



# **DOCTORAL THESIS**

## **EXPLORING BRANDED FLASH MOBS**

**A STUDY OF THE IMPACT OF BRANDED FLASH MOBS  
ON CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR AND BRAND EQUITY**

**2014**

**PHILIP STANLEY GRANT**

Division of Industrial Marketing, INDEK  
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Supervisors:

Professor Esmail Salehi-Sangari

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## **ABSTRACT**

The desire of every marketer is to develop and maintain strong customer relationships. One way this can be accomplished is through effective advertising. Marketers have recently begun to brand flash mobs as a way to effectuate strong brand relationships. Even so, it is unclear whether or not the branding of flash mobs supports or frustrates this pursuit. Therefore, the goal of this thesis is to help marketers understand the potential impact that branded flash mobs may have on consumer behaviour and brand relationships. Since these interactions are complex we need to observe the convoluted whole from untangled vantage points. Marketing scholars and researchers must then attempt to understand the latent opportunities and unsuspecting dangers when branding a flash mob. Toward this end, four distinct research papers were used to examine the phenomenon from four different perspectives.

The aim of the first paper is twofold. First, it deductively seeks to understand how to categorize branded flash mobs within the marketing literature through an historical and cultural analysis of the phenomenon. Exploratory in nature, this study then employs a mixed methods approach to understand how marketers are currently using flash mobs, and more importantly, if branded flash mobs are an effective tool of communication and persuasion.

In the second paper, a field experiment was conducted to assess the impact of a branded flash mob on consumers' emotions, consumer experience, and connectedness in a public market. In-depth interviews were used to capture the data. Shifting perspectives, the third paper seeks to understand why some branded flash mobs fail to 'go viral'. Using of a number of focus groups, participants were asked to watch several branded flash mob videos and discuss their willingness to share them online (e.g., email, Facebook, or Twitter).

Toward a better understanding of the impact of branded flash mobs on brand equity, the final paper evaluates viewers' attitude toward the ad. Using netnographic techniques (Kozinets, 2002), 2,882 YouTube comments from three virally successful branded flash mobs ads were examined to understand how branded flash mobs affect brand equity. Responses grouped into one of four archetypical attitudes, each of which has a distinct impact on brand equity.

Motivated by the potential for widespread exposure at a relatively low cost, marketers continue to produce branded flash mobs. Sometimes they are fresh and creative, while at others they are out of tune with the spirit of the phenomenon. This thesis uncovers the impact of these efforts on consumer behaviour and brand equity, and concludes with a guide for managers to consider when planning their next branded flash mob. An acknowledgement of the limitations and an outline for directions of future research are also presented.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

*"If there are discords, we must play them as beautifully as we know how."*

-Herbert von Karajan, conductor, Berlin Philharmonic

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# **CHAPTER 1: OVERVIEW OF THE RESEARCH**



## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

On January 16, 2009, T-Mobile produced the world's first *branded* flash mob (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VQ3d3KigPQM>). Set in London's busy Liverpool Station, one individual waiting in the crowd broke into a dance to pop-star Lulu's version of the Isley Brothers' *Shout*, which was being broadcast throughout the station. Moments later, several other bystanders joined in to perform a highly unexpected, well-choreographed dance. Two and a half minutes later the performance finished as abruptly as it started, with its several hundred participants popping back into reality, walking away as if it had never happened. Flash mobs aren't new but this one enjoyed spectacular success for a different reason. The entire act was branded with the T-Mobile logo, slogan, and brand sound-byte, and then hosted on YouTube, where it is currently approaching 40 million views with tens of thousands of overwhelmingly positive comments. At the moment this branded flash mob commercial is the seventh most watched YouTube advert of all time (Griner, 2013).

In pursuit of similar success, many of the world's healthiest firms, from many different industries, have been producing branded flash mobs around the world (e.g., North and South America (Air Canada and Sky-TV), Asia (Toyota), Europe (Trident), and Australia (Apple)). Some of these firms have begun to find that branding flash mobs can create an interactive and heightened consumer experience in the live space, while gaining exposure online, drawing attention to the associated brand to increase brand recognition and visibility, and engaging consumers online by making the flash mob a 'live' TV commercial (Green, 2013).

Since many branded flash mobs have surpassed 10 million views on YouTube (Table 1) it can be inferred that they are relevant in today's marketing landscape. As corporate communities continue to integrate branded flash mobs into their marketing strategy it becomes imperative for marketers, managers, and researchers alike to understand the relationship between their efforts and the brand relationship. To the best of my knowledge the benefits of branded flash mobs remain unrepresented in the academic literature, despite the growing significance of the phenomenon.

Understanding how branded flash mobs impact consumer behaviour and brand equity is urgent since marketers may waste resources, damage the brand, and/or miss opportunities to develop the brand relationship (Ay, Aytakin, & Nardali, 2010). Since the academic literature provides scant knowledge about what could be a rich and versatile marketing technique it is the goal of this thesis to fill that gap by capturing an initial and broad understanding of the impact and efficacy of branded flash mobs as a promotional tool, and to ground it in the marketing literature. Hence, based on the literature reviewed, the purpose of this thesis could be expressed as: To explore and describe the potential impact of branded flash mobs on consumer behaviour and brand equity.

In this thesis, I address these problems through four independent studies. Each study makes use of discrete perspectives and unique research questions to inform the overarching research problem. These questions are presented herein explicitly. The

query of the first paper considers, "Are branded flash mobs are an effective tool of communication and persuasion"? The second paper examines "How do flash mobs affect consumer emotion, loyalty, and feelings of connectedness?" In the third paper I aim to add depth to the thesis by examining why some branded flash mobs fail, while other succeed. Specifically I ask, "What specific factors influence branded flash mob videos to fail to go viral?" as well as a number of sub-questions: "*Do consumers distinguish branded from unbranded flash mobs? Do consumers feel cheated when they find out that a flash mob is branded because they feel that the organizing company is 'misrepresenting the truth'*" (Fournier & Avery, 2011; Campell, Pitt, Parent, & Berthon, 2012)?" Rounding out this thesis, in the fourth paper I seek an answer to the question, "What are the effects of branded flash mob viral video commercials on brand equity?" I remind the reader that the four studies combined do not intend to answer every question about the phenomenon. In fact, with each study we find that there are only more questions worthy of study.

Each study is built on an existing body of academic knowledge, which has validity and a history in the marketing literature. It is not within the scope of this introduction chapter to fully develop each literature genre therefore a more comprehensive literature review is presented in each of the studies directly. After a brief review of the extant literature on branded flash mobs, as well as crowd psychology, guerrilla marketing, background music, consumer experience and interaction, viral marketing, and attitude toward the ad (Aad), I present my four empirical studies, in terms of the methods used and the cases studied.

I then propose theoretical implications, and argue that branded flash mobs are best examined through the lens of guerrilla marketing theory. Additionally, managerial implications are discussed, and I propose eight guidelines for producers of branded flash mob to consider. Together these sections are intended to help researchers and practitioners gather a deeper understanding of the phenomenon, and to provide powerful new frameworks to examine the effects of the ad on the brand equity. Following the discussion of my findings, concluding remarks and future research suggestions are provided.



## 1.2 GENESIS AND EXPLANATION OF THE PHENOMENON

In May of 2003, Bill Wasik, senior editor for Harper's Magazine, created a social experiment designed to expose the ironic current of commonality within the non-conformist New York "hipster" subculture (young urban New Yorkers in the late 1990s/early 2000s). For the inaugural event, which took place in Macy's department store (Manhattan) at precisely 7:27PM, approximately 200 hipsters crowded into the rug department and notified the sales clerk that they were living together in a commune and looking for a 'love rug'. Ten mystifying minutes later, at precisely 7:37PM, the crowd, later dubbed *flash mob*, dispersed on its own accord.

Although Bill Wasik organized the first event, he attributes the "flash mob" label to Sean Savage, a blogger (cheesebikini.com) from Minnesota. Savage's inspiration for the name came from a 1973 science-fiction short story titled *Flash Crowd*. Since Wasik's original email called the event "MOB", it may be more accurate for Wasik and Savage to be recognized as co-creators of the name. Other initial names for flash mobs included Email mobs, Flash Concerts, Anti-mob, Flashmuggers, Social Swarming, and Inexplicable Mob. Wasik's early but incomplete definition read: "flash mob, noun: An impromptu gathering, organized by means of electronic communication, of the unemployed" (Wasik, 2006, p. 58). Academics such as Goldstein (2003) and Salmond (2010) define a flash mob as a semi-spontaneous temporary community that forms in a public space for the purpose of presenting a performance. In 2004 the *Oxford English Dictionary* added the term "flash mob" to its body, defining it as "a public gathering of complete strangers, organized via the Internet or mobile phone, who perform a pointless act and then disperse again." Whether summoned by Facebook, Twitter, websites, email, text messages, or blogs, what precludes every flash mob performance is a call to action where information such as date, location, and other specific performance instructions is given. The community, which can involve hundreds of performers, or only a few, is made up of people who may or may not be known to one another prior to the flash mob and who come together to either watch or be involved in the performance (Goldstein, 2003).

In the opinion of Zietz *et al.*, (2009) there are two overarching organizational elements of large groups that producers of flash mobs should consider. First of all, to meet firm objectives there must be a clear and focused idea, supported by strong leadership and effective planning. For example, T-Mobile's 2009 aptly named *T-Mobile Dance* (produced by Saatchi & Saatchi) required 8 weeks of planning by a production team of 14. The team reportedly held 10,000 auditions to find 400 dancers, held a secret 1 AM dress rehearsal, and utilized 10 hidden video cameras (Macleod, 2009).

Secondly, in situations where the performers are not paid, success is dependent on the mob acting according to plan since a crowd doesn't behave is just a crowd (Perkins, 2013). Zietz *et al.*, (2009) report that the key to successful crowd management starts with assessment and monitoring in the both the pre-event and during-event phases. A flash mob will only succeed if independent contributors are internally motivated to play their part and follow instructions. Since the collective efficacy is rooted in self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986) in most cases the crowd can be

manipulated by the dynamism and situational changes of the environment, participant personalities, and internal states (Slepicka, 1995; Helbing & Molnar, 1998). While the word 'mob' has negative connotations associated with violence or conflict (Zietz, Tan, Grief, Couns, & Zeitz, 2009), most flash mobs are fun-filled, peaceful performances that range from singing and/or dancing (e.g., "Sound of Music-Central Station Antwerp"), to holding perfectly still for several minutes, as in the wildly popular "Frozen Grand Central".

Branded flash mobs are similar to unbranded flash mobs in that they embody many of the joyous and seemingly spontaneous elements, including choreographed dancing (BMW's Greased Lightning), singing (Opera Company of Philadelphia's Random Act of Culture), and even kissing (Lynx Attract's Chaos on the Buses). The most obvious difference between the two is the presence of corporate branding, which by its presence is designed to increase the equity of the brand. As a result, firms must take extra care to plan and execute their flash mobs. For example, firms must consider logistical elements such as obtaining insurances and permits, creating the appropriate content and strategy to ensure a logical and congruent brand to flash mob relationship (e.g., Yoga flash mob outside a Yoga studio), practicing routines to perfection, and controlling for production quality. As the stakes go up there is less room for error, which is only compounded by the need to get it done on time, and within budget.

### 1.2.1 CONSTRUCTIVE EVIDENCE OF A PHENOMENON

To demonstrate the richness of the phenomenon, and justify pursuit of an academic study of the topic, it seems prudent to first provide an overview of the representation and diffusion of the phenomenon. A seven-part coding protocol content analysis (Grant, 2014) revealed that 120 unique companies have produced branded flash mobs across more than a dozen different industries from 26 separate countries. Table 1 exhibits the top 10 most-viewed branded flash mobs.

**Table 1 - One Million YouTube Hit Club- Top 10**

	<b>YouTube Video Name</b>	<b>Sponsor</b>	<b>Views</b>
<b>1</b>	The T-Mobile Dance	T-Mobile	39,953,793
<b>2</b>	Hallelujah Chorus	Alphabet Photography	37,439,849
<b>3</b>	A Dramatic Surprise on a Quiet Street	TNT TV	34,504,965
<b>4</b>	T-Mobile Wedding Dance	T-Mobile	25,922,759
<b>5</b>	Sound of Music	VTM	24,317,870
<b>6</b>	Black-Eyed Peas- I Got a Feeling	Oprah	22,303,350
<b>7</b>	Michael Jackson Dance Tribute	Bounce	16,674,119
<b>8</b>	The T-Mobile Welcome Back	T-Mobile	14,044,792
<b>9</b>	Glee – Il Flashmob	Fox	9,374,096
<b>10</b>	Beyonce 100 Single Ladies Flash-Dance	Trident	9,505,099

\*Last updated in Jan. 2014

The analysis also revealed that branded flash mobs have been produced in a variety of industries, and by a variety of private and public corporations. As one might expect,

the entertainment industry accounts for nearly one third of the branded flash mobs examined. As demonstrated in table 2, representatives from 11 different industries have produced a branded flash mob.

**Table 2 – Sectors: Branded Flash Mobs by Industry**

Industry	Total Branded Flash Mobs	Example
Entertainment	44	Copenhagen Philharmonic
Retail	24	Target
Travel/Location	17	KLM
Education	12	Carlton University
Telecomm	12	Samsung
Food	9	Subway
Auto	7	Ford
Finance	6	Banc Sabadel
Online/Tech	3	LinkedIn
Other	3	Various

Indicating the global diffusion of the phenomenon, branded flash mobs have been produced in 26 countries on 5 continents. Nearly half of the flash mobs collected came from the USA (66) while Australia/NZ (18), the UK (9), and Canada (7) also had multiple branded flash mobs.

Branded flash mobs can take shape in one of many different subgenres such as dance mobs, music mobs, game mobs (i.e., pillow fights), or some sort of hybrid. A majority (72%) of branded flash mobs used dancing as the main focus of the event. Branded flash mobs have also been occurring in many different public locations including shopping malls, markets, and train stations. As shown in Table 3, the majority takes place in a public place and nearly half occur in an outdoor plaza.

**Table 3 – Branded Flash Mob Type and Location**

Type	Total	Location	Total
Dance	99	Plaza	48
Singing (no dancing)	9	Mall	19
Singing (with dancing)	9	Street	17
Instrumental music	5	Airport	9
Freeze <sup>1</sup>	3	Train Station	6
Multiple <sup>2</sup>	3	Park/Beach	6
Exercise	2	In-Store	5
Staged fight	2	Resort	2
Other Types <sup>3</sup>	5	Unique Locations <sup>4</sup>	25

<sup>1</sup> A freeze mob (living statue mob) occurs when participants stand still for a predetermined amount of time.

<sup>2</sup> Branded flash mobs that change from one type to another.

<sup>3</sup> Includes kissing, reading, recycling, loitering, and driving.

<sup>4</sup> Examples include hotel, sports arena, casino and a classroom.

### 1.3 LITERATURE REVIEW

As discussed, the central aim of this thesis is to understand the impact of branded flash mobs on consumer behaviour and consumer experience. Since the approach to any research can be observed from several different perspectives (Bem, 1995). In an effort to better comprehend the branded flash mob phenomenon, the literature review will be divided into distinct concept-centric areas (Webster & Watson, 2002).

Recently, academics identified the lack of theory and well defined research on flash mobs (Walker, 2013; Houston *et al.*, 2013; Prestage, 2011). Therefore, literature extensions from related areas can be applied (Gay & Deal, 1992). To understand the offline dimension, the research will borrow from a) crowd psychology literature, since it is important to understand the crowd motivations to control for expected outcomes of the mob, b) guerrilla marketing literature, for its similarity as a marketing mechanism, c) published works on background music, to understand the mediating effects of music in branded flash mob, and finally, d) a consumer behaviour perspective, which can help us understand consumer experience, interaction, involvement, and engagement, (Zietz *et al.*, 2011) as well as consumer coping (Friestad & Wright, 1994).

To explore the impact of branded flash mobs when they are consumed in the 'online' context, the research will be rooted in the viral marketing literature, since one of the key motivations for a firm to post a branded flash mobs to YouTube is to induce virality (Green, 2013). Finally, in instances, where perspective and knowledge can be gained by using literature that is setting-neutral, the research will be rooted in a) attitude toward the ad (Aad) theory, because this construct helps us examine the influence of ads that connect emotionally (Zietz *et al.*, 1999), and most obviously, b) brand equity literature, since it is the impact on brand equity that, in great part, motivates this thesis. A brief presentation of each body of literature is now presented in the following sections.

#### 1.3.1 CROWD PSYCHOLOGY (MOB MENTALITY)

Durkheim (1895) defined Collective Conscience as the totality of beliefs and sentiments common to the average member of a society that forms a determinate system with a life of its own. At one-hundred-plus years old this definition may appear to be outdated however it seems to lack improvement. More recently, Miller (1981) defined group identification as a perceived self-location within a particular social stratum and a psychological feeling of belonging to that particular group. Understanding the cognitive and physical behaviour of the crowd allows us to make sense of the behaviour of the individual *flash mobber*. Managers who aspire to use branded flash mobs as a marketing device must employ an informed strategy towards the desired outcome. A first step toward this task would be to grasp "Why does the individual participate?" and "How do we explain activation and cooperation?" This requires a deeper comprehension of the *flash mobber* mentality. Contrary to early crowd theorists such as Freud (1957) and Le Bon (1960), who both believed that

crowd members were unable to exercise the most elementary forms of cognition in a crowd state, the current literature seems to stem from Drury and Reicher's Elaborated Social Identity Model (1999) which supports the psychological interdependence between the crowd and the individual, and suggests that individual empowerment contributes to crowd action.

The extant crowd psychology literature further divides the field into several identifiable sub-groups according to "crowd type", "crowd mood", and "crowd dynamics", with a general focus on developing physical crowd management principles in the context of violence or conflict (Zeitz *et al.*, 2009). The term 'mob' can lead one to believe that flash mobs have the potential to be disorderly, potentially violent, and to cause trouble. Although early flash mobs worried on-lookers and police alike, the positive spirit of the flash mob quickly erased the negative overtones typically associated with mob mentality (Anderson, 2012). Therefore, it seems logical that flash mobs are not so much mobs, but are better defined as crowds. This is an important distinction as it enables us to contextually study branded flash mobs in the field of crowd psychology more effectively. Crowds are "an organized event occurring within a defined space, which is attended by a large number of people... not dependent on the reason for the gathering" (Zeitz *et al.*, 2009, p. 32). This is an important distinction because most of the extant literature on mobs has a general focus on developing physical crowd management principles in the context of violence or conflict (Zeitz *et al.*, 2009). This literature is outside of the scope of this thesis and by purposely ignoring it we contextually study branded flash mobs in the field of positive crowd psychology more effectively.

In general, the flash mob participant who attends the flash mob does so with peaceful intentions (Anderson, 2012), and thus enables a democratized, like-minded collective to emerge. This collective will be examined using the Social Force Model (Helbing & Molnar, 1998), which theorizes that people in a crowd are self-driven, not irrational, and are influenced by existing norms, values and widespread popular feeling.

Further supporting this model, Informational Social Influence Theory, (Burnkrant & Cousineau, 1975) also known as Social Proof (Surowiecki, 2004), proposes that conformity occurs when one believes that another's interpretation of the social situation is more accurate than their own and trusts it will help them make a more acceptable decision. Unable to identify the appropriate mode of behaviour, individuals are driven to assume that other people possess more knowledge about the situation and follow them independent of their own private information signals.

### **1.3.2 GUERRILLA MARKETING**

Guerrilla marketing uses innovative marketing activities and non-traditional mediums to counter consumer coping strategies and to give consumers a more memorable and engaging brand experience (Ay *et al.*, 2010; Nufer, 2013). It aspires to draw mass attention to the advertising message at comparatively little cost by evoking both surprise and diffusion effects (Hutter & Hoffman, 2011). These same authors argue

that guerilla marketing stimulates consumers and/or the media to spread the advertising message. In this way, guerrilla marketing creates a heightened consumer experience through increased media exposure, increases brand visibility, recognition, and consumer engagement. Finally, guerrilla marketing enhances consumer-perceived value, which leads to higher purchase intention and word-of mouth advocacy (Dahlén, Granlund, & Grenros, (2009).

There are several potential disadvantages and risks inherent in guerrilla-marketing techniques. First, outside of the location there is no method to measure return on investment, cost-per-response, or conversion rate. Additionally, the viewer usually leaves the scene with memories (hopefully), but not with tangible brand information. Finally, for high profile brands, the guerrilla marketing attempt can decrease the brand reputation if the consumer perceives the cost or production value of the event to be too low (Dahlén *et al.*, 2009).

Merritt (2004) sought to ground the unbranded, un-politically motivated, prototypical flash mob in an art genre when he dubbed it “guerilla art”. In this thesis I seek to discern if branded flash mobs are similar to other guerrilla marketing techniques such as Ambient Marketing (Notarantonio & Quigley Jr., 2009), Buzz Marketing (Siefert *et al.*, 2009), and Ambush Marketing (McKelvey & Grady, 2008) in that they encourage long-term customer loyalty and long-term engagement.

### **1.3.3 MUSIC AND MARKETING**

Of the all branded flash mobs coded for this research, only four (.2%) did not use music. A great deal of research has been conducted that documents the significant and positive effect of background non-vocal classical music on the consumer’s shopping enjoyment, willingness to pay, and attitude toward product price (Bruner, 1990; North & Hargreaves, 1998; Chebat *et al.*, 2001), yet the current literature does not delve into the use and impact of music used in branded flash mobs. Since a disproportionate amount of flash mobs use music, an understanding of music in the service-scape will be needed to gain insight into consumer interaction, consumer emotion and arousal, and group formation that may occur as a result of a branded flash mob.

The effect of music on consumer behaviour is largely measured by background music and generally studied separately from foreground music. Yalch and Spangenberg (1993) define background music as musicians playing recorded instrumental music. Conversely, they define foreground music as original music and lyrics, by the original artist. Garland & Kuhn (1995) warn against lumping foreground and background music together since verbal communication, found in foreground classical music, demands more cognitive processing by consumers. Foreground music commands more attention than background music and generally has a stronger ability to alter the mood of the listener (Yalch & Spangenberg, 1993). Young shoppers were found to spend more time shopping when exposed to background music whereas older shoppers spent more time shopping when exposed to foreground music (Yalch & Spangenberg, 1993).

Furthermore, research has shown that all consumers rated the foreground music as more desirable than the background music (Yalch & Spangenberg, 1993). Using this framework, I will attempt to understand if branded flash mobs should be classified as foreground music, or should be properly assigned to a new or different category.

Researchers have uncovered many significant truths about music and marketing, which may or may not extend to branded flash mobs. For example, North and Hargreaves (2003) found that exposure to background classical music led subjects to a higher willingness to pay in the restaurant environment. Further, researchers found that music has the ability to create a positive influence on pleasure and arousal, which may also impact a customer's willingness to engage in a buyer-seller interaction and strengthen consumer bonds to products or brands (Dube, Chebat, & Morin, 1995). Willingness to engage in buyer-seller interaction was correlated with the increased pleasure and arousal felt by consumers (Dube *et al.*, 1995). North and Hargreaves (1996) reported that when students liked the music in the student cafeteria there was an increased willingness to return to the cafeteria and an increased willingness to interact with others in the cafeteria. Finally, Chebat, Chebat, & Vaillant (2001) report that background music helps listeners access deep thoughts that contribute and interfuse their perception of the retail experience and store environment.

### **1.3.4 CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR**

#### **1.3.4.1 INTERACTION, INVOLVEMENT, AND ENGAGEMENT**

By employing consumer behaviour frameworks, this thesis moves to study the mediating role branded flash mobs play between brand and the consumer. According to the literature, consumer interaction, involvement, and engagement are important areas and require great managerial attention since providing a positive brand experience encourages and increases brand loyalty (Brakus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello, 2009; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Prévot, 2009; Severi & Ling, 2013). What's more, a trusting relationship is the first step toward "going viral" on various social media platforms (Dube *et al.*, 1995).

Existent research also demonstrates that consumers tend to feel stronger ties of connectedness to each other in live situations where companies can increase arousal and emotion towards a product or service (Dube *et al.*, 1995). The existence of group formation has strong implications for marketing as group identification is also strongly linked with consumer loyalty (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Amidst all of this marketing jargon, it is easy to overlook the fact that most flash mobs are, simply put, fun. From a marketing perspective, the exciting and stimulating nature of the branded flash mob may allow companies to stand apart from competition and capture significant mental real estate in the mind of consumers.

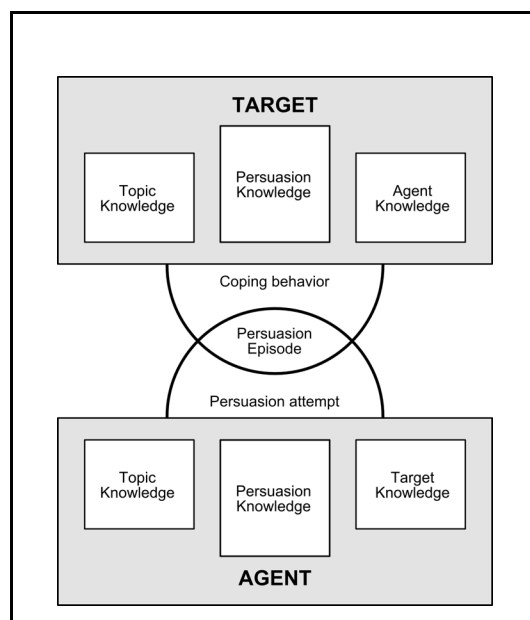
### 1.3.4.2 Consumer Coping

In an age where consumers are becoming increasingly aware of options within the marketplace, and are less easily persuaded by experiential marketing tactics (Drengner, Gaus, & Jahn, 2008), a firm's ability to set itself apart from competition is becoming increasingly crucial. To study how consumers cope with branded flash mobs as an advertising technique this research draws from persuasion theory (Cialdini, 2007; Friestad & Wright, 1994).

Friestad and Wright (1994) call the interaction that takes place between the marketer (agent) and consumer (target) a *persuasion episode*. To better understand this interaction, they proposed the Persuasion Knowledge Model, which postulates that consumers (targets) develop knowledge about persuasion efforts and use this knowledge to 'cope' with marketers' (agents) persuasion attempts. Persuasion Knowledge refers to the theories and beliefs that consumers develop about marketer's motives, strategies, and tactics; effectiveness and ethics of persuasion tactics; psychological mediators of tactic efficacy; and ways of managing oneself in the face of a persuasion episode. Since knowledge is bound by information, time, and cognitive abilities, the target must also rely on heuristics (Simon, 1954). The Persuasion Knowledge Model postulates that a consumer is able to gather and process knowledge to identify when a marketer is trying to persuade him and inform a conscious reaction to the persuasion attempt.

The model also maintains that both agent and target continually develop adaptive mental models of persuasion processes (Figure 1). As consumers develop knowledge about the persuasion tactics, they respond with coping tactics. In turn, the marketer gathers persuasion knowledge, which allows him to adapt and respond by establishing new persuasion strategies. This cycle does not end until a sales transaction occurs (Friestad & Wright, 1994).

**Figure 1 - Persuasion Knowledge Model (Friestad & Wright, 1994, p.2)**





### 1.3.5 VIRAL MARKETING

Dozens of the branded flash mobs have achieved more than 1,000,000 views. What's more, a few reached the 30,000,000-view plateau. Marketers hoping to replicate this success must understand why so many people love watching flash mobs. In this way the Internet has shaped the branded flash mob phenomenon. The use of the branded flash mob as a marketing tool has made a call for a division of flash mobs into unbranded and branded flash mobs. To understand the difference in the online forum, the viral marketing literature must be examined.

Woerndl, Spangenberg, Bourlakis, & Li, (2008, p.34) define viral marketing "as a technique which utilizes the Internet to transmit and spread messages among individuals who will filter and forward the messages to their peers, who may be potentially interested in the message's content". It seems reasonable that this definition would be useful to marketers as it helps frame their strategy and their goals. Toward helping marketers realizing these goals, several academics have begun building motivation antecedent/consequence models. Ho and Dempsey (2010) posited the following four motivators behind sharing: (1) the need to be part of a group, (2) the need to be individualistic, (3) the need to be altruistic, and (4) the need for personal growth.

De Bruyn and Lilien (2008) suggest that perceptual affinity - the similarity of receiver to sender with respect to values, attitudes and behaviours - is the key to generating viral success. Phelps, Lewis, Mobilio, Perry, & Raman, (2004) recommend strategically targeting audiences that are receptive and open to the ad, and who are likely to share the ad already (i.e., social media savvy brand loyalists). Finally, Mills (2012) created the SPIN Framework, a conceptual model that suggests four key success factors for viral campaigns: *Spreadability* (how likeable it is), *Propagativity* (the ease with which consumers are able to redistribute it), *Integration* (growth through several social networks simultaneously), and *Nexus* (successive reinforcement of the campaign).

According to Woerndl *et al.*, (2008), there are four potentially significant competitive advantages to viral marketing worth exploring. First of all, viral marketing is relatively less expensive than most advertising and marketing initiatives (Dobele *et al.*, 2005; Welker, 2002). Second, viral marketing also has positive diffusion characteristics, meaning viral marketing can reach audiences within a short period of time (Kaikati & Kaikati, 2004), which in turn can significantly accelerate the adoption of the marketed product or service (Dobele *et al.*, 2005). Thirdly, peer-to-peer transmission rates are higher in viral marketing (Dobele *et al.*, 2005), making viral marketing one of the most influential marketing methods available to marketers. Finally, viral marketing can offer the marketer a substantial and diverse audience reach by taking advantage of the audience's social contacts (Helm, 2000), which can lead to effective targeting (Dobele *et al.*, 2005).

Concurrently, there are risks and challenges of which marketers must be aware when constructing viral marketing campaigns. For example, if the effect of the persuasion attempt leaves the audience feeling exploited, cheated, and used (Dobele *et al.*, 2005), lacks ethical standards (Kaikati & Kaikati, 2004), or is an invasion of their

privacy (Phelps *et al.*, 2004), a negative backlash may produce negative brand image, a product or service boycott, and/or unfavorable attributes associated with the organization and its products and services, etc. (Dobele *et al.*, 2005; Helm, 2000; Kaikati & Kaikati, 2004; Phelps *et al.*, 2004).

### **1.3.6.1 Attitude toward the Ad (Aad)**

The topic of attitude toward the ad (Aad) has received considerable attention in the marketing and advertising literature in the past few decades. Ads that connect emotionally can influence information processing, mediate responses to persuasive appeals, measure the effects of marketing stimuli, initiate goal setting, enact goal-directed behaviours, and serve as ends and measures of consumer welfare" (Bagozzi, Gopinath, & Nyer, 1999). The term Aad was introduced in the early 1980s by Shimp (1981) who found that Aad is comprised of two distinct processing dimensions: emotional, and cognitive. Earlier the same year, Mitchell and Olson (1981) empirically substantiated the mediating effects of Aad on Attitude toward the Brand (Ab). Over the past two decades, the Aad literature has developed significantly. For example, Olney, Holbrook, and Batra (1991) expanded the literature to include hedonic, utilitarian, and interestingness dimensions, while Mackenzie and Lutz (1989) updated their earlier works to include a behavioural dimension. While we acknowledge the multi-dimensional viewpoint of Aad, this thesis will focus solely on the affect dimension because a) the author's beliefs are consistent with Shimp's assertion that the affect dimension is the most relevant to marketing (1981), b) attitude measure may be more useful than a cognitive structure attitude index (Gresham, Bush, & Davis, 1984), and c) of all the affective oriented factors, none has been more thoroughly examined than the attitude toward the brand. For example, the Aad/Ab relationship has been investigated under various conditions including involvement levels, involvement types, processing tasks, amounts of repetition, and multi-measure applications.

Much of the complexity of interpreting the Aad/Ab relationship lies in the lack of agreement of the definition of the affect construct. Authors frequently reference feelings, emotions, attitude, arousal, and mood in an ad hoc manner as the term applies to their study (Muehling and McCann, 1993). Bagozzi, Gopinath, and Nyer (1999) consider affect an umbrella term for the general category in which these psychological processes are subsumed. For the purpose of this thesis, I accept Phelps and Thorson's conceptual definition of affect which suggests that Aad may be loosely defined as "a viewer's general liking or disliking of an advertisement," (1991, p. 202) and that Aad is purely affective and not consisting of a cognitive or behavioural component (Lutz, 1985).

The Aad construct is important since Aad and brand-related beliefs are the primary influencers of Ab (Laczniak & Carlson, 1989; Cox & Locander, 1987). Additionally, affect is an important predictor of an ad's effectiveness (Burke & Edell, 1989) and has been shown to influence beliefs about the brand (Phelps & Thorson, 1991). Muehling and McCann (1993) reported that affective consequences of the ad most directly

impact brand attitude, in that positive, negative or neutral feelings about the ad can be translated into positive, negative or neutral feelings about the brand. In addition to observing an ad's influence (either positive or negative) through consumers' verbal or behavioural reaction to the brand, several studies found that Aad also has positive and significant influence over purchase intentions (PI) (Cox & Locander, 1987; Muehling & McCann, 1987; Shimp & Gresham, 1985). The consumer's attitude toward brand (Ab) also has significant and positive influence over his/her intention to purchase the advertised product (Batra & Ray, 1986). Finally, according to Phelps *et al.*, (1996) brand attitude can act as a mediator in the relationship between consumer's Aad and purchase intention.

#### **1.3.6.2 Attitude toward the Viral Video Advertisement (AV)**

Answers to questions concerning Aad and its antecedents and consequences serve little purpose to this thesis if left unexamined in an online context since the advertising landscape has become increasingly interactive. A 2010 survey by Web Video Marketing Council and Flimp Media reported that 81% of marketers use viral video (VV) in their advertising efforts, 88% of which resulted in a positive impact.

According to Huang, Su, Zhou, & Liu, (2013) viral video advertising, which involves dispatching video-based communications through interactive, network-based channels, resembles those of traditional advertising. These authors argue that the consumers' attitudes toward the viral video advertisement (Av) may influence the formation of attitude toward the brand (Ab) in a manner similar to how attitudes toward traditional advertising directly or indirectly affect the formation of Ab. Thus both the viewer's reaction to the video and to the brand representation are important for understanding the affective response of a viral video advertisement. This is important since Chakrabarti and Berthon (2012) found that emotions are central to online marketing communications. Following VV advertisement exposure, people will form a positive or negative attitude toward it, and then decide to share or not share the video with others. Only when people have a strong affective response to the video content, such as humor, fear, sadness or inspiration, will they be willing to forward it to others (Huang *et al.*, 2013). Botha and Reyneke (2013) add that marketers must pay attention to the affective reaction viewers are likely to have to the ad since viewers who feel no emotion in watching a video are unlikely to share it.

#### **1.3.7 BRAND EQUITY**

Traditionally the marketing literature has studied brand equity from two points of view: financial value and customer value. Though the ultimate goal of every marketing strategy is to create financial value for the firm, marketers must first establish and understand the underlying brand factors so that the marketing outcome for the brand is positive (Keller, 1993). Therefore this research will focus on the customer value point of view to evaluate brand equity. From the customer perspective, brand equity is built when the brand becomes unique, memorable, and is perceived as superior in

quality and reputation to its competitors (Keller, 1993). Customer-driven brand equity is a multifactor structure consisting of 1) brand association, 2) brand awareness, 3) brand loyalty, 4) brand image, and 5) perceived quality. Each of these factors has the ability to increase brand equity (Severi & Ling, 2013).

*Brand association* enables the consumer to understand brand differentiation and brand extension, and it may lead to constant purchasing of the brand over time (Aaker, 1996). According to James (2005), highly effective association helps to boost brand and equity. Aaker (1991) defines *brand awareness* as the durability of a brand fixed in the customer's memory. Brand awareness is an antecedent of brand equity since consumers may use brand familiarity, especially in low-involvement goods, as a purchase consideration heuristic (MacDonald & Sharp, 2000). Yoo, Donthu, & Lee, (2000) and Atilgan *et al.*, (2005) found that higher brand awareness and strong brand association lead to *brand loyalty*. This is important because, due to its ability to influence purchase intention, increased consumer loyalty is often the main goal of marketers (Yu & Dean, 2001; Yoo *et al.*, 2000).

Efforts to enhance the *brand image* and augment quality perceptions can improve equity (Aaker, 1991; Spratt & Shimp, 2004). Zeithaml (1988) added that *perceived quality* also acts as a key determinant of purchase decisions. In those cases where the message and theme of ads are correctly interpreted, positive brand relationships can develop (Ay *et al.*, 2010). It is therefore vital that companies create clear, compelling brand experiences that will impact the consumer's decision-making process.

The presentation of this literature review aspires to serve as a theoretical lens through which we can study branded flash mobs and build theory (Remenyi, Williams, Money, & Swartz, 1998). By providing a) elaborate definitions of the key variables, b) implicit assumptions concerning whose interests are served (Iivari *et al.*, 1998) and c) set boundaries of the work (Bacharach, 1989) these bodies of literature stack together, as building blocks, to support the investigation and development of theory (Whetten, 1989) for the studies hereafter.

## **1.4 THE INVESTIGATION: A SUMMARY OF THE RESEARCH**

### **1.4.1 FOUR PERSPECTIVES ON THE IMPACT OF BRANDED FLASH MOBS ON CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR AND BRAND EQUITY**

At the heart of the marketing discipline is a desire by every marketer to develop and maintain strong customer relationships. At the beginning of this research it was unclear whether or not the branding of flash mobs supported or stunted this pursuit. Marketers must then attempt to understand the latent opportunities and pitfalls when branding a flash mob. No doubt, satisfaction will be had when the marketing attempt succeeds; however, marketers must also be prepared to deal with the risks and consequences of a failed marketing attempt.

The goal of the research is to help marketers understand the potential impact that a company's decision to brand a flash mob may have on consumer behaviour and brand relationships. These behaviours and relationships are complex and often indistinguishable. If we are to gain any understanding of the influence of branded flash mobs, we need to observe the convoluted whole from several untangled vantage points. By examining them separately we gain the determinative ability to gather correlative insights from the specific interactions we want to understand (Fisher & Buglear, 2010).

Each of the studies presented in this thesis gives a view into one aspect of the research area; these are not intended to represent the entire research field, and I remind the reader that each study is only one part of the whole, and that the success and failure lenses offer perspectives on reality, rather than reality per se.

### **1.4.2 Paper 1**

Grant, P. (2014). Understanding Branded Flash Mobs: the nature of the concept, stakeholder motivations, and avenues for future research. *Journal of Marketing Communications*. DOI: 10.1080/13527266.2013.875930

Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) contend that by creating a heightened emotional response toward a product or service the marketer can increase consumer loyalty. Possibly the most high-spirited way marketers have integrated their brands with entertainment is by branding flash mobs. However, a fundamental question remains unanswered: Are branded flash mobs an effective tool of communication and persuasion? If we are to gain any understanding, we need to disentangle the specific proponents involved with a branded flash mob occurrence. Examination of each of these discrete perspectives lets us see something of the relationships we try to understand. Toward understanding how the consumer copes with the persuasion

attempt, the objectives of this study are threefold: 1) to introduce the branded flash mob phenomenon, and to categorize it within the existing marketing lexicon, 2) to learn more about how branded flash mobs are currently used by marketers, through a content analysis of branded flash mob videos on YouTube, and 3) to offer a psychological perspective on branded flash mobs as it pertains to producers, performers and consumers, through a conceptual discussion and a number of interviews.

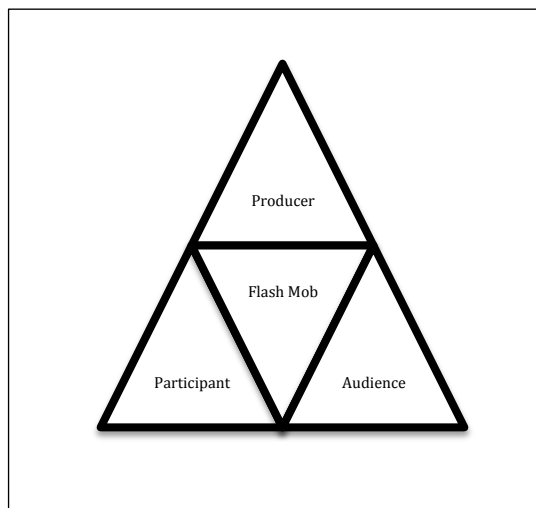
A more critical audience member may also observe that, akin to performance art, which is generally interdisciplinary, flash mobs challenge orthodox art forms and cultural and societal norms while blurring the lines between spectacle, activism, experiment and prank (Nicholson, 2005). For that reason some scholars, such as Vanderbilt (2004) and Walker (2011) have tried to classify elements of the flash mob within the jurisdictions of Happenings and Dadaism, both of which embrace a spirit of anarchy, and the Surrealist movement, which criticizes capitalist spectacles through purposeful performance. These movements were designed to impact change in their audiences while intentionally exposing the creation of their own spectacles for such criticism (Nicholson, 2005). However, these categorizations ultimately fail because flash mobs do not lie solely within the jurisdiction of politically motivated art movements. Wasik concluded that flash mobbing was a social activity for some people and a political one for others (Shmueli, 2003). In contrast to the aforementioned art movements, fun-seeking social flash mobbers, sometimes called 'sheeple' by their detractors, do not apologize for their lack of political mission (Harmon, 2003). Thus, it will be argued that the flash mob phenomenon does not fit the political motives of the Happeningists, Dadaists, or Surrealists, but instead straddles the line between political and apolitical factions.

In an attempt to root the unbranded, un-politically motivated, typical flash mob in an art genre Merritt (2004) called unbranded flash mobs "guerilla art". Akin to cultivated guerrilla marketing techniques such as Ambient Marketing (Notarantonio & Quigley Jr., 2009), Buzz Marketing (Siefert *et al.*, 2009), and Ambush Marketing (McKelvey & Grady, 2008), the concept of the flash mob as a marketing tool is best understood as a subsumed theoretical tactic of guerrilla marketing. Hutter and Hoffman (2011) concisely define guerrilla marketing as an umbrella term for unconventional advertising campaigns aimed at drawing a large audience's attention to the advertising message at comparatively little cost by evoking a surprise effect and a diffusion effect. They assert that guerilla campaigns are designed to stimulate consumers and/or the media to spread the advertising message. Although past marketing models have accounted for guerrilla techniques, such as ambient marketing, sensation marketing, or viral marketing (Hutter & Hoffman, 2011) branded flash mobs are not included in this literature. This study accepts this definition of guerilla marketing and posits that the branded flash mob should be examined as a guerilla marketing technique.

Understanding the efficacy of communication and persuasion attempts of guerrilla marketing initiatives is hard to predict and difficult to generalize (Hutter & Hoffman, 2011). Accordingly, discrete psychological perspectives of the producers, the

performers, and off-line and online observers (Figure 2) are offered through a conceptual discussion and stakeholder interviews. The psychology and behaviour of each of the branded flash mob proponents was examined separately to capture data that is precise, exhaustive, and tailored to the needs of each group. The psychology of each group is unraveled and presented separately in an attempt to reveal the generalizability of the group in a robust and transparent way. The interviews sought to understand 1) the impact of the branded flash mob on consumer behaviour and consumer experience, 2) the purpose and goals of the producer, and 3) the motivations of the audience members.

**Figure 2 - Three Proponents of Branded Flash Mobs**



Questions for the proponents were non-directive, and were designed to stimulate the interviewee into talking broadly (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983). Respondents were told of the study's purposes, that the interview was being recorded, and were assured of anonymity. Each interview began with 'warm up' questions about their feelings toward the event: *How do you feel? What did you like or dislike?* The second round of questions focused on their experience: *Can you describe your experience? What were you hoping to achieve? What inspired you to participate?* The final round included opinionate questions such as: *Did this meet your expectation? Does the branding affect your opinion? What about the performance is important to you?* Each set of questions was tailored to the appropriate proponent group. Coding took place in multiple stages. The author closely read and annotated each interview transcript. During this process, the texts were unitized and concepts were highlighted and labeled. Over time, themes and categories emerged from the data through the researcher's careful examination and constant comparison.

In total, six branded flash mob producers and 37 audience members from six different branded flash mobs, between 2010 and 2012, were interviewed pre- and post-flash mob. Additionally, seventeen participants were interviewed immediately before,

during, and after two separate flash mobs conducted on June 13, 2010, and January 8, 2012 in Vancouver, Canada respectively. Both audience members and participants were randomly selected at the event. All participants interviewed were volunteers. Paid participants of branded flash mobs were not interviewed because they were extrinsically motivated by money or exposure.

Interviews of the producers led to the following proposition:

Proposition 1a: Branded flash mobs offer the producer the opportunity to develop and strengthen brand relationships with consumers.

Proposition 1b: The purpose and aim for branding a flash mob is to increase customer awareness and interest through the product and its associated brand, and to engage with more potential consumers virally.

Close examination of the audience members' interviews influenced the following propositions:

Proposition 2a: Branded flash mobs can produce affective value.

Proposition 2b: During the live event, audience members are not alert to any involvement by the brand, or branding company.

Finally, as the interviews with the participants unfolded, it became plausible that:

Proposition 3a: People may participate in flash mobs for recreational reasons.

Proposition 3b: People may participate in flash mobs for communal reasons.

Proposition 3c: The opportunity to perform in a flash mob can motivate participation.

Proposition 3d: The spontaneous and outlandish nature of flash mobs may lead to a willingness to participate.

In addition to unraveling the motivation of the major stakeholders an effort to understand the true scope and power of branded flash mobs was made to identify the key characteristics of branded flash mobs, describe and make inferences about the nature of communications and techniques of persuasion, and assess responses to communications. To that end, a seven-part coding protocol content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004) was completed. This analysis produced the previously stated first proposition:

Proposition 4: Branded flash mobs are spreadable. That is, branded flash mobs have the power to go viral, and reach a large audience.

A YouTube search for the term 'flash mob', and 'flashmob' in October 2013 retrieved 33,000,000 results. Narrowing the search to 'branded flash mob' produced 42 responses while the search term 'corporate flash mob' found 2680 videos. These varied search results suggest that search terms are not good indicators of how many



branded flash mobs exist on YouTube. An explanation of this lies in understanding a firm's optimization strategy and tagging behaviour. To index content and narrow search results, YouTube allows the users to assign free-form terms to their video (tagging). According to Geisler and Burns (2007), many tags do not refer to, or enhance the description of the video, but instead are an indication of non-descriptive strategies for sharing video. For example, the content description of the T-Mobile Dance video used the following tags:

- T-Mobile
- T-Mobile Dance
- Liverpool St
- Liverpool St Dance
- Lifesforsharing
- Life's for sharing
- Liverpool Street st
- Public dancing
- Train station London
- Flash mob dance
- Funny ad commercial
- T-Mobile Advert
- Liverpool St Flash Mob
- Channel 4
- T-Mobile TV Commercial

While T-Mobile seemed happy to identify itself as a commercial, Attack Marketing Agency was a little more covert in their tagging strategy. They tagged their video *Jamba Juice Live Fruitfully Flash Mob NYC* without reference to branding or commercialization of their flash mob. They used far fewer terms and less descriptive terms: *jamba, juice, flash, mob, Flash Mob (Hobby), Banana, strawberry, nyc*. Using the bracketed term *Hobby* provides further support of the possibility that the marketing strategy is surreptitious in nature.

The wide range of YouTube results indicate that the potential of tags to aid in the construction of a robust database was limited. Therefore, branded flash mob videos were collected by surfing the *Recommended Suggestions* sidebar in YouTube. To keep the content analysis manageable, only videos that were posted by the branding company, or its representatives, were examined. Unofficial videos that were released by audience members or consumers were not used. A dataset of 120 unique firms who produced 137 branded flash mobs were collected. Several branded flash mobs have received tens of millions of views on YouTube, 39 of which surpassed 1 million views. Branded flash mobs have been churned out across more than a dozen different industries from 26 separate countries. The study also indicates that the majority of branded flash mobs are dance performances, and that they most often take place in a plaza or inside a mall.

### 1.4.3 Paper 2

Grant, P. Bal, A., and Parent M. (2012). Operatic flash mob: Consumer arousal, connectedness and emotion. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*. 11: 244 - 251.

The popularity of flash mobs as a form of group expression and as a marketing tool has grown exponentially over the last ten years. However, very little research has been conducted as to how flash mobs might affect consumer behaviour and emotion. Leading to increased identification and loyalty, emotional response is often the goal in marketing (Yu & Dean, 2001). This study attempts to begin understanding this phenomenon by taking an exploratory look at how flash mobs affect consumer emotion, loyalty and feelings of connectedness, using a field study during which an operatic flash mob was created. Further, this study provides theory about the impact of unexpected music on consumer feelings of connectedness and consumer-felt arousal.

The existence of group formation has strong implications to marketing. Gunar Hoydal defines planned spontaneity as an environment from which accidental occurrences can arise (Vuksanovic, 2003). While there are aspects of a flash mob that are planned, the execution, potential audience and response are completely spontaneous and unplanned. Flash mobs can look very similar to performance art, as that also attempts to organize spontaneity. Therefore, understanding the difference between flash mobs and performance art is important to understanding the nature of flash mobs. Performance art has been in existence for centuries as a means of societal questioning (Sawyer, 2000). It is defined as a public performance where the creative process is the main focus of the artist (Sawyer, 2000). The flash mob distinguishes itself from performance art through the motivation of the organizers. In other words, the top priority of the flash mob artist lies in the message first and the creative process second.

For the purposes of this study, the flash mob is an arena where we hope to observe the collective conscience; therefore, the inherent surprise element as a motivator remains the main ingredient to the definition and success of the flash mob. By understanding the definition of the flash mob, which is to say, a group of people who formulate a temporary public performance, execute it, and then quickly disperse, and that we chose an operatic flash mob for its pre-supposed ability to invoke emotion, it is possible to understand the following behavioural and contextual study of the collective conscious as it pertains to flash mobs.

One key aspect to this study is the idea that during the performance, a temporary group can form between audience members and performers. In organizations, temporary groups by definition have a finite lifespan (ranging from a few minutes to 15 minutes) and a relatively specific purpose or goal, and the participants do not have a shared history or familiarity (Meyerson, Weick, & Kramer, 1996; Terrion *et al.*, 2002). Studies have shown that in a number of conditions, trust and feelings of connectedness do form (Terrion *et al.*, 2002). However, in order for temporary groups

to develop similar characteristics to a longer-standing group they must develop 'swift trust' between participants, which enables cohesion and connectedness (Meyerson *et al.*, 1996).

As very little research on the effect of flash mobs on consumer behaviour has been conducted, an ethnographic method was proposed as a means of exploration. Since the spontaneous/unexpected nature of flash mobs rendered a traditional control environment impossible, in tandem with Vancouver's Granville Island Market administrative team, a field experiment (flash mob) was set up on June 13, 2010. Eighteen observers and six singers were recruited to create the field experiment. Observers were asked to record behaviour on handheld mobile phones, and instructed to observe the way in which consumers interacted with each other as well as the Granville Island Market environment. Following the event, demographic surveys were administered. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 81. Fifty-four participants self-identified as male, while seventy-three identified as female (one individual chose not to identify his/her gender). The eighteen observers were all graduate students at Simon Fraser University. Three students were PhD students while fifteen were completing a master's degree. The performers were hired by researchers to conduct the flash mob; they are all classically trained opera singers who had worked together prior to the flash mob. There were three female performers and three male performers.

Unstructured qualitative interviews and observation methods were employed to better understand consumer emotion and group formation. The researchers recorded video interviews immediately following the flash mob. After the interviews were transcribed, the authors analyzed the transcripts separately to identify common themes and motifs. Comparative analysis revealed several recurring themes and insights, which led us to define a number of proposals. The results of the study have been grouped into four major themes: consumer arousal during the flash mob, consumer desirability to be part of the group, consumer connectedness during the flash mob and increased consumer-felt emotion during the flash mob.

Specifically, the study proposes:

- Proposition 1: Live unexpected music in a market can lead to heightened consumer felt arousal.
- Proposition 2A: Flash Mobs can elicit a heightened emotional response in consumers.
- Proposition 2B: The heightened emotional response felt by consumers can lead to long-term consumer loyalty.
- Proposition 3A: Flash mobs can create a temporary group and sense of connectedness between audience members and performers.
- Proposition 3B: Temporary groups may turn into feelings of identification, which in turn could lead to increased consumer loyalty.

#### 1.4.4 Paper 3

Grant, P. and Boon, E. (2013). When the persuasion attempt fails - an examination of consumers' perception of branded flash mobs. *Journal of Public Affairs*. (13)2: 190-201. DOI: 10.1002/pa.1474.

Branded flash mobs are a relatively new form of group expression that has received much online viral success. Hundreds of flash mob videos, each with millions of YouTube views, can easily and quickly be found. Although streaming video has become a common marketing tool, with YouTube as the primary platform (Kousha *et al.*, 2012), marketers do not seem to be able to accurately and efficiently understand how to leverage the communication channel. Many companies, eager to emulate the viral success of the flash mob phenomenon, spend a great deal of time, money, and effort to create branded flash mobs. A branded flash mob is characterized as a flash mob that has been produced by a company with the intent to promote a product, service, or experience. True, many branded flash mob videos have had success (Grant, Bal, & Parent, 2012) but as consumers have become more familiar with branded flash mobs, they have become harder to engage, and thus marketers see the persuasion attempt fail more frequently. Despite high production values, many of them flop miserably. Therefore, this exploratory study attempts to garner a deeper understanding of how viewers can "decipher the story behind the story and figure out when a company is misrepresenting the truth" (Fournier & Avery, 2011, p. 198).

Although an impact on the live audience can be profound, the allure of the flash mob for many flash mob producers undoubtedly lies in the viral power of the Internet (Mills, 2012). Enabled in large part by smartphone technology, it is very common for audience members at the 'live' branded flash mob to video-record the event and then upload and share the recordings on social networks. In some cases the viewers and sharers may not know they are, in effect, promoting that brand. In other cases, the video sharing may be more deliberate, where the organization itself will record the event and post it to their official branded channel on YouTube. It is noteworthy that many of the top flash mob videos have been organized or produced by professionals. These branded flash mobs have received millions of views on YouTube and have gathered publicity for their creativity, production values, or message. For example, Saatchi and Saatchi won awards for *The T-Mobile Dance* (2009), which was voted "Best Television Commercial of the Year" at the 2010 British Television Advertising Awards, and *Welcome Back* (2010), which won "Best Television Commercial of the Year" at British Arrow Awards.

According to Plangger (2012), marketers are willing to spend time, effort, and money on shareable online video content to develop and strengthen the relationship with consumers and to increase brand equity. In order to maximize returns invested in branded flash mob organization and promotion, marketing practitioners similarly need to understand how consumers interpret and react to branded videos online. In an effort to explain how companies achieve viral marketing prosperity, many researchers (Dobele *et al.*, 2005; Woerndl *et al.*, 2008; Merton, Fiske, & Kendall, 1990) have studied the diffusion and success factors of viral marketing. These researchers agree

that the key success elements are emotion, innovation, and mindful targeting. Nonetheless, this paints only half the picture, and we have yet been unable to find a study that examines the failure side of viral marketing campaigns. Accordingly, the objective of this exploratory study is to identify the reasons why many branded flash mob videos are not shared by consumers and are thus unlikely to become successful. We determine the success of a branded flash mob by its ability to go viral, and because YouTube is the prevalent medium to share videos, we look in particular at the number of YouTube views. Failure is therefore defined as the inability of a branded flash mob to go viral. Although it may appear that by simply inverting the factors that lead to the failure of branded flash mobs we end up with 'success factors', but this is not the case. Rather, our factors for failure provide marketers with a baseline: get these factors wrong and the campaign will probably fail; get them right and major pitfalls can be avoided.

This study looks at the 'failure' side of viral video persuasion attempts and its application to marketing through the lens of the Persuasion Knowledge Model (Friestad & Wright, 1994) so that a) we can better understand the coping behaviour of consumers of branded flash mobs, and b) offer marketers practical knowledge that may help them create better persuasion interactions.

The Persuasion Knowledge Model is built on two assumptions. The first infers that marketers seek maximum effectiveness in their persuasion attempt. The Persuasion Knowledge Model is a potent consumer behaviour framework for analyzing the effectiveness of the branding flash mobs and the viral attempt because guerrilla marketers and viral video advertisers both employ low-cost/high-return persuasion attempts. Dobeles *et al.*, (2005) and Welker (2002) support this claim reporting that viral marketing is inexpensive relative to most advertising and marketing initiatives. The second assumption postulates that consumers seek to be maximally effective in their coping behaviour. This persuasion coping behaviour enables consumers to recognize, analyze, interpret, evaluate, and remember persuasion attempts and to select and execute tactics to deal with these attempts.

According to Friestad and Wright, the moment the target realizes that the agent is trying to persuade him is when the coping behaviour starts to play a major role. They label this shift in power the 'Change of Meaning Principle'. As consumers develop knowledge about the persuasion tactics, they respond with coping tactics. In turn, the agent gathers persuasion knowledge, which allows him to adapt and respond by establishing new persuasion strategies. This results in a moving target between the actors. In this study, it is suggested that a similar effect takes place when viewers of a flash mob are exposed to branding and they realize that the flash mob was not organized 'just for fun'. Therefore, much of the emphasis of the study was on how participants experienced the available branding, both at the event location and in the video, and whether they cared who organized the event.

To understand why certain branded flash mobs fail, we address a number of sub-questions: Which specific factors discourage consumers from sharing branded flash mob videos? Do consumers distinguish branded from unbranded flash mobs? Do

consumers feel cheated when they find out that a flash mob is branded because they feel that the organizing company is 'misrepresenting the truth' (Fournier & Avery, 2011; Campbell, Piercy, & Heinrich, 2012)?

To understand the persuasion episode, we conducted a series of three focus groups (Hydén & Bülow, 2003). In each session, we showed the respondents four carefully selected branded flash mobs, each directly followed by a discussion period. Focus groups were chosen as the mode of examination because they can help generate hypotheses, explore opinions, attitudes, and attributes (Fern, 1982). Furthermore, through straightforward, free-flowing discussion focus groups facilitate data collection, and make the nature of the content cognitively accessible (Morgan, 1996). Merton *et al.*, further suggest that focus groups "yield a more diversified array of responses" (1990, p. 135) since focus groups have the potential to delve deeper into the psyche of the respondents in situations where they think they do not have more to say (Morgan, 1996).

Additionally, focus groups seemed suitable for this study because, unlike an ethnographic approach, which examines the interaction between the respondents, we hoped to capture respondents' ideas and impressions. Accordingly, we accepted Fern's claim that two focus groups of eight would produce as many ideas as 10 individual interviews (Fern, 1982). While concerns of moderator interference may arise, according to Morgan (1996) there is no evidence that the focus group moderator's impact on the data is any greater than the researcher's impact on participant observation or individual interviewing. Upon completing the third focus group session, we became satisfied with the variety of ways the topic had been discussed and found that several recurring concerns and ideas had emerged. A fourth session was thought unnecessary because new learning had waned (Calder, 1977).

The focus groups were organized in two different locations: two in Vancouver, Canada, and one in Geneva, Switzerland. Focus group participants were recruited through online social networks (Craigslist for Canada, Glocals.com and Facebook for Geneva), and a small compensation was offered for participation (5 to 10 US dollars). To prevent participants from preparing, the precise subject was withheld until the focus group took place. Our recruitment criteria were a) participants had to be relatively young (20-40 years old), b) proficient Internet users, and c) good English speakers. As recommended by Sampson (1972), all three focus groups had between five and eight participants (Vancouver 1 and Geneva: eight participants, Vancouver 2: five participants). Table 4 shows a sample of our focus group participants. To preserve anonymity the participants' names have been replaced by codes: for example V1-C for participant C during the first Vancouver focus group, and GE-F for participant F during the Geneva focus group.

**Table 4 - Sample of Focus Group Participants**

<b>Focus Group</b>	<b>Code/Pseudonym</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Nationality</b>
<b>Vancouver 1</b>	V1-A	Female	28	Canadian
	V1-D	Female	26	Canadian
	V1-G	Male	34	Canadian
<b>Vancouver 2</b>	V2-A	Female	32	Canadian
	V2-B	Female	23	Canadian
	V2-E	Male	29	Canadian
<b>Geneva</b>	GE-C	Female	24	Swiss
	GE-E	Male	26	Italian
	GE-G	Male	32	Indian

Each of the three sessions lasted between 75 and 90 minutes. The moderators, who followed a prepared script, focused on keeping the discussion open and natural. To prevent dominant respondent bias, an effort was made to engage all participants equally. Participants were encouraged to ask questions and to react to each other's opinions.

Before starting, the researchers explained the purpose of the focus groups (without giving away the exact subject), introduced themselves and the academic institution they worked for, and pointed out that the focus group would be recorded. The participants were informed that they would remain anonymous and that only the researchers would have access to the recorded material. Participants were asked to fill in a form, both to collect demographic information and to confirm that they were made aware of details regarding privacy and ethics.

To warm up the respondents were asked to discuss their Internet usage, focusing on social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn. From there we moved the discussion to viral video advertising. We then introduced the subject 'flash mobs' and asked their experience and opinions: *Have you heard of them? What are they? Do you like the idea? Who organizes them?* We then showed them four videos of 'branded' flash mobs (Table 5) and used these videos to stimulate the discussion: *What did you like and dislike? Do you think it was successful? Who organized it? Would you show this video to your friends?* After these four videos we discussed flash mobs in general: *What makes them fail or succeed? Does it matter who organizes them? Does the branding affect your opinion? What about the performance of video is important to you?* Finally, we told the participants how many views, likes and dislikes each video got on YouTube, and asked them whether or not this met their expectations.

**Table 5 – Branded Flash Mob Videos Shown During Focus Groups**

<b>Title</b>	<b>Company</b>	<b>URL</b>	<b>Views*</b>
HIER Flashmob Hoorn	HIER	<a href="http://youtube.com/watch?v=YnLxdQ6_Ugo">youtube.com/watch?v=YnLxdQ6_Ugo</a>	3,555
Rogers LTE flash mob	Rogers	<a href="http://youtube.com/watch?v=p7GWsyUMG8c">youtube.com/watch?v=p7GWsyUMG8c</a>	4,639
Ford Fiesta Movement Malaysia	Ford	<a href="http://youtube.com/watch?v=cGPzK6YaomA">youtube.com/watch?v=cGPzK6YaomA</a>	2,870
Dell Streak Flash Mob Sydney	Dell	<a href="http://youtube.com/watch?v=zkvW2he2loc">youtube.com/watch?v=zkvW2he2loc</a>	87,610

\*Retrieved from YouTube, June 6 2012

To allow for in-depth discussion of each video, as well as time for a general summarizing discussion at the end, four videos were selected from a vast YouTube search. Since our emphasis was on failure we selected three videos that had low YouTube viewer ratings. We also included one successful video for participants to give them a reference point and to discuss the differences between them. For the successful branded flash mob we selected the *Dell Streak Flash Mob Sydney* video because it has a number of elements that seem standard for flash mobs (large crowd, build-up from a few dancers to a large group, music, branding at the end), and because it is relatively unknown, which lowered the chance that participants had been exposed to it earlier. For the three less successful branded flash mobs (HIER, Rogers, and Ford) we selected videos that were different in nature (in terms of the performance, branding, video quality, and crowd). This allowed us to discuss various elements with our participants. Table 6 describes each video in some detail.



**Table 6 – Branded Flash Mob Video Descriptions**

Branded Flash Mob	Description
HIER Hoorn	HIER is a Dutch magazine The video shows a small crowd of people sitting at a square in Hoorn (Netherlands), on self-brought chairs, reading HIER magazine, and holding balloons, which they released at the end. Halfway through the video a <i>dance</i> song starts playing (on the video, not at the event) and the video shows several images of the front cover of the magazine.
Rogers LTE	Rogers is a telecom/internet provider in Canada, and LTE is a mobile communication standard. The video starts with an empty street, when suddenly a group of about 20 people gather and start dancing to <i>dance</i> music. The dancers are wearing T-shirts that say 'LTE', and at some point position themselves to spell 'LTE' as the camera shoots them from above. When the song finishes the dancers vanish as quickly as they appeared. There is no audience and the background is a modern office building. Several cameras are used to capture an array of close-ups and wide-angle shots.
Ford Fiesta Malaysia	A group of about 30 people in business attire dance around a car (Ford Fiesta), which has a large printed 'Fiesta' magnet on its sides. There may have been an audience behind the camera, but is not visible. Shot with one, un-edited low-quality camera from a distance.
Dell Streak Sydney	In a crowded square in Sydney, it starts off with 2 men dancing to a classical song, and gradually people are added, up to about 40 dancing synchronously. The dancers are dressed in a mix of business attire and construction worker uniforms. Cameras captured a variety of angles, individual dancers, as well as audience members showing engagement and emotion. When the song finishes, all dancers disappear, leaving one guy looking at his (Dell) mobile. During the event there was no branding, but the video finishes with the tagline "Now that 's entertainment" and the Dell logo.

After transcribing the sessions, the researchers analyzed each of the transcripts separately to identify common themes within the focus groups. Comparative analysis between the data sets revealed several recurring themes, which led us to define a number of insights. These findings, which are in line with Persuasion Knowledge Model, especially the Change-of-Meaning Principle, led us to propose the following:

- Proposition 1: Unoriginal branded flash mobs are less likely to be shared by consumers.
- Proposition 2: Branded flash mobs that do not stimulate a positive emotion are less likely to be shared.
- Proposition 3: A video where the live audience is not visible or not engaged is less likely to be shared by viewers.
- Proposition 4: Videos with low production and performance quality are less likely to be shared.
- Proposition 5: There is an aversion toward corporations, and viewers hold them to different standards.

#### **1.4.5 PAPER 4**

Grant, P., Botha, E., and Kietzmann, J. (Submitted for Review). Branded Flash Mobs, YouTube, and the Effects of Viewer Attitudes on Brand Equity. *Journal of Interactive Marketing*.

Branding flash mobs is a means to generate brand exposure through minimal cost to the firm. While many firms have actualized branded flash mobs as a viral marketing advertisement, quantitative metrics such as YouTube views, sharing intention (SI), purchase frequency (PF), and click-through rates fail to provide the firm with attitudinal data, which according to Shimp (1981) is a major indicator of the impact of an ad on brand equity.

Calder, Malthouse, & Schaedel (2009) reported that Social-Interactive Engagement (online discussions) has its own impact on advertising effectiveness. Therefore, toward understanding the effect that branded flash mobs imprint on brand equity, this study uses a market-oriented netnographic examination of 2,882 YouTube viewers comments posted for three popular branded flash mobs (Table 7). Netnography, or ethnography on the Internet, is an online marketing research technique that provides insights into the consumer community through the study of contextualized data (Kozinets, 2002). Based primarily on the analysis of textual discourse, this interpretive method allowed us to gather and manage the netnographic data, analyze and interpret it. Most relevant to this study, netnography is a powerful tool to help researchers uncover shared norms and values in online communities.

Based on the findings these cases yield, we then propose and discuss our framework, which provides new insights around online branded flash mob consumer

conversations, and allows researchers and practitioners to better understand the effects of branded flash mobs on brand equity.

**Table 7 - YouTube Summary Statistics**

<b>Branded flash mob Title</b>	<b>Upload Date</b>	<b>Views</b>	<b>Comments</b>	<b>Likes</b>	<b>Dislikes</b>
Wells Fargo NYC Flash Mob Surprises Times Square	12-Apr-11	2,573, 256	444	3,665	488
Miku-Compact Flash Mob (Toyota)	06-Jun-11	381,657	1,593	3,267	253
H&M Kids Fashion Flash Mob	28-Mar-10	923, 229	845	3,412	151

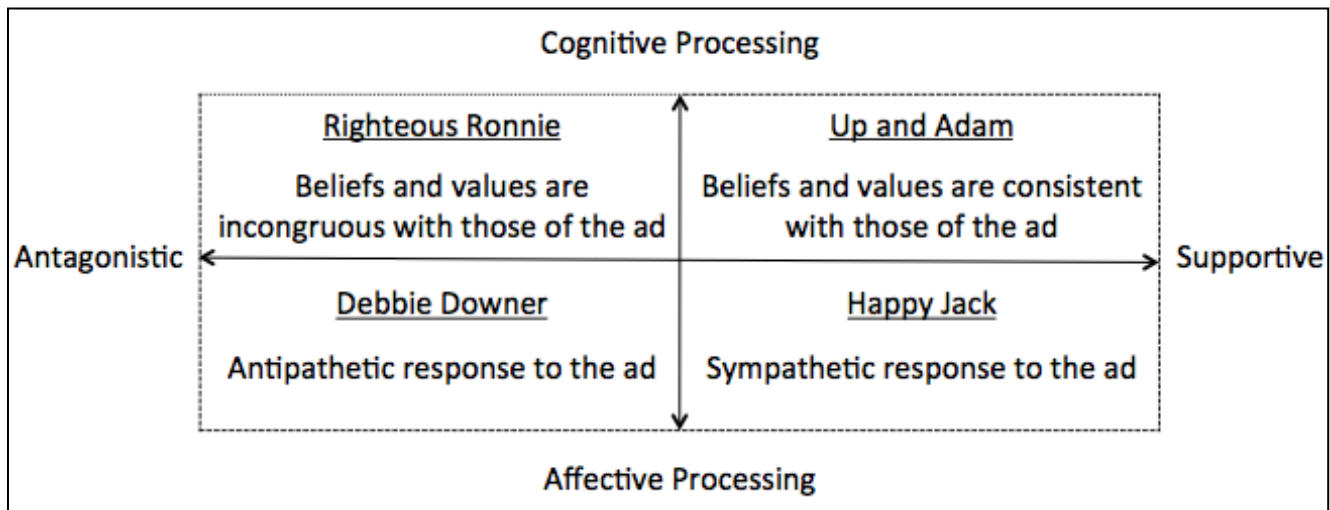
\*last updated Feb. 9, 2014

Each of these videos represents a different industry and target demographic and has strong and unmistakable elements of the sponsoring brand. Interestingly, they differ in their degree of branding. For example, the Wells Fargo ad did not reveal their logo to the live audience but instead subtly dressed their performers in the company colors. Wells-Fargo further demonstrated a reserve toward over-branding by using a small transparent watermarking of their logo in the bottom left of the video, which they didn't reveal until more than halfway through the ad. H&M did not brand the live event either, but were the most specific of the three companies when it came to naming the YouTube ad (*H&M Kids Fashion*). H&M explicitly invited viewers to "Check us out!!!" at the end of their video, whereas the Wells-Fargo and Toyota ads simple showed the company logo as the video faded to black. The Toyota ad "Miku- Compact Flash Mob" displayed the brand logo throughout the ad on the performer's T-shirts but was the only one of the three that did not include the name of the company in the advert title. This is a plausible indication of their intention to hide the brand behind the endorsed celebrity Miku.

Viral video advertising strategies are not yet fully explored in the advertising literature. By examining viewer comments made in YouTube ads, we can better describe and make inferences about the nature of communications and techniques of persuasion, and assess responses to communications. A cursory textual discourse inspection of the three selected videos indicates that the majority of the comments about the ad were positive. This is consistent with the expectation of virally successful videos. However, closer inspection of viewer comments reveals that many viewers had contrasting attitudes. Our examination of the comments about the branded flash mob ads revealed several different comment facets, which grouped into two significant and overarching dimensions. First, many responses to the ad were *supportive* - "Great commercial!" (Wells Fargo), while others demonstrated an *antagonistic* attitude - "Imagination Needed." (Toyota). This dimension echoes Batra and Ray's (1986) general filing of ad responses as either *source bolstering* or *source derogation*, both of which are important influencers of Aad. Second, our findings echoed MacInnis and Jaworski's (1989) advertising response groupings of *affective* and *cognitive* processing components. Plainly, some viewers expressed their sentiments toward the video, e.g., "Wow! Guaranteed Goosebumps!!" (Wells Fargo), while others critically analyzed the information in the video - "Kids shouldn't be shaking their booties like that" (H&M).

Clearly, diverse consumer attitudes dimensions have emerged but the literature does not yet provide a typology of brand customer-value perspective for online advertisements. Therefore, to better understand the effect on brand equity, a typology of attitudes toward the online ad was created. Typologies allow us to classify responses based on similar features, are effective at illustrating the differences in the responses, and are common in the advertising literature (Campbell *et al.*, 2011). By mapping Batra and Ray's supportive/antagonistic continuum (1986) together with Poels and Dewitte's (2006) emotional continuum four archetypal attitudes emerged, which we embodied in viewer characters (Figure 3). These "archetypes" of consumer attitudes help scholars and practitioners assess consumer responses by combining consumer processing (cognitive or affective) with consumer stance (supportive or antagonistic).

**Figure 3. Archetypes of Consumer Attitudes toward Online Ads Matrix**



Hidden behind YouTube's privacy policies, consumers like *Righteous Ronnie* can safely critique an ad. He can be expected to have one of two negative responses (Wright, 1973). The first, 'counter argument', occurs when the ad presents information that opposes his morals, ethics, or principles. An example of a counter argument toward the ad can be drawn from the H&M flash mob, where one Righteous Ronnie posted:

*"Flash mobs should not be abused for commercial advertizing. Real flash mobs are uncommercial, spontaneous and mostly unorganized. This is more like viral marketing because it has a subliminal message ("look, all our clothes are from H&M")."*

Source derogation, the second response type, is a negative response focused on the brand rather than the ad content:

*"Flash Mobs are great fun, but they totally lose their charm when they are Corporate Sponsored -- Yes, I'm talking to you, Wells Fargo!"*

*"Thanks H&M for showing us how "awesome" your brand is! PATHETIC."*

At times, Righteous Ronnie may post comments that involve both the counter-argument and source derogation components (e.g., *"NOT a flash mob; a cheap way to get international attention for Wells Fargo"*).

From archetype quadrant two, *Up and Adam*, responds to the ad by forming evaluative mental responses such as opinions, thoughts, and learning (Greenwald, 1968). According to Wright (1973), viewers will be supportive in their cognitive response in cases when the information in the ad is congruent with their own ad evaluation or already entrenched beliefs. Up and Adam's comments, which are typically supportive and cognitively processed, are exemplified by one viewer who wrote:

*"one of the best ads I've seen on Youtube. And I actually watched the whole thing instead of moving on to the video I wanted to see. Hopefully more ads will follow suit and attempt to entertain us instead of just push their name around". (H&M)*

*Happy Jack* is our name for the viewer who had sympathetic a response toward the ad. Specifically, the ad failed to oppose his values or beliefs, but instead was met with a feeling of approval. Comments typical of him include:

*"i luv this ad so much, ive put it in my favourites and if im feelin down i just watch it and it makes me smile." (Wells Fargo)*

*"Amazing i was so excited throughout the whole video and even got shiver. i really liked this idea. H&M really nailed it!"*

*"Love how you're using Miku as like the mascot for the car." (Toyota)*

*Debbie Downer* is the type of viewer who reports various negative feelings (antipathy) and aversion toward the ad. Edell and Burke (1987) found that negative feelings elicited by an advertisement should be treated separate from positive responses, and in 1989 empirically confirmed that negative feelings affect brand equity negatively and that there is no balancing influence to offset the effects generated by these negative emotions (Burke & Edell, 1989). Debbie Downer's feelings range from mildly disappointed to angry:

*"Wells Fargo, you are SO not cool". The worst Flash Mob ever, boring as hell!!!!!! WF need to learn how Flash Mobs work."*

*"I hate to see children performin such sexually provocative dance moves, especially in what is nothing more than an advert." (H&M)*

*"I feel kind of angry that Toyota is using Miku to sell cars."*

Through this study we present several theoretical and managerial implications for marketing scholars and managers to consider. In addition to providing a tool to develop deeper insights toward customer value effects on branded flash mobs on

brand equity, we found that a branded flash mob is a mechanism that, akin to guerrilla marketing, can affect brand equity. The two are similar in that they both a) aim to provide consumers with a more memorable and engaging brand experience (Ay *et al.*, 2010), b) aspire to draw mass attention to the brand at comparatively little cost by evoking both surprise and diffusion effects (Hutter & Hoffman, 2011), and c) can leverage network effects to increase brand visibility, and recognition. Therefore, we argue branded flash mobs be integrated into the guerrilla marketing literature since our study is not only informed by the extant guerrilla marketing literature, but it also contributes back to it. Moving forward, we also present a definition of *branded flash mobs* as “a marketing tactic that is designed by private and public organizations to increase brand equity through online and offline methods”.

In addition to the framework presented above, we expect that by grounding branded flash mobs in the guerrilla marketing literature, we provide managers with a basis to make planning and execution decisions. Also, we advise managers against myopic targeting toward Happy Jacks since viewers who have a negative attitude toward the ad may still share the video with friends who may see it differently. Since, as discussed, emotionally captivating ads can elicit a direct and positive brand attitude change we advise marketers to try to improve the emotional appeal of their advertising, and in this way, create Happy Ronnies, Happy Debbies, and Happy Adams. To that end, we encourage marketers to test the effects of the branded flash mob adverts before posting to YouTube in an effort to ensure that the outcome will be aligned with management objectives.

#### **1.4.6. Overall Research Design**

Complex research is best examined by a design that deconstructs the corpus into relevant and logical independent sub-areas of interest (Fisher & Buglear, 2010). Separating the research into four studies (Table 8) is beneficial as it allows for data capture that is precise, exhaustive, and tailored to the needs of the research questions (Donaldson & Preston, 1995). Each of the four studies in this thesis focuses on a separate aspect of the research problem and aspires to identify unique factors or circumstances that may be used to provide marketers with practical tools (Webster & Watson, 2002). Germane to this research, areas include the behaviour of the flash mob participants and its audience (studies 1 and 2), the viral persuasion attempt (paper 3), and the attitude toward branded flash mobs as an advertisement (paper 4). In turn, the objective(s) of each area of study is used to motivate the research design (Cooper & Schindler, 2003).

**Table 8 - Overview of research presented**

Paper Title		Research Method
Paper 1	Understanding Branded Flash Mobs: the nature of the concept, stakeholder motivations, and avenues for future research	Qualitative
Paper 2	Operatic flash mob: Consumer arousal, connectedness and emotion	Qualitative
Paper 3	When the persuasion attempt fails—an examination of consumers' perception of branded flash mobs	Qualitative
Paper 4	Branded Flash Mobs, YouTube and the Effects of Viewer Attitudes on Brand Equity	Qualitative

According to Eriksson and Wiedersheim-Paul (1997), the design of most social science research is focused on achieving one of the following objectives:

- Predictive: Project future outcomes
- Explanatory: Describe the reasons or consequences of something
- Evaluative: Provide a critical analysis of something
- Descriptive: Report something factually, such as conditions, events, or actions
- Exploratory: Discover new information
- Procedural Improvement: Solve problems or improve routines

These objectives can be further grouped into three main design categories, which are addressed in turn in section 3.3 (Hair, Babin, Money, & Samouel, 2007):

- *Exploratory research*, used when the researcher is looking for patterns, themes and ideas
- *Descriptive research* provides descriptions of the characteristics of the research topic through measures of events or activities
- *Causal research*, where an explanation of the relationship between variables is sought

The design of this research requires exploratory and descriptive methodologies. Due to the qualitative nature of each study, there are no causal designs included. Causality requires control for certain conditions such as time, and co-variation between variables (Cooper & Schindler, 2003), which seems unnecessarily complex, or not collectible. Instead, the research design of this thesis is exploratory and descriptive, as described in the next section.

### 1.4.7 OVERALL RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Guided by the aim and purpose of the research questions, construction of a thorough research design can inform the selection of appropriate methodology (de Weerd-Nederhof, 2001). Table 9 provides an overview of the research methods used in each study. A fuller explanation of each methodology and the selection criteria for each studied is then discussed.

**Table 9 - Overview of Research Methods**

<b>Method</b>	<b>Content Analysis</b>	<b>Individual Interview</b>	<b>Focus Group</b>	<b>Participant Observation</b>	<b>Netnography*</b>
Paper 1	X	X			
Paper 2		X		X	
Paper 3			X		
Paper 4					X

\*Netnography, or ethnography on the Internet, is an interpretive online research method that provides insights into the consumer community through the study of contextualized data (Kozinets, 2002).

The focus of the first paper is to introduce the concept of branded flash mobs to the literature. It is exploratory in nature and combines an explanatory discussion of branded flash mobs in a marketing context with a number of studies to understand how marketers are currently using flash mobs, and more importantly, if branded flash mobs are an effective tool of communication and persuasion. This study deductively seeks to understand how to categorize branded flash mobs through an historical and cultural analysis of the phenomenon. It also provides a content analysis of branded flash mobs posted on the video sharing website YouTube, to discover if branded flash mobs are used for promotional purposes in one industry more than another, which type of branded flash is used in majority, and where they normally take place (e.g., in a store, a plaza, or a mall). To uncover the intervolved behaviour and motivations of branded flash mob stakeholders (producers, the audience and the participants) the study relies on several in-depth interviews (studies 2a, 2b, and 2c).

The second paper is both exploratory and descriptive in that it searches for recurring themes and ideas through an examination of the influence of an operatic flash mob on consumer behaviour and consumer experience in a public market. A field experiment was conducted to assess the impact of a branded flash mob on consumers' emotions and connectedness in three conditions: spontaneous live music (flash mob), recorded music, and no music, and audience responses to the shopping experience in all three conditions were analyzed. The environmental manipulation was used as a mechanism to see if in fact the flash mob could create a sense of community connectedness. Qualitative interviews and observation techniques were put into practice to better understand consumer emotion and group formation.

Next, the third paper sought to understand why, in light of many spectacular successes, several attempts to make branded flash mobs go viral fail. This exploratory study made use of a number of focus groups wherein participants were asked to discuss their reaction to selected branded flash mob videos and discuss their



willingness to share them with their friends by electronic means (e.g., email, Facebook, or Twitter).

The final paper, *Branded Flash Mobs, YouTube and the Effects of Viewer Attitudes on Brand Equity*, also an exploratory study, evaluates viewers' attitude toward the ad to better describe the effect of branded flash mobs on brand equity. To build thicker descriptions, we examined 2,882 YouTube comments from three virally successful branded flash mobs ads using a netnographic approach (Kozinets, 2002). Further explanation and consideration for each of the methodologies presented above can be found directly in the body of each respective study (see chapter 2).

The compositional nature of this project required that each study sought fidelity toward the greater research project. Therefore certain trade-offs were made at the level of the individual study to maintain the integrity of the larger research project. While each study possesses its own inherent limitations that are addressed within each of the respective studies none of these limitations alone or taken together impacts the meta-findings in any significant way. In the same manner, the aspirations of each paper also had to be managed to serve the greater research goals. Again, none of these compromises impacted the outcomes at the micro or macro level.

#### **1.4.8 CONCLUSION TO THE INTRODUCTION**

In closing this introduction to the four studies, I present a few observations about them as a set. First, these studies are qualitative in nature, employing interpretive, social anthropological, and collaborative social research approaches (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Each approach yields non-quantifiable data such as words, motifs, and themes, which inform conclusions and explanations of the branded flash mob phenomenon. Second, as outlined in tables 8 and 9, various research techniques and methodologies - empirical and exploratory, primary and secondary, were used. Next, the content analyses examine both manifest content (the elements that are physically present and countable) and latent content (an interpretation of the symbolism underlying the physical data). Finally, while the use of software programs in qualitative research can help researchers collect and determine many aspects of the data set, a quantitative computer program that can describe the findings and analytic importance of the data does not exist (at least not yet). The responsibility to decipher the latent symbolic meaning of the content then lies with the researcher. Since many explanations of the data are possible (Miles & Huberman, 1994), the reader is reminded that the interpretation of the content in this thesis is subjective.



## **CHAPTER 2: THE INDIVIDUAL PAPERS**



**2.1 Paper 1:** Understanding Branded Flash Mobs: the nature of the concept, stakeholder motivations, and avenues for future research.

This paper was published in Journal of Marketing Communications in 2014

Grant, P. (2014). Understanding Branded Flash Mobs: the nature of the concept, stakeholder motivations, and avenues for future research. *Journal of Marketing Communications*. DOI:10.1080/13527266.2013.875930

**Abstract:**

*In an effort to increase interaction and brand exposure, marketers have recently begun using flash mobs as a marketing device. This exploratory paper combines a conceptual discussion of flash mobs in a marketing context with a number of qualitative studies to understand how marketers are currently using flash mobs. This paper categorizes flash mobs as a subsection of guerilla marketing, and provides a historical and cultural analysis of the phenomenon. The first study, a content analysis of branded flash mobs on YouTube, shows that flash mobs are primarily used to promote entertainment, retail and travel organizations, that the majority of branded flash mobs are dance performances, and that they normally take place in a plaza or inside a mall. Through in-depth interviews, the second study examines the three important stakeholders of flash mobs: the producers, the audience and the participants from behavioral perspectives. Implications for the marketing manager are noted and areas of future research are offered.*

**Key Words:** branded entertainment; crowd behaviour; flash mob; consumer interaction; guerilla marketing;

## Introduction

*Every crowd has a silver lining. - P. T. Barnum*

Branded entertainment is increasingly becoming part of a marketer's communication strategy. Initiatives such as product placement in TV and movies, advergames, contentainment (in-store sampling and retail entertainment), webisodes, and theme park rides (Hird 2011) offer consumers a way to interact with their brands in new and engaging ways. Indeed, more and more marketers are relying on branded entertainment to grab the attention of the consumers who are turned off by traditional advertising (Solomon et al. 2003). Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) contend that, by creating a heightened emotional response toward a product or service, the marketer can increase consumer loyalty. Possibly the most high-spirited way marketers have integrated their brands with entertainment is by branding flash mobs.

A flash mob is a semi-spontaneous community that briefly congregates in a public place, performs an unusual and seemingly pointless act, then disperses, often for the purposes of entertainment, satire, and artistic expression (Goldstein 2003; Salmond 2010). Flash mobs are typically organized via social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, via email, or through specialized websites such as [www.theflashmob.ca](http://www.theflashmob.ca) (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011). For example, in May of 2003, Bill Wasik, senior editor of Harper's Magazine, produced the world's first flash mob. His goal was to create a social experiment that would denounce the non-conformist attitude of the New York "hipster" by exposing the current of commonality within the "hipster" community. The inaugural event took place in Manhattan between 7:27PM and 7:34PM on June 3rd in Macy's department store, where approximately 200 people crowded into the rug department. Upon arrival they notified the sales clerk that they were all living together in a commune and looking for a "love rug". After ten minutes of standing around, apparently doing nothing more than confusing the sales clerk, the crowd dispersed of its own accord, concluding what we now call a flash mob.

Although Wasik created the first event, he attributes the "*flash mob*" title to a blogger from Minnesota named Sean Savage ([cheesebikini.com](http://cheesebikini.com)), whose inspiration for the name came from a 1973 science-fiction short story called "Flash Crowd". However, since Wasik's original email called the event "MOB", it may be more accurate for Wasik and Savage to be recognized as co-creators of the label. Other initial names for flash mobs included Email mobs, Flash Concerts, Anti-mob, Flashmuggers, Social Swarming, and Inexplicable Mob. Wasik's early, but incomplete, definition read: "flash mob, noun: An impromptu gathering, organized by means of electronic communication, of the unemployed" (Wasik 2006, 58). Academics such as Goldstein (2003) and Salmond (2010) defined a flash mob as a semi-spontaneous temporary community that forms in a public space for the purpose of presenting a performance. In 2004 the *Oxford English Dictionary* added the term "flash mob" to its body, defining it as "a public gathering of complete strangers, organized via the Internet or mobile phone, who perform a pointless act and then disperse again." Individually, these definitions are either incomplete or outdated. It is necessary to add that what

precludes every flash mob performance is a call to action where information such as date, location and specific performance instructions are given. In addition, whether summoned by Facebook, Twitter, websites, email, text messages, or blogs, flash mobs can involve hundreds of performers, or only a few. The community is made up of people who may or may not be known to one another prior to the flash mob and who come together to either watch or be involved in the performance (Goldstein 2003).

On January 16, 2009, T-Mobile produced the world's first *branded* flash mob in London's Liverpool Street train Station (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VQ3d3KigPQM>). Since then, more than 130 branded flash mobs in North and South America, Asia, Europe, and Australia have been produced. Branded flash mobs are being used by marketers, managers, and publicists as a way to create an interactive and heightened consumer experience while gaining exposure online. Many branded flash mobs have remarkably surpassed 10 million hits on YouTube. Therefore, as flash mobs become more common it is imperative that marketers have a better understanding of them. Since there is scant theory and literature on the subject, many relevant research areas pertaining to the flash mob as a marketing technique, and the impact of the flash mob on consumer behavior and consumer experience, remain unexplored. In less than a decade the phenomenon has significantly grown in popularity as it has evolved from a simple social study to a fresh and creative marketing communication device. It is then plausible that marketers will shape the future of the medium while trying to control the costs, diffusion characteristics, peer-to-peer transmission, and audience reach.

The objectives of this paper are threefold: 1) to introduce the flash mob phenomenon, and to categorize it within existing marketing lexicon 2) to learn more about how flash mobs are currently used by marketers, through a content analysis of flash mob videos on YouTube 3) to offer a psychological perspective on the flash mob as it pertains to producers, performers and consumers, through a conceptual discussion and a number of interviews.

Flash mobs have the potential to be disorderly, potentially violent, and to cause trouble. Although early flash mobs worried the police, the positive spirit of the flash mob quickly demonstrated that flash mobs are not so much mobs, but are better defined as crowds. Crowds are "an organized event occurring within a defined space, which is attended by a large number of people...not dependent on the reason for the gathering" (Zeitz et al. 2009, 32). This is an important distinction because most of the extant literature on mobs has a general focus on developing physical crowd management principles in the context of violence or conflict (Zeitz et al. 2009). This literature is outside of the scope of this paper, and by purposely ignoring it we contextually study flash mobs in the field of positive crowd psychology more effectively.

The structure of the paper is as follows: First, a recent history of unbranded and branded flash mobs, along with a discussion of research that has so far been performed on the subject, is presented. Next, a discussion of the rationale for using flash mobs as a marketing tool, and a conceptual framework that highlights the flash



mob's primary stakeholders is given. Thereafter, a content analysis of YouTube videos of branded flash mobs and a second study, which consists of interviews with producers, audience and participants, are offered. Finally, managerial implications, limitations, and propositions for future research are offered for consideration.

## **Classification of the branded flash mob**

Observers of the phenomenon (Karastamatis 2003; Ryan 2003; Walker 2011) have struggled to classify flash mobs. To the casual on-looker the flash mob event itself consists of a group of rehearsed performers providing an audience with a short organized performance in a public space. However, it is not completely accurate to label flash mobs as "Performance Art". Although Wasik described the fad as 'spectacle for spectacle's sake' (Hewitt 2003), it is more correct to say that the flash mob producer's primary concern is the message, and the creative process is secondary. This distinguishes the flash mob phenomenon from performance art, which Sawyer (2000) defines as a public performance where the creative process is the main focus of the artist, and the significance of the message is secondary.

A more critical audience member may also observe that, akin to performance art, which is generally interdisciplinary, flash mobs challenge orthodox art forms and cultural and societal norms while blurring the lines between spectacle, activism, experiment and prank (Nicholson 2005). For that reason, some scholars, such as Vanderbilt (2004) and Walker (2011), have tried to classify elements of the flash mob within the jurisdictions of Happenings and Dadaism, both of which embrace a spirit of anarchy, and the Surrealist movement, which criticizes capitalist spectacles through purposeful performance. These movements were designed to impact change on their audiences while 'relying on the creation of their own spectacles for such criticism' (Nicholson 2005). However, these categorizations ultimately fail because flash mobs do not solely lie within the jurisdiction of politically motivated art movements. Wasik concluded that flash mobbing was a social activity for some people and a political one for others (Shmueli 2003). In contrast to the aforementioned art movements, fun-seeking social flash mobbers, sometimes called 'sheeple' by their detractors, 'make no apologies for their lack of political mission' (Harmon 2003). Thus, it will be argued that the flash mob phenomenon does not fit the political motives of the Happeningists, Dadaists, or Surrealists, but instead straddles the line between political and apolitical factions.

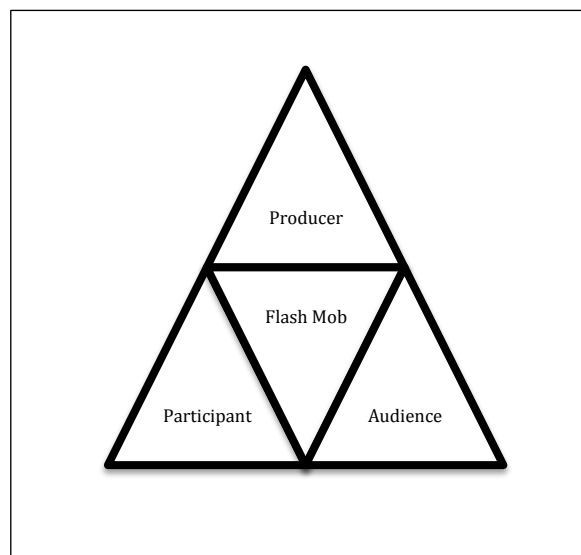
In an attempt to root the unbranded, un-politically motivated, typical flash mob in an art genre, Merritt (2004), called non-branded flash mobs "guerilla art". Akin to cultivated guerrilla marketing techniques such as Ambient Marketing (Notarantonio and Quigley Jr. 2009), Buzz Marketing (Siefert et al. 2009), and Ambush Marketing (McKelvey and Grady 2008) the concept of the flash mob as a marketing tool is best understood as a subsumed theoretical tactic of guerrilla marketing. Hutter and Hoffman (2011) concisely define guerrilla marketing as an umbrella term for unconventional advertising campaigns aimed at drawing a large audience's attention to the advertising message at comparatively little cost, by evoking a surprise effect

and a diffusion effect. They assert that guerilla campaigns are designed to stimulate consumers and/or the media to spread the advertising message. Although past marketing models have accounted for guerrilla techniques, such as ambient marketing, sensation marketing, or viral marketing (Hutter and Hoffman 2011), flash mobs are not included in this literature. This paper accepts this definition of guerilla marketing and posits that the flash mob should be examined as a guerilla marketing technique.

### **The three proponents of the branded flash mob**

In an effort to better understand the flash mob, simultaneous attention must be given to the interests of all the parties involved. Accordingly, the derivatively legitimate stakeholders were broadly categorized by their interests (Donaldson and Preston 1995) into the following distinct groups: 'producer'- those who design and organize the flash mob, 'audience'- those who witness the flash mob, and 'participant'- those who participate in the flash mob (Figure 1).

**Figure 1-Three Proponents of Flash Mobs**



#### ***Proponent 1) The Producer***

While many people create flash mobs 'simply for fun' others are more strategic in their approach. Managers who aspire to engage consumers through flash mobs must develop an informed strategy towards the desired outcome. According to Zietz et al. (2009), the key to successful crowd management starts with assessment and monitoring in the both the pre-event and during event phase. While an official flash mob manifesto does not exist, there are a few guiding principles common to all flash mobs: the audience shouldn't have prior information about the event; the event

should not last more than 10 minutes; and no one should remain at the site after the flash mob is over. Finally, the element of surprise is one of the most crucial and attractive characteristics of the performance, so it must appear spontaneous (Wasik 2006). Past these rudimentary features, there are two overarching elements of flash mobs for producers to consider (Zietz et al. 2009). First of all, there must be a strong focused idea (seed), led by strong leadership. Produced by Saatchi & Saatchi, T-Mobile's 2009 flash mob (aptly named T-Mobile Dance") required 8 weeks of planning by a production team of 14. The team reportedly held 10,000 auditions to find 400 dancers, held a secret 1 AM dress rehearsal, and utilized 10 hidden video cameras (Macleod 2009).

Secondly, success is dependent on the performers acting according to the plan. According to Bandura (1986), collective efficacy is rooted in self-efficacy. The flash mob only succeeds if independent contributors are internally motivated to play their part and follow instructions. In most cases, the crowd can be manipulated by the dynamism and situational changes of the environment, participant personalities, and internal states (Slepicka 1995; Helbing and Molnar 1998). Additionally, when asked if he had any tips for potential organizers, Wasik replied, "Keep the ideas short and funny. Be meticulous in your planning, and in your instructions. Keep the organizers in the background" (Delio 2003).

### ***Proponent 2: The Audience***

There are two potential audiences available to the producer; live audience- members who attend the event, and video viewers- those who watch the video on-line. Branded flash mob producers concerned with executing a successful persuasion attempt, aimed at either group, must try to influence for a desired impact and outcome. Working towards this result, the producer should try to ensure the quality of the flash mob. According to Petty, Wells, and Brock (1976), successful persuasion relies on the capability of the viewer to perform a critical evaluation. Since the quality of a performance is unpredictable and incommensurable (Mencarelli 2008) (even Pavarotti has been booed), the flash mob producer is forced to accept audience members' varying evaluative standards, which affect receptivity to the performance. When one does not have enough information to make a proper assessment of the quality of a performance, or they have difficulty distinguishing between the quality of two high level performances, audience members look for other indicators that inform them of the quality of a performance (Petty and Cacioppo 1986). Many of us look to experts, such as critics, authors, or other artists, to indicate the level of quality (Cialdini 2007). Others may look to peers for cues as to how to react (Surowiecki 2004). Additionally, video viewers may look at hit counts, or comments, as an indicator of the quality. Regardless of the source, audience members do have, and use, external cues to help them ascertain the perception of the quality level of a performance.

### ***Proponent 3: The Participant***

The quality of the performance is inherently dependent on the performance abilities of the participants. To control for this, many companies hire professional performers, especially when they want a stylized performance such as an operatic aria or ballet. In cases where amateur performers will do, participants are recruited by open call where all are welcome, or, as in the aforementioned T-Mobile Dance, people audition for the opportunity to participate. Human behavior cannot be reduced to any single narrowly circumscribed and simplistic theory but it is plausible that several cognitive (attitudes and beliefs) and behavioral factors (intrinsic and extrinsic social incentives) motivate people to participate. Many turn out because they are flash mob enthusiasts while others are general followers of the brand. Providing a positive experience for these people is important since a positive direct brand experience encourages and increases brand loyalty (Brakus et al. 2009). Encouraging participants to share their enthusiasm for the flash mob or the brands with others should be a part of the organizer's loyalty strategy since the relative costs of customer retention are considerably less than those of acquisition (Fornell and Wernerfelt 1987). In fact, *brand ambassadors* can be the best salespeople a company will ever find, and they often work for free (Solomon 2012). These *brand loyalists* are consumers who are highly involved in the marketplace and represent an important source of marketplace information to other consumers (Clark and Goldsmith 2005). This paper posits that flash mobs have the potential to create such a bond between the brand and the consumer.

## **Rationale of the Flash Mob**

### ***Study 1: Characteristics of Flash Mobs***

The purpose of this study is to identify the key characteristics of branded flash mobs, describe and make inferences about the nature of communications and techniques of persuasion, and assess responses to communications. Using a grounded theory approach, a seven-part coding protocol content analysis (Krippendorff 2004) was utilized. A search using the video hosting site YouTube using the key words "flashmob" and "flash mob" retrieved 110,000 results. Narrowing the search to include "corporate", "brand" and "company" produced 137 flash mobs that appeared to be sponsored by a company or had been produced to promote an offering. In cases where the official sponsor posted two or three versions of the video, the hits were combined and represented in the analysis as one video. Unofficial videos that were released by audience members or consumers were not used.

In total 120 unique firms have produced 137 flash mobs. In eight cases, companies posted two or more flash mobs, and one, *Flash mob hazebrouck*, was a co-production involving 11 different French companies. 62% of the videos attempt to promote a service (Radio Klassik, Banc Sabadell), 31% of the brands promoted a product such as

Trident or Bounce, and 7% promoted a location such as Orlando or Ireland. As shown in Table 1, the flash mobs were further broken down into broad sectors such as entertainment, retail and education.

**Table 1– Sectors: Branded flash mobs by Industry**

<b>Industry</b>	<b>Total Branded Flash Mobs</b>	<b>Example</b>
Entertainment	44	Copenhagen Philharmonic
Retail	24	Target
Travel/Location	17	KLM
Education	12	Carlton University
Telecomm	12	Samsung
Food	9	Subway
Auto	7	Ford
Finance	6	Banc Sabadel
Online/Tech	3	LinkedIn
Other	3	Various

The YouTube search retrieved branded flash mobs from 26 countries on 5 continents, which indicates the global spread of the phenomenon. Nearly half of the flash mobs collected came from the USA (66) while Australia/NZ (18), the UK (9), and Canada (7) also had multiple branded flash mobs.

Flash mobs can take shape in one of many different subgenres such as Dance Mobs, Music Mobs, Game Mobs (i.e., pillow fights), or some sort of hybrid. A majority (72%) of branded flash mobs used dancing as the main focus of the event. Flash mobs have also been occurring in many different public locations including shopping malls, markets, and train stations. As shown in Table 2, nearly half occur in an outdoor plaza.

**Table 2- Flash mob Type and Location**

<b>Type</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Total</b>
Dance	99	Plaza	48
Singing (no dancing)	9	Mall	19
Singing (with dancing)	9	Street	17
Instrumental music	5	Airport	9
Freeze <sup>1</sup>	3	Train Station	6
Multiple <sup>2</sup>	3	Park/Beach	6
Exercise	2	In-Store	5
Staged fight	2	Resort	2
Other Types <sup>3</sup>	5	Unique Locations <sup>4</sup>	25

<sup>1</sup> A freeze mob (living statue mob) occurs when participants stand still for a predetermined amount of time.

<sup>2</sup> Flash mobs that change from one type to another.

<sup>3</sup> Includes kissing, reading, recycling, loitering, and driving.

<sup>4</sup> Examples include hotel, sports arena, casino and a classroom.

For most companies, the potential value in flash mobs lies in the viral power of the Internet since many flash mobs have received tens of millions of views on YouTube (Mills 2012). Further, 39 of those videos surpassed 1 million hits. Table 3 shows the top 10 branded flash mob videos.

**Table 3- One Million YouTube Hit Club- Top 10**

	<b>YouTube Video Name</b>	<b>Sponsor</b>	<b>Views</b>
<b>1</b>	The T-Mobile Dance	T-Mobile	39,953,793
<b>2</b>	Hallelujah Chorus	Alphabet Photography	37,439,849
<b>3</b>	A Dramatic Surprise on a Quiet Street	TNT TV	34,504,965
<b>4</b>	T-Mobile Wedding Dance	T-Mobile	25,922,759
<b>5</b>	Sound of Music	VTM	24,317,870
<b>6</b>	Black-Eyed Peas- I Got a Feeling	Oprah	22,303,350
<b>7</b>	Michael Jackson Dance Tribute	Bounce	16,674,119
<b>8</b>	The T-Mobile Welcome Back	T-Mobile	14,044,792
<b>9</b>	Glee – Il Flashmob	Fox	9,374,096
<b>10</b>	Beyonce 100 Single Ladies Flash-Dance	Trident	9,505,099

\*Last updated in April 2013

## ***Study 2: Stakeholder Interviews***

For this study, in-depth unstructured interviews were conducted to obtain detailed information about the respondents' thoughts and behaviors and to explore this issue in depth (Thompson, Locander, & Pollio, 1989). Respondents were told of the study's purposes, that the interview was being recorded, and were assured of anonymity.

In total, six branded flash mob producers and 37 audience members from six different branded flash mobs, between 2010 and 2012 were interviewed pre and post-flash mob. Additionally, seventeen participants were interviewed immediately before, during, and after two separate flash mobs conducted on June 13, 2010, and January 8, 2012 in Vancouver, Canada respectively. Both audience members and participants were randomly selected at the event. All participants interviewed were volunteers. Paid participants of branded flash mobs were not interviewed because they were extrinsically motivated by money or exposure.

### ***Study 2a: Producer Interviews***

In addition to producing flash mobs for online marketing purposes, managers and business owners have also begun using flash mobs as a way of making corporate events unique and special. Recent examples of this have included product launches, grand openings, fundraisers, and trade shows. In these settings, the event organizers *hire* people to perform a flash mob with the goal of making the event memorable and unique. As reported by a retailer:

“We wanted to give an enjoyable, memorable and impressive experience to the audience.”

Another producer reported:

“I wanted our audience to feel surprised, have fun, join in and then talk about the event as an added bonus to their day.”

In an effort to make the event memorable some producers entice the audience to join in. Producers who have successfully generated audience participation have done so by influencing social subgroups, which according to Madhavan, Papelis, Kady, & Moya (2009), produces changes in individual motivation. For example, in order to encourage the audience to participate in the flash mob at a recent brand launch, one producer hired 10 flash mobbers to start singing the national anthem. The manager recounted:

“We were hoping to create a moment of surprise and delight for the audience. To create participation from the audience with a device that they would not necessarily perceive as staged or planted and that would make members of the audience feel unself-conscious enough that they would join in with flash mob members, because they thought the flash mob were just random, enthusiastic folks in the audience.”

In addition to building brand value during the live event, for many marketers the dominant focus is to take create a viral video. Woerndl et al. (2008, 34) define viral marketing as “a technique which utilizes the Internet to transmit and spread messages among individuals who will filter and forward the messages to their peers, who may be potentially interested in the message’s content”. When considering viral effects, flash mobs have the potential to increase customer awareness and interest for the product and its associated brand (Ay et al. 2010), and to increase brand equity since the online viral community offers the brand an opportunity to develop and strengthen a positive relationship with consumers (Plangger 2012). Furthermore, marketers aim to engage with more potential consumers virally since electronic word-of-mouth can move much faster to the consumer than traditional advertising (Kaikati and Kaikati 2004). As one flash mob producer revealed:

“I felt that a flash mob was a great fit for our brand and consumers. It also created a wonderful opportunity for us to increase brand awareness through YouTube.”

More evidence comes from the 2011 interview between financialbrand.com’s Jeffry Pilcher and Ed Terpening, VP Social Media at Wells Fargo:

"Really, the point was to capture the event for wider impact through YouTube. We were not counting on PR coverage so much as driving brand engagement impact on YouTube after the event with the fully produced video."

Once the video is edited and posted to YouTube, the marketing manager can make an effort to track and understand the efficacy of the attempt. YouTube's Analytics program is a useful tool for the marketer to help determine the penetration, reach and consumer engagement, working toward a better understanding of the consumer (Kumar 2011).

### *Study 2b: Audience interviews*

If the flash mob performance is of a certain quality it can produce heightened emotion (Grant et al. 2102) in the observers. Audience members reported heightened excitement during and after the flash mob. Some spoke of impact of the element of surprise on the audience. One shopper observed:

"When the performer got up, she was sitting next to a couple of ladies eating their lunch and they were blown away when she started to sing. Their faces were priceless."

Another commented:

"It seemed to me like people were pretty excited when the full-on singing was happening. At first they were like, "WTF!...What's going on?" And after they started hearing the whole ensemble they got really excited. A lot of people took out their camera and started filming it and taking pictures."

Other shoppers commented on the impact on the environment:

"There was a definite buzz about the place for the next hour, as people who had witnessed the opera scene talked about it, and the food court area of the market was vibrant!"

And finally, others spoke to the value of the experience. One woman recalled:

"The level of energy rose considerably during the singing, and it felt as though we were suddenly the lucky participants in a special once-in-a-lifetime experience, and as a result, were delighted and thrilled with the surprise element."

Another shopper reported:

"I felt like I was a part of the group and that I shared something very special with a bunch of complete strangers. I was really proud to be there and a small part of the event."



Most likely, these words fail to fully describe the intense emotional experience of the flash mob or the impression left on the unsuspecting audience. However limited, these responses portray some degree of consumer arousal, as well as the captivating ability and the effectiveness of the flash mob.

### *Study 2c: Participant Interviews*

Several pre- and post-flash mob interviews were conducted which support Bill Wasik's hunch that "a participant's motivation for taking part in a flash mob can stem from a variety of different desires" (Shmueli 2003). These interviews revealed four central themes that motivate activation. First of all, Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) indicate that participation might be motivated by the fun and enjoyment that a participant derives from direct involvement. One participant who had seen similar events on the Internet before said:

"It was great. I've seen similar things online but I've never been part of something like that before. It's really exciting so I wanted to come down."

For others the appeal of the social, collective element is their motivator. Acting in concert within a group evokes the perception of being a part of something wonderful and of great importance (Hoffman and Hutter 2012). One participant commented:

"There is something special about these people. I've done these before and the people are always great. Plus, it's more fun to do wild things in a group than by oneself."

Many flash mobbers reported wanting a memory or story, as one told:

"I wanted a story to tell my friends at work tomorrow. I thought it would be awesome to say I was here."

Another flash mobber reported:

"I wanted to be able look back at my life and say I did something crazy like this."

Finally, Hewitt (2003) posited that in western society there is nothing but order everywhere and that flash mobbers love to be a part of something that nobody was expecting. People intuitively understand that it is a powerful thing to very quickly and surprisingly transform a physical space, and there is a feeling that something is being

created that can't be ignored (Harmon 2003). Feedback from several respondents supports this assertion. One participant stated before the flash mob started:

"I can't wait to see the look on people's faces."

While another exclaimed:

"I love shocking people. The fact that we're going to do something that people don't expect, and then to see their faces...it's totally awesome!"

None of the prevailing motivational theories can singularly provide a satisfying explanation for why flash mobbers participate. Therefore, these concepts are highlighted not to create a taxonomy of flash mob motives, but rather to orient the reader to the range and possibility of reasons people participate in flash mobs.

In addition to unraveling the motivation to participate, it is also important to articulate *activation* and *co-operation*. The idea of participating in a flash mob may be cognitively appealing for days, or even hours in advance, but a fear of the unknown and hesitancy to step outside our comfort zone lies within all of us (Cain 2012) and could cause participants to rethink their involvement (Bandura 1986). While motivation can predict willingness, intention is an insufficient condition of participation (Klandermans and Oegema 1987). Indeed, *Physical Activation* requires more commitment since there are barriers, in the form of fears or insecurities, to overcome. Where the organizer challenges the comfort level of the participant by asking him to do something outlandish, intra-group dynamics lead to collective support, which enables people to bravely move into action (Drury J 2002).

In situations where individuals don't know how to behave activation can be explained by *Informational Social Influence Theory* (ISI) (Burnkrant and Cousineau 1975). Also known as *social proof*, ISI is a psychological phenomenon that occurs when one believes that someone else's action in a social situation reflects the correct behavior, and trusts it will help them make a more acceptable decision. This happens most frequently in situations where the individual is unfamiliar with the social setting. Unable to identify the appropriate mode of behavior, people are driven to assume that the surrounding people possess more knowledge about the situation and follow them, independent of their own private information signals. As a result, activation and synchronization happens within seconds as naïve, unsophisticated agents coordinate themselves as a part of a system, whether they know where they're headed at the start or not. (Surowiecki 2004).

When participants arrive at the event, their goal is to blend in and commit to a community of bodies acting as a leaderless pack (Canetti 1960). Early crowd theorists such as Freud (1957) and Le Bon (1960) believed that crowd members were unable to exercise the most elementary forms of cognition in a crowd-state, however, the current literature is grounded in theories that support the psychological interdependence between the crowd and the individual. It also suggests that individual

empowerment contributes to crowd action (Drury and Reicher 1999), and acknowledges that people in a crowd are self-driven, not irrational, even though they are influenced by existing norms and values (Helbing and Molnar 1998). So while flash mobs may create a form of benign herding behavior, or “Safety in Numbers” mentality, which allows the individual to meld into the collective, flash mobbers are not zombies.

While ISI moves toward explaining *Activation*, Lord, Lee, & Choong (2001) state that consumers can jointly pursue both normative and informational social influence objectives. Accordingly, Normative Social Influence Theory (NSI) can, in a very simple way, articulate why, after the flash mob has begun, people co-operate with the rules instead of combat them. Turner (1991) reports that meeting other people’s expectation of us (conformity) leads us to be liked and accepted. Moreover, crowd members look for equality (Canetti 1960) and shared attitudes toward the goal may be an important determinant in willingness to conform (Klandermans and Oegema 1987). Therefore, conformity can be expected, since approval and acceptance is awarded after participants have made a contribution that is in line with the goals of the community. Further explanation of why participants are not likely to deviate from the choreographed plan can be drawn from *task-based cohesiveness theory* (Zaccaro and McCoy 1988). This theory suggests acceptance and ownership of additive tasks, along with pursuit and attainment of personal goals, act as pressures to keep members within the group. Concurrently, NSI theory claims that non-conformity results in punishment or social ostracization. This assumption is akin to functionalist theory in its attempt to explain why individuals do not deviate from the given directions. Functionalists do not encourage people to take an active role in changing their social environment. Even when change may benefit them, functionalists believe that the group is held together by social cohesion, in which group members work together to achieve what is best for community as a whole.

## Discussion

In an effort to understand the true scope and power of branded flash mobs, this paper presented a mixed-methods examination of the flash mob phenomenon. In addition to subsuming flash mobs under the category of guerrilla marketing, by way of a content analysis, an effort was made to describe how marketers are currently using flash mobs. The analysis reports that 120 unique companies have produced flash mobs across more than a dozen different industries from 26 separate countries. The study also indicates that the majority of branded flash mobs are dance performances, and that they most often take place in a plaza or inside a mall.

As marketers become more skillful at producing, developing and targeting branded flash mobs, the phenomenon may grow substantially. From a research standpoint, it is therefore important to identify and understand the stakeholders of flash mobs. Accordingly, a psychological perspective as it pertains to flash mob producers, performers and observers, was offered through a conceptual discussion and several

stakeholder interviews. From a communications perspective, we now have stronger insights to help marketers incorporate strategies to produce an event that will generate advocacy for their brand and, with it, brand growth.

## **Managerial Implications and Propositions for Future Research**

In an age where consumers are becoming increasingly discerning, traditional marketing tactics have become less effective (Friestad and Wright 1994). As a form of guerilla marketing, branded flash mobs present many distinctive marketing opportunities. As discussed, they are one of many environmental variables that impact consumer's cognitive, affective, and behavioral response. It then seems plausible to hypothesize that due to the heightened emotional response created by many flash mobs, many latent benefits await exploration. For example, flash mobs have the potential capability to increase brand awareness and create a social community in the social media arena (Oakes and Warnaby 2011). In addition to the prospect of creating momentary atmospheric "buzz", branded flash mobs potentially create consumer loyalty and trust. Further research could also provide insight into how branded flash mobs impact the quality of the shopping experience and willingness to pay. Increased traffic may encourage increased spending on conveniently available items such as food, drink or retail products and spaces that struggle to generate foot traffic may catalyze a re-enchantment of the space, which can be leveraged by for place marketing purposes (Oakes and Warnaby 2011).

Like many guerrilla marketing techniques, little is known about the effect of flash mobs on consumer interaction. This paper has shown that while many companies have successfully produced branded flash mobs, it is not yet been established whether a video with one million YouTube hits actually encourages long-term customer loyalty, long-term engagement, and word-of-mouth advocacy. Future research could focus on the link-equity (i.e., page rank) of branded flash mobs, which is increased when content is shared across different types of social media (Kietzmann, Silvestre, McCarthy, & Pitt, 2012). Finally, since guerrilla tactics require new and unexpected actions to attract attention, future studies might explore whether the efficacy of flash mobs declines as the concept becomes more familiar. It is plausible that flash mobs will suffer from wearout effects unless the producers can constantly vary the concept in such a way that it remains appealing to consumers (Bass, Bruce, & Majumdar, 2007).

## **Limitations**

As with all forms of research, I recognize that limitations exist within this analysis. First, this paper provided a content analysis of 137 branded flash mobs, which were collected from YouTube. Many of the branded flash mobs in this study are also posted on other video-hosting sites such as Vimeo, MetaCafe, and Google Video. Therefore, in

addition to potentially altering the view counts and rankings provided herein, these sites may also host additional branded flash mob videos from different regions or industries. Thus, this study is not meant to be representative of the entire population of branded flash mobs but instead presents an exploratory analysis of branded flash mobs and additional avenues for study.

Another area of concern lies with the distinct character of each live performance. The issue that no two performances are alike is compounded by the subjective response of the individual audience members, producers, and participants. Further insight into this potential issue may be gained by conducting several field experiments with different controls. For example, future studies may build on this research by testing the effect that different performers, performance locations, or types of flash mobs, each independently have on its audience.

## **Conclusion**

By the time he finished his eighth and final Manhattan flash mob on September 10, 2003, Bill Wasik announced that his project had run its course (Nicholson 2005). However, the flash mob originator believed that the future was bright when he foretold that flash mobbing was not a movement, but instead was 'a pre-movement' (Harmon 2003). The analysis of the 137 branded flash mobs provided in this paper indicates that with the emergence of flash mobs as marketing device Wasik's prediction was correct. Originally intended to be nothing more than a pointless aggregation and then dispersal of participants (Wasik 2006), the flash mob movement continues to rapidly develop today. While it is uncertain how they will continue to develop, this paper aims at providing an insight into the perspective of the producer, the audience and the participants of branded flash mobs. In fact, while branding flash mobs was the first development of flash mobs, there have been other spinoffs. Two wonderful examples include *cashmobs*, where people collectively go into struggling businesses and make a purchase in order to give the business owner a little bit of economic stimulus, and *carrotmobs*, where consumers vote with their money to encourage corporate socially responsible behavior.

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## **2.2 Paper 2:** Operatic flash mob: Consumer arousal, connectedness, and emotion.

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Grant, P., Bal, A., and Parent M. (2012). Operatic flash mob: Consumer arousal, connectedness and emotion. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*. 11: 244-251.

**Abstract:**

*This study examines the influence of an Operatic Flash Mob on consumer behaviour and consumer experience in a public market. A field experiment was conducted to assess the impact of operatic music on consumers' emotions and connectedness in three conditions: spontaneous live music (Flash Mob), recorded music, and no music. We analyze audience responses to the shopping experience in all three conditions with particular focus on temporary group formation and felt emotion. Results show that the Flash Mob enhanced consumer arousal, connectedness and positive emotions, as well as consumer-to-consumer interaction.*

**Key Words:** opera, flash mob; behaviour; field experiment; consumer interaction, emotion

## Introduction

The popularity of Flash Mobs as a form of group expression and as a marketing tool has grown exponentially over the last eight years. However, very little research has been conducted as to how Flash Mobs might affect consumer behaviour and emotion. The following study attempts to begin understanding this phenomenon by taking an exploratory look at how Flash Mobs affect consumer emotion, loyalty and feelings of connectedness, using a field study during which an Operatic Flash Mob was created.

A Flash Mob is a semi-spontaneous temporary community that forms in a public space for the purpose of performance (Goldstein 2003, Salmond 2010). The community is made of people who may or may not be known to one another prior to the Flash Mob and who come together to either watch or be involved in the performance (Goldstein 2003). The Flash Mob performance can be any number of things from a choreographed dance routine, to spontaneous sing-a-long or, even, a group of individuals staring at a blank wall. Typically, information about the location and performance expectations is spread through social media such as Facebook, Twitter and flashmob.com. Organizers include location, time and performance information.

While the performance element of Flash Mobs grew out of other historical performance pieces with social aims, (protests, raves and agitprop-theatre), Flash Mobs were in their inception a simple social experiment. However savvy marketers are now increasingly using Flash Mobs as a means of generating consumer interest and to create affinity and loyalty to a product or brand. On November 13, 2009 the first Operatic Flash Mob was recorded in Valencia, Spain. Six classically trained singers seemingly stepped out of their day to day lives and suddenly began singing a couple of operatic favorites from Verdi's Opera *La Traviata*. Dressed as vendors, parents, or general passers-by, each singer came forward from the crowd one at a time, adding their voice to the excitement and splendor. By the time the second song had ended, the audience had been whipped into a frenzy- laughing, dancing and singing along. The Valencia Opera had used this Flash Mob as a means of increasing interest in a forthcoming performance of *La Traviata*. The video, called *Opera en el Mercado* (Opera in the Market), has nearly 4.5 million hits on YouTube and can be found at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ds8ryWd5aFw>

The purpose of this paper is to understand what effect a Flash Mob might have on consumer behaviour and perceived values not associated with the Flash Mob itself in order to ascertain if feelings of connectedness within the food market between consumers might emerge as a result of this catalyzing event. Further, this paper provides theory about the impact of unexpected music on consumer feelings of connectedness and consumer felt arousal. The paper continues as follows; we begin with a literature review of Flash Mobs and the relationship between consumer behaviour and music, we continue with a description of methodology and findings; concluding with a discussion section.

## Genesis of The Flash Mob

In May of 2003, Bill Wasik, senior editor for Harper's Magazine, organized the world's first Flash Mob as a social experiment to poke fun at hipsters, exposing their dedication to non-conformity as in fact status quo (Goldstein, 2003). Today, Flash Mobs are used more commonly as performance art, and, increasingly as a part of an organization's guerilla marketing strategy. A Flash Mob is defined as groups of people who pre-organize, typically on a social media platform, then assemble in a public place, do something performance oriented, and quickly disperse. The purpose of a Flash Mob is to go against the expectation of the status quo and use the public space in a unique and memorable manner (Salmond, 2010).

While weeks or months of preparation and planning are often necessary to conduct a successful Flash Mob, by definition the event must appear spontaneous. Gunar Hoydal defines planned spontaneity as an environment from which accidental occurrences can arise (Vuksanovic, 2003). While there are aspects of a Flash Mob that are planned, the execution, potential audience and response are completely spontaneous and unplanned.

Flash Mobs can look very similar to Performance Art as it also attempts to organize spontaneity. Therefore, understanding the difference between Flash Mobs and Performance Art is important to understanding of the nature of Flash Mobs. Performance Art has been in existence for centuries as a means of societal questioning (Sawyer, 2000). It is defined as a public performance where the creative process is the main focus of the artist (Sawyer, 2000). The Flash Mob distinguishes itself from Performance Art through the motivation of the organizers. In other words, the top priority of the Flash Mob artist lies on the message first, and the creative process second.

Durkheim (1895) defined Collective Conscience as the totality of beliefs and sentiments common to the average members of a society that forms a determinate system with a life of its own. At one hundred plus years it may appear to be an outdated definition however it seems to lack improvement. More recently, Miller, (1981) defined the group identification as a perceived self-location within a particular social stratum, along with a psychological feeling of belonging to that particular group. Targeting the non-conformists, at its' creation, it seems that Wasik (2003) must have understood the appeal of the Flash Mob as an opportunity for the social iconoclast to be heard. Hence the attraction to the art form was the intrinsic shock value and challenge the event made to the status quo and not the art of the event itself. For the purposes of this study, the Flash Mob is an arena where we hope to observe the collective conscience; therefore, the inherent surprise element as a motivator remains the main ingredient to the definition and success of the Flash Mob.

While the underlying purpose does not significantly vary amongst Flash Mobs, the type of Flash Mob does. The decision to choose opera as a platform for this field event seemed ideal as it presented an opportunity to challenge the audience, protract emotion and it remained consistent with Bill Wasik's original intention for Flash Mobs (2003) to challenge the status quo, due to the elitist nature of the operatic art form

(Kenyon, 1993). Several contributing factors for this label are the rich clientele, the European origins, the high production costs funded by corporations or the rich, and the scarcity of vocalists endowed with the talent to be opera singers (Berger, 2005). The enjoyment of one striking aria does not guarantee the survival of an art form long regarded as over-elitist, over-recondite, and over-priced (Kenyon, 1993).

One relevant and key aspect to this paper is the idea that during the performance a temporary group can form between audience members and performers. In organizations, temporary groups by definition have a finite lifespan (ranging from a few minutes to 15 mins), a relatively specific purpose and or goal, and the participants do not have a shared history or familiarity (Meyerson *et al.*, 1996, Terrion *et al.*, 2002). Studies have shown that in a number of conditions trust and feelings of connectedness do form (Terrion *et. al*). However, in order for temporary groups to develop similar characteristics to a longer standing group, they must develop 'swift trust' between participants enabling cohesion and connectedness (Meyerson *et. al* 1996).

By understanding the definition of the Flash Mob, which is to say it is a group of people who formulate a temporary public performance execute and quickly disperse and that we chose an Operatic Flash Mob for it's pre-supposed ability to invoke emotion, it is possible to understand the following behavioural and contextual study of the of collective conscious as it pertains to Flash Mobs.

## **Music and Marketing**

Clynes (1977) stated appropriately structured music acts on the nervous system activating brain processes with corresponding emotional responses. The aesthetic quality of music has the ability to alter our emotions as well as our state of mind. Lowis (2010) noted that music has the ability to create a broad spectrum of emotional responses. Alpert and Alpert, (1990) found music can affect the favorableness of people's feelings and moods. More simply put, music can give us joy, delight, and take us outside of ourselves (Roche and McConkey 1990, Lowis 2003). Similarly, music can enhance somber mood, melancholy and despair (Krumhansl 2002, Lowis 2010). Many believe that the primary motivation for music consumption is its emotional effect on individuals (Krumhansl 2002). Undoubtedly, as Gordon Bruner (1990) reported, music can act as a powerful stimulus for affecting moods.

Similarly, the effect of music on consumer behaviour has been studied a great deal. North and Hargreaves (2003) found that exposure to background classical music led subjects to a higher willingness to pay in the restaurant environment. Further, researchers found that music has the ability to create a positive influence on pleasure and arousal, which may also impact a customer's willingness to engage in a buyer-seller interaction and further, strengthen consumer bonds to products or brands (Dube *et. al* 1995). Willingness to engage in buyer-seller interaction was correlated with the increased pleasure and arousal felt by consumers (Dube *et. al* 1995). North and Hargreaves (1996) reported, that when students liked the music in the student cafeteria there was an increased willingness to return to the cafeteria and an

increased willingness to interact with others in the cafeteria. Finally, Chebat, *et al.* (2001), reported that background music helps consumers' access deep thoughts that contribute and interfuse their perception of the retail experience and store environment. Zhu and Meyers-Levy (2005) found that background music should align with the targeted audience as individuals respond differently to background music.

The effect of music toward consumer behaviour is largely measured by background music, and accordingly must be studied separately from foreground music. Yalch and Spangenberg, (1993) define background music musicians playing instrumental music. Conversely, they define foreground music as original music and lyrics, by original artist. Garland and Kuhn, (1995) warn against lumping foreground and background music together as foreground classical music brings the complicating variable of verbal communication into the equation. Foreground music commands more attention than background music and generally has a stronger ability to alter the mood of the listener (Yalch and Spangenberg 1993). Young shoppers were found to spend more time shopping when exposed to background music whereas older shoppers spent more time shopping when exposed to foreground music (Yalch and Spangenberg 1993). Furthermore, research has shown that all consumers rated the foreground music as more desirable than the background music (Yalch and Spangenberg 1993).

Music tempo has been shown to have a significant effect on behaviour. Caldwell and Hibbert (1999) studied the effect of music on consumer capital expenditure in a restaurant environment; specifically, experiments were conducted charting personal expenditure on food, drinks and total spent. Analysis of these data revealed that slow music increased consumer expenditure in all three categories. Similarly, Milliman's (1986) study that showed fast music persuaded diners to eat more quickly while slow music led to slower eating. Slower food consumption also led to more drinks being ordered from the bar (Milliman 1986).

Other studies have also indicated a relationship between musical tempo and the speed of the consumer shopping behaviour. Milliman (1982) reported that fast music incited shoppers to moving around the supermarket faster than slow music. It extends that there was a correlation between the pace that the shopper walked and the amount of money spent (Milliman 1982). Specifically, research indicated that shoppers who were exposed to fast music spent more money than those who were exposed to slow music in a grocery store environment. Yalch and Spangenberg (1993), also support this claim, reporting that some restaurants use fast-tempo music to encourage rapid turnover during times when the demand for tables is high and slow music to encourage customers to spend more time in the establishment to consume high margin items such as alcoholic drinks and desserts.

Current research indicates that classical music can increase customer spending in certain restaurant conditions (North and Hargreaves 2003). North and Hargreaves (2003) conducted a field experiment over 18 evenings in a British restaurant. The customers were exposed to pop music, classical music and no music. The average bill per head, was calculated for appetizers, entrees, desserts, coffee, bar drinks, wine, overall drink bill, overall food bill and total bill (North and Hargreaves 2003). Analysis



revealed higher actual spending from those exposed to background classical than those who were exposed to no music or pop music (North and Hargreaves 2003).

North and Hargreaves measured the effects of different musical styles on the perceived characteristics of the dining environment. Classical music was associated with the subjects prepared to pay the most for food items and that classical music has more potential to increase sales than easy listening or silence. This study replicated findings by Yalch and Spangenberg (1990), who found that consumer spending is greater after exposure to classical music versus country and western music.

The foregoing research reports that music has the ability to increase sales and profit; however, managers and business owners must intelligently seek music that properly fits their product, service approach and environment. Areni and Kim (1993) conducted a field experiment in a wine cellar that exposed the consumer to both classical and Top-40 music. From this experiment they found that exposure to classical music led to customers buying more expensive wine. Conversely, Alpert and Alpert (1990) reported that sad music led to higher purchase intention for greeting cards than did happy music because the fit seemed more appropriate.

The impact of *background* music on consumer behaviour has been studied and is well documented. At the birth of this research field, many savvy marketers began using background music, so much so it has become a common marketing technique. As we stand at the dawn of Flash Mobs as a marketing technique, and as marketers slowly begin to incorporate Flash Mobs and live music into mainstream marketing techniques, it becomes clear more research on the topic is necessary. 15 of the top Flash Mobs from around the world can be viewed online at <http://mashable.com/2010/06/20/flash-mob-videos/>. Each of these events was intended to pull attention, distract, and bewilder. Accordingly, corporate markets and vendors alike need to better understand how the Flash Mob affects consumer behaviour.

## **Methodology**

While a great deal of research has been conducted as to the effects of music on the consumer behaviour, no research has been conducted as to the effect of Flash Mobs on consumer behaviour. To acquire an exploratory understanding of the relationship between Operatic Flash Mobs and consumer behaviour, a field experiment (Operatic Flash Mob) was designed and conducted at the food court of a public market – Vancouver Canada's Granville Island Market. Granville Island Market is more than traditional shopping centre. While clearly, a hub for epicurean pleasure (there are 73 places to buy fresh or prepared food on the Island) it does not represent mainstream commercialization. 57 shops, or roughly 40% of business on the Island, are Arts and Culture related.

Specifically, the field experiment was set up with three conditions where observation was the mode of data collection. The environmental manipulation was used as a mechanism to see if in fact the Flash Mob could create a sense of community connectedness. The qualitative interviews and observation were employed to better

understand consumer emotion and group formation. Eighteen observers and six singers were employed to create the field experiment. Observers were instructed to observe the way in which consumers interacted with each other as well as the Granville Island Environment. Additionally, observers were asked to circulate with demographic surveys. Additionally, video interviews were recorded and later coded. Finally, observers were asked to record behaviour on handheld mobile phones. These recordings included not only the Flash Mob but consumer reaction as well. As very little research has been conducted as to the effect of Flash Mobs on emotional behaviour, a qualitative method was proposed as a means of exploration. Moreover, the spontaneous/unexpected nature of Flash Mobs rendered a traditional control environment impossible.

## **Field Experiment**

To acquire a distinguishable and representative understanding of the relationship between Operatic Flash Mobs and consumer affective behaviour, a field experiment (Opera Flash Mob) was conducted in the food court at Vancouver's Granville Island Market on June 13<sup>th</sup> between 12:30 PM and 4:30 PM. The field experiment employed a three level design; no music, recorded music and live music. A survey was distributed at the end of each exposure, (see methodology). In the first condition, no music, observers were asked to circulate throughout the food court to see how consumers interacted with each other and vendors. In the second condition, a recording of the third act quartet from Verdi's *Rigoletto* followed by Luigi Denza's *Funiculi, Funicula* was played throughout the food court. The music was played out of the same corner that would later hold the Flash Mob. Again, observers were asked to circulate throughout the food court and watch how consumers interacted with vendors as well as with each other. Finally, in the third condition live music, the same two musical selections from the second conditions were performed and observers were once again asked to circulate throughout the food court and observe consumers. When the experiment was over, formal interviews were conducted and performers were asked to stay and speak with audience members. Further, observers, performers and audience members were asked to give reflections on the event. Qualitative data from these interviews and observations were then coded for themes.

## **Participants**

A brief demographic survey was included when observers spoke with customers. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 81. Fifty-four participants self-identified as male, while seventy-three identified as female (1 individual chose not to identify his/her gender). As the Flash Mob included interaction between performers and visitors to the market, we include the demographic information of them as well. There were eighteen observers and six performers also included in the field experiment. The eighteen observers were all graduate students at Simon Fraser University. Three students were PhD students while fifteen were completing a master's degree. The performers were

hired by researchers to conduct the Flash Mob; they are all classically trained opera singers who had worked together prior to the Flash Mob. There were three female performers and three male performers.

## Results

As previously mentioned, both the surveyors and the singers collected data related to the audience's emotional reaction in an attempt to find contextual results from the effect of the Flash Mob on shoppers' moods. This was achieved through in-depth unstructured interviews and observations.

The findings have been broken down into four major themes: consumer arousal during the Flash Mob, consumer desirability to be part of the group, consumer connectedness during the Flash Mob and increased consumer felt emotion during the Flash Mob. The results are presented by theme and then broken down by behaviour and interview.

In the no music condition, consumers seemed to keep to themselves. If they interacted with others, they were individuals they had come in with or seemed to know prior to their trip to the market. Numerous observers expressed frustration, finding it extraordinarily difficult to convince shoppers to speak with them. The market was abuzz with hundreds of simultaneous conversations. People seemed to move around continuously, eating quickly and returning to other parts of the market. One observer recalled the following interaction with consumers at the market:

"Two men said they were busy and didn't want to speak with me."

One observer said approaching people prior to the Flash Mob was difficult. After the Flash Mob, participants approached the observer directly to speak about their feelings but prior to the Flash Mob, the observer found it awkward to speak with shoppers: "... I was a bit apologetic, not wanting to disturb people during their lunch."

Another observed:

"Prior to the Flash Mob I was nervous even approaching people. Everyone seemed to keep to themselves and I felt bad intruding their space. During the Flash Mob it was different people were approaching me, wanting to help and speak to anyone involved with the planning."

"I found the first two hours really frustrating. It was hard to convince people to speak with me. Everyone seemed to keep to themselves and a few were annoyed when we asked them to speak with us."

In the second condition, recorded music, much of the behaviour of the shoppers stayed the same. Similar to the no music condition shoppers also kept to themselves

or people they previously knew. In the second condition, observers and researchers received numerous complaints about the recorded music. Numerous individuals said they didn't like opera while others complained about the location and the volume. Once again, observers complained that it was very difficult to convince shoppers to speak with them. One observer who has engaged in conversation with a family was turned away when the music began because he they were so irritated by the opera. One observer said:

"Everyone was complaining about the music. They said it was loud and that they didn't like the music. I actually had to go speak with a manager at a coffee shop to calm down her employees (who were complaining about the music)."

"A LOT of people complained about the recorded music, the volume was the biggest complaint."

In the final condition, live music (the Flash Mob), much of the behaviour in the market changed. Observers actually had shoppers asking to speak with them about the Flash Mob and the market. A crowd of approximately 300 people gathered around the performance. Shoppers were swaying, dancing and even singing along with the performers. Numerous shoppers took out their phones to take videos of the Flash Mob while others sat silently mesmerized by the event. Vendors stopped conducting business and numerous employees of the food stands came to join in. Numerous shoppers were moved to tears by the live performance and stayed after to thank performers and researchers for the event.

## **Arousal**

Participants reported extreme excitement during and after the Flash Mob. These beliefs were conveyed to the singers, observers and between consumers. Participants in the field experiment were highly involved during the Flash Mob. People were shouting praise, singing and dancing along with the other shoppers. Numerous individuals waited after the performance to speak with researchers and performers to convey their sheer excitement at the event. One shopper said:

"There was a definite buzz about the place for the next hour, as people who had witnessed the opera scene talked about it, and the food court area of the market was vibrant!"

The live interaction of the event added a level of arousal for audience members. Another participant who had seen similar events on the Internet before said:

"Really enjoyed it. I've seen similar things on the Internet, but I've never been part of something like that before, so it's really exciting and I was glad to be here when it happened."

The “buzz” at Granville Island remained for about an hour after the performance but certainly swelled while the performance was still going on. Word spread rapidly during the performance and people came from all over the market to be a part of the performance, as the population of observers swelled, the excitement in the room did to.

“I actually came to get something for dinner, and when we came around, and heard... [singing and] I said, “Where is this voice coming from? Where is this voice? Let’s follow the voice. So we just came down and it did move us to tears. There’s no doubt about it, it’s fantastic and I hope it was impromptu and that you startled everyone here, because what an experience they had. It was lovely, it was wonderful.”

The energy of the market completely shifted during the Flash Mob one observer stated:

“I can't describe the feeling except to say the feeling was electric. People were so excited to be there.”

The electric atmosphere and evidence of consumer arousal lead us to the following proposition:

P1: Live unexpected music in a market can lead to heightened consumer felt arousal.

## **Heightened Emotion**

One of the major themes we observed and later heard about from shoppers at the market was the heightened emotion they felt watching and being apart of the Flash Mob. Numerous people were in moved to tears during the performance as well as immediately after. One performer reported:

“Upstairs there was a woman in absolute tears. She couldn't speak much but did say she was deeply moved.”

Another singer reported:

“The man at the bottom of the stairs who, when I came down, took my hands in his, kissed them, then looked up with tears in his eyes and said ‘you're beautiful, THIS was beautiful. Thank you.’”

One observer reported:

“People were very emotional watching the performance and after. There were numerous people in tears, some quietly reflecting.”

Emotion can manifest in a physical manner as observers and performers noted after the conclusion of the Flash Mob. Numerous studies have shown that music has the power to magnify emotional experience (Alpert and Alpert 1990, Lowis 2010). Emotional response is often the goal in marketing, leading to increased identification and loyalty (Yu and Dean 2001). The authors acknowledge that consumer loyalty was not tested in our study. The nature and duration of the field study did not allow for in depth study of consumer loyalty, however numerous articles support the idea that heightened emotional response toward a product or a service increase consumer loyalty (Bhattacharya and Sen 2003). One area for future research would be to look at specific changes to consumer felt loyalty in the Flash Mob arena. Our findings, supported by past studies, and led to the formation of following propositions:

P2A: Flash Mobs can elicit a heightened emotional response in consumers.

P2B: The heightened emotional response felt by consumers can lead to long-term consumer loyalty.

## **Connectedness**

During the Flash Mob, there was a heightened sense of connectedness amongst shoppers as well as between the shoppers and performers. What was more surprising was shoppers that were attempting to speak about the experience transferred their feelings of connectedness with the observers. In the first two conditions, observers stated that convincing people to speak with them was like pulling teeth. After the Flash Mob, numerous audience members wanted to speak with researchers as well as the performers. There was a feeling that people wanted to document their involvement in the Flash Mob:

“... A lot of people took out their camera[s] and started filming [the Flash Mob], and taking pictures and it wasn't any of the [researchers]...”

During the Flash Mob, shoppers were interacting with one another in a way they hadn't in either of the previous conditions. Numerous participants were swaying along together, singing to Figaro. Numerous participants took photos with the singers and even each other. While there were numerous cell phones filming the event, one unknown person even posted his video on YouTube (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7T4dgkUH88Y>).

The feeling of connectedness extended beyond performers and audience members and even to observers. One observer noted:

“I felt like I was a part of the group and that I shared something very special with a bunch of complete strangers. I was really proud to be there and a small part of the event.”

The establishment of a temporary group was supported by the data. The existence of group formation has strong implications to marketing. Group identification is strongly linked with consumer loyalty (Bhattacharya and Sen 2003). The temporary group formation lead to the following propositions:

P3A: Flash Mobs can create a temporary group and sense of connectedness between audience members and performers.

P3B: Temporary groups may turn into feelings of identification, which in tern could lead to increased consumer loyalty.

It is unlikely words can fully describe the energy and dynamism of the event or the impact of the Operatic Flash Mob had on the unsuspecting audience. These responses speak to the captivating ability and the effectiveness of the surprise element of the Flash Mob. Clearly the mood of the audience was heightened and the impact of the Flash Mob was significant.

## **Limitations**

This field study measured the effect of an Operatic Flash Mob on the emotion engendered by unsuspecting shoppers. This experience would remove the consumer from the typical shopping experience resulting in a heightened level of arousal, emotion and connectedness. The Operatic Flash Mob does not conform to the definition of classical background music. Therefore, it is worth clarifying that all of the secondary research presented in this paper parrots research collected from non-vocal classical music. According to Garland and Kuhn, (1995) music research should be separated into verbal and non-verbal forms of research. Their research describes music as a non-verbal form of communication associated with emotion and feeling, which listeners process in the left hemisphere of their brain. Conversely, speech, which originates in the right brain, communicates facts and ideas. Therefore, they argue that to investigate the effects of music, classical vocal repertoire should be avoided as they add the complicating variable of verbal communication into the equation. Since there is not enough data on the difference between vocal and non-vocal classical music there is potential for more research.

As with all field studies, there are few limitations to our study. First we our study was context specific and as such finding are not generalizable without further data collection in numerous and varied conditions. Second, at the time of the event, the participants were already in Granville Island and therefore do not make up a random sample. Finally, as with all qualitative research, potential researchers bias may exist.

## **Discussion and Managerial Implications**

Of late, the popularity of Flash Mobs as a marketing tool has grown exponentially. However questions still remain as to the effectiveness of the Flash Mob. Examples of companies that have used Flash Mobs as a marketing tool have included T-Mobile (London), Kadaver (Denmark) and Air Canada. For example, on December 21st, 2010

Air Canada sponsored a holiday Flash Mob at Vancouver's YVR airport. Over 60 dancers and 5 musicians were hired to sing and dance to Christmas carols. Numerous passengers videotaped the event and over 300,000 people viewed separate and unique amateur videos on YouTube. Further, numerous news organizations such as CTV (Canada), the Huffington Post (US), and Vancouver Sun (Canada) amongst others (cf. The Huffington Post December 21st, 2010) reported the event in newsfeed. From a managerial perspective, the cost expenditure for this event was very low relative to the exposure Air Canada received.

While this new field offers many implications, the authors present three major points that managers can take away from this field study. First, consumer involvement is an important area for managers to consider. In an age where consumers are becoming increasingly savvy to options within the marketplace, and are less easily persuaded by traditional marketing tactics, a firm's ability to set itself aside from competition is becoming increasingly important. The high level of interaction between producers and consumers in a flash mob help companies distinguish themselves from others and give consumers an avenue for creative expression and interaction. It is widely accepted that consumers don't trust marketer's motives, nor do they want to feel manipulated by advertisers. Producing a flash mob, makes the producer's motivation to create a heightened existential experience transparent, and when combined with the astuteness of the consumer, has potential to create a trust between the consumer and the company, which may result in "buzz" about the company, mall, event on various social media platforms. Second, social networks have become a strong indicator of consumer identity (Schau and Gilly, 2003). The ease with which an individual could share information about a Flash Mob or perhaps a video of the Flash Mob could increase ties to the company that sponsored the Flash Mob. Finally, the live nature of the Flash Mob was shown to heighten consumer felt emotion and arousal. Existent research demonstrates that consumers tend to feel stronger ties of connectedness in situations where companies can increase arousal and emotion towards a product or service. From a marketing perspective, the unorthodox nature of the Flash Mob may allow companies to stand apart from competition and capture significant mental real estate in the mind of consumer.

## **Conclusion**

As Flash Mobs continue to increase in popularity, marketers, organizers, protestors and artists alike will look to take advantage of the Flash Mob forum. This paper has endeavored to analyze audience response and understand temporary group formation and consumer felt emotion as it pertains to the Operatic Flash Mob. As hypothesized, it was observed that the Operatic Flash Mob experience enhanced consumer arousal, connectedness and positive emotion, as well as consumer-to-consumer interaction. However, this is simply a modest beginning for a fascinating new field. Further research needs to be done to discover the empirical statistical impact of Flash Mobs on consumer purchasing behaviour, willingness to pay, and Flash Mobs as a marketing tool in terms of raising brand awareness and loyalty.



This paper provides an exploratory study of the affect that foreground music has on the consumer. It differentiates itself from the current literature from both a live music and vocal music perspective. While much has been written about the effect of background music on consumers, the current literature does not delve into Flash Mobs, live music, or vocal music. Since all three of these areas have recently been creeping into mainstream marketing techniques, more research on the topic is necessary.

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### **2.3 Paper 3:** When the persuasion attempt fails – an examination of consumers' perception of branded flash mob.

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Grant, P. and Boon, E. (2013). When the persuasion attempt fails – an examination of consumers' perception of branded flash mobs. *Journal of Public Affairs*. 3(2): 190-201.

**Abstract:**

*Flash mobs are a relatively new form of group expression that has recently been taken over by marketers to engage their consumers and to create a viral effect. Yet as consumers become more familiar with 'branded' flash mobs they become less easily engaged, and marketers see their persuasion attempts fail. In a time when many brands are having marketing viral success by branding flash mobs, this paper examines why certain flash mobs fail to go viral. By conducting a number of focus groups where participants were asked to discuss their reaction to flash mob videos and their willingness to show them to friends, the researchers found that: (1) consumers are unwilling to watch and share flash mob videos if they are not creative, if they do not arouse a positive emotion (e.g. excitement or amusement), and if the video does not show an audience that is affected by the performance; and (2) consumers have an aversion toward corporations, and are less likely to share a video when they realize that it is made for commercial reasons.*

**Key Words:** branded flash mob; focus group; persuasion attempt; coping behaviour; viral marketing

## Introduction

This paper aims to assess consumers' perceptions of flash mobs that are organized by companies to create an online viral effect. Flash mobs are semi-spontaneous, temporary, and publically congregated communities that form for the purpose of performing (Grant *et al.*, 2012, Goldstein, 2003, Salmond, 2010). A flash mob performance can range from a well-choreographed dance routine to a spontaneous large-scale pillow fight. The participants may or may not know each other prior to the flash mob, yet come together to either watch or be involved in the flash mob (Goldstein, 2003, Grant *et al.*, 2012). Typically, performance details of the flash mob are communicated to participants through social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, through email, or through specialized websites such as *theflashmob.ca* (Kietzmann *et al.*, 2011).

Flash mobs initially worried police and city officials who were concerned that such public gatherings would cause confusion, disorder, and violence. However, the positive spirit of the flash mob quickly became apparent, and demonstrated that flash mobs are not so much mobs, but are better defined as crowds. This is an important distinction because the term 'mob' infers an intention to cause trouble, while crowds are "an organized event occurring within a defined space, which is attended by a large number of people...not dependent on the reason for the gathering" (Zeitz *et al.*, 2009, p.32).

While we could not find any serious reports where flash mobs escalated out of control, local authorities remain concerned about public safety and often patrol events.

While some flash mobs are organized 'just for fun' (Pitt, 2012) or to raise awareness for a cause, companies have increasingly shown an interest in organizing them as part of their marketing activities. Although an impact on the live audience can be profound, the allure of the flash mob for many flash mob producers undoubtedly lies in the viral power of the Internet (Mills, 2012). Many flash mobs have received millions of views on YouTube and have gathered publicity for their creativity, production values or message. An explanation for the willingness that marketers have shown to spend time, effort and money on branded flash mobs (Pilcher, 2011) is provided by Plangger (2012), who reports that viral marketing offers the opportunity to develop and strengthen the relationship with consumers, and to increase brand equity.

To avoid wasting resources on flash mobs marketing practitioners need to understand how the consumer interprets and copes with branded videos, as well as how they respond to them. In an effort to explain how companies achieve viral marketing prosperity, many researchers (Dobele *et al.*, 2007; Woerdl *et al.*, 2008; and Merton *et al.*, 2011), have studied the diffusion and success factors of viral marketing. These researchers agree that the key success elements are emotion, innovation and mindful targeting. Nonetheless, this paints only half of the picture, and we have yet been unable to find a study that examines the 'failure' side of viral marketing campaigns.

Accordingly, the objective of this exploratory paper is to identify the reasons why many flash mob videos are not shared by consumers, and are thus unlikely to become successful. For this purpose we determine the *success* of a branded flash mob by its ability to go viral, and because YouTube is the prevalent medium to share videos we look in particular at the number of YouTube views. *Failure* is therefore defined as the inability of a branded flash mob to acquire YouTube views.

There are three important points to be made about these definitions. First, we recognize that some marketers organize flash mobs with an initial aim of engaging the live audience, and have uploaded the video to YouTube as an afterthought. However, due to the nature of the study we measure success of a branded flash mob by its viral effectiveness. Second, we purposely do not consider the consequences of any negative publicity that may result from flash mob videos, as the debate about the risk and merit of negative publicity falls outside the scope of this study. Finally, although it may appear that by simply inverting the factors that lead to failure of flash mobs we end up with 'success factors', this is not the case. Rather, our factors for failure provide marketers with a baseline- get these factors wrong and the campaign will probably fail; get them right and major pitfalls can be avoided.

To understand why certain branded flash mobs fail we address a number of sub-questions:

*Which specific factors contribute to the failure of a flash mob to be shared? Do consumers distinguish branded from unbranded flash mobs? Do consumers feel cheated when they find out that a flash mob is branded because they feel that the organizing company is 'misrepresenting the truth' (Fournier and Avery, 2011; Campbell et al., 2012)?*

Through a series of three focus groups, this study will look at the 'failure' side of viral marketing attempts, using Friestad and Wright's Persuasion Knowledge Model (1994) as a theoretical lens. This model is predicated on the assumption that agents (marketers) seek to be maximally effective in their persuasion attempt, whereas targets (consumers) seek to be maximally effective in their coping behavior. This persuasion coping behavior enables consumers to recognize, analyze, interpret, evaluate and remember persuasion attempts, and to select and execute tactics to deal with these attempts (Friestad and Wright, 1994).

The paper continues as follows: first, we provide a brief history of the flash mob, and a general overview of flash mobs as a viral marketing approach. Second, we explain the use of the Persuasion Knowledge Model and its application to viral marketing attempts so that we can better understand the coping behavior of consumers of branded flash mobs. Following a description of our methodology, we will provide several propositions as a deduction of our study. The paper will conclude by acknowledging the limitations of the research provided here, an outline of the practical implications for brand managers, and suggestions for future research on this topic.



## History of the flash mob

In May of 2003, Bill Wasik, former senior editor for Harper's Magazine, created a social experiment to expose the ironic current of commonality within the non-conformist New York "hipster" subculture (young urban New Yorkers in the late 1990's/early 2000's). For the inaugural event, which took place in Manhattan, between 7:27PM and 7:37PM, 2003 in Macy's departments store, approximately 130 people crowded into the rug department and notified the sales clerk that they were living together in a commune and looking for a "love rug". After ten minutes of confusing the poor sales clerk, the crowd, later dubbed flash mob, dispersed on its own accord.

Since then, many different groups have performed many different types of flash mobs for many different reasons. A YouTube search for the term 'flash mob' in September 2012 retrieved 18,100,000 videos. Since Wasik's initial event, flash mobs have been produced in many public places such as plazas, malls, airports, train stations, and in stores. However, it was not until T-Mobile's broadcast their 'T-Mobile Dance' commercial in 2009 that marketers started realizing the potential of branded flash mobs (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VQ3d3KigPQM>).

## Flash mobs and viral marketing

As the Internet has grown, so too has web marketing. As flash mobs continue to increase in popularity marketers, protestors, activists, and artists alike strive to use it as a form of viral marketing. Woerndl *et al.*, (2008, p. 34) define viral marketing "as a technique which utilizes the Internet to transmit and spread messages among individuals who will filter and forward the messages to their peers, who may be potentially interested in the message's content". Even though marketing managers have at times aimed to produce a flash mob to increase consumer experience around a specific event, such as a *Grand Opening*, the most common reason for branding a flash mob is to "increase customer awareness and interest through the product and its associated brand" (Ay, Aytakin and Nardali, 2010, p. 285) and to engage with more potential consumers virally since electronic word-of-mouth can move much faster to the consumer than traditional advertising (Williams, Crittenden, Keo, & McCarty, 2012).

T-Mobile has produced a successful series of flash mob ads over the past three years. *Dance (2009)*, was voted "Best Television Commercial of the Year" at the 2010 British Television Advertising Awards, and has amassed over 11 million views on YouTube. *Welcome Back (2010)* won "Best Television Commercial of the Year", at British Arrow Awards and *Sing Along. Sing Along (2009)* has generated over 9 million YouTube views and was shown on over 80 commercial channels including Sky, ITV and Channel 4. The innovative campaign increased search results for T-Mobile by almost 40 per cent (Farey-Jones, 2010). There are four potentially significant competitive advantages to viral marketing (Woerndl *et al.*, 2008). First of all, viral marketing is inexpensive relative to most advertising and marketing initiatives (Dobele *et al.*,

2005; Welker, 2002). Second, viral marketing has positive diffusion characteristics, meaning viral marketing can reach audiences within a short period of time (Kaikati and Kaikati, 2004), which in turn can significantly accelerate the adoption of the marketed product or service (Dobele *et al.*, 2005). Third, peer-to-peer transmission rates are higher in viral marketing (Dobele *et al.*, 2005), making viral marketing one of the most influential marketing methods available to marketers. Finally, in addition to benefiting from effective targeting (Dobele *et al.*, 2005) viral marketing can offer the marketer substantial and diverse audience reach by taking advantage of the audience's social contacts (Helm, 2000).

On the other hand, there are risks and challenges that marketers must be aware of when putting together a flash mob marketing campaign. By definition, *pull* marketing must give power to the 'audience as marketer' causing the organization to relinquish control of the diffusion effect as well as the message around the transmission (Dobele *et al.*, 2005; Helm, 2000; Kaikati and Kaikati 2004; Welker, 2002). For example, if the marketing attempt leaves the audience feeling exploited, cheated, and used (Dobele *et al.*, 2005), if there is lack of ethical standards (Kaikati and Kaikati, 2004), or the consumer views the attempt as an invasion of their privacy (Phelps *et al.*, 2004), a negative backlash and critical word-of-mouth may occur and could produce a negative brand image, a product or service boycott, or unfavorable attributes associated with the organization and its products and services (Dobele *et al.*, 2005, Helm, 2000, Kaikati and Kaikati, 2004, Phelps *et al.*, 2004). More directly, the consequences of acrimonious consumer reactions can be dramatic. Solomon (2004) found that negative word of mouth advertising significantly influences the behavior and views of consumers, and that 90% of dissatisfied consumers do not purchase products or services of these companies (Solomon, 2003). Equally importantly, these dissatisfied customers will communicate their experience to at least nine other people, and 13% of these will spread their negative interaction to more than thirty people (Woerndl *et al.*, 2008).

For the purposes of this study, a branded flash mob is characterized as a flash mob that has been produced by a company with the intent on promoting a product, service, or experience. Flash mobs that were presented by organizations aiming to promote a cause were omitted. For example, events like Halifax-Stanfield International Airport's *HSIA's Breast Cancer FUNdraiser Flash Mob* (141,843 YouTube hits) do not meet our criteria for a branded flash mob because they were organized independently by employees rather than by the official airport organization. Still, dozens of the branded flash mob videos we looked at have been viewed more than a 1,000,000 times. Table 1 presents the top 10.

**Table 1: Top 10 ranked branded flash mobs by hits**

	YouTube Video Title	Sponsor	Hits *
<b>1</b>	The T-Mobile Dance	T-Mobile	38,015,176
<b>2</b>	Hallelujah Chorus	Alphabet Photography	37,850,894
<b>3</b>	Sound of Music	VTM	24,317,870
<b>4</b>	The T-Mobile Welcome Back	T-Mobile	11,568,677
<b>5</b>	Michael Jackson Dance Tribute	Bounce	10,969,590
<b>6</b>	Beyonce 100 Single Ladies Flash Dance	Trident	9,063,934
<b>7</b>	Glee – IL Flash Mob	FOX	8,207,678
<b>8</b>	Opera Company of Philadelphia – Hallelujah	Random Act of Culture	7,479,543
<b>9</b>	T-Mobile Sing-Along Trafalgar Square	T-Mobile	6,033,505
<b>10</b>	T-Mobile’s Home for the Holidays Surprise	T-Mobile	4,668,832

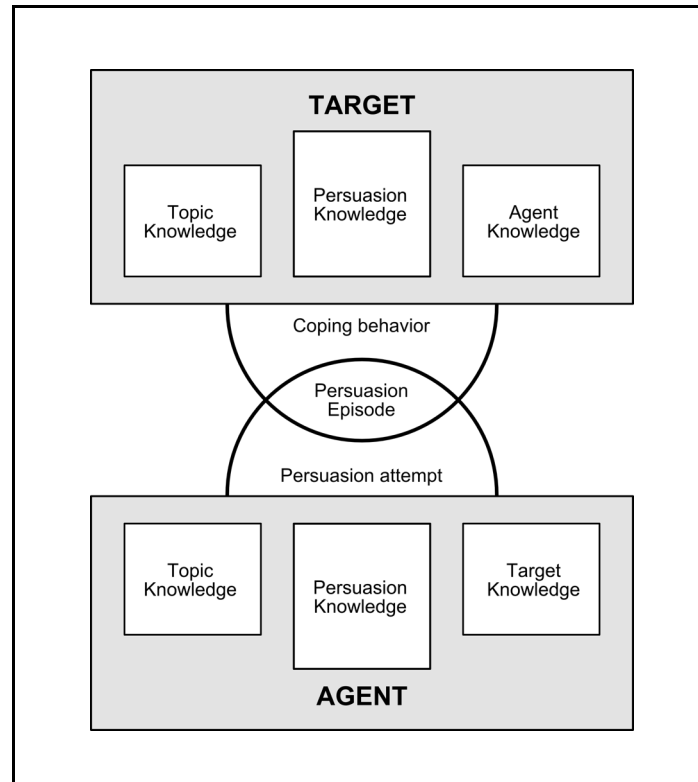
\*Updated June 2012

## The Persuasion Knowledge Model

Of primary interest to our research question ‘what makes flash mobs fail’ is learning how consumers react to a flash mobs organized by a for-profit company, and how they react when there is obvious branding either in the video or during the event itself. Since flash mobs were originally organized just for fun, it is plausible that audience members and video viewers may be unpleasantly surprised when they realize the flash mob is organized for a commercial purpose. As a consequence this may affect the way they consume the event and share their experience or the video with their friends.

To understand how consumers react to new and unsuspected branding efforts we take a close look at Friestad and Wright’s *Persuasion Knowledge Model* (1994). These authors suggest that over time ‘targets’ (consumers) develop knowledge about the tactics used by ‘agents’ (marketers and salespeople). This knowledge helps them to recognize and cope with these persuasion attempts, and as a result the agents will need to develop their knowledge as well to remain successful. Consumers’ persuasion coping behavior enables them to recognize, analyze, interpret, evaluate and remember persuasion attempts, and to select and execute coping tactics. Furthermore, it is closely related to their cognitive ability, is dependent on their cultural background, and is developed through their personal experience with advertising and sales tactics.

**Figure 1: Persuasion Knowledge Model (Friestad and Wright, 1994, p.2)**



The complete Persuasion Knowledge Model is presented in Figure 1. Friestad and Wright call the interaction that takes place between the marketer (agent) and consumer (target) a *persuasion episode*. The agent attempts to persuade the target, using three types of knowledge: topic knowledge (e.g. of the offered product), persuasion knowledge (i.e., familiarity with techniques to persuade the target), and target knowledge (information that the agent has of the target). In return, the target exhibits *coping behavior*, also using the same types of knowledge: topic knowledge, persuasion knowledge and agent knowledge.

Friestad and Wright give particular attention to the 'Change of Meaning Principle', the moment when the target realizes that the agent is trying to persuade him, as this is when the coping behavior starts to play a major role. As consumers develop knowledge about the persuasion tactics they respond with coping tactics. In turn, the agent gathers persuasion knowledge, which allows him to adapt and respond by establishing new persuasion strategies. This results in a moving target between the actors. We suggest that a similar effect takes place when viewers of a flash mob are shown a corporate logo and they realize that the flash mob was not organized 'just for fun'. Therefore, much of the emphasis during our focus groups was on how participants experienced the available branding, both at the event location and in the video, and whether they cared who organized the event.

## Methodology

In order to understand consumer's views, perceptions, experiences, and coping behavior toward the marketer's persuasion attempt, we conducted a series of three focus groups (Hydén and Bülow, 2003). In each session, we facilitated the viewing of four carefully selected branded flash mobs, each followed by discussion period. Focus groups were chosen as the mode of examination because the flexibility of focus groups can provide the researcher with the ability to generate hypotheses, explore opinions, attitudes, and attributes (Fern, 1982). Furthermore, through straightforward, free-flowing discussion focus groups facilitate data collection, and make the nature of the content cognitively accessible (Morgan, 1996). To be conservative, we presumed that the respondents would not be very familiar with branded flash mobs. Worries of shallow responses led us to employ focus groups over in-depth interviews since a strength of focus groups lies in its potential to delve deeper into the psyche of the respondents in situations where they think they do not have more to say (Morgan, 1996). Merton *et al.*, further posit, that the focus group will "yield a more diversified array of responses" (1990, p. 135). Finally, we chose focus groups since there are few barriers to active and easy interaction since the topic was expected to be an easy one to discuss.

Additionally, focus groups are suitable for this study because, unlike an ethnographic approach, which examines the interaction between the respondents, we were looking to capture respondents' ideas and impressions. Accordingly, we accepted Fern's claim that two focus groups of eight would produce as many ideas as 10 individual interviews (Fern, 1982). While concerns of moderator interference may arise, in reality, there is no evidence that the focus group moderator's impact on the data is any greater than the researcher's impact in participant observation or individual interviewing (Morgan 1996). Finally, although we had originally planned a fourth focus group, we were satisfied with the variety of ways the topic had been discussed and found that after three focus groups several recurring concerns and ideas had emerged and new learning had waned (Calder, 1977).

The focus groups were organized in two different locations: two in Vancouver, Canada, and one in Geneva, Switzerland. Focus group participants were recruited through online social networks (Craigslist for Canada, Glocals.com and Facebook for Geneva), and a small compensation was offered for participation (5 to 10 US dollars). To prevent participants from preparing, the precise subject was withheld until the focus group took place. Our recruitment criteria were that participants had to be relatively young (20-40 years old), proficient Internet users, and good English speakers. Our research subject, flash mobs, gave us no reason to set stricter recruitment criteria or to divide participants into different subgroups. As recommended by Sampson (1972) all three focus groups had between five and eight participants (Vancouver 1 and Geneva: 8, Vancouver 2: 5). Table 1 shows a sample of our focus group participants. To preserve anonymity the participants' names have been replaced by codes: for example V1-C for participant C during the first Vancouver focus group, and GE-F for participant F during the Geneva focus group.

**Table 2: Sample of focus group participants**

<b>Focus Group</b>	<b>Code/Pseudonym</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Nationality</b>
<b>Vancouver 1</b>	V1-A	Female	28	Canadian
	V1-D	Female	26	Canadian
	V1-G	Male	34	Canadian
<b>Vancouver 2</b>	V2-A	Female	32	Canadian
	V2-B	Female	23	Canadian
	V2-E	Male	29	Canadian
<b>Geneva</b>	GE-C	Female	24	Swiss
	GE-E	Male	26	Italian
	GE-G	Male	32	Indian

The three focus groups took place between May 31<sup>st</sup> and June 2<sup>nd</sup> of 2012, and lasted between 75 and 90 minutes. The moderators, who followed a prepared script, focused on keeping the discussion open and natural. Effort was made to engage all participants equally. Participants were encouraged to ask questions and to react to each other's opinions.

Before starting, the researchers explained the purpose of the focus groups (without giving away the exact subject), introduced themselves and the academic institution they worked for, and pointed out that the focus group would be recorded. The participants were informed that they would remain anonymous and that only the researchers would have access to the recorded material. Participants were asked to fill in a form, both to collect demographic information and to confirm that they were made aware of details regarding privacy and ethics.

The focus group script was structured as follows: as a 'warm up', to start engaging the participants in the discussion, they were asked to discuss their internet usage, focusing on social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn. From there we moved the discussion to online advertising and to viral videos. We then introduced the subject 'flash mobs' and asked their experience and opinions: *Have you heard of them? What are they? Do you like the idea? Who organizes them?* We then showed them four videos of 'branded' flash mobs (Table 3) and used these videos to stimulate the discussion: *What did you like and dislike? Do you think it was successful? Who organized it? Would you show this video to your friends?* After these four videos we discussed flash mobs in general: *What makes them fail or succeed? Does it matter who organizes them? Does the branding affect your opinion? What about the performance of video is important to you?* Finally, we showed the participants how successful each video was, i.e., how many views, likes and dislikes they got on YouTube, and asked them whether this met their expectation.

**Table 3: Flash mob videos shown during focus groups**

<b>Title</b>	<b>Company</b>	<b>URL</b>	<b>Views*</b>
HIER Flashmob Hoorn	HIER	<a href="https://youtube.com/watch?v=YnLxdQ6_Ugo">youtube.com/watch?v=YnLxdQ6_Ugo</a>	3,555
Rogers LTE flash mob	Rogers	<a href="https://youtube.com/watch?v=p7GWsyUMG8c">youtube.com/watch?v=p7GWsyUMG8c</a>	4,639
Ford Fiesta Movement Malaysia	Ford	<a href="https://youtube.com/watch?v=cGPzK6YaomA">youtube.com/watch?v=cGPzK6YaomA</a>	2,870
Dell Streak Flash Mob Sydney	Dell	<a href="https://youtube.com/watch?v=zkvW2he2loc">youtube.com/watch?v=zkvW2he2loc</a>	87,610

*\*Retrieved from YouTube, June 6 2012*

As a starting point for our selection, we collected an extensive list of branded flash mob videos. To allow for in-depth discussion of each of video, as well as time for a general, summarizing discussion at the end, it was decided that four videos would be shown. Since our emphasis was on failure we selected three videos that had low YouTube viewer ratings. We also included one successful video for participants to give them a reference point and to discuss the differences between them. For the successful flash mob we selected the “Dell Streak Flash Mob Sydney” video because it has a number of elements that seem standard for flash mobs (large crowd, build-up from a few dancers to a large group, music, branding at the end), and because it is relatively unknown which lowered the chance that participants had been exposed to them earlier. For the three less successful flash mobs (HIER, Rogers and Ford) we selected videos that were different in nature (in terms of the performance, branding, video quality and crowd). This allowed us to discuss various elements with our participants. Table 4 describes each video in some detail.

**Table 4: Flash mob video descriptions**

Branded Flash Mob	Description
HIER Hoorn	HIER is a Dutch magazine The video shows a small crowd of people sitting at a square in Hoorn (Netherlands), on self-brought chairs, reading HIER magazine, and holding balloons, which they released at the end. Halfway through the video a <i>dance</i> song starts playing (on the video, not at the event) and the video shows several images of the front cover of the magazine.
Rogers LTE	Rogers is a telecom/internet provider in Canada, and LTE is a mobile communication standard. The video starts with an empty street, when suddenly a group of about 20 people gather and start dancing to <i>dance</i> music. The dancers are wearing T-shirts that say 'LTE', and at some point position themselves to spell 'LTE' as the camera shoots them from above. When the song finishes the dancers vanish as quickly as they appeared. There is no audience, the background is a modern office building. Several camera angles are used, both close-ups and wide shots.
Ford Fiesta Malaysia	A group of about 30 people in business attire dance around a car (Ford Fiesta), which has a large printed 'Fiesta' magnet on its sides. There may have been an audience behind the camera, but is not visible. Shot with one, un-edited low-quality camera from a distance.
Dell Streak Sydney	In a crowded square in Sydney, it starts off with 2 men dancing to a classical song, and gradually people are added, up to about 40 dancing synchronously. The dancers are dressed in a mix of business attire and construction worker uniforms. Cameras captured a variety of angles, individual dancers, as well as audience members showing engagement and emotion. When the song finishes, all dancers disappear, leaving one guy looking at his (Dell) mobile. During the event there was no branding, but the video finishes with the tagline "Now that 's entertainment" and the Dell logo.



## FINDINGS

After the focus groups were transcribed in detail, the two researchers analyzed each of the transcripts separately to identify common themes within the focus groups. The researchers then came together to discuss their findings. Comparative analysis revealed several recurring themes and insights, which led us to define a number of proposals, each of which will be discussed below, and illustrated with responses given by the focus group participants.

We have broken this analysis up into two sections; the first deals with what makes a flash mob fail in general, whereas the second part looks in particular at the role of branding.

### WHAT MAKES A FLASH MOB FAIL

***Proposition 1: Unoriginal flash mobs are less likely to be shared by consumers.***

One of our strongest findings is that viewers will not show a flash mob video to their friends if it is not original or creative:

*"There has to be something special because if you just have people dancing and singing it doesn't make the event special." [GE-A]*

*"That's the challenge. They need a wow factor, a human interest, or that sort of thing." [V2-A]*

*"I would agree. I'd be willing to accept low production values if it was really entertaining." [V1-H]*

Some participants pointed out that their quality standards have increased as a result of their exposure to flash mobs.

*"10 years ago everyone had to watch the whole thing. Nowadays, as a company, they have to be that much more creative and original because it's up to us now to want to watch it." [V1-C]*

Perhaps this proposition seems obvious to the reader, but judging by the high number of unoriginal (and unsuccessful) flash mob videos on YouTube it is worth emphasizing. Consumers by now seem to have acquired some experience in watching flash mobs

(both branded and unbranded), and marketers will need to be more creative for a video to go viral. A plausible explanation for this could be *wearout effect* (Bass *et al.*, 2007), which states that an overexposed advertising campaign will eventually lose its effectiveness over time. This is consistent with the principles of the Persuasion Knowledge Model. That is, as consumers develop persuasion coping behavior they become more aware of the flash mob as a marketing tool, which in turn, puts pressure on the marketer to adapt with an innovative and creative response.

***Proposition 2: Flash mobs that do not stimulate a positive emotion are less likely to be shared.***

The videos that were disliked often did not give our focus group participants a positive emotion, which seemed to be an important factor for them to become engaged. Suggested responses include excitement, tenderness, or humor:

*"About flash mobs in general, I think for it to be successful it has to make you feel good. Like the ones that I've seen that I want to share make you feel good about humanity." [V1-H]*

*"I would send it to friends if there is fun or if there is something unexpected, or if there is a lot of energy in it." [GE-B]*

*"If there is a sense of humor, or sense of sappiness, or it touches on an emotional chord, it will stand out better." [V2-A]*

The HIER flash mob got particularly bad remarks because the video did nothing more than showed people sitting on chairs reading. It is plausible this happened because the marketers prioritized the impact on the live audience over the potential YouTube viewers when they created the flash mob.

(About HIER) *"They didn't seem to have fun like the other ones that were dancing, and I didn't have the feeling that the people around them had fun either. [GE-B]*

*I was waiting for them to dance or something." [V1-H]*

According to Bhattacharya and Sen (2003), there is a strong association between the emotion that advertising generates and its persuasiveness. Within the framework of the Persuasion Knowledge Model, this is an example of the persuasion knowledge of the agent.

***Proposition 3: A video where the live audience is not visible or not engaged is less likely to be shared by viewers.***

The ability to see the reaction of the audience in the video proved to be an important factor for the viewers. Whether the audience members were, smiling, clapping or moving along with the music, the participants labeled the flash mobs 'fake' if there was no audience visible.

*"For me if you watch it on YouTube, I like watching how people respond, not necessarily the people who are doing the mob but the people who are actually watching it." [V2-A]*

*"I think the whole concept of the flash mob is the reaction of the people that are there, and their reaction. Who's having a good time, and positive crowd interaction?" [V2-D]*

*"I also like it when you can see pictures of the audience, like you mentioned, that you could actually see that they were surprised and pointing, it adds to the feeling that this is something spontaneous." [GE-D]*

The (successful) Dell flash mob got several positive remarks because it engaged the live audience.

*"Felt real, felt organic. You saw the people come in one by one, you saw all the spectators, and they were still spectating at the end." [V1-A]*

*"One lady did THAT (raises arms in a V). She got into it. Which helps with everything though." [V1-G]*

In contrast, both the Rogers and the Ford flash mobs failed to attract or engage an audience.

*(About Ford) "I thought it was odd that you can't see any people not involved in the actual mob. So you feel like you just saw a video. There was no sense of it being in the middle of a crowd of other people." [GE-C]*

*(About Rogers LTE) "But for me, it's been organized by the people who do not understand the concept of flash mobs. Flash mobs have to be in the middle of a crowd." [GE-B]*

Once again, this shows that if the company fails to get the target's attention, the persuasion attempt fails before it even starts. Within the Persuasion Knowledge Model this also falls within the agent's persuasion knowledge, or lack thereof.

***Proposition 4: Videos with low production and performance quality are less likely to be shared.***

Viewers expect a high-quality production and performance values; in fact production quality trumps branding.

*"So it's not about the brand, it's about how the production, about how it's done. When it looks subpar, you're just not..." [V1-G]*

Participants agreed that a good flash mob should follow an arc; it should start small and grow gradually to its ultimate size.

*(About Dell) "I think it was successful when it swelled and it kept adding people. Because then you were always waiting and looking who was going to join in, what was going to happen." [GE-C]*

Regarding production quality, viewers specifically seemed to be put off by excessive length of the video, and the music was an important element. In contrast, video quality and resolution seemed be less important.

*"Time I think is a big thing. The one I watched was too long. I lost interest. [V2-C]*

*Definitely, I mean, videos without music, I think we don't even realize it but it's like watching an unedited movie or something." [V1-G]*

## **THE ROLE OF THE BRAND AND THE ORGANIZER**

***Proposition 5: There is an aversion toward corporations, and viewers hold them to different standards.***

Most focus group participants reacted negatively to flash mobs organized by large companies. This aversion toward corporations plays a large role when consumers decide whether to watch or show a video to their friends.

*"If I knew it was a company I probably wouldn't watch it. I would have an immediate bias." [V2-E]*

*"We're advertising for someone, where we're spreading someone's company, why would we do that?" [V1-C]*

We can again explain participants' aversion to branded flash mobs with the Persuasion Knowledge Model. As soon as viewers become aware of the commercial intentions of the flash mob's organizers (change-of-meaning), they cope with the persuasion attempt by becoming more critical of what they are shown. Our participants definitely appeared to hold corporations to higher standards than other flash mob organizers.

*"I think the bar is raised if you're a big company with clearly a lot of money." [V1F]*

*"Even if it's not organic, and I can tell it's clearly made by a large company, if it's well done, if it's aesthetically pleasing, if there is something there that is drawing my interest, then absolutely, I have no problem with it." [V2-E]*

Remarkably, these higher standards were not extended to smaller, local organization, charities, or brands that they liked.

*"If it was an ad for the local cable network, channel 4, our expectations aren't going to be that high. And when they do well, we're like 'good for them'." [V1-G]*

*"Any kind of cause will make it better. Or even if it's like a school or something benefiting from some kind of commercial enterprise, then that makes it more OK in my books." [V1-A]*

*"I prefer flash mobs being used to promote not-for-profit organizations. [V2-A]*

*"What if it was a company you liked? Then I bet you'd be willing to share it. But then you're already a customer then, so it doesn't matter right?" [V1-B]*

***Proposition 6: Branding a flash mob generally has a negative impact, but it is better to show it up front.***

Most participants showed a dislike for visible branding. Several of them seemed to re-categorize the flash mob as a commercial when they noticed a brand name or corporate logo. Again, this indicates that when viewers recognized the persuasion attempt they changed their behavior (i.e., their criteria for watching and sharing):

*"Viral marketing doesn't work when it's blatantly forced, like when you know it's sponsored by a company, and you know it's not for pure entertainment, it's for pure sell." [V2-A]*

*"You know it's Dell but it's not in your face. (If) You click on it, it's your choice. And if you see the brand all over the place you're just going to think, "I'll see that some other time". [GE-G]*

*"If I see the brand I don't feel cheated. Because then I know that it's not for fun but it's for business." [GE-B]*

However, if given a choice, viewers prefer the branding to be present immediately, and do not like being 'tricked' into watching.

*"It's quite logical. If I see the brand I won't have much fun because I know it's for business, but if I don't see the brand and then I see it at the end then I feel in a way cheated. So there is a problem one way or the other." [GE-B]*

*"I'd feel more cheated if people were dishonest about what they're doing, like more of a subliminal thing, but even at that, there is a level of cleverness that you have to incorporate if you're going to be successful." [V2-B]*

Within the Persuasion Knowledge Model, Friestad and Wright call this the 'Change-of-Meaning Principle', the moment when the target realizes that he/she is dealing with a persuasion attempt. This principle explains our findings; the realization that the flash mob is branded may lead the consumer to disengage from the persuasion attempt. There may also be a longer-term effect, as the target uses his experience to cope more effectively with future persuasion attempts. This offers an explanation for the decrease in success that marketers experience with branded flash mobs.

## **Conclusions**

This paper describes an exploratory study of the factors that make branded flash mobs fail to become viral. The series of focus groups, in which participants were asked to discuss why they do not share flash mob videos, led to a number of important findings. Videos that are not creative, not original, and that do not give the viewer a positive emotion are unlikely to be shared. An important factor in this is seeing the live flash mob audience being engaged and entertained. It matters greatly who

organizes the flash mob; in particular corporations are held to a much higher standard. Obvious branding of the live event or video puts many viewers off, especially if they find out late in the video that the flash mob was made for commercial reasons. These findings are in line with Persuasion Knowledge Model, especially the Change-of-Meaning Principle which states that the moment viewers become aware that the flash mob is a persuasion attempt they start coping to the attempt; they disengage and re-evaluate their interest. Furthermore, we found that the persuasion attempt may be influenced by *wearout effect* (Bass *et al.*, 2010); as over time more consumers become aware that flash mobs may be branded, they are less easily persuaded and marketers see their attempts fail.

Our findings offer a contribution that will be insightful for both researchers and practitioners. They demonstrate the factors that make viral marketing fail rather than succeed, and our research presents the Persuasion Knowledge Model as a useful theoretical lens to understand consumers' sharing behavior. Although our research focused specifically on flash mobs, we expect that our conclusions can be extended to other forms of viral marketing, and for similar forms of out door and event marketing.

For branded flash mobs in particular, this research shows that consumers continue to set higher standards but, providing that the marketer remain innovative, they are still susceptible to being persuaded. Bill Wasik, former senior editor of Harper Magazine, was one of the first to realize the potential of flash mobs, and described it in 2003 as a pre-movement to something bigger (Delio, 2003). 10 years later it seems he was right. Not only have we seen flash mobs develop into branded flash mobs, we have seen them develop into *contentainment* (combination of content sampling and flash mobs), *cash mobs* (events where fans of a struggling company show up and spend money to help support it), and *lipdubs* (single-shot unedited videos that combine lip synching and audio dubbing). Provided marketers continue to create flash mob type events that are fresh, creative, and professional, whilst avoiding the failure elements in this paper, persuasion attempts will likely continue to be successful.

## Limitations

This exploratory study sought to ascertain a cursory understanding of why some branded flash mobs, despite high production values, do not go viral. The primary limitation of this paper stems from the chosen methodology. Focus groups, and qualitative studies in general, allow researchers to explore consumers' thoughts and opinions in depth, but as a trade-off the research conclusions are less generalizable than research conducted through other methods. A second limitation we considered is that our research is focused on a rather narrowly defined marketing activity: flash mobs. Although we do believe that many of our findings can be extrapolated to other forms of viral and events marketing, we have no way to support this without doing further research. Finally, as with all qualitative research, there is potential for researcher bias.

## **Future research and Practical implications**

As discussed, flash mobs have served as a platform for a variety of political and artistic agendas. With the advancement of the Internet as a marketing tool, flash mobbing has become an extremely useful tool for social media marketers as well. While viral marketing may be employed to raise brand awareness, capture market-share, or create a social community (Schau and Gilly, 2003), like many guerrilla marketing techniques, we still do not know if flash mobs actually increase brand recognition, loyalty or interaction. Companies are spending a lot of money on the production of branded flash mobs yet we do not know if one million YouTube hits change consumers' long-term attitudes toward brands, or if flash mobs (and other types of viral marketing) persuade consumers to purchase products. Future research could focus on the link-equity (e.g. page rank) of branded flash mobs, which is influenced by content shared across different types of social media (Kietzmann 2012). Furthermore, understanding how to develop a solid flash mob marketing strategy, a promotion action plan, and clearly defined macro and micro conversion plans would help the manager shape and focus his efforts toward positive and increased return on investment.

Branded flash mobs continue to grow in popularity. From a managerial perspective, the lure of these types of initiatives is, that relative to the exposure that they may receive, their cost is very low. Moreover, branded flash mobs they have the potential to make an immediate impact on the live audience, potentially increasing loyalty with existing customers and raising brand awareness in others. For example, gym owner and entrepreneur Trevor Linden, organized a five minute flash mob workout at a busy bus terminal that engaged their loyal members and drew the attention of passers-by ([youtube.com/watch?v=02WBWG60\\_sg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=02WBWG60_sg)). In addition to potential for offline buzz and viral attention, the truly creative and successful flash mobs also receive notice in both print and television newsfeeds (e.g. Good Morning America, Huffingtonpost.com, NY Times). Surely, if executed properly, the reach of the advertising effort is wide and deep.



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## **2.4 Paper 4:** Branded Flash Mobs, YouTube and the Effects of Viewer Attitudes on Brand Equity.

This paper is submitted for review to the Journal of Interactive Marketing.

Grant, P., Botha, E., and Kietzmann, J. (submitted for review). Branded Flash Mobs, YouTube and the Effects of Viewer Attitudes on Brand Equity. *Journal of Interactive Marketing*.

**Abstract:**

*For many companies and consumers, advertising on online platforms such as YouTube and Vimeo has replaced commercials on television altogether. The medium is not the only element that has changed. Ads are no longer unidirectional or one-dimensional but a blend of offline and online techniques designed to directly interact with the community. Recently, branded flash mobs have emerged as a popular form of viral advertising. Many branded flash mobs have experienced millions of YouTube views; however a metric such as view count doesn't fully indicate the effectiveness of the ad. This exploratory netnographic study evaluates viewers' attitude toward the ad to better describe the effects of branded flash mobs on brand equity. To build thicker descriptions, we examined 2,882 YouTube comments from three virally successful branded flash mobs ads. We concluded that the branded flash mobs mechanism is one that affects brand equity. To understand the complex range of viewer responses, we offer a typology that enables academics to formulate research questions regarding branded flash mobs ads, and serves as a strategic guide for practitioners. We also outline the limitations of the typology and offer ways to extend the research.*

**Key Words:** Aad; Brand Equity; Branded Flash Mob; Netnography; Viral Advertising

## Introduction

More and more companies are rethinking their approach to advertising and consider investing in 'the social' to leverage the enormous power of social media. In order to shape consumers' perceptions of brands, products, as well as corporate reputations, advertisements are curated with the hope that they will be 'voted up' by their consumers and shared widely among their networks of friends, colleagues and followers. In pursuit of the elusive but much-desired online virality, *branded flash mobs* have recently emerged as a particularly trendy form of online advertising (Green, 2013), based largely on the success of "The T-Mobile Dance" (T-Mobile) in 2009.

The T-Mobile branded flash mob was the first of its kind. It was set at London's busy Liverpool Station, where unexpectedly, one individual, waiting in the crowd, began dancing to Lulu's version of the Isley Brothers' hit song *Shout*, which was being played on the station's speaker system. Very quickly, other onlookers joined in to perform a highly unexpected, well-choreographed dance. Two and a half minutes later, the performance stopped just as unexpectedly as it started, with its several hundred performers quickly dispersing and assuming their everyday lives. While such a video, and even the performance itself, might appear not just unusual but also possibly pointless at first, it has enjoyed a spectacular success. The entire act was captured with multiple cameras, edited, branded with the T-Mobile slogan, logo, and brand sound-byte, and then hosted on YouTube, where it has amassed over 38 million views and thousands of overwhelmingly positive comments. To date, it has become the seventh-most-watched YouTube ad of all time (Griner, 2013).

In an attempt to replicate T-Mobile's success, other companies have produced their own branded flash mobs. Some who have caught the 'viral wave' with their videos on YouTube include Trident with its "Beyonce 100 Single Ladies Flash-Dance Picadilly Circus, London", (9.1 million views), Fox TV's Glee performance in Rome (8.2 million views), and Planet Hollywood's "Phamous Planet Hollywood Flash Mob" (2.9 million views). While lots of YouTube views certainly indicate a video's popularity, fame does not automatically equate to an increase in brand equity. Numbers don't tell the whole story, but worse, they could tell a wrong story, for instance if an online advert is 'popular' because it is so poorly developed (e.g., Mountain Dew: "Felicia the Goat", attracted millions of views before it was removed from YouTube for potentially being "the most racist ad ever") (Watkins, 2013). Like sales, sharing intention (SI), purchase frequency (PF), click-through rates and other quantitative metrics, YouTube views do not provide the firm with the attitudinal data, which is a major indicator of the impact of an ad on brand equity (Shimp, 1981). In this paper, we address this problem by first developing a lens for unpacking brand equity in the context of branded flash mobs, and then using it to analyze qualitative, attitudinal data from branded flash mob comments on YouTube.

The impact of branded flash mobs on brand equity is not yet understood, despite the growing significance of the phenomenon. The need to understand it is further

compounded when considering the production costs of branded flash mobs, illustrated by a report that L.A.-based Flash Mob America has charged up to \$80,000 to produce a branded flash mob (Freund, 2013). More impressive, Jeffry Pilcher of the Financial Brand estimated that the Wells Fargo flash mob cost \$250,000 (2011). Without understanding how branded flash mob videos impact brand equity, marketers will potentially waste resources and/or miss opportunities to develop the brand relationship. Therefore, in this paper we seek to provide an answer to the question: "What are the effects of branded flash mob viral video commercials on brand equity?" We investigate this problem by studying the YouTube comments of three virally successful branded flash mobs. Analysis of YouTube comments can provide implicit knowledge about users, videos, categories and community interests (Siersdorfer, Chelaru, Nejdli, & San Pedro, 2010) and they can be mined for positive, negative and neutral sentiments, which can help marketers understand and satisfy viewers' experience (Olubolu, Saadat, Alhashmi, & Siew, 2012). After building and analyzing a corpus of 2,882 YouTube video comments, we develop a typology to equip researchers and practitioners with an appropriate lens for studying and developing branded flash mob ads, as well as gathering a further understanding of the impact on brand equity.

After a brief review of the extant literature on branded flash mobs as well as brand equity and advertising, we present our empirical study in terms of the methods used and the cases studied. Since social-interactive engagement (online discussions) has its own impact on advertising effectiveness (Calder *et al.*, 2009) our data will be presented through a netnographic examination of YouTube comments. Bringing together previously disparate streams of brand equity theories to help shed light on the branded flash mob phenomenon, we propose a conceptual typology of four consumer attitudes toward the online ad. These "archetypes" of consumer attitudes to the online ad aid in the assessment of consumer response based on processing (cognitive vs. emotive), and stance (supportive vs. antagonistic). Each construct on its own has validity and a history in the marketing literature and, when mapped together, provide a powerful new framework to examine the effects of the ad on the brand equity. Following the discussion of our findings, concluding remarks and future research suggestions are provided.

## **BRANDED FLASH MOBS**

In 2004, the word "flash mob" was added to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, defining it as "a public gathering of complete strangers, organized via the Internet or mobile phone, who perform a pointless act and then disperse again". They are organized events "occurring within a defined space, which is attended by a large number of people...not dependent on the reason for the gathering" (Zeitz *et al.*, 2009, p. 32). The 'mob' here refers to a semi-spontaneous temporary community that forms in a public space for the purpose of presenting a performance (Goldstein, 2003; Salmond, 2010). It can involve hundreds of performers, or only a few, who may or may not know each other prior to the flash mob. A 'call to action' precludes every flash mob performance, where participants are summoned via Facebook, Twitter, websites, email, text messages, or blogs, and are given 'secret' pieces of information such as date, location



and specific performance instructions. In most contexts the word 'mob' has negative connotations associated with violence or conflict (Zeitz *et al.*, 2009) but flash mobs are fun-filled, peaceful performances that range from singing and dancing (e.g., "Sound of Music-Central Station Antwerp") to standing perfectly still for several minutes, as in the wildly popular "Frozen Grand Central"

Branded flash mobs are similar to unbranded flash mobs, in that they embody many of the joyous and seemingly spontaneous elements, including choreographed dancing (e.g., BMW's *Greased Lightning*), singing (Opera Company of Philadelphia's *Random Act of Culture*), and even kissing (Lynx Attract's *Chaos on the Buses*). The most glaring difference between the two is the presence of branding, which is designed to raise awareness and increase the equity of their brand. Unsurprisingly, branded flash mobs have more at stake, especially since these live performances are usually recorded and shared online by bystanders, regardless of whether they were actually good or bad. As a result, firms must plan, execute and market flash mobs differently. For example, producers must consider logistical elements such as obtaining insurances and permits, creating the appropriate content and strategy to ensure the logical brand to flash mob relationship (e.g., pillow-fight flash mob at a mattress store), practicing routines to perfection, and controlling for production quality. As the stakes go up, there is less room for error, which is only compounded by the need to get it done on time, and within budget. For example, the T-Mobile Dance (produced by Saatchi & Saatchi) required 8 weeks of planning by a production team of 14. Pre-production elements included combing a reported 10,000 auditions to find 400 dancers, a secret 1 am dress rehearsal, and storyboarding for 10 hidden video cameras (MacLeod, 2009).

Akin to 'guerrilla marketing campaigns', branded flash mobs are intended to draw a large audience's attention to the brand at comparatively little cost. They are designed to engage with consumers and/or the media by evoking both a surprise effect and a diffusion effect in their advertising message (Hutter and Hoffman, 2011). In the same manner, marketers have found that branded flash mobs can enhance consumer arousal, create a positive influence on pleasure (Grant *et al.*, 2012), lead to an increase in consumer interest, brand exposure (Ay *et al.*, 2010), consumers' purchase intention (Huang *et al.*, 2013), loyalty, and consumer engagement by making the flash mob a "live" commercial (Green, 2013). Branded flash mobs, like Tic Tac's "La Pire Haleine du Monde" (5.5 Million views), have potential to help companies position their brands, change their image, and develop a brand relationship (Freund, 2013). How these advertisements contribute to brand equity can be understood through better understanding the relationship between advertising and brand equity.

## **BRAND EQUITY AND ADVERTISING**

Brand equity stems from the interactivity between consumers and the company, which leads to the consumer developing cognitions and feeling toward the brand (Berthon, Holbrook, & Hulbert, 2003). The extant advertising literature has studied brand equity from two points of view: financial value and customer value. Though the ultimate goal

of every marketing strategy is to create financial value for the firm, marketers must first establish and understand the underlying attitudinal factors so that the marketing outcome for the brand is positive (Keller, 1993). Therefore this research will focus on the customer value point of view to evaluate brand equity. Customer-driven brand equity is built when the brand becomes unique, memorable, and is perceived as superior in quality and reputation to its competitors (Keller, 1993). It is a multifactor structure comprised of brand association, brand awareness, brand loyalty, brand image, and perceived quality elements, each of which is an antecedent of brand equity (Severi and Ling, 2013).

Many scholars have used Shimp's Attitude toward the Ad construct (1981) to study the impact of the ad on customer-driven brand equity (Edell and Burke, 1987; Gardner, 1985, Holbrook and Batra, 1987). This construct has two discrete processing mechanisms: cognitive and affective. To understand ad response through the cognitive approach, customers consciously seek consistency between the values, beliefs of the ad with their own (Greenwald, 1968). Research aimed at the relationship between cognitive processing and brand equity continues to be guided by the elaboration likelihood model (ELM) (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986) and the heuristic-systematic model (HSM) (Chaiken, Liberman, & Eagly, 1989). These theories examine persuasion variables, processes, and outcomes of cognitive processing (Petty *et al.*, 1997).

While the cognitive elements in the Aad discussion have historically garnered little dispute, academics have not yet agreed upon how to define or measure affect (Poels and Dewitte, 2006). Authors frequently reference feelings, emotions, attitude, arousal, and mood in an ad hoc manner as the term applies to their study (Muehling and McCann, 1993). Bagozzi, Gopinath, and Nyer (1999) consider affect an umbrella term for the general category of which these psychological processes are subsumed. For our purposes, we accept Phelps and Thorson's conceptual definition of affect, which they loosely define as "a viewer's general liking or disliking of an advertisement" (1991, p. 202).

Designed to help marketers create advertising strategies that target specific feelings, as opposed to a general emotional state, scholars have proposed many varying typologies of affective responses to advertising (Aaker *et al.*, 1986; Batra and Ray, 1986; Edell and Burke, 1987; see also Gardner, 1985). Holbrook and Batra (1987) developed a typology of affective responses to advertising to understand and measure how different types of feelings work. Watson and Tellegen's (1985) *Two-factor Structure of Affect*, which measures affect on two continua, (positive vs. negative and high vs. low activation) has been widely used in the literature (see for example Pugh, 2001; Gountas, Ewing, & Gountas, 2007; and Johnson, 2008). Other scholars sought to develop instruments that could gauge affective reactions to adverts (e.g., Schlinger's *Viewer Response Profile*, 1979; Wells' *Reaction Profile* (1964); and finally MacInnis and Jaworski's Cognitive and Emotional Response Generated From Ad Processing Framework (1989)). Poels and Dewitte (2006) proposed "The Emotional Continuum" that spans a range of processing from lower-order emotions such as pleasure and arousal, to higher-order, complex responses, which require cognitive

processing and self-regulative responses. This continuum is especially useful for this study as it represents the full range of affective and cognitive responses as consequences of ad processing and antecedents of brand equity.

While Petty, Wegener, and Fabrigar (1997) recommend measuring cognitive and affective responses separately, several advertising planning models integrate them. The popular “hierarchy of effects” model (Preston and Thorson, 1984) argues that the viewer’s exposure to the ad induces a cognitive response, and that response creates an affective response, which then generates action. The FCB Grid (Vaughn, 1986) and the Rossiter-Percy Grid (Rossiter *et al.*, 1991) integrate similar “feel/think” dimensions with low/high consumer involvement.

### **ATTITUDE TOWARD THE VIRAL VIDEO ADVERTISEMENT (AV)**

A 2012 survey by Web Video Marketing Council and Flimp Media reported that 81% of marketers use online video in their advertising efforts, 88% of which reported a positive impact on the brand. Online video has clearly become a mainstream application; however, the most critical factors to assessing online video advertising’s impact on brand equity remains largely unknown. Akin to the traditional advertising mediums, academics seek to understand the effectiveness of advertising in the modern online setting (Cohen *et al.*, 2003; Yoo *et al.*, 2004; and Manchanda, Dube, Goh, & Chintagunta, 2006). As discussed, the measurement of advertising effectiveness has included a range of quantitative metrics. While each of these metrics provides specific information, none of them directly assess the impact of the ad on the brand in online forums.

Huang *et al.*, (2013) recently addressed this gap in the literature. They found that online video advertising and its mechanisms resemble those of traditional advertising since online video advertising involves dispatching video-based communications through interactive, network-based channels. They also found empirical evidence that attitudes toward the viral (online) video advertisement (Av) influence the formation of attitude toward the brand (Ab) in ways that are similar to the traditional Aad construct. These reports are important to this study since we contribute to online advertising theory using traditional ad literature (Poels and Dewitte, 2006; Batra and Ray, 1986).

Following exposure to online (and offline) video advertisements people will form a positive or negative attitude toward it, and then decide to share or not share the video with others. Only when people have a strong affective response, such as humor, fear, sadness or inspiration, to the video content will they be willing to forward it to others (Huang *et al.*, 2013). Botha and Reyneke (2013) add that marketers must pay attention to the affective reaction online viewers have to the advert since viewers that feel no emotion in watching a video are unlikely to share it. Examinations of ad responses are at once necessary in order to better understand how online ads influence consumers’ attitude towards the brand. We have selected branded flash mobs as our approach to understanding online video advertisement since branded flash mobs have proven to elicit a heightened affective response in consumers and have a proven record to be successful virally (Grant *et al.*, 2012).

## **THE STUDY: NETNOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS OF USER COMMENTS OF BRANDED FLASH MOB ADVERTISEMENTS**

### **THE CASES AND FINDINGS**

Online advertising is no longer unidirectional and passively consumed, but offers consumers various degrees of interactivity, interoperability and co-creation opportunities (Campbell *et al.*, 2011). Furthermore, the Internet offers consumers many different platforms, such as Reddit, Facebook, and/or blogs to discuss adverts. Hidden behind avatars and code names, consumers are free to voice their opinion of an ad, however positive or negative that may be. Indeed, brand managers have less control over the conversations around their brand than ever before. These unfiltered conversations present great opportunities for marketers to understand consumer's attitude toward the online video advert. To explore and unravel consumer response to online branded flash mobs ads, we conducted a market-oriented netnographic study. Netnography, or ethnography on the Internet, is an online marketing research technique that provides insights into the consumer community through the study of contextualized data (Kozinets, 2002). Based primarily on the analysis of textual discourse, this interpretive method allowed us to gather and manage the netnographic data, and then analyze and interpret it. Examination of the textual discourse in this manner is less intrusive than ethnography or focus groups, and more naturalistic than surveys, or other quantitative methods (Kozinets, 2002). Uncovering shared norms and values in online communities, which may be then categorized, is also an inherent benefit of netnography.

To understand viewers' attitudes toward the ad, we examined the YouTube comments from three branded flash mobs ads. As summarized in Table, 1 these ads were Wells Fargo NYC Flash Mob Surprises Times Square, H&M Kids Fashion Flash Mob, and Miku-Compact Flash Mob, which was promoting Toyota. These ads are described in the next section.

To begin our research, we first copied all textual information from individual comments directly from YouTube into a text document. This produced a considerable amount of data for each ad. To understand viewer's judgments, perceptions, and experiences, we carefully prepared, coded, and interpreted the data using an inductive reasoning approach, by which comments were unitized by expression of themes and categories, which emerged from the data through the researchers' independent examination (Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell, & Alexander, 1990). After we analyzed and coded each data set separately, we then came together to discuss our findings through constant and re-iterative comparative analysis (Ragin, 1987). We then tested our coding scheme on a sample of text until sufficient coding clarity and consistency was achieved (Weber, 1990). Aligned with the methodology outlined by Kozinets (2002), the study was completely observational since we did not reveal ourselves to the community, nor did we actively participate in the conversation.

**Table 1: YouTube Summary Statistics**

	Flash mob Title	Upload Date	Views	Likes	Dislikes	Comments
1	Wells Fargo NYC Flash Mob Surprises Times Square	12-Apr-11	2,573,256	3,665	488	444
2	Miku-Compact Flash Mob (Toyota)	06-Jun-11	381,657	3,267	253	1,593
3	H&M Kids Fashion Flash Mob	28-Mar-10	9213,229	3,412	151	845

\*last updated February 9, 2014

In pursuit of 'thick descriptions' (Geertz, 1973) the branded flash mob ads chosen for this study provided a satisfactory richness of discourse (Calder, 1977) and were selected on the following criteria:

- 1) It was viewed as an advertisement (as some companies are less explicit in their branding).
- 2) The video has a high YouTube 'view count' (Table 1) since branded flash mobs with low 'view counts' are not likely to have comments that are rich in diversity or quantity.
- 3) There were a relatively large number of viewers' comments about the advertisement and these comments represented discussion and debate.
- 4) There was a significant variation in the types of comments determined by the attitude of the viewer.
- 5) The comments represented by diverse set of voices, which was determined by 1) the demographic, and 2) a large data set of both the 'likes' and 'dislikes'.

***CASE 1: WELLS FARGO NYC FLASH MOB SURPRISES TIMES SQUARE:  
([WWW.YOUTUBE.COM/WATCH?V=XJG9GGZMTTK](http://WWW.YOUTUBE.COM/WATCH?V=XJG9GGZMTTK))***

The Wells Fargo Flash Mob takes place in New York's Times Square. The flash mob begins with several drummers drumming on the sidewalk. This may not appear to be an uncommon occurrence in New York. However, a minute into the event, several audience members remove their jackets to reveal matching hoodies, and begin dancing in unison. The hoodies, are unbranded, but are distinctly the Wachovia shades of Blue and Green. This is significant because a minute later the dancers remove the hoodies to reveal uniform 'Wells Fargo Red' T-shirts. At 3:01 the Wells Fargo logo fades up in the bottom left corner of the video. At the end of the video, the Wachovia logo is shown, but it quickly turns into to the Wells Fargo. This represents the 2008 acquisition of Wachovia by Wells Fargo.

**CASE 2: MIKU-COMPACT FLASH MOB (TOYOTA):**  
**([WWW.YOUTUBE.COM/WATCH?V=CQLBFM58R\\_Y](http://WWW.YOUTUBE.COM/WATCH?V=CQLBFM58R_Y))**

In 2011, Toyota built an ad campaign for the Toyota Corolla that was endorsed by Japanese pop star Hatsune Miku. This campaign, which consisted of several online and offline initiatives, was aimed squarely at Asian American (Read, 2011). Like most flash mobs, this one starts with one 'random' person dancing to Miku's hit song "The World is Mine". Within a minute she is joined by 20 other dancers who, en masse, remove their sweaters to reveal the Toyota Corolla t-shirts they are wearing underneath. The dance was choreographed to the official dance moves that one would see in a live Miku concert. After the song ends the dancers put their sweaters back on and disperse nonchalantly. The video ends with a 10 second viewing of Toyota's logo and website while the sound of people clapping and cheering fades away.

**CASE 3: H&M KIDS FASHION FLASH MOB:**  
**([WWW.YOUTUBE.COM/WATCH?V=FQTEkVR2ZeU](http://WWW.YOUTUBE.COM/WATCH?V=FQTEkVR2ZeU))**

Set in San Francisco, this ad begins with a trademark Trolley car passing an H&M store. Switching to Union Square, a competitive hip-hop 'dance-off' between 2 kids attracts the attention of the audience. The kids are dancing to a live bongo drummer. Momentarily, this music is replaced by a recording of the hip-hop song called "Set It Off" by Izza Kizza. 50 others then join the two children. This song choice is important since the chorus is made up of the phrase "Check Me Out". After the flash mob ends, the video displays the company logo, contact details, and the call-to-action "Check Us Out!".

It's clear that each of these videos represents a different industry and target demographic. Each also has strong and unmistakable elements of the sponsoring brand, but interestingly, they employed varying degrees of branding. For example, the Toyota ad showed the brand logo throughout (on the performer's T-shirts). On the other hand, the ad, which Toyota called "Miku- Compact Flash Mob", was the only of the three that did not include the name of the company in the title indicates an intention to hide the brand behind the endorsed celebrity Miku. Contrary to that, the Wells Fargo ad did not show their logo to the live audience, but instead subtly dressed their performers in the company colors. Wells Fargo further demonstrated a reserve toward over-branding by using a small transparent watermarking of their logo in the bottom left of the video, which they didn't reveal until more than halfway through the ad. H&M did not brand their live event either, but were the most specific when it came to naming the You-Tube ad (H&M Kids Fashion). They also had an explicit call to action ("Check us out!!!") at the end of their video, where as the Wells Fargo and Toyota ads simple showed the company logo as the video faded to black. As one would expect, each company produced an ad that showed audience members who were laughing, smiling, and generally enjoying themselves. A cursory inspection of the data indicates that the majority of the comments about the ad were positive, which is consistent with the expectation of virally successful videos. However, as discussed in

the next section, closer examination of viewer comments reveals that many viewers had contrasting attitudes.

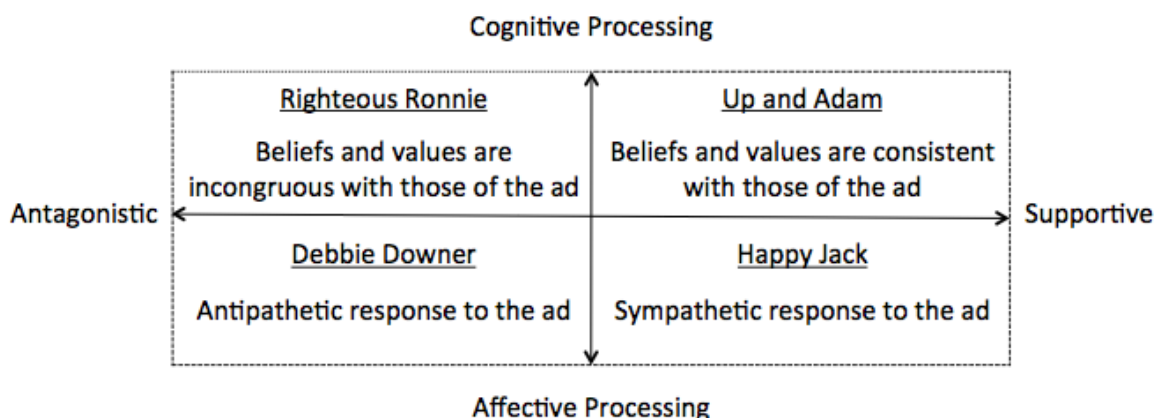
## RESULTS

Advertising literature provides scant optimization strategies regarding how to use online videos in social media and social networking environments. By examining viewer comments made in YouTube viral ads, we can better understand consumers' responses to communications. Our examination of the discourse about the three selected branded flash mob ads revealed several different comment facets, which grouped into two significant and overarching dimensions. In the first dimension, we grouped responses similar to Poels and Dewitte's Emotional Continuum (2006). This continuum provides a range of emotional and cognitive responses as consequences of ad processing and antecedents of brand equity development. Plainly, some viewers expressed warm sentiments toward the video, e.g., "Wow! Guaranteed Goosebumps!!" (Wells Fargo), while others critically analyzed the information in the video: "Kids shouldn't be shaking their booties like that" (H&M). When a person views an ad, he/she is faced with the decision of accepting or rejecting the persuasion attempt, which is consciously or unconsciously processed by relating the ad to his existing values, beliefs, knowledge, and feelings (Friestad and Wright 1994; Greenwald, 1968).

In the second dimension we classified responses into those ranging from supportive to *antagonistic*. For example, many responses to the ad were *supportive*, (e.g., "Great commercial!" -Wells Fargo), while others demonstrated an *antagonistic* attitude (e.g., "Imagination Needed." -Toyota). These opposing elements are closely aligned with Batra and Ray's continuum of ad responses (1986) in which responses range from *source bolstering* to *source derogation*, both of which are important influencers of Aad since support of the ad is a vital element for the ad to gain acceptance.

Consideration of these two continua simultaneously in a 2 x 2 matrix (Figure 1) helps us best understand the perceived effects of the branded flash mob video by revealing four new archetypes of consumer attitudes towards the online ad. Typologies such as this allow us to classify responses based on similar features, are effective at illustrating the differences in the responses, and are common in the advertising literature (Campbell *et al.*, 2011). Each of these archetypes is now discussed.

**Figure 1. Archetypes of Consumer Attitudes toward Online Ads Matrix**



### *RIGHTEOUS RONNIE (COGNITIVE AND ANTAGONISTIC)*

Hidden behind YouTube's privacy policies, consumers like 'Righteous Ronnie' can critically analyze the ad and safely dispute the persuasion attempt. This type of viewer posts unsupportive responses toward the ad, and has a quality of being morally right or justified. According to Wright (1973), if the viewer becomes an active information processor, he can be expected to have one of two negative responses. The first response is a 'counter argument', which occurs when the ad presents information that is oppositional to the viewer's ethics or principles. An example of a counter argument toward the ad can be drawn from the H&M flash mob, where one Righteous Ronnie posted:

*"Flash mobs should not be abused for commercial advertizing. Real flash mobs are uncommercial, spontaneous and mostly unorganized. This is more like viral marketing because it has a subliminal message ("look, all our clothes are from H&M")."*

The second response type is 'source derogation', which is a negative response focused on the brand rather than the ad content. As exemplified by the following:

*"Flash Mobs are great fun, but they totally lose their charm when they are Corporate Sponsored -- Yes, I'm talking to you, Wells Fargo!"*

*"Thanks H&M for showing us how "awesome" your brand is! PATHETIC."*

Another example, stated more explicitly comes from a viewer who wrote, "Curse u toyota! advertise better!" At times, viewers posted comments that involved both the counter-argument and source derogation components. As evidence, one viewer posted: *"NOT a flash mob; a cheap way to get international attention for Wells Fargo"*.

### *UP AND ADAM (COGNITIVE AND SUPPORTIVE)*

Viewers in our second archetype, who we call "Up and Adam", rely heavily on cognitive processing to arrive at an attitudinal position toward the ad. We identified cognitive processing through themes that suggested the viewer develops an attitudinal position by forming evaluative mental responses such as opinions, thoughts, and learning (Greenwald, 1968). According to Wright (1973) viewers will be supportive in their cognitive response in cases where they had congruent associations with the information in the ad, or the ad supported already entrenched beliefs. Viewer support of the brand or brand initiative is a vital element for the ad to gain acceptance. Comments of this category expressed their support with cognitively processed comments such as:

*"one of the best ads I've seen on Youtube. And I actually watched the whole thing instead of moving on to the video I wanted to see. Hopefully more ads will follow suit and attempt to entertain us instead of just push their name around". (H&M)*



Other examples include:

*"I am now very convinced to shop at H & M if these kids are representing them!"*

*"Great job from Wells Fargo Marketing."*

*"Great idea Toyota...keep on advertising Miku publically and I will buy the Corolla!"*

*"Good for Toyota for trying new stuff".*

The next set of comments examines consumers who used affective processes to express their support or antagonism towards the online ads.

#### *HAPPY JACK (AFFECTIVE AND SUPPORTIVE)*

Generating affect is one of the key aims of marketers. Ads that connect emotionally can influence information processing, mediate responses to persuasive appeals, measure the effects of marketing stimuli, initiate goal setting, enact goal-directed behavior, and serve as ends and measures of consumer welfare" (Bagozzi *et al.*, 1999). Moreover, an increase in affect towards an ad has been proven to influence beliefs about the brand (Phelps & Thorson, 1991) and create positive brand equity (Prévot, 2009). 'Happy Jack' represents the viewer who had a sympathetic response to the ad. That is, the ad did not oppose the values or beliefs, but instead left the viewer with a feeling of approval. Comments typical of him include:

*"i luv this ad so much, ive put it in my favourites and if im feelin down i just watch it and it makes me smile." (Wells Fargo)*

*"i love love love this- what a great marketing idea!" (H&M)*

*"Amazing i was so excited throughout the whole video and even got shiver. i really liked this idea. H&M really nailed it!"*

*"Love how you're using Miku as like the mascot for the car." (Toyota)*

#### *DEBBIE DOWNER (AFFECTIVE AND ANTAGONISTIC)*

We call the last archetype 'Debbie Downer'. She is the viewer type who reports various negative feelings (antipathy) and aversion toward the ad. Edell and Burke (1987) found that negative feelings elicited by an advertisement should be treated separate from positive responses, and in 1989 empirically confirmed that negative feelings affect brand equity negatively and that there is no balancing influence to offset the effects generated by these negative emotions (Burke and Edell, 1989). Debbie Downer's comments ranged from mildly disappointed to angry. Examples of Debbie's comments include:

"Wells Fargo, you are SO not cool". The worst Flash Mob ever, boring as hell !!!!!  
WF need to learn how Flash Mobs work."

*"I hate to see children performin such sexually provocative dance moves, especially in what is nothing more than an advert." (H&M)*

*"I feel kind of angry that Toyota is using Miku to sell cars."*

By its very nature, online video advertising has the potential to develop relationships between the brand and network of its viewers, regardless of viewer attitude. This is empirically supported by Huang *et al.*, (2013) who warn that although some ads, through their provocative nature (e.g., sex, violence), may increase the likelihood to share they may also decrease purchase intention and brand equity. Although branded flash mobs are generally not offensive marketers must still recognize the potential for backlash, as in the H&M Kids Flash Mob, which received many negative comments about the use of young children doing sexually suggestive dances. While it would be ideal to appeal to all four quadrants, it simply isn't likely. To that end, our matrix isn't meant to provide straightforward answers, but instead it is a tool designed to help managers find the questions that will direct their strategy and manage their outcomes.

## **THE WAY FORWARD FOR ACADEMICS AND PRACTITIONERS**

As the branded flash mob phenomenon evolves, astute and creative firms will continue to look for ways to leverage them in an effort to create value for the firm. The findings of this study give rise to a number of theoretical and managerial implications managers should consider when constructing a viral video campaign using branded flash mobs. First, we aimed to move toward a deeper understanding of the customer value effects of branded flash mobs on brand equity. This study examined three virally successful branded flash mobs and found that branding flash mobs is a mechanism that, akin to guerrilla marketing, can affect brand equity.

Aimed at giving consumers a more memorable and engaging brand experience (Ay *et al.*, 2010), guerrilla marketing uses atypical marketing activities and non-traditional mediums to counter consumer aversion to advertising (Nufer, 2013). It aspires to draw mass attention to the advertising message at comparatively little cost by evoking both surprise and diffusion effects (Hutter and Hoffman, 2011). In this way, guerrilla marketing can create a heightened consumer experience and lead to higher purchase and word-of mouth advocacy (Dahlén *et al.*, 2009).

Merritt (2004) labeled the unbranded, un-politically motivated, prototypical flash mob "guerilla art". Branded flash mobs are similar to other guerrilla marketing techniques such as Ambient Marketing (Notarantonio and Quigley Jr., 2009), Buzz Marketing (Siefert *et al.*, 2009), and Ambush Marketing (McKelvey and Grady, 2008) in that branded flash mobs can help marketers gain exposure online, increase brand recognition and visibility, and engage consumers (Green, 2013). However, branded

flash mobs are not yet included in the guerrilla marketing literature. Hence, we posit that the concept of branded flash mobs is best understood when examined through the theoretical lens of guerrilla marketing since branded flash mobs a) create a heightened consumer experience, and b) can leverage network effects to increase brand visibility, recognition, and consumer engagement. We therefore define “branded flash mobs” as a marketing tactic that is designed by private and public organizations to increase brand equity through online and offline methods.

In addition, our findings added to the body of interactive marketing and brand equity knowledge in that conversations around the brand, which can vary from supportive to antagonistic, can be realized through both affective and cognitive processing. To better understand the effect on brand equity, a typology of attitudes toward the online ad was created since a brand customer-value perspective for online adverts does not exist in the literature. Building on the work of Batra and Ray (1986) and Poels and Dewitte (2006) we presented a *2x2 Archetypes of Consumer Attitudes* typology, which unveiled four distinct attitudes toward the brand. We present the marketer with tools to help plan advertising campaigns through an understanding of the consumer attitudes.

In today’s age of “Big Data”, where managers and researchers want to know ‘how much’, ‘how often’ and ‘how many’, understanding effectiveness through a quantitative lens is extremely important. Fortunately, this data has become particularly easy to capture for online video advertising. For example, ads on YouTube can record watch time and post-exposure search queries, cookies, and log files as metrics to assess their success (Pashkevich, Sundar, Kellar, & Zigmond, 2012). Online video advertising researchers also have access to some important new tools of measurement, including: views, click-throughs, time spent at websites, exploration patterns and the pattern of online purchasing. However, according to Deighton (2009) information works at cross-purpose with meaning, leaving one quickly confronted with mass data from which little sense can be made. Our framework presents marketing managers with a lens through which they can qualitatively assess the effect of their advertisement on brand equity. To that end, we now offer deeper insights of each archetype for the manager to consider.

Much of the recent viral marketing literature indicates that ads that elicit pleasant feelings impact the brand more than negative, neutral, and also informational ads. Pham, Geuens, & DePelsmacker, (2012) found this to be true regardless of the product category or its relevance in a consumer’s day-to-day life. Emotionally captivating ads can also directly positively influence brand attitude change. Therefore, marketers should generally try to improve the emotional appeal of their advertising. In other words, they should funnel their efforts into creating Happy Jacks. For example, while the viewer support of Up and Adam is vital for the ad to gain acceptance, the impact of evaluative responses does not significantly impact brand equity since it simply affirms existing beliefs (Batra & Ray, 1986). Therefore, affective elements should be included in the ad to develop the brand relationship with him.

The effect of branded flash mobs on Debbie Downers and Righteous Ronnies is more

obvious, but also trickier to explain. To mitigate negative brand equity effects, marketers must be aware of the risks and challenges when constructing a flash mob marketing campaign. For example, viewers have an aversion toward corporate viral marketing attempts (Fournier & Avery, 2011). Additionally, the marketer must be careful not to leave the audience feeling exploited or cheated (Dobele *et al.*, 2005). Ethical standards must be also observed (Kaikati & Kaikati, 2004) and the persuasion attempt must not invade their privacy (Phelps *et al.*, 2004). If a company missteps a negative backlash may generate a negative brand image or product or service boycott (Phelps *et al.*, 2004).

To understand Debbie Downer, we turn to recent empirical research by Romani *et al.*, (2012) which produced a scale that includes six distinct negative affective responses to the ad: anger, dislike, discontent, embarrassment, sadness, and worry. They found that by focusing on these emotions separately marketers can assemble new insights into the attitude of their consumer since each negative emotion has differing negative effects on brand equity. For example, worry about brands usually leads to switching. Feelings of sadness or discontent are similar in that they cause the viewer to withdraw from the brand, with no desire to re-establish a positive relationship with the brand. Embarrassment also elicits passivity in consumers, and inhibits complaining. Conversely, anger and dislike elicit various types of adverse active responses (e.g., complaining or protesting). Understanding these negative responses to the ad is the key to avoiding a decrease in brand equity, as the knowledge helps marketers develop appropriate countermeasures. Appropriate strategies are also needed to avoid any trouble from Righteous Ronnie. Since cognitive processing leads to more effective actions (Gigerenzer & Goldstein, 1996) it is plausible he would respond by switching or withdrawing, but more likely he would complain or protest. In this way, Righteous Ronnie can both directly and indirectly negatively affect brand equity. Finally, we would argue that Righteous Ronnie is the most resistant to brand attitude change as cognitive bias supersedes affect in coping with the persuasion attempt (Friestad & Wright, 1994).

It may seem natural to some managers to address only those respondents who are supportive of the brand. The rationale being "Why waste resources on negative viewers who are unlikely to purchase the product anyway?" However this approach is myopic since viewers who have a negative attitude toward the ad may still share the video with friends who may see it differently. A full spectrum approach to ad planning is therefore needed. Managers must carefully plan the event with a focus on the desired affective and cognitive response. This awareness is important as it may inform better planning toward how to encourage sharing (virality) and increasing brand equity. Indeed, facilitating the sharing of content between all four of these archetypes of viewers should be the aim of marketers. To that end, we encourage marketers to test the effects of the branded flash mob video before posting the video to YouTube to ensure that the outcome is aligned with management objectives.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study offered a framework with which to assess and manage attitudinal responses to online content, specifically to branded flash mobs. However, the study has several limitations as well. As mentioned, this study did not examine behavioral response toward the ad. Measurements of behavioral responses that require examination include product trial and purchase intention since these are key responses examined in advertising research literature (Huang *et al.*, 2013). Rodgers and Thorson (2000) found that all of the behavioral response measures used for traditional advertising could be applied to interactive advertising. Therefore, we propose future research should consider exploring sales data as a method of measuring online video advertisement effectiveness. Additionally, since each video we studied was quite different in its composition, a close examination of the videos themselves will be useful in understanding the ad/viewer relationship. Possible questions for future research include examining how much branding is in the video, when does it appear, what is the peak and duration of the video, and quality of flash mob and brand fit.

Our chosen methodology, netnography is rigorous and more clearly defined than other forms of online ethnography (Kozinets, 2002); however, it has a narrow focus on a specific online community. Therefore future studies should test and develop our findings by examining branded flash mob videos using different methodologies. Furthermore, while we believe that our conclusions can be extended to other forms of branded entertainment on other social media platforms, we cannot support this without doing further research. Therefore future studies should include examining branded flash mobs on other platforms such as Vimeo and Reddit.

We believe that branded flash mobs are pre-movement. Recently, Belgium's TNT-TV produced a video to advertise the launch of a new high-quality TV station. The video, entitled 'A Dramatic Surprise on a Quiet Square' (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=316AzLYfAzw>) begins by showing a quiet square in an average Flemish town (Aarshot, pop. 28,000) with a sign hovering over a button that reads "PUSH TO ADD DRAMA". After a curious passer-by bravely pushes the button, a full scale Hollywood action scene ensues, with dramatic twists and turns that are both thrilling and shocking. With over 35 million views in the first two months, the video became the second most-shared ad of all time after Volkswagen's Super Bowl ad "The Force". The advertisement, which Savage (2012) calls a "flash mob type thing", has many of the branded flash mob elements; it takes place in a public space, is presented to an unsuspecting public, and at the end of it, the performers all disperse, leaving the scene as still and peaceful as when they arrived. TNT has clearly pushed limits of what a branded flash mob is. But it's not yet clear where branded entertainment is headed. As webpronews.com recently asked "Does the new TNT video successfully reinvent the 'flash mob' advertising formula? Does it work as a new take on the format made popular by T-Mobile, amongst others?" (Wolford, 2012). As the branded flash mob phenomenon evolves future research will be needed.

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## **CHAPTER 3: SUMMARY, CONCLUSION, AND CONTRIBUTIONS**



### **3.1 INTRODUCTION TO THE CONCLUSION**

As branded flash mobs become more common, it is necessary for marketing academics and practitioners to have a better understanding of the phenomenon. In less than a decade branded flash mobs have significantly grown in popularity and have evolved from its modest beginning as a simple social study to a fresh and creative marketing communication device. It is then plausible that marketers will continue to shape the future of the phenomenon while trying to control the costs, diffusion characteristics, peer-to-peer transmission, and audience reach. As the phenomenon matures the full impact of it needs to be understood.

Unfortunately, as of yet there exists little empirical research about how the varying manipulations and manifestations of branded flash mobs affect the brand relationship. To address the gap in the academic literature this study aimed to answer the overarching research question:

*How do branded flash mobs impact consumer behaviour and brand equity?*

Four independent studies were used to investigate this question. Each study puts to use a different theoretical lens and poses unique and relevant research questions to serve the overarching research question. Each paper strives to present new insights but like an unhitched puzzle piece they can only allow for a partial glimpse of the entire puzzle on their own. It is the purpose of this chapter to bind the works together and make sense of the entire complex and convoluted whole.

Just as it is difficult to build a puzzle without the box top, it is difficult to understand how each paper contributes to understanding the overarching research question of this thesis without aid. Therefore, to help the reader understand the impact of branded flash mobs on consumer behaviour and brand equity, I now move to connect the pieces of the puzzle by discussing the findings of each paper, as well as the theoretical contributions and managerial implications unraveled in each study. To help practitioners, eight guidelines for producing branded flash mobs are then offered, and finally, suggestions for future research are presented.

## **3.2 CONCLUSIONS TO THE RESEARCH QUESTION**

Partially embedded in the title of this thesis is the research question “How do branded flash mobs impact consumer behaviour and brand equity?” As covered in chapter one the overarching research question is, at its core, a two-part query. Each study provides insight into the impact of branded flash mobs on consumer, the impact of branded flash mobs on brand equity, or both. This section focuses on the conclusions and contributions of each paper toward both elements of the research question. I remind the reader that the four studies combined do not aspire to answer every question about the phenomenon. In fact, with each paper we find that there are only more relevant questions worthy of study.

### **3.2.1 FINDINGS IN RESPONSE TO RESEARCH QUESTION PART A: IMPACT ON CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR**

As discussed, each paper addresses the first part of the research question in various ways. For example, the first paper asks “Are branded flash mobs an effective tool of communication and persuasion?” To understand the true scope and power of the phenomenon it uses a mixed methods approach to provide an answer. The content analysis in this study revealed that 120 separate firms have produced branded flash mobs across more than a dozen industries in 26 different countries. Through several stakeholder interviews, this study also revealed the dominant motivations for each participating proponent of branded flash mobs. Producers aimed to make a live event memorable or to engage consumers in new ways whereas people reported to be motivated to participate in branded flash mobs for fun or enjoyment, for social reasons, for the memory or story, or to shock or entertain people. These elements serve to provide a range of the driving factors, not a complete taxonomy of responses.

The second paper examines the impact on consumer behaviour through the research question “How do flash mobs affect consumer emotion, loyalty and feelings of connectedness?” Results indicate that branded flash mobs may enhance consumer arousal (atmospheric buzz), consumer desirability to be part of the group, (connectedness), and increase consumer felt emotion during the flash mob.

Understanding why some videos go viral and others do not is receiving an increasingly significant amount of attention among academics (Ferguson, 2008). Where studies 1, 2, and 4 all seek to understand the propitious relationships between branded flash mobs and consumer behaviour, the third paper provides a binary examination of the research topic, by asking “What specific factors cause branded flash mob videos to fail to ‘go viral’?” Toward answering this question a number of sub-questions were needed, and include: *Do consumers distinguish branded from unbranded flash mobs? Do consumers feel cheated when they find out that a flash mob is branded because they feel that the organizing company is ‘misrepresenting the truth’* (Fournier & Avery, 2011; Campbell *et al.*, 2012)?

The third paper also identifies a potential relationship between uncreative branded



flash mob ideas and the likelihood of video sharing. Stale adverts do not seem to heighten affect or inspire sharing. Consumers by now seem to have acquired some experience in watching flash mobs (both branded and unbranded), and marketers will need to be more creative for a video to go viral. This is supported by the Persuasion Knowledge Model (Friestad & Wright, 1994), which explains that over time consumers will adapt to the persuasion attempt unless the producers can vary the concept in such a way that it remains appealing to consumers.

### **3.2.2 FINDINGS IN RESPONSE TO RESEARCH QUESTION PART B: IMPACT ON BRAND EQUITY**

Evidenced by the dozens of branded flash mobs that received millions of YouTube views, it seems plausible that branded flash mobs can offer the firm an opportunity to develop and strengthen brand relationships and to increase customer awareness and interest for the associated brand. Accordingly, in the fourth paper I seek an answer to the question: "What are the effects of branded flash mob viral video commercials on brand equity?"

Referring to the in-depth interviews in paper 1, producers reported that they were motivated to produce branded flash mob videos in an effort to build brand value through viral video marketing. The online viral community offers the brand an opportunity to develop and strengthen a positive relationship with consumers (Plangger, 2012). Further, paper 1 indicated that branded flash mobs may have the potential to build brand relationships since there is evidence that branded flash mob advertisements can be virally successful. Finally, virally successful branded flash mob ads can increase customer awareness and interest for the associated brand (paper 2) since viral success allows firms to instigate new relationships through each viewer's network.

Even in situations where the video produces a neutral attitude toward the ad viewers will share it provided there are other motivating factors. This is evidenced in paper 4 where viewers commented on how much they loved the video, but felt little toward the sponsoring brand. So while the ad may have no impact on a viewer's brand perception, the ad may generate value for the firm from that unaffected viewer's network provided he or she is motivated to share it.

An inherent assumption across all four studies is the postulation that viewer attitudes toward flash mobs can be positive, negative or neutral. The Aad literature indicates that these attitudes have an impact on the brand directly (Cox & Locander, 1987; Laczniak & Carlson, 1989; Phelps & Thorson, 1991). An ad might elicit a range of feelings, either simultaneously or on a subsequent viewing (Edell & Burke, 1987). In fact, advertisers may sometimes intend to elicit negative feelings. There is a substantial body of literature that suggests that negative feelings such as fear can have a positive effect on behaviour and attitudes (Dabbs & Leventhal, 1966; Ray & Wilkie, 1970). For example, insurance ads may choose to show a house burning down to persuade viewers to buy fire insurance.

Logically then, there is potential for those positive, negative or neutral feelings about the ad to be translated into positive, negative or neutral feelings about the brand (paper 1). While this may seem obvious to the reader from this simple statement comes deeper insight. Information can be sought through a breakdown of these antecedent/consequential relationships. For example, positive and neutral ads can potentially produce all three consequences (paper 4). In paper 3, we found that if a viewer has a negative attitude toward the video, the only outcome is negative brand equity since viewers are unlikely to share ads they didn't like. This is important as it helps managers frame and understand the latent risks in producing a branded flash mob.

Of the 140 flash mobs examined in paper 1, 58 (41%) of them failed to reach 100,000 views, 28 (19%) of which did not make it to 10,000. This was addressed in paper 3, which found that videos with low production/performance quality are less likely to be shared. Regardless of their goals, it seems reasonable to propose that at least 60% of flash mob producers in paper 1 found some degree of viral success with their video. As evidenced in papers 3 and 4, producers found viral success due to several production factors. For example, in papers 3, respondents stated explicitly that production values must be high since they held corporations to higher standards. Viewers specifically seemed to be put off by excessive length of the video, and the music was an important element. Regarding video quality, sound and resolution also had an effect on viewer receptivity. Participants also agreed that a good flash mob requires a story 'arc'; it should start small and grow gradually to its ultimate size. Finally, respondents responded positively when the ad showed engagement with the live audience.

### **3.3 THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE THESIS**

#### **3.3.1 BRANDED FLASH MOBS: A GUERRILLA MARKETING TECHNIQUE**

As discussed in section 1.2.2 above, there is scant marketing literature that specifically provides theory and methods by which we can understand branded flash mobs. As a result one objective, and consequently a contribution to the body of marketing knowledge presented by this thesis is to find a theoretical lens through which academics and scholars can understand the branded flash mob phenomenon. In its own way, each study in this thesis provides evidence that the guerilla marketing literature provides the best lens to do this. The evidence is divided and examined as follows:

##### *(1) Return on Investment*

Guerrilla marketing relies on unorthodox advertising campaigns to draw the attention of a large, broad audience to the brand at comparatively little cost (Lefevers, 2008). In the same way, producers of branded flash mobs have learned to leverage the network of online viewers to increase brand visibility and recognition at a low cost (Green, 2013). Through a content analysis, paper 1 exhibits many branded flash mobs from around the world (Table 2) that surpassed one million YouTube views, (Table 1) at a cost that is, relative to traditional advertising, very low.

##### *(2) Element of Surprise*

Guerilla campaigns are designed to engage with consumers and/or the media by evoking a surprise effect with their advertising message (Hutter & Hoffman 2011; Lefevers, 2008). Similarly, branded flash mobs can engage audience members by leveraging the element of surprise. While each of the studies conducted herein address this element, the field experiment in the second paper extracted this truth most explicitly. Many respondents spoke to the impact of the spontaneous nature of the event. As an example, one attendee declared:

'I actually came to get something for dinner, and when we came around, and heard... [singing and] I said, "Where is this voice coming from? Where is this voice? Let's follow the voice." So we just came down and it did move us to tears. There's no doubt about it; it's fantastic and I hope it was impromptu and that you startled everyone here, because what an experience they had. It was lovely, it was wonderful.'

### *(3) Heightened Affective Response*

Unlike traditional advertising, which seeks to educate consumers, guerrilla marketers aim to entertain and create heightened consumer engagement (Dahlén *et al.*, 2009; Lefevers, 2008). As discussed in the second paper, branded flash mobs are similar to other guerrilla marketing tactics as they enhance consumer arousal, and positively influence the pleasure response. Whether the audience members were smiling, clapping, or dancing along, the reaction of the audience proved to be an important factor for the viewers. Additionally, in the third study we found that, similar to guerrilla adverts, flash mobs that do not stimulate a positive emotion are less likely to be shared.

### *(4) Creativity and Originality*

At its core, guerrilla marketing is innovative and creative by nature. According to Ay *et al.*, (2010), guerrilla marketing initiatives are most susceptible to failure when they are not unique or lacking in imagination. Further, if the guerrilla marketing technique employed becomes overexposed it will become less effective (Bass *et al.*, 2007). This is aligned with the principles of Persuasion Knowledge Model (Friestad & Wright, 1994), which states that consumers will develop coping behaviour that enables them to recognize, analyze, interpret, evaluate and remember persuasion attempts, and to select and execute coping tactics as they become familiar with the marketing attempt. In the same way, marketers will need to create an ad that is fresh and compelling as consumers acquire more experience with branded flash mobs. Moreover, as discussed in the third study, unoriginal flash mobs are less likely to be shared by consumers. As affirmed by one respondent who stated, "There has to be something special because if you just have people dancing and singing it doesn't make the event special."

### *(5) Disadvantages and Risks*

In paper 3 we found that there are several potential inherent disadvantages and risks shared between guerrilla marketing techniques and branded flash mobs. First, efficacy is difficult to measure. Outside of the performance location there is no method to capture quantifiable data such as return on investment, cost-per-response, or conversion rate. Second, the viewer typically leaves the scene with memories (hopefully) but rarely with tangible brand information. Finally, for high profile brands, the guerrilla marketing attempt can decrease the brand reputation if the consumer perceives the cost or production value of the event to be too low (Dahlén *et al.*, 2009).

### 3.3.2 TOOLS TO UNDERSTAND AND MEASURE THE IMPACT ON BRAND EQUITY

One of the most important facets of research is the weighing of evidence and drawing conclusions from the data. The exploratory nature of each study in this thesis guides the pursuit of the most significant findings possible. Placed within evidential context of marketing literature, and based on plausible reasoning, research propositions allow for claims to be made with due caution, modesty, and humility (Hyland, 1994). Therefore, a list of propositions (tables 10, 11, 12) is presented herein to challenge researchers to extend, substantiate, or repudiate. In this way, this thesis provides a theoretical base for academics to launch into future research.

**Table 10: Propositions from Paper 1**

Proposition 1a:	Branded flash mobs offer the producer the opportunity to develop and strengthen brand relationships with consumers.
Proposition 1b:	The purpose and aim for branding a flash mob is to increase customer awareness and interest through the product and its associated brand, and to engage with more potential consumers virally.
Proposition 2a:	Branded flash mobs can produce affective value.
Proposition 2b:	During the live event, audience members are not alert to any involvement by the brand, or branding company.
Proposition 3a:	People may participate in flash mobs for recreational reasons.
Proposition 3b:	People may participate in flash mobs for communal reasons.
Proposition 3c:	The opportunity to perform in a flash mob can motivate participation.
Proposition 3d:	The spontaneous and outlandish nature of flash mobs may lead to a willingness to participate.
Proposition 4	Branded flash mobs are spreadable. That is, branded flash mobs have the power to go viral and reach a large audience.

**Table 11: Propositions from Paper 2**

Proposition 1:	Live unexpected music in a market can lead to heightened consumer-felt arousal.
Proposition 2a:	Flash Mobs can elicit a heightened emotional response in consumers.
Proposition 2b:	The heightened emotional response felt by consumers can lead to long-term consumer loyalty.
Proposition 3a:	Flash mobs can create a temporary group and sense of connectedness between audience members and performers.
Proposition 3b:	Temporary groups may turn into feelings of identification, which in turn could lead to increased consumer loyalty.

**Table 12: Propositions from Paper 3**

Proposition 1:	Unoriginal branded flash mobs are less likely to be shared by consumers.
Proposition 2:	Branded flash mobs that do not stimulate a positive emotion are less likely to be shared.
Proposition 3:	A video where the live audience is not visible or not engaged is less likely to be shared by viewers.
Proposition 4:	Videos with low production and performance quality are less likely to be shared.
Proposition 5:	There is an aversion toward corporations that produce branded flash mobs, and viewers hold them to different standards.

Similarly, the final paper, *Branded Flash Mobs, YouTube and the Effects of Viewer Attitudes on Brand Equity*, presents a conceptual typology of four consumer attitudes toward the online ad by bringing together previously disparate streams of brand equity theories. These four archetypes of consumer attitudes to the online ad are based on processing (cognitive vs. emotive), and attitude position (supportive vs. antagonistic). Each dimension on its own has validity and a history in the brand equity literature and, when mapped together, provides scholars with a powerful new framework to examine the effects of the branded flash mobs on the brand equity. For example, and as discussed, from our examination of the discourse of the most positive archetype (cognitive and affective processing) we posit that those who were supportive engage with more potential consumers virally.

### 3.4 Discussion and Managerial Implications

Not the type to miss a beat, shrewd marketers are increasingly using flash mobs as a unique and memorable way to generate consumer affinity and brand loyalty, as well as to gain exposure and heighten the consumer experience with increased frequency online. Close examination of the branded flash mobs through the four studies set herein produced numerous noteworthy trends.

First, consumer involvement is an important area for managers and researchers to consider. In an age where consumers are becoming increasingly savvy to options within the marketplace, and are less easily persuaded by traditional marketing tactics, a firm's ability to set itself aside from competition is becoming increasingly important. The high level of interaction between producers and consumers in a branded flash mob help companies distinguish themselves from others and give consumers an avenue for creative expression and interaction.

It is widely accepted that consumers don't trust marketers' motives, nor do they want to feel manipulated by advertisers. Many marketers implicitly understand that gaining trust is critical in facilitating exchange relationships (Kemp, Bui, & Chapa, 2012). Content marketing, a marketing technique that involves the creation and publication of original content such as blogs, videos and photos, has become an increasingly important way to enhance the trust factor (Hosford, 2012). Other key strengths of content marketing include its ability to improve engagement with consumers, achieve faster, more relevant touch points in the market, and improve search engine optimization (SEO) scores (Hosford, 2012). It is plausible then, that branded flash mobs are a way to position the brand and create a dialogue between consumers.

Branded flash mobs have the potential to heighten consumer felt emotion and arousal (atmospheric buzz) and create a social community in the social media arena (Oakes & Warnaby, 2011). Consumers tend to feel stronger ties of connectedness in situations where companies can increase arousal and emotion towards a product or service (Terrion *et al.*, 2002). This leads me to posit, from a strategic perspective, that branded flash mobs may allow companies to stand apart from the competition.

In today's age of "Big Data", where managers and researchers want to know 'how much', 'how often' and 'how many', understanding Aad effectiveness through a quantitative lens is becoming more important. Marketing managers now have the tools to inform their strategies. The data has become particularly easy to capture, where watch-time and post-exposure search queries, cookies, and log files can be used as a metric to assess user impact (Pashkevich *et al.*, 2012). Viral video advertising researchers also have access to some important new tools of measurement, including views, 'click-throughs', time spent at websites, exploration patterns, and the pattern of online purchasing.

In an age where consumers are becoming increasingly discerning and skeptical traditional marketing tactics have become less effective (Friestad & Wright, 1994). To a large degree it matters who organizes the flash mob. Viewers have different criteria

for corporate productions than they do for unbranded flash mobs. Obvious branding of the event or video puts many viewers off, especially if they find out late in the video that the flash mob was made for a commercial reason. For branded flash mobs in particular, this thesis showed that consumers are setting higher standards but that they are still open to being persuaded. Persuasion attempts will likely continue to be successful, provided that marketers continue to create flash mob type events that are fresh, creative, and professional.

Our findings are in line with the Persuasion Knowledge Model, especially what Friestad and Wright (1994) call the Change-of-Meaning Principle; the moment viewers become aware that the flash mob is a persuasion attempt, they start coping differently; they tire, they disengage and they reevaluate their interest. The Persuasion Knowledge Model efficiently explains that over time consumers may become aware that flash mobs may be branded, and are thus less easily persuaded, which results in a failed marketers attempt. It is plausible that branded flash mobs will suffer from wearout effects unless producers can constantly vary the concept in such a way that it remains appealing to consumers (Bass *et al.*, 2007). Instead of the phenomenon dying out, it is more likely that it will grow. Recently, Belgium's TNT-TV produced a video to advertise the launch of a new high-quality TV station. The video, entitled 'A Dramatic Surprise on a Quiet Square' (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=316AzLYfAzw>) begins by showing a quiet square in an average Flemish town (Aarshot, pop. 28,000) with a sign hovering over a button that reads "PUSH TO ADD DRAMA". After a few moments of trepidation by a few different on-lookers, a curious passerby bravely pushes the button. A full scale Hollywood action scene ensues, with dramatic twists and turns that are both thrilling and shocking. With over 35 million hits in its first two months the video has become the second most-shared ad of all time (after Volkswagen's Super Bowl ad "The Force"). The advertisement, which Savage (2012) calls a "flash mob type thing", has many of the branded flash mob elements. Specifically, it takes place in a public space, is presented to an unsuspecting public, and at the end of it, the performers all disperse, leaving the scene as still and peaceful as when they arrived. Proving Wasik's point, TNT has clearly pushed the limits of what a flash mob is. Still, it's not yet clear what is going to come next. As webpronews.com recently asked:

"Does the new TNT video successfully reinvent the 'flash mob' advertising formula? TV channel TNT's striking new ad hit YouTube today: does it work as a new take on the format made popular by T Mobile, amongst others?" (Wolford, 2012).

As the flash mob phenomenon evolves, astute and creative advertising agencies will continue to look for ways to push branded flash mobs in new and exciting directions in an effort to create value for the firm. From a communications perspective, we now have stronger insights to help marketers incorporate strategies to produce an event that will generate advocacy for their brand and, with it, brand growth.

Finally, investigation of branded flash mobs uncovered a surprising hole in the marketing literature. Historically, the music and marketing literature has focused on background music because foreground music (defined as vocal and live) has not



effectively been used to influence consumer behaviour. Yalch & Spangenberg (1990) report that customers have a preference for foreground music but their moods and unplanned purchases were not substantially enhanced by exposure to it. Since branded flash mobs almost always use music to some degree (for dancing or singing), and have shown to make an impact on the shoppers' mood, this thesis reopens the discussion on foreground music and marketing.

The research offered in this thesis has contributed to the body of marketing knowledge in three distinct ways. First, each of the studies presented above, and summarized in Tables 8 and 9, have provided several discrete insights and contributions to the literature (Tables 10-12). A brief summation of each study can be found in section 1.4 above (The Investigation: A Summary of the Research) or found in full in chapter 2 of this thesis.

Second, this thesis also offered new insights to the marketing discipline by way of the larger researcher study. Recall, the overarching aim of this thesis is to better understand the impact of branded flash mobs on consumer behaviour and consumer experience. A meta-analysis of the four independent research studies provided several theoretical insights as well as several tools to understand and measure the impact on brand equity (section 3.3). Additionally, branded flash mobs were integrated into the guerilla marketing literature. As a third and final contribution, the next section presents eight practical suggestions to marketers who are contemplating branding a flash mob. Considerations toward implementation as well as understanding risks and rewards are offered.

### **3.4.1 MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS FOR BRANDED FLASH MOB PRODUCERS: (EIGHT CONSIDERATIONS)**

Managers who aspire to engage consumers through branded flash mobs must develop an informed production strategy towards the desired outcome. Careless planning can be ruinous. Consumers will communicate a negative experience to at least nine other people and 13% of disgruntled consumers will communicate their dissatisfaction to more than thirty people (Woerndl *et al.*, 2008). Moreover, 90% of consumers will not make a purchase from a company involved in negative word-of-mouth messages (Solomon, 2003).

While a branded flash mob embodies many of the spontaneous, fun, and peaceful elements that define the unbranded flash mob, it differs in several planning and execution elements. To produce the event effectively producers of branded flash mobs must consider pre- and post-production elements such as choreography and rehearsal requirements, the potential need for insurance and permits, and video-editing and social media diffusion strategy.

There are certain flash mob elements that marketers need to know when branding a flash mob if they are to create brand affinity. To date, a how-to manifesto toward creating a successful flash mob has not yet been empirically substantiated, however,

drawing from the research above, I now offer eight suggestions for marketers to consider while planning an event. These recommendations should be of interest to advertising and marketing practitioners based on the insight each provides.

**1) High level of spectator participation:** Producers should aim to produce the flash mob in a space where they will have access to a large physical audience since social influence is stronger in larger groups (Burnkrant & Cousineau, 1975). Furthermore, according to Meyerson (1996) feelings of connectedness can lead to temporary group formations, which is strongly linked with consumer loyalty (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Some companies (such as Rogers) completely remove the audience element in an effort to control for various aspects of production. As discussed in paper 3 this only serves to make the flash mob look 'fake' and over-produced.

**2) Represent Spontaneity:** The flash mob is meant to attract attention from an initially unsuspecting audience therefore it must seem spontaneous. While flash mobs can require a lot of planning and rehearsal, perceived unpredictability throughout the episode is key to sustained engagement.

**3) Document and track the event effectively:** Brand exposure can be tracked via analytics programs on platforms such as YouTube, Facebook and Google. Compounding the effort, spectators often video record the flash mob with their smartphone, and post the video online. This additional data should not be overlooked as it may also prove to be valuable information.

**4) Arouse, excite, or amuse:** Successfully branding a flash mob depends on the immediacy and emotional accessibility of its content to consumers. Flash mobs with greater degrees of emotional content have better chances of success (Perkins, 2013). High production values of both the branded flash mob and video footage can also influence the success rate.

**5) Innovate:** Stale ideas do not get shared, nor do they always heighten emotion, so marketers are reminded to develop fresh and creative branded flash mobs. As marketers become more skillful at producing, targeting, developing, and branding flash mobs the phenomenon will grow substantially. Therefore, it is important to stay current with what is being done by other marketers. This is aligned with the Friestad and Wright's Persuasion Knowledge Model (1994), which states that marketers must develop new persuasion tactics when the target audience learns to cope with existing ones.

**6) Create Fit:** The type of flash mob is an important flash mob element. Firms are advised to consider the relationship between the brand, or sponsoring company and the type of flash mob instituted. While the majority (72%) of branded flash mobs examined in this study used dancing in their

flash mobs this mode is not always relevant or appropriate. For example, in the "Ford Fiesta Flash mob at Menara Millenium Bukit Damansara (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cGPzK6YaomA>), twenty young men and women danced around a Ford Fiesta to promote the launch of the car. Focus group participants agreed that this video did not make sense and further reported a need to see a strong match between the mode and the brand. Uploaded in 2010, this video only received 1090 unique YouTube views.

The 2012 flash mob Lynx Attract: Chaos on the Bus (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e5wUB-VI3aY>), is a fun example of an advertisement that achieved fit (and viral success - 174,069 hits). Traditionally a male orientated brand, Lynx launched a new fragrance (Lynx Attract) targeted at women. Produced by the award winning London based Ad agency TMW, the event, which took place on a moving city bus, featured Lynx Attract branding and carried hundreds of real passengers around they city of Leeds. As the doors shut and the bus started moving, 10 'talent' couples began passionately kissing, much to the surprise of the unsuspecting passengers. Seven hours of live footage was edited into a two minute long advert and posted to YouTube on Valentine's Day (Matalic, 2012).

**7) Play Nice:** The marketer must be careful not to leave the audience feeling exploited or cheated. Ethical standards must be observed (Kaikati and Kaikati, 2004) and the attempt must not invade their privacy (Phelps *et al.*, 2004). Shocking videos may get shared but that does not necessarily translate into an increase in brand equity.

**8) Let It Go:** Viewers are going to take one of four stances toward the ad (paper 4). This may be useful in planning and preparation however marketers are advised to prepare to concede control of the message. Pull marketing empowers the 'audience as marketer' and is arguably more effective than a 'push' strategy because it is easier to sell to a consumer who has a strong positive view of the product (Dobele *et al.*, 2005; Welker, 2002).

### 3.5 SUMMARY AND SUGGESTED FUTURE RESEARCH

When I first began this thesis my overall aim was to help marketers understand the branded flash mob phenomenon and how it might mediate the brand relationship. Further, I had hoped to help them manage the persuasion attempt more fluently. As I moved through the four studies the difficulty of that task became increasingly apparent as the phenomenon proved to be multi-faceted and multi-dimensional. I hope to have approached the most important of these above, yet many facets still await exploration. For example, as presented in paper 2, I produced a branded flash mob at Vancouver's Granville Island Market. While the layout of the market was an ideal fit for a study on operatic flash mobs, that space may not work for other types of flash mobs. Therefore, it may be worthwhile to explore which flash mob types (e.g., singing, dancing, or kissing) and which location types (e.g., malls, plazas, or food courts) provide companies with the most value.

In addition to measuring the effect of the flash mob on the consumer and environment, it seems plausible that due to the heightened emotional response created by many flash mobs, many other latent benefits await exploration. Limited by the format of this thesis other areas of study not covered include impact on purchase behaviour, efficacy of the ad message, degree of branding behind the flash mob, and impact of the artistic integrity (e.g., amateurs versus professionals). This research may be also used as a platform for further study on 'customer stickiness'. Because flash mobs are so much fun it seems plausible that consumers may return to a site (e.g., mall, store, or market) that produces regular flash mobs more often if they can predict when such events will take place. *Planned Spontaneity* (consumers don't know *what* but they do know *when* and *where*) is a buzz-marketing tool used to increase foot traffic and market share with it (Bradbury, 2012). For example, members of the Covent Garden Opera Chorus sing at the Covent Garden Mall every Saturday afternoon. Many local shoppers plan their weekly shopping around this event. In this way, branded flash mobs may also impact the quality of the shopping experience and willingness to pay. Increased foot traffic may encourage increased spending on conveniently available items such as food, drink, or retail products. Moreover, locations that struggle to generate foot traffic may catalyze a re-enchantment of the space, which can be leveraged for marketing purposes (Oakes & Warnaby, 2011).

This thesis lays the groundwork for such future examinations of the branded flash mob phenomenon in three ways. First, I offered a formal set of propositions to assist future researchers in their pursuit of new insight and new directions. Second, I presented several theoretical conclusions, supported by this research. Finally, I developed a list of eight suggestions for practitioners to consider when producing branded flash mobs.

After concluding his eighth and final flash mob creator Bill Wasik understood the potential of the flash mob phenomenon, calling them a pre-movement (Harmon, 2003). The branded flash mob is certainly one illustration of a flash mob derivative but others exist as well. Examples include *Cash-mobs*, where the flash mob involves spending money at a suffering local business, *Contentainment*, where the *flash mobber* is hired to hawk merchandise following a flash mob, and *Carrot-mob*, where

the mob spends money to support a business and in return the company makes an environmental improvement to the business (i.e., solar panels). The impact each of these may have on the firm, the brand, and the consumer remains to be explored. Certainly, as the branded flash mob phenomenon evolves, future research will be needed.



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