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## **VIRAL EXPERIENCES: DO YOU TRUST YOUR FRIENDS?**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This chapter signals the implications of a shift in production and distribution practices of online advertising in an age of computer network-facilitated participation. It explores online entertainment forms such as games and films that are increasingly being used as an integral part of online advertising strategies to promote goods and services to potential consumers. These advertainments as they are often referred to, exemplify the linkage of commercial goals with cultural texts through creating engaging experiences, initiated by commercial corporations for reasons of promotion and profit, enabled by computer networks, and given form by various members of the public.

### **KEYWORDS**

Internet advertising, viral marketing, experiences, participatory networks.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Five years ago I was working on a research project that focused on the construction of the Hollywood actor as a popular and public media figure. One of my case studies was the actor Mr. Keanu Reeves who I happened to run into. Or actually, he walked into me when I was having lunch in Los Angeles. It was a bizarre coincidence since I had not thought about setting up an appointment with him. It took me about thirty minutes to decide whether I should approach him or not. We ended up talking for a long time about lots of things. Three days later this little encounter was on the E! Online web site:

*E! Online: Ted Casablanca's Awful Truth: 10/23/97*

The Eyes have it: Keanu Reeves, grunge central, chatting with a Dutch blonde woman in the lobby of Hollywood's famous [...], where the decor is as musty as Keanu's muscles.

It turned out to be my first encounter with the construction of celebrityhood and the magnitude of the Internet to 'spread the word'. Keanu Reeves is massively represented on the Internet such as on movie sites, fan sites, message boards, chat rooms, and web logs. Pictures of his private belongings are posted, claims about his whereabouts, the books he is reading, girls he is seeing, are denied or confirmed and spread across the virtual community that mainly embraces Keanu's (often wanna be) inner circle and fans. It is no wonder Keanu always finds himself awaited by a crowd of people, be it in a hotel lobby, airport, garage or club. He once said 'it is about getting organized, about being connected.' The introduction of new technologies has had an important impact on the relationship between technological artifacts and the social organization of communication, of getting connected to other like-minded people ('peers') through communication devices.

Digital technologies, especially the Internet, have reactivated debates on 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century audio-visual media such as film and television that are seen as points of convergence where technologies, corporations, and people meet (Ang, 1982; Dyer, 1998; Jenkins, 1992). Questions regarding the aesthetic status of new technologically enabled expressive forms such as digital games and web logs are raised, and challenges regarding the role of commerce in the production of commercial culture are mounted. Digital technologies have made questions regarding originality and reproducibility particularly difficult, and they have blurred the lines among producer, distributor, and consumer to a far greater extent than previous media forms, facilitating what has been termed participatory culture<sup>1</sup>. Since the late-1990s researchers have shown an increasing interest in this linkage between new technologies and publics, looking in particular at the formation of new social collectivities and 'bottom-up' redefinitions of cultural practices<sup>2</sup> such as fan fiction, the creation of spoofs ('fake ads') and modifications (variation on a game) on the Internet. When in the mid-1990s Mosaic and the Pentium chip were introduced the notion of re-circulation initially associated with digital culture by decentralizing computer networks and enabling the peer-to-peer exchange of sound, image, and text, radically changed. The Internet could be used for more than looking up information or sending email. Instead people formed networks, effectively constructing 'user-created search engines' for the exchange of music files, games (e.g. KaZaA), and increasingly, news and chat. While the present moment is marked by a legal standoff between robust communities of users (cultural co-producers) and the established

media industry (particularly the music and film industry), some elements of the corporate media world have taken a different approach, embracing the new technological use rather than attempting to outlaw it. These corporations have found their way to online participatory networks and are attempting to use them for their own good. Advertisements in the form of games, movies and the like are created to promote a company's product or service, but they crucially rely upon blurring the boundaries between production and distribution, encouraging the target audience to work for them. This study considers this corporate strategy where cultural practice constitutes the spaces of commercially produced Internet advertisements, such as films, games, and web logs, within which economic action of production and consumption is formatted and framed through viral marketing and explicitly requires the participation of networked consumers.

## **GLOBAL PEERS**

It's very odd to go on a plane and to your hotel and have people meet you there. Very odd. Probably it is about getting connected, about people who have mutual desires or getting organized. When I broke my ankle, they took a picture when I came out of cab, in general, to me, it is not that big of a deal. [...] And if people want to meet me, please, not on purpose. Hopefully it will be a pleasurable encounter, that you won't be crazy and that I won't be crazy. (Keanu Reeves, 1/4/98)

In imitation of Frigyes Karinthy's insight (1929) that people are linked by at most five links Stanley Milgram (1967) came up with his study of 'interconnectivity.' He wanted to study the distance or social links between any two people in the United States. Thus, how many acquaintances were needed to connect any two individuals? The answer turned out to be six and the well-known term 'six degrees of separation' was born. A famous example is the Kevin Bacon game: In 1994 the actor Kevin Bacon was joked to be God on The Oracle of Bacon Website where he could be connected to any other actor through less than six links by the movies he appeared in. Not only can other actors be connected to Kevin Bacon as Milgram's study has shown, any other individual can be linked to him as well. However, it may take some more degrees (Barabási, 2002; Johnson, 2002; Watts, 2003); one should not focus on the number six too much, but the meaning that any person can be reached through a limited number of steps (Rosen 2000). These steps can best be seen not as persons apart, but as 'circles of acquaintances or structures' apart (Milgram, 1967). The study of interconnectivity is a useful tool to explore

how digital technology and consumers may be connected and how corporate practice has tapped into these networks to use them for their own good.

A network is a set of interconnected nodes that may refer to a network as technology – i.e. computer networks<sup>3</sup> - and to a network as social system (Barabási, 2002; Castells, 2001; Negroponte, 1995; Robins, 1996; Watts, 2003). The introduction and fast succession of digital technologies led to the come about of a network logic where a network is seen as an integral part of a continuously evolving and self-constituting system in which real people are represented who actively engage in gathering and exchanging information. Accordingly patterns of media consumption altered profoundly. Jenkins (2002) writes:

We should document the interactions that occur among media consumers, between media consumers and media texts and between media consumers and media producers. The new participatory culture is taking shape at the intersection between three trends: 1) new tools and technologies enable consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate and re-circulate media content; 2) a range of subcultures promote do-it-yourself (DIY) media production, a discourse that shapes how consumers have deployed those technologies; and 3) economic trends favoring the horizontally integrated media conglomerates encourage the flow of images, ideas and narratives across multiple media channels and demand more active modes of spectatorship (p. 157).

The relationship between a technological and social network structure is then meaningful to grasp the impact of blurring boundaries between production, consumption and distribution for marketing purposes, because it helps to understand a network as a “conduit for the propagation of information or the exertion of influence, and an individual’s place in the overall pattern of relations determines what information that person has access to or, correspondingly, whom he or she is in a position to influence.”<sup>4</sup> The corporate world has found its way to these online participatory networks and is attempting to use these networks to work for them. Advertisements in the form of games, movies and the like are created to promote a company’s product or service and are freely provided on the Internet. Among these types of advertisements is the ‘advergame’ the most popular one followed by the ‘adverfilm’<sup>5</sup>. These terms refer to “the integration of advertising messages in respectively online games and films and [are] increasingly being used as an integral part of Internet marketing and advertising strategies to promote goods and services to potential consumers” (Buckner et al., 2002)<sup>6</sup>. Well-known advergame campaigns include the US Army game<sup>7</sup>, MTV’s Winterjam<sup>8</sup>, Coke Music<sup>9</sup>, Mercedes-Benz<sup>10</sup>, while BMW<sup>11</sup>, Budweiser<sup>12</sup>,

Volkswagen<sup>13</sup>, Reebok<sup>14</sup>, Virgin Mobile<sup>15</sup>, and Greenpeace<sup>16</sup> have gained much credit for their adverfilms. These types of advertisements, often referred to as ‘advertainment’, are being heralded as the future of Internet advertising where they build relationships between consumers and products by transferring the emotion of the game or film to the brand that is powering it and creating an engaging and interactive experience.

Advertainments are strategically placed on the Internet. Whether by playing games with embedded advertising, or inadvertently sending marketing information back to advertisers, or simply by passing advertising texts within one’s circle of friends, the target audience and the larger dynamic of participatory networks are ‘used’ by corporations to achieve their ends. This linkage of technological and social networks gives way to a network where a shift in production and distribution practices opened up participatory networks for commercial purposes. A company is always looking for a profitable way to meet its target group that based on a company’s product, service or brand encompasses a network of like-minded people (‘peers’). The latter may perhaps be referred to through the notion of peer-to-peer (p2p), which is a rather diffuse term (Leuf, 2002; Oram, 2001). Generally speaking, p2p refers to a network of individual computers that communicate directly with each other and share information and resources without using central servers (Shirky, 2000)<sup>17</sup>. There are several variations to the distributed file sharing (DFS) system in terms of purpose, moderation, control access, search options, file transfer and protocols<sup>18</sup>. Napster for instance, was server-based but p2p in terms of file transfer while Gnutella is p2p in terms of search options and file transfer. The main promise of p2p features for market-oriented institutions is the offer of large-scale groupware, which makes collaboration among peers – whether business-to-consumer (b2c) or consumer-to-consumer (c2) – possible. This type of distributed computing puts the business as content broker to the foreground and employs p2p features<sup>19</sup> such as central processing unit sharing (CPU), storage sharing, local caching service and resource discovery as means to actively push online marketing activities. Central to the p2p-concept is then that *equals are communicating with equals* by being “networked in technology, peer-to-peer in organization, and collaborative in principle” (Uricchio, 2003).

The popularity of p2p networks among peers or consumers is not necessarily shared from a commercial perspective. Issues like copyright infringement (e.g. Napster) make businesses shy away from or undertake legal actions against peer networks. However, current online advertising opportunities that use peer networks have successfully relied on changed distribution practices. Engaging advertisements give way to the content and should actively push the distribution of the ad among peers. For example, the advergame America’s Army: Operations can be downloaded through Bittorrent, a p2p software that only allows people to download one file at a time but once

one is downloading, peers can immediately start downloading it from the 'downloading host'. The game is about 500 MB and has been downloaded 5,9 million plus times<sup>20</sup>; people continue to download it (including new patches) which results in server overloads, p2p software is therefore often used to share the files relatively fast. Another good example are demos; businesses promote the latest music releases or games by distributing demos for free through p2p networks, e.g. The Beastie Boys offered their latest single online for free, Madonna – although not free - sold her single 'American Life' on her own website for just \$1.49 and at the same time allowed end users to resell the single on sites, while Trymedia uses digital rights management technology ActiveMark to encrypt games but at the same time, allows people to play a short version for free. Trymedia tested Infogrames' BeachHead 2000 that was put on KaZaA and Morpheus. 800,000 demos were downloaded and 16,000 people seemed to like the game because after trying it out they bought the full version<sup>21</sup>. Although many companies still shy away from using p2p networks – also many online advertisements may not be p2p in the sense of being networked in technology where computers share files using decentralized servers<sup>22</sup> - for advertising purposes, some have found studying these p2p services like KaZaA, Morpheus and Grokster very lucrative within the business-to-business (b2b) context. BigChampagne for instance, offers a tracking service that tracks when, where and what is shared and sells this data to the music industry among which Maverick, Warner Bros., Interscope, DreamWorks, and Elektra<sup>23</sup>. Although many are rather silent about their interest in p2p networks since it would undercut their zero-tolerance stance against file swapping which is seen as an act of infringing copyrights. Businesses have thus found another way to connect with their online customers by on the one hand, providing engaging advertisements that may be passed on within one's circle of friends, and on the other hand, studying the dynamics within the larger dynamic of participatory networks – that may be p2p – in order to cultivate the relationship with their customers. Tapping into participatory networks by using its features for marketing purposes is generally known as 'viral marketing' and has been described by Wilson (2000) as "any strategy that encourages individuals to pass on a marketing message to others, creating the potential for exponential growth in the message' exposure and influence. Like viruses, such strategies take advantage of rapid multiplication to explode the message to thousands, to millions. Off the Internet, viral marketing has been referred to as 'word-of-mouth', 'creating a buzz', 'leveraging the media', 'network marketing'."

## **MARKETING VIRAL EXPERIENCES**

More and more of the goods and services produced for consumers across a range of sectors can be conceived of as ‘cultural’ goods, in that they are deliberately and instrumentally inscribed with particular meanings and associations as they are produced and circulated in a conscious attempt to generate desire for them amongst end-users. They maintain that there is a growing aestheticization of ‘fashioning’ of seemingly banal products whereby these are marketed to consumers in terms of particular clusters of meaning, often linked to ‘lifestyles’, and this is taken as an indication of the increased importance of ‘culture’ to the production and circulation of a multitude of goods and services (Du Gay and Pryke, p. 7)

Contemporary advertising strategies often adapt cultural forms of entertainment that are turned into transient images in order to create ever-changing consumer experiences. Online advertising through films, games and the like, are an anchor point to study the shift in production and distribution practice and the cultural economic implications for the convergence of notions of marketing with those of participant agency. Trends in online advertising practices give way to study the new ‘logic of promotion’ associated with processes of commodification (Wernick, 1991) to signal the convergence of notions of culture with those of social relationships both within and outside market-oriented institutions (McRobbie, 2002). As outlined earlier, online marketing taps into peer networks that are a dynamic, self-expanding form of organization of human activity that transform all domains of social and economic life<sup>24</sup>. Through entering an engaging dialogue through creating interactive advertisements with its customers a company attempts to use the distance between people to spread its message (a ‘viral object’). Hotmail is a textbook example of viral marketing; under every single Hotmail address is written: “Get your private. Free email at [www.hotmail.com](http://www.hotmail.com).” It is free, it is easy to sign up and each time when someone sends email it is a free ad for Hotmail. Hotmail is a so-called viral object, which can best be described by a product of digital entertainment that is distributed online through a self-regulatory system of peers. The basic idea of ‘pass-it-on’ or ‘tell-a-friend’ is far from new, but the Internet and to a lesser extent p2p networks have made this marketing tool more powerful. Inherent to the nature of reaching a large-scale network of peers, incorporating a (marketing) message that embraces the communication process between at least two people has the strongest impact. This includes free postcards (e.g. Boomerang) that can be acquired for free in bars, restaurants, libraries and so fort, the electronic variant (e.g. Blue Mountain), confessing indiscretions to a friend (LastMinute.com), submitting stories and videos of memorable shags (Ishaggedhere.com), and dating-network Friendster. In March 2003 Jonathan Abrams launched

Friendster as an alternative to mainstream dating sites such as Match.com and Yahoo! Personals. Friendster differs in that it goes beyond the standard profiles of 'shared interests' and 'demographics'. Abrams says: "What I tried to do on Friendster is more reflective of real life than other dating sites. In real life, you don't socialize isolated, you do it collaboratively with your friends. It's not meant to be perfect, but I think it's an improvement."<sup>25</sup> The site started out with Abrams' friends and acquaintances that could invite people they knew to test the site<sup>26</sup>. One can connect oneself to friends of a friend and vice versa by reading someone's profile and 'testimonials' of your 'shared friends'. By late August the site had 1.6 million users and the number is increasing every minute. Although the service is still free – in the near future it will be subscription based - Abrams has already begun to develop the site into a commercial enterprise by soliciting banners, selling merchandise, and linking Amazon products to profiles in which favorite books, CDs and movies are mentioned<sup>27</sup>. Friendster offers therefore a networked environment that becomes increasingly commercially structured by tapping into connected profiles of peers.

The formation of a network of like-minded people, i.e. a participant network, like Friendster, offers a site that has certain kinds of affordances by which is meant that a participant network is only given meaning and structured through users' interpretations and negotiations (Gibson, 1979; Grint & Woolgar, 1997). The interpretations and negotiations are thus interpretations of affordances of the artifact: The possibilities for action that it offers. The range of descriptions and interpretations that can be made of an online, networked environment is constrained by the common-sense understandings and experiences of ordinary people in everyday life (Hutchby, 2001). By this is meant that human actors are not necessarily caused to react in given ways to p2p forms, however the range of possibilities for interpretations and action is not near as open as often is implied. Thus, p2p technologies have been designed to have practical and social meaning, or use value. When people interact through, around and within a networked environment, it is necessary for them to find ways of managing the constraints on their possibilities for action, that emerge from affordances of given technological forms. When corporations use interactive marketing tools to engage potential consumers in an interactive experience by letting peer networks work for them, viral objects embedded in interactive marketing messages are then expressions of affordance technologies, i.e. a technology of sociability.

Understanding online advertising as an expression of affordance technology through using participant networks means then that the main feature of viral marketing is that it heavily depends interconnected peers. Viral marketing is therefore inherently social. Viral marketing is the online outlet of word-of-mouth communication, which is the "aggregate of all person-to-person

communication about a particular product, service, or company at any point in time.<sup>28</sup> Although, interpersonal communication is just one form through which people receive information, this ‘buzz’, as many studies have shown, may have a potential impact on product sales (Banerjee, 1992/93; Bass, 1969; Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955; Kotler, 2000; Mayzlin, 2001). Businesses should therefore understand that they sell to networks not individuals. These networks are crucial for the process of anticipation and purchase; there is so much information out there, that people strongly rely on or trust their friends, but they have also found the Internet to share information and experiences among others newsgroups, message boards, chat, ratings sites, fan and hate sites.

Not all word-of-mouth is equally created. Some individuals communicate with more people about a product or service than others do. These people are often referred to as ‘opinion leaders’ or ‘network hubs’ (Barabási, 2002; Gladwell, 2000; Rosen, 2000). Rosen discerns four categories of hubs:

*Regular hubs* are regular folks who serve as sources of information and influence in a certain product category. They may be connected to only a few other individuals or to several dozens. [...] *Mega-hubs* refer to press, celebrities, analysts, politicians. These individuals have many two-way links like regular hubs, but in addition they have thousands of one-way links with people who listen to their message via media. [...] *Expert hubs* are listened to because they have demonstrated significant knowledge of a certain area. [...] *Social hubs* are those [within every group] who are more central because they are charismatic, are trusted by their peers, or are simply more socially active.<sup>29</sup>

Mapping a network hub and its links between nodes of people means studying how these networks form – i.e. power relations among people -, what they look like – e.g. large or small scale - and how they can work as interactive marketing tools. Kottler (2003) summarizes this aptly: “Companies have been turning increasingly to word-of-mouth marketing. They seek to identify individuals who are early adopters<sup>30</sup>, vocal and curious, and with a large network of acquaintances. When a company brings its new product to the attention of such influentials, the influentials carry on the rest of the work as ‘unpaid salespeople’.<sup>31</sup>” Duncan Watts and Steven Strogatz (1998) came up with a ‘clustering coefficient’ to tell how closely knit a circle of friends is, while Mark Granovetter (1973) has sought to explain the differences among networks by ‘the strength of weak ties’. Weak ties are viewed better for a network than close and strong friendships, because the former are ‘bridges’ among communities. People tend to form a network

with like-minded peers and are most likely to be exposed to similar information sources. This means that an outsider, the weak tie, may have access to different information and bring it via-via in another network ('six degrees of separation'). So any weak tie has the potential to reach more people than a strong or closely connected tie, but the information however moves slower between communities than within the network (Frenzen & Nakamoto, 1993; Reingen & Kernan, 1986).

For marketing purposes this implies that word-of-mouth requires a social interaction network where a person voluntarily communicates a piece of information to another person. With the introduction of digital technologies the spread of information has become faster and more widespread. The digitization of word-of-mouth is accompanied by promises and challenges as Chrysanthos Dellarocas (2003) writes in his paper on online feedback mechanisms or reputation systems. He examines the design, evaluation and use of online feedback mechanisms for bi-directional communication capabilities that the Internet offers. Based in game theory and economics Dellarocas explores the potential implications of these reputation systems for management activities, such as branding, customer acquisition and retention, product development, and quality assurance. Due to the potential size of online large-scale networks the intentions and implications of word-of-mouth is studied from a wide variety of perspectives, including the challenges associated with measuring online conversations (Godes & Mayzlin, 2002), customer satisfaction and repurchase intentions through the potential for timing-of-measurement effects (Söderlund, 2000), the speed of innovation diffusion (Waelbroeck, 2001), predictions of online consumer behavior based on diffusion, choice and Bayesian models (Montgomery, 2001), transformation of one-way relationship between advertisers and consumers to a two-way interaction where consumers interact with both content providers and advertisers (Drèze & Zuyfyden, 1999), and the change in evaluations and the affection of future decisions (Cowley & Rossiter, 2002).

The recent interest in adapting entertainment forms by turning them into advertisements fits Joe Pine and James Gilmore's ideas (1999) of experiential marketing. They do not talk about marketing products or services, but about marketing experiences around products or services. The ambiance of restaurants such as Hard Rock Café and Planet Hollywood provide the customer with respectively a music and movie setting. Music and wall decoration is derived from well-known musicians or movie stars. The Las Vegas strip is another example; casinos are reliving the times of Emperor Ceasar or street life in Paris, so when shopping at Victoria's Secret in Ceasar's Palace one finds oneself surrounded by fountains, statues, blue skies, and other deatiled ornaments. Companies have now found their ways into creating experiences online to lure

consumers. Advertisements in the shape of games and films are created to promote a company's brand by shaping interactive experiences that occur when a customer comes in contact with the ads. Creating engaging and memorable experiences then should lead to people telling others about it. Viral marketing works best when experiences are marketed that evoke an emotional response. Although, whether the viral mechanism will work or not – if one can ever predict that – depends largely on four factors: the type of product, the target group<sup>32</sup>, the participant network<sup>33</sup>, and the overall marketing strategy. Not all products are suitable for a viral strategy or may evoke emotional responses (Rosen, 2000). Generally innovative, exciting (e.g. movies), personal experience (e.g. hotels), complex (e.g. software), expensive, observable (e.g. clothes) products open up the buzz channels. When viral marketing suits as strategy, the advertisement should become part of the communication process, it should make people interact with each other and it should motivate people to spread the word among peers. As mentioned earlier, the US Army has been very successful at generating buzz through their online advergaming America's Army: Operations (AA:O)<sup>34</sup>. The game is part of the ad campaign 'Together We Stand: An Army of One' which is the result of missed recruiting goals<sup>35</sup>. The answer to this recruiting problematic was to change the way the US Army communicates with the young people in the USA. A short-sided approach to rely simply on its name, the US Army learned that they needed ongoing insights in research-based advertising in order to understand the attitudes and needs of young people. The US Army spends about 2\$ billion per year to attract 120,000 recruits in which the costs of the latest ad campaign are included. 'Together We Stand: An Army of One' consisted of several print ads and commercials on TV to generate traffic for the [www.goarmy.com](http://www.goarmy.com) recruiting website<sup>36</sup>. These numbers compared to building the game – for 7\$ million - means that if the game generates 120 potential recruits, it has broken even<sup>37</sup>. Since the game is launch of the game recruitment site's traffic has gone up with 28 percent, which is directly derived from the game's site<sup>38</sup>.

The [...] game is an entertaining way for young adults to explore the Army and its adventures and opportunities as a virtual Soldier. [...] It does this in an engaging format that takes advantage of young adults' broad use of the Internet [...] and their interest in games for entertainment and exploration”<sup>39</sup>.

AA:O has built a relationship between gamers and the US Army by transferring the emotion of the game to the Army brand that is powering it and creating an engaging, rather than passive, experience. The features of the game in accordance with its purpose of recruiting new soldiers

shows that the US Army has chosen the right marketing strategy. The target group consists of men in their late teens and twenties, which collides with the (online) game market where action games and weapons are favored. AA:O is designed as an online multiplayer first person shooter that emphasizes realistic, squad-based combat. AA:O represents what Schmitt and Simonson (1997) have named 'marketing aesthetics' which refers to the overall trend towards lifestyle and value systems. Consumers base their choices on "whether or not a product or service fits into his or her lifestyle or whether it represents an exciting new concept – a desirable experience"<sup>40</sup>. Thus, characteristics of the Army neatly fit the design of the online game, which is a generally preferred genre among male gamers. The AA:O community exists of several participant networks, namely developers, moderators, beta testers, and the gamers. The most important communication channel where these clusters communicate is the official forum where everybody – i.e. in-game officials and gamers - can post and respond to messages. The official forum<sup>41</sup> had by mid-August 2003 over 95.000 members, who have posted about 890.000 messages. The site also hosts, among others, a support section, a web log (by a US soldier who is currently serving in Afghanistan<sup>42</sup>) and announces LAN parties. Besides official ways to interact there are many affiliated sites, both official and semi-official, and many fan and clan sites where gamers interact with each other. The AA:O community is one that is largely interconnected and depends on online collaboration. Without in-game participants there would hardly be any use to play the game. The overall marketing strategy of the US Army is a multi-channeled one with the advergame as main fix; it had all the right ingredients to become a fruitful viral campaign.

## **MAPPING THE VIRAL**

The process of viral marketing works then when the models of business-to-consumers (b2c) and of consumers-to-consumers (c2c) belong to the same (and simultaneous) online network. Consumers participate in the corporate practice of online advertising through mediated networks. When a company encourages its customers to spread the word by the grace of the assumption of the existence of an active, creative audience that interacts – one way or another – with the ad and each other, networks<sup>43</sup> are formed of and for people who share similar interests – either positive or negative. This may vary from, often interwoven, pure entertainment (e.g. BMWfilms.com, playing the online game Mercedes-Benz World Racing, MTV's Christmas 'goodgift'), to critique (e.g. whatisvictoriasssecret.com, unbrandamerica.org), to artisanship (e.g. Budweiser spoofs<sup>44</sup>, mods). Blurring boundaries between production and distribution are therefore both an advantage and disadvantage for marketing purposes, which will be supported by several examples of highly visible viral campaigns.

*What's not in the button: value proposition of 'coolness'*

Coca-Cola launched CokeMusic.com in June 2002. It is an online meeting place for teens who are really into music. Although the site has an 'invite a friend' button, it has turned out that new users find out about the site by word-of-mouth and private email; the site has over a million views a day, the number of new visitors increases monthly with 200,000, and people spend about 25 minutes on the site<sup>45</sup>. The site has two main components that make it 'cool' and make teens want to spread the word about CokeMusic.com. First, there is the 'launching pad'<sup>46</sup> which, each month, features music, videos and bios of eight upcoming artists. The site is supposed to be a reliable place to get to know the latest emergent artists who may become the 'next big thing'. Second, the site hosts 'coke studios' which is a virtual hang out place where registered users can create "their own music mixes and customized avatars, called V-egos. Each visitor's V-ego allows the person to extend his or her personality into the Web sphere."<sup>47</sup> This means that users can chat, post messages, and listen to each other's music mixes with other V-egos. It pays off to be a good music mixer, which is contextualized within the community by a contest where a user can win 'decibels'. These are a virtual currency and can be used to buy furniture and the like to decorate one's private room. All kinds of games can be played and new games (e.g. 'uncover the music'), skins, and music among others are frequently added to attract and retain users. For instance, around Christmas Santa hats could be worn. In September 2002 coke promoted American Idol by selling Coca-Cola bottles that had coded caps that could be collected and exchanged for decibels with which one could win prizes from American Idol.

Viral campaigns can also become monstrous, such as happened for Puma. In March 2003 Puma's ads were parodied and distributed widely online. Among these spoofs as these 'fake ads' are called, was 'kneeling girl lavishes oral sex on standing boyfriend while wearing Puma trainers and Puma bag' the most popular one. They appeared on Gawker<sup>48</sup>, Felix Salmon<sup>49</sup>, and MemeFirst among others, and gained over 10,000 hits. On MemeFirst a poll was held that asked "when you think of Puma, you think of...": 146 respondents answered shoes, 19 voted for athletics, 38 for black cats, 21 for lawyers, and 471 thought about blow jobs<sup>50</sup>. The first week Puma did not respond to the spoofs, but then an official statement was made among others on ad-rag.com and blogs.salon.com<sup>51</sup>:

It has been brought to our attention that several unauthorized, sexually suggestive advertisements portraying the PUMA brand have been released over the Internet. We are appalled that images like these would be created and distributed under the PUMA name.

As a brand, we seek to take a unique perspective toward our advertising in an effort to challenge the boundaries of our industry; however we would never consider using these tactics. We are in the process of researching the circumstances and reserve any legal steps available.

Subsequently Puma started to contact people from the websites that had put these ads up. According to Puma these spoofs constituted trademark infringement, defamation, and possibly libel, so they started to threaten with legal action if the ads were not taken down. At the same time it was buzzed that these spoofs were an act of subviral marketing by Puma itself. Other companies that suffered these kinds of spoofs include Nokia ('cat spin'), MasterCard ('indecent proposal'), Levi's ('wanking'). Some spoofs tend to be more critical than others for instance the site [whatisvictoriasssecret.com](http://whatisvictoriasssecret.com) portrays all lingerie models as bulimics. Upon entering the site the following statement about Victoria's Secret is made:

We are a group of artists working collaboratively to create projects that use art as a form of social commentary. We created this site to address the ways in which the female body is represented and the concept of beauty is constructed in our society. This isn't about Victoria's Secret products, but their choice of advertisements [...] that provide the constant onslaught of idealized images of the female body.

Social engagement through 'adbusting' and spreading these ads among peers on the Internet may make viral marketing turn against you.

### **“PUTTING UP POSTERS”**

I like putting up posters. To promote a movie and give interviews, to attend the premiere if I like the movie I made. Photo-shoots are bizarre. They bring clothing and stuff which I find funny, because they want an interview about you and want you to dress up..., which I think is funny. But I don't mind. And also if you do not want anyone to see what you are actually wearing, it is easy that they have clothes there. [I'm constructed which] is something I have had to come to terms with in a sense. It happens all the time. In an early film, my scene was cut. But also in interviews they edit out of the context or they lie. I do my best and hopefully they get it. (Keanu Reeves, 1/4/98 & 5/15/03)

In this chapter I have attempted to sketch the corporate tendency to create engaging advertisements in the form of entertainment such as advergames and adverfilms. These types of ‘putting up posters’ are being heralded as the future of online advertising by building relationships between consumers and products through interactive experiences. They offer an appealing destination where a company, its marketing messages and customers intersect. Businesses crucially rely upon blurred boundaries between production and distribution, encouraging the target audience to work for them. They connect with their online customers by providing engaging advertisements that are meant to be passed on within one’s circle of friends, creating the potential for exponential growth<sup>52</sup>. This trend raises interesting questions regarding on the one hand, the cultural status of online entertainment-as-advertisement, e.g. is advertainment part of an aesthetic experience or branding experience? On the other hand, regarding participatory culture in a commercially mediated environment, e.g. what is the status of b2c, c2c, and p2p in a commercially structured network? What happens when p2p simply means sending a link from one person to another for a basically non-interactive presentation such as BMW’s adverfilm versus what happens in a fuller interactive and more difficult to control environment such as corporate web logs? How are these various sites used to leak back marketing information of different degrees to corporations? The answers to these questions among others – studied by various academic disciplines - may contribute to building a fruitful frame how companies can relate, reach out and link to their online customers through interactive marketing practices.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Participatory communication explicitly states that it favors decentralization and democracy, the interests of people at the grassroots, interpretative and bottom-up perspectives, local knowledge systems, two-way communication and education, open-ended cyclical and horizontal processes, dialogue and discussion, involvement, awareness, commitment, conscientization, empowerment and social mobilization ([http://www.wacc.org.uk/publications/md/md1997-2/review\\_article.html](http://www.wacc.org.uk/publications/md/md1997-2/review_article.html))

<sup>2</sup> These studies have tended to recover aesthetic status and social power by casting the work of participating publics as *transgressive* (against the perceived economic interests of the commercial culture producers and providers, like Napster) or as at least *unintended* (not considered by producers or providers but also not perceived as harmful, a la Star Trek fan fiction; see Jenkins 1992).

<sup>3</sup> Nicholas Negroponte (1995 p.170/1) writes "computer networks form a raster of heterogeneous processes, that function as both source and destination." For example, sending an email means unpack it, addressing it with headers and sending all the packets over various channels. In between headers are changed into new ones as well and at its destination the packets are put back together and arranged into an email.

<sup>4</sup> Watts 2003, p. 48

<sup>5</sup> Film as online entertainment-as-advertisement ('adverfilm') is the oldest and most linear one – i.e. not (very) interactive -, and is rather similar to the old medium in the cinemas, the game is recently remediated as ad ('advergame') on the Internet and is interactive though structured, while a blog is new, completely computer facilitated and the least structured ('adblogging'). So far 'adblogging' has not been very successful (e.g. Dr. Pepper, see <http://slate.msn.com/id/2081419/>), but corporations are still trying to find ways to use blogs to reach their target audience to achieve their ends (See <http://www.hyperorg.com/blogger>; <http://www.ojr.org/ojr/glaser/1055879147.php>; <http://weblogs.jupiterevents.com/blog/>; <http://www.blethers.com/blog/archives/00000237.html>). Since blogging is a rather upcoming phenomenon on the Internet, there is not a solid, extensive theoretical framework to be built upon. A blog can best be described by having a format of a diary in which its author publishes regularly (preferably daily), is marked by a date-stamp, is of a reverse chronological order, and links to other blogs. There are different forms, e.g. photo blogs, celebrity blogs, and corporate blogs.

<sup>6</sup> There are many sites that use free games to encourage traffic; advergaming however means that brands are incorporated in the game environment itself. Thus, the ad is central to playing a game. Another interactive trend that might attract attention from the business world, is a cross-over between online games

and games to be played in the ‘real world.’ For example, a ‘treasure’ – often a box with a present, a logbook and disposable camera in it – can be found somewhere on the face of the earth but hints and coordinates (global positioning system) are posted on message boards or websites ([www.geocaching.nl](http://www.geocaching.nl) and [www.bookcrossing.com](http://www.bookcrossing.com)).

<sup>7</sup> See <http://www.americasarmy.com>. America’s Amry: Operations can now also be played for money, see [http://www.ultimatearena.com/games/cmepage.jsp?body=inthenews\\_merc](http://www.ultimatearena.com/games/cmepage.jsp?body=inthenews_merc)

<sup>8</sup> See <http://winterjam.european.mtve.com/ss/>

<sup>9</sup> See <http://cokemusic.com/home/newindex.jsp>

<sup>10</sup> See <http://www.tdkm.com/games/mercedes-benz/>

<sup>11</sup> See <http://www.bmwfilms.com>

<sup>12</sup> See <http://www.completelydifferent.co.uk/collections/wassup/>

<sup>13</sup> See <http://www.boardsmag.com/screeningroom/commercials/795/>

<sup>14</sup> See <http://www.terrytate.reebok.com>. See also Superbowl XXXVII Community Research and Analysis: Advertising Study pp. 6, 15-16

([http://www.emerging.com/newsletter/bbi/Superbowl\\_Advertising\\_Research\\_021203.pdf](http://www.emerging.com/newsletter/bbi/Superbowl_Advertising_Research_021203.pdf))

<sup>15</sup> See

[http://www.brandrepublic.com/digitalbulletin/news\\_story.cfm?articleID=181803&Origin=DB04062003](http://www.brandrepublic.com/digitalbulletin/news_story.cfm?articleID=181803&Origin=DB04062003)

<sup>16</sup> See <http://www.greenpeace.org.uk/aliens/>

<sup>17</sup> See also [http://www.law.uchicago.edu/Lawecon/WkngPprs\\_151-175/162.ls.file-swapping.pdf](http://www.law.uchicago.edu/Lawecon/WkngPprs_151-175/162.ls.file-swapping.pdf)

<sup>18</sup> Ying-Dar Lin (November 1, 2000). P2P Operational and Business Models. Retrieved October 3, 2003, from <http://www.cis.nctu.edu.tw/~ydlin> (National Chiao Tung University, dept. of Computer and Information Science, Taiwan):

	FTP	NFS	Web	Napster	Gnutella	Freenet
Purpose	Remote file sharing	Local file sharing	Remote file sharing (portal)	File sharing community	Decentralized file sharing community	Decentralized anonymous file sharing
Moderated?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
Access control	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No
Search	Server-based	Server-based	Server-based	Server-based	P2P	P2P
File transfer	Client/server	Client/server	Client/server	P2P	P2P	P2P
File transfer protocol	FTP	NFS	HTTP, caching	Proprietary	HTTP	Proprietary, encrypted, caching

<sup>19</sup> Ibid 16.

<sup>20</sup> There are no numbers available regarding downloads of the America’s Army: Operations at Bittorrent. Source: <http://www.movesinstitute.org/openhouse2003slides/Wardynskiopenhouse2003.ppt>

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.nwfusion.com/newsletters/fileshare/2002/01175586.html>

<sup>22</sup> Note: within marketing literature c2c and p2p are generally used interchangeable. However, I would like to argue that c2c does not equal p2p. On the contrary, p2p as expression of being both technologically networked and peer-to-peer in organization it calls into question the usage of concepts such as ‘participatory’ agency within a commercial context. Although p2p and c2c are both a means of distribution their conceptualizations we know nowadays may complicate an equal exchange among concepts. More research is needed.

<sup>23</sup> [http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/11.10/fileshare\\_pr.html](http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/11.10/fileshare_pr.html)

<sup>24</sup> Castells (2001).

<sup>25</sup> Sellers, J. (2003). Can We Still Be Friendsters? *SPIN*, November 2003, pp. 101-106.

<sup>26</sup> You can sign up on your own, but you need at least one friend before you can start browsing the network.

<sup>27</sup> Sellers, J. (2003). Can We Still Be Friendsters? *SPIN*, November 2003, pp. 101-106.

<sup>28</sup> Rosen (2000) p. 7.

<sup>29</sup> Rosen (2000) pp. 45-48.

<sup>30</sup> Note that early adopters are not necessarily hubs or vice versa. See Rosen (2003) p. 52-53.

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- <sup>31</sup> Kotler (2003) p. 186.
- <sup>32</sup> For instance, some ethnic groups tend to rely more on peers than others, just like teens.
- <sup>33</sup> “The more connected your customers are to each other, the more you depend on their buzz for future business” (Rosen, p. 27).
- <sup>34</sup> See <http://www.americasarmy.com>
- <sup>35</sup> Since 1995 the US Army missed its recruiting goals three times, i.e. in 1999 there had been a shortage of 6,500 recruits., i.e. in 1999 there had been a shortage of 6,500 recruits (Van der Graaf, S. & Nieborg, D.B. (2003). Together We Brand: Amercia’s Army. *DIGRA*. Forthcoming).
- <sup>36</sup> See [http://www.defenselink.mil/news/Jan2001/t01102001\\_t110army.html](http://www.defenselink.mil/news/Jan2001/t01102001_t110army.html)
- <sup>37</sup> See Moves 2002 activity report, [www.movesinstitute.org](http://www.movesinstitute.org)
- <sup>38</sup> Zyda, M. et al. (January/February 2003). Entertainment R&D for Defense. (pp. 28-36). *IEEE Computer Graphics and Applications*.
- <sup>39</sup> See <http://www.americasarmy.com/faq.php>
- <sup>40</sup> Schmitt, B. and Simonson, A. (1997). *Marketing Aesthetics: the Strategic Management of Brands, Identity, and Image*. New York: The Free Press (p. 16)
- <sup>41</sup> See <http://www.americasarmy.com/forum/index.php>
- <sup>42</sup> See [http://www.americasarmy.com/features\\_weblog.php](http://www.americasarmy.com/features_weblog.php)
- <sup>43</sup> Selling through advertising means then creating conditions for contact and experiences on the basis of the advertisement; the relationship between brand and consumer and the relationship between consumer and consumer through the brand. The brand as experience, network, or ‘netbrand’ (Geursen, 1994).
- <sup>44</sup> See <http://www.completelydifferent.co.uk/collections/wassup/>
- <sup>45</sup> See [http://www.turboads.comcase\\_studies/2003features/c20030514.shtml](http://www.turboads.comcase_studies/2003features/c20030514.shtml)
- <sup>46</sup> It is based on a partnership with AOL Music.
- <sup>47</sup> See [http://www.turboads.comcase\\_studies/2003features/c20030514.shtml](http://www.turboads.comcase_studies/2003features/c20030514.shtml)
- <sup>48</sup> See <http://www.gawker.com/03/03/004875.html>
- <sup>49</sup> See <http://www.felixsalmon.com/000150.php>
- <sup>50</sup> <http://www.memefirst.com/pollbooth.php?qid=Puma&aid=-1>
- <sup>51</sup> No statement was made on puma.com.
- <sup>52</sup> This tactic of businesses to use advertainment for promotion purposes through viral marketing means foremost creating loyalty, but also cutting through information clutter, affording protection from competitive attacks, and saving costs while increasing profits.