mentioned above. To accomplish these objectives, various theories, constructs and variables were taken from relevant and cited sources by means of the web-search of several databases of academic and business journals.

Based on the literature review, it was decided to choose a research approach, which would be relevant to this dissertation and its purpose. Thus, exploratory research was chosen as the main approach for this study. Literature review shows that the problem has not yet been studied thoroughly and there is a gap in the knowledge, so in order to collect and analyse the primary data, a quantitative study has been conducted by distributing the survey developed through the software Qualtrics.

## **Measurements**

The measures used in the questionnaire were adapted from the existing literature on social marketing, social media and credibility of comparative reference groups. In order to make sure that there is no state-dependence effect from repetitively using the scale throughout the whole questionnaire, it was decided to use both 5-point Likert scale. However, questions were put in an order, which ensures that respondents would not blindly answer the given questions. Most scales ranged from 1= "strongly disagree" to 5 = "strongly agree" which can be seen in the survey guide in the Appendix.

To measure 'familiarity with social media', in total, respondents were asked several questions about their personal social media usage to ensure that they are active on said social media. These questions were adopted from the research of Saud et al. (2020). Then, respondents were asked to answer several questions on 5-point Likert scales, with 1= strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree, adopted from the study of Izuagbe et al. (2019) about their perception of the value of social marketing activities. Furthermore, as this study aims to get more insight into the influence of social media on the effectiveness of social marketing, it was decided to test the perceived usefulness of social media platforms by adopting questions of Alsisi et al. (2020). They were also measured on the same 5-point Likert type scale as the previous part of the questionnaire.

The 'credibility of the source', as well as the 'message credibility', sections included questions adapted from various sources (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Zogaj et al., 2021; Ohanlan, 1990; Appelman and Sundar, 2015; Martensen et al., 2018 and Erdogan, 1999). Based on the questions in mentioned studies, respondents were asked questions about honesty, reliability to measure perceived trustworthiness of the source, about knowledge, experience and validity to measure the perceived competence (expertise) of the source as well as questions using Martensen et al.'s (2018) findings that message credibility can be described by three adjectives. All the items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale in which 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree. Then, questions about increase in health awareness (dependant variable) were asked, which measured the effect of each independent variable and moderating variable. The final section of the survey was added to get reliable socio-demographic information about gender, age, occupation, country of residence and school degree.

The questions that were asked were based on the overall perception of comparative reference groups on social media and social marketing activities, which were taken throughout the existence of the COVID-19 pandemic. To ensure the clear understanding of questions and to ensure that the results are truthful, the definition of all terms, which might not be known to the participants was provided at the beginning of the survey and before each part, which involves these terms.

### **Sampling**

The link to the survey was provided on various social media, such as Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp and V Kontakte in order to get responses from participants who actually use social media networks. This was done to ensure the minimum of false responses. Moreover, using social media as channels of dissemination ensured that the responses would be recorded from as many demographically various groups as possible. Moreover, since respondents had to answer questions connected to the usage of social media, several questions were implemented at the beginning of the questionnaire to ensure that they were active social media users so that this important determinant can be represented fairly in the results. Convenience sampling was thus mostly used for the purpose of this research since there were no restrictions for filling in the questionnaire. Responses were collected in the period between 3 and 10 May 2021. In order to apply the snowball method, questionnaire was shared by various people by direct posting or re-posting the original post of the author. After enough responses had been collected, a statistical analysis was calculated measuring subject's responses. For the purpose of this research, a minimal amount of 50 respondents per hypothesis was required, which led to 169 collected responses.

## Results and discussion

### Demographics

A total of 169 respondents filled in and completed the survey. However, 5 responses were found to be outliers by screening the data manually and deleting "obviously wrong" observations, such as repeating patterns like 4,4,4 or 1,2,3,1,2,3. These responses were deleted from the dataset. The sample after deletion consisted of 22.7% male respondents, 71.2% female respondents, 3.1% non-binary respondents and 3.1% decided not to put in their gender. The biggest age group was respondents from 21-25, which correlated to 61.6% of responses. The next biggest cluster would be people from 36 and above, who correlate to 14.6% of all respondents. This phenomenon can be explained by the snowball method where the questionnaire was shared by decent amount of people, part of whom belonged to the said age group. 9.1% of respondents were younger than 20, while 7.3% were between the age of 26 and 30 or 31 and 35. Of all people who have completed the questionnaire, 35.8% lived in Belgium, 51.2% lived in Russia and 13% resided in other countries.

When talking about the current employment status, 49.7% of respondents identify as students, while 39.3% were full-time employees. 6.1% had part-time employment, 3.1% were either unemployed or were not looking for work at the time of submitting the questionnaire and 1.8% were retired. 163 responses were collected for the degree of education. 44.2% of respondents have completed their Bachelor, while 25.8% have graduated with their Masters. 24.5% of respondents have finished High school, which correlates with the age groups of below 20 and 21-25. Lastly, 5.5% of respondents have completed their PhD.

Apart from the age- or gender-related demographics, it was decided to test the frequency of social media usage to see whether the respondents are active users of said platforms or not. The responses showed that 73.2% of the respondents use social media platforms every day, 20.7% use them 5-6 days per week, 4.9% use them 3-4 days per week and then only 0.6% were using it 1 day per week and 2 days per week. This shows that the biggest part of the respondents, namely 93.9%, are active social media users, which is important for the purpose of this study. Moreover, to see how much time they spend on social media platforms, respondents were asked to put down the average usage time per day. The responses were quite understandable. 34.1% of the respondents used social media on average 1-2 hours per day, 23.8% used them for the period of 3-4 hours per day, 20.7% used it up to one hour per day. Also, there were 18.3% of respondents who used social media for more than 4 hours per day and only 3% used it for less than 30 minutes.

Furthermore, it was interesting to see which sources are considered the most useful for getting COVID-19 related information. The responses to this would be of utmost interest since this research tries to see if there is any effect from using the social media platforms on the relationships between social marketing and increase in health awareness. Based on the responses, an overall of 45.6% of respondents considered social media platforms, namely 21.3% for Facebook, 15.2% for Instagram and 8.5% for Vkontakte (Russian equivalent of Facebook). 24.4% of respondents, however, preferred news and 21.3% used government websites and channels. Only 9.1% were using other sources of information.

By using Crosstabulation, it was decided to see whether there is an explanation of the said percentages depending on the age or country of residence. The following analysis showed that Russian respondents preferred news as means of getting information (23), while Belgian respondents preferred Facebook (18), followed by government websites and channels (17). It was surprising to see that the biggest age group (21-25) actually preferred using government websites and channels, while respondents older than 36 used Facebook and news to get new information regarding COVID-19. However, respondents between the ages of 21 and 25 also quite liked news and Facebook or Instagram as a source of information according to the conducted analysis.

Normality of the data has also been assessed by conducting Skewness and Kurtosis analysis to see the value of the different variables (Table1).

|             | Mean | Skewness | Std.Error of Skewness | Kurtosis | Std. Error of Kurtosis |
|-------------|------|----------|-----------------------|----------|------------------------|
| Value1      | 3.73 | -.872    | .190                  | .945     | .377                   |
| Value2      | 3.57 | -.470    | .190                  | -.045    | .377                   |
| Value3      | 3.79 | -.709    | .190                  | -.071    | .377                   |
| Usefulness1 | 3.50 | -.629    | .190                  | .280     | .377                   |
| Usefulness2 | 3.45 | -.310    | .190                  | -.604    | .377                   |
| Usefulness3 | 3.84 | -.923    | .190                  | .671     | .377                   |
| Usefulness4 | 4.07 | -1,089   | .190                  | 1.923    | .377                   |
| Trust1      | 2.81 | .171     | .190                  | -.189    | .377                   |
| Trust2      | 2.89 | .138     | .190                  | -.128    | .377                   |
| Trust3      | 3.10 | -.069    | .190                  | -.375    | .377                   |
| Expertise1  | 3.09 | -.125    | .190                  | -.315    | .377                   |
| Expertise2  | 2.60 | .267     | .190                  | -.503    | .377                   |
| Expertise3  | 2.49 | .405     | .190                  | -.380    | .377                   |
| Expertise4  | 3.10 | -.198    | .190                  | -.342    | .377                   |
| Message1    | 3.09 | .075     | .190                  | -.497    | .377                   |
| Message2    | 3.07 | -.005    | .190                  | -.088    | .377                   |

|            |      |        |      |       |      |
|------------|------|--------|------|-------|------|
| Message3   | 3.07 | -.066  | .190 | -.229 | .377 |
| Awareness1 | 3.96 | -1.090 | .190 | 1.367 | .377 |
| Awareness2 | 3.88 | -.916  | .190 | 1.159 | .377 |
| Awareness3 | 3.07 | -.398  | .190 | -.243 | .377 |

Table1. Descriptives

Since absolute values of Skewness and Kurtosis for the said variables are not higher than 3, the dataset is considered to be normally distributed.

### Factor analysis

Factor analysis is usually used to group similar variables into dimensions and to identify latent variables. Thus, the aim of conducting this analysis would be to reduce the number of individual items and group them into several dimensions for the purpose of easing the further analyses. In this research, several dimensions are hypothesised: perceived value, perceived usefulness and perceived credibility.

A principal axis factor analysis was conducted on 164 items after deleting the outliers from the dataset. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure verified the sampling adequacy for the analysis. The measure for the analysis is 0.89 and it is greater than the minimum value of KMO, which equals 0.6. Thus, it can be said that the sampling is adequate. Moreover, Bartlett's Test of Sphericity is significant with  $p < .001$ . Both these tests show that this analysis has passed the minimum standards and factor analysis can be further conducted.

Taking into the account that the Eigenvalue for the component should meet the minimum value of 1, three components were found. These components would be named: Perceived credibility (consisting of Trust1, Trust2, Trust3, Expertise1, Expertise2, Expertise3, Expertise4, Message1, Message2, Message3), Perceived value (consisting of Value1, Value2, Value3), Perceived Usefulness (consisting of Usefulness1, Usefulness2, Usefulness3 and Usefulness4) and Increase in health awareness (consisting of Awareness1, Awareness2). Awareness3 will be emitted from further research due to having a low communality (0.1) and Cronbach's alpha analysis, which will be discussed further. 3 components, namely Perceived credibility, Perceived value and Perceived usefulness, explain 64.9% of the variance and Increase in health awareness explains 59.8% of the variance.

### Cronbach's alpha

Following the conduction of principal axis factor analysis, it was decided to compute Cronbach's alpha to see whether the data is reliable or not. This analysis tests the consistency of questionnaire responses when collecting data needed to measure the study of interest. The values are located between 0 and 1, and for the purpose of this research, the minimum of 0.7 was used for interpreting 5-point Likert scale questions, which are related to research's variables.



The result of the reliability analysis was at .92, which is higher than the needed minimum of 0.7, thus the construct is measured in a reliable way. Awareness3 was not used for the factor analysis due to it having positive effect on Cronbach's alpha in case of its removal. Thus, it supports the decision made during the factor analysis.

After measuring Cronbach's alpha, it was decided to calculate the descriptive statistics. In order to compare variables with focus on detail, mean and standard deviation of each variable were measured and compared. Those values were put into the table for the easier understanding of multiple outputs. After conducting factor analysis, variables were combined into several components, thus the table shows these new components' mean and standard deviation (Table 2).

| Variables   | Mean | Standard deviation |
|---|------|--------------------|
| Perceived value of social marketing activities            | 3.7  | .82                |
| Perceived usefulness of social media                      | 3.71 | .75                |
| Perceived credibility of comparative reference groups     | 2.93 | .75                |
| Perceived trustworthiness of comparative reference groups | 2.93 | .86                |
| Perceived expertise of comparative reference groups       | 2.81 | .79                |
| Perceived message credibility                             | 3.08 | .84                |
| Increase in health awareness                              | 3.91 | .79                |

Table 2. Statistical descriptives

As Table 2 shows, the mean point for all variables was 3 and almost all variables were either a bit smaller than this mean or above the mean point. Interesting takeaway would be that all variables connected to the perceived credibility of comparative reference groups: perceived trustworthiness, perceived expertise and perceived message credibility had a lower means than the rest of the variables, which can be explained by a somewhat negative attitude towards the comparative reference groups in general and their credibility (2 was coded as "disagree" and 3 as "neither agree nor disagree").

According to Table 2 and the results of descriptive statistics analysis, respondents somewhat agree that they perceive social marketing as valuable. Since the mean for the perceived value of social marketing is closer to the 4 (3 was coded as "neither agree nor disagree" and 4 as "agree"), it can be said that they have a positive attitude towards social marketing in general and social marketing campaigns. Respondents also had a positive response to the perceived usefulness of social media; thus, it can be stated that they perceive social media as useful for the purpose of getting

information about COVID-19 and they agree that social media platforms enhance the effectiveness of social marketing.

Looking at the increase in health awareness, it can be stated that respondents are very close to agreeing with the fact that social marketing and social media increase their health awareness regarding COVID-19 measures and symptoms.

### Correlation and regression

According to the conceptual model introduced in this research, the following model will be used, implementing the interaction effects of perceived usefulness of social media and perceived credibility of comparative reference groups. Perceived value of social marketing was also integrated.

$$Y = \alpha_1 + \beta_1 V + \beta_2 U + \beta_3 C + \epsilon$$

Where the dependent variable is  $Y = \text{Increase in Health Awareness} = (\text{Awareness}_1 + \text{Awareness}_2) / 2$

And where the independent variables were coded as following:

$$V = \text{Perceived Value of social marketing} = (\text{Value}_1 + \text{Value}_2 + \text{Value}_3) / 3$$

$$U = \text{Perceived Usefulness of social media platforms} \\ = (\text{Usefulness}_1 + \text{Usefulness}_2 + \text{Usefulness}_3 + \text{Usefulness}_4) / 4$$

$$C = \text{Perceived credibility of comparative reference groups} = \\ (\text{Trust}_1 + \text{Trust}_2 + \text{Trust}_3 + \text{Expertise}_1 + \text{Expertise}_2 + \text{Expertise}_3 + \text{Expertise}_4 + \text{Message}_1 + \text{Message}_2 + \text{Message}_3) / 10$$

First of all, in order to give insight into the dependent-independent relationships, correlations matrices are presented.

| Variable                     | Perceived value | Perceived usefulness | Perceived credibility | Increase in health awareness |
|------------------------------|-----------------|----------------------|-----------------------|------------------------------|
| Perceived value              |                 |                      |                       |                              |
| Perceived usefulness         | .59**           |                      |                       |                              |
| Perceived credibility        | .24**           | .39**                |                       |                              |
| Increase in health awareness | .59**           | .73**                | .42**                 |                              |

Table 3. Correlation

Before conducting multivariate regression analysis, it was decided to test the correlation between variables in order to analyse whether there is a relationship between them and how strong that relationship is. The correlation analysis showed a positive relationship between all independent

variables on increase in health awareness as well as the positive relationship between independent variables themselves.

Results of the Pearson correlation shown in Table 3 indicated that there was a significant positive correlation between Perceived Value and Increase in health awareness ( $r(164) = .59, p < .001$ ). Another significant correlation was noticed between Perceived Value and Perceived Usefulness ( $r(164) = .59, p < .001$ ). Moreover, there was a significant positive correlation between Perceived Value and Perceived Credibility ( $r(164) = .24, p = .002$ ), which has the lowest correlation between the introduced variables. Furthermore, another correlation was indicated between Perceived Usefulness and Increase in health awareness ( $r(164) = .73, p < .001$ ), which has the strongest positive correlation effect. Thus, the higher is perceived usefulness of social media, the higher the health awareness increases. The same can be said for the relationship between perceived value of social marketing and increase in health awareness. Even though the relationship between Perceived Credibility of comparative reference groups and increase in health awareness ( $r(164) = .42, p < .001$ ) is not as strong as the previously mentioned relationships, it is still strong and positive as well. Thus, it can be said that the more people perceive comparative reference groups are credible, the higher the increase in health awareness would be.

Following the correlation analysis, a multivariate regression analysis was conducted to analyse the interaction effects of independent variables and examine the effect of perceived usefulness of social media platforms and perceived credibility on the relationships between perceived value of social marketing and increase in health awareness.

| Variable  | Standardized coefficient Beta ( $\beta$ ) | t-value | Sig. |
|---|---|---------|------|
| Perceived value   | .227                                      | 3.66    | .000 |
| Perceived usefulness  | .512                                      | 7.84    | .005 |
| Perceived credibility   | .158                                      | 2.94    | .004 |
| Perceived Value X<br>Perceived Usefulness                                   | -.118                                     | -2.31   | .022 |
| Perceived Value X<br>Perceived Credibility                                  | .084                                      | .737    | .462 |
| R Square  | .608                                      |         |      |
| Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>   | .597                                      |         |      |
| Adjusted R <sup>2</sup> after<br>deleting the non-<br>significant variables | .598                                      |         |      |

Table 4. Regression

Multicollinearity occurred during the conduction of the analysis because of the high correlation between main effect and the interaction effects. High Variance Inflation Factors were found to be varying from 13.42 to 52.55. This indicated that there is a very high correlation between the variables. In order to reduce the occurred multicollinearity, it was decided to use the residual centring method introduced by Lance (1988). This method explains how two-step multivariate regression can reduce VIFs after being applied to the data. It can be stated that this method has indeed helped with the multicollinearity since VIFs have been reduced to be between 1.04 and 1.73.

A conducted multivariate regression analysis indicated that perceived value of social marketing campaigns is a significant predictor of increase in health awareness ( $\beta=.23$ ,  $p<.001$ ). Thus, it can be stated that H1 is supported at 95% confidence level, which means that the more people think of social marketing as a valuable activity, the more their health awareness grows, which is undoubtedly an important finding for social marketers. This is also supported by previously conducted studies from all over the globe. Moreover, the analysis showed that the perceived usefulness of social media platforms is a significant predictor of increase in health awareness ( $\beta=.51$ ,  $p=.005$ ). This finding supports the previously done studies about the usefulness of social media and how it can impact health awareness (Saud et al., 2020; Mehmet et al., 2020). However, at the same time, H3 had to be rejected since perceived usefulness had a negative significant effect ( $\beta=-.12$ ,  $p=0.022$ ) on the relationship between perceived value of social marketing campaigns and increase in health awareness. Taking into account the relatively small sample size, it can become a more significant and even positive predictor if measured more accurately. This interaction effect has been researched before and the finding of this particular study has contradicted the existing studies about social media on social marketing and how it enhances the effectiveness of social marketing campaigns (Huang et al., 2019; Laranjo et al., 2014; Thackeray et al., 2012). These authors have shown that social media usefulness has a significant positive effect. However, this contradiction can be explained by the rather small sample size and with standardized coefficient Beta being almost positive, it can be hypothesised that with larger sample size, the results would have supported the previous findings.

Perceived credibility was also found to be a significant predictor ( $\beta=.16$ ,  $p=.004$ ). This supports the studies found on comparative reference groups and their influence on health awareness and other types of consumer behaviour (Appelman & Sundar, 2015; Meyerowitz & Chalken, 1987; Zogaj et al., 2021). However, perceived credibility was not a significant predictor of the relationship between perceived value and increase in health awareness ( $\beta=-.08$ ,  $p=.462$ ). This interaction effect had not been researched yet, since most of the studies were focused on the direct relationship between comparative reference groups credibility, which consisted out of message credibility, trustworthiness and expertise on the health awareness or other types of consumer behaviour. This can be explained by the fact that not many social marketing campaigns on health awareness with the help of influencers or celebrities have been conducted so far. Thus, the effect of comparison reference groups is not that well known. Moreover, based on the conducted research, it can be seen that the stigma around the comparison reference groups might have impacted the findings of this study.

The multiple regression analysis showed that all used variables, namely perceived value, perceived usefulness and perceived credibility explained 59.7% of the variance in increase of health awareness ( $F(5, 158) = 49.301, p < .001$ ). However, perceived credibility did not have a significant effect on the relationship between perceived value and increase in health awareness. Thus, a new adjusted  $R^2$  was calculated in order to include only relevant variables. After deleting the non-significant variables, perceived value and perceived usefulness explained 59.8% of the variance in increase of health awareness ( $F(4, 159) = 61.688, p < .001$ ).

Thus, the final model for this research would be represented by the conceptual model with arrows accompanied by the coefficient value beta, which resemble only significant effects that variables have. Thus, for other lines and other relationships no significant effect was found.

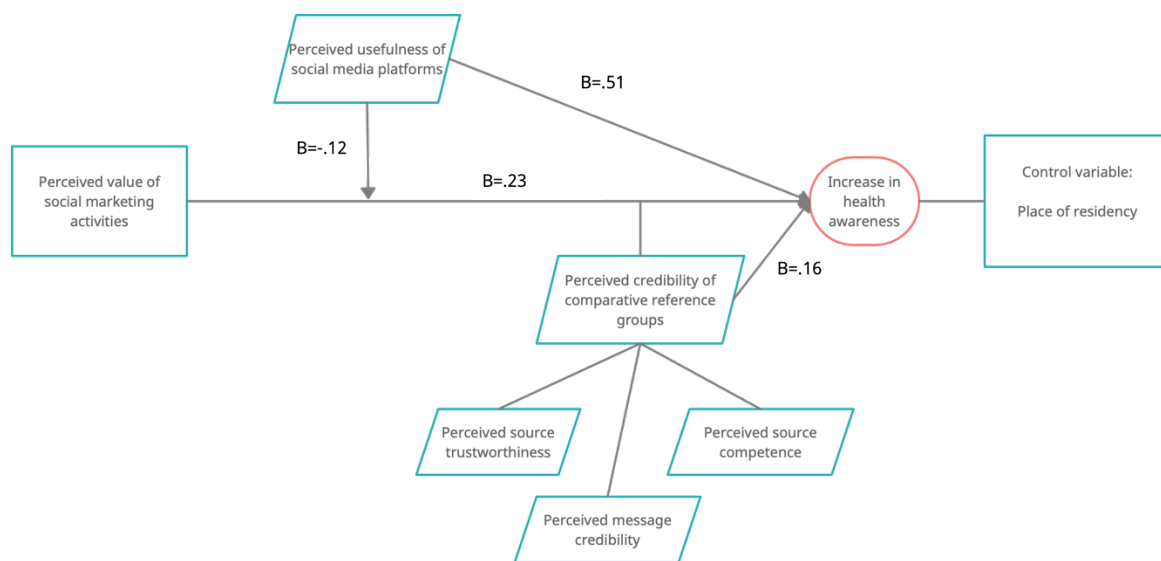


Figure 2. Interaction effects on conceptual framework

Moreover, it was also quite intriguing to investigate how the control variable, such as place of residency could have affected the relationships. Since it was decided to use "country of residency" as a control variable, independent and dependent variables corresponding to "Belgium" and "Russia" were conducted to try and identify if different cultures and geographical locations could impact the significance of the relationships mentioned above.

Based on the correlation matrices, all correlations have not changed their positivity and all of them continued to stay significant for the variables, which correspond to people residing in Belgium; same can be said for the correlations based on the variables related to respondents from Russia. Moreover, based on the multivariate regression analysis, variables "from Belgium" explained 50.5% of variance in increase in health awareness. However, the coefficients were not significant. This can be easily explained by a very small sample size since only 57 people have responded that they were residents of Belgium. On the contrary from Belgium, variables correlated with responses from Russia had significant effects. Perceived value of social marketing activities was a significant predictor for increase in health awareness based on the answers of Russian respondents ( $B = .897, p = 0.13$ ). Perceived usefulness of social media platforms was also a significant predictor of the dependent variable ( $B = 1.089, p < .001$ ) and was a significant negative predictor of the relationship

between perceived value and increase in health awareness ( $B=-1.099$ ,  $p=0.31$ ). All these results correspond to the initial results of the joint analysis. However, it is worth to mention, that variables corresponding to Russian responses explain higher percent of variance, namely 64.4%, in increase in health awareness, which is quite interesting to see since there is quite a big difference between adjusted  $R^2$  between Russia and Belgium. This means that additional input variables are better contributors to the model in case of Russian respondents.

## **Conclusion and limitations**

The aim of this research was to investigate the possible effects of using social media platforms and comparative reference groups on the effectiveness of social marketing campaigns on the increase in health awareness. Prior research discussed how social media and social marketing could be used to increase the health awareness but there were not that many studies conducted investigating the interaction between the two. Moreover, as literature study suggested, comparative reference groups, especially influencers and celebrities and their influence were thoroughly investigated in the existing research. However, the results were not promising as very few articles discussed the mentioned effect or the relationship was stronger between reference groups and health awareness than between social marketing and health awareness with an impact from comparison reference groups (Abidin et al., 2020; Mangyo & Park, 2011; Martin et al., 2013). Since the gap existed, it was decided to conduct this research in order to try and investigate whether social media usage actually contributes to the effectiveness of social marketing campaigns and whether comparative reference groups, such as influencers and celebrities, would have a positive effect on the increase in health awareness.

The first hypothesis (H1) suggested that perceived value of social marketing campaigns positively affects the increase in health awareness. After conducting the research on literature and analyses on the collected data, it can be stated that H1 is accepted. This is supported by the correlation and regression analyses results. Thus, it can be stated that the perception of value of social marketing campaigns does positively influence the increase in health awareness and the more people think of social marketing as a valuable activity, the more their health awareness grows. These results are in line with previous studies about the impact of social marketing on health awareness (Odigbo et al., 2016; Odigbo et al., 2020).

Many studies have been conducted on the effect of social media usage on the consumer behaviour and sometimes even health awareness. Moreover, more articles have been published since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic about how social media were used or should be used but almost none of them discussed the relationship between social marketing and social media (Puri et al., 2020; Schillinger et al., 2020; Wong et al., 2021; Odigbo et al., 2020, Mehmet et al., 2020). Since social media are considered consumer-friendly, interactive and useful, they could be turned into a promising social marketing channel (Huang et al., 2019). In order to understand whether social media is actually useful for audience and whether this perceived usefulness can possibly influence the relationship between social marketing and increase in health awareness, hypotheses 2 and 3 (H2 and H3) were created. Based on the literature study and several various analyses, it was investigated, that perceived usefulness of social media platforms does positively impact the increase in health awareness directly, leading to acceptance of H2. However, it negatively influences the relationship between the perceived value of social marketing and increase in health awareness. This means that perceived usefulness of social media leads to significantly higher increase in health awareness on its own, while at the same time leading to significantly lower effectiveness of social marketing campaigns aimed on health awareness. Thus, it can be stated that hypothesis 3 (H3) was rejected since the effect was significant but negative. Nevertheless, it

was quite interesting to see this finding which shows that the more social media are used for social marketing campaigns' purposes, the less the increase in health awareness will be.

Lastly, hypotheses 4 and 5 (H4 and H5) suggested that perceived credibility of the comparative reference groups would have a positive effect on increase in health awareness (H4) and the impact of social marketing campaign on increase in health awareness (H5). To fully grasp the meaning of credibility, it was decided to combine perceived trustworthiness and expertise of the source as well as perceived message credibility. So, in terms of composite measurement, influencers and bloggers are perceived to be credible if they are trustworthy, have enough knowledge or expertise on the subject and if their message is authentic and believable. Based on the conducted literature research (Abidin et al., 2020; Mangyo & Park, 2011; Martin et al., 2013) and various analyses, it can be stated that H4 was accepted since the direct effect of perceived credibility was found to be significant and positive, which means that the more the target audience perceived influencer as credible, the higher their health awareness would be. However, H5 was rejected because no significant effect was found between perceived credibility and the main relationship between perceived value of social marketing activities and increase in health awareness.

To conclude, the perceived value of social marketing activities has a significant positive effect on increase in health awareness, while perceived usefulness of social media platforms negatively affects the said relationship while positively influencing increase in health awareness on its own. Moreover, it was quite interesting to see that the direct relationship between perceived credibility of comparative reference groups and increase in health awareness had a significant positive value while having no significant interaction effect between perceived credibility and social marketing campaign effectiveness on increase in health awareness.

As with any other study, this research also had its limitations. First of all, the sample which was used to conduct the analyses was rather small, which might have impacted the results of the study. This can be especially seen with the research results regarding perceived usefulness and its impact on the effectiveness of social marketing campaigns on social media. The significance might become positive with the bigger sample size, which then would then be supported by various studies. Moreover, an initial bias towards comparative reference groups might have impacted the results and the way respondents answered questions related to the credibility of said groups. Lastly, unbalance in the country of residence might have impacted the control variable analyses since there were almost twice as many respondents from Russia as there were from Belgium. These limitations led to theoretical and managerial implications of how this research and overall topic can be improved further in both academic and business sphere. Moreover, based on the findings of this study, it was possible to give several recommendations concerning social marketing campaigns, social media usage and enlisting the help of comparative reference groups.

### **Theoretical implications**

This study's findings will redound to society's benefit, considering that social marketing plays an important role in the nowadays pandemic life. The important contribution of the conducted research to the field of marketing lies in the investigated relationships between the social marketing, health awareness, social media and comparison reference groups. Among other things, study also opens discussion about the possible interactive effect of comparison reference groups



on the relationship between social marketing campaigns and health awareness. Before COVID-19, social marketers did not use influencers or celebrities to the best of their abilities to promote a specific consumer behaviour like it is done with the brands and purchase intentions. Thus, future research can be conducted investigating this interactive effect more precisely and efficiently. This research also contributed to making the gap on literature about the effects of social media and comparison reference groups on efficiency of social marketing campaigns smaller.

Moreover, in future research, it would be quite interesting to research more about the impact of social media platforms usage on social marketing effectiveness. Furthermore, various social media platforms could be investigated in order to understand which platforms have better chances of enhancing the efficacy of social marketing activities. Not only that, but also various types of social media could be examined by researchers in order to understand which type is best suited for the purpose of social marketing. As for the credibility of comparative reference groups, based on the conducted analyses, it would be an interesting idea to research the credibility based on these parameters in a different context since COVID-19 is quite a controversial topic that might have led to the results seen after conducting various analyses. Moreover, research of both these moderating variables on a bigger sample might show results differentiating from this study, which is also worth investigating.

Additionally, since this research used only one control variable, such as "country of residence", other possible control variables such as age, gender, average social media usage or comparative reference group following could be investigated as control variables in future research. It is hypothesised that they could have a significant effect on the changes in the relationships between independent and dependent variables. Furthermore, since the country of residence only had three options of the answer, namely Belgium, Russia and Other, the difference between other countries or more countries could be investigated in order to understand how cultural differences impact the significance of various relationships and whether there is a big difference between the final results as it has been seen in the adjusted  $R^2$  value in this study.

### **Managerial implications**

Since one of the reasons for conducting this study was to try to understand the key reasons for success or failure of social marketing campaigns on social media, it was decided to give proper recommendations for social marketers who will in the future launch social marketing campaigns on social media platforms based on the conclusions of this study. One of the most important findings was the fact that social marketing does indeed influence the increase in health awareness during the COVID-19 pandemic, which is quite beneficial for social marketers since they could know that their proposed campaigns and activities could be used for increasing the awareness around COVID-19 measures as well as ongoing vaccination campaigns. This finding can not only be related to the pandemic but to other causes worth mentioning, such as e.g., substance abuse, mental health, smoking.

Moreover, based on the findings about usefulness of social media, it can be said that various social media platforms can and should be used for the purposes of increasing health awareness. For instance, how it was done by Instagram or Facebook, when they provided the information about COVID-19 symptoms, thus increasing health awareness without using social marketing techniques.

People do perceive said platforms as useful for getting new information, confirmation and saving time, thus it can be an interesting takeaway for the managers and developers as well. Also, when social marketers from governmental departments or business departments would want to launch a campaign or another social marketing activity, it could be beneficial for them to understand that they should not depend on the usefulness of social media and approach the social media from the point of its interactivity instead. That is because, based on the findings of this study, perceived usefulness of social media platforms negatively influences the effectiveness of social marketing campaigns on the health awareness. Thus, it would be interesting for marketers to make their campaigns more interactive, and play-like which can be done as, e.g., gifs on social media, various challenges and viral ads. A perfect example of that would be a "Stay home. Stay safe" campaign on Instagram back in 2020 when an algorithm was used triggered by using specific gif which would put your "story" in a separate folder visible to all followers and subscribers. This feature was used further for the campaign of "Thank you to doctors" in Russia and other countries both on Instagram and V Kontakte.

Furthermore, since this study has also investigated the possible effect of comparison reference groups on the relationship between social marketing and increase in health awareness, the findings could be useful for future campaigns. This said, it is quite important to understand that the COVID-19 topic is quite controversial, and thus, the results for this specific part could be not reliable enough. However, it could be of interest to know that comparative reference groups, which were introduced as influencers, celebrities and bloggers mainly on social media, did not have a positive nor significant impact on the efficiency of social marketing campaigns on increase in health awareness. Thus, it could be interesting for social marketers to use either specific groups of influencers, such as famous doctors, heads of medical research or other people who are experienced enough and have enough knowledge to talk about the matter. The same can be said about having a good reputation among not only colleagues but also the target audience of the campaign. In this specific case, using this kind of influencers might prove to have better results than using influencers like brands do to increase their purchase intentions. Furthermore, it could be helpful to use normative reference groups as well in order to increase health awareness. However, for that, prior research, not only academic but also market research, would be needed in order to understand the current situation in that sphere.

With the information gathered from not only literature study but also quantitative research, it can be concluded that social marketing is a powerful tool, which can and should be used to promote health awareness and health itself all over the globe. Moreover, marketers should use social media platforms to enhance the increase of health awareness and social marketing campaigns since we believe that this study's findings regarding social media can be improved by having a bigger sample size. Using social media can be quite beneficial and the same can be said about comparative reference groups. Even though usual influencers do not impact the social marketing effectiveness, it is believed that if chosen correctly, using mentioned recommendations, influencers and celebrities might make the social marketing campaign stand out even more, thus leading to a higher increase in health awareness. By adopting managerial implications and recommendations of this research, the social marketing campaigns aimed on the increase in health awareness can become more prominent and have better results at the end of the campaign.

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## Appendix

### Survey

Hello.

My name is Anastasiia Urazbakhtina. I am a student of the Master of Management: International Marketing Strategy program at Hasselt University in Hasselt, Belgium. I am writing my master thesis regarding social marketing on social media and would highly appreciate it if you contributed to this study. This survey will take around 7 minutes. Answering this survey is voluntary, and you can stop it at any time. The results are going to be used only for the purpose of the study. There are no "good" or "bad" answers. Try to answer spontaneously and simply give your opinion.

Your answers to the questions will be stored anonymously and only be used in aggregate format. By continuing to the next page, you confirm that your data may be used for this master thesis research.

Key definitions which will be used in the survey:

- Social marketing talks about the ways to promote health and well-being. Anti-smoking campaigns, social distancing campaigns, "Stay home. Stay safe" campaigns during the first lockdown are clear examples of the usage of social marketing for the social good.
- Social media are websites and mobile apps that allow users to post content, rate and discuss it. Most famous examples are Facebook, Instagram, TikTok etc.
- Influencers, bloggers and celebrities are clear examples of comparative reference groups. They are the people you can compare yourself with and who can influence your behaviour or attitude towards something e.g., product, company, COVID-19 measures.

1. How often do you use social media platforms during the week?
  - 1 day per week (1)
  - 2 days per week (2)
  - 3-4 days per week (3)
  - 5-6 days per week (4)
  - Everyday (5)
2. How much time do you spend on social media platforms daily?
  - Up to 30 min (1)
  - Up to 1 hour (2)
  - 1-2 hours (3)
  - 3-4 hours (4)
  - More than 4 hours (5)
3. Which source do you consider the most useful for getting covid-19 related information?
  - Facebook (1)
  - Instagram (2)
  - Vkontakte (3)



- News (4)
- Government websites and channels (5)
- Other (6)

**Start of Block: Perceived value of social marketing questions**

For your convenience, the definition of social marketing is provided below:

Social marketing talks about the ways to promote health and well-being. Anti-smoking campaigns, social distancing campaigns, “Stay home. Stay safe” campaigns during the first lockdown are clear examples of the usage of social marketing for the social good.

Please indicate to what extent you agree or disagree with the following statements regarding the value of social marketing campaigns:

- I find social marketing campaigns aimed at improving health e.g., covid-19 vaccination campaigns, promoting social distancing, effective
  - Strongly disagree (1)
  - Disagree (2)
  - Neither agree nor disagree (3)
  - Agree (4)
  - Strongly agree (5)
- I think social marketing campaigns aimed at improving health e.g., covid-19 vaccination campaigns, promoting social distancing, change my attitude towards the cause
  - Strongly disagree (1)
  - Disagree (2)
  - Neither agree nor disagree (3)
  - Agree (4)
  - Strongly agree (5)
- I think social marketing campaigns aimed at improving health e.g., covid-19 vaccination campaigns, promoting social distancing, increase my knowledge about this topic
  - Strongly disagree (1)
  - Disagree (2)
  - Neither agree nor disagree (3)
  - Agree (4)
  - Strongly agree (5)

**Start of Block: Perceived usefulness of social media platforms questions**

For your convenience, the definition of social media is provided below:

Social media are websites and mobile apps that allow users to post content, rate and discuss it. Most famous examples are Facebook, Instagram, TikTok etc.

Please indicate to what extent you agree or disagree with the following statements regarding the usefulness of social media platforms:

7. Using social media for adopting promoted through social marketing message will give me the necessary information to make the right decision
  - Strongly disagree (1)
  - Disagree (2)
  - Neither agree nor disagree (3)
  - Agree (4)
  - Strongly agree (5)
8. Using social media for adopting promoted through social marketing message will save me a lot of time when making the right decision
  - Strongly disagree (1)
  - Disagree (2)
  - Neither agree nor disagree (3)
  - Agree (4)
  - Strongly agree (5)
9. Using social media platforms provides me with new information on covid-19
  - Strongly disagree (1)
  - Disagree (2)
  - Neither agree nor disagree (3)
  - Agree (4)
  - Strongly agree (5)
10. Using social media platforms provides me with new information on covid-19
  - Strongly disagree (1)
  - Disagree (2)
  - Neither agree nor disagree (3)
  - Agree (4)
  - Strongly agree (5)
11. Using social media enhances the effectiveness of social marketing campaign
  - Strongly disagree (1)
  - Disagree (2)
  - Neither agree nor disagree (3)
  - Agree (4)
  - Strongly agree (5)

**Start of Block: Perceived credibility of comparison reference groups**

12. Do you follow or used to follow in the past any influencer or celebrity on social media platforms?
  - Yes (1)
  - No (2) (If "No" skip to question 14)
13. On average, how many influencers or celebrities do you follow?

- 1-3 (1)
- 4-5 (2)
- 6-8 (3)
- 9-10 (4)
- More than 10 (5)

For your convenience, the definition of comparative reference groups is provided below:

Influencers, bloggers and celebrities are clear examples of comparative reference groups. They are the people with who you can compare yourself and who can influence your behaviour or attitude towards something: product, company, COVID-19 measures.

Please indicate to what extent you agree or disagree with the following statements regarding the trustworthiness of social media influencers and celebrities

14. I consider social media influencers and celebrities to be TRUSTWORTHY when talking about COVID-19

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- Agree (4)
- Strongly agree (5)

15. I consider social media influencers and celebrities to be RELIABLE when talking about COVID-19

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- Agree (4)
- Strongly agree (5)

16. I consider social media influencers and celebrities to be HONEST when talking about COVID-19

- Strongly disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- Agree (4)
- Strongly agree (5)

Please indicate to what extent you agree or disagree with the following statements regarding the expertise of social media influencers and celebrities:

17. I consider social media influencers and celebrities to post valid information about COVID-19

- Strongly disagree (1)

- Disagree (2)
  - Neither agree nor disagree (3)
  - Agree (4)
  - Strongly agree (5)
18. I consider social media influencers and celebrities to be experienced to talk about COVID-19
- Strongly disagree (1)
  - Disagree (2)
  - Neither agree nor disagree (3)
  - Agree (4)
  - Strongly agree (5)
19. I consider social media influencers and celebrities to have enough knowledge to talk about COVID-19
- Strongly disagree (1)
  - Disagree (2)
  - Neither agree nor disagree (3)
  - Agree (4)
  - Strongly agree (5)
20. I consider social media influencers and celebrities to have a good reputation if they post about COVID-19
- Strongly disagree (1)
  - Disagree (2)
  - Nether agree nor disagree (3)
  - Agree (4)
  - Strongly agree (5)

Please indicate to what extent you agree or disagree with the following statements regarding the message credibility of social media influencers and celebrities:

21. I consider messages about COVID-19 posted by social media influencers and celebrities to be ACCURATE
- Strongly disagree (1)
  - Disagree (2)
  - Nether agree nor disagree (3)
  - Agree (4)
  - Strongly agree (5)
22. I consider messages about COVID-19 posted by social media influencers and celebrities to be AUTHENTIC
- Strongly disagree (1)
  - Disagree (2)
  - Nether agree nor disagree (3)
  - Agree (4)

- Strongly agree (5)
23. I consider messages about COVID-19 posted by social media influencers and celebrities to be BELIEVABLE
- Strongly disagree (1)
  - Disagree (2)
  - Nether agree nor disagree (3)
  - Agree (4)
  - Strongly agree (5)

**Start of Block: Increase in health awareness**

24. I think that social marketing campaigns increase my awareness of COVID-19 symptoms and anti-COVID measures
- Strongly disagree (1)
  - Disagree (2)
  - Neither agree nor disagree (3)
  - Agree (4)
  - Strongly agree (5)
25. I think that social media platforms and the information distributed on them increase my awareness of COVID-19 symptoms and anti-COVID measures
- Strongly disagree (1)
  - Disagree (2)
  - Neither agree nor disagree (3)
  - Agree (4)
  - Strongly agree (5)
26. I think that influencers and celebrities who post relevant information increase my awareness of COVID-19 symptoms and anti-COVID measures
- Strongly disagree (1)
  - Disagree (2)
  - Neither agree nor disagree (3)
  - Agree (4)
  - Strongly agree (5)

**Start of Block: Demographics**

27. Gender
- Male (1)
  - Female (2)
  - Non-binary (3)
  - Prefer not to say (4)
28. Age
- Below 20 (1)
  - 21-35 (2)
  - 26-30 (3)
  - 31-35 (4)

- 36 and above (5)
29. Current employment status
- Full-time employment (1)
  - Part-time employment (2)
  - Unemployed / Not looking for work (3)
  - Student (4)
  - Retired (5)
30. Country of residence
- Belgium (1)
  - Russia (2)
  - Other (3)
31. Highest level of education completed
- High school (1)
  - Bachelor (2)
  - Master (3)
  - PhD (4)