1. Viral reality marketing

> *How do you tell a story of a marketing campaign that is not (yet) a marketing campaign when encountered?*
>
> *A campaign driven by curiosity spurred on by uncertainty and ambiguity, and everchanging as it grows. Where each participant and beholder encounters a different set of subparts and facets and does so in a different order than everyone else.*
>
> *A campaign that is brief but intense. Appearing out of nowhere, without warning nor time to prepare. Omnipresent yet fleeting, gone as quickly as it appeared. And where the digitally mediated communications immediately wither away. Distorting or erasing the components and leaving the campaign hazy and difficult to pinpoint retrospectively.*
>
> *This is *a* story of that.*

This dissertation explores an advertising strategy where the work of spreading specific messages and brand awareness is carried out by those who are the targets of the campaign. They participate on a completely voluntary basis, which means that every time a message is shared, or awareness created, it is an active choice. Awareness is created through well-established relations and very often very personal ones too. Such personal stamps of approval of brands and messages are exceedingly difficult to buy with money. Yet in viral marketing, it often seems to be available to advertisers at low cost. Success story upon success story confirms that it is possible to reach millions of consumers in no time, partly because of personal relations and willingness to share, and partly due to the fast pace with which information can travel through digitally mediated settings.

However, despite the economically cheap solution, there are risks that need considering. The initial sender is not in control of the message, and there is a price to pay if that message is changed, either deliberately or through misunderstandings. Let us start with a few empirical examples.

Viral. Viral is something infectious, which spreads exponentially and survives due to its access to hosts. When it comes to information spreading through social media, a few examples are: news of missing persons, where crowds of volunteers share pictures and information about the person[i], a home video of a three-year-old girl providing an exhaustive summary of Star Wars Episode IV to her parents in the kitchen[ii] or copycats in the wake of that video[iii], a piece of music that can become the most watched video in the *history* of YouTube in less than 6 months[iv] and result in millions of remakes[v].

The viral content does not have to be controversial. A one-minute-long video clip of a frog sitting on a bench doing absolutely nothing became subject to millions of shares in less than a month[vi] .

These examples show that we must not simply focus on the original content being spread. To understand what we are dealing with, we need theoretical tools that capture and shed light on references to, and alterations of, that content. To stay in the metaphor of the virus, the content mutates as it spreads. The video of the girl in the kitchen encounters new hosts, who find it sufficiently intriguing to make another version of the summary as a "reply". The frog on the bench might be the most boring 43 seconds you have ever spent, and one must wonder why it has been watched millions of times. However, it has mutated, as various people have edited the video, adding soundtracks or alternative titles to the video, or even making completely new videos involving benches but no frog, yet referencing the original and connected to it through tags such as #sittingonabench. This instantly raises the question: how is a video of a frog able to get so much attention? How does it become viral? And, given that there are videos where the frog is not even featured, but only represented through the title of the video referring to it, what is the shape and what are the boundaries of the story of the frog? Where does the viral content begin and end? Initially, we could have stated that these examples consist of various innovative contributions of various independent hosts who have engaged and enhanced exposure. Furthermore alterations and mutation are central features in most of the examples.

Marketing is a strategic way of spreading information to create awareness of a specific product, brand or message or altering people's perception of this. A basic example is planting a sign where it is likely to get high exposure. A real estate developer might benefit from advertising along the highway to promote houses closer to the city. Announcing that this saves time spent in traffic jams on the highway presents the product to potential buyers. Companies can buy access to places where the target demographic is exposed.

Placement in time can be equally important to the physical placement. In the weeks surrounding Christmas, people spend more money and may be more likely to consider quick loans to make ends meet. Thus, marketing concerns itself with ensuring exposure at the right place to the right people at the right time. Achieving this can involve using an already established network such as the drivers stuck in traffic or people during Christmas season. *Time*, *place*, and already established, *temporary networks* of potential targets are the keywords worth remembering here.

Viral marketing combines the phenomenon of the viral spreading with the strategic attempts to create exposure of specific messages for a target audience. It attempts to have people voluntarily engage and thus create awareness, with the same amount of enthusiasm as when something takes off on its own.

In this type of marketing, it is not directly the brand or product that circulates, but rather the story of it. Consider the following example of how an audience can be mobilized to share, and how place and exposure can get new dimensions when something becomes viral. A Danish comedian, Anders Lund Madsen, had a sign made in Danish, announcing a Danish TV broadcast. However, he had it set up in India along a roadside[vii]. Along with the sign he announced, in a Danish press release, that the reason for placing his sign in India, was because so many people live there and therefore the exposure is much higher than in Denmark. (Lund Madsen 2010). This is of course not the real argument! It is a comedian's attempt to reach people through humor and absurdity. But it is also a strategy that relies on others to ensure that the story of the sign, along with the actual message, gets shared among Danes and thus reaches the target audience.

The outcome of this stunt was that people started talking about the sign and sharing photographs of it on various social media like Twitter, Facebook, Flicker and Tumblr. Thus, the story of the sign in India spread. This is clearly marketing, as the goal was to announce a new Danish TV show. However, the initial sender was not in control of the dissemination, which explicitly relied on others to engage and share the story. It was the story and picture of the sign, which was the advertisement, not the sign itself, and this could be shifted onto other media where it received exposure. It could become viral as it was easily converted to a variety of platforms and people found it worth sharing. As we shall see throughout this dissertation, there are many creative variations of this kind of engagement by audiences.

Viral reality marketing. The dissertation further zooms in on a specific type of viral marketing**.** In this type, initial stories are made to look real, even though they are staged and are part of a specific campaign. This attempt to boost spreading of awareness serves the purpose of adding a layer of mystique and ambiguity. By insinuation that a story *might* not be true, many get curious and start activating their social network to learn what they think and to make up their own mind. They start developing and sharing their own theories by making new connections between bits of information and by filling in gaps. This often results in an exceedingly high exposure. In almost all cases, the product or message in question is not clear from the beginning. It is revealed after enough exposure has been gained. This strategy intrigues more people to engage. However, it also adds a challenge for the companies using it. Even though their stories get high exposure, there is work to be done in ensuring links between the stories that developed *before* it was revealed to be a campaign, and the specific product that is intended to gain awareness from the exposure *as* it is revealed. Furthermore, there is a challenge in making sure people do not feel deceived and lose trust in the product, as they discover they were part of a campaign without knowing for sure.

The Danish Road Safety Council, in a campaign intended to create speed awareness among young men in Denmark, released a video on YouTube that informed viewers about a new Danish solution for creating such awareness. The video entitled Speedbandits, informed the viewers of a new system featuring topless women standing along the roadside while holding speed limit signs. While awareness of speed was part of the campaign from the very beginning, the story of the solution of using topless women was staged. And since the Danish Road Safety Council did not immediately reveal that they were behind the video, no one knew for sure if it was part of a campaign and nor did they know who might be behind it. Several foreign countries however, believed the story to be true. A Brazilian news channel TvGlobo even broadcast the story as such. Danes of course knew that the news was not real even before it was officially claimed as an ad, yet they engaged because they were entertained by the rest of the world believing, discussing, and contemplating it. Thus, the Danes voluntarily created exposure of a message about speed awareness, while intrigued by who might have made the video in the first place. After some weeks it was finally confirmed to be a made-up story, and the Danish Road Safety Council officially declared that they were responsible for it. Politicians, feminists, comedians, and people with a different cultural background than Danish, uttered their objections. For some, it was the way women were exposed that became pivotal for the discussion. For others, it was the mix of sex (a matter of leisure) and traffic security (a highly serious matter) that was the problem (Lofstad 2007). Thus, a viral reality marketing campaign might be subjected to great exposure and might raise awareness of speed from the very beginning, but it also facilitates many voices that mingle with the message of speed awareness simultaneously. For instance, people who were fooled into believing it to be true, or feminists who turned it into a matter of gender instead of speed. The Speedbandits facilitated a range of discussions of differences in culture as it traveled unhindered across geographical borders as well as cultural boundaries. It became a cacophony of voices and opinions. And while more voices and perspectives emerged, the campaign gained momentum and grew even further.

1.1 Fieldwork and the field

As an anthropologist, I designed my project to include fieldwork, thereby prioritizing empirically gathered data as the starting point and motivation for the theoretical and methodological discussions to come.

Doing fieldwork on viral marketing gave rise to two challenges; firstly, that of setting up boundaries for what should be studied, while seriously taking the lack of boundaries as valuable data too. Secondly, dealing with the double role of campaigns before and after they are revealed to be so.

As the campaigns held back vital information, the information regarding the brand, and the sender behind the campaigns were not the same when gathering data and when, retrospectively, analyzing that data. It shifted between unknown, potential, and confirmed outcomes. This called for an awareness of positioning in time, for me as an ethnographer in the field, as well as in the role of an analyst looking back.

1.1.1 Boundaries

The primary consequence of using empirical data gathered through fieldwork is that being in the field, and taking the paths of informants seriously would point in many contradictory directions. Like any social phenomenon, viral marketing is not ready and delimited. However, the true benefits of conducting fieldwork are exactly the new insights that emerge from such tensions. One of the main insights gained is spurred by participants not fitting into my analytical boundary-making between advertisers and those who do the work of spreading awareness. When entering the field, I encountered an interesting difference between the two groups. Whereas advertisers were talking specifically about *their* campaigns, comparing their original intentions with later measurements of exposure, those who shared it operated with the content as part of their own agendas, more than as part of any campaign. For the latter group, it almost never mattered whether there was a marketing strategy or a product behind it. This made me expand my criteria to collect data while in the field to include things that were considered viral without limiting my focus to ads. The different way the two groups defined the boundaries of what was shared allowed for an awareness of the two seemingly conflicting perspectives on ads, depending on whether I would understand the approach of the advertisers or of those who contributed by sharing. Since the first group's success relied on the latter's way of sharing, the difference became pivotal for my data gathering. It was the first sign to look for multiple *coexisting agendas*.

Campaigns, competing brands, politicians, comedians, journalists, and Youtubers[1] – all competed by modifying and removing elements to ensure their own agendas. Sometimes more agendas walked hand in hand and even acted as catalysts for each other. Sometimes they limited each other. Asking whose exposure is created when content is shared is therefore not a simple matter that can be separated into those who make campaigns and those who enable them.

The importance of references

To describe the perspective from where to study the phenomenon of things going viral, it is necessary to illustrate the complexity when it comes to empirical boundary-making. At the beginning of my fieldwork, I took specific ads that people had shared on Facebook as a starting point, while asking them why. While asking my informants, about what they were sharing, I was met with a surprising response. To most of them, whatever content was worth sharing was referred to as viral[2], and whether it was an ad or not, was not mentioned. Participant observation allowed me to take an active part in the activities of sharing and discussing content with my informants. This meant that while I was in the field, I started locating popular videos, pictures, and stories, and took an active part in passing them on, discussing them, as well as nurturing various networks through exchanges of such content. In the beginning I spent a lot of time exchanging videos and opinions with informants, mediated through Facebook, Rocket on, YouTube, Vimeo and FunnyorDie.com. To get a better idea of the platforms my informants inhabited, whenever I received something, I started asking what *else* was worth watching. Thereby I tried to establish a link between what I had just received, and other things considered equally funny, serious, artistically amazing etc. Whenever that question was asked, people started showing their personal favorites, and most of them eagerly continued saying: *"you have to see this too"*, often followed *by: "oh that reminds me of this one",* as if it was some sort of association game. I also asked for recommendations when meeting informants outside the computer mediated setting. Sometimes we were just talking and referring to classics. This of course required that we shared some of the same references, but it was also a way of determining if we thought of the same kind of content. These classics showed me that there is a practice of actively making *inclusions and exclusions* through referencing.

[1] People who make money out of creating content on their own YouTube channel.

[2] This was the response in 2008. In 2021, concepts of viral and viral marketing are no longer buzzwords that describe whatever is shared for entertainment through a digital setting. But when I began fieldwork, when I asked my informants for examples on something viral, they referred to whatever was shared on social media.

I realized that there was an already established genre of content that I should know to be able to participate. Referring to classics required experience and a familiarity with what was going on, and what people assumed that other people knew as well. I did not possess this knowledge from the beginning. I slowly learned more and more about such classics. I learned that there was a repertoire of pictures, pieces of music, and genres of storytelling that were brought into play again and again, yet always with tiny twists that made them relevant in new contexts. For instance, referring to Chuck Norris, using a Russian reversal, attaching the phrase “like a Boss” etc. These were classics many of my informants knew, and were often revisited whenever something else gained much attention. However, one could not just refer to them in any way or any context. One would have to choose the right references at the right time, with the right words or pictures for others to like it, or pass it on. I will return to the whole genre and the social skills and knowledge one would have to possess to make successful references in chapter three. For now, it is sufficient to say that starting to follow informants wherever they pointed, made visible how not everyone could make such successful references. This made it clear, that there was a field to enter; a field that for the anthropologist must be entered with humility and with a beginner’s limitations, but also with curiosity and without too many preconceived assumptions.

Often, we ended up in front of a screen almost fighting to share funny stories, hilarious jokes, prank calls, artful demonstrations of skill etc. These encounters were like social magnets. They often happened at parties, where a group of people ended up gathering around a screen, using their personal favorites as party entertainment. But much more than taking shift in showing videos was going on in these exchanges. There was a constant exchange of references to things. Both in the videos that got played, but also in conversations going on about one video, as another one was shown. Most videos were cross-referencing several things at the time. For instance, by mixing a reference to the Danish Road Safety Council with Hitler Rants Parodies.[3] These references served to map out who was familiar with different genres, specific spoofs, and even who was able to catch subtle references without too much explanation. It was an exercise in reference skills and genre recognition alongside the harmless entertaining act of watching amusing videos with friends.

The video mentioned earlier with a frog sitting on a bench is one such example of both cross-referencing and the requirement of knowledge. As people started adding music, comments, and voice

[3] if the reader does not yet recognize the Hitler Rants Parodies, then the reader might consider him or herself in the same position as the anthropologist encountering it before becoming familiar with the genre. Do not worry, in two pages time you will know more about this phenomenon as well.

over, this frog, literally sitting on a bench doing nothing, somehow started to become fun to watch. It served as a facilitator for people making references and matching content by making new connections and links. A tiny example of in- and exclusions made by references was a version of this video with the title: Sitting on bench like a boss. To appreciate this, it would require knowing and recognizing the Like a boss meme[viii].

Another insight learned from exchanging videos gathered around a shared screen[4] was that surprisingly much time was spent on waiting due to technical issues, as someone needed to find a specific video or picture. Sentences like these were quite common: "*I have to log on to my Facebook account to find this one*[5]", "*I'll try Googling it using other words"*, "*You can't see this tomorrow without being my friend on Flickr, only my friends can see it.*" and, *"what? YouTube must have deleted it!"*

It became clear to me, that exchange of content was neither an activity solely to be studied sitting behind one's screen at home, since references were made orally too, nor was it one that was unaffected by the digitally mediated platforms used, as locating content was affected by deletions, different spellings, or which type of digitally mediated connection there was between my informants and me. In- and exclusions were made digitally, but also materially and socially.

"Is it an ad?"

Following informants contributed to an interesting nuance: one of my initial categorizations had to be adjusted. Asking people to point out what was viral, and how they engaged with viral marketing failed. For one thing, the marketing element was not really something they noticed or were conscious about. To them "viral" meant something entertaining. Whenever I mentioned viral marketing, they replied by pointing to something they had received or shared that they liked. Often, they did not even realize that some videos were ads whereas others were not. They almost never referred to "the ad" or the products. They referred to elements of what they shared: "*look at this guy, he jumps the bus, but it looks fake*" or "*check out this soundtrack, I wonder who made it?*" "*This is a remake of another*

[4] In 2021 it would be more normal to gather around smartphones. But this was in 2008.

[5] In 2008 it was more common to log out whenever Facebook was not in use. The button was easy to see and was featured on the front page on the user's profile. Today Facebook has changed its set up so that the log off button is hidden in a drop-down menu. Furthermore, Facebook is connected to other services the user is likely to use, for instance WhatsApp (1,3 million users in 2019), messenger (1,2 million users in 2019) Instagram (0,8 million users in 2019). This makes is feasible to stay logged in at all times so shifting between the platforms can happen without logging in and out. The platforms also ensure that connected content from one of the users' platforms can get shared on the other easily.

video, I'm sure! Let me see if I can find it for you." If, during such conversations, I reminded them of the marketing aspect, most of them did not really care. For them, the distinction between ads and other types of videos had little or no relevance.

I also made it clear to my personal network, i.e., family, friends, and colleagues that my new work was about viral marketing. This resulted in a new desire to share some of the videos I had encountered during my initial fieldwork, but it also resulted in many friends wanting to show me other things in return. However, once again the layers of references and the in- and exclusions became clear. For example, my husband shared an office with a colleague from Germany. Once he asked what I was doing and said: *"if you study viral marketing then you have to see this. It is in German, but it is hilarious"*. It was a scene with Hitler and his soldiers gathered around a table. It was from a movie but the difference between the actors' lines and the words in the subtitles gave away that something had been changed. My husband's colleague laughed as we watched the video. I did not. When I asked him what the point was, he replied: *"it's just a joke!"* When I asked who made it, he replied: *"I don't know"* and when I asked again what was so funny, he said: *"come on, it was just a hilarious idea."* When I got home, I did a little research, and found several hundreds of these videos with Hitler and his men. They were all from the movie called The Downfall (org. title: Der Untergang), and always the same scene, where Hitler rages against his men as he realizes his defeat. Further investigation revealed that when things happened that carried relevance for the broader public, be it world championships, earthquakes, or presidential elections, someone had customized new subtitles on the topic as a reply[ix]. Often replies would not only reference events but also other video responses. There would be versions referencing the octopus who foresaw the outcome of the World Cup in 2010 (The Telegraph 2010) as well as the death of the octopus half a year later. In one version Hitler would discuss with his men what to do with the dead octopus. In another he would ponder whether it had foreseen its own death too. There would be versions concerning Obama being elected as president, the release of the new Star Trek movie, or Egypt's Mubarak blocking the internet. Often such events are soon forgotten, but as they circulate, they reflect or carry references to something easily recognizable, typically topics that are already on many people's lips.

Knowing what I know today, I recognize and embrace the genre. The Hitler scene, known as Hitler Rants Parodies[x], has become a classic, and I am aware of it as such. Even as I write, not a day goes by where I do not encounter the scene when spending time on some of the digital platforms I have inhabited. Yet each time the story is different. How exactly this scene from this movie became famous is difficult to say. But many people *recognize* the genre, some, enough to pass them on, and some, enough to make their own. Their reasons for making their own specific versions vary greatly. Some have competitions with others working hard to find the best story to combine with the pictures and sound. Some become part of communities who take the whole movie and its entire universe of themes and characters as equally suitable for remakes. Others are individuals who have messages they want to spread and doing so in the form of this Hitler scene makes sure there is recognition among most viewers, while also ensuring higher ratings at places like YouTube or Google.

Today, I would have contributed to the conversation with the German colleague by showing one of my own favorites: the self-aware Hitler who is annoyed with all the people who keep making Downfall parodies. I would probably have shown him some of the Danish makeovers as well. For instance, the one where Hitler is shocked to hear that juice and cake will no longer be served in the waiting rooms of hospitals. This specific reference is aimed at a Danish politician who blamed immigrants and their big families for the fact hospitals no longer serve free juice and cake (Politiken 2010). They simply bring too many relatives, the politician claimed. This video response was made by a Dane as a small protest. The person behind this version was Danish and told me that he was just fed up with the politician who made the racist comment. Making a Hitler Rants Parody, he thought, was most effective way to communicate this. Furthermore, he thought that the connection between the politician's general views and Hitler's would be insinuated with this mix of political messages and historical connotations[6]. Thus, he was involved in the viral phenomenon of Hitler Rants Parodies. Yet, when asked, he replied that communicating through the Hitler scene was merely a matter of finding a channel through which to reach more people than he would by writing on his blog, or just sharing his opinions with the nearest friends. Amongst many others, the Hitler Rants Parodies have become a "classic" when it comes to viral videos. It is viral but not perceived as marketing. But this does not mean it cannot be used in creating, for instance, political awareness or in facilitating brand awareness.

The Hitler example serves to illustrate how not insisting on boundaries, by excluding elements that are not necessarily considered marketing, has proven useful. It provides insights into the already

[6] Later during a conflict with schoolteachers, a teacher made a Hitler Rants Parody. However, a journalist not familiar with the Hitler makeovers, used it to suggest that the teacher made comparisons between Danish politicians and the Nazi regime. It caused a stir and gave those who are not familiar with the genre a reason to be offended. (Dyrberg 2013)

established genre of parody and a set of mutually agreed upon classics, which is necessary to know, to understand the environment in which viral ads grow.

Often campaigns are so deeply integrated with each other, and reference other things, that boundary-making becomes tricky, not only between ads and non-ads, but also between campaigns for one product and another, and between ads and parodies. A brief example is Blend Tec, a company that has had great success with promoting their blenders through various filmed experiments of what can be blended. In the experiments Blend Tec has blended iPads, a BIC lighter, a Weezer album, the videogame Guitar Hero, and a Wii Wheel, just to mention a few. People watch these videos out of curiosity and for amusement, but not because they are necessarily interested in the specific brand . The brands blended in Blend Tec's videos are subjected to exposure, yet they are not cooperating and their appearance is often intended as negative commentary.

But Blend Tec also refers to some brands as a positive gesture. They made a spoof where they blended an Old Spice perfume, while changing their format of the video, which is otherwise strictly the same from experiment to experiment. In the Old Spice spoof, the character from the original Old Spice ads (not the real one, but a man hired to look like him) is wearing the lab coat that the experiment conductor usually wears, and the conductor utters catchphrases that the man in the Old Spice ads usually says. Whereas iPads and other brands blended are subjected to negative comments by the conductor, this video celebrated the brand of Old Spice. Even though it is a spoof made by Blend Tec, it can also be perceived as an ad for Old Spice.

Vat19.com is an online store, which among other things sells what they call "world's greatest gummy bear", and Vat19.com makes videos to communicate with its users. Once, they claimed that a viewer had asked them: "will it blend?" – a clear reference to Blend Tec's experiments. They then replied by making their own filmed experiment, remarkably similar to the original Blend Tech ads. It is not clear if someone asked that question, or whether they just said so (it is often used as an element to read letters from viewers, which are not actually from viewers. It is often a rhetorical tool for introducing motivation for experiments). However, the exposure of the gummy bear, as well as their brand is made recognizable due to referencing, or tapping into the already established genre of blending things that were not meant to be blended. The audience is rewarded for recognizing this reference, and they share it to illustrate to others, that they are aware of the link between the two. Sharing things that connect several classics in ways that add something new to both, is very characteristic in viral spreads.

Whereas it is not always clear whether links made between brands are done as part of an agreement between the two or as a spoof, sometimes brands officially reference each other. For instance, eD FM, a radio station in Albuquerque, New Mexico, enlisted the front person from Will It Blend? to do a Will It Blend? version promoting their radio station. The outcome was three 30-second commercials showing different styles of music CDs being blended, showcasing the station's variety format, while playing on the pun that their music blends well. They too leached on Will It Blend? – but this time Blend Tec gave their official stamp of approval by letting their front figure advertise for the station. Whether the radio station paid for the service or not is not clear, but the examples serve to illustrate how lines between one campaign and another can be blurred. Sometimes brands play with this lack of transparency as well. They can spoof other brands, so it looks as if they are cooperating, or deny associations in ambiguous ways that make people start discussing if there are connections[xi].

And Hitler? Is it possible to reference anything without mentioning him? A spoof of Hitler pondering if the blender can really blend anything is, of course, also made. Hitler is sure that a German U-boat armor cannot possibly be blended. He even wants to test it himself wearing the same glasses as the actor in Will It Blend? while testing[xii].

Several attempts to create awareness of brands happen simultaneously, as brands attach themselves to other campaigns or get referenced by other brands. Separating one brand from the other is not only difficult, it also makes invisible that activities around sharing, involves mastering the active creation of references between content, including both, other ads and non-ads.

Summing up, these empirical examples stand as a reminder that empirically separating one campaign from another, as well as making clear that boundaries between entertainment, ads, and political agendas is often difficult, as is pinpointing the original, the beginning or the end of what is referred to. These examples provide useful insights to the genres and practices in which companies hoping to go viral enter. If one wants to understand the layers of complexity and possess the skills for interacting within this genre, the focus should be on references.

The following section will give an overview of previous academic studies that have dealt with viral marketing. It serves to map out which areas have been subjected to interest in academic and theoretical approaches to viral marketing. It also illustrates how studies labeling themselves as viral marketing studies do not capture the challenges mentioned above. Following this I will pinpoint new areas and questions emerging from the empirical examples given above to pinpoint areas that still call for elaboration.

1.2 Previous studies and contributions

To study a phenomenon that tries always to be ahead of what people expect, that uses the newest technological features, and that gets its attention from surprising its audience, will always make literature seem insufficient. Therefore, it is not a simple task of locating studies that concern viral marketing, and even more specifically viral reality marketing. The literature that I have used as inspiration, therefore, is a palette of various studies and traditions.

1.2.1

> *"The concept [of viral marketing] is quite simple: "it comes down to word-of-mouth advertising on the internet" (Raula Girboveanu and Puiu 2008)*

Two things are worth bearing in mind when looking at studies that label themselves as viral marketing studies: first, they tend to shift the term viral marketing to another term – word of mouth (WoM). Consequently, their focus tends to be on the difference between the two. Secondly, since they focus on how people's opinions affect other's attitudes towards a product after it has been branded, they do not provide insights as to how this can be used strategically as a marketing strategy; in all examples, studies are concerned with successes retrospectively, thereby taking as the starting point things that became a success, while retrospectively ascribing the success to those who initiated it.

The two-step flow model

Studies concerned with viral marketing are found primarily in communication studies. However, they tend to define it as word of mouth (WoM), electronic word of mouth (eWoM), or word of mouse. Let us therefore start paying attention to these variations of conceptualization.

Let us begin with the shift from viral marketing back to WoM. To understand the consequences of this shift, we need to look at the history of WoM studies. This involves older literature, but it is crucial if we are to understand WoM as a well-established concept in the genre of communication studies.

WoM can be defined as:

> *"Oral, person to person communication between a receiver and a communicator whom the receiver perceives as non-commercial, regarding a brand, product, or service" (Arndt 1967).*

Similar to this definition, WoM can be a way of diffusing advertised content using personal relations, such that it has a greater effect on user decision making, than any advertiser's controlled source of information would have had (Day 1971; Buttle 1998; Sheth 1971). It is assumed, that this form of interpersonal communication has greater reliability and flexibility, which allows WoM to more effectively influence consumer decisions (Bolfing 1989; Richins 1983; Engel, Blackwell, and Kegerreis 1969; Day 1971; Tybout, Bobby J. Calder, and Sternthal 1981). However, these studies have a great variety, when it comes to the more specific task of pinpointing what is worth studying, and how to obtain knowledge about this form of message spreading. Two things are emphasized in the following section on WoM studies: a focus on the character of the content as being either positive or negative, and a focus on the translation from viral marketing back to WoM, turning online versus offline into the differencing factor. The studies I surveyed, selected on the basis of their labeling of topics as "viral marketing," rarely cover the tensions and nuances that my empirical data brought into play. Instead, they relabeled viral marketing as word of mouth, only "digitally", "online" or "on the internet".

Word of mouth often refers to sociologist Paul Lazarfield's two-step flow of communication theory, which involves opinion leaders and the spreading of opinions via various communication channels. The model was first introduced by sociologist Paul Lazarsfeld et al. (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1944:151ff) and later elaborated by Elihu Katz and Paul Lazarsfeld (Katz and Lazarsfeld 2005:309 ff). The overall argument in the two-step flow model, is that product information does not affect consumers as well when it comes directly through the media, as when it is mediated by an opinion leader or influencer. The influencer is both actively recommending the product and has strong relations and a trustworthy position for people to perceive it as personally approved. The double role of the influencer as having a personal relation while promoting specific products, makes this channel of communication more effective than the same information coming directly from the media.

The first appearance of this two-step flow of communication, introduced in "The People's Choice", (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1944), focused on the process of decision-making during a presidential election campaign. The researchers expected to find empirical support for the direct influence of media messages on voting intentions, but were surprised to discover that informal, personal contacts were mentioned far more frequently than exposure to radio or newspaper as sources of influence on voting behavior. They concluded that people appeared to be much more influenced in their political decisions, by face-to-face contact with other people, than as a direct consequence of mass media exposure. The model suggests that information from the mass media moves in two distinct stages. First, opinion leaders who pay close attention to the mass media and its messages receive the information. Secondly, they pass on their own interpretations in addition to the actual media content. The first step from media sources to opinion leaders is, according to Katz and Lazarsfeld, mainly a transfer of information, whereas the second step, from opinion leaders to "their followers" involves interpersonal influence. Consequently, the term 'personal influence' is introduced to describe the process intervening between the media's direct message and the audience's reaction to that message. The theory refines the ability to predict the influence of media messages on audience behavior, and it offers an explanation as to why certain media campaigns may have failed to alter audience attitudes and behavior. But it is worth noticing, that it is but a few who are privileged enough to influence others. Consequently, if one wants to understand how personal influence can affect people, one will have to pinpoint such opinion leaders and pay attention to their translation of actual media content, while most individuals are considered followers and thus not relevant to pay attention to. The model is not referred to very often anymore, due to strong critique. For instance Troldahl, as well as Rogers, have emphasized that mass media information often flows directly to people. (Troldahl 2001), (Rogers 2003:303, 304). Furthermore, Rogers emphasizes that the two-step flow model can be too simplistic. Instead, he points to a much more complex process, which elaborates on various stages of the individual's decision-making. Still, it is important to mention the two-step flow model as a notion, since it often appears in studies of mass media communication, diffusion studies and studies of word of mouth. As an example, two things that had their origin in the two-step flow model have remained central in studies of word of mouth: the focus on personal influence as the intermediary process that allows messages to diffuse from producers to users, and the role of these intermediaries as influential. I will go into more detail with Roger's decision-making model in section 2.3.

Viral marketing = word of mouth online?

Newer studies that label themselves as studies of viral marketing argue that there is a distinction between viral marketing and WoM. Yet, they almost instantly sift out viral marketing from WoM without further explanation. It is characteristic for these studies to start with the assumption that viral marketing is word of mouth - *only online*. From that point, they begin focusing on the implications of online as opposed to offline, which turns viral marketing into a motivation for new implications as we move to a new environment for interactions online. Thus, the environment becomes pivotal due to new features such as faster dissemination of messages, lack of trustworthiness, and lack of regulations.

Fattah in his article: "Viral marketing is nothing new", has described it as:

> *"word of mouth advertising on steroids" (Fattah 2000:88–89)*

Goldenberg et al. writes:

> *"The mounting use of the internet, enabling surfers to communicate quickly with relative ease, has established the contemporary version of this phenomenon, known as "internet w-o-m" or "word of mouse", as an important communication channel. In what is sometimes labeled as" viral marketing," companies are currently investing efforts to trigger a word of mouse process and accelerate its distribution"* (Goldenberg et al. 2007:212)

Whereas these Fattah and Goldenberg point to speed as the determining factor, Lance Porter and Guy J. Golan focus on the specific term of viral marketing. Their goal is:

> *"to ultimately define viral marketing"* (Porter and Golan 2006:26, 29, 31).

However, their first move is to rename viral marketing to eWoM (Electronic Word of Mouth). This has led them to the conclusion that the difference between WoM and eWoM is worth exploring. In exploring the difference, they turn the discussion into a difference between online and offline interaction. From there they specify that the study focuses on differences between ads when shown on TV and online – called viral ads. This enables them to point to a unique thing about the internet since viral advertisements are not subject to regulation by the Federal Communication Commission. They then refer to the "anything goes" environment of the World Wide Web as an important factor in understanding the success of viral marketing as an online version of word of mouth. Thus, viral is portrayed as ads, only online, and ads are the "same thing", only different depending on whether they are online or not. Viral becomes an adjective, that comes automatically from the environment. Consequently, Porter and Golan's ultimate attempt to define viral marketing has ended up as a study on how the internet changes WoM as we know it.

Stringam & Gerdes specifies viral marketing differently by referring to the term Word of Mouse. (Stringam and Gerdes 2010). They evaluate consumer ratings and comments from an online distribution site to explore what factors drive consumer ratings of hotels. The study attempts to locate and analyze the most frequently used words, as well as patterns of word usage characteristic for high and low guest ratings, respectively.

Similarly Xia & Bechwati try to understand the mechanisms underlying the differential impacts of online consumer reviews (Xia and Bechwati 2008). Through two experiments, they show that the level of cognitive personalization developed while reading an online review influences consumers' purchase intention. The consequence of insisting on using the framework of WoM, only online, is that it is the online aspect alone which is brought into focus. In this new setting, personal relations, according to Xia & Bechwati, cease to exist, and therefore, we will have to find new ways of interpreting information, since the trustworthiness that followed from personal relations in WoM is now gone. This leads to new questions such as: *"how do consumers determine whether to trust online reviewers and their reviews?"*(Xia and Bechwati 2008:3). Like Stringam & Gerdes, they refer to Word of Mouse, which, they argue, differs from traditional WoM as the sources of information are individuals who have little or no prior relationship with the information seeker. The only source from which readers can draw experiences about trustworthiness is the review itself. Again, we see that viral marketing is immediately exchanged with WoM. The focus lies in translating WoM into its equivalent online. This gives rise to a lot of new challenges since people do not know each other, and new issues of trust must be dealt with.

Early research on WoM focused on the role of negative WoM, concluding that it can be even more influential than positive, due to the fact that dissatisfied customers tend to tell more people about their experience, than those who are satisfied or even delighted (Arndt 1967; Bolfing 1989; Tybout, Bobby J. Calder, and Sternthal 1981). As a counter-response to this, Buttle has shown that consumers sometimes perceive negative WoM as positive, which complicates studies that deal with the consequences of positive and negative WoM respectively (Buttle 1998). As a consequence, newer studies of WoM have stopped focusing on the meaning of positive and negative in favor of detecting methods for measuring either the difference in consumer responses or the effects it has on growth in sales of given products (Goldenberg et al. 2007; East, Hammond, and Lomax 2008; East, Hammond, and Wright 2007).

Troy Elias has done an extensive study that brings together the studies of positive and negative word of mouth, and the implications when translating WoM to a setting on the World Wide Web.

His study concerns recommendations made by anonymous individuals who have no prior relationship with the information seeker. Elias is interested in how people perceive recommendations from people they do not know, and how people's ability to identify themselves with the imagined sender affects their attitude towards the reviewed product. In an experiment, 150 black and 111 white participants were asked to fill out a questionnaire based on their experience of a specific website that recommended restaurants. The website is known by the slogan *"Unbiased reviews by real people"* (Elias 2009:27). However, the site used in the experiment was constructed to look just like a real site, and with made up "real people" recommending restaurants. None of the participants, however, were aware of this while participating. For each recommendation, four profile pictures, accompanied by four recommendations were shown. In some scenarios, all four reviewers had black profile pictures; in some they were all white, and in some, two of each appear as reviewers. The reviews were constructed to be either good, bad, or neutral. The purpose of the experiment was to determine whether participants adapt attitudes from someone with the same skin color, and whether positive and negative reviews are more likely to be adopted if the skin color is the same. The conclusions were that positive online consumer feedback led to significantly more desirable consumer attitudes than sites with no consumer feedback, or sites with overly negative consumer word of mouth. Furthermore, black people tend to respond more favorably to services that are linked to their own racial group if those services have some positive consumer evaluations, whereas with whites, the effect is larger for negative WoM. These conclusions, as well as the object of study, tell us something about individuals located in a specific context, and how this affects their attitudes towards given products. But the project's primary aim was not to understand neither viral marketing nor WoM, but more specifically to test hypothesis on the effect of positive and negative messages when it comes to racial differences.

It is, however, worth noticing, that the study differs from the previous studies mentioned in one important aspect. It contemplates how the user has a double role in both receiving and considering whether to pass on information, thereby enabling insights into how people transform opinions into their own and to something they consider spreading further. This is not a crucial point in Elias' work even though he did contemplate on how racial images were being reproduced. This double role has been dealt with in another study by Walter J Carl, who focused on what it meant, and the demands, on having this double role.

Carl considered the relation between agents and potential targets, and how honesty and reliability affect potential users' choices (Carl 2006; Carl 2008; Carl and Noland 2008). This was done by focusing on agents who are paid by producers to recommend products to their personal network. Carl's starting point was to focus on the agent's double role as agent and friend, as well as his or her decision on whether to disclose the role as agent. One would think, Carl argues, that disclosure of one's role as an agent recommending products for a company, would be bad. However, users perceived the disclosure as a gesture of honesty, which made the role of the agent less complicated and allowed it to be an integrated part of the relationship. *"Existing relationships implies a history of conversation about brand-related and non-brand-related topics"* (Carl 2008:23). In conversations not related to the organized program, i.e., to the product the agent is paid to recommend, trust and goodwill was built up between agent and potential user. In some of his studies such agents had relationships with some of the potential users that dated back to 6 years or more. Carl's study is interesting because it focuses on how recommendations are mediated from producer to user through a double agent. His study focused on a direct line from producer to potential target, with only one intermediary, and the double role is carried out by someone paid by the producers.

Challenges arise

Studies exchange the term viral marketing for WoM. Consequently, viral becomes the catalyst for discussions on how thing change when ads spread online. Acknowledgement of the interpersonal relationships influence and focus on what it takes to be the intermediary that turns media content into relevant recommendations for potential consumers and targets. Yet the empirical data calls for a more nuanced perspective when it comes to boundary-making as well as to the role of agents.

Recalling the situations where a group of people were gathered in front of a shared screen one can ask: are these informants interacting online or offline? Boundaries between online and offline are difficult, because the exchange of content in this example happens offline and online simultaneously.

Furthermore, content visibility depends not only on the specific platform in question, but also on the given user's account on that platform, e.g., which other accounts are connected to it. This illustrates how a single platform gives rise to many, distinct channels of communication as well as highlighting the need to explicitly consider the in- and exclusions made by digital infrastructures. The concept of online captures interactions analytically, but is less sensitive to the role that different digital platforms play in distributing and delimiting access to content. Often social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram feature a large group of connections that are heterogeneous i.e. a mix of family, friends, colleagues, and acquaintances from sports etc. Thus, even within one specific platform relations are very mixed.

Empirical data illustrates how we need to go beyond metaphors such as online, or interaction mediated through the screen, as many nuances are left out. Access to content often requires active participation and is affected by social as well as digital in and exclusions. Making references through links is a mediated process, where digital infrastructures constrain and enhance interaction. Marketing experts working with viral marketing are aware of this and operate with a far more nuanced understanding of the environments in which viral content travels. In viral marketing, memes, messages, brands, and product awareness have to do with exposure shared through as many platforms and channels of communications as possible, and by as many people as possible. According to Jim Maymann co-founder of the Danish company GoViral, it is content's ability to travel unhindered that ensures momentum, since advertisers are no longer in control of the travel.

> *"When we look at the arena of digital interaction as an environment, content does not necessarily have to come in one shape, form, or carrier/agent. Strategically activating a brand campaign, should allow for multiple carriers of messages, which are easily transferable to other contexts and platforms, which are not always originally intended." (Maymann 2008:43)*

> *"If your content is of high quality, you will no longer be the only one distributing it. Consumers will post, share, send, publish, and otherwise distribute the material to their friends and other networks. This calls for an understanding of the media landscape as environments rather than channels." (Maymann 2008:43)*

When it comes to understanding the way marketing experts think of viral marketing, not much is achieved by concluding that viral marketing is WoM, only, online. This argument reduces the discussion to one about how an already known and well-studied phenomenon changed due to a new channel of communication – the internet. Instead, we need to pay attention to the variety of channels, or environments, as well as the continuous translations that happen to make things accessible across them. We need to pay attention to the various local contexts where the messages can travel and how they are modified to make sense. The metaphor of environments used by Jim Maymann is quite useful in suggesting that there are indeed rules, norms, and constraints, but we need to pay attention to the specificity of exchanges. Agents are not only a few influencers; all who contribute are agents as they decide to pass on content. There are differences in who establishes positions to have more influence. But as we have seen with Speedbandits, the voices are often unpredictable, and often, the discussion takes an unpredictable direction as it is out of the control of the promoters of the specific brand or product.

Furthermore, Maymann's definition illustrates how the agents passing on content are everyone who find it interesting enough. It is not a matter of pinpointing influencer and opinion leaders. It is a more organic approach that assumes that if the content is interesting, many will become agents simultaneously. Thus, the potential target might also be the influencer.

Influencing or adding value to a product is neither reserved for a unique group of people who qualify as opinion leaders (Katz and Lazarsfeld 2005; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1944) or paid agents (Carl 2006; Carl 2008; Carl and Noland 2008). Thinking in terms of two-step flow model, dividing people into those who recommend and those who change attitudes towards products due to such recommendations, misses out on a crucial element in the viral marketing strategies I encountered. For instance, that people would hopefully be both, as each person engaging, becomes an agent in the instance he or she decides to share content with others. This means that stamps of approval, as well as opinions, might change from iteration to iteration[7]. In viral reality marketing, this is most visible, as content is deliberately made to be debated, and gaps are laid out to be filled in by people making up their own theories about what is going on. The campaigns mutate and gain momentum because of their ability to be creatively adapted in the process. People opposed to a message might become agents who, both, enhance awareness and provide counter-awareness. Thus, the double role must be elaborated on, because some of the participants, in sharing ads, do not seem to be aware or care that it is an ad. Furthermore, some carry the double role of ensuring awareness of a message or product, while promoting something else; for instance, a brand attaching their product to another as a gesture, or as a critique.

In conclusion, most academic studies of viral marketing emerge from communication studies. It is a common trait that they take Lazarfield's two-step flow model as a starting point. Even though the two-step flow model had been criticized and nuanced, there are elements that have stayed and recur in these studies. The media, the influencer and the influenced are all well-defined and analytically separate items in the analysis. There is a clear order and linearity as news of a product travels from the media to influencers and, in the end, to the potential targets. In WoM, the media is neutral as it passively mediates the news of the product unbiased. However, these studies challenge this. Unfortunately, the acknowledgement of the media in playing an active role is treated with a lack of nuance in comparison with how marketing experts doing viral marketing perceive the field. The

[7] I am aware they the term iterative suggests a linear process where something gets modified or reframed. The process is far from linear. It consists of several simultaneous events that affects each other mutually. I will return to this in chapter four.

empirical data calls for more nuances regarding online as opposed to offline, of for instance, content that travels across various platforms, as well as content that is excluded from some. The intermediary role of the media needs further elaboration than just online as opposed to offline. Furthermore, in splitting into online versus offline, these studies localize differences by pointing to lack of trustworthiness, rules, and regulations.

1.2.2 Related themes and empirical motivations for looking in new directions

In chapter two I will go further into these critiques by looking at a framework for innovations and how they diffuse. But first, I will bring another set of themes and concepts into play, for we need to elaborate on the relationships between producers, users, and innovations, as well as shape-shifting moving objects. Whereas there seems to be a gap between viral marketing studies and the empirically gathered data, there are other studies that deal with related and relevant themes.

Relations between producers and consumers

There are many empirical examples of successful mobilizations of crowds. For instance, Threadless.com (Threadless.com 2012) is a homepage that enables users of the site to upload their own T-shirt designs, while voting on all incoming suggestions. Once a design has reached a given number of votes, it is put into production and sold by Threadless.com. The site has made a business, that relies on the active participation of the crowd (Brabham 2008; Piller and Walcher 2006; Piller 2010). This business model keeps growing. Starbucks has created a community of coffee lovers amongst their customers, whom they include as product developers (Starbucks.com 2012). Dell has made a computer program, "Idea-storm" in which users' ideas can be directly implemented (Dell.com 2012), and Sarah Lee, who sells cookbooks has invited the public to contribute with recipes, with the promise that if they are exciting enough, they will become part of her next book (Openinnovationsaralee.com 2012). These business models illustrate that a business case can be made successfully while including people who engage on a voluntarily basis.

In the film and music industry, fans contribute on a voluntary basis too. Fan culture has been subjected to many academic studies. The relationship between fans and those whose work they interact and interfere with (musician, artists, labels and broadcasting companies) is dealt with from primarily two perspectives. Firstly, the emphasis is on the fact that fans often challenge companies because they compete on promoting content and thus fans can be a challenge or competitors for bands, musician, labels, and broadcasting companies. The other perspective takes the opposite approach by focusing on how businesses strategically feed fans with information in order to persuade them to work towards the same goals as themselves. (Barra 2009; Baym and Burnett 2009). The perspectives do not characterize different strands of literature, but they illustrate how the literature on fans often see fans and companies as two groups with different goals.

Paul Booth, in his book Digital Fandom (Booth 2010), encourages us to approach the relationship between groups such as fans (who do the work completely voluntarily) and businesses (who makes the money) differently. He argues that it is important to move beyond the opposition between producer and consumer (his terms) as separate independent groups of actors. This view is characteristic for several recent studies of fandom (Bruns 2008; Lessig 2009). For Booth, the interplay is emphasized. Instead of dividing into consumer and producer, he suggests a more symbiotic relation between the two. He points to a crucial lack in the tradition of consumer studies when it comes to fandom. He argues that if media companies "produce" and audiences "consume," then what fans create through rewriting or remixing is "garbage". Instead, he suggests retrospectively thinking these metaphors to see how a different economic model – the gift economy – could work to establish a new way of describing fandom in the digital age. He proposes that media text is a gift that the receiver can reciprocate through attention, feedback, fandom, or even by purchasing advertised products. This reframing of relationships is useful in understanding viral reality marketing as well. For what if all who engage do so out of reciprocal motivation? What if they do not define themselves as consumers and producers respectively, but instead as participants with individual yet shared motivations?

Relations between global and local

Whereas WoM studies discuss how personal relations simply cease to exist, and that therefore no one can be trusted online, a more useful and nuanced contribution to interaction in digitally mediated environments is to be found in another contribution from fan studies. Luca Barra elaborates on the concept of global media products. Her study pays attention to the specificity of the process of adapting global media products into a language and a narrative that makes sense to a specific nationality, for instance, by incorporating dubbing and subtitles to make content available to Italian speaking audiences (Barra 2009). Barra underlines empirically how globally shared media products undergo a series of modifications and alterations to become accessible and make sense locally. And it is not only a matter of cultural adaptation; the translation process is a negotiation between machines, computer programs, distribution sites and access to these. Another area in which such concerns have been discussed is to be found in Japanese anime, where fans have put time and energy into creating subtitles to make sure various series became accessible to non-Japanese speakers. This includes a huge effort and the incorporation of de-Japanized elements, as well an ability to convert and explain context, character design, and narrative organization to outsiders of Japanese culture (Cintas and Sánchez 2006; Lu 2008; Mio Bryce 2010). A point worth noticing from these studies is the issue of local adaptation. Even though things can be globally shared, they still need translation, explanation, and modification to make sense locally. These studies touch upon a very concrete example in mentioning language barriers. Furthermore, humor, irony, and even rational arguments are not always the same across cultural barriers. Limor Shifman too directs attention directly to humor and the relationships between globally spread humorous texts and the translations that go into locally adapting them (Shifman 2007). In studies of memes, and mutations of popular music videos such as Gangnam Style, she examines the seemingly chaotic universes of user generated content (Shifman 2013). Small texts, such as jokes in particular vary greatly from "global hits" to "translation-resistant" jokes (Shifman, Levy, and Thelwall 2014). Thus, despite having digital content traveling worldwide, local contexts challenge conceptualizing it as one thing. Here too, translation is an important element to keep in mind, when talking about shared content. This is not only a matter of cultural interpretation; content is digitally adapted and altered by algorithms and digital infrastructures as well.

Relations between algorithms and users

Studies of computer mediated interaction pinpoint that a lack of trustworthiness can be caused directly by digital infrastructures, suggesting that they are far from neutral intermediaries. An empirical point to bring into play here, is that digital infrastructures are often created with dynamism that take users' actions as useful input, indicating what they are likely to prefer. Thus, they change due to the way they are used.

To provide an example, Amazon.com has a service that, in addition to selling books and music, provides the user with suggestions to additional purchases, based on what others who bought the same product were interested in. This is an automatic pairing of offers done as a service by Amazon. It is not neutral, and far from impossible to compromise. In an episode of "Sex and the City", a main character Carrie Bradshaw reads a book entitled "Love Letters of Great Men." After the episode, several thousand fans of Sex and the City logged on to Amazon searching for the book. Unfortunately, no such book existed. It was fictive. Instead, Amazon's search engine suggested a collection of love letters from the 1920s called "love letters of great men and women" as a possible match, leading multiple customers to click on this entry. This action fed information into Amazon's search engine, indicating a connection between Sex and the City and the book. Some bought the book, and consequently Amazon's automatic generation of offers then suggested that these two items could be bought together with a rebate, since people often bought them together anyway. (Hansen, Hendricks, and Rendsvig 2013). This is an example of dynamism between systems and their users. Systems are programmed to feed on input of users to better sort relevant connections from less relevant ones. So here too, people act voluntarily (even though not necessarily with consent) to improve software systems, and in the end change the output of information shown to them.

The same goes for Google, which has very advanced Search Engine Optimization to make sure users get the information they are likely to find relevant. But such systems are not neutral. Furthermore, they can compromise, and even though they might be programmed to make tasks easier and more relevant to users, they also become the subject of speculations and active attempts to alterations from many sides. For every step Google takes to optimize their algorithms, a new strategy is developed by people who attempt to take advantage of it. Often, it is a continuous race between developers and groups of creative users, fighting on both sides to gain control over the system. As an attempt to (re)gain control over their search optimization algorithms, Google started deliberately downranking homepages that aggressively tried to gain traffic. (Moz.com 2013; Schwartz 2013). Consequently, some started using the same tricks they had “illegally” (according to Google) used to gain traffic over their competitors. In doing so, they created so much traffic on their competitors’ sites that Google became suspicious, and started downranking these instead. (Jensen 2013). It illustrates that not only creators of systems try to affect what is highlighted and what is downplayed; users change their actions to benefit from the system as well. With systems that are deliberately programmed to learn from users’ behavior, there is a dynamic worth paying attention to. This is relevant in understanding viral videos as well, since there is a similar battle in manipulating digital infrastructures and algorithms going on there. People who realize that a specific hashtag is suddenly getting a lot of attention start adding the hashtag to their (unrelated) content to become part of what everyone is talking about. Platforms such as Facebook continuously change their algorithms to provide personalized content. This also means down ranking users actively trying to use the platform for advertising.

This turns into an ethical dilemma about what and how to filter content through algorithms. Some studies have turned their attention to specific platforms, focusing on how ranking can be obtained by familiarity with the structure of the system (Batista 2007). This has caused some to point to ethical implications, since advertised content can buy its way to higher ranking while not disclosing that it is advertising. As Karp expressed it, traditional guidelines for separating “advertising” content from “editorial” content breakdown. (Karp 2007)

This provides challenges for platforms like Facebook that earn money on advertising, yet only the advertising provided directly by them. However, at the same time, others try to take advantage of the platform with attempts of click- and likejacking. This is a form of harvesting information by making people believe that they are participating in purely entertaining initiatives, not affiliated with advertising, while, without people’s consent, harvesting personal data for the purpose of targeting ads specifically back at them. Facebook tries to downrank advertising from others, but sometimes fails to recognize it as such, because it does not look like an ad-related activity.

Such examples illustrate that it is necessary to consider the role that technical infrastructures play, and how these are affected from many sides simultaneously. Locating and determining what an ad looks like, is not only a matter of people’s ability to interpret it, but also a matter of how digital infrastructures categorize and try to control it. Due to algorithms taking input from users, it is not only a matter of creating algorithms. Algorithms are, in some sense, like living organisms that are subjected to changes from many sites simultaneously.

Ethics is a concept worth keeping in mind. This becomes relevant when looking at viral reality marketing. Here, we are directly dealing with stories that are made up to look like real stories, not ads. And depending on the execution, sometimes such stories come out as hilarious pranks (like the story of the Danish Road Safety Council); other times they come out as “Denmark branded on a lie” (like “Danish Mother Seeking”, a case that I will return to in detail in chapter four).

Ethics and trustworthiness also come up in studies of how digital content is treated through algorithms and across digital platforms. Daren C. Brabham’s studies of the ethical aspects of businesses like www.subvertandprofit.com are worth mentioning here in particular. The site provides a technology that allows clients to effectively “game” social networking and social news sites by crowdsourcing micro-tasks such as voting, “digging,” “liking,” and sharing content. This technology allows companies to buy their way into higher ranking. They are able to do so through channels that make recommendations look as if they come from people who have individually and honestly made the recommendations. Subvertandprofit.com has been of interest to many researchers before (Brabham 2012; Lehdonvirta and Ernkvist 2011; Zhu 2010). However, Brabham noticed that the matter of trustworthiness has rarely been discussed in relation to strategic communication before. His point is that there is a lack of discussion about the ethical implications of using a service like subvertandprofit.com in the first place, and it is important to critically intervene in these practices to remind these professionals of their ethical duty to the public interest and to their clients. (C. Brabham 2011)

Here we need to bear in mind how actors are continuously fighting to bypass or take advantage of digital infrastructures. In addition, single actors, who are not part of a campaign can leach onto it and turn it to their own advantage, by using the same hashtags, keywords, and domain references. A few examples that I will go further into detail through analysis later are:

Click- and Likejacking: a phenomenon on Facebook, where people must like videos before watching them. As soon as they click "like", the videos are shared to all their contacts as recommendations of the video. Likewise, a click on the video's play button can be automatically converted through a script into a "like".

Likehunting: likes are harvested, sometimes through click- and likejacking, sometimes by making a page with a name of something likely to be liked. ("Peace on earth", "Coffee", "Girls"). After a while, the name of the page is changed, thus converting millions of likes for "Peace on earth" into likes of something else without asking for the consent of those who liked it.[8] All three are attempts to harvest likes are a result of a business model, where a company pays a person to direct attention to them, which he or she does by taking advantage of a breach on Facebook.

Typosquatting: the strategy of buying domains with spellings close to other domains, for instance goolge.com. As a result, unaware people end up on pages often used for porn due to their typos. As Speedbandits.dk was rolling, someone bought Speedbandit.dk to steal traffic from it.

Domain takeovers: someone buying domains, while keeping the content, pretending that it is still owned by the previous owners, thereby misleading people to think information comes from another source than it does[9]. After Speedbandits was over and the domain no longer needed, someone else bought it took advantage of those who still searched for it.

[8] This was an often-used strategy until Facebook changed its algorithms. This has been done several times; first a restriction ensured that pages with more than 200 likes could not change name. Later the button to change name was removed, and page owners had to request a name change through personally contacting Facebook. These continuous changes illustrate how Facebook tries to maintain control as well as protect its users.

[9] *http://www.speedbandits.dk/* http://www.speedbandit.dk/

Google bombing: a strategy that has been used as tactical media in performing 'hit-and-run' attacks on popular topics. Nothing goes viral as simple messages like "*try typing in *keyword* in Google, hit "I'm feeling lucky*" *and see what happens*". The more people do so, the more Google's search optimization learns that these search terms are relevant. Consequently, they are ranked high, yet only temporarily, and only as long as people keep searching for the specific phrase. A classic, that unfortunately no longer works is "French Military Victories." If typed into Google, followed by a click on the "I'm feeling lucky" button, Google would claim there were no results, and would instead suggest trying "French Military Defeats". However, this is not actually what happened. Instead, Google learned that a particular page was often visited, and therefore it assumed it was the most relevant. This page had a layout that imitated Google, and made it look as if it was Google who suggested that no entries for French Military Victories existed.[10]

In addition to using digital infrastructures and algorithms as allies, there is an additional layer of complexity concerning ethics when it comes to viral reality marketing. Encouraging people to share content and fill in gaps brings a challenge when it comes to converting it into awareness of a specific brand retrospectively. Making things look as if they are real while later admitting they were fake and part of an ad campaign does not always turn out as a success for the brand. Hoax stories and attempts to engage people under false pretense are a well-known phenomenon for those who are well acquainted with such environments and therefore recognize the signs. However, since not all inhabitants in these environments are experienced, they do not recognize the signs, and hence engage with false pretense. One example that illustrates the difference between experienced and inexperienced inhabitants is trolling – someone who posts inflammatory, extraneous, or off-topic messages in an online community, such as a forum, chat room, or blog, with the primary intention of provoking readers into an emotional response, or of otherwise disrupting normal on-topic discussion. Experienced participants know that the most effective way to discourage a troll is to ignore it, because responding tends to encourage trolls to continue disruptive posts. Hence the often-seen warning: "please do not feed the trolls"[xiii] . However, inexperienced people might still feed the troll without ever noticing that this is what has happened, or that the troll was never sincere from the beginning. The same goes for messages that go viral again and again, because some people take their messages

[10] If searching for "French military victories" in 2010, you would be directed to the page that looked like Google and stated that no such victories have ever existed. Instead the page suggested: do you mean French military defeats? Since June 2013, this page is no longer the highest ranking. Instead, a page on humor referring to it comes on top. This illustrates how ranking changes.

seriously even though they are a hoax[xiv]. Many such hoaxes are made by people who want to see how many they can fool. And they serve to make a distinction between those who instantly recognize it as a hoax and those who time and time again fall for it. But here, these can always be defended by referring to inexperience, whereas viral reality campaigns cause inexperienced people to blame the brand if they discover they were engaging under false pretense. Thus, there is an additional layer to fake stories, when products and brands use them, due to the risk that it is easier to blame the products, and not the people who fall for them because of inexperience. In my case studies, not only companies brand products, but more specifically publicly funded organizations do. They try to reach citizens with information. This touches upon a distinction between them and companies that want to make money (and here they do have a history of using certain extent of fakeness when it comes to utilizing staged and glamorous presentations of products and their effects). However, when it comes to government financed companies, there is no history of making things look like something they are not.

Both empirically, and from other studies of digital infrastructures, we have seen the relevance of paying attention to the relation between systems and their users, not only focusing on constraints and advantages, but also paying attention to the constant dynamism between the two. A first step in this direction was already taken by taking digital infrastructure into account, and by taking the technical aspects seriously. Yet, there is a need to elaborate further on the role of these. Analytically, I will include them as actors, i.e., active participants, since they both affect and can be affected by users. Furthermore, the issue of ethics becomes relevant since we are dealing with strategic communication where brands and companies' reputations are at stake. This is particularly the case with publicly funded organizations who have a history of honest communication without hidden agendas and ulterior motives.

Relations between in- and outside games

The PhD was partly financed by Sensemaking in User-driven Innovation in Virtual Worlds, primarily with an empirical emphasis on Second Life, a virtual world in which where people interact as avatars and, at the time[11], often detached from their person in real life. This raised a lot of interesting questions and topics overlapping with viral reality marketing. For instance, what counts as real, and how are boundaries between inside and outside virtual worlds negotiated, challenged, or broken down?

[11] Today, Secondlife is a platform that facilitates a greater variety of types of interactions than in 2008.

Literature-wise, this project on virtual worlds pointed in the direction of games and how these manage to maintain a frame for defining in and outside it as well as how to differentiate and communicate differences between play and non-play.

The modern study of play can be traced back to the publication of Dutch historian Johan Huizinga's groundbreaking study *Homo Ludens* (1938). Huizinga's book describes play as a free and meaningful activity, carried out for its own sake, spatially and temporally segregated from the requirements of practical life, and bound by a self-contained system of rules that holds absolutely. He defines it as:

> *“All play moves and has its being within a play-ground […] The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice etc., are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e., forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act.” (Huizinga 1955:10)*

Although its core topic is playing, rather than gaming, the concept of magic circles remains a standard reference in game design studies. Notably the concept was picked up and applied to digital games by Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman. They note that even though

> *"the magic circle is merely one of the examples in Huizinga’s list of ‘play-grounds,’ the term is used ... [by him] as short-hand for the idea of a special place in time and space created by a game.” (Zimmermann and Salen 2004a:95)*

In more detail, they describe that in a basic sense, the magic circle of a game is where the game takes place. To play a game means entering a magic circle, or creating one as a game begins. They argue that

> *“the term magic circle is appropriate because there is in fact something genuinely magical that happens when a game begins." (ibid).*

Edward Castronova in his studies of virtual worlds (Castronova 2005; Castronova 2008) uses the notion of magic circles to describe the barrier between in and outside virtual worlds.

> *”The synthetic world is an organism surrounded by a barrier […] The membrane is the magic circle within which the rules are different […]The membrane can be considered a shield of sorts; protecting the fantasy world from the outside world. The inner world needs defining and protecting because it is necessary that everyone that goes there adhere to the different set of rules.” (Castronova 2005:147).*

Castronova refers to Huizinga, yet he emphasizes that contemporary virtual worlds illuminate how the magic circle is quite porous.

> *"In the case of synthetic worlds, however, this membrane is actually quite porous. Indeed, it cannot be concealed completely; people are crossing it all the time in both directions, carrying their behavioral assumptions and attitudes with them. As a result, the valuation of things in cyberspace becomes enmeshed in the valuation of things outside cyberspace" (Castronova 2005:147, 271–272).*

More directly, there appears to be a relationship between virtual worlds and the outside world. Specifically, Castronova argues that three distinct areas stand out: markets, politics, and law. Even though virtual worlds display a range of attributes that are unique to their realm, they also exhibit characteristics deriving from the outside world. Yet despite focusing on the porousness of the membrane, he emphasizes how the membrane can protect and maintain a boundary between worlds, allowing money laundering, which is illegal outside the membrane, to take place inside. With reference to the membrane – the community of fantasy aspects – he also points to the protective function of membrane that makes actions unreal, or parts of play (Castronova 2005:245)[12]. Thus, in some instances, the membrane allows some actions to be less likely to be troubled by outside forces such as laws or politics. Castronova sifts out the term magic circle from membrane, while calling it only an "almost-magic circle due to its porousness. (Castronova 2005:147). Yet, his approach helps illustrating that the membrane can be both broken down, and yet used strategically to separate things in and outside.

Another study often referred to in game studies is Gregory Bateson (Bateson 1972) who adds that a difference between in and outside games often has little to do with what happens, but instead with the meta communication about what it means. That is how signals carrying the message "this is play" are exchanged. An example is the monkeys playing in the zoo.

> *"What I encountered at the Zoo was a phenomenon well known to everybody: I saw two young monkeys playing, i.e., engaged in an interactive sequence of which the unit of actions of signals where similar to, but not the same as, combat. It was evident, even to the human observer that to the participant monkeys this was 'not combat'" (Bateson 1972:191).*

[12] Richard Bartle too elaborated on how the membrane can be used to protect the game conceit from the courts (Bartle 2004).

Bateson emphasizes that a bite might look the same and even be constituted of the exact same actions, yet by communicating that this is not a bite but instead a game in which we bite, the two are separated (Bateson 1972:191). To play is not just to follow rules and rituals of play, but also to continually communicate the idea that the play-actions are just play, not something else. This calls for consideration of what is done to continuously communicate to audiences what is at play.

Instead of online versus offline, game studies provide an alternative to looking at different types of narratives. Salen and Zimmerman illustrate a divide between narratives as linear, and a game as non-linear. Whereas the two types of narrative do not map onto online vs offline, what we need to focus on are the structures that support different types of narratives. This divide corresponds with the way Mike Montello describes the environments in which the first big viral reality marketing campaigns emerged. The movie industry was one of the first to use the strategy of communication with ambiguous stories, hints, and unconfirmed side stories to create attention prior to the movies. The Blair Witch Project is considered one of the pioneers, often described as *"The marketing, which went viral even before "viral marketing" was a buzz word"* (Hutchinson 2008). Mike Monello is the executive creative director of the marketing agency Campfire and one of the people behind the Blair Witch project campaign as a viral reality campaign. In an interview he explains that the kind of storytelling that works online is different that the kinds of stories that work in movies and books. Linear stories are more difficult online.

Asked if this is happening only online or on IP-enabled platforms, he replies that it is not a matter of whether online or not or IP-enabled or not. For instance, WebTV or webisodes are places people return to, to catch up, but people lean back to see it and the sequences are easily presented in a chronological order that supports linear storytelling. However, places like YouTube and Facebook are places where we dip in and out and where we do not necessarily have to follow a linear path.

Therefore, he suggests that we think of the internet as performance media, not distribution media. To achieve successful marketing campaigns, entrepreneurial storytellers need to accept that it is about enabling people to build upon stories, instead of restricting them in the way it should be done (Monello 2011).

Games and narrative storytelling are related. Zimmerman and Salen refer to a way of distinguishing between linear and nonlinear. One way of describing the difference is by Greg Costikyan:

> *"a story is best envisioned as "beads on a string," a linear narrative; a game is best envisioned as a triangle of possibility, with the initial position at one apex, and possible conclusions along the opposite side, with myriad, ideally, infinite paths between initial state and outcome" - Greg Costikyan (Zimmermann and Salen 2004b:379).*

As a response to this definition of narrative stories, Salen and Zimmermann argue that it is not whether games are one or the other. Their point for game designers is *how* we can use these different understandings to create meaningful play.

In short viral reality marketing uses a strategy that can be best explained as a nonlinear story that helps it gain momentum. Here bits and pieces are put together in a cacophony of contributions across several platforms, in digital media as well as on television and in newspapers, by politicians, comedians, Youtubers, and regular people. Any attempt to map out a linear structure is impossible.

Yet, the creators of these campaigns retrospectively attempt to turn it into a linear story – a game all along – through re-introducing past events, i.e., the various bits of pieces from the various participants, as part of a whole story about the product. When rephrased as a game, the premise of retrospectively accepting to be fooled is more acceptable than a classic ad, or a story in serious news media. But as we have seen with the Speedbandits, sometimes the news media picks up viral stories and transforms them into something considered serious and real.

Game studies reminds us that several types of narrative are at play at the same time, and that mastering them requires an awareness of how and when boundaries are built and broken, as well as the ability to pay attention to retrospective changes in what it's all about. This literature moves beyond online versus offline and turns the focus to in and outside particular circles surrounded by shared ideas of what can be done within and across them. Magic circles have been used for their ability to emphasize the membrane's protection of the insides of a game from the outside. Whereas the viral content travels across platforms, the metaphor of the game suggests a way of thinking of the stories playing out within a sphere different from the outside. If success results in framing a staged viral story as a game, where people participate for the ride, accusations of lying and fooling people are not necessary. Furthermore, the game metaphor directs attention to a space that occupies both a specific time and place.

Ambiguity and intertextuality

Another strand of literature to bear in mind comes from public relation studies and their focus on crises management and strategic communication. Public relation studies introduce the concept of strategic ambiguity (Eisenberg 2006; Miller, Joseph, and Apker 2000), which can be used as part of a deliberate attempt to divert attention away from undesired discussions. Instead of denying knowledge of documents on sensitive issues, one can for instance, question their existence and create disagreements amongst crowds about their authenticity. Public relation studies do not focus specifically on the role of digitally mediated settings. However, they do cover aspects of trustworthiness when it comes to brands as well as massive media attention. (Fitzpatrick and Gauthier 2001; Paul and Stribak 1997; Sellnow and Timothy 1997; Sim and Fernando 2010).

An empirical example on using strategic ambiguity, in which digital infrastructures play an important role, is the circulation of a manifesto written by the Norwegian terrorist Anders Behring Breivik. On 22 July 2011, he bombed government buildings in Oslo and shot 69 people. Afterwards he said that his main motive for the atrocities was to market his manifesto; a far-right militant ideology in a compendium of texts entitled “2083 - A European Declaration of Independence”, which he distributed electronically on the day of the attack. Counteraction in the form of *“Operation UnManifest”* was initiated by Anonymous, a loosely associated network of hacktivists[xv].

Anonymous encouraged their network to download the manifesto and change it.

> *“Change it, add stupid stuff, remove parts, shoop his picture, do what you like to. Republish it everywhere and up vote releases from other people. Declare that the faked ones are original. Let Anders become a joke, such that nobody will take him seriously anymore.”(Pastebin.com 2011).*

This encouragement to diffuse stories is a good example of strategic ambiguity, as it became difficult to know for sure who was in possession of the original document. Digital infrastructures played a crucial role since participants affected not only the document but also rankings of it.

We can add a focus combining ethics and strategy from public relation studies with studies of brands. Strategic ambiguity can be useful in indicating connections as well as creating doubts about them. This has proven useful for several brands. Take for instance, a study of the 2009 Pepsi logo that emphasized an insinuated relationship between Pepsi and the election campaign of president Obama (Davisson and Booth 2010). Pepsi spent 1 million dollars and six months of work on developing a new logo and slogan, which they launched right before the election. Their logo bears a strong resemblance to that of the president’s[xvi], insinuating a connection between the two. Whereas Obama used the slogan “Yes we can”, Pepsi introduced theirs as “Yes you can.” According to Davisson and Booth, Pepsi gained attention by suggesting cooperation between their brand and the president.

They also turned the focus onto the consumer, “you,” and played with the double meaning of the word can (as both a verb and a noun). As with the switch from “we” to “you,” the videos suggested that it was about the individual who was given a voice to utter their future hopes. Pepsi did not deny references to Obama, but did not confirm either. Instead they referred to underlying trends in culture that may have caused similarities in the two campaigns. (Like Obama, Companies Sell Own Brand Of Change n.d.). Theoretically Davisson and Booth point back to Bakhtin’s concept of Utterance (Bakhtin 1982) and, building upon this, Julia Kristeva’s concept of intertextuality (Kristeva 1980) as useful in understanding gaps left for an audience to fill in. This approach suggests, in line with my empirical data, that connections and references are important. It elaborates on the ability to read one text within the framework of another, which is a well-established genre within the field where I gathered data. Donohoe (O’Donohoe 2001) reminds us that ambiguity has been an element of advertising for a long time, and Fowls points to the increasingly leaky boundaries between advertising and popular culture (Fowles 1996).

Empirically, this calls for elaboration in a setting like viral reality marketing, where the marketing strategy is based on entering an already existing, well-established practice, of sharing, mixing matching, and mapping previously unrelated things on each other, parodying, and filling in gaps. These examples suggest that if we are operating with ambiguity, forgiveness is sometimes unnecessary. Since there are no claims but only indications, there is nothing to be blamed for later.

Other themes that can be used to elaborate on the avoidance of asking for forgiveness are found in jokes and detective stories. Jokes occupy spaces within which ambiguity is a key premise. Ambiguity is acceptable because it is part of the specific domain of jokes. By extension, comedians can communicate messages that would otherwise be offensive or too provocative, because it is done in a space in between fun and reality, where both coexist simultaneously. Jokes and comedy constitute a specific genre, a magic circle, where references are protected from being made directly, as when Pepsi did not reference Obama. Yet the relation between the two existed, since people did see them and make them. A final point to mention is that time plays a unique role in both jokes, and detective stories, as these genres of narratives can all provide explanations retrospectively. For the joke to come out right, listeners must be fooled at first. The same goes for detective histories, where the audience receives bits and hints in order to find the killer, but is deliberately mislead at first. Hints are laid out for the audience to appreciate the elimination of usual suspects one by one, before finally being able to find the true killer. Viral reality marketing campaigns can be seen as detective stories as well, as it is part of the game to look through many theories and potential connections to get to know what it is all about. When it comes to games, adding the explanation that it was a game all along, is an attempt to rewrite history and reshuffle what it was all about from the very beginning. Using ambiguity strategically to entice participation, and then attempt to rewrite what it was all about retrospectively, when revealing the brand, is a core feature of viral reality marketing that I will elaborate further on.

1.2.3 Change as methodological challenge

Studies of relationships between fans and artists, between global and local, as well as in- and outside games, however, are not forced to have a binary view, analytically speaking. Instead of focusing on how fans and artists sometimes collaborate, and sometimes clash, we need to consider how to analytically treat such relations when they are held together by something that is both ambiguous and continuously changes. This is particularly important because viral reality marketing campaigns are deliberately designed to simultaneously encompass multiple, differing notions.

I will draw on a different analytical focus; an approach that treats various practices without analytically taking binaries (global vs local, fans vs artists, in- vs outside games) as opposites. They need not be contrasted or viewed as ends of a spectrum with opportunities for plotting items between them. The problem with these perspectives is that they rely on a fixed scale on which to measure. For instance, it makes sense to contrast global to local if something is the same, only with different features in global and local contexts. In viral reality marketing, it is deliberate ambiguity itself that keeps the relations intact and, thus, holds the campaign together. The new approach suggested captures and illuminates such ambiguities. It embraces conflicts, incoherence, as well as elements that are not easily mapped directly on to each other. As an overall concept, we refer to it as a concern for shape-shifting moving objects.

1.2.3.1 Immutable mobiles, mutable mobiles, and the achievement of stability

Theoretically, shape-shifting moving objects are recurring analytical concerns in several studies of complex phenomena in science and technology studies (Law and Singleton 2000; Law and Singleton 2003; Law 1986; Law 2002a; de Laet and Mol 2000; Annemarie Mol 2002; Berg and Mol 1998). These concerns for how to analytically treat and capture objects that are both shared yet different, while *also* changing are highly relevant to consider when it comes to viral reality marketing. We have stories that are subjected to multiple interpretations, and thus are both one globally shared story and at the same time, many local interpretations of it. But the stories in viral reality marketing also change from being a potentially true story, to potentially an ad, and finally a confirmed ad for a specific brand. And the more participants contribute to these various versions of the story, the more versions come into being. Therefore, we must attend to the features of something that both mutates and increases in ambiguity, while at the same time manages to keep its stability as a campaign. This is what the final body of literature will deal with.

Two things are worth emphasizing explicitly in this approach: the *inclusion of non-human actors*, and the focus on the *relations between changes and stability*. One of the first contributions dealing with both human and non-humans and relations that stay intact despite traveling is found in laboratory studies, where Bruno Latour is concerned with how scientific facts are produced through references. In his study of whether the savannah increases or decreases over time, Latour centers his study around the question: *"How do we pack the world into words?"* (Latour 1999:24). He is particularly interested in "reference" as a philosopher, and not in its "context" as a sociologist. His emphasis is therefore not on explaining, but on tracing and accounting for the minute details of converting the savannah to first the soil samples representing it in the lab, and then to an academic paper, which speaks on its behalf with words, graphs, and comparisons of numbers. The savannah is transformed in shape, as well as moved geographically.

The first question in scientific facts traveling according to Latour is: how to ensure that they stay intact while moving from one lab to another, and from one representation to another. If we want to ensure that scientific facts travel unhindered, work is often delegated to non-human actors. Since the savannah cannot be brought back to the lab, or fit into an academic paper directly, a small number of pertinent features representing it are transported and translated. A network of relations helps keep the pertinent features of the savannah intact while it travels. Latour describes the savannah as an immutable mobile. It is mobile since it is open to translations, as the samples of soil, while removed from the savannah, still speak on behalf of it. It is immutable because some types of relations are kept intact (Latour 1999:306–307).

The interest in immutable mobiles helps to raise the question of what needs to be kept in place for something to stay the same despite traveling. Theoretically, this way of conceptualizing objects provides an opportunity to explore the relationship between similarities and differences necessary for an object to remain stable, despite conversion in various formats. The approach, however, has also met with criticism. It has been pointed out, that behind any stabilization of objects, there is invisible work. Objects are not inherently stable. This critique has been raised and thoroughly discussed by Star (Star 1990) and Haraway (Haraway 1997).

Objects, however, can be stable by other means. Mol and de Laet direct attention to objects achieving their stability by changing. In their study of the Zimbabwe bush pump, they argue that the pump is a mutable mobile, i.e., it keeps stability by changing slowly. The pump is a piece of technology, which holds promises of various realities simultaneously, while remaining a single object. This mutable mobile is considered a fluid object. It keeps stability by changing relations, not by keeping them intact. (de Laet and Mol 2000)

These concerns for objects and the relationship between maintaining stability and changing relations are relevant to keep in mind for theoretical approaches to viral reality marketing. They allow for the direction of attention to what provides an object its stability. Stability may not only be achieved by fixing relations, but can also be obtained by shifting them. Yet asking how it stays intact despite of, as well as because of, shifting relations is an obvious analytical starting point since, in viral reality marketing, the campaign is assumed to achieve stability through ambiguity. Viral reality marketing campaigns grow by traveling between people, and across domains. They gain momentum through the continuous appearance of new relations made between content elements, spurred on by lack of information and absence of confirmation. They consist of rumors and potentials, and continuously shift shape. In the beginning, as participants play detectives, they are potentially ads for unconfirmed brands, as well as potentially true stories. Later they become confirmed campaigns for specific brands. These features make it difficult to view the campaign as the same object subjected to various interpretations. Shape-shifting moving objects help to cast light on something that grows *because* of its shape-shifting features.

1.2.3.1 Mutable mobiles applied

The concepts of mutable mobiles, shape-shifting moving objects, and fluidity have been well used across several sciences. However, they have been applied mostly to studies that are assumed to have complex objects of study that figure across several domains, while shared between diverse groups. Common to these studies is that they face objects that are considered difficult to grasp. They are often concerned with asking broad questions, often related to the emergence of new technologies, and most studies use the theoretical approach on larger and more overall phenomena such as mobile phones, digital data, and tourism.

One such example is Peggy Jubien who set out to elaborate on why mobile phones are more complex than assumed in education. She set out to *"learn about the multiple entanglements of students, teachers and smartphones in overlapping networks*" while examining the pedagogical practices created within these assemblages (Jubien 2013:1). She used the concept of fire objects, an object that, like the fluid object, obtains its stability by shifting relations. However, as the fluid object does so gradually, the fire object achieves its stability through abrupt changes and through patterns of discontinuity. Absence and presence are key concepts, and sometimes parts of an object must be absent for it to appear present – a theoretical elaboration that I find highly relevant to consider in relation to viral reality marketing as well. Yet, when it comes to pinpointing absences and presences, there is some unclarity in Jubien's analysis. Jubien argues that a focus on absences and presences is relevant when studying users of smartphones, because there are obvious patterns of absence and presence made possible through these devices. *"These notions of fluid and fire objects (which overlap and share similarities) captured some of the messy*[13] *and unpredictable qualities of smartphones in post-secondary education."* (Jubien 2013:5). Here, smartphones are considered to be the shape-shifting moving objects that come into being from a pattern of absences and presences. But through the empirical examples, it is the user who, through the smartphone can manipulate his or her presence and absences. *"The smartphone permits Adam to manipulate his presence and absence; at one moment, he is present in the library and absent from his apartment, and in the next, he is virtually present in his apartment building and physically present in the library."* (Jubien 2013). Therefore, the study does not as such contribute to shape-shifting moving objects, here, with mobile phones, achieving stability because of a specific relationship between absences and presences. Instead, it ends up illustrating how absences and presences become visible because of the phone.

Another study that sees fluid objects and mutable mobiles as useful theoretical tools is Terrie Lynn Thompson's who used it to tackle the large phenomenon of digital data. Thompson takes as a starting point, data shared. *"[...] coded materialities (the digital in all its forms, including software, devices, networks, artefacts, and algorithms) are notoriously fickle. Digital things are often described as unbounded, evasive, distributed, and constantly mutating"* (Thompson 2014:431). This led Thompson to ask how networked learning researchers reckon with these mobilities and multiplicities. She called on ANT to explore how the digital interposes data within the research process – freezing, thawing, excluding, including – beckoning researchers to attend to the sociality of data. To cope with this, she introduced the concepts of fluid and fire objects and raised the question: "how can [these

[13] Jubien does not define "messy" but the term she refers to is John Law's concept (Law 2006). "Messy" refers to a situation in which the object of ethnographic research is interpretatively complex to such a degree that the ethnographer may become trapped in the attempt to capture all of the various facets of the object. Law's point is that if a phenomenon appears difficult to grasp, complex, incoherrent or contradictory, then something less messy, a framework or a concept will instead make a mess of describing it. See also (Law & Singleton, 2005)

concepts] reveal new aspects of data traveling?" Following this, she concluded that to grasp mobility of data, fluid objects and absence and presence captured and illuminated new aspects of what data is, by helping to *"draw contrasts, articulate silent layers, turn questions upside down, focus on the unexpected, add to one's sensitivities, propose new terms, and shift stories from one context to another"* (Thompson 2014:433). But it is not digital data in general that was her object of study. Her analysis was a metanalysis of how participants in a symposium have used the concepts of data diversely. Her analysis was an attempt to grasp differences in uses of the same shared concept of digital data. It seems that between this aim to grasp data defined as *"digital in all its forms",* and the actual empirical material represented, even though the fluidity approach is considered useful to treat all large, undefined, and widely shared phenomena, boundary-making is still an issue. It became clear that using fluidity and shape-shifting moving objects does not solve the issue with boundary-making, when attending to complex and "seemingly messy" phenomena. Instead, it suggests an active awareness of boundary-making and its consequences.

Just as Thompson used fluid objects to analyze how others use shared concepts differently, Richard Ek performed a metanalysis of other studies and their use of the concept of tourism. Fire objects have also been used to study how others, in studies of tourism write about social media and its role related specifically to tourism. (Ek 2013). Richard Ek argued that, *"social media as represented in other studies of tourism is messy".* The intention was to introduce and explore what kind of new research questions could be asked if social media was imagined as something not easily compartmentalized and tangible, but instead as fluid and spatially more complex than a distinct ''object in space'' (Ek 2013:21). Ek takes as starting point, something that is considered messy by directly referring to Law's concept of mess while using fluidity and fire objects as new ways of grasping this. John Law's concept of mess was part of a greater methodological concern for things that may have a character that is altered and simplified by most methods. Common to the work of Thomson and Ek is the way they have located phenomena that is assumed to be complex. Furthermore, they have used these as means for metanalysis; to grasp other's use of the concepts. This takes them in a different direction when it comes to shape-shifting moving objects, which deals neither with non-human nor with how stability is achieved despite, as well as because of, differences.

Whereas these studies are more concerned with the theoretical relation between concepts, there are other studies that attend more specifically to empirical material. Technologies that are under development, which are to be shared between groups with multiple interests, across many sites are considered empirically complex and are often discussed with reference to shape-shifting moving objects and fluidity. These studies approach technologies while *embracing* the double-sidedness in objects as being both shared, yet locally adapted simultaneously. Studies that have served as inspiration for me are those about different medical practices such as studies of electronic patient records, in which the representation of the patient is digital, and hence shared across domains, hospital wards and between different specialties. (Svenningsen 2003; Jensen 2004) These studies are concerned with the way the digital representation of the patient is shared across domains and used differently in various local settings. Fluidity has also been linked to several medical conditions, such as liver disease (Law and Singleton 2003; Law and Singleton 2000), atherosclerosis (Annemarie Mol 2002) as well as differences in medicine (Berg and Mol 1998). Common to all these studies is that they specifically attend to the *relation* of an object being one and multiple simultaneously.

When trying to grasp viral reality marketing, these approaches allow for a shift from concerns of a global campaign contrasted to the various local responses; to a fluid approach that has a focus on the way shape-shifting moving objects achieve and maintain stability because of their ambiguous and constantly shifting relations. Videos are not just traveling objects that hold the campaign together, they shift shape as well. This is crucial as we are not just studying a video versus its local responses; we want to explore the intriguing mechanisms that make participants contribute and add to the confusion of what is going on.

1.2.3.3 Multiplicity, ontology, and methodological awareness

The academic field and tradition to which this thesis belongs, Science and Technology Studies, is inseparably linked to a mindset that requires an explicit focus on non-human actors. These are not "more important" than human actors but must simply not be distinguished a priori from them. Key parts of this field also reject reality as a fixed constant. There is no single truth, and multiple "realities" may be practiced simultaneously. Some of the influencing studies that have put multiplicity on the agenda are Annemarie Mol's studies. Multiplicity is a key term here:

> *"[...]objects come into being – and disappear – with the practices in which they are manipulated. As such object of manipulation tends to differ from one practice to another, reality multiplies." (Annemarie Mol 2002:5).*

In "Cutting Surgeons, Walking Patients: Some Complexities Involved in Comparing", Mol raises the issue of comparison between walking therapy and operations as treatments for arterial disease in the lower limbs (A. M. Mol 2002). She discusses how a seemingly simple phenomenon such as atherosclerosis is, in practice enacted in multiple ways. She deliberately uses the term *multiple* in favor of ambiguous, incoherent, and conflicting, to distance herself from a pluralistic social constructive way of thinking. Instead of seeing atherosclerosis as one thing that can be approached from various perspectives, the concept of the multiple directs attention to how it is enacted in different ways, in different situations, places, and practices simultaneously. And this is where methods play a role. For attending to multiplicity is about seeing both objects and the worlds as never singular.

Along with concepts and their sole theoretical value, the literature concerned with fluidity adds a methodological awareness when it comes to speaking of objects as well as worlds. It is concerned with how a particular world is enacted, and it directs specific attention to researchers and the positions from which they speak. This literature advocates a shift from epistemology to ontology. Epistemology is about acknowledging that while there might be one object, or one reality, there are various perspectives on that object or reality that exist simultaneously. Capturing the nuances of such variations gets us closer to understanding the object. Ontology distances itself from getting closer to the object or to reality, since reality itself is left untouched. Whereas ANT abandons concepts such as reality as a priori distinction (Latour 2005; Latour 1996a), shifting to ontology celebrates it, however in plural. This pluralistic approach is not concerned with measuring them up against each other. Instead, it states that there are many ways of knowing an object, and there are many ways of practicing the multiple versions of it. Questions such as "what to make of an object?" are exchanged for, "how are multiple versions of it being practiced?" Annemarie Mol, suggests that new questions emerge as the objects handled in practice are not the same from one site to another:

> *"If practices are foregrounded there is no longer a single passive object in the middle, waiting to be seen from the point of view of seemingly endless series of perspectives."* (Mol 2002:5).

Instead, objects come into being – and disappear – with the practices in which they are manipulated. As such, objects of manipulation tend to differ from one practice to another, and reality multiplies. Therefore, she suggests specifically to attend to the multiplicity of reality.

Representation and intervention

I have taken inspiration from studies concerned with shape-shifting moving objects. (Law and Mol 2001; Leigh Star 2010; Star and Griesemer 1989; Zeiss and Groenewegen 2009) (Law 1986) in particular different topologies (Law 2002a; Law 2002b; Law 2000). This has to do with the acknowledgements of methods as active enactments. However, along with the concern for practices and enactments of objects lies another implicit matter; the role of the researcher. For the researcher actively participates in enacting objects, when *studying objects* as well as *representing them in writing retrospectively*.

The first matter came up as a methodological concern regarding gathering data around ads when informants considered them differently. It is not sufficient to simply distinguish between campaign leaders wanting to create brand awareness and the participants enabling this by passing on content, when the latter group is highly diverse. It is not a given that all participants care about the brand, or even that they are aware of it. This dichotomy calls for awareness of the researcher's challenges and responsibilities in bringing concepts and ascribed roles of informants into the field. The implications of choosing between different options for analytically framing the concept of participation will be a recurring theme throughout this dissertation.

The concerns for the researcher's position, both when gathering data and when writing about it afterwards are issues that need exceptional attention in the specific field of viral reality marketing. Signe Vikkelsø (Vikkelsø 2007) provides considerations useful to both these concerns. She emphasizes that researchers who follow the actors (Latour, 1987) or do praxiography (Mol, 2002) must take into consideration that informants – just like researchers – are cartographers, to whom the emerging descriptions are strategic opportunities or threats. Vikkelsø bridges the gap between ANT and the after-ANT agenda elaborated on by Mol, Law and others (Annemarie Mol 2002; Law 2002a; Law and Moser 1999). She defines it as multiplicity-oriented ANT. This allows her to attend to coexisting and partly connected versions of reality as they are enacted. Both researcher and informants enact these simultaneously.

The researcher's descriptions are not passive ones, but active enactments of particular versions of objects, worlds, and realities. No description leaves the described untouched, as the object and the agency of observation are inseparable. Likewise, informants, as well as objects are not just passively waiting to be described. They may resist, or they may be eager to be described. Resistance may come from actors, who are part of a large, powerful network, and wish to keep secret the kinds of allies and actions that help to establish this power, but it may also come from something so simple as a nurse resisting being followed by the ethnographer as she secretly withdraws to have a break and rest her legs. Eagerness to be described, likewise, highlights how informants have interests in which they include the researcher as her engagement becomes part of their individual strategies. A good description, Vikkelsø argues, is one that is put at risk by being exposed to multiple audiences, and that is aware of the way it also puts others at risk through descriptions.

Descriptions are never just that. Stories rarely start when the researcher enters; entering is done into already established practices. The relationship between researcher and informants is not just a simple collaboration to reach a shared goal or solve a shared mystery (Vikkelsø 2007:300). Vikkelsø's concerns are highly relevant to bear in mind specifically when it comes to viral reality marketing and its consequences for the researcher. The features of viral reality marketing call for sensitivity when it comes to creating a narrative retrospectively that is kept together by its uncertainties and ambiguities.

Other noteworthy studies are from John Law, looking at the British attempt to build a military aircraft (Law 2002a) and Bruno Latour, on the French attempt to build a guided transportation system (Latour 1996b). Both made specific choices in their style of writing in order to represent actors playing crucial roles. They explicitly avoided narratives taking innovation as the starting point, and projecting it back in time, as though it had always existed. Furthermore, they gave voice to their earlier selves in order to highlight how they too had shifted position in the process.

Studies of shape-shifting moving objects, ontologies, and multiple realities direct attention back to the researcher and her accesses, but also create awareness of how informants as well, are positioned in networks of relations that cut off or enhance some types of information. They signal the importance of paying attention to fractal perspectives based on positioning in a specific time and place. Whereas studies dealing with shape-shifting moving objects and how stability is achieved have not yet been related to viral reality marketing, theoretical concepts and concerns for specific methodologies hold promise for new ways of approaching viral reality marketing. They provide new ways of thinking about a phenomenon that is both globally shared, while at the same time locally interpreted, but at the same time continuously growing as a consequence of changes as well as its ambiguous character. In chapter five I will go into further details about this.

Before continuing to the second chapter, an outline of the remaining chapters is provided to give an idea of what is to come.

1.3 Outline of chapters

Chapter 2 presents a range of theoretical approaches to the concepts of users, producers, and innovations. The variation in roles ascribed to the users in the analysis of innovation is discussed, as users vary from being relatively passive receivers that are resources to innovators, to being the primary source from where innovations emerge. As participants in viral reality marketing, they are both the sources of new content while at the same time a resource to those who want to create specific brand awareness. This double role calls for an improved analytical approach to the complexities of user roles. The concept of innovation likewise, is discussed by presenting a theoretical approach that represents innovations as existing independent of, and prior to, meeting the user. In this approach, the theoretical interest is centered on the user, not the innovation. (Rogers 2003). This is discussed and contrasted to another theoretical perspective, where the innovation is not considered as a concept useful to describe what circulates or those engaging with it. This latter approach considers innovation as neither preexisting nor stable. Instead innovation is constantly in the making. (Latour 1986; Akrich, Callon, and Latour 2002a; Akrich, Callon, and Latour 2002b). From these juxtapositions, we learn how concepts of users and innovations need further theoretical exploration.

Chapter 3 presents and analyzes various examples of marketing campaigns, real time marketing, and social media games. These are used to pinpoint potentiality and temporality as central issues. The empirical examples also serve to put a specific emphasis on the challenges encountered by the ethnographer in the field, by the analyst creating order in cacophonous stories, and finally by the writer retrospectively accounting for them to the readers, who are separated from the field in both time and frame of reference.

Chapter 4 presents and analyzes three specific viral reality marketing campaigns with government financed Danish companies trying to reach citizens with specific information. Building on the preceding chapters, it presents the analytical implications of describing collaborations between actors, where relations are not the same on all sides. We find that actors may appear as the same from one side while being distinct from another; actors may collaborate without being aware, or they may collaborate despite conflicting interests. All these ambiguous relations serve to illustrate a need for thinking differently about such relations.

Chapter 5 contemplates the different academic stages: gathering data, analyzing it, and finally presenting it. As the object of study is changing, these different stages, and the methodological concerns that should go into moving between them, are discussed. Modes of ordering (Law 2004) are brought up as a methodological concern, and different modes of ordering for the researcher throughout the process are discussed.

Additionally, this chapter will direct specific attention to present and future orientation respectively (Brown, Webster, and Rappert 2000; Michael and Brown 2010). These perspectives are useful when studying sporadic, ambiguous, and messy interactions. In addition to present and future as orientations, a final orientation towards absence is suggested. An emphasis on constancy as an effect of discontinuity and a specific analytical focus on relations between absence and presence is discussed. Sometimes objects stay stable because they fix relations, (Law 1986), sometimes by shifting relations (Annemarie Mol 2002), and finally some keep stable through a relation between presence and absence. In this latter approach, stability is explained by focusing on what must necessarily be absent for something else to be present. (Law and Mol 2001). The emphasis of absence and discontinuity provides a theoretical contribution to the concept of shape-shifting moving objects that allows us to elaborate on how something can travel and change radically, while keeping certain elements intact. Methodologically, this chapter suggests clarity and directs specific attention to the role of the researcher and her shifting positions throughout the process.

The conclusion emphasizes how novel insights may be uncovered through the use the concepts of ambiguity, potentiality, and temporality. Having these concepts specifically in mind, encourages attention to phenomena and interactions that are difficult to grasp and might otherwise be seen as a hindrance to focusing on the object of study. Deliberately looking for temporalities, potentiality, and ambiguity encourages focus on uncertainty, open ends, and multiple possible versions. Doing so is crucial when attending to matters that are both sudden, intensive, highly digitally mediated, and subject to massive attention.