ADVERTISING AMONGST OURSELVES:
A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF VIEWER ATTITUDES TOWARDS VIRAL MARKETING

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ABSTRACT

STEVEN C. KULP: Advertising Amongst Ourselves:
A Qualitative Study Of Viewer Attitudes Towards Viral Marketing
(Under the direction of John Sweeney)

The purpose of this study was to gain insight into the attitudes of consumers towards viral marketing. In-depth interviews with college undergraduates were used to explore the motivation to share content, specifically, videos found on YouTube.com. Four themes emerged from the analysis. First, several factors functioning as filters in the decision to forward content are identified. Second, humor and personalization are identified as major factors in this process. Third, the perception of advertising as entertainment is discussed. Finally the extent to which content is new is found to be a major factor. The significance of these findings is two-fold. Each theme affects the likelihood that content will be forwarded. More importantly, the findings uncover the motivation to share content altogether, conforming to the theory of social capital, in which information is used to establish social status. Ultimately, these findings further the practical and theoretical understanding of viral marketing.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Though the term has been around for several years, the marketing world's

understanding of *viral marketing* is still in its infancy. Some, even those within the

advertising industry, see *viral* as nothing more than a funny video, passed around by

consumers online. One Advertising Age article claimed that putting forth a successful viral

campaign is as simple as this; "Create something fun that appeals to the YouTube set–

something that doesn't scream *Buy this product!*" (Viral, 2006). It is this tendency to see

viral marketing in very narrow terms that has stunted its potential as a new way of

approaching advertising. Viral marketing as we have known it needs to be reconsidered.

Of course, the rise of viral marketing is directly linked to the pitfalls that traditional

advertising has seen in recent years. No less than advertising legend Maurice Saatchi has

declared "The Strange Death of Modern Advertising" in a 2006 speech, reprinted n the

Financial Times of London.

> The first stage of the illness, they said, was sociology – the family no longer gathered
> to watch television. So they said, the 30-second commercial was finished. The next
> symptom was technology – because, they said, even if family members were all in the
> same house, they would not be watching the same screen. Laptops, mobile phones,
> iPods, games – all brought more media fragmentation, more channels more choice,
> more complications. (Saatchi, 2006).

As the advertising world mourns death of the old model of "push" marketing (Grant,

2006) and looks for "life after the 30-second spot" (Jaffe, 2005), it is clear that a new

marketing paradigm is needed. The old model of advertising in which the audience was a

captive one, is gone. "Today, advertisers chase consumers with a certain air of desperation," (Auletta, 2005, p. 38).

With the rise of technology and its ability to bring individual consumers, together in new force, a viral approach to marketing seems less like an imperative than an option. Audiences are behaving as networks—networks primed for the introduction of new brand ideas that look less like marketing messages and more like simple communication between individuals. Whether online or off, consumers are far more savvy than they have ever been (Grant, 2006). Marketers need to recognize this and show them the respect they deserve engaging them in a dialogue.

Unfortunately, the current state of viral marketing is dire. While a few marketers have found great success in thoughtfully integrating a viral approach into their campaigns, most still see it as the aforementioned "funny video" or as way to advertise on the cheap. Conversely, consumers have seen it as free entertainment, at best, and a nuisance, at worst. The line between "viral marketing" and "spam" is decidedly thin. As prevalent as viral marketing may have become, its value is certainly in question. Moving beyond the conception of *a viral*, a type of marketing media, to *viral* a way of understanding consumer involvement in the marketing process is long overdue.

The intention of this paper is to further the understanding of viral marketing from the point of view of the consumer. Such investigation of consumer perception can be utilized to help build a rationale for more thoughtful, and hopefully more effective viral marketing. A series of interviews were conducted with 18-24 year-old college students to gain insight into their actions and attitudes concerning viral video content. Viral marketing seems to have the potential to become a full-fledged advertising medium. Though just one facet of viral marketing, viral video is currently growing in its popularity. Sites like YouTube have made

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the exchange of viral video convenient and available to many. For this reason, the emphasis of this study is focused on, but not entirely limited to, viral video as a means of exploring the larger viral phenomenon.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

New models of marketing

The Cluetrain Manifesto (Levine, Locke, Searls and Weinberger, 2000) puts forth the idea that the interaction between a corporation and its customers is evolving into a dialogue whether the corporation likes it or not. The book opens with "95 Theses" (pp. xii-xviii) that lay the groundwork for this rationale. Written from the perspective of the consumer, each of these theses probes at the breakdown of traditional push marketing. The first of these theses says it all, "Markets are conversations," (Levine, et al., p. xii). A new, more complex model in which consumers interact with advertisers and other consumers online has replaced the old model in which advertisers spoke to a captive audience. Ultimately, the importance of *The Cluetrain Manifesto* is the way in which it expresses these new complexities of the marketing process. The old paradigm of direct, business-to-consumer marketing is being interrupted by new modes of consumer-to-consumer marketing.

The main argument made in *Cluetrain* is that the internet and new communication technologies have empowered the consumer to become more involved in the marketing process. In a sense, this new world of "market conversations" tends to shift the power dynamic between corporation and consumer. Online, consumers have endless information at their fingertips. They have the ability to differentiate between products and services with ease. Most importantly, they have the ability to communicate amongst themselves about products, leaving them less reliant on advertising as they are on their own research.

Consumers have the ability to see through advertising rhetoric and make more educated decisions. This empowerment on the part of the consumer makes this new marketing paradigm seem much more like an inter personal relationship than a business transaction.

> Brand loyalty is the corporate version of going steady, but the breakup is inevitable—and coming fast. Because they are networked, smart markets are able to negotiate relationships with blinding speed. (p. xiv)

While *Cluetrain* was written as a direct reaction to the rise of the internet as a tool to empower the consumer, the importance of its message is not limited to the online world. In fact, the authors see this technological shift as leading to an environment that harkens back to the pre-advertising world, the exchange of products and services were much less complex and much more human.

> For thousands of years, we knew exactly what markets were: conversations between people who sought out others who shared the same interests. Buyers had as much say as sellers. They spoke directly to each other without the filter of media, the artifice of positioning statements, the arrogance of advertising, or the shading of public relations. (p. 77)

While the authors of *Cluetrain* are not marketing professionals or advertising practitioners, their text is intended as a warning to the marketing and advertising world. Their perspective is that of the consumer, calling for a fundamental change in their relationship with corporations. While this point of view may seem somewhat naïve from a practical marketing perspective, their message is clear. Communication between empowered consumers is a new force in the world of marketing.

Where *Cluetrain* is written as a sort of open letter to corporations and their marketing partners, John Grant's book *The Brand Innovation Manifesto* (2005), reads as a response. Grant, a well respected brand consultant, echoes the sentiment that the relationship between corporation and consumer has fundamentally changed. One symptom of this change is a rise in the "marketing literacy" of the general population, "the critical ability to 'read through'

marketing and examine its construction and intention," (p. 7). Ultimately, Grant proposes that marketers shift from "targeting messages at passive audiences" to "ideas being adopted by (or co-created with) groups for whom they are relevant," (p. 54).

As *Cluetrain* offers its "95 Theses," Grant offers "32 Brand Elements" (p. 89), a toolkit of strategic brand ideas intended to inspire marketers to rethink their efforts in terms of "strategic cultural ideas" that have relevance for the audience (p. 86). Most of theses ideas are based around the notion that marketing needs to engage the consumer in an open, honest manner akin to the "market conversations" advocated in *Cluetrain*. Grant urges marketers to think of their interaction with the customer in terms of their actual needs rather than an ad-created artifice.

> Understanding ideas on this level, the insight behind them, why people seem to find them compelling, how they seem to work makes them more than just a list of brand ideas. And it also makes the whole exercise of working on marketing campaigns more interesting: every project shines a torch on a slightly different aspect of human nature. (p. 93)

It is no longer sufficient to view an audience in terms of simple demographics and the outmoded formulas of reach and frequency. Both *Cluetrain* and *The Brand Innovation Manifesto* propose a paradigm shift in the world of marketing that includes the consumer in the process. This shift in mindset sets the stage for further consideration of the concept of viral marketing.

Defining viral marketing

In order to proceed in an investigation of consumer attitudes towards viral marketing, a clear definition the term "viral marketing" must first be established. This proves to be a challenge, as the common usage in the advertising industry changes to suit a particular context. This shifting definition is mainly due to the fact that most definitions tend to be

either online specific or overbroad in their wording. It has been left somewhat undefined so that it can serve as a general category of marketing tactics. This issue is apparent upon a cursory survey of the glossaries of common advertising and marketing texts. In Armstrong and Kotler's popular marketing text (2005), viral marketing is defined as a strictly online phenomenon.

> The internet version of word-of-mouth marketing—e-mail messages or other marketing events that are so infectious that customers will want to pass them along to friends. (Armstrong, G9)

This online-exclusive approach to viral marketing also appears in *Advertising and Integrated Brand Promotion* (2006), a text used in undergraduate advertising courses at universities all over the country.

> The process of consumers marketing to consumers over the internet through word of mouth transmitted through e-mails and electronic mailing lists. (O'Guinn, Allen and Semenik, p. 745)

> Helm (2000) offers a similarly web-centric definition in a journal article surveying

the basics of the concept of viral marketing, or "word-of-mouse" as she refers to it.

> Viral marketing can be understood as a communication and distribution concept that relies on customers to transmit digital products via electronic mail to other potential customers in their social sphere and to animate these contacts to also transmit the products. (p. 159)

> These three definitions, framing viral marketing as a strictly online phenomenon,

seem to be of the common type found in journal articles, industry publications and popular media coverage of viral marketing. Such definitions seem short sighted in making such a sharp differentiation between offline word-of-mouth and online viral marketing. Each is essentially the same tactic executed in two different media, though it is important to acknowledge that online communication has the ability to reach a broader audience with amazing speed. In a true "word-of-mouth" scenario, information travels person-to-person in a

more or less individual manner. Nowadays, an individual can essentially broadcast information to countless individuals via personal email, blogs or other online media. The salience of the viral concept is the transmission of an idea from consumer to consumer rather than from marketer to consumer.

Steve Jurveston, the venture capitalist that coined the phrase viral marketing, chose to define it in the less strict terms. His extensive articles concerning the genesis of viral marketing are written, "without defining it more precisely as 'network enhanced word of mouth.'" (Jurveston, 2000). Though his experience with viral marketing was in a strictly online medium, his conscious decision to under-define the phrase leaves room for a broad definition that encompasses both online and offline applications. He goes on to describe viral marketing not as a medium, but as a strategy, and one open to interpretation. "The idea of viral marketing itself spreads like an adaptive virus. The idea itself evolves as it is retold in society." (Jurveston, 2000)

Other sources follow this broad sense of defining viral marketing in terms of a media-neutral concept rather than online only. *The Dictionary of Brand* (2004) provides such a definition.

> Viral marketing: A technique by which social networks are used to spread ideas or messages, through the use of affiliate programs, co-branding, e-mails, and link exchanges on-line, or off-line, through use of word-of-mouth advertising and memes. (Neumeier, 102)

Ultimately, this is the clearest and most comprehensive definition to be found. It eschews the online connotation that other rely upon. Instead, it favors the term *social networks* in an attempt to remain as relevant to the online world as the offline. Another strength of this definition is the inclusion of *memes*, a key theoretical component in understanding the

transmission of viral messages. In terms of this study and its operationalization of the phrase viral marketing, this definition is to be referenced.

Word-of-mouth research

When attempting to discuss the current state of viral marketing, it is important to acknowledge the legacy of word-of mouth marketing research that has been undertaken for decades. *Word-of mouth* (WOM) can be defined quite simply as "product information transmitted by individual consumers on an informal basis," (Solomon, p. 602). Though such a definition would certainly seem to include modern modes of communication such as email, text messaging, blogging and online message boards, the bulk of existing WOM research is pre-internet. The existing research on the topic deals strictly with direct, oral communication via face-to face or telephone conversation (Woodside and DeLozier, 1976). Christiansen and Tax (2000) acknowledge this fact in a manner that begins to fuse the history of WOM with the current state of viral marketing as one area of research.

> WOM has always been prevalent, but historically its reach has been limited by geography and technology. Today, advances such as electronic bulletin boards, e-mail and the internet have created a new backyard fence over which consumers meet to gather and share information about products and retailers. This new media makes it easy and ordinary for consumers who have never met to exchange recommendations or warnings about products (p. 186).

While the media may have changed, Christiansen and Tax assert that the content of the conversation has not. Their viewpoint is that new technology has enabled WOM to flourish beyond one-on-one interaction into something profoundly more powerful. Liu (2006) elaborates on this notion in a research study that deals directly with online WOM and motion picture marketing. In discussing the ease with which individuals are now able to share their

thoughts and experiences, Liu states that online media actually "…increases the likelihood of consumers using WOM in decision making," (2006).

That said, there are some fundamental limitations in the extent to which viral marketing and WOM research be compared that needs to be clarified. Traditionally, WOM research dealt with consumer-generated opinions, expressed verbally or in writing. Viral marketing, as enabled by technological changes, has the opportunity to be much more content-rich and interactive, including images, video content and links to interactive websites that can be passed along from one individual to others.

Likewise, this technological evolution requires a fundamental reevaluation of the models researchers have used to analyze interpersonal communication. Much of the existing WOM research relies on a dyadic model of communication in which information is transmitted from a single sender to a single receiver (Christiansen and Tax, 2000). In the age of e-mail, blogs and other socially networked communication, this simple, dyadic way of looking at WOM is of questionable value given the complexity and scale of the online environment. Simmons (2006) puts this in perspective, "Our e-mail contact lists are always at our fingertips, so it is easy to see how something can quickly get passed on to thousands," (p.1). In a published review of all existing WOM research to date, Arndt's (1967) organizes the research into just two distinct categories, one containing studies that focus on the receiver of information (p. 26) and one concerning the communicator (p.46). No research concerning community or the longitudinal transfer of information is offered.

These limitations in applying WOM research in no way negate the value of existing body of knowledge. Rather, it stresses the point that WOM as it has been understood historically is a particular mode of viral communication, in no way representative of the full scope of viral marketing. It also serves to put into priority the theoretical elements of WOM

historical WOM research the do have value and are directly applicable to the investigation of viral marketing.

Upon review of existing WOM literature, it becomes clear that the seminal research and theoretical writing on the subject was undertaken in the late 1960s by Johan Arndt. The aforementioned literature review (Arndt, 1967) is oft cited in WOM articles, as is his original empirical research. Arndt's three-part theoretical model, used to explain the effect of WOM, is especially insightful and applicable to viral marketing.

1) Word of mouth is thought to give reliable, trustworthy information, and, hence, it can help people to make better buying decisions.
2) In contrast to the mass media, personal contacts offer social support.
3) Information provided is often backed-up by social pressure and surveillance. (p. 25)

Essentially, this construct states that WOM communication operates on a sort of self-legitimizing principle. Whether true or not, the sheer perception that interpersonal communication is more reliable than commercial or marketing communication bears heavily on the effect of WOM. The idea of *social support* compounds this assumption that WOM is more trustworthy by leveraging existing relationships to serve as the media by which the information travels. The final point, concerning *social pressure and surveillance*, functions as a sort of peer pressure, in which the decisions you make as an individual are held in comparison to those of your peers. The logic and strength of this theoretical construct is somewhat hard to ignore. Clearly, this three-point model serves as the foundation of any type of research involving peer-to-peer communication, be it dyadic WOM or network-driven viral marketing.

Memes

British evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins introduced the word *meme* in his book *The Selfish Gene* (1978). A meme is "unit of cultural transmission" (p. 206), or put

simply, an idea, that is capable of spreading from person to person in the way that a genes are transferred from person to person. "Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body…so memes propagate themselves in a meme-pool by leaping from brain to brain," (p. 206). While this analogy was initially intended to complement Dawkins' study of imitative behavior in animals, its application to the transmission of information between human being has proven to be the key to its longevity.

Philosopher Daniel Dennett has also been a key proponent of memetics. In his work, Dennett follows Dawkins' explanation of memes while weaving in a secondary explanation that seems more fitting to viral marketing.

> Memes now spread around the world at the speed of light, and replicate at rates that make even fruit flies look glacial in comparison. They leap promiscuously from vehicle to vehicle, and from medium to medium, and are proving to be virtually unquarantinable. (Dennett, p. 131)

While this may seem as though it was written to describe the flow of memes online, it is important to note that this was first published in 1990, well before the internet revolution. The prescience of his conceptualization of memetics is even more evident in the following text that seems to speak directly to the state the advertising industry would find itself in years later.

> Brute physical replication of vehicles is not enough to ensure meme longevity. A few thousand hard copies of a book can disappear with scarcely a trace in a few years. Who knows how many brilliant letters to the editor, reproduced in hundreds of thousands of copies, disappear into landfills and incinerators every day? (Dennett, p. 131)

Memes need to have a life of their own in order to survive. Their replication, the transfer from person to person, is what determines their longevity and cultural relevance. Though Dennett is not writing explicitly about marketing, his use of the term *vehicle* is consistent with use in the advertising industry. Dennett uses the example of a book as a vehicle while

advertising practitioners are more likely to refer to a magazine or a television program.

Simply disseminating an advertisement to millions of people via these traditional media

(print, radio, television, etc.) in no way guarantees that it will be remembered. In effect,

Dennett is arguing that people become a media and every individual becomes a vehicle,

spreading memes from one to another. This is the core theory behind what is referred to as

viral marketing.

While Daniel Dennett inadvertently hinted at the idea of memes, viruses and

marketing in his work, Douglas Rushkoff brought the concept front and center in his book

Media Virus! (1994). Rushkoff proposes that the media-saturation of the modern world can

be viewed as an environment in and of itself, one that he calls the *datasphere* (p. 4). Our

social, economic, professional and civic lives have developed an increasing dependence on

mass media. With the explosion of the internet, only in its infancy as Rushkoff developed

this theory, his position has become even more resonant. This datasphere has, in some

regards, become as integral to our daily lives as our physical world and face-to-face

interactions. This new environment enables the rapid transmission of "media viruses" (p. 9)

or memes, as Dawkins or Dennett would refer to them. Rushkoff argues that these media

viruses are akin to actual biological viruses in their transmission.

> Media viruses spread through the datasphere the same way biological ones spread
> through the body or a community. But instead of traveling along an organic
> circulatory system, a media virus travels through networks of the mediaspace... A
> media virus might be an event, invention, technology, system of thought, musical riff,
> scientific theory, sex scandal, clothing style or even a pop hero–as long as it can catch
> our attention. (p. 9-10)

Rushkoff continues to develop this analogy by establishing a taxonomy consisting of three

main types of media virus. The first is a constructed virus, one that is created with the sole

purpose of "spreading a product or ideology." The second is a bandwagon virus, one that is

co-opted in order to promote an agenda. The third type, the self-generated virus, represents ideas that "elicit interest and spread of their own accord because they hit upon a societal weakness or ideological vacuum," (p. 10-11).

Each of these three types of media viruses can be viewed in terms of viral marketing. Generally, most viral marketing would fall into the first category, the constructed virus. This type of virus begins with the creation of an idea, or a marketing message, that is released with the intention of persuading an audience to engage a product or service by inspiring conversation amongst them. In this sense, almost all successful advertisements are constructed viruses, becoming a part of the lexicon of popular culture. The same is partially true of the bandwagon virus. The fundamental difference is that the audience can make the association between a viral idea and a product or service without the prompting of a marketer. This occurs when a product gains some legitimacy or relevance to existing cultural idea and benefits from the consumer making an association between the two. Self-generated viruses function as viral marketing in cases of new product launches and innovative products. The buzz surrounding a new product or service can function as a media virus with absolutely no overt action on the part of the marketer, functioning as a sort of surrogate marketing message. Ultimately, Rushkoff's idea of the media virus and his construct of these three types of virus lend themselves directly to understanding the ways in which viral marketing operates in society.

Rushkoff represents an important first-step in translating the more philosophical theories of Dawkins and Dennett into one that is palatable for mass consumption. Malcolm Gladwell continues this trend, with great popular success and notoriety. In his influential book, *The Tipping Point* (2002), Gladwell uses a viral or epidemic analogy to describe "…that magic moment when an idea, trend, or social behavior crosses a threshold, tips, and

spreads like wildfire" (p. 310). In explaining this theory, Gladwell uses a simple construct, the "Three Rules of the Tipping Point": *The Law of the Few*, *The Stickiness Factor*, and the *Power of Context* (p.29). The Law of the Few states that messages are passed from person to person and that some people are more likely to pass information along than others. The Stickiness Factor implies that the more interesting, attractive or entertaining an idea is, the more likely it is to propagate. Finally, the Power of Context states that the timing and personal relevance of an idea dictate whether it is to be deemed important enough to be shared with others. These three ideas collectively represent the idea of *The Tipping Point*.

Though absolutely no mention is made of memes, Dawkins, Dennett or Rushkoff, *The Tipping Point's* concept is analogous, though somewhat simplified in that it avoids the rhetoric of memetics. The key learning is the idea that a series of small ideas communicated between members of an audience, can snowball and become a full-fledged trend or market force. The success of the book brought with it the ascent of the phrase *tipping point* into everyday usage. While most empirical inquiry into viral marketing operates without a solid theoretical base, the popular notion of the tipping point serves as a solid conceptual reference point.

The transfer of ideas in everyday life, including marketing messages, can be described in these terms. Such ideas can move rapidly between people, ultimately becoming a part of the cultural lexicon. While advertising and marketing professionals, have been slow to adapt this concept to their industry, it has begun to appear in recent publications. One branding reference text, *The Dictionary of Brand*, has gone so far as to include a definition of the word meme, portraying it as, "an idea that self-replicates like a virus; a unit if social currency," (Neumeier, p. 67). Bulik and Kerwin (2006), Boxer (2004), Williams (2002), and Gelb (1997) have each published articles that introduce the concept of memes and state the

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case for further investigation. However, it is important to note that there has been little or no empirical research applying memes to advertising and marketing.

Consumer attitudes towards viral marketing

Very few empirical studies have been undertaken to investigate the world of viral marketing. Given that so much emphasis has been put on this topic in the trade-press, the reluctance of the academic community to initiate research in this arena comes as a surprise.

One of the few major studies dealing with the viral transmission of e-mails appears in the December 2004 issue of the *Journal of Advertising Research* (Phelps, Lewis, Mobilio, Perry, and Raman, 2004). While this study deals with pass along emails of all types, its ramifications for the understanding of viral marketing are clear. Five investigators, including both academics and industry professionals, this study is concerned with providing "…a better understanding of the motivations and behaviors of those who pass along email messages," (p. 333). In order to do so, the researchers undertook their study in three distinct phases, each employing a different research methodology.

The first phase was a series of exploratory focus groups. A total 66 participants took part in eight focus groups conducted in four different cities across the United States. In each city, one focus group consisted of participants that were identified as *viral mavens* while the other consisted of *infrequent senders*, based on their proclivity to pass along viral e-mail messages. From these focus groups, the researchers were able to discern several emotional responses, both positive and negative, associated with pass-along e-mails. The positive responses centered on the feeling of sense of belongingness and social connection associated with sharing messages via e-mail. The negative emotions stemmed from nuisance of being sent too many messages or being sent messages that seem to have no personal or social

element to the individual. There seemed to be no fundamental difference between the perceptions of the two groups of participants.

Thirty-four participants, pooled from both the viral maven and infrequent sender focus groups were included in the next phase of the research, a content analysis of pass along e-mails. These individuals shared with the researchers all incoming and outgoing pass along e-mails over the course of one month. The results show that nearly half of all messages analyzed were humorous in nature. It was also evident that the viral mavens were more likely to screen e-mails and carefully select which e-mails they sent to which recipients. Likewise, the infrequent senders were more likely to include personal notes with each e-mail sent. Each action represents an attempt to establish a social relevance for each message sent, reinforcing the focus group finding that social networking plays a large part in viral e-mail messages.

The third phase of this study consisted of follow-up telephone interviews with each of the 34 participants from the content analysis phase. The subjects were asked to rate their reasons for sharing pass along emails on twenty-eight motivations. Assessing each on a five-point Likert-type scale, four of the five the top rated answers related to the entertainment value associated with sending e-mails.

Ultimately, this study puts forth three key findings. First and foremost is the effect that content has on the likelihood that a message will be passed along. Entertainment value, especially humor is the key motivation behind the dissemination of a message. Second, the social value of pass along e-mail cannot be overlooked. Careful selection and personalization of messages drove both the act of sending and the emotions associated with receiving messages. Finally, an awareness of the type of audience to which a message is being sent is of the utmost importance. Personal relevance seems to be the driving force behind the will to engage in pass-along e-mailing.

One limitation of this study is that it is limited to pass-along emails. While this may have been the dominant means of online communication when the research was conducted, new modes of online communication such as blogs, virtual communities and social networking sites have become popular. While email is still relevant today, it is hardly the sole manner in which consumers communicate amongst themselves.

In Thorston and Rodgers (2006), the focus of the research is viral marketing, referred to in the article as electronic word of mouth, as it pertains to political advertising. Specifically, they looked at audience perception of involvement and interactivity when using political candidate blogs as a means of communication between audience members and candidates. While social interaction between audience members is clearly at the heart of what we refer to as viral marketing this study introduces the concept of *parasocial interaction* (p. 42). Parasocial interaction is defined as "interpersonal involvement of the media user with what he or she consumes," (p. 42). This includes a sense of involvement with a product, celebrity or even a website with which actual social interaction is impossible or highly unlikely. The study used a series of experiments and questionnaires to measure perceived levels of interactivity and favorability when viewing candidate websites. Ultimately, the authors find that the mere presence of interactivity on a candidate website increased favorable attitudes towards both the site and the individual candidate (p. 46). While political advertising and candidate evaluation is not precisely analogous to brand advertising, this study offers a potentially important point of view regarding the positive effects of involvement and interactivity.

Types of viral messaging

Porter and Golan (2006) reinforce the assertion that there has been almost no

academic research concerning viral marketing, though major advertisers such as Toyota, Burger King and Anheuser Busch have executed successful viral campaigns. Not only have viral strategy and creative tactics been overlooked by the research community, even the phrase *viral marketing* has yet to be clearly defined. This study was undertaken to establish the fundamental differences between traditional television advertisements and viral advertisements, including the types of appeals and the types of products associated with each type. Executing a content analysis of 501 advertisements (235 television and 266 viral). The authors identified two key distinctions between these two modes of advertising.

First, they found that viral advertisements were far more likely to employ humor or sexually provocative content to encourage pass-along from viewer to viewer (pp. 35-36). While this may be attributed to the underground nature of viral advertisements, these types of ads are generally exempt from the regulations and standards established by the FCC and individual television stations, granting some degree of creative freedom. The authors also found that Fortune 500 companies were far less likely to engage in viral campaigns than non-Fortune 500 companies (p. 36). The authors are careful to note that as viral advertising and the metrics with which it can be measured become more widely accepted, larger, more conservative advertisers will begin to integrate viral elements into their marketing plans. Though this study is exploratory and cannot be considered definitive in its findings, it offers an important early step in the empirical study of viral advertising.

<div align="center">Viral strategy</div>

Thomas (2004) offers a theoretical framework for *buzz marketing*, which, by his admission, is essentially viral marketing (p. 64). The author establishes four different states of buzz: *uncodified buzz*, *codified buzz*, *pseudo-buzz* and *ultimate buzz*. *Uncodified buzz*

occurs when an audience's interest in a product is such that they begin to communicate amongst themselves about the product with only minimal involvement from the marketers of the product. This would include conversation between consumers concerning an advertisement seen in a traditional setting such as television or print. *Codified buzz* represents the active attempts of a marketer to initiate or inspire dialogue about a product using a variety of tools. It provides a framework for naturally occurring uncodified buzz in order to manipulate the conversation about a product and assure its continuation. Though mentioned briefly, *pseudo buzz*, more commonly known as stealth marketing, is an important part of the equation. It occurs when a marketer uses confederates to stimulate interest in a product without the knowledge of the audience. Finally, *ultimate buzz* is a state not unlike uncodified buzz in that it occurs with minimal intervention on the part of the marketer. Ultimate buzz, however, occurs when a product or service is so innovative or emotionally engaging that the promise of the product itself is the buzz. It requires no other stimulation beyond the presence of the product itself. While not a piece of empirical research per se, this theoretical framework is supported by practical examples providing real-world examples for each. It provides an important starting point for further investigation into the consumer perception of these different four tactics.

This buzz marketing framework bears a strong structural resemblance to Rushkoff's previously discussed taxonomy of media viruses (1994). Uncodified buzz is analogous to Rushkoff's bandwagon, both representing a connection between an existing cultural idea and a product or service with little or no action on the part of the marketer. Codified buzz is essentially a constructed virus, originating with the marketer for the sole purpose of persuading an audience to partake in a particular product or service. Thomas' pseudo-buzz would also fall into the category of a constructed virus. Though the connection between the

message and the product or service is intentionally obscured from the audience, it is intentional and constructed nonetheless. Finally, ultimate buzz can be considered directly analogous to the self-generated virus described by Rushkoff. Both describe cultural ideas that would exist with out without the intervention of an intentional marketing message. These are the biggest ideas, the ones that sell themselves.

Social capital

Social capital is a sociological theory of interpersonal relations, typically viewed as networks. Though there are several researchers working with social capital, Nan Lin in considered by many to be the preeminent authority on the subject. His widely accepted definition of social capital is as follows: "investment in social relations with expected returns in the marketplace." (Lin, 19). Clearly, this concept is akin to other theories of capital, including the more widely understood Marxian approach to capital. In the simplest possible terms, capital is a resource controlled by an individual or organization. This resource can be used in any number of ways, though it is mainly used as a means to accrue more capital. In Lin's theory of social capital, information is the currency or commodity. Individuals use this information, this social capital, to establish and maintain their position in a social network. Essentially, a person's social status can often be linked to their access to information and resources.

Nan Lin also identifies a four-part process/construct that explains how social capital operates. As mentioned, *information* is the first part. It is the unit of trade. Information flows from person to person across what can be very complex networks of individuals. Information has somewhat subjective value that changes, depending on the nature of the network, the relationship between two individuals and the information itself. According to Nan Lin, the

information carries *influence*. Unlike monetary currency, this influence is not fixed. As mentioned, its value shifts contextually. Some information is more valuable to some that others. Individuals in a network serve as owners or gatekeepers of this information. This establishes *social credentials* for the individual, their position in the network hierarchy being directly linked to the relative importance of the information they hold or have access to. In a sense, an individual is only as important as the information they can provide to the group. Their willingness to share or conceal information, over time, provides *reinforcement* to the social credentials and network position. Whether an individual's network position is static or shifting, it is always subject to reinforcement as they interact with others. Basically, network position relies on sharing information with others. (Lin, 20-21)

Summary

Though the research surrounding viral marketing has been of relatively high quality, the number of research studies undertaken has been relatively low. Each of the aforementioned articles deals with a specific issue surrounding viral marketing. Phelps (2004) deals with the motivations behind pass-along emails, though not limited to marketing messages. Thorsten and Rodgers (2006) establish that the perception of interactivity between consumer and brand, or in their case, voter and candidate, can build favorable attitudes. Porter and Golan (2006) investigate viral marketing directly, but only to contrast it with traditional marketing media, making no mention of consumer perception or behavior. Likewise, Thomas (2004) provides an interesting taxonomy of viral marketing strategy that hints at consumer attitudes without taking the issue on in earnest. Taken as a group, these studies begin to shed light on the dynamics at work behind viral marketing though there is little that pulls them together as a cohesive body of research.

Ultimately, Lin's theory of social capital may prove valuable in furthering the understanding of viral marketing. By definition, viral content such as online videos are transmitted from person to person via a network of social connection. This content is one type of information or resource to which Lin is referring in his definition of social capital. Though this theory has typically been applied in quantitative sociological research, the general theoretical model seems perfectly applicable to viral marketing. It provides the framework from which the interactions and motivations of the senders and viewers of viral content can best be understood.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Taking into consideration the lack of cohesiveness in the current body of research and the move within the advertising industry towards viral marketing efforts, it is clear that the subject warrants further research. While consumer attitudes, viral strategy and types of viral messaging have been addressed independently, these topics need to be investigated in tandem in order to establish a solid foundation of viral marketing research. The following research questions have been developed to address these different aspects of viral marketing and gain insight into the viewer perspective on the subject. This initial research question is intended to better understand viewers' general attitudes towards viral marketing:

RQ1. What motivates viewers to share viral marketing messages?

After establishing some general attitudes towards viral marketing, the following research questions are intended to focus directly on exploring more specific viewer perceptions of viral marketing as an advertising medium:

RQ2. Do viewers perceive viral marketing differently than traditional marketing?
RQ3. Do viewers make a distinction between different types of viral marketing?
RQ4. Does such a distinction affect transmission of marketing messages?

CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Given the somewhat exploratory nature of this study, a qualitative methodological approach was taken in order to explore the issues raised in these questions. The original research began with a series of fifteen in-depth interviews of college undergraduates, age 18-24. Analytic induction was employed in collecting the data, allowing for some flexibility in investigating the issues at hand. This format provided the opportunity to gather rich and comprehensive data concerning attitudes towards viral marketing amongst individuals with open access to the internet and a proclivity to use it. The primary motivation for choosing this particular demographic group was their tendency to use online communication tools such as email, blogs, social networking sites and instant messaging at a rate much higher than the general population (Pew, 2005). It is also important to note that the actions and attitudes of this particular demographic may be indicative of future trends in online usage and viral marketing.

Sampling frame

The recruitment of interview participants began by utilizing the existing university pool of voluntary research subjects. The subjects volunteered to take part in this particular research study without any overt recruitment efforts or incentive on the part of the researcher. While geographic location of the interviewees and their connection with the university may not be relevant to the subject matter of the research, it was a practical and financial

consideration in terms of data collection. It allowed for data collection to take place within a

reasonable time frame and budget without sacrificing the quality of the study. Once the

participants volunteered for the study, they were contacted via email to confirm their

participation and to establish a mutually agreeable time and place for the interview to occur.

Interview Format

The interviews were focused on the research questions identified above. A loose

interview guide (see Appendix) was also used to structure the content of the conversation to

some degree. Such a structure also provided some consistency between interviews, allowing

for limited comparison and contrast between the data obtained from different subjects. The

use of an interview guide with probes allowed for the conversation to unfold in as fluid and

natural a manner as possible. Keeping the tone of the conversation open-ended helped

maintain the appearance of informality and minimized reactivity on the part of the subject.

The open-ended structure also allowed for responses to flow from the subject in their own

words as much as possible, minimizing the effect of the researcher's preconceived notions or

reflexivity to a minimum.

Each interview began with the collection of all necessary demographic information,

including basic information about the subject including name, age, and college major. This

opening to the discussion was intended to warm up the subject and make them feel at ease in

the interview. The researcher then briefly discussed their research interest in advertising and

marketing, and the general purpose of this interview. The subject was also notified that

neither their name nor any identifying information will be used in any publications resulting

from this research. This promise of confidentiality allowed the subjects to speak freely and

openly about their opinions.

A total of fifteen interviews were completed over a three-day period. While the length of interviews will vary somewhat depending on the subject, the average interview lasted approximately thirty minutes. All interviews were recorded in their entirety by the interviewer. Upon completion of data collection, each interview was transcribed verbatim. Field notes were also recorded during the interviews and taken into consideration during the data analysis.

Analysis

The transcripts were analyzed using a system of open and axial coding to organize the data. This particular method of analysis allowed for the interview data to be viewed in a way that allows key concepts to emerge. The first step in this analysis is open coding, in which the data was "broken down into discrete parts, closely examined, and compared for similarities and differences" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 102). These parts were then collapsed into categories in order to begin establishing relationships between the concepts. This is referred to as axial coding. Once these themes are identified, the transcripts were reviewed again to discern key passages that support the insights provided by the open and axial coding stages. Occasionally, a final stage, selective coding, is included in this sort of analysis procedure. Selective coding is intended to clarify and refine the themes that are prevalent in the data as a means of generating theory that is applicable for future research. As this study is exploratory in nature, it would be presumptuous assume that cohesive theory could arise from the data. Therefore, selective was not completed for this particular study.

CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS

Eight relevant open codes emerged in this first step of data analysis. Each represents a statement or sentiment that is pervasive in the fifteen interviews. The intent of the open-coding portion of this data analysis is to allow recurring ideas, words or sentiments to emerge. At this point in the process, these open codes are kept discrete and individual, without regard to one another. These open codes ultimately serve as the raw material for the selective coding process. The following section details these open codes using examples pulled directly from the interview transcripts.

Open Coding

Advertising

As this is ultimately an investigation into viral video as an advertising medium, some effort was made to glean subjects' general attitudes toward advertising. Their initial comments regarding advertising varied greatly. Many seemed indifferent to advertising, especially online. As one subject noted, "I don't think I really pay attention to ads online." Others expressed a more extreme degree of ad aversion; "I really don't pay attention to ads very often. I kind of ignore them on purpose." A small number, however, reported being extremely interested in advertising, "I love ads. Ever since I was little, I just loved funny ads, and I know every ad on TV."

Despite the wide array of opinions and attitudes towards advertising, each of the fifteen subjects mentioned ads alongside other viral content without differentiation. It seems very little, if any, distinction is made between content that is intended to serve as entertainment and content intended to promote a product or service. In short, viewers don't seem to care if something is an advertisement or not. In the words of one subject, "If it's a commercial or just a random video, if it's funny, it's funny."

The same assessment of how humorous something is, and thereby, its quality, is made with little regard to the intent of the video itself. One subject, however, did remark that they do occasionally notify the receiver that they are sending them an ad, especially if the ad is particularly long, "I'd probably put a little disclaimer saying, "This is an ad for yaddah yaddah, but the four minutes just before that are golden." In this case, the sender chose to add the disclaimer, but the fact that it is an ad does not prohibit him from forwarding the video. When queried further about advertising as entertainment, he stated: "I think the line is just getting more and more blurred…They have to put more entertainment into it."

As advertising has become viewed as entertainment, it seems that some of the interview subjects forget about the commercial aspect of advertising altogether. Several subjects noted that they don't care what an ad is for, as long as it is entertaining. One noted, "Most of my favorite commercials are for thing that I don't even use." Another subject, discussing an ad she particularly enjoyed, was unable to remember what the ad was actually for, "Oh, I love the…God what is it for? This is the problem with advertising right now, it's too funny and I can never remember what the ad is for."

One subject in particular described this situation in detail while discussing an ad that she was sent by one of her friends:

It wasn't this situation where it came on TV and I was like, "Ooh, I wonder what this is advertising?" It was the opposite. Some one sent it to me and was like, "Watch how cool this commercial is." And so I wasn't looking for what it was advertising…
Because my sole intent on viewing was rating its coolness in that situation.

At best, the perception of a viral video as advertising is muddled in the fact that it is successful in functioning as entertainment. As this last statement makes clear, the entertainment component of a viral advertisement can subvert and completely obscure the commercial intent of a marketing message. Viewers look to these videos for entertainment, find it, and move on. Whether it is or is not an advertisement falls by the wayside.

Humor

Through the course of these fifteen interviews, there was one fact concerning viral video that was both incontrovertible and pervasive. The quality of an online video is largely judged by how funny it is. This notion became abundantly clear early in each interview, as subjects first started talking about whether they share links with their friends. The following are unprompted statements from four different subjects, illustrating this point:

Just funny things we find.
Not unless something's really funny on YouTube.
If they send me something, I assume it's gotta be pretty interesting or funny.
I mean normally, the only time I ever send anything along would be if it's funny.

Of course, sense of humor is a highly personal trait, though one that is often commonly shared amongst friends. Many respondents reported that they rarely receive videos from friends that are intended to be funny, but miss the mark. Humor seems to serve as a sort of filter, helping determine what to share with friends:

A lot of times if somebody sends me a link to something, I'm more willing to look at it just because I assume that person has looked at it and already thinks it's funny, and my friends generally are gonna like the same general things I do.

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Likewise, agreement on what is or is not funny is a tie that can bind individuals into a group of friends. In discussing a particular video that had become popular amongst her peers, one subject described the following:

> When I watched it with a group, the more times we watched the funnier it became. And the more people who are around you, the more funny it was, because you kind of fed off each other.

While funny may not be the only quality that determines whether a video is passed along, it is clearly a major contributing factor in an individual's decision to do so. One subject, discussing a particular advertisement she had been forwarded describes the decision to pass it along to a group of friends:

> I sent it because I thought it was funny, and I normally send to people who have the same sense of humor, who laugh at the same things. I wouldn't send it to anybody if I knew they wouldn't laugh at it. I have some friends who wouldn't think it was funny. They just don't have the same sense of humor. But normally, most of my friends do.

What you think is funny and choose to share with others also says something about your personality. One subject describes the sense of validation that occurs when sending a funny video that is well received by peers:

> I think when you send something on, it does say a little bit about what you think is funny or interesting or appealing or whatever…If it was something funny, and I find it first and I sent it to other people and they thought it was funny, yeah, there may be a little value in that, because they appreciate my sense of humor.

The sharing of funny content seems to serve as a sort of social glue. This collective sense of humor draws peers together into a sort of link-sharing dialogue that reinforces the bonds between them. These videos ultimately become a part of a common vocabulary of cultural reference.

Personalization

One common assumption concerning viral marketing is that the transmission of viral

content happens in an almost exponential manner. The momentum of a viral campaign, that it to say, its rate of transmission, is assumed to be driven by an individual's willingness to send content out in a broadcast manner to a large group of people at once. While there may be some truth to this assumption, subjects in these interviews tended to be very careful and deliberate about what they sent and to whom. None of the subjects reported passing links along to large groups of people more than rarely. At least one subject reported never having sent things along to groups, stating, "I don't think I've ever sent to multiple people." Another subject, sensing her peers' preference for sharing messages on a more individualized level, reported the following behavior, "I might send the same link to a few people, but it's always in a personalized way."

Of course, individuals' habits related to how they send videos are, to a great degree, tied to their preferences in receiving videos. Each the fifteen subjects interviewed made note of the fact that they prefer to receive things from friends that are personalized or intended just for them because it suits their personality. Receivers appreciate the fact that their friends see a video, think of them, and take the time to forward it. When asked how they felt when receiving a personalized link from a friend, one subject described her reaction in the following manner:

> On FaceBook you can put up a video now, so that's for everybody, and sometimes I'll click on somebody's link like that. Those are funny too, but I'll enjoy it more when somebody specifically sends me a link…They send it to me personally, and they took the time to think, "Well, she'll like this video."

Another subject described a specific incident in which a friend sent a link to an online video that seems particularly suited to her taste and sense of humor:

> Well, actually…there was some Will Ferrell thing on Letterman or something and he was singing a song from Phantom of the Opera. And I'm like, a Phantom addict, and that's the only reason she sent that to me…It feels like a gift, sort of.

Something as simple as an email with a link to a video can feel "like a gift" when sent in a personalized manner. Had the same video been sent to a dozen people in a broadcast manner, one must wonder whether the subject would have the same warm reaction? One subject went so far as to report that she actually perceives things as being funnier when a friend forwards them to her in a personalized manner:

> It think it'd be funnier if someone sent it to me online, like somebody that knows I'd like it because it would just be funny that they remembered it, and they obviously like it enough to send it…It shows that they're wanting to share things they found that they think you'll like, and that they remember you when they see something.

When asked what makes a video worthwhile, whether something was remarkably funny or just well suited for them, one subject replied, "All of the above; extra funny and something that pertains to me."

This preference towards personalization may actually serve to slow the rate of transmission of a viral video. Individuals who choose to broadcast links to dozens of friends, rather than a select few, contribute heavily to the rapid distribution of viral content. One subject describes her process in deciding with whom she should forward a piece of online content:

> If it were related to somebody else, I'd probably share it with them, but only them. I wouldn't send it to five of my friends if I only thought it would relate to two of them.

Rather than sending a video along to the entire, but still quite small, group of five friends, this subject sends videos along with pinpoint accuracy to only those to which it would be best suited.

While this type of decision-making may seem to slow transmission of viral content, it may also help build stronger relationships between individual sender and receivers as well as more positive feeling towards the content itself. A broadcast email, sent to dozens at once may have a certain disposability in the eyes of the receiver. However, a link sent in a more

personalized manner may be looked upon more fondly. Another subject described, in very simple terms, how he decides to forward a video:

> Unless it reminds me of a person, or unless I think it's absolutely hysterical, I don't typically take the time to send it.

Ultimately, it may that simple. Personalization and humor are often the most impactful criteria that factor into the decision to forward viral content. While the interviews yielded several other interesting points in the open-coding process, consistent and pervasive attitudes toward these two factors were found in all fifteen interviews.

YouTube

Very early in the interview process, it became clear that any discussion of online media habits, especially the viewing of video content online, would revolve around YouTube. Every respondent, unprompted by the interviewer, identified the popular video-sharing site as one of the key places they look for online entertainment. One respondent noted that the act of searching for videos online is now referred to as "YouTubing it" amongst her friends.

Furthermore, the discussion of the sharing of links amongst groups of friends also relied heavily on YouTube. Whether the mode of transmission was face-to-face conversation, e-mail, or instant messaging YouTube links are clearly the unit of trade. When asked whether they traded links with their friends, one subject responded, "Not really, not unless something's really funny on YouTube."

When asked what types of things she send and receives online, another subject seemed to imply that the common denominator with all things she sent to and received from friends online was YouTube videos, "It's usually on YouTube, whatever it is."

Yet another subject, responding to the same question, reinforces the ubiquity of the site in an obvious, matter of fact manner, "A lot of YouTube links, what else?"

Several subjects regard YouTube with what seemed to be mixed emotions. While they seem to rely on it for personal entertainment and as a sort of social currency, they bemoan the distraction it has become for themselves and especially their peers. One subject expressed this sentiment as follows:

> I have friends who will just sit on YouTube and just look at YouTube videos, just 'cuz they're bored….That's why I'm like, "Cool. YouTube. Whatever. Someone has too much time on their hands."…That's why I don't really care that much about YouTube videos.

While this particular subject does show some disdain for the time-wasting effect of YouTube, it is clear that she and her peers are nonetheless quite invested in the site as a source of entertainment.

Everyone else

It must be noted that the amount of time spent online for personal entertainment did not vary greatly from subject to subject. While this was not a quantitative inquiry by any means, subjects averaged roughly 2 hours per day online for purposes other than the completion of school or work-related tasks. One subject reported spending only 1 hour per day, while another reported spending as much as 4. In spite of this apparent homogeneity in the amount of time spent online, each subject commented that they thought their peers spend much more time online that they do.

In fact, each subject made some reference to the fact that they believe that everyone else is more frivolous concerning the time they spend online. This implies that individuals see their personal time as being productive and well spent while others are simply bored and

killing time. One subject, discussing a friend who often forwards viral videos describes this as follows:

> I have no idea what he does with his life that he has enough time to sit down and find all these videos, or where he finds them. He just sends them to me.

This sentiment is expressed in many ways, but the sense that everyone else is more active in their pursuit of new online content to share is very apparent.

From this perception that everyone else is spending more time online comes the sense that everyone else has seen every video that they have seen. The majority of the interview subjects expressed a lack motivation to pass along a particular link, regardless of quality, due to the assumption that everyone has seen it already. When discussing a specific advertisement that she liked, one subject expressed her disincentive to share this ad by simply saying, "I feel like a lot of people have seen it already, so I didn't really think I would send it to anybody." Another subject echoes this sentiment, referring to an ad she saw on a friend's social networking page:

> It was a link on Facebook. And then I clicked on it and saw it, so I figured a lot of people were doing that, so I didn't really send it out to people.

This creates a scenario in which the individual feels somewhat disempowered as a part of the process of sharing viral video. On one hand, they believe that everyone else has seen a video, removing incentive for them to send it along to others. Furthermore, they feel no need to spend time actively looking for new content to share, as other seem to be willing and able to invest more time in doing so. Ultimately, the individual sees themselves as simply an audience, not a contributor in passing along viral video or other online links. As one subject so bluntly put it, "I don't spend time on YouTube looking for funny videos. My friends do that."

Ultimately, all subjects in one way or another described themselves as being a part of a large group of recipients of links. One subject, while discussing a friend who is especially good at forwarding interesting links, seems quite aware of this hierarchy:

> I'm like the second tier of people to get things. I have a couple of friends who have friends who will be like, "Oh, I found this funny thing." And then sometimes it'll be passed along to me. So that's kind of my filtering system. They'll see it first. I'll get it sometimes.

This hierarchy that underlies the sharing online viral videos implies a social construct in which individuals opt to invest more or less energy into finding, sending, and forwarding fresh content. At the heart of understanding this construct are the people who actually do choose to invest more time than others in this process.

First

One topic that tended to recur in the interviews was the importance, or lack thereof, of being the first in a peer group to find and forward new content. Initially, subjects responded that primary senders of content simply had more time to spend searching for online videos or chose to waste their time on the distraction of YouTube.

> Some people definitely may be just wasting time, like they don't really want to do their schoolwork. They'll push it off until one o'clock in the morning. And other people do it in their free time. "*What are you doing today? Oh, just YouTubing.*"

While this may be true in some cases, it begs the question of why these individuals choose to use their time in that manner. Subjects were asked to identify potential explanations for this phenomenon, based on their own experience and understanding of their peers' behavior. While most subjects saw themselves as a large group or a "second tier" of recipients, each was able to identify an individual that was of the "first tier" of primary senders of new content. Discussion concerning the motivations of these primary senders

revolved around the value of being the first to find and forward videos of interest to the group.

Subjects were also asked to identify a time when they were the first of their peers to do something. In order to facilitate the discussion of their personal experience, subjects were asked to discuss a time in their life when they were the first in their peer group to find and forward online video content. This tactic was intended to explore the social or emotional gratification attached to being first, or, as several responded phrased it, being "ahead of the curve" or being "a trendsetter". One subject, speaking specifically about funny online videos, described both the value of being first and the social construct of sharing. When asked whether being first was a good thing, he responded in a very rich and descriptive manner:

> If you do it enough times, it builds on your reputation as being someone who has a good sense of humor. It just kind of adds…I guess in simple terms, adds to your value, adds to the value of your friendship with... Because as much as you don't want to say it, friendships are like, you do something for them, they do something for you. So its just another thing you bring to the table.

Clearly, subjects seemed to have positive associations with being first and a personal understanding of the social value of being first. However, a few of these subjects also voiced some discontent with the same behavior in their peers. Rather than respect and admiration for their peers, a latent resentment became apparent. When asked to describe the possible motivations behind a particular friend's efforts to be "ahead of the curve," one subject attempted to provide a somewhat psychoanalytical explanation:

> They just starve for attention…They're the only child. I don't know if that has anything to do with it. But I know they love to be in the spotlight and being the center of attention and planning things and always having praise on them. I mean, it gets frustrating sometimes.

Granted, this statement seems rooted in a personal conflict rather than a larger social phenomenon. However, this subject also noted in their responses to other questions that they do appreciate the benefits of being the receiver of new and interesting online contents, as

much as they question motivation and priorities of the sender. One subject, describing a friend who is particularly good at finding and forwarding content, described their relationship as follows, "I benefit from his long, long hours. [laughter]" Yet another subject, describing a similar friend, echoes this sentiment, "Yeah, you can kind of use her. Just a tiny bit. She's a good friend though." These particular subjects seemingly enjoy the content that their friends find and forward to them and occasionally share the content with other friends. Yet, they are perfectly comfortable with the fact that these relationships are one-sided and report never having found or forwarded new content themselves and sharing reciprocally.

These subjects, among others, see no value in investing their time in finding new content to share with friends when someone else is already doing so, and doing it well. This reinforces the hierarchical dynamic behind sharing of viral video. There is a first tier of people finding and forwarding content and a second tier of viewers consuming this content without reciprocation. There is an intrinsic value in being first, but many seem happy to let a select few do the work and reap whatever social reward there may be. One subject described this fact particularly well:

> I don't find any joy in finding the video or whatever, but I know that people do. And sometimes I appreciate being the one that it gets passed along to, because sometimes they're funny. But it's not my thing.

While they see some value in passing along funny or interesting videos, they do not see it as an original act. Assuming that the sender did not create the video, it is quite likely that someone else passed it along to them.

> I think usually when I see a video or something that my friend sends me; I assume they got it from another friend. I don't assume they went and searched for that and found it. I assume it's being passed around, so I don't think people typically think, "Oh, this person always finds good stuff on the internet."

This sentiment, expressed to varying degrees by several subjects, implies that nobody is

actually "first", but there are senders who have access to new and interesting online videos "before" the large second-tier of receivers. To some degree, this seems to undercut the value in being first altogether.

Time

As alluded to in several of the open codes above, time is a recurring element in each of the interviews. Subjects feel as though many of their peers spend more time online that they do. Subjects feel as though many of their peers waste their time on sites like YouTube as a way of avoiding schoolwork. In the lives of these college undergraduates, time is a valuable commodity. Their lives are lived at the mercy of class schedules, due dates and deadlines. One subject seemed to voice concern for the way in which one of her peers uses her time searching for online videos:

> I do have one friend who makes me wonder how much time she spends searching this stuff out. She seems to find the absolutely strangest video clips ever…It makes me wonder, I don't know, if she's not doing her homework or something.

> This leads to another aspect of time that is worthy of discussion; respect for time. A

common sentiment expressed by subjects is their frustration with peers passing along uninteresting videos that waste their time. In the words of one subject:

> I think that most people sort of respect that they're taking at least a few seconds of somebody's time be sending them something, so I think they would at least consider whether it's something that anyone will even remotely be interested in.

In this scenario, a small detail, such as the running time of a video, may ultimately be of great importance. While other factors such as quality or personal relevance certainly contribute, the length of a video can have tremendous bearing on the decision to forward or not forward. One subject, discussing her decision whether to share or not share a particularly long advertisement, sees excessive running time as an annoyance:

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> It's funny, but it's long, so I would be kind of annoyed. It's probably a good two-and-a-half, three minutes…I think it should be pretty fast, they should get the point across, because most people lose attention pretty fast. I know I do, at least.

To some degree, the subject seems to be weighing the length of the video against how funny it is. In this particular situation, it is clear that a much shorter version of the same ad, without sacrificing the humor, would be more likely to be forwarded. One subject compares her decision-making process for forwarding videos to that of her roommate, who is notorious for sending along uninteresting content:

> It would have to be pretty amazing, because I'd want them to think it was funny too. And, to not be like my roommate, sending me dumb things that take up my time.

> Of course, when a friend forwards something that is interesting, the effect is quite the opposite. The fact that a peer used their valuable time to forward something specifically suited to your taste is typically acknowledged and appreciated. One subject described the feeling of receiving a link from a friend:

> That they took the time to actually send me the video because they thought I'd like it obviously means that they were thinking about me, and that they care.

> Likewise, subjects are very concerned with being deliberate and careful in which videos they choose to forward to others, as not to waste their time on the simple act of sending the link. One subject details how he rationalized the value of taking the time to share a video with a friend:

> If they would enjoy something enough it would warrant looking up their email and spending a few seconds forwarding something to them. It's maybe more a time consideration…if my time is worth whatever they're going to get out of something I would send along.

The process of sending this link, an event that, according to this subject may take "a few seconds," can be enough to dissuade one from sharing a video. Another subject echoed this sentiment:

> If I have time to send it to people, I will, but normally I just watch it and go on…Unless it reminds me of a person, or I think it's absolutely hysterical, I don't typically take the time to send it.

Both examples, the length of a video and the time it takes to forward the video, may seem inconsequential. Yet, both appear to be major factors in the process of making that crucial decision whether to share or not share a video.

Axial Coding

The intention of the axial coding stage in this type of data analysis is to use the results of the open coding as individual components that can be compared and contrasted in order to identify broader themes. Literally, the phrase *axial coding* is meant to imply an exploration of the dynamics that exist at the intersection of the open codes. In this case, there are seven individual open codes to be considered: *humor, time, advertising, first, everyone else, personalization* and *YouTube.*

The axial coding process yields four key categories, *filtering*, *decision-making*, *advertainment*, and *freshness*. The axial codes are comprised of one or more of the open codes, and represents a broad theme that has become apparent in the analysis. The first such theme, f*iltering,* is a function of all seven of the open codes. To some degree, each of the open codes plays a part defining how an individual decides to forward a video or not, forming a somewhat complex filtering process. Some of these open codes, however, bear much more on this decision. For example, the second axial code, *decision-making,* is comprised of the *humor* and *personalization* open codes. It is apparent that these two factors play an enormous part in the likelihood that a viral content will be forwarded. The third axial code, *advertainment*, represents the intersection of advertising and entertainment. The lack of distinction between the two leads to a blurring of the line between them. The entertainment

value of a viral video is judged without regard to whether it was intended to be a marketing message or a piece of entertainment. The final axial code identified, *freshness*, is comprised of the *first* and *everyone else* open codes. The degree to which a viral video is perceived to be new and unseen by an individual's peers has a profound effect on whether they opt to share it. Content that is not fresh does not move forward in the fear that it would waste the time of the recipient. Each of these axial codes will be explored in greater detail in the *Discussion* section of this thesis.

Selective coding

The selective coding phase in this type of analytic induction analysis is where the results of the open and axial coding phases can be interpreted as creating new theory on which future research can rest. Given the exploratory nature of this study, it was unlikely at the outset that that level of coding would occur. While the study has yielded significant insights into the processes behind the transmission of viral marketing and audience perception of viral marketing, there is simply not enough existing theory and research in the filed to provide a solid foundation for newly developed theory.

CHAPTER 6

DISCUSSION

These axial codes identified, *filtering*, *decision-making*, *advertainment*, and *freshness*, are the results of this research. Each represents some insight into viewers' actions and attitudes concerning viral video. The following chapter looks at these findings in detail, exploring their relevance in terms of this study's research questions, existing research discussed in the literature review. This is followed by discussion of possible implications of these findings on future academic research and professional practice, as well as a brief explanation of this study's limitations.

Filtering

The broadest theme that emerges from the data analysis is the elaborate *filtering* process that occurs with the transmission of each and every viral video. Each of these seven open codes plays a part in this process, determining the success or failure of a video. These filters are minor, often subconscious, factors that have some slight bearing on the likelihood that a video will spread as intended.

The most direct example of this filtering process is the perception of time as it pertains to a particular video. As explained in the analysis of the *time* open code, this is two-fold. First, the senders are concerned about wasting their own time in sending the video. While it may not seem like a laborious process, the moment it takes to forward a video is of value to the sender, and can inhibit the forwarding of a video. Likewise, the sender is also

sensitive of the time it takes for the receiver to view the video. In this sense, the length of a video becomes extremely important. A video that otherwise meets all of the sender's criteria to be passed along may be left unsent if the running time is unwarranted. A video of lesser quality may be more likely to be shared if it is of a more compact running time. These seemingly minor assessments of time, measured in mere seconds, can make all the difference in terms of the success or failure of a video.

On a related note, the availability and convenience of sending of a video are also important. *YouTube* availability, introduced above as an open code, is key to this convenience. As each of the subjects interviewed mentioned the site as the default source of online video, its importance as a vehicle for viral content becomes clear. YouTube provides an interface that is simple and easy to use, making it wildly popular. It has become a compendium of viral content, and in a sense, YouTube has become synonymous with online video altogether. The subjects' reliance on this one site implies that if a video does not exist on YouTube, it doesn't exist at all. At the very least, the site has become a convenience to those engaged in sharing video, helping assuage some of the issues surrounding *time*.

The issues surrounding the open codes of *first* and *everyone else* are somewhat interrelated in terms of filtering. Both speak to the importance of providing new content into the dialogue of viral videos shared amongst peers. In a way, they are two degrees of the same general phenomenon. Some individuals are inclined to spend their time searching for fresh videos that their peers have not yet seen. Others do not choose to be so proactive, but do hesitate to share a video they suspect everyone else has already seen. In any event, it is this fear of redundancy that can often dampen the prospect of forwarding what may otherwise be considered worth forwarding.

If any of these factors were to be considered of lesser importance in the filtering process, it would be the perception of a video as *advertising*. As established in the discussion of the advertising open code, viewers draw little distinction between what is and is not an ad. While an ad is often sent with the disclaimer that it is an ad, it is sent nonetheless. The sender may be aware of whether something is, in fact, an ad, though this has no bearing on whether something will be shared amongst friends. It is evaluated primarily in terms of its value as entertainment and little else. In the words of one of the subjects, *"Funny is funny."*

The two remaining open codes, *humor* and *personalization*, also serve as filters for what viral video is shared, but on a grander scale. T*ime, advertising, first, everyone else,* and *YouTube* provide a slight, almost subconscious, filtering mechanism. H*umor* and *personalization* operate as major factors in the decision whether or not to forward a video, and will be discussed in greater detail as the *decision making* axial code.

From a theoretical standpoint, the process represents the fundamental difference between the traditional marketing paradigms lamented by both John Grant (2006) and the authors of the Cluetrain Manifesto (2000). Where as the old model of advertising was built on the principles of reach, frequency and a captive audience, viral marketing is built on a network of individuals who are able to self-select what they share with each other based on their own convenience. While these filtering mechanisms do not create the "market conversations" called for in Cluetrain, they do represent the power of the viewer to establish the parameters in which viral marketing can exist. These filters are a gatekeeping mechanism, representing the fine line between what becomes a part of the audience's experience and what does not.

The first research question presented in this study (RQ1) dealt with the motivation to forward viral content. These seven factors, *humor, time, advertising, first, everyone else,*

personalization and *YouTube*, all play some part in the motivation to forward viral content. The filtering process is very individualized. While there are factors that bear more heavily on the decision to forward content, these factors each have the ability to enhance or dampen the likelihood that a video will be forwarded.

Decision-Making

The *humor* and *personalization* open codes represent two factors that bear more heavily than others on the decision to forward a video. Each serves as primary criteria in this decision, whether independently or in tandem. Essentially, these are the two traits that drive the bulk of viral video sharing, at least the sharing amongst peers that is considered welcome and entertaining. What truly separates *humor* and *personalization* from the *filtering* codes mentioned above is that they are evaluations of quality rather than convenience. A good video, one worthy of being shared, needs to be either extremely funny, extremely suited to one individual, or both. While other practical considerations are relevant, *humor* and *personalization* are paramount.

Humor is seen as the major factor behind the spread of viral videos. As illustrated above, all of the subjects equate how funny something is with its overall quality. Humor is the shared currency that drives viral video. In order for content to be worthy of being shared, it must be deemed funny by both the sender and the intended receiver. While other *filtering* factors mentioned above may inhibit sharing to some degree, humor is without a doubt, the driving force behind viral video. Less that desirable running time, convenience and freshness of a particular video can be easily overcome if the video is funny enough. In the minds of each of the subjects interviewed, funny equals viral.

When discussing the decision-making process, *personalization* is the one factor that competes with *humor* in importance. In a sense, humor can be a blunt instrument. Some videos are funny enough that they can be shared with a variety of individuals and are well received. Conversely, the degree to which a viral video is forwarded in a personalized manner is much more incisive a tool. The ability to select a video that suits one individual recipient is seen as key in building personal relationships using viral video. As illustrated in the *personalization* open-code analysis, the subjects interviewed have a preference for sending and receiving videos in a personalized manner. It establishes a bond between individuals based on mutual understanding of each other's taste and preference. Of course, sense of humor is often used to establish such a bond.

Several references cited in the literature review presented above corroborate these findings. Two of Gladwell's (2002) *Three Rules of the Tipping Point* are directly concerned with factors that lead to the success or failure of viral content. *The Stickiness Factor* implies that the more interesting, attractive or entertaining an idea is, the more likely it is to propagate. *The Power of Context* states that the timing and personal relevance of an idea dictate whether it is to be deemed important enough to be shared with others. These two rules, in terms of this study, are directly analogous to *humor* and *personalization*.

Likewise, the findings of this study are reinforced by Phelps (2004). The first main insight of the Phelps study was that entertainment value, especially humor, functioned as the key motivator behind the dissemination of pass-along emails. The second finding was that the careful selection and personalization of emails had an effect on the way in which the email was received. In both cases, the social value of sending and receiving information is emphasized.

To a great degree, this way of understanding the importance of humor and personalization is supported by Lin's (2001) theory of social capital. Viral videos represent the type of information on which social capital operates. This information is a commodity. It has a value that can be leveraged to attain social position. In this case, that value is established by a particular video's *humor* and *personalization*. Funny videos are valuable. Unfunny videos are not. Videos that have some personal relevance are valuable. Those that have no personal significance are less so. Of course, the assessment of value is completely subjective. What is funny or personally relevant to one may be of no significance to another. This is part of what makes social capital so applicable to viral marketing. The network of individuals involved is potentially quite broad. The connections between them are primarily digital and easily accessed. The perceived value of the viral content traded is completely subjective from peer to peer. The transmission of viral content amongst peers certainly seems to happen within the theoretical construct of social capital.

As with Lin, Arndt (1967) places emphasis on the social consequences of information exchange between peers. While Arndt was concerned specifically with word-of-mouth, his key findings establish that "social pressure and surveillance" (p. 25) occur in a network of peers who share information. In this study, the *humor* and *personalization* potential of viral content are the qualities with which Arndt's social pressure occur. An individual's social status in terms of viral video sharing network is directly tied to their ability to find and forward humorous content to the group or to consistently forward personally relevant content to individuals.

Ultimately, these *decision-making* factors speak to this study's first research question (RQ1), concerning viewer's motivation to share viral marketing messages. An individual's decision to share a video with peers seems to be directly tied to their desire to affirm their

position in a social hierarchy. Sharing content that will be perceived as humorous or personalized seems to be an attempt on the part of an individual to ingratiate themselves to their peers. If this social motivation did not exist, viewers would find interesting content online, watch it, and not even consider forwarding it to others. The driving force behind the sharing of viral content appears to be entirely social in nature.

Advertainment

The extent to which the subjects interviewed regarded viral video advertisements simply another form of entertainment was somewhat surprising. The lack of distinction made between the two on the part of viewer's places it in the nascent category of marketing media called *advertainment*, a hybrid of advertising and entertainment.

In one light, this phenomenon can be viewed positively. The fact that senders and receivers of viral video are not discriminating against advertisements bodes well for the potential success of a campaign. A less tolerant attitude towards advertising would likely mean diminished prospects for transmission. Videos are evaluated based on criteria such as humor and personalization rather than where it originates. Ultimately, it means one less roadblock in the path that a video travels throughout an audience. In John Grant's *Brand Innovation Manifesto* (2006), the central theme is a call for advertising that is both culturally relevant and engaging in terms of its target audience. Clearly viral content is capable of meeting these criteria. The audience has welcomed viral video as a form of entertainment.

Phelps (2004) and Porter and Golan (2006) corroborate this point. In both studies, the perceived entertainment value or viral content was paramount in it success or failure. The Porter and Golan study offered a content analysis of both traditional television and online viral commercials. They found that to a great degree viral video is seen as entertainment first

and marketing message second. The commercial product appeals used in traditional advertising were rarely employed in viral ads due to the audience's expectation of entertainment. They also noted that this entertainment typically came in the form of humorous or sexually suggestive content.

It is clear that viewers' perception of viral marketing differs radically from their perception of traditional marketing. The second research question presented in this study (RQ2) was concerned with this particular finding. While it may be true that some see traditional marketing efforts such as television advertisement as entertaining, the success of viral marketing is reliant on whether or not the content is entertaining. In order for a viral video to be voluntarily forwarded from viewer to viewer, it must do more than simply sell a product.

Unfortunately, there is an alternate effect related to the lack of distinction made between advertising and entertainment. As illustrated in the analysis of the *advertising* open-code, many viewers are so focused on being entertained the advertising content falls by the wayside. They either lose the perception that a video is an ad or become so distracted that they have no idea what the ad is for. The truly interesting paradox is that the more entertaining an ad is, the more this effect seems to be amplified. It literally seems that viewers can end up laughing so hard that they miss the portion of the ad that tells them what is for. While being funny or entertaining may be the key to a viral ad's success in terms of transmission, it may also be its downfall in terms of retention.

The phenomenon of advertainment speaks to the third and fourth (RQ3/RQ4) research questions presented in this study. The value of a viral ad is directly tied to how humorous the content or personally relevant it is. This perception of advertising as entertainment does allow ads to be forwarded without bias, but also distracts viewers from

any commercial message that may be present (RQ4). Not only do viewers not make a distinction between different types of viral marketing, they make no distinction between marketing and entertainment content (RQ3). This insight is particularly challenging, as the component that drives the transmission of viral videos, its entertainment value, seems to be the very component that distracts viewers from the fact that it is an ad at all.

Freshness

The fourth and final axial code that became apparent in the analysis is *freshness*. *Freshness* is a theme that arises from the issues of *first* and *everyone else*. There is some value in either being first to find a video, forward a video or even receive video. Its freshness is a quality, along with *humor* and *personalization*, which has some bearing on the likelihood that content will be passed along. A viral video that is perceived by an individual to be new and unseen by his or her peer group has a high value. A video that everyone else has already seen had a diminished value.

Of course, freshness in and of itself is not an assurance that a video will succeed. The decision-making axial code discussed above still represents the primary criteria by which a video will be judged. If a video is not funny and not personally relevant, the fact that it is fresh and new is of no consequence. It will not be forwarded, as a video is always at the mercy of this decision making process carried out by an individual, not to mention the filtering criteria. In fact, the open codes *first* and *everyone else* do appear as part of this filtering axial code, as previously mentioned.

The true importance of freshness is the extent to which it sees to drive the behavior of the senders of viral videos. Being first to find or forward a video had some perceived value amongst a peer group. From a social capital point of view, the *freshness* of a video is a

commodity. The person who controls the distribution of this content has a certain advantage over their peers. They also invest time in consistently being the first and forward to find interesting content, thereby building a reputation as being ahead of or above their peers in whatever social hierarchy exists.

The open code of *time* also factors into the theme of *freshness*. The quest to find new content is often time consuming, and only a small part of any given peer group seems to be willing to invest this time. Of the fifteen subjects interviewed for this study, none identified themselves as being this type of person. However, each was able to identify an individual in their peer group that did. While many voiced respect for the fact that this individual is good at sending them entertaining content, they also questioned this person's motivation. While almost all subjects questioned the amount of time others put into this endeavor, a few suspected more ego-driven motivation. Referring back to Nan Lin's (2001) conception of social capital, some hinted that a peer's motivation in sending them viral videos is driven by a desire to establish or solidify their social position. While thankful for the interesting content they received, they seemed to resent the fact that this hierarchy exists.

Unwilling to invest their own time in finding new content, the subjects seemed to react to this in two ways. First, they downplay the importance of finding this fresh content and question the time that others spend in doing so. Second, they do what they can to find their position in this hierarchy. While they are not engaged in actively finding out the freshest content, they do find some satisfaction in being the first to forward something that they have received. Subjects referred to themselves as being in the middle or "second tier" of this viral video hierarchy. One subject described this as "benefit[ing] from his long, long hours." This reliance on peers to supply fresh content reinforces the social capital implications of viral video sharing. Even the "second tier" subjects are working to establish position, to get closer

to the source or the content. They benefit by being able to send things along to other peers, establishing their own place in this network.

This social hierarchy of viral video sharing seems to be directly analogous to Gladwell's *Tipping Point* (2002), in which he presents the three laws that seem to govern the transmission of a meme or cultural idea. The *The Law of the Few* states that messages are passed from person to person and that some people are more likely to pass information along than others. This point corroborates the finding that there is a tiered hierarchy of viral senders and receivers. It also reinforces the point that some individuals invest more of their time and energy into this process and therefore, their place in this hierarchy. Of course, Lin (2001) confirms and elaborates this point in his previously discussed concept of social capital.

The first research question presented (RQ1) dealt with the motivation to forward viral content. The absence of *freshness* seems to be a factor that can eliminate the motivation to share a video, in spite of other *filtering* and *decision-making* factors. If the content in question is not perceived as new or unseen by a viewer, the likelihood that they will forward it to their peers is severely diminished, if not eliminated entirely. Typically, only fresh content tends to be forwarded.

Implications for the advertising industry

Each of the four axial codes can be interpreted into actionable tactics for the conception and creation of viral marketing campaigns. *Humor* and *personalization*, the criteria that seem to fuel the *decision-making* process behind the transmission of viral video, are measures of quality. It is the quality of a viral video that dictates not only whether the ad will resonate with viewers, but also whether the ad will be seen at all. This is a major departure from the traditional media-planning model that relies on the principles of reach and

frequency to reach a target audience. Simply put, it is all about ensuring that as many members as possible of the desired demographic see the spot (reach) as many times as it takes for it to be remembered (frequency). Basically, marketers could force-feed an audience by simply placing a commercial in the right place at the right time. Budget permitting, they could do it over an over again until they were assured that the audience had taken note. In this traditional way of presenting an advertisement to an audience, a viewer could dislike and ad but they could not avoid it. They had virtually no control over what ads they saw. They were a captive audience.

Viral videos function in a completely different manner. Certainly, there are video ads that appear on websites and attached to other entertainment content, but that is simply online advertising, not viral marketing. By its very nature, there is no way to force an audience to sit through a viral ad. The process requires the audience to opt-in and to share the video with peers. The notion of reach is directly tied to a single viewer's decision whether or not to forward a video. There is no other mechanism at work. Funny, relevant ads get forwarded while others do not. The same is true of frequency. It is not possible to force a viewer to see an ad more than once unless they choose to. While the very best viral videos are viewed over and over again while sharing it with friends and re-viewing it for one's own amusement, most suffer a different fate. They are watched once, possibly forwarded, and never seen again.

This is precisely where the notion of *freshness* becomes so vital. If even the best viral videos are seen only a few times and forgotten, how can the advertiser continue to remain fresh in a viewer's mind? Without the ability to force the audience to view the same advertisement multiple times, how does a marketer compensate for what is lost in terms of frequency? The fact that a viral video needs to be new and unseen in order to succeed has

interesting implications on the way that campaigns are created and launched. Traditionally, television campaigns would be comprised of a limited number of spots centered on a common theme or strategy. Being quite expensive to produce, these spots were typically few in number and shown as many times as possible as to maximize investment in production.

With viral video, it may be more beneficial to produce more spots that are shorter in length. One long viral video with a running time of sixty seconds may be viewed once and passed along to peers, who will in turn view it once and possibly pass it along again. A series of shorter clips, for example, four videos running fifteen seconds each, could offer four different viewing occasion and four different instances to pass them along. The key here is that the four videos be released either at different time or through different means so that they are not viewed and forwarded in quick succession. This type of strategy also feeds the need of some audience members to be the first to find and forward content. It provides more individual videos and thereby more opportunities to share with peers. It may also tend to alleviate the perception that a video is not worth sharing because of the concern that everyone else has seen it. Ultimately, this strategy of providing a larger quantity of smaller videos could take on an almost game-like tone in which the search for new videos becomes an engaging part of the campaign.

Of course, the notion of providing the audience with shorter clips also plays into some of the more practical concerns associated with the *filtering* axial code. Subjects reported being somewhat hesitant to share long videos out of respect for the time of the receiver. Shorter videos certainly alleviate that concern to a great degree, possibly eliminating one of the filters that could possibly hinder transmission.

Another filter was centered on the convenience of a site like YouTube as a vehicle for distribution of viral video. It is not the intention of this study to endorse YouTube as a

service, but the extent to which subjects see the site as a primary source of video content should be addressed. Unless a campaign is designed in such a way that visiting the website of the brand being advertised is necessary, viral videos should be easily found on the most commonly used video sites. In fact, there is no reason why every commercial currently on television is not also on a site like YouTube. Though many of the viral campaigns discussed in the interviews were intended for online viewing, the vast majority were television spots that were posted and became popular online. Though not intended to be a part of a viral campaign, they became so at the will of the audience. This may seem somewhat accidental and haphazard, but the simple act of placing a commercial on a site like YouTube can only facilitate the possibility that an audience will find it and share it as viral content.

The issues raised by the perception of viral videos as *advertainment* are not so easily dealt with. In fact, this issue is not exclusive to the world of viral marketing at all. This finding reinforces a fundamental problem with advertising in general; the disconnect between content and commerciality. For decades, viewers have griped that ads often tell you nothing about the products they purport to be selling. Advertising agencies often become so caught up on the ads being funny, sexy or visually engaging that all focus on the product in question is lost. At one point or another each of us has remarked how much we enjoy a particular commercial but are unable to remember what brand, or even what type of product the ad was for. The same is true of viral video as a medium, and possibly to a greater extent. Ideally, a viral advertisement should not rely solely on being funny. The humor needs to be intrinsic to the product being sold. Far too many thirty second commercials are comprised of twenty-five seconds of funny content with a five second tag at the end that tells you what brand is being promoted. This tactic does not work with viral video, especially when the viewer is able to stop the video whenever the see fit. Ultimately, the product being advertised

and the entertainment content of the ad need to be integrated in order to have maximum effectiveness. It seems that the only solution to this issue is the hardest to accomplish; better creative.

Implications for future academic research

With so little empirical research dealing specifically with viral marketing, it is clear that there are tremendous possibilities for future academic studies. The results of this study represent avenues for further academic research that can hopefully help establish that solid foundation of viral marketing research that is, thus far, absent. This study deals with viewer perceptions of viral marketing and their habits concerning the sending and receiving of these videos. While this series of interviews can help gain bring relevant themes to light, it is not intended to be a conclusive evaluation of the viral video phenomenon. A qualitative study such as this one offers insight into individual's perceptions of viral marketing, but its findings are in no way generalizable to the general population. A quantitative study, most likely a survey of the same demographic, would be extremely beneficial in furthering the understanding of viral marketing. Such an approach would allow for the issues surrounding this subject to be explored with more precision. Specifically, questions regarding the time individuals invest in online video searcher, viewing, and forwarding could be answered. Issues such as viewer perception of content, running time and ad recall could all be explored to some degree through a survey. Ultimately, such issues may best be explored using in an experimental setting where different variables can be manipulated in a variety of ways and evaluated by an actual viewer. That said, it seems to be that the most logical next step following this study would be a general exploratory survey.

Study Limitations

While focusing the sample frame on one demographic at one university did offer a certain convenience, it did potentially limit the variety of responses. While there is no evidence that this university's population has a particularly distinct attitude towards viral marketing, one must wonder whether the perspective of students at one university differs from those in other parts of the country. Likewise, richness of the responses offered during in-depth qualitative interviews is ultimately dependent on the candor of the subjects. Every effort was made to put the subject at ease. Each was assured that the interview transcripts would be completely de-identified, severing any connection between the individual subject and the responses given. Reflexivity on the part of the researcher is always present in some degree. Every possible step was taken to mitigate this bias. It is also important to note that the results of this study are intended to be exploratory in nature and not intended to be representative of the attitudes of all university students. As with all qualitative research, the results are not generalizable to a broader population. Such results are intended to provide deep insight into the subjects' attitudes.

CHAPTER 6

SUMMARY

This study began as an exploratory investigation into viral video as a means to foster understanding of the broader world of viral and consumer-to-consumer marketing online. Being a nascent and largely misunderstood topic, there was little in the way of existing research on which to rely. Popular understanding of viral marketing was largely based on anecdotal case studies, broad assumptions and the limited empirical research that exists. It was the intent of this study to explore these issues in a broad and open-minded way as a means of opening the door to further inquiry. The themes of *filtering*, *decision-making*, *advertainment* and *freshness,* shed light not only on the factors that contribute to the dissemination of vital content, but the social constructs behind it all. As viral marketing continues to become more and more prevalent as a practice, the insight gained by this study will hopefully be of value in future academic research and professional practice. As viral marketing has yet to become a full-fledged advertising medium, such research will be vital helping it do so.

APPENDIX

Interview Guide

1) Would you describe yourself as being net savvy?

    a. How many hours a week to you think you spend online, recreationally?

    b. What types of things do you look at regularly online?

    c. Do you and/or your friends keep blogs or social networking sites?

    d. Do you trade links, videos, etc. with your friends via email?

2) Tell me about some of the things you've received from friends/family recently.

   (Interviewer will identify specific viral marketing items from response.)

    a. Tell me more about this particular item. What was interesting about it?

    b. How did this item came to your attention?

    c. Did you pass it along to others in any way? Why/why not?

    d. What factors affected that decision? Content? Need to share?

    e. How aware were you that this particular item was a marketing message?

3) How did the fact that it was a marketing message effect your decision to share it?

    a. If you had seen this message on television, with no way to share it online,
       would you feel compelled to tell people about it? Why/Why not?

    b. Are you more likely to share something that is not marketing? Why?

    c. How would you feel if you found out that something you thought was not
       a marketing message turned out to be? (Use examples based on prior
       responses)

4) Tell me about a new product that you've recently become aware of.

    a. How did you become aware of it? (Interviewer identifies type of
       marketing message: viral, traditional, WOM, etc.)

b. What if you had found out about it a different way?

c. Do you think that would have affected the way you perceived the product?

5) Do you know what "viral marketing" is?

a. How would you define it?

b. Could you give me some specific examples of viral marketing?

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