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## Show me what you share and I'll tell you who you are

- A study into consumers' willingness to share viral marketing

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# Abstract

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## **Show me what you share and I'll tell you who you are**

- **A study into consumers' willingness to share viral marketing.**

Viral marketing is a technique employing consumers as a market force to spread messages in social networks, almost like a virus. The challenge with viral marketing is knowing how it works. We argue that previous research has focused too much on the content of the messages, rather the ones who actually share them. The purpose of this study is to gain deeper insights into viral marketing from a consumer perspective, focusing on the aspects consumers find significant when sharing material online. By conducting qualitative interviews our findings show that even though the respondents were active on social media, they were quite passive users. Our analysis show that what consumers decided to share were contingent upon the purpose of the share, the messages had higher significance than the content. Our analyses show that sharing viral messages is not seen as an innocent share, but rather elements in the respondents identity construction.

*Keywords:* Viral marketing, social media, identity, self-presentation, consumer studies

*Number of characters (with spaces): 109 238*

# Sammanfatning

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## **Visa mig vad du delar så ska jag berätta vem du är**

### **- En studie om konsumenters villighet att dela viral marknadsföring.**

Viral marknadsföring är en metod som använder konsumenter som en marknadsföringskraft för att sprida budskap i sociala nätverk, likt ett virus. Utmaningen med viral marknadsföring är att förstå hur metoden fungerar. Vi menar att tidigare forskning mest fokuserat på innehållet av materialet snarare än de som faktiskt delar dem. Syftet med denna studie är att erhålla djupare kunskap och förståelse av viral marknadsföring utifrån ett konsumentperspektiv genom att fokusera på de aspekter som konsumenterna anser vara viktiga när material delas på nätet. Genom att genomföra kvalitativa intervjuer har våra upptäckter visat att även om respondenterna var aktiva i sociala medier, var de relativt passiva i sitt själva användande. Analysen visar att vad konsumenter väljer att dela är kopplat till syftet med själva delningen, budskapet är större än själva materialets betydelse. Vår analys visar även att delningar inte är bara enkla delningar, det är snarare ett verktyg för respondentens identitetsuppbyggnad.

*Nyckelord: Viral marknadsföring, sociala medier, identitet, självpresentation, konsumentstudier*

*Antal tecken (inklusive mellanslag): 109 238*

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# Preface

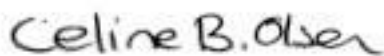
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We would like to express our deepest gratitude to those who have helped us along the way during the process of writing our dissertation. First of all, we would like to thank all of the respondents that participated, who offered their precious time and contributed with such energy and commitment making this study possible.

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We also want to stress that both students invested equal amount of time and effort to this research study.

Thank you!



Celine Bisgaard Olsen



Christofer Gaude

# 1. Introduction

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With the rise of social media the digital landscape has changed as it opens up for interaction in a whole new way. Consumers have become more powerful and influential by being able to share their opinions and ideas, to the entire global landscape. According to Allsop, Bassett and Hoskins almost 60 per cent share content online with their peers (Berger & Milkman, 2012). This gives organizations new marketing opportunities and challenges, as they are now able to work with, and involve their audience in other ways, instead of communicating one-way (Rollins, Anitsal & Anitsal, 2014). One of the ways organizations have changed their marketing functions is by taking advantage of viral marketing. Social media channels as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter offer organizations new methods to adapt, and merge marketing strategies to trends, by making the audience able to like, publically share or forward a campaign (Rollins et al, 2014). In light of this a new marketing trend has emerged, viral marketing. Viral marketing is often described as a digital, or online word-of-mouth communication, which exploits existing social networks by encouraging consumers to share product information with their friends (Leskovec, 2007). As such, viral marketing can be considered a sort of interactive advertising (Dahlén, Lange & Smith, 2010). By the nature of its message conduit, such as social media-sites, most of viral marketing campaigns are directed towards digital naturals; “individuals who are comfortable in an online environment, being equipped through experience and exposure, to both its cultural norms and the technological competencies required to operate effectively” (Young & Åkerström, in press). The importance of viral messages increases and business-initiated viral marketing campaigns often plays a vital part when it comes to organizational aspects such as corporate reputation, brand and products. An indication on the extreme development and interest in viral material is the creation in the last couple of years of several websites, such as BuzzFeed, Reddit and 9gag, devoted to gather viral material for online users. Even though there are many viral success stories, there are many more attempts that have failed. The absence of success could depend on the lack of knowledge on what actually contributes to a successful campaign (Van der Lans & Van Bruggen in Botha & Reyneke, 2013). In the article *Viral Marketing: Techniques and imple-*

*mentation* Rollins et al (2014) state that viral marketing is perceived as an unpredictable strategy of marketing due to variable reception and interpretation by the consumers. Even though viral marketing is conventionally considered random and unmanageable (Bampo, Ewing, Mather, Stewart, & Wallace, 2008), and decades of listening to similar business-to-consumer messages have made consumers inattentive and skeptical about advertisements (Rollins et al, 2014), there is a common assertion in the marketing literature that consumers see viral marketing as a more honest and trustworthy form of marketing (Rollins et al, 2014; Botha & Reyneke, 2013; Bampo et al, 2008). According to Dahlén et al (2010) people may filter out traditional-media advertisements, but they do listen to people they know and trust. However, according to Rollins et al (2014) there is a lack of academic research proving that consumers actually perceive viral marketing as honest and trustworthy.

Most of the previous research on viral marketing is done from a business-perspective with focus on how to get consumers to make marketing campaigns go viral (e.g Liu-Thompkins, 2012; Rollins et al, 2014). However, there seems to be fewer qualitative research-studies on the phenomenon from a consumer-perspective. As viral marketing campaigns become a more integrated part of the digital media-strategy amongst organizations, increased knowledge about consumer perception and behavior in the digital era seems crucial. According to Phelps, Lewis, Mobilio, Perry and Raman (2004) there seems to be little known about the perceptions and arguments of the people who pass along these messages. Why consumers share and how they perceive online marketing campaigns, and consequently help campaigns “go viral”, seems to be an under-researched area within the field of marketing communication at this time (Phelps et al, 2004; Lee, Ham & Kim, 2013; Dobeles, Lindgreen, Beverland, Vanhamme & van Wijk, 2007; Rollins et al, 2014; Botha & Reyneke, 2013; Ho & Dempsey, 2010). As Phelps et al (2004) so eloquently describes “understanding what drives and characterizes pass-along behavior is essential to influencing that behavior. Only then can advertisers target individuals with messages developed to enhance viral activity” (Phelps et al, 2004 p.335). This insight has led us to the research area as well as purpose for this study.

## 1.2 Purpose and research questions

The purpose of this study is to achieve a deeper understanding of the digital phenomenon of viral marketing from a consumer perspective. By applying a consumer perspective we hope to gain deeper knowledge into what aspects consumers consider to be of significance when deciding to share certain viral material rather than others. This could contribute valuable insights to consumer studies within the field of marketing communication.

To fulfill the purpose of this thesis, the following questions will guide the research design:

- Why do consumers share certain marketing campaigns with their social network?
- What aspects do consumers consider significant when deciding to share viral material?

## 1.3 Delimitation

As with any research study it is important to clarify the scope and boundaries that shape this paper. Firstly, when discussing viral marketing we refer to messages spreading through social networks by peer-to-peer communication almost like a virus. Viral marketing has in that way much in common with both word-of-mouth marketing as well as buzz marketing. However, in this thesis we are not interested in the creation and sharing of consumer reviews on sites such as Amazon, Yelp et cetera concerning brands, services or products, neither focusing on the consumer's motivations for creating peer-reviews or sharing other peer-reviews. Instead we are interested in business-initiated viral marketing. There are two ways that corporate messages can go viral; consumer-initiated and business-initiated viral marketing (Rollins et al, 2014). Corporate messages can become popular because consumers mention them through social media networks such as Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, YouTube, Instagram, and Rollins et al (2014) refers to this type of "hands-off viral marketing" as consumer-initiated viral marketing. However, companies can also be active and create messages that they attempt to go viral. Companies such as Hotmail with their free email service-offerings, Old Spice with their funny videos and IKEA Singapore's "book book" parody, and taunting of Apple's product-commercials, is good examples of this type of "hands-on viral marketing" (Rollins et al, 2014). Business-initiated marketing implies thus messages designed by corporations, but disseminated and popularized by social network-users (Rollins et al, 2014). As such our perspective is market messages disseminated through personal communication, and not mass communication.



## 2. Literature review

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Before presenting the theoretical analytical tool that will influence our understanding of the empirical material, we consider that it is important to put the phenomenon of viral marketing in a historical context, to give its emergence and growth as a marketing strategy a broader context. Even though it can be considered as a fairly new phenomenon within the digital era, its basis and premise can be argued to stem from a paradigmatic shift in the dominant logic of marketing. The short historical background will be followed by a definition of viral marketing and review of previous research on the area from a consumer perspective. We will then address theories of interpersonal communication and social interaction as a theoretical tool for our analysis later in this research study.

### 2.1 Consumer-centered marketing perspective

Vargo and Lusch (2004) describes in their paper *Evolving to a new dominant logic for marketing* that in the past several decades there has been a change in the dominant logic of marketing; “from a focus on tangible resources (manufactured goods), embedded value and transactions (...) new perspectives have emerged with a focus on intangible resources, the co-creation of value and relationships” (p.1). Marketing is now more focused on the exchange of intangibles, specialized skills, knowledge and processes (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Consumers do not longer simply buy goods or services; according to Gummesson, they buy offerings, which render service(s), which *create value* (Gummesson, 1995 quoted in Vargo & Lusch, 2004). According to this perspective value-production no longer end with the manufacturing process, consumers are now viewed as *co-producers* of value and production is seen as an intermediary process. Value is both defined by and co-created with the consumers (Vargo & Lusch, 2004; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004) instead of something inherent in the product. With this shift in the marketing logic consumers have moved from being passive receivers and targets of output, to active co-creators and resources for organizations throughout the entire value chain (Vargo & Lusch, 2004; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004).

With the rise of the Internet and user-generated social media the active consumer has transformed into the viral consumer.

*“These talkative, influential consumers will play a critical role in the future of your marketing schemes, loyalty programs, customer service efforts, public relations outreach, brand management, privacy policies and bottom line”. (Blackshaw, 2001 p.20)*

According to several researchers the traditional top-down pattern of marketing communications has changed, and the power previously held by advertisers is now placed with the consumers (Dahlén et al, 2010; Quinton, 2013). The viral consumer is informed and connected, and messages are spread across the digital sphere in an incredible speed (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Blackshaw, 2001). With the viral consumer geographical boundaries are now eroding fast, and consumers can access any information about products, brands and organizations with just a simple click. As the quote above implies, consumers can now “make or break an organization” (Blackshaw, 2001). One way-communication will no longer suffice for the viral consumer, and organizations are as such being forced into thinking differently when it comes to their marketing mix. Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) describes that as consumers now are armed with new connective tools, consumers want to *interact* and co-create value. The researchers focus on co-creation experience, interaction and consumer engagement describes a fundamental change in how many organizations today interact, and communicate with their consumers. The interactive and co-creating experience does not entail simply outsourcing product development, or customization of merchandise to the consumers, but “it involves the co-creation of value through personalized interactions that are meaningful and sensitive to the specific consumer” (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004 p.6). As such, the market is no longer focused on the organization or the specific products or services, but rather around the individual consumers and their experiences. A clear evidence for this could be the numerous forums, blogs and social media-sites that has flourished over the last couple of years, and has been increasingly acting as important conduits for these consumer experiences; creating communities where peer-to-peer communication is often regarded as the more trustworthy and honest form for marketing communication (e.g Kozinets, de Valck, Wojnicki and Wilner, 2010).

A marketing phenomenon that has embraced the interactive consumer is viral marketing. Viral marketing is based on the premise that consumers are active, eager to create experiences and engaged. Often by the nature of its design it leaves the consumers free to attach any

message to the pass along content, creating as such, a personalized and individual “consumer-experience” for the sender as well as receiver. Consequently, much of the power behind viral marketing lies in the consumers’ hands. Viral marketing turns thus the viral and co-creating consumer into a market force. However, this way of viewing consumers as a market force has been criticized by many (e.g see Cova & Dalli, 2009; Arvidsson, 2005). Cova and Dalli (2009) refer to the co-creating consumer as being double exploited by organizations. The researchers criticize and contest the view of consumers as producer seeing as producers receive revenue from the market, however the consumers do not. Instead they add value to brands and products by co-creating products they want, and at the same paying for the products themselves created (Cova & Dalli, 2009). According to Cova and Dalli (2009) organizations exploit this form of immaterial labor<sup>1</sup>. The same critique of exploitation of immaterial labor can be directed towards organizations use of viral marketing strategies. Viral marketing exploits already existing social networks by encouraging consumers to pass along product information to their friends (Leskovec, 2007). Consumers forward this type of interactive advertising for free whilst the organizations, or brands, behind them often reap the benefits of increased brand recall, revenue and brand reputation. The knowledge of the interactive consumer co-creating their own individual experiences helps set the background for understanding, and analyzing consumers reasons for sharing viral messages during the later parts of this thesis.

## **2.2 Viral marketing definition**

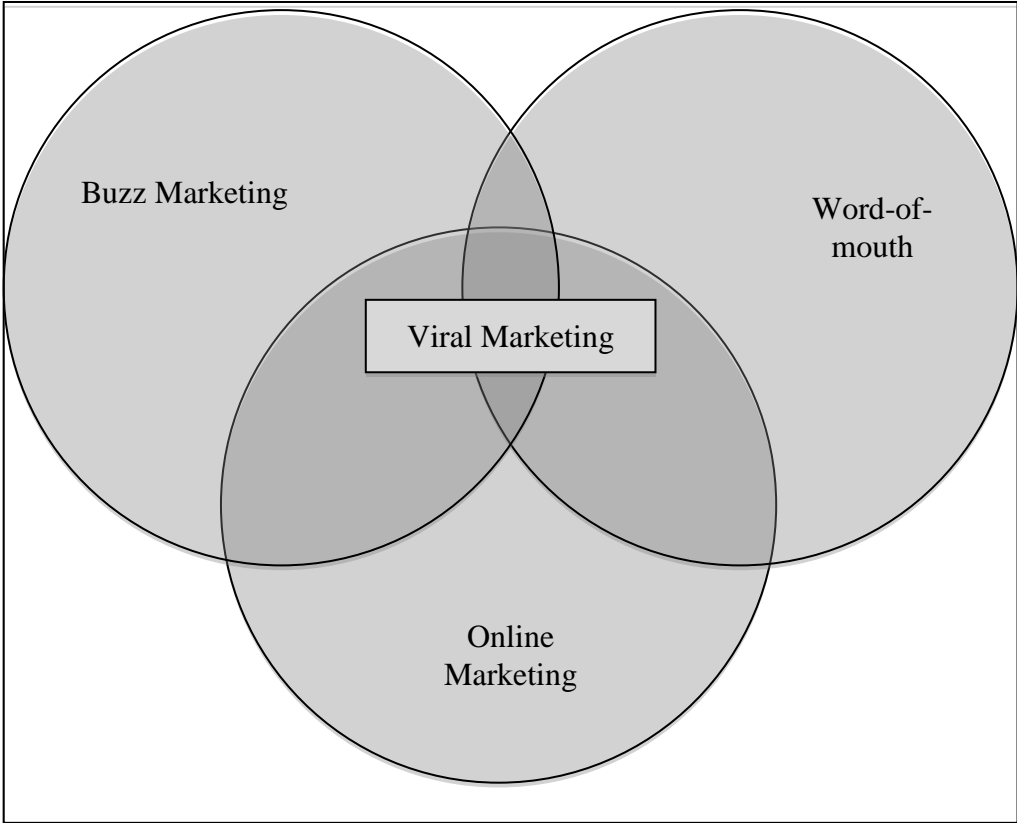
Viral marketing can be considered a fairly new phenomenon as the term is often linked to the rise of the Internet and the digital era. Viral marketing has been described as “the process of getting customers to pass along a company’s marketing message to friends, family and colleagues” (Laudon & Traver, 2001 in Dobele et al, 2007 p.291). Even though the term is quite new there exist disagreement about the terms definition. Phelps et al (2004) describes that some view it as a form of word-of-mouth (WOM) advertising where consumers tell other consumers about products or services. Others, however, think it differs from WOM-advertising in that “the value of the virus to the original consumer is directly related to the number of other it attracts” (Phelps et al, 2004 p.334). However, viral marketing is in the most literal sense marketing messages spread by peer-to-peer communication (e.g Rollins et al,

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<sup>1</sup> Lazzareto describes immaterial labor as the practices that produce either the immaterial content of commodities, or the social context of production itself (Lazzareto in Arvidsson, 2005 p. 241).

2014). As such, it is difficult to define viral marketing as a unique phenomenon within marketing communication; it has much similarities with online word-of-mouth marketing as well as buzz marketing, where the object is to create messages that generates buzz. Rollins et al (2014) has developed a model showing how viral marketing relates to the above-mentioned marketing strategies.

Figure 1: Key relationships in Viral Marketing



(Modified figure from Rollins et al, 2014 p. 4)

Buzz marketing is the practice of creating excitement through noteworthy marketing messages often through the use of unusual methods such as for example guerilla marketing (Emakina, 2007 in Rollins et al, 2014). Online marketing, on the other hand, is marketing campaigns disseminated through Internet and email, and can incorporate elements such as search engine optimization, banner-ads and email-marketing (American Marketing Association (AMA), n.d.). The last section of the figure is word-of-mouth marketing. According to American marketing association (n.d.) Word of mouth marketing occurs when consumers share information about marketing campaigns or products with their friends or peers. Accord-

ing to Kozinets et al (2010) the exchange of brand-related marketing messages is motivated by a desire to help others, to warn others about poor service and/ or communicate status (Kozinets et al, 2010 p.72). All of these marketing strategies, perhaps except online marketing which can be considered more of a conduit-strategy, attempt to influence consumer perception and behavior (Rollins et al, 2014). In our understanding viral marketing differs from the other marketing strategies in how it approaches the concept of peer-to-peer communication. Business-initiated viral marketing is a content *designed* to spread virally (through peer-to-peer communication) whereas in our understanding WOM and generating buzz can be considered more of the *result* of brand management, a marketing- or PR campaign. As the figure on the previous page displays, viral marketing encompasses and embraces elements from all of the mentioned marketing traditions, making it a hybrid of the different marketing strategies. It is worth noting that as a phenomenon viral marketing has similar traits with other areas within the field of strategic communication then marketing communications. Within public relations viral marketing as a strategy can be associated with the use of advocacy and opinion leaders to spread marketing messages trough for example networked communities, such as blogs (e.g Kozinets et al, 2010). However as we have decided to employ a consumer-perspective for this thesis, the field of marketing communications has more relevant research for our approach.

In this paper our interpretation of the phenomenon is linked to the term ‘viral marketing’ introduced by Knight in 1996, which refers to “the messages or content spreading within social networks like a virus” (Botha & Reyneke, 2013 p.160). Even though the different definitions of the term include many of the same features, we argue that this definition is better connected to message conduit present in this thesis; social networking- sites. Viruses spread while replicating itself into new environments by its hosts, the better the surroundings to the virus, the better the exposure (Welker, 2002). The same idea applies for viral messages; they are based on, and created to encourage individuals to share the message with their social network in order to increase number of views, and as such give the messages or content more impact (Wilson, 2000). According to Welker (2002) viral messages are often based on a number of certain principles:

- Prospects and customers of the idea are offered a technology platform providing a possibility to send a message to a majority of persons;
- There is an emotional or pecuniary incentive to participate. Ideally, niches of needs and market vacua are filled with funny ideas.

- The recipients are facing emotional or pecuniary incentives to contact a majority of further recipients; this induces a snowball effect and the message is spread virally and,
- The customer is activated as an “ambassador” of the piece of information, for instance promoting a product or a company (Welker, 2002, p. 3).

Viral marketing as such can be considered an organic form of marketing solely relying on consumer engagement to be successful. When it is executed right viral marketing can “drive sales, reduce marketing costs and reach media-jaded consumer segments (Dobele et al, 2007). As the foundation of the phenomenon is audience participation even start-ups and low-budget organizations can make good use of this type of marketing strategy to create buzz, strengthen their brand, reputation and often as a result their bottom-line. However, to make use of this type of marketing strategy the content have to reach the sharing threshold of the audience (Rollins et al, 2014). According to Dobele et al (2007) that implies that there has to be something “uniquely powerful” about the message, something that encourages consumers to pass it on. However, that means that for organizations to make the best use of viral marketing one have to gain deeper insights into consumers sharing threshold; into why they decide to share and forward certain marketing campaigns with their peers.

### **2.2.1 Motivation for pass-along behavior: the emotional trigger**

Previous research regarding viral marketing seems to be divided into two main areas; seeding strategies (often linked to theories on advocacy) for, as well as research into how viral messages spread (e.g Bampo et al, 2008; Liu-Thompkins, 2012) or the role of content in motivation for pass-along behavior (e.g Botha & Reyneke, 2013; Dobele et al, 20007; Phelps et al, 2004; Brown, Bhadury, & Pope, 2010; Berger & Milkman, 2012; Kietzmann & Canhoto, 2013; Ho & Dempsey, 2010). For the purpose of this thesis the role of content in pass-along motivation is the most interesting area to explore further, as we are interested in aspects consumers find significant when deciding to share viral messages. Phelps et al (2004) studied the behavior and motivations of those who receive and pass-along email messages. The result of this highly cited study concludes that the main motivations for the participants to pass-along messages was “because it was fun, because they enjoyed it, because it is entertaining, to help others and to have a good time” (Phelps et al, 2004 p.343). The study indicates that the respondents passed along email-messages because they triggered an emotional reaction. However, the study also revealed that the respondents themselves experienced positive emotions

by passing-on emails, such as happiness, excitement, helpfulness and/ or satisfaction by sharing online content (Phelps et al, 2004). This notion was also noted by Ho and Dempsey (2010). In their research on motivations to forward online content they identified a positive relationship between the feeling of altruism and online forwarding behavior. Their research study reveals that even though individuals passed along messages because they thought it would benefit the receiver, either by amusing or helping them, there seems to also lie a more “self-serving”-motive behind the act for many of the participants – the motivation for self-gratification. By forwarding messages they felt good them selves. Even though Phelps et al (2004) has a thorough study into the premise behind viral marketing, we argue that the research study is too descriptive leaving questions unanswered when it comes to individuals’ motivation for passing along some viral messages rather than others. Both Phelps et al’s (2004) and Ho and Dempsey’s (2010) studies describe how consumers feel positive emotions, as well as a form of altruism when forwarding messages to friends and family. However, the researchers never follow up on how this actually influences referral behavior, to what extent it affects the consumer’s decision-making process, and what that actually means for the success of viral marketing.

The connection between contents that spark, or trigger emotions, and the prospect of message pass-alongs to others in the same network, are detected and verified in several reason research studies about viral messages and consumers motivation (e.g Dobeles et al, 2007 about why pass on viral messages; Brown et Al on the impact of comedic violence on viral ads, 2010; Botha & Reyneke, 2013 on to share or not to share; Lee, Ham & Kim, 2013 on why people pass on viral online ads; Rollins et al, 2014 on their exploratory paper on techniques and implementation of viral marketing and Ho and Dempsey, 2010 on motivations to forward online content. The research studies conclude that for viral messages to be passed-along, and achieve virality, they have to incorporate certain elements that entertain, benefit or catch the consumers’ interest. Dobeles et al’s (2007) research is guided by the same notion. The study examined the effects of viral messages containing the six primary emotions; surprise, joy, sadness, anger, fear and disgust (Dobeles et al, 2007). Their findings conclude that the element of surprise, with a combination of at least another emotion, had a massive impact in order for the viral message to be effective (Dobeles et al, 2007). Further, gender as well as culture affected the reception of and intended forwarding of viral messages, making males more bias towards forwarding disgust and fear-based viral messages (Dobeles et al, 2007). Brown et al (2010) studied the impact of comedic violence on viral advertising effectiveness and their research showed that humorous ads that combine higher levels of violence intensity with more

severe consequences appeared to result in higher pass-along probability, and greater ad likeability. However, they have arguably the same limitations as Phelps et al's (2004) study when it comes to consumers' motivation. They specifically look at the role of emotions and content in viral messages, and which emotion portrayed in the content maximizes the chances of message-referral from consumers. However we miss deeper knowledge into how this is connected to what aspects consumers consider significant when passing along certain campaigns rather than others. The role of the content is arguably an extremely important element of the viral message, however to achieve success with viral marketing one have to gain deeper knowledge on *why* some content go viral over others. Even though emotions incorporated in viral messages secures a higher referral behavior it may not be enough to secure action, and thereby success (Maute & Dubé, 1999 in Dobele et al, 2007 p.293). It is only by knowing consumers' reasons for forwarding and sharing viral material, that we can influence that behavior (Phelps et al, 2004).

Lee et al (2013) researched which factors lead to consumers' behavior of passing along online video ads. Their findings conclude that subjective norm; the perceived social pressure to perform (or not to perform) a given behavior significantly influences the intention to pass along online video ads (Lee et al, 2013 p.8). Their research shows that it is not only the content of viral messages, or their emotional connection to sender and receiver that explains motivations behind referral behavior; the sense of a certain social pressure or "duty" to pass-along forwarded messages also play a significant part when it comes to the success of viral marketing. However, their research, as they themselves note, is based on testing of data providing them with models and probable correlations, and do not give any deeper insights as into how this actually affects the consumers decisions to share certain content (e.g Lee et al, 2013).

### **2.2.2 Theoretical reflections**

Most of the previous research into consumers motivation for passing along viral messages concludes that individuals forward marketing campaigns because they connect emotionally with the sender and receiver. However, these research studies only scratch the surface of the reasons behind referral behavior, and mostly focus on the role of the content in the messages. As such, with the knowledge gained by the previous studies as a conceptual backdraft and framework, we are inspired to continue the research into the phenomenon of viral marketing from a consumer perspective. By digging deeper into, and focusing on, the aspects consumer



find significant when sharing some marketing campaigns over others we want to contribute valuable knowledge to consumer research within the field of marketing communication. Further, the digital landscape has changed drastically since for example Phelps et al (2004) did their research into consumer motivation and perception, and most of the sharing and forwarding of viral messages is today done on different communication platforms. Previous studies have focused on the role of the content in the message, as well as the forwarding of viral messages in general, and as such by connecting the phenomenon to a concrete social context instead, such as social networking-sites, this study will hopefully gain a different perspective, and new insights into consumers' referral behavior. As Becker (2008) argues; phenomenon's are historically, geographically and contextually bound, and it is only by studying the same problem as others in the field, that one can gain new knowledge about a problem.

### **2.3 Interpersonal communication and social interaction**

To be able to achieve a deeper understanding of what aspects consumers find significant when deciding to forward certain viral messages, we want to apply theories of interpersonal communication and social interaction, as a vantage point and an analytical tool for this thesis. We have argued that to understand the phenomenon of viral marketing it is not enough to look at the role of the content in the message, but one also has to adopt theories that emphasize the consumers' role. Theories on interpersonal communication dig deeper into reasons for why people talk about certain things rather than others, and are as such a more helpful and valuable framework to understand the mechanism behind viral marketing. Theories on social interaction focus on social norms and roles that can affect individuals' identity construction; how they wish to portray them selves in everyday life through the use of for example interpersonal communication. Even though the perspectives are derived from psychology and social psychology, and as such can be viewed as contrasting perspectives, we have arguably chosen theories that highlight social interaction and interplay amongst individuals, and in that way arguably complement each other. The analytical perspectives proposed are also line with our epistemological and ontological standpoint, social constructionism where knowledge is considered something that is not naturally given but constructed in interaction with others. This will be further discussed later on in the chapter on methodology.

We decided to take a vantage point from Jonah Berger's (2014) research review "*Word of mouth and interpersonal communication: A review and directions for future research*". Berger (2014) argues that even though it is well known that word of mouth is frequent, im-

portant, and has a huge impact on consumer behavior, there is less known about the behavioral factor that drives people to share word of mouth. Berger (2014) suggests that word of mouth can be understood in terms of the five key functions that it serves for the senders; 1) Impression-management, 2) emotion regulation, 3) information acquisition, 4) social bonding and 5) persuasion. According to his research review these five entail different, but yet often coherent functions: Sharing word of mouth may present who people are or who they want to be creating opportunities for individuals to construct a desirable image of themselves. This form of *impression management* is according to Berger (2014) facilitated in three ways in interpersonal communication; through self-enhancement and identity signaling (share things to communicate certain identities). Sharing word of mouth can also be seen as an *emotional regulator* by facilitating social support, venting, sense making, reducing dissonance, taking vengeance and relive positive emotional experiences for the sender. A third function of word of mouth is to *acquire information* about certain topics, products or brands by seeking advice or resolving problems. Further, a fourth function of sharing word of mouth is to connect with others. Berger (2014) argues that it reinforces that we care about them and what is going on with their lives (Wetzer et al 2007 in Berger, 2014 p.595) through reinforcing shared views, reducing loneliness as well as social exclusion. As such, sharing word of mouth creates a common ground between recipients. The fifth key function of sharing word of mouth is to persuade and affect others (Berger, 2014).

The factors does not have to be exclusive from each other and motives for sharing certain material can, according to Berger (2014), consist of several behavioral factors; E.g a consumer may share a humorous marketing campaign with a friend to bond socially, but also to create an impression that the sender is funny, like a certain type of humor, or to manage and reinforce a certain identity.

The focus of this research study is different aspects consumers find significant when deciding to share content on social networking-sites. An important aspect of social networking sites is arguably how one chooses to present oneself to the public. In his seminal work *the presentation of self in everyday life* Goffman (1959) applies concepts from the theatrical world to explain social interaction and the presentation of self. Goffman (1959) describes how interpersonal communication can be used as a type of *performance* where individuals present themselves in an image they find desirable to others. Goffman (1959) describes how this type of *impression management*, the attempt to control how other individuals perceives ones self, is often exhibited through what he terms as *front stage* and *backstage* behavior. Front stage behavior is described as the constructed identity and front the individual deliberately put up

for the public. According to Goffman (1959) the front stage performance of an individual may be seen as an effort to maintain and embody certain standards, or norms, attributed by the social environment. The backstage however, is a place where the individual can relax as one does not have to construct a certain image, or maintain a certain role (Goffman, 1959). The *roles* individuals plays is not only a performance to meet certain social demands, but is by Goffman (1959) argued an implicit request to the audience that they believe the individual actually possesses the attributes presented before them. The role the individual play is often depicted as their true self. Goffman (1959) describes this act of playing a role as wearing, what Park argues, a *mask*. Park conceptualize that “the mask represents the conception we have formed of ourselves, the role we are striving to live up to, the mask is our truer self” (Park, 1950 in Goffman, 1959 p.30). The same thoughts can be attributed to the constructed front stage image.

However, Goffman’s (1959) theories for social interaction have been questioned for its applicability in recent times as computer-mediated communication has facilitated non-physical online environments on behalf of social interaction (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013). However, entering social networking sites individuals can create and tailor their own personal profiles by what they share, like and post of pictures. As such, the online environment can be seen as a stage, where the offline life can be considered as the backstage (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013 p.103). This notion of separate stages concerning social networking sites will be developed in the analysis.

## **2.4 Literature summary**

There has been a shift in the dominant logic of marketing from viewing consumers as passive recipients to active co-creators of value (e.g Vargo & Lusch, 2004; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). Viral marketing as a strategy has embraced the active consumer by turning them into a market force. As a marketing technique viral marketing replicates itself almost like a virus in social networks relying solely on peer-to-peer communication. Previous research into consumers' motivation and reason for passing-along viral messages concludes that individuals forward marketing messages because they connect emotionally. Phelps et Al (2004) showed that many senders motivation for passing along messages lies in the belief that the content would entertain, or be helpful to the receiver. However, at the same time the forwarding of the messages works as a self-gratification for the sender by often triggering positive emotions such as happiness, satisfaction and excitement (Phelps et al, 2004; Ho & Dempsey, 2010; Dobele et al, 2007).

We argue that previous literature presented in the thesis only scratches the surface on the consumer perspective, and to fully understand why consumers share viral marketing one has to apply other analytical perspectives that emphasize the role of the consumer, and not solely the content in viral messages. As such, we argue that theories on interpersonal communication and social interaction will be of value as analytical frameworks.

## 3. Methodology and research design

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As this research study is designed as an explorative study trying to gain deeper insights into what aspects the consumers find significant when sharing viral marketing, we argue that applying a qualitative approach will provide the best knowledge to fulfill the purpose of this study. Qualitative research consists of “a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible, and is highly useful when wanting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003 in Nylén, 2005 p.11). As the aim of this study is to interpret how consumers perceive the phenomenon of sharing viral marketing, a qualitative research approach was deemed suitable to obtain this knowledge. This chapter will firstly describe the epistemological and ontological framework that shape this thesis, before describing the method of choice, the selection of respondents, the analytical process, as well as the methodological implications and ethical reflections raised during the course of the research study.

### 3.1 Epistemological and ontological standpoints

This study will be directed from a social constructionist point-of-view. Social constructionism is influenced by thinkers such as Marx, Nietzsche, Dilthey, Mannheim, Scheler who all questioned the existence of a truly objective and rational knowledge (Alvesson & Skjöldberg, 2009; Berger & Luckmann, 1966). For social constructionist reality and knowledge is not something naturally given, but is something that is constructed based on individual’s social, cultural and historical background, and is thus contextually bound (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Alvesson & Skjöldberg, 2009). Hence, knowledge and reality is not an independent, naturally given truth, but is constructed in interaction with others. For this thesis the perspective entails that we view that how consumers perceive the use of viral messages as well as how they use, and creates social media profiles, as a socially constructed phenomenon. When using social-networking sites consumers are constructing knowledge about who they are, and how they perceive the world with what they decide to post and share with others. As such, we argue that social media in itself is viewed as a social construct, created and re-created by numerous individuals post, pictures and active participation. However, we contend that how one

perceives social-media use is contingent upon cultural context. As such, for our thesis we have decided to apply an interpretative hermeneutical perspective in relation to social constructionism. Hermeneutics argue that the meaning of a part can only be understood if it's related to the whole (Alvesson & Skjöldberg, 2009). This entails to that fully interpret the aspects the respondents find significant when deciding to forward online material, we have to view it in relation to the social, cultural and historical context from which it arises. This in line with the social constructionist-perspective. Further, we realize that by applying a social constructionist perspective we as researcher are a part of the constructed reality, and are as such co-creators of the social world while researching it. As we as researcher can be said to be members of the digital natives, use social networking-sites on a regular basis, we realize that our first hand knowledge cannot be entirely disconnected from the interpretation of the material (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014).

## **3.2 Qualitative interviews**

Qualitative research emphasizes the importance of the individual's interpretation and perceptions of one's social reality (Bryman, 2011). As our research is qualitative in nature exploring consumer's perception about a phenomenon, we decided to retrieve the empirical material through the use of interviews (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Gubrium, Holstein, Marvasti and McKinney (2012) argue that interviews are favorable when the researcher pursues a deeper knowledge and understanding of a phenomenon. The purpose of the qualitative interview is to try to understand the world from the interviewee's perspective; the respondents are able to tell their story in their own words, and to develop meaning and knowledge from their experience (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). We perceive that interviews have an explorative characteristic where knowledge is something created in the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014). As such, by using interviews we want to explore the aspects that are significant in the respondents' willingness to share viral marketing. The interviews were designed with a semi-open structure, based on a few pre-established topics (Bryman, 2011).

### **3.2.1 Selection of and criteria's for respondents**

Since this study focuses on the aspect consumers find significant when sharing viral messages within their social network, our main criteria for participating were that the respondents had to be familiar with, as well as active within one or more social medias on a regular basis. As

there are millions of users on social media-sites, to reduce it we decided to focus on members of the digital naturals. Young and Åkerström (in press) argues that the number of digital naturals will increase in the years to come to the point that being a digital natural will be the norm. As such, we argue that it seems significant to understand this category of individuals. According to Young and Åkerström (in press) the feature characteristics of this group entails; to have routine access and use of online platforms for news, conversation and information seeking. Further, digital naturals have a propensity to share information, opinions and emotions, as well as a digital aptitude. Lastly, they inhabit the ability to critically assess sources and content.

Due to the nature of this group we decided to focus on students as they have grown up with computer-mediated communication (CMC), and followed the establishment of social medias. And as such, can contribute with different perspectives on CMC and social networking-sites, than late adopters of the medias. A part from often being acknowledged as tech savvy, students were also chosen because they are on their way to embark on their career life, and will soon be of spending power (e.g Gardyn 2002 in Botha & Reyneke, 2013), and as such are arguably an attractive target group from a marketers perspective. From a theoretical perspective student members were chosen as there is little research known on their market-related behavior (e.g Bolton, Parasueaman, Hoefnagels, Migchels, Kabadavi, Gruber, Louriro & Solnet, 2013; Botha & Reyneke, 2013; see Martin & Turnely, 2004 and Noble et al, 2009 in Botha & Reyneke, 2013) and this study could contribute valuable insights to this marketing segment. The selection of respondents for this research study was done after three sets of criteria's;

- The respondents had to use social media on a regular basis
- To be qualified as a digital natural
- Currently being a student

Besides these set of criteria's we wanted an equal distribution between men and women. As such, our sampling can be characterized as a purposive sampling; a strategic sampling based on the wish to interview people who are relevant for the research questions (Bryman, 2011). It can also be mentioned that even though it was a strategic sampling based on certain criteria's, it had notions of convenience as we at first approached students attached to the Lund university (Bryman, 2011).

To recruit respondents we put messages on several social media sites such as different Facebook-groups addressing active students linked to Lund university, as well as visited university classes to present our research study. However, as the response and recruitment was miniscule, we realized that we had to change our way to approach students to be able to keep our time schedule. The snowball-method seemed like the most viable option, as the most natural starting points for us, social networking sites and the university, did not result in too many respondents. According to Patton (1990) snowball sampling is beneficial to studies where one needs to track down respondents who could share useful insights, and information, to the research purpose. By applying the snowball-method we were able to get in touch with respondents whom we might not have reached otherwise. By making use of an acquaintance as an initial gatekeeper we came in contact with respondents, who then in turn recommended and nominated new potential candidates for our study. After a few interviews we decided to add more gatekeepers to reach even more respondents. The shift in strategy gave us access to students connected to other institutions of higher education in Sweden. At the end of our sampling we had 8 male and 9 female respondents. They were all currently students on bachelor level attached to the Lund university, Linné University in Kalmar, Borås University, Fridhems Folk high School in Svalöv and the Sales and business School in Gothenburg. The respondents were characterized as digital naturals, growing up, and familiar with computer-mediated communication. That all respondents were students on bachelor level were not a deliberate choice, but more a result of the chosen gatekeepers.

Applying the snowball-method as our method for empirical data collection turned out to be slightly more limiting than firstly assumed, as we for the most part only got in touch with people that were closely connected to each other. These respondents shared extremely similar values; worldviews, interest and educational background and this gave us a too coherent respondent group. Even though that this is a qualitative research study, and the interview sample is not meant to be generalizable for a whole population, we wanted a bit more variation in our respondents group. Our purpose by expanding our sample technique was not to make the case more objectively true, but solely based on the fact that we wanted to see if this would contribute other perspectives to the phenomenon, and as such another depth to our analysis. As Berger and Luckmann (1966) argues that when it comes to social construction of reality one has to wonder if social construction is due to different societies. As such by expanding our search we could reach other “societies” with other types of knowledge, which could add an interesting facet to this research study. This forced us to look for more, as well as different, gatekeepers to be able to reach respondents we would not have otherwise reached had we con-



tinued on the path we set out to from the beginning. As we had mostly female respondents from the beginning, the switch in how we decided to start the snowball-method (through several gatekeepers instead of just one) gave us access to more males, making the division between the genders more equal. The switch from one gatekeeper to several gatekeepers can be criticized for orchestrating a more generalizable sample, however, we argue that this switch gave us access to a richer empirical material, as well as a deeper understanding of the phenomenon as there were several analytical categories that were present in all of the interviews regardless of their gender, educational background and geographical location. For us this finding indicated that our first impression of the material seemed to be an actual shared social construction amongst our respondents.

### **3.2.2 Interview proceedings**

The respondents were sent a welcoming messages 24 hours in advance to inform them about the topic for the interview, as well as the room where the interviews were being held. This was done strategically to minimize the risk of dropouts, as we initially had problems recruiting participants. Almost all of the interviews were conducted on the grounds of Lund University, either in Lund or their Campus Helsingborg division. Some of the interviews were conducted through the use of Skype due to different geographical locations between the researchers and respondents. Even though it created a distance with the respondents, it seemed to make them more relaxed, as they did not have two researchers looking at them while debating their own answers. According to Kvale and Brinkmann (2014) there is always an asymmetry in power when conducting interviews; but it seemed like the use of technological mediated communication helped balance it out. The respondents appeared to use more time to think through their answers, which seems to be reflected in the length of the interviews, as the ones conducted over Skype were generally longer than the ones conducted in private rooms. As Skype is a medium where you can talk to the other person through the computer, it gave us the opportunity to record the interview and follow up on answers in real time, just like we did with the respondents we met face to face. Since the respondents were members of the digital naturals, Skype were a program that our respondents were both accustomed to and comfortable with using (Young & Åkerström, in press). As such, we argue that the use of Skype-interviews did not inhibit our empirical data. Taylor and Lindlof (2011) argue that there are benefits in interviews that are not done face-to-face; other types of interview-styles might help the respondent to talk more freely about intimate thoughts. All interviewees were asked

before the interview if we could record them as recording is an essential part of capturing, and saving the information (Gubrium et al, 2012). All of the respondents were positive to this matter. The interviews were transcribed in their full length and included in the analysis. Interviews were conducted until a theoretical saturation was reached, indicating that there were no new perspectives added (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014). In total a series of 17 interviews were conducted with an approximately duration between 30 and 45 minutes.

Our intention was that the interviews were going to be conducted with both researchers present. However, this turned out to be more difficult than initially expected due to logistical reasons. Even though both researchers conducted most of the interviews, eight interviews in total were conducted with one of the researchers present. The one who were not participating therefore had to transcribe that interview to be familiar with the material.

The topics in the interview guide were inspired by previous research on viral marketing, and worked as a basis for an exploratory interview. The topics as such included questions on content, sender and reasons for forwarding of viral material (see interview-guide in appendix). We were aware that conducting interviews may not be a linear process, and that we might have to go back and forth between our questions to follow up answers, and issues raised by the respondents (e.g Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014). As such we tried to keep the interview-guide as open and flexible as possible, to give us this opportunity. The interview guide developed over the course of the interviews, both in questions and structure, as new issues were raised and as we reflected on previous interviews (Gubrium et al, 2012).

As with any research study there are certain ethical aspects that need to be addressed. The first thing we were concerned with was making sure that the respondents gave their informed consent before participating in the research study. This entailed that they were fully informed about the nature of our study, how we were going to apply the empirical data, as well as who is going to see it. Secondly, we invited the respondents to read through their transcribed interviews to make sure that their answers were correctly transcribed, and as such correctly interpreted by us (e.g Bryman, 2011; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014). As the respondents, on their own accord, shared extremely intimate details from their personal life, we felt that it was important that the respondents could approve the information transcribed from the interviews. Only two of the respondents asked to read the transcripts, but neither asked for any changes. As the respondents disclosed intimate matters during our interviews we decided to keep the respondents anonymous by giving them fictional names (Gubrium et al, 2012).

### 3.4 Analytical process

Our analytical process has been inspired by the framework for data analysis of qualitative data in consumer research, as proposed by Spiggle (1994). The framework consists of categorization, abstraction, comparison, dimensionalization, and iteration. According to Spiggle (1994) these cannot be considered ordered and sequential activities, neither stages in a research process, but operations that researchers use in the various stages of the analysis (Spiggle, 1994 p.493). By addressing and discussion each operations separately our hope is that the reader will see how we systematically have arrived at our interpretations of the empirical material, and that it provides more information as to judge the epistemic warrant of the research product (e.g Hunt, 1989 in Spiggle, 1994 p.497).

Firstly, to ease the analytical process all of our interviews were transcribed at the first available moment (Eksell & Thelander, 2014; Bryman, 2011). This provided us with the possibility to set up structure of all the collected data, by allowing us to categorize and code the different units of text. The coding-categories emerged as a combination of inductive and deductive processes, known as an abductive process (Eksell & Thelander, 2014). This entails that preliminary categories were constructed on the basis of the purpose of the thesis, research questions and theoretical framework. However, they were considered both flexible and open as new coding categories emerged from the empirical material (e.g Eksell & Thelander, 2014 p.203). The process of abstraction is characterized as recognizing that elements in the interview transcriptions is an empirical indicator of a more general construct, and makes the researcher look beyond the identification of patterns in the individual transcribed interviews Spiggle, 1994 p.493). Through abstraction and comparison we explored the difference and similarities within the empirical material; identifying larger conceptual classes of data as argued by Spiggle (1994). By implementing this shift from vertical (focus on single interviews) to horizontal analysis (reading across the interviews), we found larger intelligible topics present in the material. On the basis of this process, the analytical topics presented in the analysis were formed, and translated into English. These are also the foundation for the titles in the analysis chapter; *to inform others, confirmation from peers, social bonding, source transparency, conflict and multiple audience problem, public versus private sphere* as well as *identity signaling and impression management*. The comparison of individual patterns and creation of larger analytical categories allowed us to see the depth and different dimensions in our material. Through the process of iteration; applying the hermeneutical perspective of moving back and forth between the single parts of the text and the whole context (Spiggle, 1994), we con-

structed a framework of explanation to reveal, and explain the underlying structures that were found in the material. The aim of the analysis has been to explore and generate new insights about the phenomenon, and as such not produce quantifiable material.

As our study is directed by a social constructionist-perspective, this will also guide how we present the empirical material in the analysis (e.g Nylén, 2005; Eksell & Thelander, 2014). This study aims at generating knowledge of the respondents constructed reality, how they perceive a phenomenon. As such we have decided to adopt what Nylén (2005) describes as the coercive case- description. The ambition of this way of presenting empirical data is to introduce knowledge about the studied world through the use of quotes, and thorough descriptions of the empirical material (Nylén, 2005 p.70). As such our aim is to show the totality and depth of the empirical material, and its basis for our interpretations. It is our hope that this will also make it easier for the reader to see the totality of, and take part in the empirical material (e.g Eksell & Thelander, 2014).

We would also like to address that we acknowledge the issues that arise when translating interviews from their original language into another. In this particular case, from Swedish to English. We are aware that translating an interview always entails changing the original message (Cassinger, 2014). As Cassinger (2014) argues, the translators own norms, values and worldviews will help shape the translations and as such cannot be disconnected from it. As such, we are aware that our hermeneutical understanding may shape the results of the interview, as we as researcher are part of the social world that is under research (Alvesson, 2011). Further, we realize that when translating meanings and phrases from Swedish, meanings can be lost or diminished. We have tried to minimize this issue by asking follow up questions to verify that our interpretation of the respondents answers is interpreted as correctly as possible, so that we can apply English phrases that give the same connotations as the original ones.

## 4. Analysis

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Viral marketing is based on consumers' agreement to act as a market force, distributing advertising or marketing messages online through acts of interpersonal communication; sharing and forwarding to, and with their social network. But why do certain marketing campaigns get shared rather than others? And, what aspects do the consumer find significant when deciding to share viral messages? These questions will be discussed in this section. The analysis will be divided into two sections guided by the research questions structuring this thesis. The first section will be of a more descriptive nature focusing on why consumers choose to share certain marketing campaigns, whilst the last section will be dedicated to discussing what aspects the consumers find significant when deciding to share marketing content online. The analytical categories presented below emerged during the analytical process. They are not presented in sequential order as they were revealed during the interviews, but rather how much the respondents emphasized their significance in their willingness to share viral marketing. As such, the more general categories are presented and discussed first.

Even though social media-sites as Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn and Youtube were discussed by some of the respondents, the main focus for all of the respondents when discussing social networks were on Facebook. As such the main focus of our analysis will be of sharing and forwarding marketing messages on Facebook. When going through the material we noticed that there was no outspoken difference between male and females, and as such gender will not play an important part in our analysis.

### **4.1 Why do people share certain viral messages?**

When asked why share some viral campaigns rather than others it became evident that the reason is contextually bound. Why some campaigns got shared by the respondents and others did not is according to our findings related to the purpose of the share. The respondents stated that there were three main purposes that governed their decision; to inform others, to receive confirmation from their peers and to bond socially. These will be discussed independently.

#### 4.1.1 To inform others

*“Sharing material may seem to be motivated by the thought that it may make a difference. It may seem naïve, but often it is that I want people to see something that they may not have seen before, or that I think it is important for others to see this. So that they might go “Oh so there are others sides to this”, or “this is also a way to do things” ” (Ylva).*

As the quote above displays, one of the reasons why the respondents shared certain marketing campaigns was based on the need to inform others in their social networks. Not only about whom the respondents are as individuals; their interest and what they value in life, but also to guide their peers into rethink their previous opinions. To inform their social network was described as a possibility to help others who may not have the same knowledge, or insight as him- or herself. Informing their peers was not just perceived as to present new and interesting products in the form of word of mouth recommendations, but the respondents mentioned that it was also to inform them about topics regarding ideological issues such as environmental preservation. The respondents hoped that them sharing certain campaigns helped creating a difference for those who might read it. During the interviews it became clear that another way to view their willingness to share was that it could be argued that it is grounded in a feeling of obligation, or duty for the respondents. The interviewees share material because they feel that if they do not share it no one else will, and the information will be lost for many in their social network. However, this feeling of duty seems not to be bound in a sense of altruism to help organizations or brands spread their messages. Sofia exclaimed that there is always an ulterior motive behind sharing content; much of the content that respondents shared involved convincing others about their own values and worldview.

We interpret that the purpose to share can be regarded as not only to inform others about different perspectives, but to *persuade* their peers that their own interpretation and perspective is the more correct way of viewing things. Sofia argued that she experienced that there are so many that are misinformed, and as such felt an obligation to share the *right perception* of things. In his review Berger (2014) describes that persuading others is one of the fifth main functions of sharing word of mouth. In extent the act of sharing to inform can be seen as more self-serving than an act of altruism, as it helps assert the individuals own values above that of others. According to research sharing ones own personal thoughts and feelings activate the same brain regions that respond to things like food, money and seeing attractive

people (Berger, 2014 p.597). This notion helps explain the second purpose for sharing material amongst the respondents; to receive confirmation from peers.

#### **4.1.2 Confirmation from peers**

*“When I share something publicly I do not expect any response, but it would be nice to receive some type of feedback. If you share something of course you want people to see it. So you do have certain expectations”*  
(Stina).

When asked if and what kind of response they expected on the content they shared, the respondents stated that they did not really have any high expectations of feedback from their social network. However, when the question was repeated in respect to examples provided by the respondents during the interview, they revealed that they hoped for some likes or comments from peers, a confirmation of sorts that they had shared something of interest. During our interviews the respondents reported that when they shared content, which generated positive response from their social network, they started to think that this could have made a difference for someone. That they perhaps had started changing their mind-sets. The respondents reported that they experienced that the confirmation from their peers worked as a “pat-on-the-shoulder”, providing them with a sense of accomplishment. In the sense that they had contributed with something.

As with Phelps et al’s (2004) research our empirical findings confirm that sharing content with others often generates positive emotions for the sender. They share certain content not only to receive confirmation from peers, but also to experience self-gratification. We interpret these statements in accordance with the respondents wish to share something new and exceptional. The respondents stated that they were more interested in sharing viral messages that had not been shared numerous times. Hence, material that were at risk of being missed by their peers. If a campaign all ready had been shared in their news feed by others, they were less likely to share that same viral message. These notions is in line with previous research on viral marketing; Dobeles et al (2007) argued that for viral marketing to work there must be something uniquely powerful about the message, something that encourages would-be advocates to pass it on (Dobeles et al, 2007 p.292). Tommy argued that if he was going to share a viral message, it had to be considered newsworthy. The respondents described a problem with

information overload on Facebook, and they were apprehensive to add more information to an arena that already suffered of overload. The respondents argued that if the message could not be considered newsworthy enough for them to share, their social network would probably see it anyway because the content were already shared on Facebook. We interpret their focus on innovative campaigns in conjunction with the respondents focus on information overload on Facebook. If the respondents shared material that had been share numerous times before, there is a risk that the feedback, or confirmation from peers, can be withheld as the content probably has been viewed many times before. The respondents' focus on sharing innovative and new campaigns can also be seen as a form of self-enhancement, they want to be perceived positively by sharing unique material (Berger, 2014). Ylva explained the desire for confirmation from peers,

*“Of course I expect that people will think that I am smart, or that I have good values and intentions. It feels a bit ridiculous, but that is actually how it is. I want people to think that I am smart, and that I am a cool person”.*

Sharing certain campaigns can be seen as elements in constructing a desired image amongst the respondents. This will be highlighted in the second section of the analysis.

### **4.1.3 Social bonding**

When asked who they shared viral material with the respondents answered that they shared mostly with friends, fellow students and perhaps family. The respondents argued that the reason behind sharing certain campaigns was because the respondents thought that their friends would enjoy it, or because it was some interest they had in common. According to Berger (2014) a key function of word of mouth is to connect with others, and to increase social bonds. The respondents argued that the reason as to why they have social networking-site is to maintain social inclusion. As Glenn explained, *“that is basically the reason as to why I got Facebook in the first place back in the days. To be able to have contact with friends, and that is what I am trying to do”*. When forwarding campaigns to individuals they are close to the respondents made an unconscious screening process; certain campaigns got shared over others because they were deemed more relevant. By sharing material that was relevant for their friendship the respondents stated that it did reinforce a sense of social belonging. This is in accordance with theories on interpersonal communication. Berger (2014) argue that sharing



word of mouth reinforces shared views and group membership, and reduces loneliness by providing a sense of social inclusion.

However, put the purpose of the share aside, all of the campaigns the respondents had shared, or could be willing to share was something they connected with emotionally, *"if I was to share something it would be something really close to my heart. Or, something that concerns me, or someone in close proximity to me"* (Mattias). Here our empirical findings confirm previous research on the role of content in viral marketing. In their research on why pass on viral messages Dobeles et al (2007) discovered that if the message was emotional enough to have an impact, the recipients were more likely to pass it along to friends and family (Dobeles et al, 2007 p.292). An emotional connection does not only mean serious material that challenges social consciousness and fears, but also material pertaining humor or surprises. Our findings on why certain viral messages get shared rather than others is in line with the previous research mentioned on motivational factors affecting forwarding behavior (see Dobeles et al, 2007; Phelps et al, 2004; Botha & Reyneke, 2013). Even though our findings confirm previous research on why some viral marketing campaigns get shared over others, our analysis shows that why the respondents shared some viral material, was related to the purpose of the share, and differed *contextually*. From a marketer's perspective these findings make it challenging for organizations to control their marketing campaigns. They can be shared in other contexts, and with different purposes than they were originally designed for.

## **4.2 Aspects of significance when sharing content online**

During the interview-session all of the respondents stated that they were active users of social networking-sites; they were constantly logged in, keeping updated several times a day, but they describe themselves as quite passive users. This was unexpected as members of digital natives have a propensity to share information, opinions and emotions online (Young & Åkaerström, in press). Even though the respondents were members of digital natives their propensity to share content online was restricted by certain aspects that shaped their willingness to share viral messages. When exploring what aspects consumers find significant when deciding to share marketing messages with their peers, there were three main aspects that were highlighted by the respondents. Firstly, the multiple audience problem, conflict and source transparency. Secondly, public versus private sphere; who is the material relevant for, and thirdly, identity signaling and impression management. The analytical categories will be discussed independently, however they cannot be considered exclusive of one another as they

are highly interconnected, and shape each other. When reading the analysis it will be evident that the category of identity signaling encompasses, and is regarded important regarding all aspects the consumers find significant when sharing content online. And as such, it cannot be entirely disconnected from the other analytical categories. However, we choose to further and evolve the identity-aspect as an individual category as we argue that, from a hermeneutical perspective, it contributes a larger context to the aforementioned parts of the analysis. As such, the discussion entailing identity signaling can be viewed as a sort of meta-analysis, analysis of the previous analytical discussions.

#### **4.2.1 Multiple audience problem, conflict and source transparency**

When asked what type of viral material the respondents had, or would be willing to share it was evident that they were quite restrictive with what they would share online. However, *if* they were to share something the source of the message was an important decider in their willingness to share. The respondents argued that if they were to share content the source of the message had to be *transparent*. By source transparency the respondents argued that it was inherent for them that not only the creator of the advertisement was easily identified, but also the core-values of the organization, or brand, from which the message originated. If they were uncertain of the source of the message, the respondents reported that they often did research of the brand or organization before deciding to share the message. As such, the few messages that passed the sharing threshold for the respondents were content they could defend sharing, as they knew the source of the message and what values it represented. Even though the respondents argued that they would rather share marketing messages that were new, innovative and at risk of being overseen by their peers, our findings indicate that their willingness to share new messages has limitations. In our interpretation the respondents are more willing to share viral messages from brands and organization they already are acquainted with, than new and perhaps unknown organizations. Even though viral marketing is described as an ideal strategy for start-ups and low budget organizations (e.g Rollins et al, 2014), our findings indicate that it can be difficult for their messages to be shared online, and achieve virality, if their brand is less known. As such, our empirical findings support the theory postulated by Rollins et al (2014); that marketing messages will only go viral or be spread if the consumers trust and like a company.

According to the respondent Martina what one share on social media acts as personal marketing of oneself, and the content that is shared helps shape the impression one gets of

that individual. That is why the respondents answered they found it easier, if they were going to share something, to share marketing messages from for example volunteer organizations. When sharing something from organizations that aims to help others, the respondents stated that they cannot be criticized for it, as it could be considered more ethically sound than promoting “just a commercial product”, as explained by Sofia. Online content created by volunteer organizations was the only category (see interview guide) that all of the interviewees could consider sharing with their social networks. A marketing message promoting a higher, selfless cause is not something that could be easily critiqued by others and, according to Mattias, is as such simply the easiest message to share with others publicly. Tommy explained during his interview that,

*“(...) I would find it easier to back up sharing that type of message, because they represent something neutral and good, and it does not take a stand towards or against something. It just kinda works for everybody”.*

One challenge with social networking sites is what is referred to as the multiple audience problem (Leary, 1995 in Attril, 2015; Rui & Stefanone, 2013). With the rise of web 2.0 cultural and temporal boundaries are broken, and individuals can have multiple social spheres present in their social networks at the same time; friends, colleague’s, family who “all have different expectations about the individuals ideal self” (Rui & Stefanone, 2013 p.112). According to Rui and Stefanone (2013) one way to circumvent the difficulties the multiple audience problem can convey is by sharing neutral posts that can act as a common ground for all of the different social spheres. The multiple audience problem was highlighted by the respondents as an aspect they considered significant when sharing online content; Stina reported “*you have so many different types of people on Facebook, and it just does not feels that private*”. The respondents argued that one would not post just about anything on their profile, because they could never really know who actually sees it, how they would interpret, or react to it. Due to the multiple audience problem they chose to rather be more restrictive with what they shared publicly. This notion will be highlighted in the next section on different sharing-spheres.

According to literature on self-presentation online this type of considerations before deciding to share material can be explained, and attributed, to a form of strategic acquisitive - and protective self-presentation. According to Goffman (1959) the goal of self-presentation is to make others accept the impression that is presented before them. To reach this goal indi-

viduals have to adjust to their social roles to their audience (Rui & Stefanone, 2013) to which in the online sphere of social networking sites can be difficult. The purpose of acquisitive self-presentation is creating desirable images of themselves to seek approval of their peers, whilst to protect their self-presentation by making neutral expressions, conformity and modest self-disclosure as to avoid disapproval from the audience (Rui & Stefanone, 2013). Even though these two forms of self-presentation strategies usually operate exclusive from each other in the literature, our respondents combined these two strategies when deciding to share something online. The respondents could with ease share, or be more willing to share material that constructed their online image in a positive manner and appeal to more than just one of the social spheres in their network. However, what type of content that actually constructed a positive online image was a matter of subjective opinion amongst the respondents; for some of the respondents it was the sharing of content that represented clear-cut political views, confirming their values and beliefs for everyone, for others it was sharing more neutral marketing material pertaining elements of for example humor or surprise.

When asked why they did not share certain viral messages it was evident that their demand of source transparency was rooted in a reservation towards creating debates online. As Martina explained that;

*“It takes courage to share. I do not know what type of associations the content raises, and it always ends in discussions. When someone shares something there is always someone that criticizes that share. And I do not want to sit behind my computer and take the online abuse (...) that’s why I do not share that much”.*

The respondents reported being scared of conflicts on social media because everything that is shared, posted and written there can be interpreted in a hundred different ways. As such, the image they try to create for them selves can easily be misconstrued by others. According to Bullingham and Vasconcelos (2013) if one do not follow the social conventions online, the individual can risk losing face, which means that they fail to project the image that they want to create for themselves. The role the respondents strived to uphold online would risk being put into questioning by their audience (e.g Goffman, 1959). In our interpretation this notion of self-protection makes it increasingly harder for the respondents to share viral messages in fear of misconceptions. The respondents exclaimed that sharing marketing messages online were the equivalent of entering a debate. If they were not prepared, and could defend what they shared, they could risk losing face. As such they argued that if they were to share something,

they had to know almost all of the aspects concerning the campaign, the organization or brand.

When being asked if the content were created by a commercial organization were an aspect they considered before sharing material the answers amongst the respondents varied. For some of the respondent it was more important that the content interested them, and that they could justify sharing material from that organization or brand. However, others expressed extreme negative feelings towards sharing marketing campaigns for commercial organizations. They stated that they did not want to be another wheel in their machinery, or as claimed by Lisa “*another capitalist baby*”. According to the respondents they were highly critical of what they shared; sorting and filtering out the messages that did not suit them, and as such could not be used as passive agents doing immaterial labor for organizations (see Cova & Dalli, 2009). They did not want to be used as a market force promoting commercial products that did not match their ideal self that they tried to construct, and maintain, online.

Even though the respondents conveyed negative feelings towards sharing commercial marketing message, we interpret that it is not actually that the viral material is created by a commercial agent, which was the main concern for the respondents. As Tommy explained during his interview:

*“If it is a business or commercial agent that is behind the marketing message, one can accept that, as long as one is made aware of it”.*

We argue that the important aspect for the respondents was that they wanted to know *what* they shared. By knowing the facets of the content of message the respondents did not risk their own persona. They know what they shared, and could justify it if criticized. In that way they did not risk feeling exploited by a “hidden puppet master” promoting ideals or causes them selves did not believe in. As the respondents argued throughout the interviews; if they knew what the brand, or organization, that created the campaign represented, and their ideals matched their own constructed online image, then they were more likely or more willing to share the marketing campaign. The demand for transparent communication in marketing messages can be interpreted as an extension of the increasing demand of transparency of information and accountability bestowed upon organizations in today’s postmodern market place (see e.g Schnackenberg, 2009).

#### 4.2.2 Public versus private sphere

*“I do not really think it is that cool to see what everyone else share, so why would they be interested in what I share, when it does not even affect them or is something they can relate to.” (Maria)*

When asked if and when the respondent shared viral material it became clear that the act of sharing content online was only associated with sharing material publicly through their online profile. However, when asked whom they shared viral material with the respondent answered in private messages with their friends, classmates or in groups. Unmistakably, the respondents had divided their social network into different “sharing-spheres”, public and private. The respondents argued that *relevancy* was significant when deciding to share something with the different social spheres. The respondents stated that they considered whom the material was relevant for, and who would actually want to see it before deciding to share content online. The respondents expressed that they found it to be disrespectful to share private jokes or internal topics in the public sphere. It was not considered disrespectful out of regard of whom the message actually was intended for, but it was considered disrespectful for the other individuals on their social network-site. Even though social media sites, such as Facebook, is a tool used to keep up-to-date with what their social network finds interesting, seeing people sharing posts such as viral messages in the news feed was for the respondents considered a disturbing, and interruptive element, in their daily scrolling. Pontus reported that he was *“sincerely disturbed by people who shared content online all the time”* and that they were considered a nuisance. That was also why the respondents chose to not share, or be restrictive with what was shared in the public sphere.

However, the respondents reported that one important facet for their decision to share something was the social *norm* that members of the digital natives should not share material actively on social networking-sites. According to the respondents it was an established fact that sharing too much on social media was considered abnormal, a violation against the accepted rule of social conduct on social networking sites. The respondents viewed the people who shared too much in a different light than others. The exception to this rule however, was adults, or elderly, who had in recent years adopted an online persona. According to Glenn,

*“They are not accustomed to social networking sites as Facebook, how to use them and how to act on them. Their understanding is different than ours (...) that’s why I find it okay if they share something that I normally wouldn’t”.*

An explanation of this can be drawn from Goffman’s (1959) performance theory. He analyzes how interpersonal communication can be seen as a performance where the object is to project a desired image to the public. Goffman (1959) argues that the performance the individual projects represent abstract claims put upon the audience. And as such, constitutes one way that a performance is socialized and molded to fit into the understanding and expectations of the society in which it is presented (Goffman, 1959 p.44). This entails that when the individual presents himself or herself to others, the image they project, the role they exhibit, will tend to incorporate the official values of the society (Goffman, 1959 p.45). To draw on Goffman’s (1959) notion, the self-presentation given by the respondents publicly on social networking sites is not so much a projection of them, but can be seen as to represent the values accredited by the surrounding society, to their online and offline selves. In our study this can be argued as the social norm of passivity on social media bestowed upon members of digital natives. As such, the self-presentation can be seen shaped by the social and cultural context in which it presents. In our understanding this indicates that if and how sharing viral marketing is perceived can vary from culture to culture. Lee et al (2013) research noted that the attitude towards a given behavior, the subjective norm, could be seen as the strongest determinant of the intention to perform that behavior (Lee et al, 2013 p.10). As such our findings is in line with Lee et al’s (2013) research on factors that influence consumer pass-along behavioral intent. The act of sharing too much on Facebook was considered as a lack of criticism by our respondents, and was deemed inappropriate for their social group. Violating this socially constructed rule did not only change the way the respondents viewed others, but it was reported that it could have social consequences; being blocked or even removed from their social network.

The risk of being excluded socially was not the only aspect the respondents found significant when deciding to share content, many of the respondents expressed concern about the difficulty navigating the boundary between the private and the public sphere. As previously argued, the respondents stated that they experience that Facebook, and other social-networking sites, has grown out of proportion, and that they do not have control over who actually sees the things they share anymore. Martina explained that,

*“I just find it creepy posting something that I cannot control, especially in form of who sees what. I am afraid that it will go too far (...) What one posts online creates an image of who you are”.*

In our interpretation this sense of lack of control has made the respondents apprehensive with what they share where. As such, the respondent’s decision to have separate sharing spheres online can be interpreted as way to regain a small sense of control over the multiple audience problem. By dividing up their Facebook into different spheres made them able to project the desired image they wanted publicly. Aresta, Pedro, Santos, and Moreira (2015) argues that in the online environment information can be stored indefinitely, replicated and transformed by other users in the system and individuals should be aware of this. They argue that individuals may resort to different strategies to avoid the collision of different worlds and the consequent emergence of socially awkward situations (Aresta et al, 20115 p. 75), one of these strategies entails being restrictive with what one shares with the online audience by using multiple or faceted identities. In our findings the use of faceted self-presentations was present amongst the respondents. They shared only certain aspects of themselves online, and how and what the respondents wanted to communicate differed from sphere to sphere, from context to context. The different sharing spheres on social networking-sites facilitate the possibility for faceted self-presentations. As discussed in the theoretical framework the online sphere can be considered a stage where the individual is given the opportunity to create and edit a desirable image of them selves by controlling what they share, post and like. Bullingham and Vasconcelos (2013) argues that when individuals share in the online public sphere they exhibit what Goffman (1959) terms front stage behavior; they are more conscious of being observed by others, and as such will perform accordingly to certain set of social norms. However, what the individuals share and how they behave in the back stage will be completely different as no performance is necessary (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013). This is increasingly true for the respondents in this study. The respondents stated that when sharing material with close friends they did not have any reservations of what sort of material they should or should not share. All of the respondents answered it was easier to share content with friends via the private Facebook application messenger, because their friends already knew who they were and they did not have to project a certain image of themselves. This indicates that back stage behavior is not only reserved to their offline life. Paradoxically the online messenger application is also included in this notion of private, back stage behavior. Even though the application is a part of the social networking-site, as it allowed them to distinguish



whom they shared content with, they could share almost anything through the online application. The respondents reported being less critical about how the message could be interpreted because in the end, they did not share for themselves, but they shared content they thought would entertain the recipient.

From a hermeneutical perspective our findings fits into the pattern of change in the nature of marketing communication as described by Dahlén et al (2010). According to the researchers the post-modern marketplace is not only characterized by fragmented markets and media, but with a dynamic and changing communicational context. The one-to-many model of communication is moving through a one-to-one phase and might eventually become one-and-one (Dahlén et al, 2010). Our findings indicate that consumers are becoming increasingly tired of interruptive, mass communicated marketing campaigns, preferring one-to-one communicated campaigns (see Jaffe 2005 cited in Dahlén, et al, 2010). The respondents described it was rare that they forwarded marketing campaigns that were posted in their news feed on social media-sites, they mostly scrolled past or got annoyed by it. Glenn argued that the only time he would consider looking at ads or marketing campaigns on Facebook was *“if a close friend or family directed it towards my. If it is a good friend that links something to me (...) it is only then I would consider looking at it”*. For the respondents the most important factor was the person it came from, as it often *“created an event and a thing between us friends”* as, Erik explained. The co-creation experience between the respondent and the receiver made the forwarding and receiving of marketing campaign more accepted, and unique for the respondents. Paradoxically, the respondents expressed their negative feelings towards sharing viral material as they felt they performed a sort of immaterial labor. The respondents argued that they knew that no matter what the content of the message was; the bottom line was that it was to promote and strengthen an organization or brand. Furthermore, if they were to consider sharing content online, the content had to represent their identity. Tommy argued, *“it has to be something that I can justify sharing, and without feeling like a spokesperson for the business per se”*

However, when dividing their online presence into a front stage and a backstage arguing that what they post is not relevant for everyone, what they actually are doing is performing a form of micromarketing. Micromarketing is characterized as a marketing strategy focusing on a highly targeted group of consumers (Dahlén et al, 2010). So even though the respondents have objected to being a concrete market force for organizations, seeing as they were less critical with what they shared in their private spheres, they are arguably still operate, even though subconsciously, as a market force spreading marketing messages. By sending messag-

es they thought the receiver might enjoy, the respondents were in fact co-creating “consumer experiences” for the receivers of the message (e.g Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). By tailoring the message to the receiver, the respondents were arguably creating value for both the consumer (the recipient) and the organization or brand behind the message: For the recipient by constructing a personalized experience through social bonding, but also value for the brand and organization that benefits from the social bonding. Dahlén et al (2010) describes that successful brands connect emotionally with their consumers. The emotional connection help develop meaningful symbiotic relationship between the consumers, and in the end with the brand (Dahlén, 2010). Thus by subconsciously performing micromarketing, we argue that the respondents subconsciously helped strengthen brand recall and essentially, brand equity.

#### **4.2.3 Identity signaling and impression management**

*“It is probably because I want to convey what type of person I am. The Facebook-page shows how I am as a person, and as such I want it to display who I am to a larger group” (Sofia).*

One aspect that the respondents described as the increasingly significant was that the viral material they shared matched their own values and worldview. As Tommy so vividly stated; it is the respondents’ values that govern what type of content that gets shared *“It is what governs what makes it through the filter and what gets filtered out”*. The respondents argued that even though they were restrictive with what they published, paradoxically they could share almost anything as long as it matched their own values. The important aspect was that the content was something they could justify sharing because it represented something essential about them. However the material did not only have to match their personal values, but it had to represent the respondents *identity*.

When asked if the respondents experienced that they created any difference between their online and offline identity, the respondents answered that they tried to be true to their offline-self, online. They would not post or share anything that could not be attributed to their overall identity, offline as well as online. Mattias explained that:

*“I try to keep the same personality online as in real life. It would look strange if I produce something online that is not at all like me, so I think I try to keep it considerably similar”.*

However, when analyzing the empirical material we discovered ambiguous aspects in the respondents' answers. The personal traits described by the respondents did not match how they described their personality, or self-presentation, on social networking sites. The respondent characterized himself or herself as an open or social person. However, when describing themselves in social media, the respondents said they were quite passive users, bordering on non-existing, not wanting to contribute that much to the social network. Ellen explained that,

*“ I am quite open as a person, in person, but I don't enjoy being that open on Facebook (...) so that's maybe the difference when it comes to me – I am a very open, social person, just not on social media”.*

Aresta et al (2015) argue that the use of faceted identities online enables the individuals to build specific and adequate reputations and establish connections in different online environments (Boyd in Aresta et al, 2015 p.75). According to Berger (2014) one of the key features as to why consumers want to share WOM-communication is to present people with who they are and especially who they want to be. Ylva reported that she only shared content in the public sphere that represented her moral and ethical values. Not only to maintain a certain impression of her self to others, but to have something to aspire to when offline. She argued that her online, public, self figured as an ideal self of sorts. The online identity became the desired offline identity for the respondent. In some way the constructed online image can be seen as what Park (in Goffman, 1959) describes as a mask for the respondents. For Park the symbolism of a mask is “recognition of the fact that everyone everywhere is more or less playing a role. The mask represents the conception of ourselves – the role we are striving to live up to (...) the mask is our truer self, the self we would like to be” (Park in Goffman, 1959 p.30). As mentioned in the analytical framework when an individual plays a role he implicitly requests his observers to take seriously the impression that is fostered before them (Goffman, 1959 p.28). Goffmans (1959) writes that the individual asks the audience to believe that the attributes that the individual appears to possess are something that is inherent, and present in the individual's character. When posting certain marketing campaigns online, that inhabits certain statements, the respondents asks the social network to believe that the values associat-

ed with the campaigns are an inherent part of their character. Lisa illustrated this during her interview:

*“You only put up your most positive features, the best aspects of your self, online. The stressed and unsecure parts of me is not present in social networks in the same way”.*

The tendency to self-enhancement can be considered a fundamental human motivation, people like to be perceived and present themselves in ways that gives away a certain impression (Berger, 2014 p.588). Social networking-sites becomes a stage where the respondents display content that emphasize their desired image, and that accentuate the role they want to play. Their online profile figures a mask for their truer self. Goffman (1959) argues that the individual however, is not performing an act on behalf of himself, but for the benefit of other people. Goffman’s (1959) argument is present in the respondents’ line of reasoning; the respondents described that when deciding to share content in the public sphere, they considered first if the content could be viewed as a desirable self-presentation for future employers. On questions of why the respondents did not share certain types of material, Stina exclaimed *“I guess its because I don’t want it to be posted on my social networking-profile. I am thinking about what if future employers see it”*. In their research into students’ self-presentation on Facebook, Chen and Marcus (2012) noted that potential employers used individuals post on social networking-sites to assess their employment qualifications; some individuals were penalized on the basis of their photo, shares and text-posts. Our respondents reported that they were previously less critical about what they post, but that they had changed their behavior in the last couple of years, some of them after joining the university. Markus stated that after lectures given by organizations at the university he started to rethink what to post, and not to post, online:

*“Facebook have become an arena where even your job can look at your profile, so you have to be more careful with what you post. I have attended lectures, and viewed lectures online saying that your private life can give ramifications for your work life, especially if you post content that does not portray that well”.*

We interpret it as the respondents were not only restrictive with what they shared online because it could create conflicts by entering unwanted debates or distort their role performance, but they were concerned with how it could affect their brand as future potential employees. With the increasing accessibility and popularity of social media- sites the concept of and focus in personal branding has amplified. Social media gives the opportunity to manage personal brands more easily than manage a product or a service brand (Karaduman, 2013 p.465). Personal branding is directly intended to create an asset and brand equity to a particular person or individual, as well as it includes, but is not limited to the physical appearance and personal knowledge of the individual (Karaduman, 2013 p.465). When used correctly personal branding can give great advantages for the individual. As our respondents are students it is likely that they are concerned with impression management, as they are soon to be applying for work. However, we find it thought provoking that the act of sharing viral marketing campaigns within social networks can be considered such an important aspect of their personal brand as future employees. Inspired by Goffman's (1959) theory on impression management, the act of sharing certain viral messages can arguably be seen as constructing different elements in an interactive résumé.

## 5. Conclusion

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The purpose of this study has been to gain a deeper knowledge as to why some marketing campaigns go viral over others. Viral marketing is based on peer-to-peer communication employing consumers as a market force, and is as such considered a cost-effective means of marketing. However, one of the main challenges with this marketing technique is understanding how it works; why some campaign gets shared and essentially go viral over others. To fulfill the purpose of this study we applied a consumer perspective exploring what aspects they find significant when deciding to share, or not to share, marketing messages online. Even though the respondents in this study are members of digital naturals, being prone to sharing information and emotions online, our respondents reported that they were quite restrictive with what they shared with their social network. Our analysis show that when it comes sharing viral marketing the level for sharing content is set low, but at the same time increasingly high by the respondents.

As with previous research studies our analysis shows that the respondents would be willing to share, or forward viral messages, with their friends and family if it connected with them emotionally. The emotional connection could be attributed to emotional content such as messages based on humor or surprise, or that it triggered an emotional response within the respondents. However, our empirical findings show that it is not enough to study the effect of content on pass-along behavior like with previous research on viral marketing. In our study the respondents reported that the campaign does not only have to be considered relevant in terms of new and innovative, but if they would share the campaign were more or less contingent on the purpose of the share. Our analysis show that why some campaigns gets shared over others differs with the purpose, which makes it accessibly difficult for marketer to control their marketing messages, as they are subject to constant contextual change. Our analysis shows that there are three main purposes that shape their willingness to share. The respondents shared campaigns to spread information and to try to persuade members of their social network to think differently, further to reap confirmation from peers in an attempt to self-enhance. And lastly, the respondents used viral messages as a conduit for social bonding with

friends and family. The respondents reported that many of the marketing campaigns they shared had content that were relevant for the recipient, or for their friendship.

We argue that to understand why some viral marketing campaigns go viral over others, it is not enough for researchers to simply look at the content or look at motivational factors to explain consumer pass-along behavior. To achieve deeper insight into the phenomenon of viral marketing we suggest that it is important to emphasize the role of the consumer rather than the content of the message.

By applying an interpersonal communication-perspective as an analytical tool, we have uncovered a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of why some marketing campaigns get shared whilst others do not. Our analysis shows that the content does not only have to be experienced as relevant for the respondent, but it also has to match their desired image in all of the different online social spheres. The respondents use viral marketing to create, edit and re-edit their desired online self-presentation. Sharing content online is not considered just an innocent share, but is considered an important element in their identity narration. What they decide to post online is part of their storytelling to both their social network as well as future employers. As such, we argue that marketing messages is no longer used to sell products or services, but is increasingly connected to the construction of identities. Holt (2004) describes how brands have become symbols, or embodiments of different myths. These myths often address people's identities connecting the brands markers (logo, product and design elements) to certain lifestyles, values and qualities (Holt, 2004). He argues that when consumers "drink, drive or wear the product, they experience a bit of the myth" (Holt, 2004 p.8). When consumers consume the brand, they take part in the qualities, lifestyle and values associated with the myth. By engaging with the brand the consumers create an image that they themselves embody these qualities, and according to Holt (2004) it lessens their identity burdens. The brand and its associated qualities becomes an element in their identity construction and identity validation (Dahlén et al, 2010).

We argue that Holt's (2004) thoughts are also applicable for viral marketing. To share viral marketing can be considered as a form of identity-valued branding amongst the respondents. The respondents emphasize this by arguing that what they share on social media highlight and accentuate their own values and beliefs. What they share on social media should mirror or reflect their desired identity, their desired personal brand. The respondents argued that what they share on social networking sites contains content that construct an image of them selves that they wish to fulfill and uphold, both online as well as offline. The respondents argued that it was the person they wished to be, and the person they wished others would

perceive them as. From a Goffmanesque (1959) perspective they used viral marketing as an element in public impression management.

As such, we argue that sharing viral marketing can be compared to the consumption of brands. Consumption and identity-construction is not only ascribed to what one wears or what type of car one drives, but our research indicates that in web 2.0 era, it is also ascribed to what one shares on the Internet. According to our respondents what you share will tell the world who you are. By being selective with what they shared where, they were in charge of their own personal brand narrative. Our analysis indicates that to create successful viral marketing campaigns it will be increasingly important for marketers in the future to know their target groups values, worldviews and beliefs.

## **5.1 Suggestions for future research**

For future researchers we suggest that it would be beneficial to look at the generational gap when it comes to perceptions of sharing viral messages. The respondents answered that the ones who shared the most viral messages on their social networking-sites often were from an older generation; late adopters of an online persona. Even though there existed a social norm amongst student members of the digital naturals of being restrictive with what they shared, the late adopters were exempt from this social convention. We argue that it would be interesting to see why these are more willing, and seemingly less critical towards sharing viral content than student members of digital naturals. One may wonder if it is because they already have established a stable identity and personal brand, or if there are other aspects that are important to them. We argue that this would provide a broader perspective on why some marketing campaigns go viral rather than others. It could also show if there is a correlation between online aptitude (digital natural versus late adopters) and the sharing of viral messages on social networking sites.

Further, we suggest that future research should focus on what respondents defined as different sharing-spheres on social networking sites, and viral marketing effectiveness. The respondents argued that they would rather share privately to a chosen few, than publicly in terms of impression management. Our research show that this change in social media-behavior occurred during the last couple of years, for the respondents. By focusing on the consumers change in social media-use, it could provide insights into the challenges marketers may face by the development into a one-to-one communication model (Dahlén et al, 2010).



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# 7. Appendix

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## Intervjuguide

*Startar med att förklara vad vi menar med viral marknadsföring och hur det relaterar till vår utbildning.*

Virala kampanjer är de kampanjer vars syfte är att spridas vidare likt ett virus via sociala nätverk på internet genom att personer delar eller skickar dem vidare. I detta fall riktar vi in oss endast på de som har ett företag eller organisation som avsändare eller skapare. Det kan vara material som bilder eller filmer och kan anspela på olika känslor såsom humor, allvar, våld etc.

### Uppvärmningsfrågor

Hur gammal är du?

Hur skulle du beskriva dig som person?

Hur ofta använder du dig av sociala nätverk?

Vilka sociala nätverk använder du?

Hur spenderar du din tid på sociala medier?

Gör du någon skillnad på dig sociala medier jämfört med annars?

### Hur?

Hur ofta skickar du vidare viralt material?

Vilka skulle du säga att du skickar det vidare till?

Hur gör du det?

- Privat eller publikt – Varför?

Vad för typ av kampanjer skulle du säga att det var?

Vilka typer av kampanjer skulle du säga att det handlar om?

### **Criteria for sharing - vad?**

Vilken typ av viralt material delar du?

- Till exempel va slags avsändare och va slags av innehåll?

### **Varför?**

De kampanjer som du delar, vill du beskriva vilket innehåll de har/hade?

Vad var det som gjorde att du ville sprida dessa vidare?

Vad skulle du säga att var din motivationsfaktor/syftet för att dela dessa vidare?

Vad skulle du säga att du fick ut av att dela det vidare?

Vad skulle du säga att responsen var när du skickade vidare?

Hade du några förväntningar på responsen?

### **Varför inte?**

Varför skulle du säga att du inte delar olika typen av material?

Vad för slags kampanjer väljer du inte dela vidare?

- Har du tagit emot någon sådan som du inte har delat vidare, privat eller offentlig?
- Vad var innehållet i dem?

Vad tänker du om de som delar sånt här material?

### ***Da går vi in i sista delen av intervjun;***

Vad tycker du om konceptet virala kampanjer?

Vad skulle få dig att dela (mer) viralt material?

Vem skulle du då dela det med?

### ***Avslutningsvis:***

Har du något du skulle vilja lägga till?

Avsluta med att tacka för deltagelsen och fråga hur det har varit att intervjuas.

## Message when recruiting respondents via Facebook

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**Christofer Gaude**  
den 19 mars

Tja! Vi är två masterstudenter vid programmet Strategisk Kommunikation som ska skriva den mest fascinerande och intressanta uppsatsen om viral marknadsföring. Till vår studie behöver vi nu några till personer som vi skulle kunna få intervjua. Vi riktar oss till personer som är i åldrarna 20 till 25 år och som är aktiva inom sociala medier. Intervjuerna sker med fördel under nästkommande vecka och vi beräknar intervjun till att ta cirka 30 till 45 minuter. Säg till om ni kan och vill! 😊

[Gilla](#) · [Kommentera](#)

## Message when offering the respondents the chance to read their transcribed interview

Hej [redacted] Hoppas att allt är toppen. Vi har nu gjort klart våra transkriberingar och vill därför höra om du vill läsa din intervju. Säg gärna till om det är så. Annars vill jag bara passa på att tacka för din medverkan och vill du ha en kopia på vår uppsats är det bara att säga till. Med vänlig hälsning, Christofer