VIRAL MARKETING

A CURRENT ANALYSIS OF THE CONCEPT

2013-01-10

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Acknowledgments

Abstract

Marketing and the art of conveying brand and product identity in a customer relevant way to encourage sales has taken many forms over the years and in this thesis a closer investigation, of how the phenomenon of viral online spread can be used as a conscious marketing tool rather than only being considered a fortunate outcome, is realized.

Viral campaigns are traditionally considered cheap and of high customer credibility. An increased understanding of what makes an individual ready to share his/her brand experience with friends and family may help companies reduce costs as well as improve message credibility.

When studying current literature the authors of this thesis find numerous adequate conceptualizations of specific facets of viral marketing. An extensive overview, compiling the many aspects into a conceptual framework, is however not available.

In writing this thesis the authors hope to aid in broadening the understanding of viral marketing and contribute to the conceptualization of the subject. This thesis is a redefinition of the concept of viral marketing in a present day context.

The research takes an exploratory approach and investigates qualitative primary data, in the form of interviews, as well as previous research to later present an analysis of aforementioned information leading up to final conclusions.

The theoretical framework of this thesis is organized into a traditional sender-receiver model to easily illustrate the many aspects of viral marketing. Two main perspectives are assumed and division is made into one segment focusing on the commercial and creative aspects of the sender and another segment pertaining to the behavioural and psychological aspects of the receiver. Additional features such as noise and communication channel are also briefly considered. The findings of this chapter include individuals' need to be unique and create social reciprocity as powerful motivators for sharing online content. A strong relationship between positive content and viral potential is also established.

The empirical data collected through interviews with industry professionals and focus group interviews with consumers hints to fact that a substantial budget is needed to successfully push a video through the noise and that it is a necessity to attract the viewer's attention before they even click play.

To conclude the thesis a viral checklist based on theoretical and empirical analysis is constructed. It contains a number of important aspects for companies to consider including brand presence, story and distribution.

Viral marketing has evolved from trial and error based hopes for success to conscious marketing strategies where a certain outcome may be guaranteed through professional distribution.

Glossary

E-word of mouth: The process of telling people you know about a particular product or service, usually because you think it is good and want to encourage them to try it. In E-word of mouth these actions are performed using the Internet medium.

Word of mouse: Communicating via computer or electronics, as opposed to oral communication.

Like: An option on many social media platforms such as Facebook and YouTube that provides feedback on content. The Like option allows you to acknowledge an item in a positive way without needing to add actual commentary.

Share: An action on social media that enables your online contacts to take part of content that you want to highlight. Most shares are links to websites featuring the content that you want to share with someone special or the whole online community.

Social media: A term used to describe a variety of Web-based platforms, applications and technologies that enable people to socially interact with one another online. Some examples of social media sites and applications include Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, blogs and other sites that have content based on user participation and user-generated content.

Viral Spread: The spread of certain content online were the distribution is self-reproductive, the same way infectious viruses spread. One individual share the content with his/her social online contacts and the content gets exposed and passed on by some of these contacts leading to a exponentially growing number of individuals exposed.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Subject background

Within the field of marketing lies one specific area in which we as authors not only find ourselves particularly interested but also identify a need to conceptualize and further understand. This area is viral marketing.

A study by the Online Publishers Association (2005) highlight the significant impact online video may have on consumers. A total of 44 % of the respondents owed up to having taken action based on an online video advertisement. (See appendix 1 for a complete statistical overview).

From a commercial perspective the positive effects a viral marketing campaign may have on brand awareness is well documented. The craft behind deliberately creating this effect however is only loosely depicted in current literature. Our personal interest resonates well with the absence of predated research clearly describing a recipe for viral success.

Viral campaigns or initiatives are considered cheap and possess' high credibility in the minds of consumers. Understanding what makes an individual ready to willingly share his or hers brand experience with friends and family is therefore crucial not only to reduce costs but also in improving a message's credibility.

When understanding this field from a psychological perspective one must recognize the inclusive and democratic aspect of viral marketing. It allows for consumers to be included in setting trends and defining product lines, consequently making it a form of customer based dialogue from which deciphering new trends and customer demand is facilitated.

As we turn our gaze towards the effectiveness of viral marketing, going beyond simple brand recognition, it is vital to comment on the aspect of conscious choice and the very high level of content attention directed at the message. These two facets efficiently contribute to consumer relevance and adequateness.

Management consultants McKenzie estimate that 2/3 of the US economy is driven by word of mouth (Dye, 2000) hinting at the vast economical potential of understanding how and why people share their brand experiences with others. It is of course reasonable, even without further investigation, to believe this to be true for the European, African, Oceanic and Asian markets as well.

1.2 Defining the term

The concept of viral marketing can popularly be defined as a strategy which focuses on spreading the commercial message of a brand or product in a word of mouth manner, by using the internet medium. (Kirby & Marsden, 2006)

The archetypal example is when a person forwards a YouTube video with an embedded commercial message to a friend. This friend shares the video on a social media platform such as Facebook and the video starts to spread like a virus, exponentially growing with every pass-on.

The authors choose for this thesis, a more in-depth definition of the concept referring to marketing techniques using pre-existing social networks and other technologies to increase brand awareness (or other objectives such as sales) through a self-replicating viral process. It may be delivered by word of mouth or enhanced through the network effects of the Internet.

When used later in the thesis the term viral marketing consequently refer to the above-mentioned definition.

1.3 Defining the problem

The field of viral marketing is, as a target for scientific research, a relatively young concept and with this follows of course certain gaps in the understanding of aforementioned concept. When studying current literature the authors have encountered many adequate conceptualizations regarding specific parts of viral marketing. An overview of the subject compiling the various aspects and organizing them into a contextual framework is however not available.

When investigating this concept one must first understand its core. Defining the problem of viral marketing is the aspect of control. As a company aims to obtain a viral spread for their message across the web, it surrenders control of that same message. The potential benefits of including the public in the spread of a message are enormous but so are the possible disadvantages. With over one billion views on *Youtube*, Psy's hit song "Gangnamstyle" is history's most frequently watched video clip and earning substantial profit. At the other end of the spectrum one finds social media outbursts such as the sexual harassment and bullying *Instagram* scandal in Göteborg just this winter. Such is the power of viral, and understanding its multi-faceted nature is crucial to anyone wielding its double-edged sword. Its power is fascinating but potentially destructive and further conceptualization of the phenomenon must be made.

In writing this thesis we hope to aid in broadening the understanding of viral marketing and contribute to the conceptualization of the subject. We mean to redefine the concept of viral marketing in the context of present time and highlight the crucial factors of successfully launching an intentionally viral campaign.

1.4 Research question

This thesis investigates the intricate concept of viral marketing using a classical sender-receiver model to schematically show its many aspects and answer the following main research question:

What constitutes a successful viral campaign today?

Today is here to be understood as the industry-specific context of 2012. To adequately answer this question a number of sub-questions must first be answered. These initial questions are the foundation of what was later described as *Informational need* in the following chapter.

1.5 Informational need

This chapter details the respective areas of knowledge the authors needed to acquaint themselves with to adequately answer the established research question. In the picture shown below these particular areas are presented.

Table 1 - Author-created image illustrating the informational need of this thesis.

WHAT CONSISTUTES A SUCCESSFUL
VIRAL CAMPAIGN TODAY?

TO ADEQUATELY ANSWER THIS QUESTION
CERTAIN INFORMATION HAD TO BE ACQUIRED

1. CONCEPTUAL UNDERSTANDING OF VIRAL MARKETING AND THE CONTEXT IN WHICH IT OCCOURS
2. BASIC UNDERSTANDING OF ONLINE SHARING BEHAVIOUR
3. COMMUNICATION THEORY
4. SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS
5. CREATIVE ASPECTS OF MAKING A VIRAL VIDEO
6. PREVIOUSLY SUCCESSFUL CAMPAIGNS

A conceptual understanding of viral marketing and its concepts include a historical overview of the phenomenon as well as an investigation of present day events. The arena of viral marketing is here to be understood as the interconnected network of social media platforms available today.

To properly comprehend the online sharing behaviour of today's youth a focus group was assembled and previous research consulted.

Additionally it was crucial to understand the main theorisation of human communication. The traditional communication model developed by Shannon and Weaver in 1949 here constitutes the conceptual framework for understanding communication. The authors have modified the model used in this thesis.

When answering the research question of this thesis it becomes vital to accurately understand the social media platforms on which the infectious spread takes place. As will be mentioned in chapter *1.8 Delimitations* however, this is not a thorough investigation of social media.

The creative aspects of a viral campaign are many, and hard to isolate as the process by definition revolves around creation and novelty. To obtain a profound understanding of how industry professionals work, interviews were conducted with world-leading ad agencies.

After having consulted aforementioned agencies interest in a particular campaign arose and a brief case study was performed to more closely specify what made this particular campaign successful.

1.6 Purpose

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate and further comprehend the concept of viral marketing and isolate key components in successful campaigns. In doing so we will enhance the understanding of what constitutes the creative edge needed to successfully launch such a venture. Consequently, creating an embryo that could grow into a full-scale commercially valid model, depicting the most essential components of viral marketing today.

1.7 Key words

A few words have been of special interest while scanning previous literature and the following constitute the key word framework of this thesis.

- Viral Marketing
- Word-of-mouth
- Buzz marketing
- Connected marketing
- Word-of-mouse
- E-word-of-mouth

The selection of these particular words derives from an initial search for viral marketing synonyms present in academic contexts. The databases available at The Gothenburg University Library allow for such a search and quickly present the researcher with adequate results. Concepts such as connected marketing and buzz marketing are generic expansions of the field of search to include greater amounts of data.

1.8 Delimitations

In an attempt to additionally specify the field we would study, a few delimitations were made. The authors are constrained to performing their empirical research on a regional scale and the interviewees have been contacted accordingly.

As the creative work behind distinctive media production is substantially different from one another the authors have chosen to concentrate their research on the online video medium. Further delimitation to only studying videos that are part of intentionally viral campaigns has been made.

 The research will also, for the empirical data collection, be limited to investigating only one generation in respect to its use of social media and

partaking in viral distribution. Due to their extensive experience of social media and upcoming purchasing power the selected generation is young adults.

Even though a basic understanding of social media is needed to accurately answer the research question of this thesis no in-depth analysis of social media has been realised. The same relationship applies to the additional aspects considered in chapter 2, Theoretical framework.

2. Theoretical framework

This chapter reviews previous research and makes a division into two classically occurring aspects in communication theory, the sender and receiver perspectives. In doing so we mean to illustrate in a pedagogical way how a video may obtain a viral spread across the web. As little research has been done regarding the spread of videos exclusively, this chapter takes a general approach to online sharing and communication behaviour.

2.1 A brief history of the phenomenon

Viral marketing may be considered a most natural development of word-of-mouth behaviour taking on a digital form. Technology allows for a faster spread of content and severely elevates the number of individuals exposed. (Kirby & Justin, 2006)

In the mid 1990's the world saw its first true viral marketing success. Hotmail went from 0 to 12 million users in 18 months by simply attaching a tagline at the bottom of every email saying *"Hotmail: Free, trusted and rich email service. Get it now".* (Kirby & Justin, 2006)

Many of the early examples in successful viral marketing were not carefully planned campaigns but more so strokes of luck. The effective spread made marketers interested and the strategy quickly became accepted as a viable option. As pressure to deliver good return on investment increased during the dotcom era of the early 2000's the popularity of viral marketing strategies rose mainly due to its, at the time, low costs.

The development of digital technology made broadband available to the masses and the way we used the Internet changed. It was no longer just a practical source of information but also a place for entertainment and interpersonal communication providing a rich hotbed for the growing seed of viral marketing. (Kirby & Justin, 2006) Social media made the Internet participatory with the facilitation of user-generated co-created and shared content. This evolution is generally referred to as the transition from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0. (Baines, Fill & Page, 2011) Technological advancements made it easy to spread rich entertainment and pushed the boundaries for what was possible. (Kirby & Justin, 2006)

TRADITIONAL MEDIA
TELEVISION
PRINT
RADIO

SOCIAL MEDIA
BLOGS
FACEBOOK
PODCASTS

1.0
PUSH MARKETING   PULL MARKETING   2.0
                                                PARTICIPATING

TIME

INSTITUTIONAL CONTROL ━━━━━━━━━━━━━━━━━━ CONSUMER CONTROL
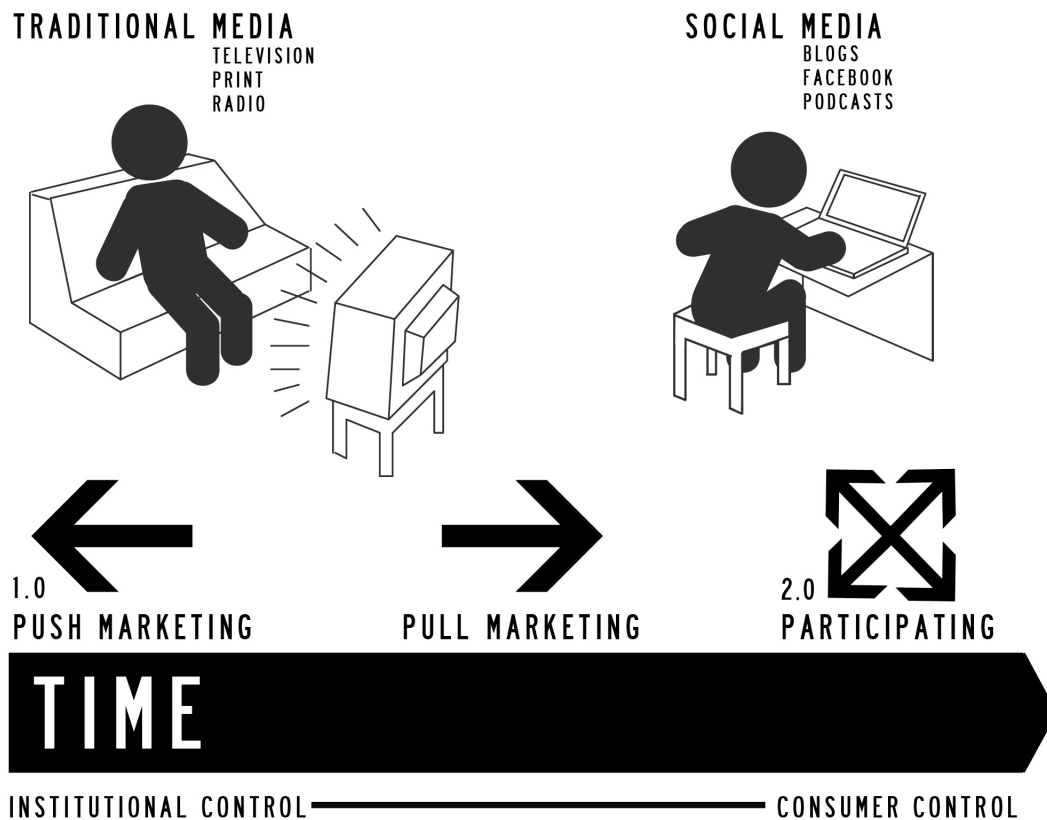
Image 1 - Time capsule, media development and the change in user participation.

With technological change followed an adjustment in user participation transforming the Internet from a channel of passive communication to a medium for interactive dialogue between sender and receiver. This change also entails the increased possibilities to apply not only "push" but also "pull" characterized models of communication. The pull factors are of the utmost importance, as penetration and viral spread will not be achieved if people do not actively choose to participate in a given marketing activity. (Baines, Fill & Page. 2011)

We are now experiencing a change in how companies view viral marketing and the way consumers perceive it. The following will investigate these changes and lay a solid foundation on which theories based in empirical research will be constructed.

2.2 Two perspectives

For the initial review of previous research a classical sender-receiver model has been selected to pedagogically illustrate the many aspects of online communication. Two main perspectives are assumed, dividing this chapter into a sender and a receiver category. Additionally the aspects of noise, communication channel, context and feedback are briefly considered.
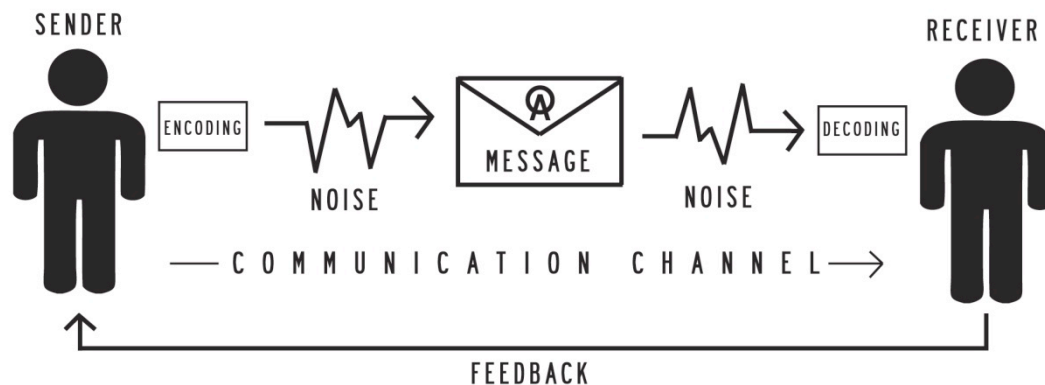

Image 2 - Own model created freely with inspiration from the classical sender-receiver model originally created by Shannon and Weaver (1949) and further developed by Schramm (1955).

2.2.1 Sender perspective

There are three major aspects the sender will have to be aware of when creating a campaign meant to go viral; sending the message to the right people, creating an adequate message and designing a message-beneficial context.

The right people

Key of course, in a viral campaign, is to get people to share your message with others. Different types of people react differently when exposed to an online commercial message, and there are some types who are more prone to share than others. Kaplan & Haenlein (2011) describes this by highlighting three social characters whose participation is needed in order to achieve a vast spread of your campaign.

The first type of social character that makes for an effective information communicator is an individual who has extensive knowledge of the marketplace. This person is generally referred to as a "market maven". The message will spread from the "market maven" because of the individual's perceived expertise of the market and his/her willingness to share. The "market maven" will often be the first to receive a message.

The second type of individual that marketers should aim for is the "social hub". This type of individual has a big network of friends, family and associates. When the "social hub" shares your message it will spread to a large number of individuals instantly.

The third relevant personality is the "salesperson" that will make your message more compelling and relevant to the public. This individual may also work as a bridge between the "market maven" and the "social hub" making the information

more persuasive and easier for the "social hub" to pick up on. (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011)

When aiming for a substantial viral spread it is of great importance for the marketer to focus the sent message on individuals with a high propensity to share online content. There are especially two attributes that characterize a typical sharing personality, egocentricity and extroversion.

Why an extrovert person shares more than the average person is logical, it is simply a part of an extrovert personality to share and show people what one enjoys. Egocentric people are eager to share mainly to increase their social status. Showing off their great taste, social connections and media smartness is usually the reason why they share a link, not the joy of others. (Teixeria, 2012)

The message

Even if one manages to reach the perfect blend of demographic groups, a particular content will still lack the possibility of becoming a viral success if the message is not memorable and interesting. To use a medical term, the more memorable and interesting the framing of the message, the more infectious it is. (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011)

Teixeria (2012) shows in his study that our eyes focus on logotypes and the mouth of the actor while watching a commercial. Initially this may seem beneficial to the marketer but it was established that prominent logos and invasive brand presence make viewers more likely to stop watching. A solution to this problem is to try to integrate the logo or symbol of the brand into the story and only show it for a very limited period of time.

Human coders have made tests measuring facial expressions but with new technology this can now be done automatically making it possible to examine larger samples. In Teixeria's study the research group examined over a thousand people's reactions from watching advertisement videos online.

The study showed that people's attention span when watching videos online is quite short and that viewers may easily lose interest. People stop watching especially when two key ingredients are lacking in a video, joy and surprise. The traditional way of telling a story includes a dramatic climax in the end. This dramaturgical approach has been successful in TV ads but does not seam to work online. Today people need to be hooked right away in order to remain interested.

The study also showed that viewers easily lose interest when the emotion evoked by the video is constant. An emotional rollercoaster will engage the viewer's much more effectively than an emotionally flat-lined video. Change for the better makes us experience pleasure but with time the feeling wears off. Key is to take away the viewer's feeling of joy or surprise and then restore it. (Teixeria, 2012)

On the matter of making a video interesting and relevant to the target group Kaplan and Haenlein (2011) stress the importance of including real people and true stories to maintain the audience's interest. Positive rumours are another

powerful mechanism that may be used to improve the spread, as rumours often have a tendency to be passed on quickly. In general, a message that triggers the receiver emotionally will be memorable. Sex and humour are well-documented examples of how to successfully engage the viewer. Additionally, combining a positive or negative emotion with a surprising element has proven to be effective as the surprising element makes the viewer more observant in respect to the message.

For a message to be both memorable and interesting it takes a certain level of emotional arousal. It is however important not to go over the edge as one might find one self with an inappropriate video rather than a provocative one. (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011)

For example, a shocking effect in a video may be enjoyed privately but Teixeira´s research demonstrates that shock decreases people's desire to share a video.

The message context

If one manages to get the right message to the right people the next thing to focus on is transmitting the message in the right environment. Kaplan and Haenlein suggest that viral marketing should be accompanied by a conscious marketing mix and advocate the importance of having a realistic view of how much a viral marketing campaign may accomplish. If one cannot support a viral campaign with a good product, competitive pricing and adequate distribution it will not succeed. The marketing mix must integrate the viral campaign in order for it to bear fruit.

An individual is not prone to spread a message if he/she experience that people already know about it. A common mistake among companies today is initially spreading the message too intensely. This means many individuals in the same social group know about the message and because of this they are less likely to share it. The spread will reach higher numbers if many individuals feel like they are the first to receive news of the message. The solution to this problem is aiming the message at disconnected social groups. (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011)

Maymann presents two main problems in viral marketing today. The first is the ever-increasing amount of information available online making the marketers work increasingly difficult. This will in combination with the recent surge in social media networks form present day's online marketing challenge; how to create relevant content that allows for the message to make it through the noise. (Maymann, 2008)

Maymann advocates a combination of conventional marketing methods and the vast potential of viral campaigns. Brands should take full advantage of the interactive opportunities that online marketing offers and reallocate considerable shares of their marketing budget to viral efforts.

The second issue addressed is the maturing of the Internet and its users. People today are proficient online navigators and much less likely to follow a company's agenda than ever before. It is necessary to team up with the big media players and make sure they involve one's content instead of trying to convince people to

visit a specific website. It is crucial that a message exists on a platform where people like to spend time and feel comfortable. (Maymann, 2008)

This is also pointed out by Kaplan and Haenlein (2011) as their study show the importance of understanding the target group and finding contexts in which it interacts as being one of the key components in a successfully launching a viral campaign.

It is also vital to understand that something that worked yesterday may well not be successful today and that different companies using the same strategies may not get the same results. (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011)

2.2.2 Receiver perspective

Getting people to watch and remain interested is one aspect of viral marketing; the other is making people share the content with their friends and family. To further investigate this side of the problem we take a closer look at psychological and social factors and establish the ways in which people receive and interpret a message. Initially this is done viewing online sharing as a classical way of communicating but later on a more focused online context will be applied.

Psychological factors

When considering the aspect of control and personal growth, Schutz (1966) offer a view stating our interpersonal need for control as related to feelings of competence, achievement, influence and accomplishment. He goes on to say that people high in this need want to make a difference in their social environment but also control in what way that difference or change is made.

Ho & Dempsey (2008) purpose that young adults may engage in the forwarding of online content as a strategic career building activity. People are motivated to forward information as a means of increasing their knowledge base and by a sense of personal growth. In continuation Wojnicki and Godes (2008) consider the possibility that people may share online content to appear knowledgeable or to enhance other's views of themselves.

The amount of online content consumed by an individual was, by Ho and Dempsey, (2008), found to have a positive relationship with sharing content online. Specifically it was suggested that people who actively seek information on the Internet are more likely to engage in e-WOM.

The hypothesis stating that individuals with a high sense of curiosity would have a greater tendency to consume online content was not supported by the test results. In continuation the aspects of altruism and personal growth were indeed found to positively affect forwarding behaviour while curiosity was not. (Ho & Dempsey, 2008)

Content provoking negative emotions, on a general, show less viral potential than positive messages. Barrett and Russel (1998) however establish the difference between the levels of activation in regards to an emotion. Anger and anxiety are characterized by a state of heightened arousal or activation while sadness is characterized by low arousal or deactivation and therefore tend to be less viral.

Johan Berger and Katherine L. Milkman find in their study of what articles made the most e-mailed list of The New York Times that while more negative or more positive content is more viral than non-emotional content, positive content is more viral than negative content. The authors also find that content evoking high-arousal emotions such as awe, anger, and anxiety are more viral regardless of their valence.

Anderson (1998) show that people tend to engage in word of mouth at a larger scale for content positioned at the extremes of satisfaction (highly satisfied or highly dissatisfied). People may also share emotionally charged messages/content in an attempt to make sense of their experiences, deepen social relationships, or reduce dissonance.

Social behaviour

Ho and Dempsey (2008) considers e-WOM a conversation between two sources and aims to explain why we engage in interpersonal behaviour based on the conceptual framework purposed by Schutz (1966).

Using aforementioned writer's FIRO-theory as their base Ho and Dempsey (2008) identify four potential categories of motivation: (1) the need to be part of a group, (2) the need to be individualistic, (3) the need to altruistic and (4) the need for personal growth.

The first two categories are generally referred to as inclusion and consist of two polarized aspects, the need to be part of a group and the need to be unique, where the latter was found to be the only aspect out of the two positively affecting our motivation to forward online content. Below we illustrate the factors considered in the survey and how they relate to the forwarding of online content. A solid line means a direct and positive effect on an individual's tendency to engage in e-WOM while a dashed line represents a previously expected connection that was not confirmed in the survey.
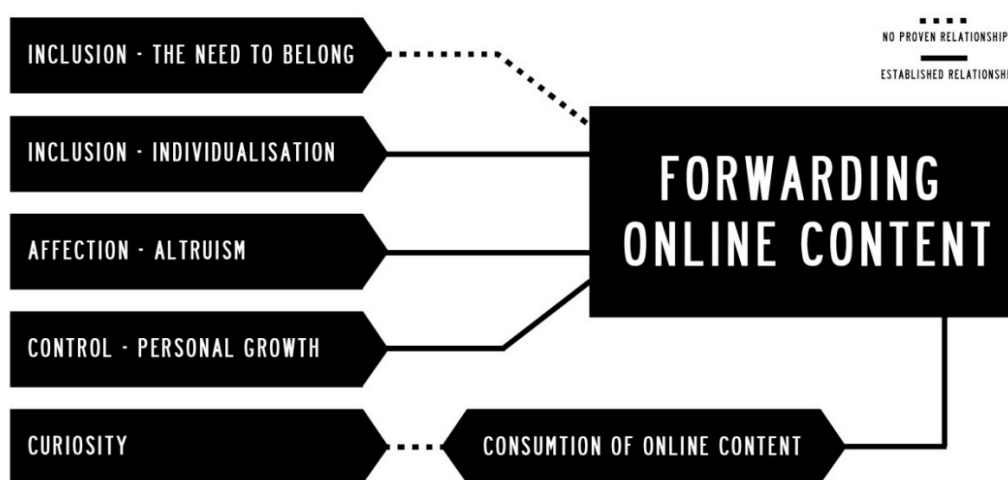

Image 3 – Reproduction of model presented in Ho & Dempsey, 2008.

The authors go on to more clearly describe the above-illustrated reasons for forwarding online content. According to the FIRO theory the need for inclusion can best be described as referring to the need we all feel to be recognized as participants in human interaction. This need can be fulfilled either through being identifiable or by being different from others (Shutz 1966).

Baumister and Leary (1995) say that we all possess "a need to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of interpersonal relationships". Both Phelps (2004) and Metzger (2001) discovered in their research that as for interpersonal or face-to-face communication the need to fulfil social bonding and connecting with others were important also for online methods of communication.

Our need to be different and individualize the public's perception of ourselves is evident. A study made by Chung and Drake (2006) suggests that individuals are more likely to engage in WOM for products intimately associated with one's self-image.

In a study made by Mitra and Webster (1998) self-enhancement was found to be a very important motivator when forwarding online content and that approximately 20 % the respondents had engaged in e-WOM to enhance their personal status. Studies also show that people who are high in public individuation are more willing to make themselves heard and stand out in a group or community. (Malach, 1985)

The act of forwarding to others within a specific network allows for the sharing individual to effectively differentiate him or herself and thus positively affecting the forwarding of online content. (Ho & Dempsey, 2008)

In the context of forwarding online content Ho and Dempsey (2008) consider altruistic motives as being the most evident source of the need for affection. Dichter (1966) purposed that some people share information with others to express friendship or love.

Shutz (1966) defines affection as the need to maintain a satisfactory relationship, leading individuals to engage in behaviours related to intimacy and emotional involvement. Altruistic acts are often considered as selfless, or actions based on love and affection.

Research states that the concern for the welfare of others is one of the key tendencies of marketplace helping behaviour. Fay (2007) and Henning-Thurau (2004) both support this notion with research based on analysing online forums.

According to Homans (1958) practically useful content has an aspect of social exchange value and people may well share such content to create social reciprocity. (Fehr, Kirchsteiger & Ridell, 1998)

Viewer characteristics

An individual's consumption of electronic content is also considered a vital factor in understanding the tendency to forward information online. Previous research confirms this theory and Sun (2006) found that elevated Internet usage was notably related to chatting and forwarding. Thus suggesting that familiarity with

the Internet is necessary to become an online opinion leader. Consequently Ho and Dempsey (2008) suggest that an elevated consumption of electronic equivalents to mainstream media like newspapers and user-generated platforms like Wikipedia or YouTube positively affects forwarding behaviour.

Curiosity is defined as the desire to know and learn and research show evidence to the notion that people with a high trait curiosity are more likely to try new and challenging things (Kashdan, 2004). In light of this it may seem intuitive to believe that curiosity will positively affect the consumption of online content but Ho and Dempsey (2008) find no such evidence in their study.

2.2.3 Additional aspects
After having considered the way a message is created and the way it is received, we now turn to investigating the channel with which it is transmitted and the interference it may experience on its way to the target. As mentioned in chapter 1.8 Delimitations the following is only a brief overview and should be considered subjects where further research is required.

The communication channel

A message depends on its carrier to successfully reach its target. In this thesis the carrier is online video. A channel of communication characterized by low priced and flexible publishing as well as content richness as a combination of moving images, sound, text and animation can easily be made. In 2009, three and a half billion pounds were spent on online marketing in the UK alone, hinting at the industry's belief in the potential of the medium. The interactive nature of online video (later described under 3.2.3.3 Feedback) and today's technological abundance jointly present a unique opportunity for users to watch, comment and share online video where ever they are. (Baines, Phil and Page, 2011)

The functions of the social media platforms can be identified as seven blocks.

1. Identity
2. Conversation
3. Sharing
4. Presence
5. Relationships
6. Reputation
7. Groups

(Kietzmann et al. 2011)

Two-thirds of the world's Internet population regularly visit a social network, blog or other social media site and these activities now account for over 10 % of all time spent online. (Baines, Fill & Page, 2011)

Historically the Internet medium has been used to take part of pre-existing information and to realise service or product purchases. The surge of content sharing platforms has brought about a substantial change in Internet usage and the user/consumer now controls much of what is displayed online. (Keitzmann et al., 2011)

Kietzmann et al. (2011) illustrate the configuration of social media structures using a honeycomb of seven essential building blocks (see appendix 2). Emphasis is placed on the identity forming aspect of social media participation.

Social media platforms are interconnected and grow together. Every day, five hundred years worth of YouTube video is shared on facebook (Youtube, 2012) presenting an intricate challenge but also a vast potential to marketers today. No in-depth investigation of these relationships is made in this thesis however.

Noise

In the sender-receiver model used in this thesis noise is depicted as a disturbed line, as something interfering with the message making it either harder to understand or perhaps even impossible to receive.

Noise involves distorting influences on information that make a message difficult to decode and interpret correctly. It may be anything distracting the receiver or interfering with the transmission of a message. (Baines, Fill and Page, 2008, Marketing, oxford university press, London)

Even though social media platforms present an enormous potential of achieving viral spread with over 500 years of *YouTube* video being shown on *Facebook* every day there is a downside to these incredible amounts of traffic. Given that the average video on YouTube is three minutes long more than 1,7 million videos are uploaded to the site every day (YouTube, 2012) making the statistical probability of a specific individual watching a certain video vanishingly small.

Maymann (2008) suggests that the democratization of information made possible by web 2.0 developments has brought about an informational overload. Consumers can easily create their own media content, making attention a scarce resource in today's media landscape and thus increasing the importance of economic factors. Marketers who hold a financial advantage over their competitors may direct the public's attention more efficiently.

Feedback

Online marketing hold, on a general, a substantial benefit in its inclusive nature. Consumers may interact with the sender in real-time and control the formal content presented in the message. The increased activation of the consumer leads to less frustration over being ignored and allows for the sender to correct any mistakes that may have occurred. (Banes, Phil and Page, 2011) The ease with which a user may leave a comment on video content, share it with friends or like it by simply pressing a button highlight this feedback related advantage.

Message context

Maymann (2008) highlights the need to be present on social media platforms and team up with big media companies rather than trying to convince consumers to visit a specific company website. People are comfortable and willingly spend time on social media platforms such as Facebook or twitter and may attribute increased credibility to a video presented in that same context.

Empirical data indicate a tendency to avoid being affiliated with obviously commercial content, making the potential benefit of presenting a video in a social context quite substantial. This notion is also supported by Kaplan & Haenlein (2011).

Encoding and decoding

When a message is encoded the sender selects a combination of adequate pictures, words or symbols to represent it. The receiver in his/her place needs to decipher the message to correctly understand it. The process of decoding a message is accordingly how the receiver gives it meaning. (Baines, Fill and Page, 2008)

2.3 Theoretical summary

The most significant aspects of the theoretical framework will be summarized below. This chapter also serves as the foundation from which the research methodology of this thesis has been designed. This relationship will, in the following, be explained.

First, a brief historical overview was made and the enormous surge in Hotmail users during the mid-1990's was quoted the world's first viral success with a simple tagline attached to every email creating an increase from 0 to 12 million users in 18 months.

Then a division into two main perspectives was made to pedagogically illustrate the aspects of viral marketing. This division follows the classical sender and receiver model developed by Shannon & Weaver in 1949 and thus organizing this chapter into a sender and a receiver perspective. Additionally the aspects of communication channel, noise, feedback and message context were briefly considered.

When considering the concept of viral marketing from the view of its sender further classification of important aspects was made and the need for companies to reach individuals with certain personalities is made evident. So is also the need to create relevant content and maintain a very high level of credibility. The importance of locating a message within a beneficial context is also mentioned and highlighted through research in viewer attention and online behaviour.

In the application of the receiver's point of view other vital aspects become evident. Here further division into the categories of psychology, social behaviour and viewer characteristics was made. A strong relationship between positive content and viral potential was established. The level of activation in regards to an emotion was also found positively affecting the viral potential of online content. People's reasons for sharing were investigated and the need to be unique was found to be an important factor as well as the creation of social reciprocity.

Finally, in regards to the development of an adequate research design this chapter has proven very useful. When considering current literature it is evident that qualitative research techniques dominate the field. Considering the explanatory character of the questions derived from the theoretical framework

presented here a quantitative method of research seems irrelevant and quite imprecise. Consequently the authors of this thesis assume a qualitative approach to research asking mainly "how" and "why" things happen. The following chapter details this approach.

3. Methodology

This chapter serves to guide the reader through the many aspects of this thesis. We begin with a summary of the scientific approach selected as the most basic conceptual framework for this thesis and then move on to describing the research design adopted here. In doing so a presentation of adequate methods for data collection and analysis as well as a critical reflection on aforementioned concepts are offered.

3.1 Scientific approach

This thesis takes a hermeneutical approach to science, thus interpreting and analysing the meaning of a text from the perspective of its author. In a modern context however this may perfectly well be translated to social contexts, video or other non-text-based sources of information. As this thesis is entirely based on qualitative research it resonates well with the hermeneutical pretext (Bryman, 2002). All data is subjectively interpreted and analysed by the authors and consequently filtered also through previous knowledge and not only through the conceptual understanding produced by this thesis.

3.2 Research design

The methodological design of this thesis follows an exploratory direction falling under the definition of Hair, Bush, & Ortinau, (2006) "research that focuses on collecting either secondary or primary data and using an unstructured format or informal procedures to interpret them".

An exploratory study is used to classify problems or understand phenomenon and is seldom intended to provide conclusive information in order to determine a course of action. The approach typically contains focus-group interviews as well as in-depth interviews and is particularly appropriate when the researcher's pre-existing experience in the chosen field is limited (Patel & Davidson, 2003). Accordingly such a method has been chosen for this thesis.

In continuation an abductive method of research, combining the two classical methodologies (inductive & deductive) will be applied to the exploratory approach taken by this thesis. By adopting this method the researcher studies a single case from which he/she phrases ideas or suggestions to new theories (the inductive part). These newly formulated theories are then tested on additional cases (the deductive part). Taking such an angle at research involves a risk of becoming overly subjective and overlooking important factors but simultaneously allows for the researcher to be very thorough and maintain an open mind throughout his/hers work (Patel & Davidson, 2003). For this particular thesis slight modification to this method of research has been made. The case study will be supplemented with two interviews and further testing of the theories presented in this thesis will be left for future research.

3.3 Data collection

Two types of data exist and the way we distinguish the two is quite clear. *Primary data* is collected specifically for the purpose of answering a given question while *secondary data* has been collected for an entirely different primary purpose. Accordingly, all secondary data was once primary data in another study (Babbie, 2006).

Primary data is most valuable as it can easily be adjusted to fit current research but the collection of such data is often time-consuming and costly (Hair, Bush & Ortinau, 2006).

Secondary data on the other hand is a much less expensive and time-consuming alternative but also contains an inherent weakness as it was previously tailored to fit an entirely different research context. Consequently the researcher needs to apply a very critical point of view to the information at hand (Hair, Bush & Ortinau, 2006). The use of secondary data may result in substantial time-savings and big reductions in cost (Saunders et al. 2009).

For this particular thesis secondary data plays a very important role in establishing a basic conceptual understanding of the subject at hand while primary data form a current analysis of the studied phenomenon.

3.4 Literature search

As the authors, previous to this thesis, possessed limited academic insight in the chosen field a number of pre-existing books, articles and studies were consulted with the intention of creating a solid knowledge foundation from which an adequate problem definition could be phrased.

The Gothenburg University Library provided access to the databases necessary to conduct such a research. A few databases proved extra nourishing in the search of previous viral marketing research. Among them were: *Emerald, Business Source Premier, ScienceDirect* and *ProQuest dissertations & theses.*

The search was as previously stated under "Key words" focused around concepts such as "viral marketing", "buzz marketing", "word-of-mouth" and "word-of-mouse" progressively leading into investigations of communication on a general note where group dynamics and psychological needs come into play.

3.5 Qualitative research

Qualitative research is exploratory and designed primarily to develop insight into a specific problem or into a certain opportunity. (Hair, Bush, & Ortinau, 2006). The ambition is to gain knowledge of a behaviour or phenomenon using detailed data collected from a limited population sample.

The advantages and disadvantages of qualitative research compared to quantitative research can be summarized in eight categories:

Table 2 – Reproduction of table presented in Hair, Bush & Ortinau, 2006.

Advantages	*Disadvantages*
• Economic data collection	• Deficiency of generalizability
• Rich data	• Incapability to distinguish minor differences
• Accurate recording of marketplace behaviour	• Lacking reliability and validity
• Insight into building models and scale measurements	• Hard to find well-trained researchers, observers and interviewer

Different forms of the qualitative research can be executed. This thesis includes two practices, the semi-structured interview and the focus group.

3.5.1 Interviews

This thesis' empirical data is based on two interviews with industry professionals designed to explore the sender perspective of viral marketing. A focus group interview was performed to further investigate online content sharing-behaviour from a consumer's perspective. A semi-structured interview is a method where one works explorative and simultaneously verifies facts with the respondent. (Justesen & Mik-Meyer 2010)

The interview with Jacob Lachmann from the company Goviral was performed in this manner. Facts about the company were initially discussed, and various theories on viral marketing were presented. For the most part however Jacob spoke freely about his thoughts of what viral marketing is and how GoViral work with different clients. As the interview proceeded increasing focus was given to a particular campaign that GoViral had recently worked with.

Due to Jacob's extensive knowledge of the campaign and his inspirational stories it was later decided for this particular campaign to serve as a case study meant to provide further insight in the creative work behind a viral campaign.

To get a comprehensive view of the campaign it was necessary to speak to the people who created it, *Forsman & Bodenfors*. An interview with two of the people behind the very successful campaign was performed and from that grew a case study in which we immerse ourselves in the creative work behind this particular campaign.

3.5.2 Case study

As this thesis aims to further investigate and explain the present time inner workings of viral marketing many of its questions will begin with a "how" or a "why" thus making a case study a very relevant approach to collecting data (Yin, 2009).

This thesis strives towards an in-depth description of what constitutes a successful viral campaign and seeks to understand sharing behaviour in an online context. When a comprehensive depiction of a subject is at hand a case study once again becomes very adequate (Yin, 2009).

For this particular thesis the launch of Volvo's latest truck and *Forsman & Bodenfors'* work behind the intentionally viral campaign that pushed it was chosen for specific scrutiny. This method allows for a more practical understanding of viral marketing and provides this thesis with the knowledge of industry professionals.

3.5.3 Focus groups

To arrive at a better understanding of the public's attitudes towards online sharing and further conceptualize an individual's behaviour and participation in the spreading of online content a focus group was assembled.

The aforementioned method may be divided into two different areas. A *group interview* is a form of focus group where several individuals discuss multiple issues. The *focused interview* on the other hand focuses completely on one question and the participants are chosen based on their relation to the subject of discussion. (Bryman & Bell, 2011)

The second approach, *focused interview* was in this study selected to highlight the consumer perspective on, and participation in the viral marketing process. The discussion mainly addressed the participant's attitudes towards sharing online content on social platforms.

Group dynamics is, by the authors of this thesis, perceived to be of great importance when analysing the act of sharing videos. Sharing is in its core an interaction between individuals, making the use of a focus group very relevant as it effectively simulates a small online community and allows for the participants to jointly produce ideas and further refine each other's statements while the moderator is presented with a great opportunity to observe how group dynamics may affect individual behaviour. (Bryman & Bell, 2011)

Morgan and Smircich (1980) suggests that a focus group should consist of 6-10 individuals and Blackburn and Stokes (2000) side with their colleagues and state that a group larger than eight tend to be hard to manage. For this thesis a focus group of 6 people was utilized.

A large number of focus groups can make the transcript material almost impossible to handle. On the other hand only one focus group can make it difficult to really determine the patterns and tendencies of the answers (Wibeck 2010). The authors were, due to shortage of time, limited to only arranging one

focus group and its participants were chosen based on perceived interest and knowledge in online communities.

The participants of the focus group assembled for the purpose of further investigating the behaviour of consumers in the context of online sharing were as mentioned selected based on their perceived knowledge of the subject but also to the convenience of the authors.

The group consists of six students at different branches of *The University of Gothenburg*. They are all between 24-26 years of age and actively participate in online communities on a daily basis.

3.6 Content analysis

Qualitative data-analysis refers to an examination of non-numerical data and observations leading to an understanding of underlying meanings and patterns in the observed data. (Babbie, 2006)

The qualitative approach encompasses an initial collection of first-hand raw data observations made in, for example, in-depth interviews. The key to understanding the data and generate relevant conclusions is to categorize the collected data in theoretical segments. (Saunders et al. 2009)

It would be problematic, for this particular study, to rate the answers and give any form of numerical description to them. Instead the main analysis will be concluded trough categorizing the retrieved data into general frameworks for further analysis.

3.7 Credibility

This section applies a critical view to the work of this thesis and presents the reader to the considerations made by the authors regarding relevance and reliability. First a brief note on source criticism is made.

3.7.1 Source criticism

When considering any source of information one must maintain a critical posture and understand the context from which it came. First comes of course the comprehension of author bias and being humble before the possibility of slanting research towards a desired goal.

The authors have consciously applied effort to eliminate such tendencies.

As for the relevance of the established research question its organic formations should be considered. Along the investigation of previous research and current literature grew an embryo that ultimately, through a research design process and industry professional interviews, became this thesis' main research question. Both Forsman & Bodenfors and GoViral have expressed interest in taking part of the findings of this thesis.

3.7.2 Validity

Validity refers to the extent to which the conclusions drawn from an experiment are true and thus measuring only if a study in fact investigates what it means to. Validity is traditionally divided into two parts: external and internal aspects.

External validity comprises the relevance of observed relationships when applied on an entire target population. Internal validity addresses the researcher's ability to, through a relevant research design; accurately discover relationships made visible in a study. (Hair, Bush & Ortinau, 2006)

To ensure the validity of the conclusions drawn from this thesis, constant connection between analysis and research questions is made. When a question is asked it is immediately aligned with the thesis methodology and followed up in the conclusion.

In an attempt to ensure the academic relevance of previous research and current literature the authors limited their search to the databases available at The Gothenburg University Economics Library. Items were chosen for consideration based on their occurrence in other scientific circumstances and level of previous citation. In doing so the authors make sure that the developed body from which they will later draw conclusions is of an academically high standard.

In response to the possible threat of misunderstanding interviewee responses all conversation was recorded and summarized in text before making any concluding statements. Additionally contact with both Forsman & Bodenfors and GoViral was maintained throughout the work of this thesis to ensure no misunderstandings occurred. Both companies had constant access to the written material and have made corrections where needed.

3.7.3 Reliability
For an experiment to be considered reliable it must be possible to repeat with similar conclusions (Hair, Bush & Ortinau, 2006). Reliability in that sense is a measure of precision and shows a study's consistency over time. A very important aspect of this is of course performing a true sampling of the target population. For this thesis the authors have chosen to focus their sample around people with perceived knowledge of the topic instead of establishing a sample base formed of a cross section of the population. In doing so we hope to reach more adequate conclusions as it in this case is very likely that the unaware part of the population is of no commercial interest to the companies.

A final comment should be made on the interviewees' possible commercial interest in portraying viral marketing in an overly beneficial way and the potential bias this brings to their answers.

As far as construction of interview questions and the potential peer-pressure of a focus group are concerned the authors have taken preventive action to make sure the effect this might have on the answers is limited to a minimum. The focus group interview was held in a, to the participants, familiar environment and at a time of their convenience. Even though the focus group was closely moderated to maintain a focused discussion no leading questions were asked. The interviews with Forsman & Bodenfors and GoViral were held at the F&B Gothenburg office to better accommodate the employees and as a semi-structured interview method was applied much room was given to the interviewees to freely develop on answers and statements.

4. Empirical Data Collection

The following chapter presents primary data collected through qualitative methods as previously described in chapter 3 (methodology). The performed interviews will here be presented in a summarized form including interviewee quotations. Both the interview with Forsman & Bodenfors and the focus group were conducted in Swedish and consequently the translation of data presents a possible source of error.

4.1 Interview 1

Below follows a brief summary of the interview made with Jacob Lachmann, managing director of GoViral. (See Appendix for description of GoViral).

The interview starts off with a quick recap of what has been going on in social media and viral marketing during the last few years. Back in 2006, the year Jacob states as the starting point for social media in a wider sense, the requirements of an online video were much fewer and less noise disturbing the message existed. Achieving novelty was fairly easy and even a low budget production had a good chance of being spread across the web. To put it simply: "*It was much easier being cool back then.*"

"*Today it is very rare that a commercial video without conscious distribution or a substantial budget becomes a viral success.*" Considering financial crises and the ever-increasing pressure on marketers to bring about substantial return on investment one can no longer leave the success of an investment up to faith and therefore engage heavily also in the distribution of online content.

Video is now an important and established cultural reference and at present date, due to the very rapid expansion of social media, you are most likely not the first one to discover a video and therefore less inclined to share it.

According to Jacob, successful viral campaigns all have a few things in common. They all have content offering great value to their core audience and they are all supported by a large budget and professional distribution.

GoViral has to this day distributed 30.000 videos and of course learnt a lot about what really works as a viral campaign. Intentionally viral videos need to possess certain qualities and *GoViral* rates the viral potential of a video on a scale of 1-5 for the following categories.

- Outstanding story – the storyline needs to be funny, provocative or otherwise highly involving.
- Originality – something the user have not seen before or at least a new and better angle.
- Relevance – both in the aspect of entertainment and solving a consumer's problem.
- Sharability – both in the aspect of non-offensive content and practical functions making it easier to share the video (like-button, "share with a friend").
- Audience hook – something maintaining interest throughout the length of the video.

- Instant attraction – intriguing the viewer's early in the video or even before they klick play.
- Overall campaign – the viral video must fit into the overall marketing concept.

Contradicting the old notion of viral marketing, as being a cheap way to achieve brand awareness is the fact that most successful viral campaigns today are heavily funded and supported by company controlled online sharing. "Viral is not dead, it is different" as Jacob chooses to put it.

Jacob goes on to talk about the validating effect viral spread may have on classical communication. Nike for example will get millions of hits on YouTube with a new TV commercial telling them the public liked it and that they are on the right track. Jacob also comments on the different roles a viral campaign may play in a marketing strategy. Red Bull for example clearly divides their communication in two parts. There is the emotionally engaging brand awareness and identity building aspect and the sales pushing aspect. Their viral content belongs under the first part.

Jacob describes a three-stage process in distributing online content:

1. *Professional distribution* – In this phase *GoViral* locates adequate blogs and websites that will constitute the base of the campaign. These distributors are all paid to post the video on their site.

2. *Social amplification* – If the previous phase works well the video will create a buzz resulting in e-WOM on social platforms such as Facebook, MySpace, Twitter and personal blogs. A high number of views validates a video in a personal respect and conveys a substantial personal relevance to future viewers.

3. *Old media acknowledgement* – When a video reaches a few million views on YouTube and become heavily debated on social platforms old media will take notice. In this phase classical media such as TV, newspapers and radio begin to adopt the story and thus amplifying brand exposure and pushing the content to viewers who would not normally come in contact with content of this kind. This of course serves as a validation of the content in the eyes of the consumers.

These stages present a reversed motion of traditional commercial communication where something is first reported on in classical media and then becomes subject to word-of-mouth. This marks a very interesting shift of power from the journalists and industry professionals to the consumers and social media users.

Jacob also comments on the core strength of viral marketing and highlights the fact that the method makes consumers into brand ambassadors and thus heavily increasing product credibility in the eyes of other consumers. Our most

important point of reference when evaluating a purchase, either already made or soon to be made, is the opinion of our peers.

When asked to define viral marketing as it is today, Jacob chooses to use Volvo Trucks' latest campaign commonly referred to as "the ballerina stunt" as an example and comments *"Good content. Good piece of budget and a sensible expectation of what should come from it"* making it quite clear that the days of free exposure is over. He also emphasizes the way this particular campaign is based on values affecting its core audience but designed for everyone. This video is relevant not only to the trucker but also to his/her partner, their children and their friends. Behind this approach lies of course the realization that our peers to a great extent affect our purchases. To conclude his thoughts on "the ballerina stunt" Jacob praises the level of brand presence in the video and the way the stunt is actually performed to create an authentic viewer experience.

Summing up the interview Jacob stresses a few benefits of viral marketing. *"We are all natural born storytellers. Historically we were sitting by the campfire and telling stories but today we upload videos on a social media platform."* A high quality viral video automatically finds its target group through e-WOM and the direct referral.
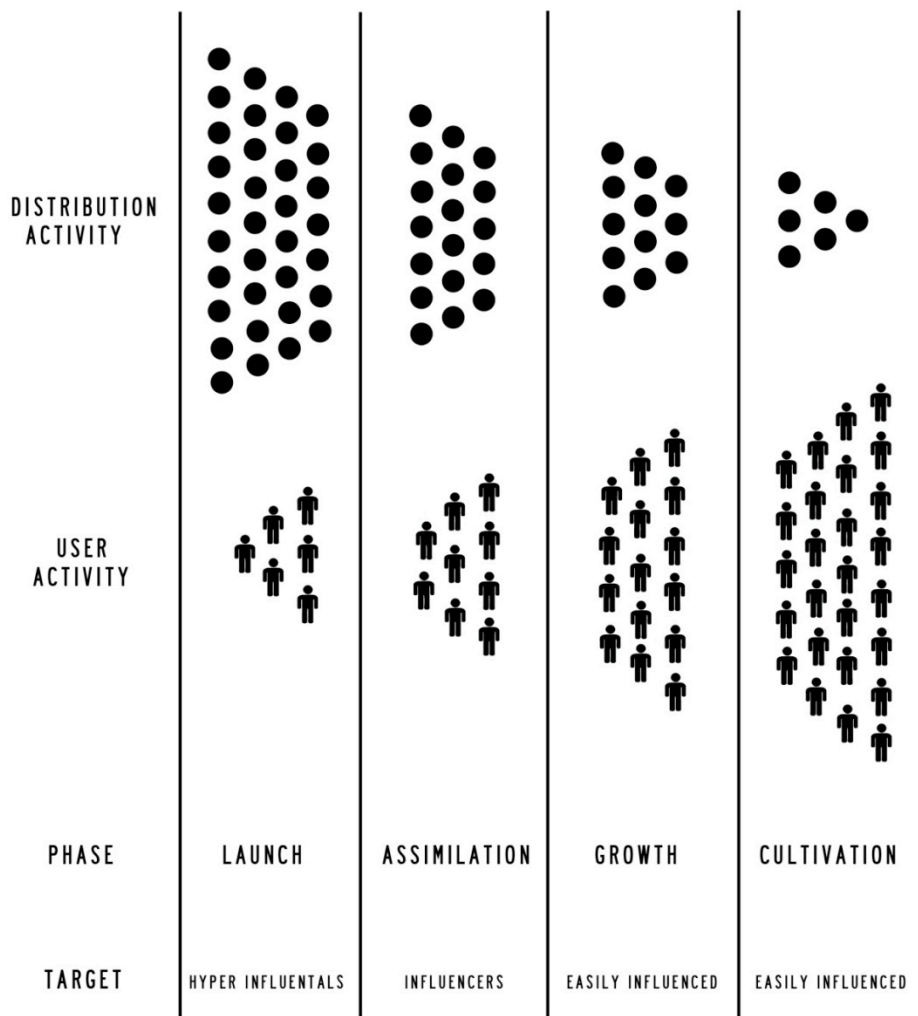

Image 4 - Reproduction of model in Maymann, 2008.

4.2 Interview 2

Below follows a brief summary of the interview conducted with Forsman & Bodenfors employees Björn Engström and Martin Ringqvist.

When the interviewees were initially inquired about the general differences between the work behind an intentionally viral campaign and a more conventional production they started with pointing out how the time frame changes. A viral video that is strictly designed for online viewing may be much longer than a TV commercial as it is not an imposition on the viewer but the viewer's conscious choice to click play.

They go on to talk about the possible cost reductions achievable by using online distribution methods compared to transmitting a video on TV where one pays for every extra second of video.

The aspect of choice and active participation in an online video has two sides to it. On the one side the action of clicking play will greatly increase the viewer's emotional participation and he/she is more likely to finish the whole video. On the other side, this active and conscious concept creates a necessity of attracting the viewer with only a title, a short description and a first picture frame. If this does not appeal to the viewer the video will never be seen. To describe this one might resort to a metaphor stating, "one must find a way to be invited to the party, not crash it". In this very simple way one effectively illustrates the sophistication of viral marketing but also the bluntness of old media.

The first thing that you will encounter when watching a video on YouTube or another online video platform is the title of the video. It is of importance to already in this stage create excitement and arouse interest in what the video might contain.

In continuation the interviewees state they do not believe in a universal formula for successfully creating a viral video even though they admit to working with a few do's and don'ts when it comes to this particular field. For example they talked about the need to capture the viewer within the first ten seconds of a video thus completely changing the dramaturgical structure as compared to classical TV commercials.

It is of great importance to constantly work with, and understand the delicate balance between commercial message and the viewer's propensity to keep watching a video. An overly strong brand- or product-presence might discourage the viewer. A comparison between viral video and art successfully highlights this aspect. The artist wishes to evoke some kind of emotion or reaction from his/her audience but there is no correct way of thinking about or experiencing a painting. With a commercial viral video however the sender needs to make sure that the audience understands the content the way they are meant to.

Furthermore Martin and Björn bring out the very important aspect of sending a customer relevant message and not getting lost in supplying entertainment for the viewer. The video's end purpose is of course increased bran/product awareness leading to an elevation of sales.

They move on to underline the need for recognizing proper funding as a vital part of a successful campaign and by that clearly stating that the time of free views and "no-budget YouTube sensations" is long gone. A sizeable budget is crucial to stand out in the noise interfering with all communication.

In this sense viral marketing is approaching traditional media such as TV and radio where the marketer must pay the station to show their ad. Similarly, you must spend money on online distribution to reach a position from which your content may go viral. The consumer is also becoming increasingly numb to advertisement stimuli thus making a high level of content and a professional production crucial to success. This of course is expensive.

One may certainly try one's luck and go with a low budget production and just hope for success but this is not a valid method for a serious company in which every investment has to be accountable.

The interviewees hold the first 48 hours after the launch of a video highly important to its future success. During this time period the video must find its way onto the YouTube top list and thereafter being featured on the website's home page. To make it onto that list the video needs to receive a very large number of likes and comments in a short period of time. Once on that list a video gains great leverage and may even become something of interest to big news media such as CNN or BBC, consequently gaining free world wide attention.

Martin and Björn end the interview with addressing a few issues regarding the ongoing change in the advertisement industry. For the last three years they have both been involved in working with a viral campaign and notice a grave change, just during this short period of time, in the challenge that is going viral. It gets harder by the minute and the rules for how to do things change so fast they think one is better off trying to create something new or break the rules rather than intending to figure out what has been successful in the past or replicate a successful previous campaign. Due to the ever-changing context that is the advertisement industry finding new approaches is key in all commercial communication and even more so in viral marketing.

4.3 Case study
The following details the viral campaign designed to launch Volvo Trucks' latest model.

In august 2012 Volvo Trucks released a three-minute long video trough their YouTube profile. A month later it had been viewed 6,5 million times. We intend to look further in to this campaign and isolate what factors made this video a viral success.

The assignment given to Forsman & Bodenfors by Volvo Trucks was to show the stability of the truck and the precision with which it handles. The creative work was based on this specific task.

So how does one show the stability of the truck and the precision of control in a dramatic way? What is the ultimate test? These questions lead the team straight to the idea of doing a stunt in which a professional slackliner walks on a

tightrope between two trucks in motion. When creating a video of this sort its authenticity is crucial. If the audience do not believe that the stunt was done in the way it is shown the video will not spread. It is also very important to consider how the campaign resonates with the image of the company. Could the video potentially damage Volvo's reputation or jeopardise their positioning.

The Ballerina film was created to generate interest in the big launch event of the new Volvo truck, which was the core of the campaign. The campaign was also supported by the product website, music performances and a slack-lining world record attempt at Götaplatsen in Gothenburg alongside printed advertisement.

The video features the world champion slack-liner, Faith Dickey performing an unbelievable stunt. A wire is set up between two brand new, never before shown Volvo trucks and Faith then performs the slack-lining stunt between the two trucks travelling at a speed of 80 km/h. She has only a limited time to get from the first truck to the second as there is a tunnel coming up. Just as she takes the last leap towards the second truck the wall separating the two lanes cuts off the wire and she lands safely on the truck.

This is the very first time the new truck model is shown, and for Volvo Trucks, as well as for the trucking community, this is a big thing. Twenty years have passed since Volvo Trucks released the previous model and the trucking world has been looking forward to this launch.

Image 5 – The ballerina stunt

An interview was performed with two members of the creative team behind this campaign, Björn Engström and Martin Ringqvist. The following is a summary of the interview regarding information about the Ballerina-video.

The selection of a viral campaign arose from the need to engage a very dispersed primary target group including truck drivers, haulage contractors and chief executives of international logistics companies.

There are trucking magazines and a few other straightforward media channels directly approaching the target group, but it is quite difficult to get a proper impact on the target group only through these channels. Forsman & Bodenfors instead chose to take a detour to the main target audience through all the people that surrounds them. The family, friends and colleagues of the target group affect the preferred brand and increase the status associated with driving a Volvo truck. The Ballerina-video was created to attract a bigger audience than the actual target group.

The director of the Ballerina-video, Henry Alex Rubin has great experience of making viral advertising videos and has also participated in the making of a number of Hollywood productions. When making the Ballerina-video he told the creative team at Forsman & Bodenfors that "fine taste", aesthetics and such, could be thrown out the window in the making of a viral video ad. This is entertainment for the masses and Henry Alex Rubin suggested using classic Hollywood clichés and dramaturgical tricks.

When editing the video, emphasis was put on limiting brand presence and making sure the video did not feel like a normal commercial. With this said, Volvo's new FH series truck is without a doubt the star of the video.

The finished video is, with viral standards, quite long and this is a potential problem that Forsman & Bodenfors considered. In the end it was decided that the presentation of the stunt and its participators would contribute to the dramatic effect of the video as well as its credibility.

In regards to the budget of the Ballerina-video, figures are not official but what can be revealed is that about half of the budget went to distribution and the other half to production.

It is not possible to derive the direct sales benefits generated by the Ballerina-video. However, one can deduce that brand preference has increased substantially. The pre-production set goal for the campaign was to reach 1,6 million views on YouTube. This goal was exceeded by 5 million views and counting. Including blogs, news sites, TV-news and other media picking up the video, the exposure is estimated to 162 million potential individuals watching it. When translating these numbers to media value it is estimated to 29 million Euros. Forsman & Bodenfors praises the courage of Volvo Trucks to go through with a campaign like this, as it is unique in B2B today.

4.4 Focus group
A focus group was assembled to further investigate online sharing behaviour.

The focus group was performed with 6 individuals and based around the question of "why and how we share online content?" The discussion was held in Swedish and the following citations have been translated.

To start of the discussions the participants were shown a short video-ad and asked to freely comment on the content. Next, the importance of a certain content's origin (i.e. sender and purpose) in respect to the viewer's propensity to share it was covered. The participants were then led into a discussion regarding their reasons for sharing online video and the issue of forming an identity was addressed as well as other more basic reasons for sharing such as the desire to help others. Additionally the participants were presented with the hypothetical possibility of getting paid to share online video and unanimously said to be ready to put their name on almost anything that was not criminal or discriminating in any way.

The participants were also shown the "ballerina video" and asked to comment on the video's quality and dramaturgical build as well as how they would feel about sharing it on a social medial platform.

The participants' reluctance to share commercials and other strongly branded material quickly became evident and few of them could recall ever having shared a commercial video online. The common understanding was that if the participants were to share commercial material they would want to do so directly to a certain individual rather than making a public post for all to see.

"There is a general feeling that all that you share reaches some kind of audience which makes you think twice before hitting the share-button. "

"You communicate a lifestyle and social profile through your Facebook, so you think about how the content that you share will be received in different social groups."

"I think it's easier to share with my inner circle of close friends because they will understand my message when I send out a specific video."

"If I find a video or something else that I know a friend of mine would like, I am more inclined to send the link as a private message (on Facebook) than to post it for everyone to see on my Facebook feed. The more narrow the content of the video, the more inclined I am to send it privately."

The origin of a video proved to be an important factor when understanding an individual's propensity to share online content. The informational value of a video was also mentioned as an important motivational factor for sharing a video. The group unanimously agreed on a need to be the first to share a video to actually do so.

"I'm probably 10 times more likely to share something if I know that I'm the first to discover it. If you are the first one to add something to the conversation, it always feels nice."

"It must be a very good video for me to spread it if I do not look up to the sender. On the contrary, it takes much less for me to share content from a sender I admire."

When addressing the issue of what constitutes sharable content in the eyes of the participants it became clear that demand for personal relevance is extremely high and consequently that the participants would not share content that does not resonate perfectly with their individual preferences.

"For example the Absolut Vodka commercials featuring the band Little Dragon were something that was shared in my social circle. It was shared because the song that Little Dragon performed was so good it made it worth sharing. But my friends commented on Little Dragon for "selling out" to a corporate brand like Absolut Vodka. I think for a commercial video to have impact and spread it has to be connected strongly with some other quality content."

"I have shared Nike commercials but it is rather a sensation that is formulated in an enjoyable way than sharing the brand Nike. It is not Nike as a brand that I want to share. It is the emotion conveyed in the film. The way the video expresses a cool and innovative feeling around playing football. But, of course, the brand behind the video will be a part of the content".

This year's big viral video hit was without a doubt the Red Bull Stratos Project were Felix Baumgartner performed a base jump from just over 39 km of altitude and with this breaking a row of previous world records. The video showing this Red Bull sponsored stunt was shown to the focus group in order to discuss the factors behind this marketing sensation.

All participants had previously seen the video and three out of six had also shared it on a social media platform. The general consensus of the group was that additional brand presence might have stopped them from sharing the video even though they all liked it very much.

"I am impressed by this in two different ways. Not only is it an extremely cool video but you also understand that it is marketing for Red Bull and with this understanding comes an admiration for Red Bull for choosing this way of marketing the brand. I shared it and followed it live."

"If there would have been a lot of advertisement banners, and stuff like that I would probably not have shared it. Red Bull is so well established in the extreme sport category that it does not feel ill fitted in context. It is natural that the brand Red Bull is involved in this type of extreme concepts."

To obtain a less augmented and considered opinion on the "ballerina stunt" the participants were presented to the video and asked for their initial opinions. The video raised question among the group about its ability to reach the target group.

"I think it feels a little bit suspect, this may be fake and because of this uncertainty I would not want to share it. But I think that if I had been part of the target group maybe I would have had a different attitude."

"The movie is good. The question is if it reaches the target audience."

"If I had had a friend who was interested in buying a truck, I would definitely share this movie with him."

Regarding the question of getting paid to share commercial content the group agreed that they would share commercial content if the price were right. No more than a 1000 kr (Swedish currency) a month would be needed for the group to willingly share content of an employer's choice. Considering the fact that none of the participants had previously shared more than one or two commercial videos in their entire life this makes for a massive behavioural change.

Their social profile is important to them but can quite easily be bought. They do also express a need to tell their inner social circle of friends that they get paid so at least they understand their change in Internet behaviour.

"I would like to tell my closest friends that I get paid for sharing. Otherwise I would not want to do it."

The topic of different types of online sharing was also brought up. The group discussed the difference in *sharing* and *liking* content on *Facebook* on highlights the difference as a variation in social affection and participation. Sharing something is, to the focus group participants, a much stronger act than just liking and implies a more explicit request where others are asked to partake in the spread of the video while liking merely expresses personal approval.

"It is not the same feeling to a like and a share. If a share is a kiss a like is a hug."

4.5 Empirical summary

With the intention of concluding this chapter and preparing the reader for the analysis a brief summary of the empirical data findings will now be made. Additionally a few comments liking the empirical research back to the methodological approach of this thesis is made.

The empirical data of this thesis has been collected through various methods selected to highlight different aspects of viral marketing. In-depth interviews with industry professionals were realized to obtain an up-to-date understanding of how the industry works today while focus group interviews with young adults served as a mapping of contemporary online sharing behaviour. Finally a case study was performed to highlight the creative aspects of successful viral marketing.

As already presented in the theoretical framework of this thesis the need for an individual to feel like he/she is the first one to share a message is crucial to that same individual's propensity to participate in the spreading of aforementioned message. This chapter also hints to fact that a substantial budget is needed to successfully push a video through the noise and the necessity to attract the viewer's attention before they even click play.

5. Analysis

This chapter serves as a rational illustrative of the empirical and theoretical framework established in this thesis. Here we engage in a comprehensive comparison of empirical primary data findings and previously performed research. To further logically arrange information and facilitate the reading of this thesis the insights in this chapter have been divided into three categories leading up to the creation of a checklist depicting the most basic and necessary qualities of a viral video.

As commented by the interviewees at *Forsman & Bodenfors* the fast paced technological change of today presents the marketer with the increasingly difficult task of breaking through the noise, making the need for high quality content and creative edge greater than ever before.

Consequently a brief but essential criticism towards the very concept of establishing a universal framework for viral marketing must be made. As creativity by its very definition relates to the use of imagination or original ideas to create something (Oxford Dictionaries, 2012) it is fundamentally misguided to intend for an academically universal description of the phenomenon. It is however most adequate to formulate and analyze the reoccurring aspects of viral success, as shall be done below.

5.1 Psychology

When comparing the empirical data collected for this thesis with previous research on the subject it becomes evident that an individual is much more likely to share a video when he/she is, or at least believes he/she is, the first one doing so within a certain social context. Being first conveys a level of awareness and street smartness increasing the individual's status within a specific group of people. Understanding this is crucial to companies during the distribution phase of a viral campaign. A video shared by an individual without commercial interest will, in the minds of other consumers, always have a greater credibility than a video pushed by the company behind it. To appropriately adapt to these conditions companies need to aim their distribution at disconnected social groups and thus allowing for as many individuals as possible to feel like they are the first ones to share a certain video. This strategy will heavily increase the impact of a video as its credibility will increase and consequently the number of views will surge.

A profound understanding of what individuals are willing to share is of course crucial to successfully launch a viral video. Our empirical data suggest that people tend to share the sentiment of a video rather than its actual commercial content. In our interviews with ad agency *Forsman & Bodenfors* and distribution bureau *GoViral* the level of brand presence was discussed and they both stress the importance maintaining an unobtrusive posture in this respect. One of our focus group participants point out that he has previously shared Nike videos as a way of conveying a love of football and winning. Not to promote a certain football boot or brand. Companies would do well in remembering that individuals tend to shy away from obvious commercial messages but may share

a video evoking the right set of emotions. The link between a video and its producer however needs to be apparent, as it is still a marketing strategy.

Furthermore one must understand how people tend to share a video. Our focus group participants unanimously state that they prefer to share a video directly with a certain friend through sending him/her a link or posting the video on his/her social media profile rather than posting it on their own profile for all to see. This once again hints to the fact that people are reluctant to put their name on commercial content but may make an exception when they know a certain friend will take great interest in a particular video. This realization brings fourth two important aspects. Firstly and to companies most beneficially it highlights one of viral marketing's greatest strengths; the way a video will seek out its primary target through referral. Secondly it applies additional emphasise on the need to not overly crowd a video with product information or intrusive logos. "The more prominent or intrusive the logo the more likely viewers are to stop watching" (Teixeira, 2012)

It seems clear that our focus group participants are mostly guided by emotions when forwarding online content. Something that resonates well with previous research investigating the effects different emotional content may have on the spread of a video, article or photo. It has been established that positive content has a greater viral potential than negative content but also that the level of arousal evoked by the emotion matters significantly. Emotions such as anger and anxiety create a heightened state of arousal while passive emotions such as sadness create a very low level of arousal and therefore tend to be less viral. It is also apparent that surprise and sudden changes in the evoked emotions contribute to increasing a video's viral potential. These realisations equip companies with a guide to managing a video's emotional content and focus should be applied to positive and surprising content with a high level of activation.

To conclude this part we quickly address how personality traits may affect online forwarding behaviour. It was established that an elevated usage of the internet medium positively affects online sharing behaviour. The trait of curiosity however was not found to have any direct relationship with increased sharing in an online context. It was also determined that people may share online content as a part of their personal growth or to obtain career benefits.

5.2 Creative
The aim of all marketing is to affect the target population in some way, be it increased sales, elevated brand awareness or simply informing on product features. In the context of viral marketing the authors have identified a broad spectrum of possible ways to deliver a message. The two extremes of this array of strategies will now be considered. Firstly one may design the content of a video to specifically cater for the preferences of a certain target population. This approach allows for the content to become very detailed and presents the possibility to use industry specific jargon, thus making the message homing in its very character, as it will be forwarded to a particular target group or directly find its way there due to its precise nature. Consequently, this approach requires less of a commitment to distributional activities but also provides the message with a

very high level of credibility as it is most likely passed on by a friend or found when actively searching for information on the subject.

Secondly, one may instead design video content to accommodate the entertainment preferences of a much wider population. In doing so one hopes to achieve a very high number of views and create a buzz big enough for traditional media to take notice and consequently reach the target population through the massive exposure they provide. As this approach entails the very crucial step of being featured on online top-lists as well as becoming a highly debated subject on social media platforms to be successful, it requires, according to empirical studies, extensive and well planned distribution. This method of reaching the target population has the potential benefit of attracting new customers in a way that the first approach does not.

The aforementioned strategies will now be schematically simplified below.
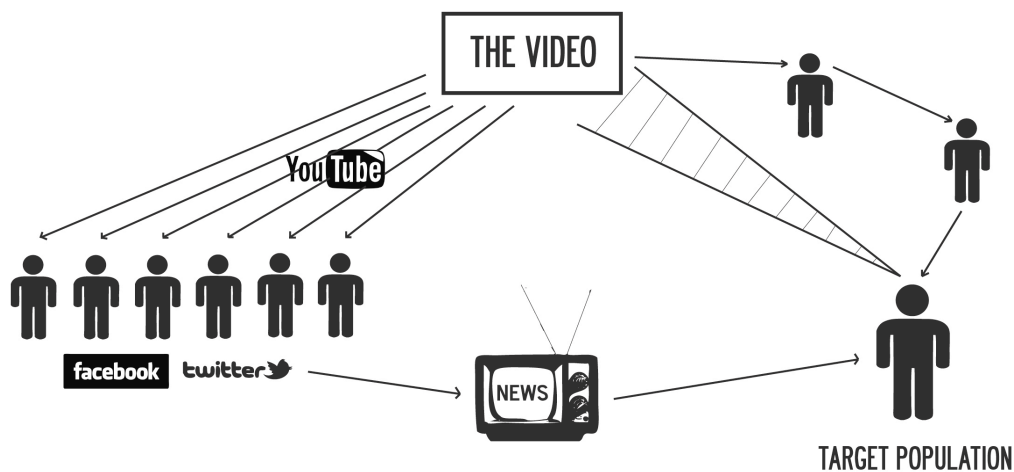

*Image 6 - The Pathfinder, two approaches to reaching a target population.*

After having realised that active engagement in distributional activities is a necessity to successfully reach one's target population the next step is quite clear. It is important for a video to be present on platforms and websites where the consumers feel comfortable and willingly spend their time rather than trying to convince them to visit a specific company website.

On the subject of distribution, the collected primary data and previous research disagree. While current literature propose actively trying to appeal to the e-maven, the social hub and the sales person so that they willingly engage in the spread of a certain video, empirical research indicate that these people should be paid to ensure an effective initial spread.

5.3 Noise

The technological development and maturation of Internet users in the 21st century together form a base from which enormous amounts of online data traffic derive. Every month some 800 million unique users visit YouTube resulting in the showing of over 4 billion video clips daily. (YouTube, 2012) This of course pushes the competition and the fight for user attention is constantly becoming harder to win. In such a context professional distribution becomes essential to make it through the noise and be seen by the target population. In this sense, online video is approaching traditional media, as companies are now increasingly required to buy views in order to make onto the crucial top-lists of big video distributers such as YouTube.

It is of course impossible to draw any definite conclusions from a study with such a limited population sample as this one, but empirical data supported by Maymann (2008) indicate a development where the increasing level of noise is forcing companies to spend escalating amounts of money on distribution in order to reach their target population. Below, this relationship is simplistically illustrated as a linear correlation of two factors, budget and noise.
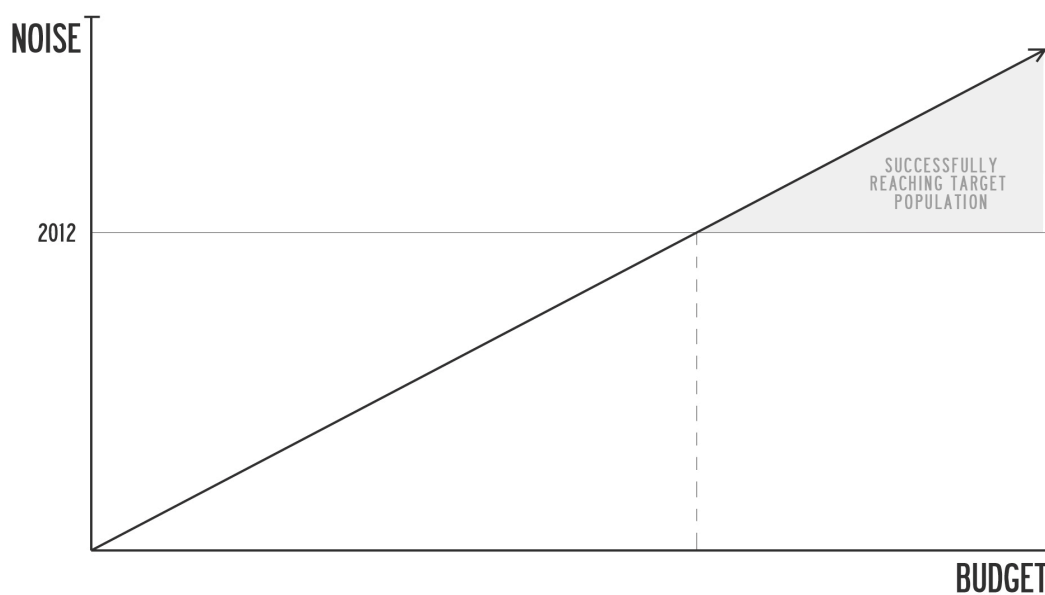
Image 7 - Money Talks, how to push through the noise.

The relationship illustrated above is not to be considered an absolute truth but a way to simplify the trend indicated by empirical research.

6. Conclusions

This chapter summarizes and further develops the commercially relevant aspects highlighted in the analysis and serves as a direct answer to the research question of this thesis as well as an alignment to the academic purpose of the same. Initially a number of key components to a successful viral campaign are presented.

To begin this very conclusive part of the thesis a brief recap of its purpose should be made. The purpose of this thesis is to investigate and further comprehend the concept of viral marketing and isolate key components in successful campaigns leading up to the main research question: *What constitutes a successful viral campaign today?*

What now follows is the answer to that very question.

As stated in the previous chapter there is no universal recipe to viral success but with the creative aspects excluded there are still a number of factors that successful campaigns have in common. Based on the findings of this thesis the authors have created a checklist for successfully realizing a viral marketing effort.

THE CHECKLIST

- Brand presence
- Budget
- Story
- Message delivery strategy
- Distribution
- Overall campaign

The level of brand presence in a video is a delicate issue. The link between the video and its sender is necessary to drive sales but logos and product information tend to drastically reduce people's propensity to share online content. Companies need to consciously balance brand presence and viewer preferences to obtain a viral spread.

In this thesis it becomes apparent that a substantial budget is required to push a video through the noise. Today's call for professional distribution and high quality content drives the need for financial contributions and without money supporting a viral campaign; companies stand a small chance of success.

As for the creative aspects and the storyline of a video the conclusions drawn from this thesis are focused around the irrelevance of trying to find a universal method for viral success. Companies should focus on trying to create something new and are probably better of breaking the rules than following them. This does not mean that creative edge is not crucial to success but only that such an edge cannot be effectively depicted. As previously mentioned positive and surprising emotions characterized by a high level of activation are highly viral and the fight for the viewers' attention needs to be won early in the video or perhaps even before they click play.

For a viral marketing campaign to be finically successful it has to reach and appeal to its target population. This thesis has identified a spectrum of different strategies in reaching a core audience ranging from a wide spread via mass media to a homing message directly finding its way to the target population through referral or individual information search. It is wise to already in the first creative phase of planning a viral ad consider how one shall frame the message. The making of a distribution plan for the video should then follow this decision.

Today's pressure on marketers to tie financial numbers to marketing efforts makes for an interesting backdrop to viral marketing. Professional distribution of online media content is not only necessary to push through the noise but also provides for a very accountable investment. Companies cannot afford to invest millions in the production of a video and then leave its spread up to the customers. As commented in the analysis two polarized strategies of reaching a target population may be identified. They differ in the level of distributional commitment required and in content character and such variations must be consciously considered at an early stage of the viral marketing process as well as being aligned with the company's over-all campaign.

It is crucial to consider how a viral marketing campaign may be integrated into a company's overall marketing strategy. No in-depth investigation of these relationships has been made in this thesis but the subject makes for interesting future research and its importance is not overlooked here.

For the following, correlation between previous research and empirical data is evident which has led to the formulation of these very tangible and potentially commercially valid suggestions on practical work with viral marketing.

In order to ensure that as many individuals as possible feels like they are the first one to acknowledge and share a certain message within a specific social context, that initial distribution of the message should be aimed for individuals in disconnected social groups.

Companies should thoroughly consider the delicate balance of brand presence and the customers' reluctance to share overly branded content.

Even though no conclusive evidence has been found to indicate what creative solutions most effectively aid in the making of a viral video a few guidelines to managing online content exists. Focus should be applied to positive and surprising content with a high level of activation.

Professional distribution is today, if not an absolute necessity, unquestionably vital to ensure a vast viral spread. It is of course still possible to break through the noise without professional distribution but intending to do so is a risk most companies cannot afford to take.

Finally, a trend analysis illustrating the conceptual development of viral marketing should be made. The conclusions drawn in this chapter are to be summarized as a development from the realm of phenomenon and awe to what should in a modern context be described as methodological. Viral marketing has evolved from trial and error based hopes for success to conscious marketing

strategies where a certain outcome may be guaranteed through professional distribution.

As the level of noise is continuously rising the consumer's numbness to commercial messages increases and his/hers propensity to be surprised or impressed diminishes, constantly pushing the boundaries for what is needed to be seen. In the mid 1990's a simple tagline in an email made for viral success. In 2012 a man jumped from the edge of space wearing a Red Bull logo.

6.1 Future research

As work with this thesis progressed a number of related areas and interesting aspects have been left out to effectively answer the chosen research question. This chapter briefly discusses these aspects and the potential contribution their investigation might make to the existing body of knowledge.

Many of these consciously overlooked aspects are part of the delimitations made to help focus the work of the authors, and some are realizations made along the way. The problem in measuring a possible increase in sales caused by viral marketing is evident and this link cannot be made without further technological advancements where IP-addresses are connected to credit card information or other user specific data is generated. As marketers constantly face difficulties in validating their work such an investigation would significantly aid companies in evaluating their marketing efforts.

For this thesis an assessment, based on interviews with industry professionals, was made regarding the commercial relevance of different generations. Young adults were consequently selected for focus group interviews and there is an obvious limitation in restricting the research to only one generation and a broader investigation would of course benefit the understanding of the subject.

Even though this thesis contains a brief overview of social media in a general context it is not an in-depth investigation of the intricate network created by the numerous social media platforms available today. Such an investigation would shed further light on the phenomenon of viral spread.

Empirical data as well as previous research suggests that people have a strong need for being the first one in a certain social context to share a video online to feel comfortable in doing so. This psychological aspect presents a very interesting application of traditional knowledge to a modern context.

This thesis isolates the method of viral marketing to its effects on video and further research should encompass other media selections to adequately depict the phenomenon.

As part of the conclusions of this thesis and highlighted by the case study, the need to understand how viral marketing fits into a traditional marketing mix is pointed out but not thoroughly investigated. If given additional time, the authors would immerse themselves in this topic.

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Appendix

1.
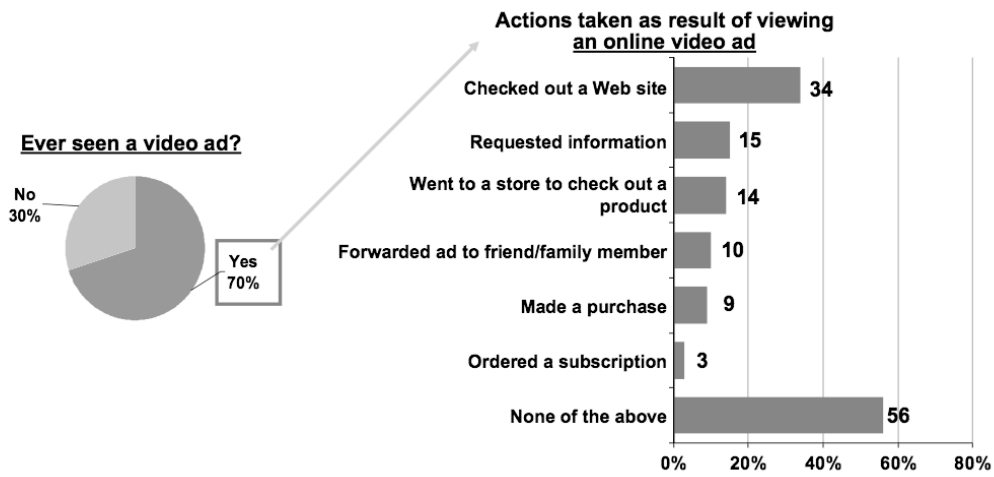
Q.75: Have you ever seen a video ad on the Internet, meaning a product or service advertisement that incorporates a video clip? BASE: Total sample (N=27,841).
Q.76: Which of the following have you ever done as the result of viewing an online video ad? BASE: Those who have seen video ads (N=19,608).
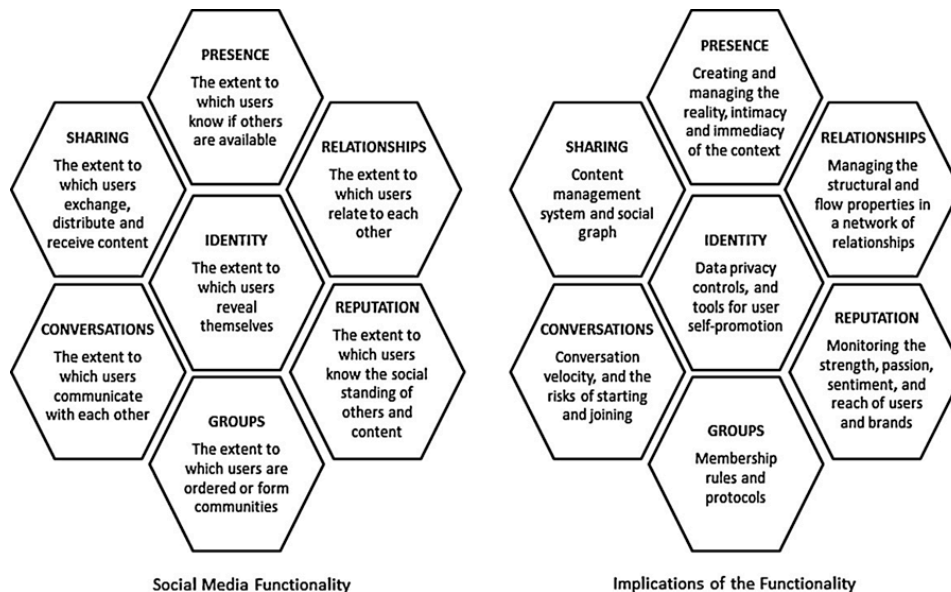
2.

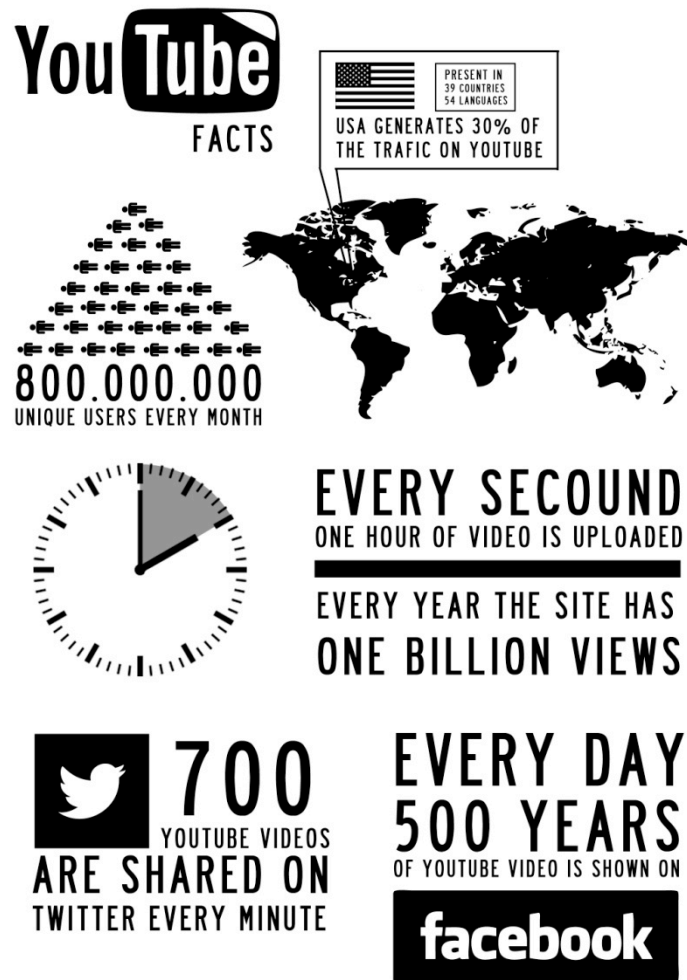*Image 9 – Honeycomb from Kietzmann et al. 2011.*

3.

Image 10 - Own image crated from official YouTube statistics 2012.

4. "GoViral is the leading distributor of branded entertainment content across a premium network of publishing sites globally. We work with a plethora of brands and award-winning creative agencies, media agencies and marketers around the world.

Every day close to 2m people chose to click and play one of our branded videos across 22 verticals in 90 countries. Every month our players invite over 900m users to engage with our brands content. We are in the business of content distribution and since GoViral's inception in 2005 we've helped the biggest brands in the world to deliver awe-inspiring campaigns with unprecedented results.

Using our proprietary technology to connect you with a portfolio of over 40,000 influential blogs, passion websites, social platforms and apps across multiple screens, GoViral allows you to integrate into each platform in a way that is native to the platforms we work with. Unlike interruptive pre-roll ads or banners that sit next to the conversation, social video joins the conversation and engages viewers that have chosen to watch your content.

We have offices located in Luxembourg, London, Copenhagen, Munich, Paris, Madrid, Milan, Stockholm and New York. GoViral was acquired by AOL in January 2011 which has seen the business extend its reach even further through partner companies in the AOL Advertising.com Group."

 (GoViral. 2013. http://www.goviral.se/sv/about (Accessed 2013-01-08))

5. Forsman & Bodenfors is a Swedish advertising agency formed in 1986. It has one office in Gothenburg and another I Stockholm. Forsman & Bodenfors is one of the leading agencies in Sweden and were internationally ranked as the World's 7th best agency, according to the Big Won.

Clients include big brands as Volvo, Tele2, If Försäkringar, Göteborgsposten, Unicef, Coop, Apoteket and Systembolaget.

Today the company has over 100 employees working at the two offices.

In addition to the agency there are six affiliating companies connected to Forsman & Bodenfors. These companies specialize in areas a little bit outside of the core of what Forsman & Bodenfors does.

(Forsman & Bodenfors. 2013. http://fb.se/#/en/Search/ABOUT F&B/ (Accessed 2013-01-08))