“We already think of the marketing behind it.” An exploratory qualitative research of the online sharing behaviour of consumers, and the implications for viral marketing.

Master thesis

Name: Quirine Brouwer
Student ID: 412393
Supervisor: Jason Pridmore

Master Media Studies – Media and Business
Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication
Erasmus University Rotterdam

February 10, 2019
“We already think of the marketing behind it.” An exploratory qualitative research of the online sharing behaviour of consumers, and the implications for viral marketing.

Abstract

This research aimed to find out more about virality as a whole, the sharing motivations of social media users, and what this means for viral marketing. Current literature has not yet discussed virality in combination with sharing motivations and popular content in the current online environment. Most of the literature discussed either one aspect of virality and viral marketing, such as memes or influencer marketing, while a general idea of why and what people share was not yet discussed. This research wanted to explore this topic further in an inductive manner, based on the following research question: How do social media users decide on sharing content in relation to perceived branded viral content? A starting point was based on the literature surrounding WoM and eWoM, specifically as these topics are closely related to virality and viral marketing. This helped in structuring the research and developing questions for the focus groups. Focus groups were used to emphasize the social aspect of online sharing, as it was expected that the social setting of the focus groups would help to get more elaborate findings. The research found that the content of a message is less important than the motivations for sharing something. The interactions people have on social media are very similar to the ones they have offline, which means that the same cultural and societal rules matter. Participants of the focus groups made it clear how viral content helps them connect with other people and express themselves. Brands have to be careful with trying to involve themselves too much as this could lead to annoyance amongst the consumers. However, there are some ways in which brands can interact that will help them blend in in viral culture. The focus for brands should mostly lie on creating a good fit between the message they are sending out and the brand identity, and not trying to appeal too much to viral culture.

Keywords: viral marketing, virality, online sharing, sharing motivations
# Table of contents

Abstract ................................................................................................................................. 2

1. Introduction ....................................................................................................................... 4  
   1.1 The important concepts ............................................................................................... 6  
   1.2 Relevance of this research ......................................................................................... 8  

2. Theoretical background .................................................................................................. 10  
   2.1 What is viral marketing? ............................................................................................ 10  
       2.1.2 Characteristics of viral marketing ...................................................................... 12  
   2.2 Viral culture and brand stories ................................................................................. 15  
   2.3 Motivations for sharing ............................................................................................ 18  
   2.4 Characteristics of viral content ................................................................................ 21  
   2.5 Measurability of viral marketing and platform affordances .................................... 22  
   2.6 Possible pitfalls of viral marketing .......................................................................... 24  

3. Research design ............................................................................................................. 27  
   3.1 Overall research design ............................................................................................ 27  
   3.2. Sample ................................................................................................................... 28  
       3.3 Operationalization ................................................................................................. 30  
   3.4 Data analysis ............................................................................................................ 31  

4. Results and discussion .................................................................................................. 34  
   4.1 Virality, social structures and identity construction .................................................. 34  
       4.1.2. Social sharing and online surveillance .............................................................. 35  
       4.1.2 Identity construction ......................................................................................... 38  
   4.2 The presence of brands in viral culture ..................................................................... 41  
   4.3 The characteristics of viral content .......................................................................... 44  
       4.3.1 Influencing factors on sharing .......................................................................... 45  
       4.3.2 Vague threshold for sharing .......................................................................... 46  
   4.4 Brand fit and consumer expectations ...................................................................... 50  

5. Conclusion ..................................................................................................................... 56  
   5.1 Implications of this research...................................................................................... 56  
   5.2 Limitations and recommendations .......................................................................... 58  

6. References ...................................................................................................................... 60  

7. Appendices ...................................................................................................................... 65  
   Appendix A – Discussion guide ...................................................................................... 65  
   Appendix B – Overview of participants ......................................................................... 67  
   Appendix C – Probes ..................................................................................................... 68  
   Appendix D – Code table .............................................................................................. 68
1. Introduction

Today much of our interaction happens through online sharing – we share videos, products, commercials, music clips, memes: anything, really. When a message gets shared enough and at a high enough rate, it can be considered viral. This term comes from the idea that this content has spread exponentially like a virus across the internet. In response to this, companies are increasingly seeing financial potentials in this phenomenon. If they can get people to share their message at an exponential rate for free, they will have all the benefits of advertising and marketing but none of the costly or time-consuming elements. One of the most successful examples of how this works is the Ice Bucket Challenge of 2014, a trend that started in the USA where people challenged each other to pour a bucket full of ice water over their heads. If they refused to do that, they had to donate 100 Dollars to the ALS Association. As a result, over 100 million Dollars were donated to the ALS Association, which was six times as much than the year before (Steel, 2014). A more recent example is the Bird Box challenge, based on the Netflix-produced movie Bird Box that came out on December 21, 2018. For this challenge, people have to go about their daily lives blindfolded, just as the characters in the thriller have to. After the challenge started, Netflix quickly came out with a statement saying that the challenge is dangerous and people should not participate (Deb, 2019). However, with the challenge-videos having millions of views, it is unlikely that Netflix will complain about all the free promotion. Neither of these trends were planned by the organisations, but they still received worldwide attention. If there were a formula for brands to create this viral buzz around them: they would save millions on their marketing budget, while gaining millions in their reach. This is what many organisations and brands are trying to figure out, and this new way of thinking about marketing is called viral marketing.

Of course, viral marketing is not necessarily a new phenomenon. Hotmail was one of the first companies to use viral marketing as a potential strategy in 1996 (Subramani & Rajagopalan, 2003). The email provider launched a campaign by attaching a promotional message about their free email service to every email that was sent through Hotmail, meaning that this message would go viral through the forwarding of emails (Schulze, Schöler & Skiera, 2014). Through this technique, Hotmail gained around ten million users in only
seven months (Porter & Golan, 2006). The makers of this campaign, Steve Jurvetson and Tim Draper, introduced the term ‘viral marketing’ to describe their strategy: it was based on the knowledge of Jurvetson’s wife who was a physician. She told him that when someone sneezes, two million particles get released and spread. They wanted a similar effect for their message about Hotmail, and it worked.

Today viral marketing entails much more than just email messages and is mostly aimed towards social media. An early definition of virality is given by Welker (2002), who defines it as “strategies that allow an easier, accelerated, and cost reduced transmission of messages by creating environments for a self-replicating, exponentially increasing diffusion, spiritualization, and impact of the message (p. 4).” In this research, we wanted to know how that environment is created. If we look into the topic a bit further, current literature on the topic often uses the concept viral marketing and the concept of e-Word-of-Mouth (eWoM) interchangeably. This makes sense: it involves the same basic idea of peer-to-peer sharing of information. (Abedniya & Mahmouei, 2010; Camarero & San José, 2011; Porter & Golan, 2006; Woerndl, Papagiannidis, Bourlakis & Li 2008). While this says something about the nature of viral marketing, it does not necessarily say anything about its characteristics. For instance, it does not tell us which messages receive that type of attention and which do not, and why that is the case. Much of the literature is still unclear when it comes to many of these questions and cannot seem to agree on one working strategy. Most of it also focuses solely on the content of viral messages rather than the users and sharers of these messages.

This research therefore focused on the users of viral content and their motivations to click like or share a message. These motivations were expected to tell us much more about the phenomenon of viral culture rather than the content itself, which is unpredictable. This is related to the uses and gratifications (U&G) theory: this theory helps explain what social and psychological needs drives and motivates users to focus on and share particular content on social media (Lee & Ma, 2012). Again, there has been research on these uses and gratifications, and the motivations behind sharing, but there is still much disagreement between scholars on these motivations. Furthermore, this research focused on the involvement of brands in sharing motivations and how brands may or may not affect how
people decide to share a message. Therefore, this research focused on the following research question:

*How do social media users decide on sharing content in relation to perceived branded viral content?*

1.1 The important concepts

By conducting an open and exploratory research on viral marketing, pre-conceived notions of the phenomenon become less important. Much of the literature on this topic is outdated, not focusing on viral marketing through social media, but older technical means such as the use of email. Therefore, previous research and its findings may be less applicable to the current ‘viral environment’, which exists mainly out of sharing content through social media. The word ‘sharing’ in the research question relates to all actions on social media that result in at least one more person seeing the content of the message, meaning that it involves liking, retweeting, commenting, tagging, sharing on timelines and private sharing in private messages. Likewise, ‘branded viral content’ in this research question holds all the same characteristics as normal viral content, but the difference is that it includes some sort of branded message that was intended by the brand itself.

Virality involves many different aspects that were important to keep in mind for this research. Because it is such a broad, diverse topic that is still quite unexplored in connection to the current online environment, this research approached the topic in a qualitative, exploratory manner. The main driver of virality is the sharing behaviour of people: something only goes viral when it gets shared on an exponential basis. There are many social and psychological factors that drive people to share content. Therefore, the most fitting way to research this was also in a social setting, particularly as this would draw out the social aspects of sharing. People may come to different conclusions and develop further insights when they can engage in informal conversation with their peers. They might recognize their behaviour in others which will spark a more ongoing and in-depth conversation. Based on this approach to the research, the data was collected qualitatively through focus groups. This method allowed for direct responses to the questions, but additionally unexpected topics
came up that could be incorporated in the research. This was helpful given that a lot was (and is) still unknown regarding virality, sharing behaviour and branded content.

The main emphasis in the focus groups was on the sharing behaviour of participants. By discovering why people want to share certain content (or why not), we could draw further conclusion on what this could mean for brands and their marketing strategies. As mentioned before, the U&G theory was used to look at sharing motivations (Lee & Ma, 2012). However, something that came up during the focus group that turned out to be the most important driving factor behind virality. Put simply, this factor is the culture that is created around it: the online environment functions much the same as an offline environment, in which people have to live up to certain expectations and are questioned when they do the opposite. The online viral space is a very social environment, and people do not only seem to share for themselves, but also for others. If we first understand viral culture for the social phenomenon it is, we can better understand the motivations behind sharing and how brands may or may not affect these motivations.

There are other aspects that could be discussed besides sharing motivations to better understand the concept of virality, such as the expectations of users when they think of viral content. This could later be connected to where brands fit in with these expectations. Furthermore, the participants in the focus groups were asked what ‘going viral’ means for a brand, and if it can also possibly be harmful for the brands’ identity. And when they manage to go viral, there is no guarantee this will lead to long-term commitment of consumers to the brand, as it might also just create short-term attention. This will partly determine if it is a good marketing strategy or not.

Sharing of content is but a part of virality, as it also involves active creation of users themselves. This is seen in for instance influencer marketing, which is further discussed below. It is also visible in meme culture, in which users create the content themselves and give different meanings to pre-existing messages (Blommaert & Varis, 2017). Memes have not been discussed in relation to viral marketing and the opportunities they might provide for businesses, even though various businesses have certainly made attempts to include memes in their strategies. The Dutch website Bol.com is an example of a company that tries
to implement memes in their marketing. The distinction between passive consumers of content and active creators of content is being blurred, meaning that the distinction between consumer and brand is also being blurred. Brands used to be the creators, but why would consumers seek out the content they want from brands if they can get that same content from their peers? Because of this development brands needed to readjust their strategies, meaning that they need to keep creating new needs for consumers in order for the consumer to keep coming back to them.

1.2 Relevance of this research

Viral marketing is a relevant topic to research for three main reasons. First, there is a clear gap in the literature, with most of the literature being contradictory. Much of the research is outdated and focuses solely on the idea of viral marketing through email. This is less or even not at all relevant for the current meaning of the concept of viral marketing. Memes are for instance mainly discussed in relation to cultural phenomena in current literature, and not yet in relation to viral marketing. Therefore, an exploratory research study could lead to new insights and a clear starting point in new ways of looking at viral marketing.

Second, this research is relevant to get a broad and in-depth insight into user behaviour and sharing motivations on social media from a qualitative perspective. As the users are the ones who decide if a message is interesting enough to make it go viral, that is where the basis of this research focused on. This research also brings some interesting insights on the social aspect of sharing, which very much seemed to rely on reputational concerns. This suggests that the reputational implications of a message are the first concern of a user when they decide on sharing something, and not how much they enjoy the content. Therefore, this research could contribute to findings surrounding the psychological and sociological implications of the online environment within which people interact.

Third, the relevance lies in the opportunity to provide businesses with useful insights into their consumers’ minds when it comes to viral marketing, which they could use for future attempts to create viral marketing campaigns. The insights on sharing motivations can be used commercially for brands – however, they need to be mindful of the environment they are operating in. The online space is for many people a social and cultural space where at
least previously there was not much room seen for brands (Fournier & Avery, 2011). This research shows why this is so important to remember and how brands can work to still be relevant in an environment where they may be less welcomed or wanted.
2. Theoretical background

In this section of the thesis we look at relevant literature that have researched (some part of) viral culture and viral marketing. First, the nature of viral marketing will be discussed, along with its characteristics to get a better idea of what viral marketing entails. This will then be summarized in one working definition for the purpose of this thesis. Following that, the nature of viral content itself and what motivates people to share this content will be discussed. The focus will then be shifted towards more practical matters, such as: how can we measure virality, and how is virality influenced by the affordances of each social media platform? It is important to look at how social media platforms are involved in influencing virality themselves, and what this means for both brands and consumers. Finally, the potential negatives and downfalls of viral marketing will be critically discussed as well.

2.1 What is viral marketing?

The definition of viral marketing has changed over the years – the same way the online environment in which viral marketing is happening has changed. Therefore, there still seems to be a lot of confusion on the specifics of viral marketing and what it exactly entails. In this section I will attempt to draw together different ideas and voices in the field. If we start at the basics, virality relates to a virus that spreads very quickly from person to person. In the case of viral marketing, the same happens with a branded message (Porter & Golan, 2006). An early definition of virality is given by Welker (2002), who defines it as “strategies that allow an easier, accelerated, and cost reduced transmission of messages by creating environments for a self-replicating, exponentially increasing diffusion, spiritualization, and impact of the message” (p. 4). The words ‘cost reduced’ and ‘exponentially increasing’ are of importance for brands here: viral marketing gives them the opportunity to have a very large reach for a very low cost (Abedniya & Mahmoudi, 2010). For another definition of viral marketing, we can look at the article of Cruz and Fill (2008). They define viral marketing as “the informal, peer-to-peer electronic exchange of information about an identifiable product
or service” (p. 746). This definition puts more emphasis on the social aspect of sharing by calling it a peer-to-peer exchange.

These definitions are still quite vague, and they specifically do not tell us anything about the nature of this sharing, such as why or how people do it. From the literature it became clear that the concept of e-Word-of-Mouth is closely related to online virality, so this concept might help to deepen our understanding of virality. Many scholars seem to agree on the idea that viral marketing is a subsection of Word-of-Mouth (WoM) and e-Word-of-Mouth (eWoM) advertising, as it involves the same basic idea of peer-to-peer sharing of information. (Abedniya & Mahmouei, 2010; Camarero & San José, 2011; Porter & Golan, 2006; Woerndl, Papagiannidis, Bourlakis & Li 2008). If viral marketing is so similar to eWoM, or can be considered a related concept, it might be helpful to look at the definitions and characteristics of eWoM so that we might understand viral marketing better, as well. Regular WoM marketing can be defined as “the intentional influencing of consumer-to-consumer communications by professional marketing techniques” (Kozinets, de Valck, Wojnicki & Wilner, 2010, p. 71). WoM has shown to be an effective marketing strategy and can even be up to seven times more effective than traditional marketing techniques, such as print advertising (Kaplan & Haelein, 2011). Kaplan and Haelein (2011) explain why people are willing to engage in WoM marketing: it offers advantages for both the sender of the message, who see it as an opportunity to help others and increase their self-confidence, and for receivers, as it is an opportunity to reduce risk and time spent on finding information. What the authors do not touch upon, is how people might be manipulated into engaging in this type of behaviour by strategically thought out incentives that might be involved. For brands, eWoM offers two main advantages in comparison to traditional WoM: electronically, the information can be spread on a much higher speed, and secondly, eWoM and its results are much easier to monitor which allows for a more trustworthy analysis (Kaplan & Haelein, 2011). As the concepts of viral marketing and eWoM are used interchangeably by many scholars, it is important to keep these definitions and characteristics in mind: they also tell us many things about the nature of viral marketing.
2.1.2 Characteristics of viral marketing

Porter and Golan (2006) address an interesting characteristic of viral marketing: it is almost always unclear if the content was created with the intent of a viral campaign, as a joke, or as unofficial guerrilla marketing. This might make it hard to clearly define its characteristics. As noted by the authors, we can start by seeing the differences between traditional marketing and viral marketing. Traditional marketing is paid, while viral marketing makes use of unpaid media. Viral marketing, in comparison to traditional marketing, relies on personal aspects – meaning that it needs to encourage the viewer to share it with people close to them. Brands now try to do this by for instance using current events or trends in their marketing messages. Traditional marketing uses many channels and forms of media, while viral marketing is native to the internet. Lastly, traditional marketing involves general communication, while viral marketing often has to be provocative and play on emotions in order for it to be memorable (Porter and Golan, 2006). In order to reach this emotional reaction, brands often have to take a risk and push the limit, such as Nike did with their 2018 campaign involving Kaepernick. Another characteristic of viral marketing is similar to that of WoM – it can be a highly effective tool, but it also brings risks and a lack of control over the message, because after its release it is hard to trace (Cruz & Fill, 2008). These characteristics give us a starting point of what to expect when looking at viral content. However, the articles are quite outdated and based on viral email forwarding, and we need to keep in mind that there could be various differences when it comes to virality on social media today. For instance, we can already see that viral marketing is not completely unpaid anymore, since it is now possible to have sponsored posts that get boosted by Facebook and Instagram. Furthermore, since many brands are aware that viral posts usually have to be provocative or play on emotions to get shared, they exploit this to such an extent that it may become manipulative. We will get into this further at the end of this chapter, however, it is important to be mindful of the fact that many of the earlier findings on viral marketing are general knowledge to many brands today. As a result, these strategies have become so standard that consumers are starting to see through them, possibly creating a counter-effect. This is what this research partly focused on as well.
Abedniya and Mahmouei (2010) present us with some ideas on viral marketing somewhat more appropriate to the current online environment, relating to social media networks. They also call viral marketing the internet-based version of Word-of-Mouth, with at the base the idea that viral messages are spread between peers through the internet. According to the authors, this works, because friends can determine the most appropriate target market better than any marketing company would. Since viral marketing is in its basis all about sharing things with friends and acquaintances, something that seemed to be ignored in the early definitions, this take on viral marketing is more interesting for the current online environment. Abedniya and Mahmouei (2010) explain that people’s friends on social media are the most trustworthy sources to get information about certain products, and this way social media users take on two roles: the suppliers and the consumers of content. Suppliers of content are often highly engaged consumers and therefore influential people in influencing other people’s opinions. This is interesting for companies and potential viral marketing campaigns, because users will perceive the content shared by these trusted friends as valuable information, instead of information that is being pushed at them by companies (Abedniya & Mahmouei, 2010). Gosh et al. (2018) also found that people are less likely to trust promotional communication that was posted by the company itself, as opposed to peer-to-peer recommendations. This topic came back various times in the focus groups as well, and the findings of these authors seem to be valid: since social media users do not have to rely on companies for getting the content they want, they tend to reject branded content and would rather engage with content that was made by the consumer in the ‘supplier’ role.

This is also emphasized by Camarero and San José (2011), who explain that if the source of a message is known by the message recipient, their beliefs and attitudes as a consumer are more quickly influenced than when the source in unknown. The ‘trusted friend’ aspect of viral marketing therefore seems to be a key component in a successful viral campaign. However, it is also emphasized that in viral marketing you do not necessarily have to know the source of the message in order for it to reach you – think about online forums or followers that are not offline acquaintances (Camarero & San José, 2011). Brands could find more appeal by trying to blur the distinctions between brand and consumer by positioning themselves as online influencers. If people see them as a place to go to for
valuable, trustworthy information and less as a brand that just tries to market products and services, the relationship brand-customer can be changed.

Related to this is influencer marketing as well, in which the influencer is trusted by his or her followers not because they are friends, but because the influencer has a certain trustworthy reputation. Influencers usually have a large following, which results in their messages being shared a lot. That is something companies can easily use to increase awareness on their products and services. According to De Veirman, Cauberghe and Hudders (2017), social media influencers are highly trusted tastemakers in one or several branches and they have access to a considerably large network of people that follow them. This has a “far reaching impact and viral growth potential” for brands (p. 798). Again, the information about the product or brand comes from a trusted source, even though the user might not know this person in real life. Because of their large network, the source is perceived as credible and people are therefore willing to pass it on to their friends again, creating a viral culture around this influencer. Influencers could be seen as facilitators of viral messages, something that could be explored more in the focus groups, where the source or sender of the message will be discussed in relation to the participant’s perception of the message.

These trusted ‘friends’ of Abedniya and Mahmouei (2010) thus do not necessarily have to be trusted friends in real life as well, as long as they have a positive reputation in the online environment. This connects to this research in the sense that there is a distinction between offline and online acquaintances, which might impact the sharing behaviour of social media users. As detailed below, this research indicates that there had to be a clear distinction in the relationship the receiver of the message has with the sender of the message. It turns out that while people are generally interested in content that does not come from real life-acquaintances, they are more likely to actively engage with content from people they do know outside of social media. They might look at influencer content but are less likely to click the ‘like’ button or comment. This might suggest that influencers are not seen as a close, trusted friend anymore as they were at the time Abedniya and Mahmouei (2010) conducted their research. The researchers’ conclusion was “This [influencer] strategy has low cost and more influence between customers for marketers because customers more trust to their friends rather than company advertisement” (Abedniya & Mahmouei, 2010, p.
The findings of this research, however, revealed that influencers are so immersed in the world of marketing and PR that they become more and more brands themselves, and are therefore not as successful as ten years ago.

2.2 Viral culture and brand stories

The idea of a ‘viral culture’ is important: a culture is something that is both created and reciprocated by a group of people, and the same happens with viral messages: virality exists because people decide to share and keep sharing. What this means for viral marketing is that brands are not the main authors of their brand stories anymore, or as Scott Cook said it: “A brand is no longer what we tell the consumer it is – it is what consumers tell each other it is” (Gensler, Völckner, Liu-Thompkins & Wiertz, 2013, p. 242). Brands use user generated content (UGC) to tell their story through their consumers (Mairinger, 2008). This can have various advantages for a brand, such as adding real experiences and emotion to their brand story. Through viral marketing, consumers participate in this brand story by sharing it and adding their own meaning – and these consumer-generated brand stories that are spread in an online environment are more powerful than the ones on more traditional channels. This is because social media “utilize social networks, are digital, visible, ubiquitous, available in real-time, and dynamic” (Gensler et al., 2013, p. 243). These are all characteristics that set viral marketing apart from traditional marketing, and also make it much more complicated.

While these characteristics offer many possibilities when it comes to spreading a message, it also means a loss of control once the message is out there. After its release it is hard to trace (Cruz & Fill, 2008). Fournier and Avery (2010) discuss this as ‘open source branding’. Open source branding happens when a brand is embedded in a cultural conversation, with a more equal relationship between brand and consumer and the strength of their voices. Consumers might even have a greater say than marketers about the nature of brands, meaning that brands are more highly depended on their consumers’ view on them than ever. Fournier and Avery (2010) discuss three strategies that brands can use to overcome this risk. These are the strategies of the least resistance, ‘playing their game’ and inviting consumers to ‘play the brands game’. Viral marketing seems to fit in very much in
the second strategy of playing the consumers’ game, as they are using the viral culture of consumers to get their message out there as well. However, the focus groups also revealed that consumers are becoming more and more aware of brands doing this, and they are starting to feel like viral culture is becoming more of a branded space and consumers are playing the game of brands rather than brands joining in already existing consumer practices.

Another part of viral culture is the more recent emergence of meme culture. Most of the literature on it emerged first in 2017 but only focuses on memes within a specific context. For instance, Boudana, Frosh and Cohen (2017) researched the use of historical, iconic photographs as memes and how this changes the meaning of these historical events. Aguilar, Campell, Stanley and Taylor (2017) studied memes within a religious context to see how religion is understood in popular and modern culture. Another example is the research of Ross and Rivers (2017), who studied memes about the presidential candidates of the 2016 US election, to see how memes can undermine power and the legitimacy of the candidates. While all these studies are interesting and helpful to understand the impact of memes, they do not give us any information on where memes come from and why they are so popular. Furthermore, research on memes from before 2017 is very limited in its findings, even though the meme culture has been growing for a few years now. In this research, we looked at how they fit in the whole idea of viral culture. Blommaert & Varis (2017) define memes as “signs the formal features of which have been changed by users” (p. 36). To create memes, people engage in imitation processes or re-mix and re-edition of existing content, meaning that it has to have some pre-existing form that can be recreated by others (Benaim, 2018). Blommaert and Varis (2017) explain that the original signs are altered and adjusted in such a way that the memes produce very different communicative effects in the end. Memes are the product of intertextual recognizability and individual creativity, and the ultimate goal of the creators is to go viral with their version of a usually already existing meme (Blommaert & Varis, 2017). Seiffert-Brockmann, Diehl and Dobusch (2018) describe memes as “short bits of information that are easily reproduced and shared by large audiences” (p. 2863). They suggest the popularity of memes comes from the idea that citizens can use memes to undermine the elite creators of mass media. This relates to the earlier mentioned idea that users themselves are now both the suppliers and consumers of content, so there is a larger
chance of brands’ content being rejected. Other scholars describe memes as popular nonsense (Katz & Shifman, 2017), while some think it is meant to be a humorous online exchange that crosses cultural borders (Laineste & Voolaid, 2017).

Benaim (2018) does not agree with that notion: behind the apparent ‘stupid’ or ‘useless’ forms and ideas are huge symbolic values embedded in a complex cultural context. The author goes on to argue that memes are not inherent in viral culture, but memetic culture. They encourage active participation as opposed to passive sharing. However, this relates to people that actively create memes, whereas there is a large group of people that solely shares memes, which then would be part of viral culture again. Benaim (2018) also introduces five main types of memes: “collaborative, absurdist humour in multimedia forms, fan-based memes, hoax memes, celebrations of the absurd or unusual, and social commentary” (p. 901). Memes are thus very broad and therefore also have many possibilities and opportunities for brands. More and more brands are trying to engage in this type of behaviour in order to hit a cord with the masses, but there seems to be no clear idea of what works and what does not. This might be due to the fact that memes are very much a thing of the users themselves, as mentioned before. It is the type of content that is made and shared by users and they do not need brands to be involved. Since memes are a way of cultural and societal commentary, it might even be counterproductive for brands to become involved. Consumers might simply reject their presence. This is something this research tried to find out more about.

If we summarize the most important ideas surrounding viral marketing as one definition, we might say that viral marketing is related to eWoM and involves a branded message that has spread through an online culture of sharing between trusted networks in order for brands to create a brand story with the largest reach possible for the lowest cost possible. This ‘definition’ or summary tells us quite a bit, but also raises many questions. In this research, we were able to address issues such as the dynamics of trusted online networks and how the online culture of sharing is created: it turned out to be very much a social issue that was based on reputation and group dynamic. Furthermore, this research managed to connect this idea to brands and how viral culture can contribute to a brand story.
2.3 Motivations for sharing

At the core of virality lies the act of sharing. Because people keep sharing content online, the viral culture keeps existing. Therefore we can learn a lot about virality to look at the motivations behind sharing, that is, the process a person goes through before they decide on sharing something, and all that influences this decision. This idea relies on the underlying uses and gratifications (U&G) theory, a theory which explains, in the broadest sense, for what purposes people use forms of mass communication. People have certain needs, and they use different types of media to gratify those needs. In this particular case, the theory relates to the social and psychological needs that drive and motivate users to seek out particular content on social media and what motivates them to pass it on (Lee & Ma, 2012). According to Alhabash and McAlister (2014), there are a variety of needs that could motivate users to contribute to and share information on social media, including information seeking, entertainment purposes, social connections, habitual use (passing time) and expressing identity. Messages on social media can all gratify these needs when the user seeks them out. However, it is important to note that media also play a role in creating those needs. Netflix, for instance, is very good at making its consumers addicted to their content (Franssen, 2017). They do this by for instance adding cliffhangers to episodes and creating a sense of accomplishment for its users when they finish a show. While we may use media to gratify our needs, media also use us to create certain needs that make us keep coming back.

Scholars also emphasize the importance of the social aspect of sharing viral content (Eckler & Bolls, 2011). In sharing something on a peer-to-peer basis, you add something to the relationship you have with that person, whether you are the sender or the receiver. This can involve a mutual understanding, an inside joke, a confirmation of earlier information, helping each other out, and so on. Sharing content can gratify various social needs, or even the personal need of recognition. This research also confirms this, but it goes even further than that: social sharing seems to lie at the basis of every action people take when they engage with a message on social media. However, with this also comes the issue of social surveillance: in every social structure, there are rules that people expect you to adhere to. On social media, people are expected to act in such a way they would also in real life (Lyon &
Trottier, 2013). If they do not, they might get scrutinized for it. Viral content thus has to appeal to people in a way that it gratifies their needs without endangering their position in the social structure.

Another motivation for online sharing can be identity construction, as described by Goffman (1959). Goffman explains how people, while in the presence of others, engage in an ongoing presentation of the self in such a way they wish others to perceive them. He calls this the social ritual of ‘impression management’, in which individuals also learn how to deal with responses of others by ‘putting on a face’. This is very relevant for how people engage online, as it is a very accommodating environment for people to present themselves in a way they wish others to see them. Kim and Jang (2018) even go a step further, and state that online sharing behaviour is based mostly on the narcissistic nature of people. Sharing on social networks has both social benefits and self-promoting benefits that people tend to be looking for (again, the uses and gratifications come in). The authors explain that “these platforms provide a perfect venue for narcissists to aggrandize their self-image and receive attention or admiration from a large number of people” (Kim & Jang, 2018, p. 90). It was expected that it was difficult for the participants in the focus groups to talk about this, because due to the group effect it might be difficult for people to admit that engage in such behaviour.

If we look at the motivations for sharing branded content specifically, we can see there has been some literature on the motivations of sharing online marketing messages, but this covers a wide range of topics. Much of the literature focuses on WoM and eWoM, but it is possible to connect this to viral marketing. It seems that many of the same motives drive people to share something to one person or to their entire online network, which also became apparent in this study. Reputation and identity are the most important in these motivations. Kaplan and Haelein (2011) explain why people are willing to engage in WoM marketing: it offers advantages for both the sender of the message, who see it as an opportunity to help others and increase their self-confidence, and for receivers it is an opportunity to reduce risk and time spent on finding information.
Berger and Schwartz (2011) also talked about WoM, but they did have an interesting insight on what stimulates people to talk about a product. They found that two factors mostly stimulate people to do so, and those are interest and accessibility. While the interest of a product stimulated more immediate and explosive WoM right after the consumer learned about the product, accessibility made for more ongoing and constant WoM. Accessibility, in this case, means how visible and available the product is to the consumers. This works generally the same for viral marketing, as the message has to be visible and repeated in order for the message to stay in the users’ mind. According to Harvey, Stewart and Ewing (2011), the very fact that a message is so visible or even already viral, makes it seem more credible – the content of the message is endorsed and therefore people are more willing to forward it. Participants of this study reinforced this idea by explaining how many likes or views ‘triggers’ their interest and encourages them to watch or read the message. It seems therefore that interest and accessibility are not two separate factors, but there rather is an interplay between the two factors where one will influence the other. It is therefore possible that going viral can both have short-term and long-term benefits for a brand.

While some users may not be consciously paying attention to the fact they are talking about brands or products with their network, some do engage intentionally in viral marketing. De Bruyn and Lilien (2005) say intentional viral marketing happens when consumers willingly become ambassadors for the brand, product or service and forward the message to their network. They are either motivated by an explicit incentive such as financial incentives (this often happens for influencers) or personal and social incentives, such as the ones mentioned before by Alhabash and McAlistor (2014). Those included information seeking, entertainment purposes, social connections, habitual use (passing time) and expressing identity. The incentive to share is most strongly felt when the user feels the message contains something valuable to those they forward it to, something Harvey et al. (2011) call ‘involvement’. They consider it a crucial factor of forwarding behaviour, and they think this is a rather surprising find, as normally, it was agreed on that the content of a successful viral message can appeal to both the sender and receiver (Kibby, 2005). This theory suggests that if a user comes across a video on Facebook that does not particularly interest them but knows a friend will think it is interesting, they would still feel motivated to
forward the video. If we look at the incentives of Alhabash and McAlistor (2014), this seems not such a surprising find at all: such behaviour can be explained by the incentive of strengthening social connections. Harvey et al. (2011) also suggest that the already existing amount of online communication has a significant impact on forwarding motivations. If someone is particularly active online or has a lot of communication with certain friends, this person is more likely to share videos than when a person has a lot of close friends but rarely interacts with them online.

2.4 Characteristics of viral content

Current literature is not very clear regarding the characteristics of viral content in our current online environment, but some older sources may be helpful in getting an idea in what sparks peoples’ interest and motivates them to forward a message. Porter and Golan (2006) found that viral ads place their focus on different factors than television ads, such as humour, sexuality and violence. Messages that are forwarded the most contain good deeds, naked pictures, humour/jokes, crime warnings, games and chain letters (Phelps et al. 2004). Research shows that positive reactions (forwarding) do not necessarily correspond with positive emotions (Eckler & Bolls, 2011). Again, this is not so surprising. The sharing incentives mentioned above all suggest that the message has to appeal to someone on a personal level, especially when it comes to establishing social connections or expressing identity, status or reputation. The forwarder of information must know that it would include something of value for the receiver, otherwise there is no purpose for forwarding it. This makes viral content hard to predict and mostly seems to be based on coincidence, as sometimes a message is ‘just funny’ to people, and that is enough incentive to forward it. What the current literature does not explain is if these are just ‘happy accidents’, or if they are predictable, strategic viral campaigns. A more recent research, which focused solely on viral video ads, found that the video ads should ideally make the users feel emotions of awe and affection. These types of emotions were most likely to prompt viral sharing as they created a feeling of emotional connection and emotional generosity in relation to the ad and brand (Nikolinakou & King, 2018). For this research, I expected this to relate to the popularity of feel-good videos and cute videos about animals, which is why those were
incorporated in the probes to stimulate participants to talk about the topic.

As most of the literature on user- and sharing motivations is quite outdated, revisiting this topic in this research can give us new, interesting results. In this research, the aim was to find more clarity on what type of messages are the most popular on social media right now, and why people share them. Earlier findings were taken into account as probes or suggestions in the focus groups, such as the findings of Porter and Golan (2006) that humour and sexuality work best in appealing to large groups of people. This helped in demarcating the research and question a bit, while still leaving the conversation open for new suggestions. The recent findings of Nikolinakou and King (2018) are useful to better understand what messages are popular as well but focus only on video ads as opposed to all types of messages. Again, the focus groups were used to see if their findings could apply to all viral content. However, because of the limited findings in previous theory, it was also important to explore sharing motivations with an open mind in regard to the new ideas participants could come up with.

2.5 Measurability of viral marketing and platform affordances

While many scholars were interested in providing definitions of viral marketing, there seems to be more insecurity on the topic of measurability. When can a message be considered ‘viral’, and when does it become profitable for a company? It could be possible we have to look at the very practical calculation of conversion rate, meaning how many people received the message, how many clicked on it, and how many bought something. It seems that there are no clear answers or explanations yet, but it is clear that measurable results of viral messages include the reach, meaning the amount of views (Alhabash & McAlister, 2014). The authors explain this is called measuring in ‘affective evaluation’, meaning that social media users can express their feelings and response to an online message that is visible to others, such as the likes on Facebook and Instagram, or the favourite button on YouTube, Tumblr and Twitter. As Gerlitz and Helmond (2013) describe, likes allow for instant transformation of user engagement into numbers that are meaningful for brands. There are other ways to measure the popularity of a message, as Alhabash and McAlister (2014) note. There also is message deliberation, which refers to comments on the
(viral) message – in which both the volume and tone are important to indicate virality. Facebook made this even easier by introducing various emotional responses besides the ‘like’ button for their users, meaning that emotions can now be expressed in another way besides commenting, something that current literature has not touched upon yet. This all comes down to Facebook’s strategy of turning social connections and sharing into valuable consumer data (Gerlitz & Helmond, 2013).

Companies have more insight through this information than ‘regular’ social media users, as all social media offer more extensive options for tracking engagement for the pages of brands. For regular users however, these numbers are not readily available, and they can only measure popularity of a message based on likes or comments. This means that it is difficult for them to tell whether a message is already viral or not. And this, as was revealed in the focus groups, was an indicator for people that it is probably interesting content they should watch. The more popular a message already was, the more a user feels triggered to watch the message as well.

Something that also needs to be taken into account when discussing the technicalities behind viral marketing are the affordances of social media platforms themselves. In answering our research question and finding out why people share certain things, it was also important to find out how much free will there is involved. The algorithms of social media sites decide what people get to see, based on those people’s data (Carah, 2017). This means that the more people engage with certain content, the more they will eventually see of this content. The algorithms therefore also have an influence on virality, as not everyone gets the same chances to receive the same type of content. The amount of times a message gets shared therefore also depends on the amount of times it shows up in people’s timelines. Participants in focus groups were surprisingly unaware of this fact. And awareness is an important factor in shaping how the algorithm works, says Bucher (2017). The more people understand the power of algorithms, the less power they will have. People can shape the way algorithms work by deliberately branching out and engaging with different types of content.
When we relate this to viral marketing, algorithms have very important implications for brands as well, as they have to engage with consumers in their cultural world in order to influence the logic of algorithms (Carah, 2017). This means that in branding, the logic of participation has shifted, as it is not just created by the brands and its consumers anymore, but also by the algorithmic media infrastructure. Carah (2017) calls brands ‘experiments’, to illustrate how they constantly have to change and adapt to new forms of technology, to create valuable forms of attention for themselves. Viral marketing is one of these new ways brands can experiment by participating in both the media environment as well as the culture and sociality of its consumers. The trick is then not getting rejected by the consumers, as the focus groups of this research revealed. In the next section, I will discuss some of the other risks that have been talked about in previous research.

2.6 Possible pitfalls of viral marketing

Until now, viral marketing has been discussed in a fairly positive light, being described as the ideal way for a brand to market their products or services. However, we should also critically consider some of the downsides of this strategy. We already briefly touched upon the notion of loss of control over the message. As Cruz and Fill (2008) mention, if a message goes viral, it is very hard to trace. Especially when people start creating remakes such as memes, as described earlier by Benaim (2018). This happened for instance with the 2018 Nike campaign involving Kaepernick, which went viral in itself, but in which people also saw the opportunity to recreate the message as a way of social commentary. There was no way for Nike to control these new messages that were spread under their name, and there are various other examples of this happening to brands. Viral marketing may seem like a desirable strategy in terms of its cost- and timesaving factors, but it also brings a big risk with it when successful.

Viral marketing is an even more questionable strategy from the consumers’ side. Even though many social media users may be under the impression they are independent and acting with free agency, many of the affordances of social media ensure the opposite. Social media platforms make use of complex algorithms that decide what people get to see and what they do not (Carah, 2017). This means not everyone gets to see the same type of
content, and more importantly, not every message gets the same chance of spreading as far as the other. This means virality is a very subjective process that some creators (including brands) will benefit from, while others are disadvantaged. To counter this disadvantage, many creators engage in the act of manipulation and clickbait to draw as many people to their messages as possible. Kadian and Singh (2018) describe clickbait as “tabloid-like articles on the Internet which attract users through its graphic content and/or catchy headlines” (p. 1). These catchy headlines are usually an exaggeration and do not correctly represent the content of the actual message, making them an annoyance to users. They are a distraction and crowd out useful content (Kadian & Singh, 2018). It is hard for social media networks to combat clickbait, as creators usually walk a fine line between actual fake news or just exaggeration to increase clicks and views (Wiegmann et al., 2018). The participants in this research said to also be familiar with such click-bait posts, especially the tag-your-friend posts brought up many feelings of irritation and frustration.

Another but similar issue is media manipulation. According to Marwick and Lewis (2017), social media is very dependent on the following factors: analytics and metrics, sensationalism, novelty over newsworthiness, and clickbait. These factors make them very vulnerable to manipulation, as many people will try to take advantage of these factors to increase the visibility of their messages by going 'viral'. One major trend that Marwick and Lewis (2017) identify is ‘trolling’, referring to people that purposely bait people with controversial content or remarks to elicit an emotional response. This type of behaviour plays into the social media affordance of sensationalism. Trolling can refer to “relatively innocuous pranks, but it can also take the form of more serious behaviours. Trolling can include mischievous activities where the intent is not necessarily to cause distress or it can seek to ruin the reputation of individuals and organizations and reveal embarrassing or personal information” (Marwick & Lewis, 2017, p. 4) As a result of this type of behaviour, people lose trust in social media and there is an increase of misinformation. Even though brands may not be likely to engage in this type of behaviour due to reputational risks, it is important to note that with the rise of viral strategies, these forms of ‘cheating’ also emerged, which makes social media users more skeptical towards content that is created by people they do not personally know. This research also revealed skepticism is becoming quite a big issue. Many of the participants were very skeptical of messages that were made
by brands, as they questioned their authenticity and motives. Especially tag, share and win posts received much scrutiny as many participants assumed they were fake, due to the many actual fake posts of that nature out there. This shows that trolls and manipulation are becoming an issue that actually starts to affect the reputation of brands on social media in general, which is definitely something that should be kept in mind if brands want to put themselves out there.

Overall, we can see that there is a lot of information to be found about eWoM as a marketing strategy, but not so much about the connection with the current online environment. Social media platforms are a very social and self-sufficient environment in the sense that users both create and engage with the content. Brands are not necessarily needed, and this makes it harder for them to ‘infiltrate’ in viral culture. They are finding ways around this that are questionable strategies from the consumers’ point of view, such as manipulation of the social media algorithms with things as clickbait or even fake news. However, the expectation was that brands are more likely to succeed when they understand the consumer better. They can do this by focusing on the consumers’ sharing motivations, which is what I will focus on in this research. If consumers want brands to succeed, is another question we will have to ask ourselves.
3. Research design

3.1 Overall research design

The very meaning of viral content is that it gets shared by people to their peers, which leads to an explosive or exponential growth of the attention that is paid to the message. In that sense, it is related to Word-of-Mouth marketing (Abedniya & Mahmouei, 2010; Camarero & San José, 2011; Porter & Golan, 2006; Woerndl, Papagiannidis, Bourlakis & Li 2008). This means that behind viral marketing lies a social activity, something that motivates people to share certain messages. The data for this research was therefore also collected in a social setting, namely through the use of focus groups. Focus groups can be defined as “small groups of people with particular characteristics convened for a focused discussion of a particular topic” (Hollander, 2004, p. 606). Focus groups are particularly useful for exploring an issue or topic and collecting general information, as well as identifying overarching themes and frameworks. Participants can freely share their motivations, preferences, attitudes and beliefs (Brennen, 2017). This method is also very popular in marketing, as many researchers use it to understand how people use different services and products, and marketeers use it to target consumers more effectively. This especially makes it an appropriate method for this research, as it is about viral marketing and we want to know how brands can use virality as a strategy to target consumers.

Participants in focus groups are relatively free to discuss the topic the way they want it, while more guidance from the moderator is also possible (Morgan, 2012). The moderator is the key part of each focus group, as he or she has to guide the discussion and manage the group dynamic during focus groups. In order for the moderator to do this successfully he or she should be “personable, persuasive and energetic, have excellent listening skills, be organized and flexible, communicate effectively and have a great short-term memory” (Brennen, 2017, p. 65). All participants must feel welcome and comfortable in order for the discussion to run smoothly and make everyone feel encouraged to share their experiences. I tried to create such an environment by creating an informal atmosphere by providing snacks and holding the focus groups in spaces that were familiar to the participants, such as their
The social setting of the focus group was the main incentive for this research to use this method. During the discussion, participants recognised their behaviour in others which would spark a more ongoing and in-depth conversation – as this is often a unique result of using focus groups as a research method (Lindlof & Taylor, 2010).

There are some other characteristics in focus groups that I needed to be aware of that can be both helpful or a possible pitfall. In focus groups it is possible that a group effect occurs, meaning that people draw upon a shared fund of experiences. This can be helpful to get details and insights because participants build on each other’s responses. This way the discussion might get to details that the researcher or moderator would not have touched upon in, for instance, one-one-one interviews. However, the group effect can also play out negatively, in the sense that participants are aware of other participants’ judgments. Hollander (2004) identifies two main problems: problematic silence, in which a participant withholds their viewpoints, and problematic speech, in which a participant makes statements that are not their own. During the analysis this had to be taken into account.

Furthermore, it is also possible for one group member to completely dominate the discussion, or for one group member to not talk at all. Brennen (2017) explains that this can be countered by using various exercises and using verbal and non-verbal cues to stimulate all participants to participate equally. I tried to achieve this by going around the room for various questions to get an answer from everyone in the room, after which the conversation could flow freely and could touch upon everyone’s different opinions. If one participant was quieter than the other, I would address him or her directly in a non-threatening way and ask if he or she could share some thoughts on the topic. Furthermore, visual probes were used to encourage people to talk about examples. Overall, this strategy worked fine in getting everyone to say something, but it was still hard to avoid some people being more talkative than others.

3.2. Sample

The sample existed out of twenty-two people of thirteen different nationalities, all between the age of sixteen and fifty-two. The full list of participants can be found in appendix B. The criterium was that they had to be active on at least one social media
platform. There were no age or gender restrictions to the sample, so that the results could be relevant for as many brands as possible with such a small sample. While analysing the data, however, the possible differences in results of ages and gender were taken into account. Different generations have different interests and different online experiences, which you can already see in the use of platforms. The younger participants in the focus group tended to be more active on Instagram and Snapchat, and the older generation more on Facebook and LinkedIn. The sample was collected through a snowball sampling strategy: as the research was on social media users, a message asking for participants was set out on social media first. If there were people willing to participate, they could share the message to ask their friends, and so on. Interestingly enough, this means a form of eWoM and WoM was used in order to find a sample.

The aim was to have four to six focus group with a maximum of six participants per group. In the end, there were five focus group conducted with in total twenty-two participants. Lindlof and Taylor (2010) suggest six to twelve participants as the ideal number of participants, however, as someone who has no previous experience with focus groups, smaller groups were preferable and beneficial to the quality of conversation. The risk with less than six people in a focus group was that there is a less diverse range of useful comments. Since the main aim of the data collection is to reach saturation in the results, more groups could have been included if needed, but five focus groups seemed to be sufficient to reach satisfactory results. Furthermore, there had to be awareness of the differences between focus groups with participants that are strangers to each other, or participants that are not. If the participants are strangers to each other, there is usually less risk of the conversation going off-topic too often, while the shared history of familiar participants might make it easier for them to start a discussion (Lindlof & Taylor, 2010). Again, these factors were also taken into account when conducting the focus groups. Overall, familiarity helped in creating an engaging and lively discussion between the participants.

All focus groups took place between the start of October and the end of November, meaning that in this relatively small timeframe many of the same ‘trends’ were popular on social media, and many of the participants were able to talk about these trends. Some of
these were also used as an example to probe the participants and direct the discussion, which will be explained in the next section. Lastly, it is important to mention that in the results and discussion chapter all participants are given a pseudonym. This way, the quotes that were used to illustrate and explain the results cannot be traced back to each individual participant to ensure their privacy.

3.3 Operationalization

To operationalize the research question there was a distinction made between the two main concepts: non-branded viral content and branded viral content. Virality is defined as “strategies that allow an easier, accelerated, and cost reduced transmission of messages by creating environments for a self-replicating, exponentially increasing diffusion, spiritualization, and impact of the message” (Welker, 2002, p.4). However, the concepts in the research question are also closely related to WoM and eWoM. The aim was to get as many ideas on the topic of virality and viral marketing as possible, meaning that a wide range of questions were asked. The discussion focused around the participants’ general perceptions of viral content and viral messages, why they share these messages, what type of message motivates them to share, when something can be considered viral, if they also share branded content, how they feel about branded viral content (does it affect their perception of the brand), and possibly any other issues that were to come up later in the research. An example of the focus group discussion guide that addresses these questions is provided in appendix A. The discussion focused overall on three larger themes: the participant’s general perception on viral content and all that it entails, their motivations behind participating in this viral culture, and what the involvement of brands in this culture means to them. These topics were all discussed interchangeably by the participants, but the larger discussion was separated in two parts: normal viral content and branded viral content.

Overall, all focus groups managed to adhere to this structure. Helpful for that were the various probes that were used to get the conversation started and to give the participants something tangible to talk about with each other. See appendix C for an overview for all the examples that were used as probes. These probes were various messages that have gone viral recently (in the past year), which could be videos, images or text. They included at least
some of the characteristics that have been known to motivate users to share the message, such as humorous, sexual or feel-good content, as well as content that makes users feel emotions of awe and affection (Nikolinakou & King, 2018; Porter and Golan, 2006). As discussed in the theoretical framework, these types of content are most likely to prompt viral sharing as they created a feeling of emotional connection and emotional generosity in relation to the ad and brand (Nikolinakou & King, 2018). There was for instance a video of a cute baby goat used, a funny video made by Netflix that internationally caught on as ‘the invisible challenge’ and a more controversial example of YouTube star Steven Crowder in which he debates with people on the street on the topic ‘male privilege is a myth’. In the first half of the discussion the probes were non-branded, and in the second half they were branded. This distinction helped to understand if there were any differences in attitudes towards the messages if they were branded or not, and the participants could then reflect on these attitudes in a discussion. The discussion guide included at least some questions to stir the participants in the right direction, however the idea was that the discussion could be very open in which the participants would mostly guide each other in coming up with meaningful topics.

3.4 Data analysis

The results of the focus groups were then transcribed, and the resulting data was analysed based on grounded theory in an inductive manner, meaning that I took an open approach towards the data and did not at first focus on the themes discussed in pre-existing literature. The reason for this is that the existing literature is quite outdated and often contradictory or one-sided. According to Charmaz and Belgrave (2007), grounded theory is an analytic procedure aimed to develop theory. Though my research does not develop ‘theory’ in this way, it does develop and expand upon existing theories by following this grounded theory process. As such, the analysis starts with individual cases, which we call ‘open codes’, true to the approach to this method by Corbin and Strauss (1990). Open codes can be short descriptions or interpretations that make sense to the researcher (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Here the researcher categorizes chunks of data without analysing them in depth yet, as this will happen in the next stage (Lindlof & Taylor, 2010). In the next stage, codes develop progressively into more abstract conceptual codes that help explain the data in such a way
that you can see the overarching patterns, themes and relationships (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2007). This stage is called axial coding, and here the open codes are interpreted, given meaning and assigned into categories. Finally, these axial codes will be placed under two to five selective codes – these are the main themes that were found in the data and will be discussed along the lines of previous research. The most important advantage of grounded theory is that it does not force preconceived ideas and theories upon the data of the research, which helps in making new discoveries (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2007). It was only in this last stage – the process of developing selective codes, that the categories of axial codes were connected together to answer my research question in light with other related literature. This form of analysis is especially fitting for this type of research, as it gives the opportunity to explore the topic of viral marketing with an open mind and create a clear, new set of categories surrounding this topic (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It helps to capture the most important themes of a topic, but also the nuances, contradictions and other important factors.

The coding process is presented in a coding tree as described by Boeije (2010). An extract of this tree can be seen in table 1, and the full tree with all codes in appendix D. Through this coding tree or table it is possible to create a clear overview of all the open codes, how they are categorized into axial codes, and how these axial codes relate to each other with the selective codes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Open codes</th>
<th>Axial codes</th>
<th>Selective codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Funny things, inside jokes, dogs, funny remakes, relatable memes, counters all bad news, different versions, relatable, feelgood videos, animals work well, kids work well, reliving memories, making others happy, countering boredom, waste of time,</td>
<td>Funny and entertaining content</td>
<td>Sharing behaviour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interesting news articles, close proximity news, relevant lifestyle articles, high interest for friends, good causes, relevancy</td>
<td>Usefulness of sharing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
matters, shared interests, positive news, strengthening relationship, bringing back memories, seeking approval, quick communication, Facebook used for practical matters, for university, for work, Facebook for ‘stalking’,

Table 1: excerpt of coding tree in appendix D

In this excerpt you can see how the open codes eventually all could be grouped together into different categories, under the overarching theme ‘sharing behaviour.’ Under this theme I grouped types of messages, sharing motivations and ways of sharing participants engaged in. At the end of the coding process, I was left with three selective codes and guiding themes for the discussion, which were sharing behaviour, viral- and meme culture, and the involvement of brands in viral culture. Through these three themes I hoped to say something meaningful about the data, from which further conclusions could then be derived. However, at a later stage in the research these themes proved a bit too broad and were divided into sub-themes as well. In the initial stages of the research I did not expect the social reasons behind sharing to be as important as they were, so in the results more emphasis is placed on this. Viral culture is therefore discussed in connection to the social structures and identity construction being exercised within this culture. The involvement of brands in viral culture is discussed in two sections: how brands are currently visible in viral culture, and how consumers expect them to interact. Sharing behaviour was again, connected to the social structures and identity construction and can be seen as the common thread connecting the entire research together.
4. Results and discussion

Below, the results of the data analysis will be presented and discussed. The coding process is based on a grounded theory approach to coding (see appendix D) and resulted in four overarching themes as discussed in the methodology. These themes can deepen our understanding of the ideas and topics surrounding viral marketing from a consumer perspective. First of all, we will talk about virality as a cultural phenomenon and how important the social aspect of sharing is for social media users, as well as the presentation of self through online sharing behaviour. We will then ask ourselves how brands will fit in this online ‘culture’ and how they can deal with the many difficulties that may arise. Then, we will look at the content of viral messages and if we can make any predictions about the success of a message. Lastly, we will discuss the expectations consumers have when it comes to the communication of brands on social media, and what possibilities brands have when they want to implement viral marketing as a strategy.

4.1 Virality, social structures and identity construction

If brands want to understand how they can create successful viral campaigns, they should first of all look at all the factors that play a role in viral culture. In this chapter I will explain why we can see it as a culture and why brands need to be mindful of the fact that this is a cultural space they are barging in on. Culture can be defined as “the characteristic features of everyday existence (such as diversions or a way of life) shared by people in a place or time” (Culture, 2018). Aspects of this definition can also be seen back in the viral environment, as features of everyday existence are being shared by people on social media. People use virality to reinforce offline social structures and construct online identities. The concept of virality is already so integrated in our daily lives, and all that was discussed in the focus groups strengthened the idea that virality should be seen as an online culture in which people make sense of their lives. In this section of the results, two important factors within the culture of sharing are discussed: the social aspect of sharing, and the personal presentation of self.
4.1.2. Social sharing and online surveillance

Online sharing has many social benefits, as already discussed by Eckler and Bolls (2011) and Alhabash and McAlister (2014). This also became very apparent in the focus groups when the reasons for sharing were discussed. Social reasons were by far the most frequent, with some of the examples being relationship building, reliving mutual memories, connecting over inside jokes, updating each other on their lives, helping each other out with useful information, seeking approval or entertaining others and making them happy. Participants also stated they would share something with a friend they do not find particularly interesting, but of which they know their friend is interested in.

For instance, Charlotte said: “Something I would share with my friends is when I read something new about a particular... something about healthy eating. Like, if you eat this and this, I would share that and be like hey, have you read this?”

Interviewer: “You would share it because you think it might be relevant for them?”

Charlotte: “Yes, that’s why I would share it with my friends, because I think: they might benefit from this. Even if I already know it but I think they might not have read it yet.”

Harvey et al. (2011) called what Charlotte discussed as benefit here ‘involvement’, meaning that there is a high incentive of sharing when the user feels like the message contains something valuable for those they forward it to. Group conversations on messaging apps could be an example of this: most people reported to have different group apps with specific interests they would share posts with that align with these interests. For instance, a messaging group with gym buddies is likely to be used to share posts related to the gym, work-outs and healthy living. Emma made this clear in relation to the Albert Heijn example used in the focus group: “I would share this with the people in my gym group app. Also with my husband [who is a gym coach].”

With these social motivations for sharing there seems to be some sort of unwritten social contract with ‘rules’ people need to abide by, just as in real life. There has to be some pre-existing real-life relationship between users for them to get to ‘the stage of online
sharing.’ Anna, for example, mentioned ‘If it’s just a short conversation and you and that person never talk, and she suddenly tags you in stuff, I’m just a little like okay…[...]It kind of indicates that you’re friends or something.’ The other participants seemed to all agree that this behaviour was questionable. Sharing was seen as only working to improve or strengthen already existing relationships, as opposed to forging completely new ones, which is seen as a little strange.

However, there is another side to the fact that this social aspect is so deeply integrated in the viral culture. The same fears that haunt us socially in everyday life outside online activities are apparent within online environments. These fears include the fear of embarrassment and rejection and a need for belonging, the latter of which is vital for our psychological health (Mellor et al., 2008). In multiple focus groups it was discussed how the participants were aware of their online network and the idea they are being watched. Every action that users take, shows up in their network’s timeline. This highly influences the actions of users in terms of public sharing. For instance, Bob said: ‘Yeah, okay, sometimes I see something super funny but weird, so I’ll think about it first if I’ll like it or not. So then sometimes it’s better not to like.’ This shows that, because Bob feels he is being watched by his network, he consciously makes a decision to alter his behaviour. Kim replied to Bob’s statement: ‘Yeah, and the same with tagging. Cause then it’s like, if you tag someone everybody can see it, but if it’s a weird thing and only you and I personally understand it, then it’s better to send it privately.’ This shows people make a clear distinction between content they can share publicly and content they share privately, because they might want to present themselves in a different way to their entire network, than they might to one person they know very well.

Participants also explained they do not want to be annoying, or even seem ‘pathetic’. For instance, Maria said: ‘I would never comment by myself to share my opinion,’ to which Sarah replied: ‘yeah, people who do that are always a bit pathetic.’ This fear of being judged actually influences the sharing behaviour of users in the sense that sometimes there is a message they would like to share, but refrain from in order to not be annoying to other users. This especially was discussed in relation to the share, tag & win post that was used as an example in the focus group. Anna said: ‘I think it is also annoying for other people that
follow me. Because they would see this in their timeline and think like, oh no, not again.”

Another participant agreed with this and called it “a very selfish kind of sharing.” This implies that sharing is almost always done for other people that would see the message, and not for the user him- or herself. This almost contradicts the uses and gratifications theory, which states that people seek out media content for personal benefit as well (Lee & Ma, 2012). This indicates that at least within these focus groups, social reputation weighs more than personal benefit of for instance winning a free product or service.

Furthermore, sometimes participants would specifically share or not share certain posts to uphold a certain image of themselves they want to present to their network. Stephanie mentioned that, since she had many colleagues and supervisors as friends on Facebook, she was more inclined to share posts of charities and good causes as opposed to for instance memes:

“As I mentioned before I have too many supervisors, professors and ex-colleagues on my Facebook. So, if I share too many things like these...”

Interviewer: “They won't take you as seriously?”

Stephanie: “Yeah, or they will have some, I'm afraid they will have some immature image of me, so that's why I would only share it privately.”

This ties in with the findings of Lyon and Trottier (2013), who explain that social media users always have a particular audience in mind when they share things online, even though these might not actually be the people who end up seeing the message. However, not all participants thought like this. “I do not like posts for someone else, but more because I think: oh, fun, and I press like. [...] They are things I like for myself and I don’t use them to show others the way I hope they will see me,” said Margaret. It therefore seems that some participants are more conscious of their network’s judgments then others.

This fear of rejection and need for social belonging with friends also impacts if people decide to share a message. In one focus group, Bob mentioned: “I would not send [a friend] for example something about computers. You’d be like, dude, what are you doing.” This shows that users are very much aware when they share stuff if the receiver will enjoy it as
well. If the message is therefore not funny enough or cute enough, as mentioned by the participants, the risk of rejection becomes higher. Other qualifications the message needed to meet were: it has to be short enough, it has to be relevant or useful for the other and it has to be original (not seen before). The message therefore has to reach a certain kind of standard in order to qualify. This also goes much further than just strengthening existing social ties and relationships, as Eckler and Bolls (2011) and Alhabash and McAlister (2014) discussed. It is very much a reputational issue and people use the content they share to present an image of themselves and to minimize social risks of rejection and exclusion. Again, these ideas confirm that online sharing is inherently a very social activity, based on social ties, networks and identities. However, this social environment has rules and only specific content makes it out there, which we will get into later.

4.1.2 Identity construction

As stated in the theoretical framework, identity construction is an important part of the online culture of sharing. For this research, this idea was based on Goffman’s discussion of the presentation of self (1959), which suggests that people constantly engage in the presentation of self while they are in the presence of others. And online, people feel as if they are always in the presence of others as well, as most actions are public and visible to anyone. In the last section we already saw how much this influences the decisions people make on what they will and will not share. However, from the focus groups it also became clear that people are trying to present themselves and identify themselves through what they share.

This became most apparent when the discussion was focused on memes. One of the most mentioned words for when memes came up was ‘relatable.’ Participants wanted to see themselves back or recognize themselves in a post in order to enjoy it and possibly share it. Benaim (2018) already explained how social commentary is an important part of memes, which the focus groups revealed to be true. Participants all agreed that memes are some form of cultural reproduction and can be used to connect with each other in a humorous and light way. Memes are generally used to depict certain situations, characteristics or personal traits that are used to make fun of others or even yourself. When I asked participants why
they enjoy memes, many of the participants agreed that it was because of how they are relatable to our culture, society and self, as illustrated by the following conversation:

Vivian: “I think maybe because it’s something funny, and sometimes the people in the photo are made fun of, and I think some people can really relate to it. They think it’s really funny, and it’s not their photo, so they actually share it as in like ‘that’s me’.”
Mia: “Yeah, I do that.”
Chrissy: “Yeah, and because it’s so relatable I think people use it to kind of tell something about themselves. It’s like you’re saying, this is who I am.”
Vivian: “Yeah, it’s to connect more with people and so they get to know you.”
Interviewer: “The type of memes people share says something about their personality?”
Chrissy: “Yeah, because memes are usually about real life situations or characteristics or like, personality traits. And people always want to share it when they feel it’s about them. So, I think it’s to kind of tell the story about yourself.”

Participants explained to see memes as a means of expressing yourself and tell stories about yourself, and seeing memes that were relatable would even help to make you feel acknowledged and understood. Anna: “It’s a new way to talk about things, or stuff that happens in our life […] And it makes people feel understood.” She later came back to this saying “I especially like it when it’s about something that is really recognizable for you, like a personality trait that you have as well. It’s just funny to know that you’re not the only one like that.” This can partly be explained by the idea that memes are trying to appeal to popular culture and are trying to go viral, meaning that they have to be relatable for as many people as possible (Blommaert & Varis, 2017). However, it is clear from these examples that memes are not only used as commentary on society or others, but also in a way to make sense of ourselves. Porter & Golan (2006) already found that viral marketing relies heavily on personal aspects that people recognize themselves in, which still seems to be true almost fifteen years later.

However, this also worked the other way around as Paul said “you think that you were the only one like that and then you see that half of your Facebook friends consider
themselves like that as well.” This ties in with the theory of narcissistic online expression of Kim and Jang (2018). Sharing on social networks has both social benefits and self-promoting benefits that people tend to be looking for: people use social media to improve their self-image and receive admiration. If it turns out they are not as ‘special’ or authentic as they thought to be, this could hurt their self-image.

Another result connected to online identity construction is that users clearly see a distinction between us versus them: people that try to present a similar identity as them, and people that go against the pre-established rules they set for themselves and others. This became clear when discussing some examples that people claimed they would ‘never’ share, such as the ‘Tag a friend and if they do not respond in five minutes they have to [action]”. This post and similar examples received reactions of disgust, annoyance and even hate – even though all of these examples were viral messages, implying that many people did share them. This raised the question if sharing behaviour differs among different networks, in which we could think of age, gender, educational level, interests or even personality. It was mentioned multiple times in the focus groups that these differences probably exist. When talking about people that interact with political and highly sensitive topics, Will mentioned: “The annoying thing about social media is that everyone can use it. There’s a lot of uneducated people there.” This is clearly an us versus them distinction between higher educated people, and lower educated people.

Furthermore, in almost all focus groups it came up that certain content finds more appeal with younger generations, such as that of influencers or certain types of memes. Participants of over forty years old were not that familiar with memes, or said to never interact with them online. Another difference that was mentioned by a participant was personality traits, for instance when it came to share, tag and win posts of companies. Paul assumed that people who participate in such giveaways are “people who also play the lottery and those kinds of things. I guess it depends on what kind of person you are.” People on social media are therefore not only aware of the identity they want to present of themselves, but also what presentation others are giving of themselves.
4.2 The presence of brands in viral culture

This raises the question: where do brands fit in when it comes to all these social, cultural and self-presentation practices? While the web 2.0 may seem like the ideal place for brands to be in terms of time- and cost-reducing factors, they are seemingly barging in on a cultural and social space. If brands want to succeed in this environment, they have to be mindful of all the factors that play a role in the consumers’ mind when they decide on sharing a message, such as the ones mentioned in the previous section. Fournier and Avery (2010) discuss this in connection to the concept of open source branding, and they mention the great risk this strategy brought for brands. With open source branding, brands ‘open up’ to consumers and use them to co-write their brand story. According to Fournier and Avery (2010), consumers supposedly had an almost equal say about what brands are and how they should be viewed in this new cultural environment. However, what the authors call a ‘new environment’ has been around for almost a decade now, and brands may have claimed their position more strongly now. However, some things have not changed: the internet is still a powerful tool for consumers to engage in a conversation with brands. As discussed in the theory, a brand story is no longer one-way communication anymore, it is many-to-many communication (Gensler et al., 2013). There is a high risk of loss of control over the messages they put out (Cruz & Fill, 2008). This risk comes from, for instance, what are called internet trolls. This term refers to the threat of people that are out to cause distress by, for instance, ruining the reputation of individuals and organizations and reveal embarrassing or personal information (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). All messages that creators or brands put out there, are susceptible to such attacks. Participants of the focus group were also well aware of this. When in one focus group an example of a Dove campaign that was accused of racism was discussed, Anna mentioned: “That is one risk of brands trying to go viral, probably. They lose control over the message because it spreads so widely, and before you know it’s taken out of context and they can’t do anything about it anymore.”

Brands can employ various strategies to minimize the risk, such as the strategies of the least resistance, ‘playing their game’ and inviting consumers to ‘play the brands game’. (Fournier & Avery, 2010). When it came to the viral culture, some brands decided to employ the strategy of playing along with the consumers and trying to make content that would
appeal to this viral culture, so that they would be ‘invited’ to participate. In the focus groups, participants were very aware of this type of behaviour of brands. Mark said: “If it’s branded by a big company you can tell they are trying to appeal to the internet culture and us.” However, there are cases in which this was done successfully, as Mark went on to use the example of Wendy’s, who were very successful in creating an online presence that appeals to a young target audience. “They sort of succeeded by making it seem like they weren’t some brand, and they were just like a normal person posting funny memes. So, I guess for brands and virality you really have to make sure it looks like you’re not trying too hard, because if you see if it’s like a big corporation that’s trying to understand this…” This was mentioned multiple times: one of the biggest criteria for successful brand presence on the web was that ‘it has to look like it is not trying too hard.’ Kim for instance said about the Dutch website Bol.com: “Yeah they are really good, like it does not look they are trying too hard.” At another point in the conversation Mark also mentioned “I feel like it has to look like it’s not trying that hard. Because you see some things that are obviously trying to become viral and for me at least that immediately makes it less attractive.” The most important factor of the current online environment is that consumers do not rely on brands anymore to get the content they want: social media users are now both consumers and supplies of content (Abedniya & Mahmouei, 2010). This means that brands have to fit in there seamlessly to be accepted, otherwise the content will be sought out somewhere else.

‘Not trying too hard’ is a bit of a vague criterium to go by for brands and it implicates that an understanding of viral culture somehow has to be inherent in the brand’s identity already. If consumers feel like brands are purposely trying to barge in on their online space, a space of which they have a clear idea what it should look like, they are inclined to reject the brand’s presence. Users mostly seem to enjoy content that just ‘accidently’ came about, or looks like it was. The calculation behind marketed messages obviously make them everything but ‘an accident’, which makes for a lot of negative connotation among consumers when they see branded messages in their online environment. However, even more interesting is that from the focus groups it became apparent that there seems to be a shift between the strategies of Fournier and Avery (2010) from brands trying to appeal to consumers, to brands inviting consumers to appeal to them. It seems as if, now that brands have tried to immerse themselves so completely in the viral culture, consumers have
become suspicious of viral content itself. Kristin brought this up: “If I think of viral content, it feels very commercial. [...] I think to myself: someone probably thought about that. [...] It makes me suspicious: who is behind it? [...] Even if it’s not sponsored, it feels like it is.” This suspicion might thus be a result of the blurring boundaries between social media users, influencers and brands. Because so many people are talking about brands, and brands are active in so many online areas, people might feel as if brands are involved in everything.

Gosh et al. (2018) found that people are less likely to trust promotional communication that was posted by the company itself. This idea was reinforced several times in different ways within the focus groups. It seems as if consumers feel that the online world is less and less becoming their space, and more that of brands. It is almost like as if traditional marketing practices are coming back into place. The four distinctions between traditional and viral marketing as discussed by Porter and Golan (2006) are not as distinct anymore in the changing online environment. These distinctions were that traditional marketing is paid, while viral marketing makes use of unpaid media. Viral marketing relies on more personal aspects than traditional marketing. Traditional marketing uses many channels and forms of media, while viral marketing is native to the internet. Lastly, traditional marketing involves general communication, while viral marketing often has to be provocative and play on emotions in order for it to be memorable (Porter and Golan, 2006).

Today, brands are setting the rules more and more to their hand. The boundaries between different channels are getting more blurred for viral marketing as well, as often content from tv or other channels make it to the internet and go viral. Furthermore, the distinction that traditional marketing is paid while viral marketing is not is not true anymore today. Many brands are using paid messages to show up in people’s timelines as if they were not. Participants in the focus groups mentioned this multiple times and described it as an annoyance. Facebook was seen as a platform that is becoming more and more monetized, but Instagram seems to be following in its footsteps. Vivian said: “I think even Instagram uses it, because now when you scroll through your feed you have those sponsored photos and I don’t even know what it is. And before I know it I clicked on it and I’m like wait, I don’t follow that.” They were not positive about this development. Chrissy said “I don’t know, if it’s sponsored it’s not the same as people who would have made the content themselves. Because there’s like a whole team behind it, so it’s not really real.”
Not only brands are guilty of this sort of ‘manipulative’ behaviour that makes the consumers feel their communication ‘is not real’, the social media platforms themselves are also not innocent. And of course, these platforms can be considered brands as well, as their first goal is making money. Therefore, it is not surprising that social media platforms use their power to influence all that is happening in such a way that is most beneficial to that primary goal. In the theory we discussed the issue of autonomy and agency along the lines of Carah (2017), who explained that the algorithms of social media decide what people get to see, based on those people’s data. People might think they decide what they want to see and what they want to share, while in fact the ability to make their own choices is more limited than they think. The participants did not seem to be aware of this at all – only one participant, Paul, mentioned this issue: “I think especially on things like Facebook and stuff, if you find memes or funny videos there, Facebook usually puts the most viewed stuff first. So unless you’re subscribed to a specific page, or content producer, I think most people will see stuff that is already very popular.” As most participants of the focus group either studied media or marketing, or worked in an environment where social media was very important, this was very curious. This indicates that there is still a lot of education necessary on the manipulative nature of social media platforms.

Developments such as the active involvement and manipulation of social media platforms and brands take a new phenomenon as virality and spin in such a way that it can be used as a traditional form of marketing, just on a different scale. It is therefore not surprising people are getting more suspicious of content they find on the internet and are also becoming more critical of what content they want to engage with. Brands have to come up with something pretty special to be deserving of a like or comment, something we will get into in the next sections.

4.3 The characteristics of viral content

Now that we know a bit more about virality as a cultural phenomenon, how people use it socially and personally, and how brands can deal with that, it is also important to look at the content itself. I wanted to know if the participants had clear preferences in the type of
posts they usually share with their network and why. The focus groups quickly revealed that it is not that simple, and it is much harder to explain why certain posts are successful while others are not.

4.3.1 Influencing factors on sharing

Besides the social and personal motivations for sharing, the focus groups revealed that there were some other indicators that would increase the possibility of them sharing a post. One of these factors is the popularity the post already has: the fact that something seems viral, triggers the curiosity of users and encourages them to interact with the post as well. This suggests that the measurability of virality is more important than one initially might think: it is not only helpful for brands in the sense they can measure the success of their message, but also because it works in a vicious circle. The more popular a post is, the more people want to watch it.

Kristin: “If I see something that has hundred thousands of likes, it makes me think oh, I should watch this video, it is probably interesting.”

Emma: “Yes, it triggers a response.”

Maria: “Yeah, or if a lot of people start to tag each other under a post. Then I feel like that as well.”

Other indicators of this popularity were for instance top trending lists on platforms. Another, similar factor was repetition. If a message comes up multiple times in someone’s timeline, their interest is more likely to be aroused.

Charlotte: “I think if I see it twice on for instance the AD (Dutch newspaper), and on Facebook, and also in the LINDA (Dutch magazine), I would be more inclined to click on it then when I would only see it once.”

Steve: “That’s the repetition.”

Charlotte: “Yes, after three think you’ll be like: okay, I’ll watch it, it must be special.”
A few participants also stated that they would be more likely to engage with messages that were shared by large media companies such as a newspaper, TV show or (online) magazine: they saw them as curators of interesting content. As there is so much content out there, and it is often too much to go through by yourself, you can trust these companies to select the most interesting content for you. Kristin said: “They act as some sort of curator for me who selects the best content, so I believe them. Also, because I enjoy the magazine and feel connected to the brand. It makes me think: oh, let’s take a look, because they know what’s fun and what’s not. It saves me the trouble of looking for it myself.”

Another indicator of virality were the top trending lists on for instance YouTube and Twitter. Naming actual numbers for the amount of likes or views was harder. Some participants mentioned thousands, while others were talking about millions: “because everything goes viral nowadays,” Carla thought. However, participants were not critical of these top trending list in the sense that they can be manipulated by the social media platforms themselves. The algorithms push already very popular content to more people, so that it even becomes more popular (Carah, 2017). Less popular content then does not get the same chance to be seen by as many people.

4.3.2. Vague threshold for sharing

In the focus groups I wanted to figure out what type of posts would be most likely to go viral, with some of the findings of Phelps et al. (2004) as a starting point: they found that online messages that were forwarded the most included good deeds, naked pictures, humour/jokes, crime warnings, games and chain letters. While overall there was some overlap between those findings and the findings of this research, it quickly became clear that it is not as simple as that. Participants claimed to mostly engage with funny content, relatable content, emotional content and/or good causes, and important news messages. However, it turns out that there is some type of vague threshold that is the line between enjoying a post and actually sharing it. There are some factors that can influence this and push people over the edge to actively engage with a post instead of merely scrolling on, but for this I had to dig a little deeper in the data.
For funny posts, there was a fine line between something that was ‘just’ funny, or funny enough. Amy said about sharing messages: “For me, it depends on how funny it is.” However, the ‘funniness’ factor was hard to determine, as illustrated by the following conversation:

Interviewer: “Would you share the funnier versions?”
Bob: “Well if it is super funny I would. I guess it just depends on how funny it is.”
Amy: “Yeah, exactly.”
Interviewer: “But how do you determine that?”
Bob: “It is well.. it is subjective.”
Amy: “Yeah, it is so subjective.”
Mark: “If it is just like a 'ha' I would be like nah, but if it is like a 'hahahaha' I would send that shit.”
Bob: “If it is in caps and you want to spread it around the universe.”

Two factors that would increase in the success of a funny posts were originality and relatability. For instance, Lesley said: “I would share this, I've actually done it I think. [...] I don't know. It was something different, it was just a funny idea.” This would indicate that originality is an important factor to push people over the edge. Almost all participants agreed that they had to be able to relate to the post in order to find it funny. In other words, users want to see something of themselves or someone they know back in a post. As we saw before, this is especially important when it comes to memes. This became apparent in the following conversation between two participants:

Interviewer: “And what do you find funny?”
Mia: “When I recognize it. When I recognize myself I mean.”
Vivian: “Yeah, when it's relatable.”

This can again be explained by the theory of Kim and Jang (2018), in the sense that people are very narcissistic in what they want to see on social media. They even determine how funny they find something based on how much it relates to them. This would mean that
creators on social media should be very aware of who they want their message to reach, and what type of people these groups are.

Another type of post that frequently came up were animal videos. Granted, one of the probes consisted of an endearing video of a small goat in pajamas cuddling a stuffed animal, which steered the conversation in that direction. What came out of this is that many participants (especially girls) frequently shared online content that involved an animal. The criteria for these posts were that they had to be either really cute, or really funny. This confirms the findings of Nikolinakou and King (2018), as feelings of affection are a strong forger of emotional connection to a message. The probe used did not fulfil the criteria of either being really cute or really funny, according to all focus groups. This is illustrated by things that were said by for instance Vivian “I would not share that, but it is cute to see,” and Lesley “It is not cute enough, it has not reached the cuteness standard.” However, something that could help in reaching this standard seemed to be uniqueness. Mark said: “It really just depends on how cute something is, like I said an exotic animal would be more special or something.” This implicates that when the post is a bit different than usual and manages to surprise people, there might be a bigger change for it to go viral.

Another example that came up in the focus groups which also relates to the findings of Philips et al. (2004), although in a different form, were games as a popular viral element. Some viral messages include some sort of game-like element, such as the ones where people are encouraged to tag a friend, and if that friend does not reply on time, he or she has to do something for the other (common examples would be buying pizza, for example). When these examples were discussed in the focus groups, everyone had heard of them, but they mainly evoked negative responses. Similar messages are the ones where you can supposedly find out something about yourself by taking your initials, or month of birth, and prescribe some sort of characteristic to it, which have the feeling of a new type of horoscope. The focus groups revealed that people thought these types of posts were annoying, generic, basic, stupid, useless and childish:

Interviewer: “But you say you hate them because?”
Mark: “It's pointless.”
Amy: “Yeah.”
Mark: “Generic.”
Amy: “It's basic.”
Bob: “We don’t like basic.”

However, the fact that these types of post seem to be well-known indicates that gamified content (although in a different form) is still shared on a large basis.

Something else that previous research suggested is that people will be interested in different kinds of messages at different moments, as explained by the uses and gratifications theory (Lee & Ma, 2012). When people have a certain need, they will seek for content that gratifies that need. John, for instance, said the following: “Well, I save like backstretches and stuff.” He would seek out pictures showing the best back stretches when he wanted to find a good workout. If people want to strengthen their emotional relationship with someone, they are more likely to share a message that relates to that person, such as the earlier-mentioned quote by Bob: “I would not send [a friend] for example something about computers. You’d be like, dude, what are you doing.” This makes it hard to predict what people will share at what moments, as there are various factors influencing these decisions. Furthermore, online sharing also seems to be something that people just feel like doing and is not thought about that much. Emma said “It depends on my mood if I will like something or not. Today I am giving out likes, and the other day I am not.” So overall, even though there are many general ideas on what could go viral, it still is very much based on feelings. Based on the findings above, this research suggests a few key points that highlight how the participants thought about sharing posts themselves:

- How strong the emotional response is towards a message is important. The funnier or cuter something is perceived as, the more likely it will be shared.
- Sharing is based on subjective factors such as mood and the moment.
- Some posts are described as ‘basic’, suggesting they are not original nor interesting enough for users to engage with. Originality is important.
Sharing turns out to be an even more subjective matter than initially thought, which might have implications for viral marketing strategies. It is hard to build a strategy upon something so subjective and personal. It is therefore, as I already mentioned before, more important to look at the why behind sharing instead of the what, because the actual content that goes viral is very unpredictable and subjective.

4.4 Brand fit and consumer expectations

It is safe to say that it might be very hard for brands to employ viral marketing as a strategy to promote themselves. Not only are brands a somewhat unwanted, suspicious presence in the online viral environment, it is also hard to determine why certain things go viral. However, from the focus groups it became apparent that not all hope is lost for brands and there certainly is some content people are willing to engage with. However, from a consumer perspective, brands just have to be very careful they do not become a disruptive, manipulative presence.

When I asked the participants directly about branded content, they were not very positive about it. This is illustrated, for example, by the following conversation we had:

Sarah: “I always click like for stuff I enjoy, so plenty of things. But not of brands. I would not be inclined to like something of a brand.”
Interviewer: “Why not?”
Sarah: “I do not really know. Maybe because people will see that I like it. And I am not sure if I want to support that.”
Interviewer: “You do not want to be associated with brands?”
Sarah: “No.”

Something we did not further touch upon in the focus groups but is important to mention here is that this idea contrasts with the concept of conspicuous consumption. This means that people willingly associate themselves with (mostly high-end) brands to show off their wealth or connections (Marwick, 2015). The quote by Sarah tells us she does not want to be associated with brands, but she did not specify which brands and if there is a distinction to be made here. It is possible she would willingly show off brands that she could
think improve her image, while avoiding brands that could harm her reputation. Conspicuous consumption could also be seen as intentional viral marketing.

De Bruyn and Lilien (2005) say intentional viral marketing happens when consumers willingly become ambassadors for the brand, product or service and forward the message to their network. The participants were very aware that when they like or share certain content, they immediately become an ambassador for that content: because they are passing it on. This might pose no problem when it is just about enjoyable content, but when it involves a brand, people will think twice before they make that decision. When it came to trust surrounding branded messages, participants also revealed to be quite suspicious. Especially influencers were a point of scrutiny. Emma: “Because influencers really have become a thing, it is starting to work against them.” Kristin: “With these influencers, I only see dollar signs in their eyes. [...] You just know there is money to be made.” As Abedniya and Mahmouei (2010) already discussed, people are less likely to trust branded content, as opposed to the recommendations of trusted friends. However, influencers were thought to be the bridge between the dehumanized brands and the close friends people believe (De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017). However, since ‘being an influencer’ is seen as an actual job now, people are starting to associate it more with the intentions behind it. Emma and Kristin did agree that it might be a generational thing as well: younger people are more likely to believe the messages of influencers. Kristin: “I think that many young people, even younger than you, will still think: ‘oh, how cool. How great, they are giving away stuff!’”. But I think that people who are able to think for themselves will not fall for it.” Emma: “I think that younger people just see the fun video. They enjoy items being tested, and all that stuff. But we already think of the marketing behind it.” It could be argued that these marketing practices are only increasing the generational gap, which is already bigger than ever because of the internet. Brands should be wary of ‘playing the internet game’ as described by Fournier and Avery (2010) too much. From the focus groups it became clear that there is a risk of losing their older customer base. And those are the customers that have the money right now.

Not only does branded content raise suspicion among the participants, it also alters the way they enjoy the content. Just an example:
Bob: “But it’s weird when it is a brand. [...] Well, it just makes it seem less natural. Part of the fun is more that it seems real and it is cool that a random person came up with this idea.”

Brands do not only make people suspicious of the motives behind the message, but they also make people appreciate or enjoy the message less. The opinions on this seemed to differ, though, and especially when asked about specific examples participants were generally way more positive. Amy said about this “as long as I enjoy the content and don’t leave feeling like I need to buy something.” The feeling of autonomy seemed to be important here.

Participants in the other focus groups agreed with this. Kristin: “It is not a problem if it is commercial, if it is fun it is fun. It does not have to be... I mean, just be honest. Do not be secretive.” Anna also mentioned this. “If it is made as if it is not from the brand and you find out that it is, it might seem insincere.” Honesty was one of the most important factors for most participants. This might be due to the fact that the internet forced brands to be very transparent in their practices and motives, something that Fournier and Avery (2010) call ‘the age of transparency’. Because of the current online environment, brands cannot be secretive about their practices anymore. Consumers have such a great and important voice in brand stories now, so everything about brands can and will be exposed. “In open source branding, secrecy is no longer a legitimate competitive strategy for a firm.” (Fournier & Avery, 2010, p. 8). This has made it common practice for brands to present themselves as open and transparent, and people notice it when they are not.

However, even if brands are transparent and people enjoy the message, still some participants said they would not share such messages. Sarah: “I would not be inclined to like it [...] Because it is a brand. I might enjoy it, but I would not like or share it.” Kristin: “No, or I would talk about it in real life, but sharing...” However, when talking about specific examples they enjoyed, they changed their mind and had a different opinion. Interviewer: “You seemed to think the invisible challenge was a funny video. But because it was by a brand, you would not want to share?”

Sarah: “No, not because it is a brand.”

Maria: “I do not think that either.”

In general participants stated they would not share branded content, while when being confronted with specific, branded examples they did not say to mind. What we could draw from this is that people do not tend to like the idea of brands being involved in their cultural
space, but when it turns out this involvement can add to their enjoyment, they actually do not mind that much anymore. The challenge for brands is to see how they can achieve that.

Porter and Golan (2006) already discussed twelve years ago that viral content often relies on provocative content or emotions to be memorable. For brands, this also seems to be true. From the examples that I showed in the focus group, the Invisible Challenge by Netflix and the Nike advertisement were by far the most popular. In other words, a funny and a political advertisement. Especially the Nike one produced mainly positive reactions, because of the reputation the brand already has.

Margaret: “They always do everything with a soul... It always feels...”

Sarah: “Better.”

Emma: “I know, with the messages of Nike, I always find them interesting. I know there are good thoughts behind those, instead of bad ones.”

Again, this might come back to transparency. People want to have a sense of the intention behind the message, and that it is not all about making money. When I asked if they did not think the motive behind the Nike ad was still making money, Margaret reacted: “No, at that point is not even about money anymore. It is about how people see the world, and at that point, it has become much bigger than just the campaign.” The previous reputation of the brand seems to play a vital role here: if the brand is known to be involved in social issues with honourable intentions, people change their perspective on the campaign. They look past the marketed aspect and put more emphasis on the cultural factors.

The reputation of the brand could also negatively impact how the message is viewed.

Anna: “It also depends on how you view the brand, like how you viewed it before the content. If you kind of hate the brand and then you see a nice video, you might start to hate the video too.” Furthermore, even though the controversial advertisement of Nike was seen as very successful, participants did mention the risk such messages bring with them. One example Anna gave was that of a Dove commercial that was meant to celebrate diversity, but was accused of racism and white-washing. Anna: “I mean, their initial message was good, but they just did it very badly. [...] They messed up with execution. And they have a history with that, like on the product it said 'normal to dark skin'. So then people were like oh, okay, thank you guys. So that's why it probably was also worse.” Anna emphasizes ‘the history’ Dove has with making similar mistakes, which is probably why people are more critical towards their
new campaigns as well. Sensitive, more controversial messages were definitely appreciated, because it shows the values of the company. However, being careful with such messages is crucial for making them successful.

Other ways for brands to successfully engage were named as well. Creativity was highly appreciated, especially for start-ups. Funny and light content was the most popular, with the most frequent example being Bol.com. The Dutch webshop came up in almost every focus group, even though they were not part of the original examples that were given. The reason named for this was that Bol.com used current events and actualities and put a funny spin on them. Emma: “It shows you that the people behind it are thinking very creatively and are able to switch quickly and think: hey, we can respond to this in a fun way.” In another focus group, Amy also brought it up. “They get it. [...] They use cultural things really well.” Another characteristic that was named was inspirational posts. Interestingly, these types of posts seemed to encourage people to actively engage more than any other post. Margaret: “When Gucci for instance does a very beautiful photoshoot with someone famous, and the pictures are absolutely beautiful, I would like it. If it is something I personally really enjoy, why would I not like it?” Sarah added to this: “If I see something funny, I just think: ‘oh, that is funny.’ And when I see something inspiring, I feel more inclined to actually tell the people that made it: wow, you have done this really beautifully and well.” This comment suggests that inspiring and creative content are most appreciated when it comes to brands, which is vastly different from what participants said to enjoy when it came to non-branded viral content. There, funny and emotionally appealing content was more appreciated.

The social media platform also plays an important role in how the content is appreciated. Facebook was seen as something you ‘had to have’ for practical issues such as contacting colleagues and classmates and keeping up with birthdays, while Instagram was called “the fun part of Facebook” by Emma, in the sense that it just involves fun and inspirational imagery. Participants said to go to Instagram to find content they would find inspiring. However, in relation to virality, most participants agreed that Facebook better accommodates viral content and invites more active engagement such as commenting, sharing and tagging, while Instagram invited more passive engagement such as liking.
Sarah: “I feel like that on Facebook, something really can go viral...”
Kristin: “More so than on Instagram.”
Sarah: “Yeah, I just feel that’s the case.”

All participants stated that Instagram felt more like a private space, which results in most people sharing interesting posts privately, through Instagram Direct Messages. The platforms therefore encourage different types of sharing and result in a different kind of virality. Affective evaluation and message deliberation, meaning that the reception in both numbers and emotional response can be measured, are therefore more easily measured on Facebook (Alhabash & McAlister, 2014). This indicates that certain viral strategies are more easily employed on Facebook rather than Instagram. Sharing of content is easier on Facebook in the technical sense, however certain content finds more appeal on Instagram. This suggests that brands would have to choose between offering their users content they actually enjoy and appreciate with a low risk of it being shared, or diving into the viral environment of Facebook and adjust their content to that, with a higher risk of being rejected.

However, there is one thing that everyone in the focus group agreed on: no matter what a brand does, it has to fit their identity – that is, “the central, timeless essence of the brand that remains constant as the brand moves to new markets and new products.” (Ghodeswar, 2008, p. 5). Hannah: “It has to fit you as a company.” Charlotte: “If it is a young, dynamic company...” Creative, funny messages were seen as a better fit for young, dynamic companies. My research suggests that older, more serious brands also had to stick to more serious messages, at least according to the focus groups. The example of Albert Heijn was, for instance, not seen as a good fit because of the sexual element combined with a supermarket. Hannah: “If you are Albert Heijn, I’m thinking: why would you do this?” The overall conclusion was that brands should not go places where they should not be. If participants felt they intruded in their cultural and social space, they were quick to reject the message. However, if brands play their cards well, they might just have a chance of succeeding in this crazy environment of challenges, memes and cat videos.
5. Conclusion

5.1 Implications of this research

Let us first go back to the research question to see what we can conclude based on the findings in the previous chapter: how do social media users decide on sharing content in relation to perceived branded viral content? In order to answer this question, I first wanted to find out all the factors that are important when it comes to sharing viral messages, and second how these factors might differ when the viral messages are branded. Surprisingly, this research found it is not so much the content of the message that influences whether it gets shared or not, but rather the motivations and needs of the user. The content matters to the extent that it has to be helpful for the user to reach a certain goal. In turn, the goals and needs of the user are shaped by the constant performing of culture that happens online. The interactions people have on social media are very similar to the ones they have offline, which means that the same cultural and societal rules matter. Participants of the focus groups made clear how viral content helps them connect with other people and express themselves, which is in line with the findings of previous research (Eckler & Bolls, 2011; Kim & Jang, 2018). However, they also connected this to some normative statements that clearly indicated a distinction between people that adhere to ‘social rules’ and people that do not. This idea of social monitoring, as already introduced by Lyon and Trottier (2013), highly influenced what people will share and how they will share it. Some things are only acceptable to share in private messages, while others can be shared publicly by means of tagging, liking or commenting. This connection between online social monitoring and sharing behaviour is one of the main findings of this research that is not yet discussed in previous literature.

These findings then had to be connected to the implications for viral marketing. Clearly, viral marketing has come a long way from solely forwarding promotional messages through Hotmail (Schulze, Schöler & Skiera, 2014). On social media, consumers really took over the stage and virality became ‘a thing of the people’: consumers were not just consuming content anymore, they were creating it. However, brands are slowly taking back the power and bending the rules to their will, which leads to suspicion and rejection from consumers.
While brands are trying to blur the distinction between traditional and viral marketing, in the sense that they want to create a natural space for brands to operate in, consumers are getting more and more aware of this. The participants in this research stated that it is obvious when brands are trying to appeal to the viral culture, and viral messages themselves are becoming less and less believable because of the involvement of brands. The adaption of social media platforms to better accommodate brands and marketing is not helping the way people view brands online: the algorithms, commercialization and monetization of messages makes brands less believable. As a result, people are less willing to engage. However, various examples came up throughout the research of which the participants did not mind the branded aspect, which means that there are possibilities for brands to succeed.

Can brands easily and intentionally create the next Ice Bucket Challenge? Probably not. Viral marketing was and remains a vague practice. There are different rules because brands are operating in a space that consumers had initially taken for themselves. However, this research did begin reveal some key things that need more study, but are useful for now to better understand the way virality works in the minds of the consumer. These are all factors that the participants in the focus groups found important in relation to viral marketing and might be useful for brands to remember when they create messages on social media.

1. Viral content often feels very commercial for people. To counter the suspicion, brands should focus on the message and not on selling a product or service.
2. People want to feel inspired by the content in one way or another, either by the ‘beauty’ of the content, or in the sense that the brand shows its norms and values in a way of cultural and societal commentary in their campaigns.
3. The content has to look like ‘it is not trying too hard’ – meaning that brands should focus more on the message they want to get out there rather than trying to copy other successful viral messages, because consumers will see through that.
4. Using cultural and societal commentary and current events a great way for a brand to show their adaptiveness and creativity.
5. Transparency is a key factor in the way brands should communicate. Consumers do not mind engaging with brands as long as they do not feel forced to buy a service or product.
6. All in all, no matter what a brand does, the fit between the ‘viral’ style content and the brand identity has to be right.

These findings are helpful for us to better understand in what way consumers think about virality, and how they think brands should interact in the viral online environment. However, they are not universal truths and merely present a starting point for future research.

5.2 Limitations and recommendations

A limitation of this research is first of all that the participants of the focus group were all connected to a similar sub demographic. Because of the strategy of snowball sampling, people within the same networks were reached. As the starting point was me, someone who is working in the media and studying marketing, most people that were reached also had the same sort of background. All participants were highly educated or working in the marketing and media sector. The implications of this became apparent in some of the comments that were made in the focus group, where people would say that because they work in marketing, they are probably more aware of some practices than other people would be. Right now, there is no way to know if the findings of this research may have been slightly different if the sample included people with different educational and professional backgrounds.

Furthermore, a limitation could be the method of analysis. One of the possible dangers of focus groups is the group effect (Hollander, 2004). It is possible participants in the focus groups were more inclined to agree with each other’s statements because they did not want to contradict them, even though they might have had other ideas. In one of the focus groups, one participant actually mentioned how interesting it was they all kept agreeing on what they would and would not share. It is unclear if this was actually because they all agreed, or if people who disagreed kept silent about it.

Another limitation could be that the participants of this research were not always very reflective about their sharing behaviour and motivations behind sharing. Although this did tell us something about sharing practices and motivations, namely that we people do not always clearly now their reasoning behind certain actions, it also did leave us with some
knowledge gaps. For future research, it might be interesting to systematically research viral marketing as a marketing practice by doing either a content analysis or quantitative research as a complimentary study to this one. This way, people’s actions can be studied rather than their thoughts behind those actions, and the findings can be compared to discover what people actually share and their thought processes behind this. The vague threshold of sharing that was detected in this research, could then become a lot less vague. Also, this could detect more specific differences between for instance age-groups, gender or education-levels. These are differences this research could only hint at but not systematically prove.

Furthermore, this research only discussed viral marketing in relation to profit-seeking companies which heavily influenced the results. If participants were negative about branded messages, it was mostly because they felt they were being forced or manipulated to buy a product or service, which is usually not the goal of a non-profit company. Their goal is primarily raising awareness. Pressgrove, McKeever and Jang (2018) researched what factors non-profit companies use in order for messages to get shared, and discovered that the principles of social currency, triggers and high-arousal emotion were most prevalent. However, research shows we are becoming desensitized to such messages, meaning we are less likely to engage with them (Meade, 2014). Messages with a clear call to action, such as the Ice Bucket Challenge, seem to work way better. It is interesting to research if the goal of companies (for people to buy the product or service) and non-profit organization (to raise awareness and for people to donate) can be achieved by the same type of messages or need a completely different approach.

While this makes it clear that we are nowhere near fully understand virality and viral marketing yet, this research did manage to show how complicated it really is. Despite the small scale of this research, its broad take on the topic managed to capture many of the factors that come into play when consumers decide on sharing things on social media. The most important findings surround the process that participants go through when it comes to sharing: social structures and personal identity are much more important than the content of the message. All these factors could make for interesting future research to better understand online sharing behaviour and the involvement of brands.
6. References


7. Appendices

Appendix A – Discussion guide

1. **General information**

   These are questions to get a sense of who the participants are and what their social media behaviour looks like. This way we can determine whether they are likely to know a lot about viral content or not as much. Here we just go around the room and ask every participant their name, age, their favourite or most-used social media platform and why. Also we’ll ask how much time the generally spend on social media per day.

2. **What is virality?**

   Here we want to find out how familiar the participants are with the concept of virality, what they think it is and what the content entails or should entail. This will be the basis of the research in which virality will be explored in an open way.

   a. What does the word ‘viral content’ mean to you?
   b. When can something be considered viral (in terms of reach)?
   c. What does viral content generally look like?
   d. Who influences/determines virality?

      i. If not already answered in the first questions

      ii. Probes: influencers, social media platforms, companies, social media users

3. **What and why do people share?**

   These questions should give us some idea on the nature of viral messages, and what kind of content the participants are likely to share and what not. We also get a deeper insight in their sharing behaviour.

   a. Why do you usually share (viral) content? What type of content is it?

      i. What characteristics do you look for in the messages that you share?

   b. How do you share this content?
i. Probes: where do you share this content? Publicly in your feed, through tagging, or privately in chats.

c. With whom do you usually share content?

4. What is your perception on memes?
   a. What are memes according to you? What memes do you like?
   b. What is the purpose of memes, according to you?
   c. Do you usually share memes and why?

5. Introduction of visual probes to discover the participants towards deeper insights and/or other revelations they might not have thought of before. The first half will be non-branded messages while the second half will be branded messages. The questions are therefore also to determine if there is a change in attitude towards the message when it changes from non-branded to branded.
   a. How do you feel about this message/video/photo/meme?
   b. Would you share this message? Why (not)?
   c. Why do you think this went viral?

If no one notices or mentions the branded content, it should eventually be brought up so that we can get a clearer idea of the implications when a viral message is branded. This way we can switch the general discussion form virality to more specifically, viral marketing.
   d. Did you notice this message was associated with a brand/company?
   e. How do you feel about the fact that there is a brand behind this message?
   f. Does this influence your motivations to share and why (not)?

6. Viral marketing
   Now that the participants have been introduced to some examples of viral marketing, we can move to the questions about the concept of viral marketing itself to get a sense of how familiar the participants are with the concept, as well as how they think brands should use it as a strategy.
   a. How should or shouldn’t brands use virality to promote their brand?
b. How could virality influence a brand image / add to their brand story?
c. What types of viral messages would work for a brand?
d. What type of message that includes a brand would you share?

**Appendix B – Overview of participants**

| Focus group 1, October 4, 2018 | Marjolijn Polman (Dutch, female, 26), Wies van Beek (Dutch, female, 20), Marloes Landman (Dutch, female, 20), Jessica Kleijnen (Dutch, female, 52), Sioe Sin Khoe (Chinese, female, 33). |
| Focus group 2, October 6, 2018 | Diana Brouwer (Dutch, female, 51), Wouter Brouwer (Dutch, male, 52), Dominique Brouwer (Dutch, female, 26), Kayleigh Brouwer (Dutch, female, 16). |
| Focus group 3, October 21, 2018 | Joe Moucachen (Syrian/German, male, 23), Noah Howard (American, male, 21), Reyhaan King (Zimbabwean, male, 25), Sanna Balluff (Dutch/American, female, 22), Joyce Ng (Dutch/Chinese, female, 23), Izzy Gtzn (Hungarian, female, 21). |
| Focus group 4, November 11, 2018 | Mies Koopman (Dutch, female, 22), Ina Haid (Greek, female, 23), Yu-Hsuan Wu (Taiwanese, female, 24), Kasia Cieslik (Polish, female, 20). |
| Focus group 5, November 23, 2018 | Yash Misra (Indian, male, 23), Alex Cerecedo (Spanish/Chinese, male, 23), Amber van Mook (Dutch, female, 23). |
Appendix C – Probes

“Goat cuddling his pig toy” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ed3yGKzNzRM

“Tag someone and if they don’t respond within 5 minutes…” https://cdn.dopl3r.com/memes_files/tag-someone-and-if-they-dont-respond-to-your-comment-in-5-minutes-they-need-to-buy-you-pizza-tUtTe.jpg

“Share, tag and win” http://contests-events2u.weebly.com/uploads/7/9/0/1/7901491/14089286-1273276709358367-2171147524841721395-n_orig.png

“Male privilege is a myth, change my mind” by Steven Crowder https://meme.xyz/uploads/posts/t/l-21460-male-privilege-is-a-myth-change-my-mind.jpg

Nike commercial Kaepernick https://images4.persgroep.net/rcs/Zgif89p1OBFK8x2Xs6ynhfqfPQ/dioccontent/131394288/-fitwidth/763?appId=93a17a8fd81db0de025c8abd1cca1279&quality=0.8


Netflix Magic for humans “Invisible challenge” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fu3TFib-JK4

Albert Heijn Buik Billen Bonus commercial https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4cxaVBclszk

Appendix D – Code table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Open codes</th>
<th>Axial codes</th>
<th>Selective codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Funny things, inside jokes, dogs, funny remakes, relatable memes, counters all bad news, different versions, relatable, feelgood videos, animals work well, kids work well, reliving memories, making others happy, countering boredom, waste of time,</td>
<td>Funny and entertaining content</td>
<td>Sharing motivations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interesting news articles, close proximity news, relevant lifestyle articles, high interest for friends, good causes, relevancy matters, shared interests, positive news, strengthening relationship, bringing back memories, seeking approval, quick communication, Facebook used for practical matters, for university, for work, Facebook for ‘stalking’,</td>
<td>Usefulness of sharing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal posts, giving emotional support, visually beautiful content, original content, relevant or relatable content, inspiring content, ethical ideals, ‘different’ content, natural looking, showing support, sharing to keep in touch, needs to be real and trustworthy, Instagram for inspiring content, Facebook determines newsworthiness, algorithm suspicious,</td>
<td>Genuine/authentic message</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weird content, boring content, unoriginal, does not say anything, not interesting enough, stupid thing, annoying content, tag your friends, not funny, suspicious content, tag &amp; win is stupid, seeming desperate, seeming weird, there is no point, polarizing or sensitive stuff, content seems staged, seems fake, embarrassing content, doesn’t resonate, too obviously marketed, has ‘no purpose’, aggressive/negative content, overload of content, too many cute animals, has to be special, uniqueness factor, pointless, generic and basic,</td>
<td>Undesirable content</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>message with hidden branding, refusing to be used for advertising, attention seeking, takes you out of the moment,</td>
<td></td>
<td>Vague threshold for sharing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some things are ‘just’ funny, not funny enough, not cute enough, has to reach a standard, standard is not known, standard is a feeling, some content too sensitive, has to be someone to share with, lasting impression important, awareness of watching eye network, keeping up a public image, sharing has consequences, liking feels useless, has to be appropriate, liking depends on mood, sporadic liking, sharing annoys others, generational differences, not commenting alone, Facebook feels public, Instagram private sharing,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Important incentive helps, inspiring content encourages action, to show appreciation, uniqueness matters, exotic animals over normal pets, existing likes/views triggers, curators’ involvement, big platforms, tv shows or magazines, opinion of serious brands, liking to please, geographically relevant, liking for yourself, repetition of message, triggering content, liking as archiving, sharing hierarchy, selfish sharing, Facebook invites sharing, Instagram feels private, Instagram more engaging, social pressure to share</td>
<td></td>
<td>Incentives for sharing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enthusiasm, short videos or photos, funny, relatable, repurposed images, different</td>
<td>Meme culture</td>
<td>Viral and meme culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>era’s of memes, 9gag original source, making fun of others, connecting with people, getting to know people, personal stories, bonding with friends, catchy, shareable content, a Western concept, for younger people, light content, always positive/funny, can’t be defined as one thing, expressing yourself, to entertain, cultural reproduction, a trend, remakes, satirical, a cultural thing, self-deprecating, can’t be serious, takes context to understand, origin unknown, you’re not alone, makes you feel acknowledged, you are like everyone else, a way to talk about things, inside jokes, makes you feel understood</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Short content, popular, funny, digital, local topics, memes, accessible to everyone, snowball effect, popular pages influence virality, videos, celebrities, Kardashians, viral trends, Ice Bucket Challenge, commercial feel, news parodies, feel good videos, thought behind it, stupid/dumb things, annoying content, modern chain letter, suspicion of who’s behind it, remakes/different versions, more imagery than text, origin of message unknown, ‘weird things’, sad videos, differs per network, creates discussions, sex sells, suspicion of realness, has to look natural, has to look like it’s not trying to go viral,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-themes:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Social structures</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Identity construction</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Characteristics of viral content</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>relatable, shareable, has certain standard formula’s, kids and animals work well</td>
<td>Difficulty of measuring virality</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surprise at not knowing examples, repetition, keeps coming back, all over the world, high engagement, 1000 to a million shares, everyone knows about it, million views is common, top trending lists, influencers or celebrities involvement, confusion on measuring, hard to answer, virality more visible on Facebook,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sponsored content annoying, makes message seem fake, would not share in brands’ interests, makes people feel cheated, suspicion, too much thought behind it, marketing behind it, influencers not authentic, unknown brands, refusing to be associated with brand, don’t deserve likes, secretive or manipulation, controversial topics, trying to be young, trying to appeal to internet culture, feeling forced to buy, negative/aggressive messages</td>
<td>Undesirable brand involvement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As long as it’s enjoyable, depends on target group, young people more susceptible, well known brands, brands close to you, fun is fun, not hiding the message, open about marketing, great ads deserve appreciation, reputation of brand helps, young and dynamic brands, has to fit the brand, humanizing the brand, originality/uniqueness, creative content,</td>
<td>Positive branded content</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Brand involvement in viral culture Sub-themes:  
- Actual involvement  
- Consumer expectations | |
| has to be relatable/relevant, has to speak to target group, funny messages, raising awareness good causes, should not seem commercial, showing social responsibility, gaining positive awareness, has to fit brand identity, message needs a soul, should show ideal and values, Nike example (Kaepernick), stay close to what they represent, use the spirit of the time, play with actuality, use positive message, has to look natural, better inspiring than funny, openness, transparency, cautious messages |

|  |  |

|  |  |