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Opinion leaders and word-of-mouth

A case study of Masai Barefoot Technology shoes

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Abstract

Title: Opinion leaders and word-of-mouth - A case study of Masai Barefoot Technology shoes

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Keywords: Marketing, Word of mouth, Opinion leader, Influentials, Masai Barefoot Technology (MBT)

Purpose: This research aims at identifying the opinion leaders in order to study their behaviour, characteristics, their role within the word of mouth process, and what importance they have upon another consumers purchase decision. Also, to investigate the content of the message being spread.

Theoretical perspectives: A walkthrough on relevant theories on word of mouth, opinion leadership, and communication is provided in this chapter. The presentation of these theories creates a base from which further developed research questions are made.

Methodology: This research applies a mixed philosophy and method, integrating both qualitative and quantitative aspects. The application of mixed philosophies and methods is due to the nature of the research problem.

Empirical Foundation: Primary data has been collected using a cross-sectional case study design of Fotkultur, which is an independent concept store solely featuring MBT (Masai Barefoot Technology) shoes.

Conclusion: The results from the study show that opinion leaders are strong in spreading word of mouth. Messages were adapted by opinion leaders to suite their target audience. The results further contribute to the discussion about Watts' "influentials".

Introductory Remarks

This study has taken a lot of time and effort to complete. We are very pleased with the results, but we could not have achieved them on our own. We would like to give Fotkultur our deepest gratitude for letting us conduct this research with their customers and with their help. Our supervisor, Johan Anselmsson, also deserves our acknowledgment for being an excellent source of aide and continuously showing us a critical side to our study.

Lund, May 2007,

Patrik Lerud, Olof Molander-Hjorth, Fredrik Söderstjerna

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1. Introduction

This chapter aims to present a discussion around the declining efficiency in traditional marketing and the request for new marketing techniques, such as word of mouth. Opinion leaders are said to be the most influential and important in the word of mouth process, and this chapter links these two areas and then presents the research questions.

1.1 Background

The Super Bowl, the biggest mass marketing event in the United States, generates a lot of hype and expectations from both consumers and companies alike (Anonymous, Advertising Age, 2007). A 30 second advertisement during the half time show costs around $ 2,6 Million. There are a lot of companies that want to show their face and be seen (Ibid.). It is almost always the new, flashy gadgets that get advertised at the Super Bowl (Soat 2007). This year it was the Apple Iphone and IBM (to name a few) who wanted a part of the extreme hype. It is not surprising, since there are roughly 90 million people stuck in front of the TV on game night (Soat 2007). Klaassen (2007) writes about a man who wants to propose to his girlfriend via an advertisement during the Super Bowl. His idea is to get a number of sponsors to raise the $2 million needed for the advertisement. This is one place where we can see the real effects of mass marketing (Neff & Wheaton, 2007). Atkinson (2007) says that the Super Bowl is an excellent opportunity to generate online traffic to company's websites after seeing the commercial. Neff & Wheaton (2007) mention that visits to company's websites the day after Super Bowl soars, at least for the ones who paid the high price for an advertisement spot. Already in 1984, although a commercial spot for the Super Bowl did not cost as much as it does today, it was used to launch Apples new computer of that time, the Macintosh (Hughes 2005). Rosen (2000), Hughes (2005), Gummesson (2002), McConnell & Huba (2007) and many more argue for the decline of mass marketing as an effective marketing tool. To fully understand this, we must look back and see how it started, and what the next big thing in marketing will be.

When the paper printer was invented, advertisements started to appear in newspapers (Thompson, 2001; www.ne.se #1, 2007-05-16; www.ne.se #2, 2007-05-16). When the mass production of television sets started, television commercials started to appear (Thompson, 2001; www.ne.se #3, 2007-05-16). Basically, it is due to the development of new communications technology (www.ne.se #4, 2007-05-22) and the expansion in the economy (Eichengreen, 1996) that mass marketing grew enormously during the late 19th century until the mid 20th century. Transactional marketing theory became the dominant paradigm in the 20th century. The paradigm started in the middle of the century when Neil Borden identified twelve controllable marketing elements, that if properly managed they would enable a "profitable business operation" (Harker & Egan, 2006). These twelve elements were later to be shortened down to a four-element framework. These four have come to be called the four P:s and consists of product, price, promotion and place. The transactional marketing sees consumers as a mass market rather than as individuals and this type of marketing had been a working marketing tool until the mid 20th century when a peak to mass communication started to appear (Ibid).

Around this time, consumers learned how to recognize commercial messages, how they are shaped and from whom they are sent (Dahlen & Lange , 2003). Out of this new knowledge a tendency could be seen where each individual consumer was able to select what messages to listen to, and which to ignore (Ibid). This statement is not only based on the growth of mass marketed messages but also that consumer’s lost faith of companies and their communication (Ibid).

However there are still cases where companies gain opportunities such as growth and profits from reaching huge populations through mass media technologies (like the Super Bowl), but since the traditional marketing tools are losing their efficiency, companies are in great need of new methods to communicate with their customers (Bloom, 2006). Therefore it has lately become more evident that a paradigm shift can be seen in marketing. Gummesson (2002) has emphasized a shift to relationship marketing, which in short means that companies need to build relationships with all parties of the value chain. Through interaction between customers and companies the goal is that both parties in the relationship shall gain a higher value and be a base for a long term relationship which can result in even higher value for both parties (Ibid). Even though Gummesson (2002), Hughes (2005), Rosen (2000), Silverman (2001), to name a few, raise serious critic against the power of traditional marketing methods, there is still tremendous amounts of money poured into traditional marketing, probably more than ever before (as in the Super Bowl case). In average a person is exposed to 3000 messages per day sent out by companies, worldwide (McConell & Huba, 2007). Gummesson’s (2002) criticizes the effectiveness of traditional marketing in the information overflow and lack of human capacity to absorb such large amounts of information. The majority of the population quickly forgets the messages they have been exposed to and seldom messages ever reach its targets (Kotler, 1997; Fornell & Wernerfelt, 1988; Quickvise/Annonsörföreningen, 2005).

Silverman (2001) discusses that today consumers have built up an ability to filter among all the information they are met by every day, hence only absorbing the information they are interested in. With the 3000 messages a consumer is exposed to everyday, there is a lot of information that does not get absorbed, showing that the effect of mass marketing is declining (Silverman 2001; McConnell & Huba 2007). However, there is information penetrating this filter besides the information the consumers themselves are deciding to take part of. This information has been given more attention lately and several studies have shown that in many cases when we are exposed to information we have not asked for, a negative attitude is created. A research by Edman (2006) has shown that Swedish consumers perceive commercials as irritating. However this perception is not exclusive for the Swedish population. A study by Kaikati & Kaikati (2004) showed that in year 1995 only three ads were needed to get attention from females in America while ten years later to reach the same attention ninety-seven ads were needed. Kaikati & Kaikati drew a conclusion that consumer’s dissenting attitude came out of irritation which evolves when they are met by sales promotions they do not wish for. This scepticism can be seen as one of the reasons for the considerable change of the basic conditions of market communication. Hughes (2005) mentions that he has seen big corporate firms spend millions of dollars on conventional marketing and the results they received were, not surprisingly, conventional. He furthers argues that marketers with big spending budgets do not see the breakaway growth that can be seen with other types of marketing. Russel and Belsh (2005) show that not only is mass marketing no longer as effective as before, it also seems to create negative opinions rather than positive ones. This further emphasizes the need for new marketing communication techniques.

Even though Gummesson (2002) argues for a paradigm shift towards relationship marketing, and supports his arguments with well grounded facts an important discussion remains. One could argue for the relationship marketing's ineffectiveness when the consumer is not willing to be part of a relationship with the company. During a relationship the customer often needs to accept to be exposed to enormous amounts of information. This is an aspect which can be considered as a barrier for a relationship to emerge. If a relationship after all has been established, then incitements for the customer to stay in the relation must be sustained. Questions could be raised if companies are delivering such incitements and if customers are so deeply involved in the relationship that relationship marketing is an effective marketing tool. After all Gummesson (2002) stresses that a company should not continue a relationship or force a relationship onto a consumer if they do not want to be part of a relationship with the company or if they do no longer wish to continue the relationship. If such a situation would occur, companies will most likely fall into a lose situation with the risk of a backfire as well the possibility that the consumer develops a negative attitude towards the company.

What just been said indicates that relationship marketing will probably never be as effective as traditional mass marketing once was in reaching large amounts of customers. A working relationship between a customer and a company often comes with positive outcomes for both parties (Gummesson, 2000). However, even if a company is able to build working relationships with their customers there is a need for recruiting new ones. Especially for companies who do not wish to build relationships or where a relationship between the customer and the company plainly cannot exist. We have been showing that mass marketing is still widely used but rarely generate value for the money spent. Therefore new communication techniques are needed to recruit and retain customers.

A number of products and brands, the Beanie Babies, the Ipod, the Palm handheld organizers, and *The Blair Witch Project* to name a few, have had tremendous success that they do not owe to traditional mass marketing (McConnell & Huba 2007). The successes of these products are due to excellent product launches and buzzmarketing that surrounded the launches. Rosen (2000) stresses that buzzmarketing is about getting people to talk about the company's products. It is word of mouth initiated by companies. Rosen (2000) argues that the difference is that with buzzmarketing, the company wants to have some control over how buzz is created, spread and built up, without spending the amount of money needed for mass marketing. Since it is company initiated, Rosen (2000) furthers argues that it is important to map out a network of consumers in order to see who is influencing who, who should be talked to, and who should receive the initial information. After a company has started spreading information, word of mouth kicks in. Word of mouth in itself is not controlled in the initiating phase by a company, it happens without the company having an active part in its creation.

Word of mouth has recently been getting more attention from both researchers and marketing managers. This is because the nature of word of mouth creates an information flow where messages initiated by companies are excluded (Hofman, 2006). Thorstenson (2006) argues that this has its starting point in the fact that it is the people, not commercials, which have the highest potential to affect consumers. If there is a desire to change attitudes and behaviour, the focus should be to create trust and relations rather than to mass communicate a message. Silverman, who published his book "*The Secrets of Word-of-Mouth Marketing*" in 2001, puts it like this:

> *Word of mouth is communication about products and services between people who are perceived to be independent of the company providing the product or service, in a medium perceived to be independent of the company.*
> *Silverman, George (2001, pg. 25)*

Silverman further acknowledges that the strength of word of mouth is that the sender of the message is not seen as commercially influenced. Moreover messages which come from a person are often adapted to the receiver (Silverman, 2001).

Word of mouth comes from the human essential need of communicating through speaking and is our oldest communication medium (Kapferer, 1988; Rosen, 2000). However when discussing word of mouth through a marketing perspective it is a result of what has been earlier discussed: a result of the information overflow and lack of human capacity to absorb and remember the 3000 messages received every day (McConnell & Huba 2007). Customers and prospects discuss the information they absorb and help each other to decide what to do with it. In fact, most purchase decisions are being discussed with someone before it actually takes place (McConell & Huba, 2007). Rosen (2000) discusses the important role of communication when it comes to minimize risks, costs, and uncertainty. Through word of mouth the consumer does not need to search and evaluate the information and product on their own. The consumer can get indirect experience of the product and comparisons with other similar products and out this reduce the risk of a purchase (Rosen, 2000; Silverman, 2001). Recommendations made by friends, colleagues and relatives also come out on top in almost every survey measuring what influences a purchase the most (Bloom, 2006).

Companies often believe they cannot control word of mouth and due to this they are not devoting resources towards it. This is however not true and word of mouth is such a powerful tool that no company should ignore it. Chances are that a product is influenced more by word of mouth than anything else and word of mouth can be influenced and harnessed and in that sense controlled as much as all other marketing activities (Hughes, 2005; Silverman, 2001). Silverman further elaborates the discussion by saying that word of mouth is the most powerful tool to shorten a consumer's decision process.

> *I am the world's worst salesman, therefore, I must make it easy for people to buy. –F.W Woolworth (Silverman, 2001, pg. 18)*

Rogers was touching upon the exact same thing as Silverman but as early as in 1963. When Rogers presented his research he stressed that innovations reached higher sales much faster if the opinion leaders got involved with the innovation, accepted it, and spread the word about it. Rogers was also able to show that if the innovation got support among the opinion leaders it could reach higher sales overall than without their support. Rogers has been following up his work, which was first presented in 1963, and released updated work in books carrying the same name as the original book in both 1983 and 1995 and the latest one in 2003. For each update, the effect that word of mouth has becomes clearer, especially seen among the opinion leaders. Positive word of mouth by opinion leaders increases a company's ability to reach certain sales levels faster, and in cutting the decision time among the consumers.

If there is a common opinion almost everyone could supply the customer with information about the product. However for many products, especially new ones, there does not exist a common opinion and Rogers (1983) discusses that consumers belong to different stages within an adoption cycle. Innovators and early adopters are the first ones who are attracted to the product and try it out. Among those innovators and early adopters some will further on act as opinion leaders and spread the product to other consumers (Silverman, 2001).

Opinion leaders, advisors, influentials are among the terms used to describe these innovators discussed above (Weimann 1994). The term “opinion leader” dates back to the 1950’s when two researchers, Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955), published a book called *Personal Influence*. This was the first book that attempted to identify and categorize opinion leaders. An interesting observation is that the authors clearly state that they see a difference in what social context the people are that they want to investigate. They make it clear that they cannot look at a hospital or factory for there the social construct would impose certain roles and these roles would naturally lead to certain people becoming opinion leaders. Instead, Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) will put the people they are looking at in their natural context, in informal networks and communities. To categorize opinion leaders, the authors have chosen three elements to look at. They are, what part of the life cycle they are in, what socio-economic status they have and their gregariousness. What the authors built on was the “two-step flow of communication” model. The idea of this model is that messages are passed from mass media to opinion leaders who then pass them on to the general public. They also found that opinion leaders are influential in their communities. Gladwell (2001) suggests in his book *The Tipping Point* that any innovation or phenomenon finds an undefined state where it totally changes direction, usually from bad to good. He mentions one case with the American Hush Puppies shoes that basically overnight became a fashion sensation when the company originally wanted to phase the shoes out. Gladwell suggests that if a company finds influentials and spread the word to them, the “tipping point” will come naturally and the influentials will spread it automatically to the rest. This is largely the same notion that Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) had with their communication model. Watts (2007) argues that it is not as simple as all this. He proposes that sometimes the influential´s social networks are not connected as necessary in order to spread the word efficiently enough. If this is the case, the message that was meant to be spread might die and never reach enough “normal people”. It is hence necessary to make sure that the influentials are well connected too - “*just as the size of a forest fire often has little to do with the spark that started it and lots to do with the state of the forest*” (Watts 2007, pg.12). These assumptions suites well with how Rosen (2000) describes opinion leaders. He does not see influentials as opinion leaders since that term somehow connotes a form of leadership, and not all influentials fit that description. Instead, Rosen refers to influentials as network hubs, seeing them figuring in communities with different influence. He sees different kinds of hubs having different levels of influence over their surroundings. A “mega-hub” for example, is a member of press, a celebrity or a politician who can reach out to many listeners at once. In comparison, a “regular-hub” can be a “normal person” who has influence in a certain product category for example.

Weimann (1994) describes opinion leaders as the consumers that people seek out for recommendations and advice regarding new products. They can also air their opinion freely for anyone to receive and listen to. For one consumer, there are probably multiple influentials that figures as references (Rosen 2000). One person might have one opinion leader they seek out for the latest news about movies at the cinema, whilst a completely different person is sought for advice regarding what mp3 player to buy. Opinion leaders can voice their opinion in multiple different ways, and with the internet becoming more and more popular (Kiani, 1998), the ways in which one’s voice is heard increases too. As Castelluccio (2006) mentions, blogs are becoming more and more popular. This gives people, anyone basically, the possibility to share their thoughts and beliefs, a kind of online graffiti wall. Hence, blogs can serve as a way of getting information, and for opinion leaders to post and share their knowledge. The voice and opinion of opinion leaders are therefore of outmost importance for companies to have on their side, and for the creation and delivery of word of mouth an important resource.

1.2 Theoretical Problem

Exactly how influential opinion leaders are has been the topic of multiple researchers for the past decades. Weimann (1991) presents a review of previous research about how to classify and identify opinion leaders and their social value. Weimann then argues that the prior methods are faulty and proves that the PS scale (Strength of Personality Scale developed by Noelle-Neumann and the Allensbach Institut für Demoskopie) is a more accurate method for identifying and ranking opinion leaders. Even so far back as 1968, Kadushin (1968), referring to opinion leaders as "elites", sees the importance of having them in social circles and touches on the influence they can exercise on their surroundings. Kadushin mentions that elites have power, and this power is not given to them but earned, meaning that the opinion leaders have earned the trust of their "followers" which makes them even more trustworthy. On the other hand, Keller and Berry (2003) and Rosen (2000) define opinion leaders as "influentials", which also is the name of their book. They identify and show the importance of having influentials in society, and also what impact they have on other consumers. They mention that where the average American is connected to three groups in society, (their neighbourhood, a church or synagogue and their workplace), an influential is connected to seven groups including a political group, hobby or interest group and an alumni association. We can clearly see from this that the influentials have a larger contact area, and since they are connected, Keller and Berry show, they are also influential.

Word of mouth has also been the target of much research over the years. Haywood (1989), in 1989, published an article discussing how to manage word of mouth communications within the service industry. Most of the research has been regarding how important word of mouth is, and how it can benefit companies in their marketing activities. Dwyer (2007) discusses the effect word of mouth has on consumers in the online environment and communities. He reaches the conclusion that what consumers post online in blogs and such plays an important part in how consumers perceive the products of a company. This emphasizes the role of word of mouth in marketing as being an important tool.

Linking these two ideas together, one can easily reach the assumption that strong opinion leaders spread the most convincing word of mouth, making them highly valuable in creating positive word of mouth. Haywood (1989), researches the link between opinion leaders and word of mouth for service companies due to the nature of services being intangible, the inseparability of production and consumption and the non-standardization of its products. These forces consumers to pay more attention to what others think and evaluate the service being provided by a company. Looking back at the previous argument about opinion leaders, we can see how Haywood is right, strong opinion leaders are most often needed in order to produce positive word of mouth. Stern and Gould (1988), looks at the role of financial opinion leaders and word of mouth in the banking industry. They also reach the conclusion that is it vital that banks attract and take care of the opinion leaders since they are very influential in their communities. These two pieces of research, even though only restricted to the service industry, provide a good base for joining the two areas discussed above together. What Rogers (1983) started to look at was the pharmaceutical industry. He argues, that it is this industry that has the most innovations that need to be diffused. Hence, it is this industry that has the most effect of opinion leaders and word of mouth.

We have shown that opinion leaders are important for social influence and have a lot of social power, therefore can spread a lot of positive word of mouth about the things they are interested about. This has been shown with reference to studies concerning the service industry. Even though these studies are from some time ago, not much has changed. A Special Report published by Marketing Week in 2004 mentions that opinion leaders have just kept on growing in importance for companies when spreading word of mouth. The report even mentions that opinion leaders are not only interested in the newest products on the market, but moreover products that offer a genuine benefit (Special Report - Marketing Week, 2004). What would also be interesting is looking at another industry than service. Ebenkamp (2004) presents some interesting data on many different industries. The author bases the arguments in Keller and Berry's book (2003) and merely does an update of the information. Ebenkamp discusses what the hot topics are for word of mouth, and what topics have declined. The major topics that have increased are vacation recommendations and health problems. The topics that have decreased include cooking recipes and career choices.

Watts (2007) and Rosen (2000) both argue that opinion leaders are not as important as Katz and Lazardsfeld (1955) and many others are showing. Watts (2007), being mentioned in the "Harvard Business Review's List of Breakthrough Ideas of 2007", is the newest piece of research where he discredits the opinion leadership theories as being a thing of the past. Watts (2007) and Rosen (2000) instead argue for the accidental influentials as being more important. The accidential influentials have a larger network of contacts, and can therefore spread information to a larger section of the population faster than single opinion leaders. This contradicts traditional opinion leadership theories, which have been accurate and important, for the past 50 years (for example Katz & Lazardsfeld 1955, Rogers, 1963 and others). Watts (2007), together with his colleague Peter Dodds argue that the traditional opinion leadership theories are faulty. One opinion leader would have to influence a critical mass of people in order to get the idea, innovation or product to spread. Instead, information spreads through a large number of easily influenced people to the rest. Watts and Peretti (2007) touch upon this in a recently published article where they mention "big seed marketing" as the "next big thing" instead of focusing on opinion leaders. The idea is that companies can spread a message to 10'000 people. If it takes two people to influence one other person, the effect of the 10'000 is that they have influenced 5'000 new people, and so forth. This contradicts the opinion leader theory that a handful of people are influential enough to be able to spread an innovation or product by themselves.

With this contradiction in mind, and the new idea that opinion leaders might not be as influential as traditionally thought, we thought it would be interesting to see if this is true and to see if opinion leaders still truly are influential and vital for companies.

1.3 Research Questions

Bearing the argument above in mind, the first research question that we want to investigate focuses on the opinion leaders, and seeing if they are what Watts (2007) argues, superfluous or, what many others argue, very influential.

1. ***Does word of mouth evolve/spread primarily out of opinion leaders and do those customers have the most influence upon other customers purchase decisions?***

Our second research question concerns the content of the message about a product. Since word of mouth is happening outside of the company's direct influence, what happens to the message being spread is also of interest.

2. ***Does there exist a difference in the content of the message sent between opinion leaders and other parts of the customer base which could not be said to act as opinion leaders?***

1.4 Purpose of the research

This research aims at identifying the opinion leaders in order to study their behaviour, characteristics, their role within the word of mouth process, and what importance they have upon another consumers purchase decision. Also, to investigate the content of the message being spread.

1.5 Disposition

Chapter 2 – Theoretical Framework
A walkthrough on relevant theories on word of mouth, opinion leadership, and communication is provided in this chapter. The presentation of the theories in this chapter creates a base from which further developed research questions are presented.

Chapter 3 – Methodology
This chapter presents the research strategy and research design. A rather detailed presentation is written in order for the reader to be able to fully evaluate the research. This chapter is written with the belief that the reader is well acquainted with methodology. The chapter further provides a presentation of the cross-sectional case study on MBT and in the end a reflection the evaluation of this research.

Chapter 4 – Empirical Data
This chapter presents the empirical data. It is a detailed description containing both charts and diagrams together with short texts. The chapter is divided up according to the further developed research questions presented in chapter 2.

Chapter 5 – Analysis
An analysis of our findings with reference to the theoretical base is provided in this chapter. The chapter is built around the four further developed research questions discussed in chapter 2, and a thorough analysis is given for each of those.

Chapter 6 - Conclusion
This chapter will conclude the discussion about Watts' influentials and provide a broader application of our findings. Further, we will touch upon managerial implications for Fotkultur and finish with suggestions for future research and this research's limitations.

2. Theoretical Framework

A walkthrough on relevant theories on word of mouth, opinion leadership, and communication is provided in this chapter. The presentation of the theories in this chapter creates a base from which further developed research questions are presented.

2.1 Opinion leaders

Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet conducted a study in 1940, investigating what the real effects are of mass communication. They based their study mainly on the 1940 presidential election campaign in the United States. The research was later published in The People´s Choice in 1944. The study was founded upon the assumption that media influences mass communication. They thought that a message was communicated most effectively through mass media to mass audience, who were seen as receivers of the message. It was a common assumption among academics and researchers those days that mass media was a powerful convincer and created behaviour change. However, results from their study showed, that mass media as a channel of a message, minimally influenced the mass audience. Instead they suggested that social influences had a more effective way of transmitting the message. The term opinion leader was developed by them and they stated opinion leaders as, people who are more influential within their social networks than others.

The study in 1940 was conducted through questionnaires which was one of the reasons why Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) made a new study based on interviews instead. The result presented from this study was that 70 percent of the respondents who had been given advice, remembered the person giving it to them as well as the information given. The study also concluded that some information went directly from mass media to all people and that personal influence was given as a supplement. The personal influence had two advantages, it complemented the day-to-day mass media information and also gave other information the influencer found more relevant. The results made them divide opinion leaders into two groups, those who select and transmit information right after it appears and secondly those who spread information further after being influenced themselves by word of mouth.

2.1.1 Diffusion of innovations

Rogers (1983) describes how new ideas (innovations) flow among consumers in the market through diffusion. Diffusion is, as he describes it, the process in which innovations is communicated through channels into networks of members in social systems. Rogers argues that the key channel to effectively communicate innovations is through opinion leaders. How the networks are set up and what roles the opinion leaders have, are what decide the chance of a new idea being adopted. Rogers uses a model to illustrate the flow of communication called; “The two-step flow of communication, which was firstly introduced by Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet (1944).

The two-step flow of communication

Figure 2-1 *The two-step flow communication*

Innovations spread from sources of new ideas via media channels to opinion leaders, who are more exposed and have more potential of absorbing information. Through the opinion leaders by way of personal communication-channels to followers, people who tend to be less active when receiving information which is not personalized. The opinion leaders modified the information as well as they facilitated, so it would be more suitable for the followers to apprehend.

2.1.2 Who are the opinion leaders?

Opinion leaders can be found in all kinds of social groups depending on the area of interest. They can be found at work, in school, communities and others (Littlejohn, 1996). It is concluded by Solomon (1994) that they are very socially active and interconnected within the network they operate.

2.1.2.1 Public individuation

According to Maslach, Stapp and Santee (1985), there are people that have a tendency to see themselves as special compared to others. This is an individual choice; they choose to be somewhat different from the group. Further Maslow (1962), Allport (1961) and Erikson (1959) discuss positive side-effects of being differentiated. It rewards you with the chance of being unique and distinctive and offers an opportunity to create one´s own identity and individuality. These rewards are what individuated people strive for. Maslach, Stapp and Santee (1985) states how individuated people are seen to have a high confidence and self-esteem, which are seen to be qualities necessary to be able to survive as a unique and differentiated individual in a group.

According to Chan (1988), Goodwin and Frame (1988) it is possible to become individuated by evaluating people in special situations and see in what different ways it is possible to differ from the rest. Another way of individuating is to have greater knowledge and/or interest in a special product field which the rest are missing.

Further Chan and Misra (1990) mention that a connection and a possible relationship are reasonable to assume between individuated people and opinion leaders. They share the same characteristics and are eager to stand out in a group. Further they say that these groups have a shared desire of differentiating themselves in public, which positively affect the information they spread so the chance of it being successfully received increase. By spreading information through word of mouth communication, opinion leaders stand out in group situations and are in those situations individuated.

> *"Since opinion leadership may be an indication of innovativeness, opinion leaders may be created from early adopters to persuade later adopters to try a new product or service" Chan & Misra (1990, pg. 1)*

Midgely and Dowling (1978) argue that opinion leaders have a skill of influencing other people with the use of their tongue; they are able to influence further adoption. They hold favourable opinions of the products they are disseminating information about and transfer these opinions to the receivers.

2.1.2.2 Product related characteristics

According to Richins & Root-Shaffer (1988) and Riecken & Yavas (1986) opinion leaders are seen to be knowledgeable of the product class they speak of, and at the same time they show high involvement within the category. Further they state that high involvement shows interest and a willingness to gather information about the product class in question. Bloch and Richins (1983) say that with more information from a great width of sources, one is more able to spread and persuade opinions of the product class.

There is evidence of a few demographics separating opinion leaders and followers apart. It is found that opinion leaders are seen to be young, educated, wealthy, and equipped with a great deal of social mobility (Gatignon and Robertson 1985; Midgely and Dowling 1978; Robertson, Zielinsky, and Ward 1984; Rogers 1983). There is however no evidence to prove that these demographical attributes would be especially effective all together. It rather leans to these different demographics are efficient on different product categories. Robertson and Myers (1969) state for example that it is of importance to the opinion leader to be educated if he/she spreads opinions of politics. Riecken and Yavas (1986) argue that the impacts of the demographics of the opinion leaders are greatest when they match the recipients in a socio-demographical way.

According to Baumgarten (1975) and Summers (1970) opinion leaders are likely to be more educated and well informed since their choices of media exposure differs from the crowd. Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) describe how opinion leaders use more media and are more influenced by it than others. Further Baumgarten (1975) points out that opinion leaders are seen to prefer information oriented media rather than entertainment oriented, most common media choices of them are newspapers and magazines.

2.1.2.3 Personal attributes

Further Summers (1970) see opinion leaders as confident people, this attribute comes from the fact that opinion leaders own a greater knowledge than the recipients of the area spoken about. Therefore they gain self confidence and according to Taylor (1977), are more venturesome. They have no fear of proclaiming their opinions and no fear of speaking in front of a group of people. Opinion leaders also show a tendency to be innovative; they are positive to new ideas and are open to collaborate with these ideas as well (Myers and Robertson 1972).

Littlejohn (1996) describe the work of an opinion leader as someone who disseminates their influence through communication covering all types of topics. Their expertise of the area spoken, decides the outcome of the communication. He sees two types of opinion leaders, but does not divide them in the way that Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) did. Instead, he argues that opinion leaders are of either monomorphic or polymorphic kind. Monomorphics level of expertise tend to be limited to only one topic and are therefore only influential on this topic, while polymorphic are influential on several topics. Polymorphic leaders are quite rare to see because there are few people capable of covering multiple topics. Solomon (1994) states that even if these leaders cover multiple topics they tend to focus within one broad field such as digital entertainment or clothing. Littlejohn (1996) expands the discussion by acknowledging that while systems get more technological and complex the role of monomorphics become more predominant. Because of the modern technique, different issues require different sets of opinion leaders. But many of the opinion leaders are specialized to ordinary everyday topics. The study by Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) mentioned before based some parts of their studies by using female interviewees investigating where they turned to, apprehending information of these everyday topics, examples are fashion, public affairs and cinema visits. They asked who they saw as influentials among their relations and how they would rate themselves as a possible influencer. The results of the respondents showed that women turned to other women regarding fashion advice, men considering public affair matters and younger women when seeking information about movies. According to Reynolds and Wells (1977) it is of importance to consider the nature of the opinion leader, all communication does not need to be of verbal kind. Sometimes visible communication results in an imitating behaviour effect of the audience, visible messages can be as effective as verbal. Even if the communication is visible, verbal, or perhaps both, it is still real.

It is clear that opinion leaders are more influential than others in a group, and are also able to have a variety of topics of interest. According to Infante, Rancer and Womack (1997) what should be considered as well is that they not only use media, instead they can become the medium themselves. Not all communications are made through stiff format where one person does all the talking. It is more common in informal context, through interpersonal communication. These conversations pop up whenever the situation allows it and are often of causal character. This is especially true during friend to friend conversations about a product. In this context opinion leaders should be seen as media.

As stated above, there are two sides of every message communicated; we have discussed mostly the sender, that is the opinion leader. But what role do the receivers have, they are as essential as the opinion leaders in the conversation. Littlejohn (1996) discuss two different debates of the audience role. The first one considers whether receivers should be seen as mass public or a small community. According to him theories, that state that the receivers can be seen as a mass audience, are a great undifferentiated mass which can be convinced through media. While those who suggest the receivers as small communities where the greatest influence comes from their families, friends and colleagues. The theorists that support this model argue that the audience cannot be seen and characterized as a whole mass. Each community share their special of interest, in these settings the media content is collected and interpreted of an invisible framework where later on the opinion leaders use the selected information to change behaviour of others.

The second debate discusses whether the receivers shall be seen as active or passive. According to Littlejohn (1996), the passive one proposes that an audience is directly influenced by media while the active suggestion proposes that the audience makes more active decisions of what media they use. Therefore they are seen to be less influenced by media.

Further Littlejohn (1996) divides the active audiences into five characteristics. The fist one is their selectivity. They are selective when deciding what media to use. The second is their utilitarianism; they only use media to meet there needs and goals. The third one is their intentionality, they use media when it has a purpose and in an intentional way. The fourth one is involvement, which means that the audience actively pays attention, think about and use the media. The fifth and final characteristic is that the audience is impervious to influence. The media alone is not able to persuade and influence the audience.

Solomon (1994) categorizes opinion leaders as active audiences of media. He bases this view on opinion leaders being most likely to be opinion seekers as well. When they get in involved in a product category they actively seek information which can enlighten their knowledge. Often they only use media when it concerns their own matter of interest and are highly involved in the selection process.

Further Littlejohn (1996) discusses the role of the relationship between an opinion leader and the receivers of the message. Networks between people are viewed to have an important role in information and innovation diffusion. Networks do not only link the messenger with the audience, it needs interaction between the two sides of the communication. Diffusion appears to be result of a give and take exchange more than a transmission of information between people.

2.1.3 How can an opinion leader be found?

As mentioned above, opinion leaders can be found everywhere depending on which social group they belong. According to Stewart, Smith and Denton (1994) anyone can be an opinion leader, varying of the time and the issue in hand. It can be a family member, colleague, friend or even a celebrity. What differentiates the celebrities from the rest is that they are much easier to target comparing to those opinion leaders who we meet in our ordinary life. Solomon (1994) says that it is possible to track down opinion leaders with the use of questionnaires and interviews conducted which follows a standardized question pattern and then put into a scale which is able to recognize the opinion leader from the rest.

2.1.4 The opinion leadership scale

According to Bearden, Netemayer and Mobley (1993) the importance of opinion leaders is the necessity to have a reliable and valid multiple item-self-report scale. The measurement of opinion leadership is of greatest importance for marketing and consumer researchers.

The main method used to identify and describe opinion leaders has been; The King and Summers’ opinion leadership scale (1970). It is constructed by a seven item, self report scale which was modified from Roger and Cartano´s (1962) earlier scale. In 1986 Childers conducted a study by using King and Summers´s scale through a mail survey of electronic/technical products and cable television. The result from the respondents showed that the scale was problematic and had a questionable validity. The reasons for the poor validity were according to Childers (1986) because of doubtful response alternatives. This is why he revised them so it had a five point response format. Goldsmith and Desborde (1991) made a solid appraisal to the already modified scale. They still thought even after Childer`s changes that the nomological validity was poor and even questioned the undimensionality of the scale. Just like them Flynn, Goldsmith and Eastman (1994) questioned the scale. They thought the Childer`s (1986) self-report scale measured how people interact in social communication rather than measuring people influencing other consumers. Their contribution to the scale was to further revise the scale from a seven item scale to a six item scale. According to their study and their new implication it now gave a better validity. The item they excluded was item five from the original King and Summers´s scale (1970).

2.2 Communication

2.2.1 Sender and Receiver Perspective Models

Every communication that takes place, independent of form and content, can be evaluated and improved through different communication models. Word of mouth is communication in different forms but usually through the spoken language, writing, internet, or by the plain visual expression a person is showing of. The concept of word of mouth in itself could be as communication with certain content which separates it from all other communication. In this paper first chapter we cited Silverman's (2001) description of this content which is that word of mouth is communication about product and services between people who are independent of the company providing the product or service, in a medium perceived to be independent of the company. Because of what has been said so far it should seem obvious that communication models play great importance when discussing upon word of mouth. In the first chapter we linked word of mouth and opinion leadership together. When doing this we indicated the importance communication has for the opinion leader as well. Even though we had not been linking these two concepts together the communication had been acting as a major aspect when discussing opinion leadership and the communication models had been having great importance here as well. Although word of mouth and opinion leadership independent of each others could be understood and developed by applying the communication models to the study of them we presented in the first chapter the close relation these concepts have to each other. Because of the existing relationship and the importance of communication models for both of the concepts it should now seem obvious that communication models is useful for our research.

A breakthrough for research within the communication field was when Shannon and Weaver in 1949 introduced a communication model primarily focused upon electronic communication (Fiske 2004). However, the model came to have implications for all interaction and communication in society (Fiske 2004) and has since 1949 been developed by others, such as Lasswell, DeFleur, Maletzke, etc. (Larsson 2001), to reflect the verbal communication process in a better way. Fiske (2004) argues that the model and its updated version are still perceived as one of the most useful and effective models within communication theory. Today the model includes coding and decoding of messages as well as concerns and feedback and to what extent the context influences the message being sent (Fiske 2004).

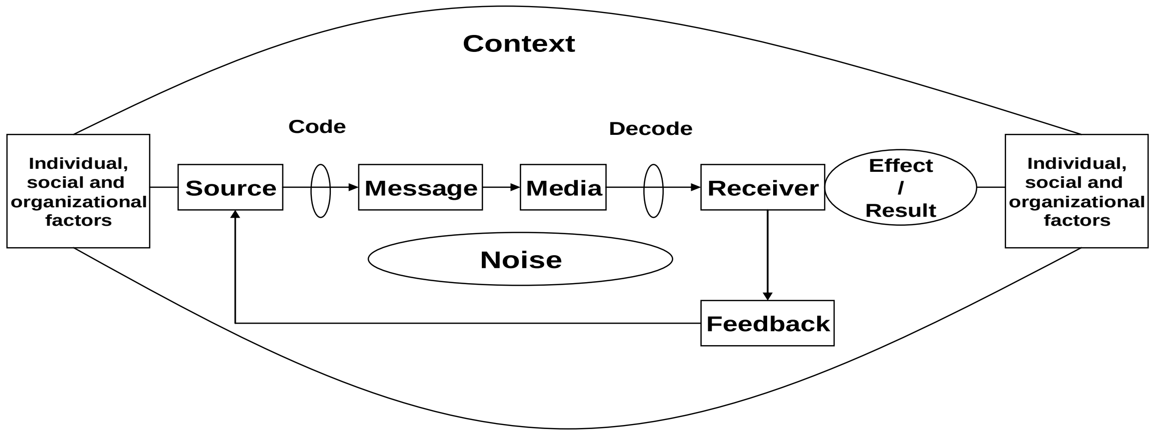

Figure 2-2 *Base Model in its Contextual Surrounding (Larsson, 2004, pp. 41)*

According to the model, optimal efficiency in communication is reached when a receiver reacts in the way the sender desires (Fiske 2004). However during the communication process there are factors that Fiske (2004) described as noise which could distort the message sent and make the receiver react in a way that differs from what the sender's intentions.

Distortion of the message could be due to several reasons. DeCarlo, Lacniak, Motley, and Ramaswami (2007) illustrates one of many distortions in their research paper. They have been able to confirm earlier research which proposed that image and familiarity have different levels of influence on receivers' assessment of negative word of mouth. An individual existing perception of a store's image and familiarity can act as noise to the message about the store from another individual. A positive perception about the store will most likely not be affected by negative word of mouth from a second part; rather a negative perception within the receiver will be directed towards the sender of the negative word of mouth. The context around the communication process is most likely to offer noise which is able to distort the message sent, but also individual, social and organizational factors have influence on how the communication is coded and decoded.

With the vast developments in communication technology we have several media to communicate through today. Many times customers' conversations are done face-to-face but telephone, and mail. provides customers with alternatives. Recently, there has been a growing interest for computer-mediated communication (Soukup, 1999) and the focus has been upon the phenomena of blogging as a communication medium (Shevked & Davkovski, 2006).

Customers are today able to communicate not only to another single customer or small group of people, with communication technologies such as internet and blogging one single customer can communicate with thousands of others (Sohn, & Leckenby, 2005). Experiences of a product can spread from one consumer into large groups of people. Critical in that sense, as Silverman (2001) expresses, is the fact that customers tend to be three to ten times more likely to tell others about a negative experience than a positive one. Through the Internet customers are able to express their experiences to a larger population than before. Silverman (2001) argues that the most credible source of information stems from customer experiences and recommendations. Linking these two aspects together, one can see that the Internet is a powerful tool in word of mouth (Silverman 2001).

By using the communication model one should be able to get insight and explain the communication process, its surroundings, and the sender and receivers personal factors which could distort the result of the communication. However the model presented above is not enough to understand the communication process that can take place between customers. Important knowledge about how people act to media can be found from using the *Uses and Gratifications Model* (Larsson 2001).

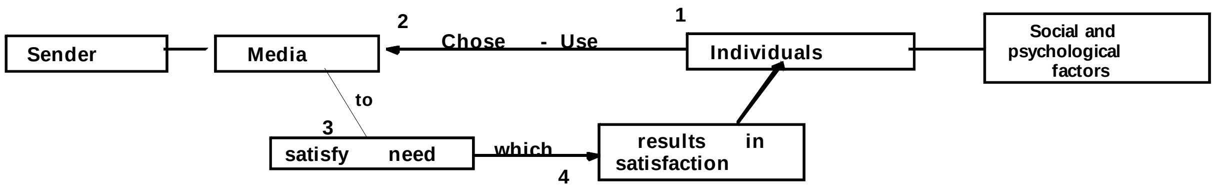

Figure 2-3 *Uses and Gratification Model (Larsson, 2001, pp. 42-43)*

The model focuses on the receiver's end, in comparison to the previous model which sees the communication process as a linear relationship from the sender towards the receiver (Larsson 2001).

Not only do the senders have the ability to choose media. The model emphasize that individuals satisfy their communication needs through certain media. Larsson (2001) argues that the individual is able to control if there will be any communication at all since it is they who are seeking information. We discussed upon this ability under the topic *2.1 Opinion leaders* where Littlejohn (1996) and Solomon (1994) were introduced. It was there said that Solomon stress that opinion leaders are active audiences of media which in other words mean that they actively are selecting their media out of their own.

So far two communication models have been presented. When working with these two it is possible to analyze the communication process from the perspective of a dominating sender and a dominating receiver. There is also an opportunity to understand if the sender is active or it is the receiver who is actively searching for the medium (sender) for information. As this research is focusing upon the communication between customers it is useful to understand that there exists more than one single communicator and as a result of this not all word of mouth is the same. Silverman (2001) divides word of mouth into nine levels, four minus, one even, and four plus, all characterized differently by the customers in their opinion and word of mouth spreading.

The 4 minus levels:	**Even:**	**The 4 plus levels:**
4. Your product has reached a public scandal and everyone is discussing it. Almost nothing survive at this level.	**0:** People use your product but are rather unbiased in their opinion.	**1.** When asked, people have nice things to say about your product.
3. Customers and ex-customers go out of their way to convince other people to not use your products. Similar to level 4 is that almost nothing survives this level.		**2.** When asked, customers rave. They go on about how wonderful your product is.
2. When asked, customers talk negatively and go on how terrible your products are. The process will be slower since people do not actively seek each others.		**3.** At this level, customers go out of their way to convince other people to use your product.
1. In this stage, people are not actively complaining about your products, but when asked, they have relatively negative things to say.		**4.** Your product is being talked about continually. People are asking each other about it. Experts, local influencers, typical customers, and prospect are all talking with each other about your product or service and raving about its virtues.

Figure 2-4 *The Nine Levels of Word of Mouth (Silverman, 2001, Ch. 3)*

These levels illustrate different stages in which the consumers can be placed within. As an opinion leader is perceived to be actively promoting their message it should be able to place this consumer category within levels minus three and four, and plus three and four. In accordance to the communication model the opinion leaders should also be representing the first model, where the sender is in focus and pushing the message out to other consumers, at the same time as they are actively searching for new information and also represents the receiver in the Uses and Gratifications Model.

2.2.2 Interactions and networks models

In many cases when consumers are spreading information to each other it is not done through one-way communication. The models which have so far been presented do not reflect the dialogue which occurs between consumers. However interaction and network models have been developed to reflect this aspect of communication.

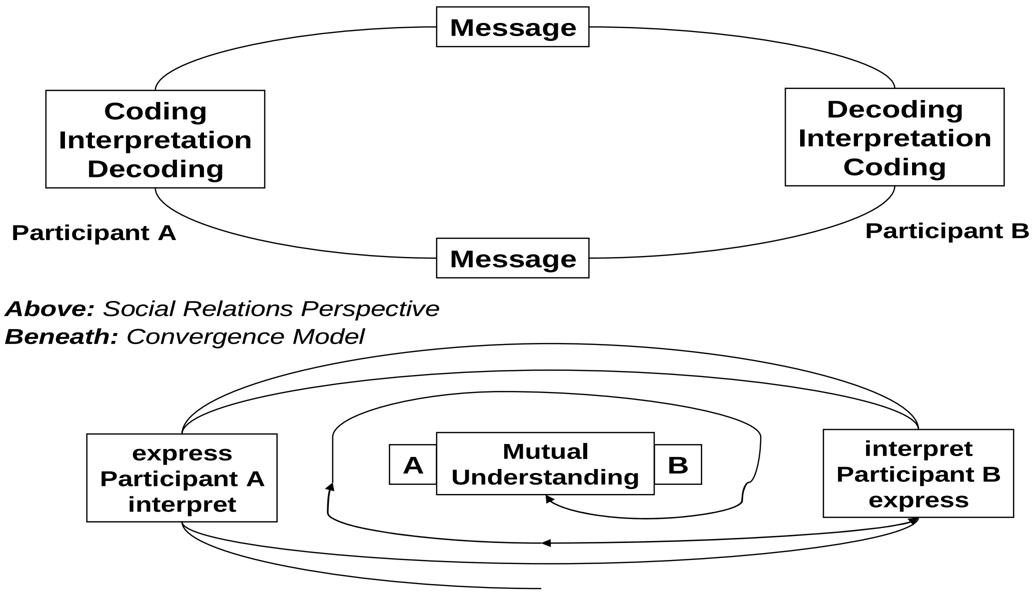

Figure 2-5 *Social Relations Perspective & The Convergence Model (Larsson, 2001, pp. 44)*

According to Larsson (2001) the models try to explain the two-way communication and represents interpersonal communication forms. They are created from the perspective of human social interaction in order to reach a deeper understanding in their communication. The Social Relations Perspective model basically describes how humans interact and provides us with the basic information needed to understand communication between two individuals. The convergence model in turn focuses upon the participants aim for a deeper and mutual understanding. Word of mouth is often taking place in conversations between two or more customers rather than during a monologue such as a speech. If we link this to that Stewart, Smith, and Denton (1994) said that anyone can act as an opinion leader we understand that when word of mouth spread by an opinion leader who are closely related such as a family member then it is natural to conclude that there is a conversation taking place such as the once at the dinner table. Even though the word of mouth should take place during a speech there should be a need for the opinion leader to convince rather than persuade the audience. When convincing it is necessary for the one spreading the word of mouth to invite the audience to a discussion if they do not accept the word of mouth from the very beginning. This is further discussed when discussing the rhetorical issues.

2.3 Relationship Between Sender and Receiver

Silverman (2001) argues that the relationship we have to the one given word of mouth a product is of absolute importance. He argues that if someone we know recommends a product or service they tell us because they think we would like it. They would not tell us about something they do not think we find interesting. The recommendation is tailored to the receiver; therefore we pay more attention to it. Further when a product is recommended through a colleague they tend to give information the receiver would ask and possibly search for during the decision process. Since the information meets the receiver`s demand of information, it shortens the purchase decision time. Further consumers pay more attention to it since information got seem to be more relevant and complete than if the information would come through other forms of communication alternatively from someone unknown. The function of the information that comes from friends and colleagues is seen as a verification of the product.

According to Silverman (2001) every industry has their specific experts, for example shoes which are used in a physiotherapistical sense, have doctors physiotherapists as experts. These experts are the prime opinion leaders. The experts have an automatic interest of the field they work in and they find it stimulating when people ask them for their expertise. Further Silverman argue that experts often are intellectually confident and because of their expertise unthreatened by not knowing something. Experts tend to be neutral towards the product speaking about, therefore they are not submitted to persuade the consumers to buy the product, more likely they tell about the upsides respectively downsides under the circumstances of the product being relevant to the consumer asking. The function of the information expert give can be seen as a confirmation of the product.

2.4 Messages

The communication process taking place between the sender and the receiver, in the spreading of word of mouth, and the opinion leaders influence on others embrace a content which use to be called message. In fact the word *message* is synonym to *communication* and this tells us that all communication includes a message since the words describe the same thing even though it is often separated from each other in peoples mind. We have earlier stressed the importance to look upon the communication process but at the same time it is just as important to look upon some issues regarding the content of the communication/message in order to answer our research questions.

2.4.1 Rhetorical Issues

There is a need to distinguish between persuasion and convincing rhetorical forms. Modern rhetorical researchers emphasize the convincing communication since it is a basis from an equal discussion where the best argument wins (Larsson, 2001). Johannesson (2002) reflects upon persuasion and says that the individuals are often persuaded against their own will, therefore convincing forms should be in favour of persuasion. The basic knowledge of how to convince another is through arguing. Essentially, arguing is to be able to back up the statements taken with information and proofs that others would perceive as true or highly possible. However, we defend ourselves out of instinct against any form of persuasion, but also against all forms of influence. This is why convincing and persuasion is so hard (Ibid.).

There are two ways of getting people to listen to what you have to say, through authority and through skills and knowledge about how to speak (in other words rhetorical skills and knowledge). (Johannesson, 2002) For our research rhetorical issues may come in handy to describe the word of mouth process taking place. Through research we know that opinion leaders have abilities to influence other consumers (Solomon, Bamossy, and Askegaard, 2002) and since this often is done through verbal and written communication one must conclude that those opinion leaders exert influence through either skills in rhetorical issues or through authority. One can gain authority in different ways, such as what job she/he has, having knowledge, having skills in some certain area, well-known last name, etc. Someone can also exert influence upon other consumers through being part of those consumers reference group or when being in the same consumer group (Solomon et. al. 2002; Corrigan 2006; Elliot and Wattanasuwan 1998; Sturrock and Pioch 1998; MacCannell 1973; Goffman 2004; Muniz and O'Guinn 2002). However, we have earlier touched upon the rhetorical issue among opinion leaders. In our discussion under the topic *2.1 Opinion leaders* we introduced that it could be argued according to Midgely and Dowling that opinion leaders have a skill of influencing other people with the use of their tongue. This connotes that the opinion leaders assert more or less rhetorical skills rather than the authority aspect needed to influence others.

2.4.2 Emotional and Rational Messages

When constructing the message marketers often distinguish between two types of creative appeals when expressing and translating their creative idea, rational*/informative* and emotional messages. Rational messages contain one or several information cues that can serve as evaluative criteria. Emotional messages on the other hand try to evoke emotions rather than thinking (De Pelsmacker, Geuens, and Van den Bergh, 2004; Larsson 2001; Solomon et. al. 2002).

Rational Appeals	**Emotional Appeals**
• Talking head	• Humor
• Demonstrating	• Fear
• Problem Solution	• Warmth
• Testimonial	• Eroticism
• Slice of life	• Music
• Dramatization	• Etc.
• Comparative ads	
• Etc.	

Figure 2-6 *Creative Advertising Appeals and Advertising Formats (De Pelsmacker et. al., 2004, pp. 189)*

Emotional messages increase the potential chance of the messages being received and are used to establish a connection between the consumer and the product. Emotional messages can increase the consumer's involvement with the product and are more likely to be retained in memory. Emotional messages are primarily chosen when consumers are familiar with the product. When used in advertising the messages mainly consists of non-verbal elements such as images and emotional stimuli. Though, contra the strong impression emotional appeals are able to create, there is a risk of not communicating an adequate amount of product-related information (De Pelsmacker et. al. 2004; Larsson 2001; Solomon et. al. 2002).

Rational messages have shown to be more effective for products new on the market. Rational messages are also to favour when the product is known on the market but consumers need additional information for comparing and evaluating the product against competing products. This is why rational messages often are the better choice when it comes to intangible products, and for low and high competitive markets (De Pelsmacker et. al. 2004; Larsson 2001; Solomon et. al. 2002).

As said earlier, the typical opinion leaders are among several things characterized by high product involvement. It is therefore not unbelievable that these customers to a high extent use emotional messages when communicating about the product. This is illustrated in research on brand communities where the consumer's within them develop very strong feeling towards the product and very often also feelings which normally are considered to be feelings that evolve between humans (Muniz and O'Guinn 2002; McAlexander, Schouten, and Koening, 2002; Harvard Business School Case – Posse Ride, 2000).

2.4.3 Gatekeeping

When looking upon communication/messages the sender decides what information to be sent. According McQuail (2000) the sender can be called *gatekeepers*. He says that the sender can choose what information that will be sent, and what is excluded in the information flow. Silveman (2001) adds a dimension to McQuail´s argument, by saying that gatekeepers control the knowledge in a social system; they decide what information of a product that will enter the system. Gatekeepers can be found at many workplaces and social communities, their decisions controls the potential to create a mental picture, that are then formed in people's understanding of what is happening in the world around them. Gatekeeping is important in communication planning and most communication includes some part of gatekeeping (McQuail, 2000). According to Silverman (2001) the decisions the gatekeepers do are based on their influences, preferences, motives and common values of a product. Gatekeeping is often used and its function is to control the information flow so the receivers do not get overflowed of information.

As we have stressed more than once, an opinion leader is seen as spreading the word of mouth more than those who are not seen as opinion leaders. The opinion leaders are also as earlier said actively seeking media and information which they have an interest in. From the information collected and from own experience of a product, service, subject, etc. the opinion leaders are spreading communication to others. When spreading the communication/messages the opinion leaders take the role of being a gatekeeper who decides what information to be sent. Although everyone who communicates act more or less as gatekeepers the opinion leaders are seen as very important since it those who have great power of convincing others.

2.5 Consumer Purchase Decisions

2.5.1 Critic towards the rational view upon purchase decisions

As theory tells us that opinion leaders are able to influence other customer's and their purchase intentions it is useful to look into how consumers act in their purchase decisions though it actually is this process the opinion leaders exert influence upon. The decision process and makers have according to Mowen (1988) traditionally been approached from a rational perspective by researchers. Such an approach has been criticized by several researchers, Solomon et. al. (2002) has covered what several critics have said and the common view among those is that consumers do not go through a rational decision process in every situations. Instead consumers evaluate, directly or indirect, every decision making process and out of the evaluation the decision process is determined and a suggestion is made to distinguish between *routine response behaviour, limited problem-solving*, and *extensive problem-solving*. For the routine response behaviour the customer barley reflects over the purchase decision while for an extensive problem-solving a careful decision process is taking place which could be described as a rational process. However many purchase decisions falls in between those two extremes.

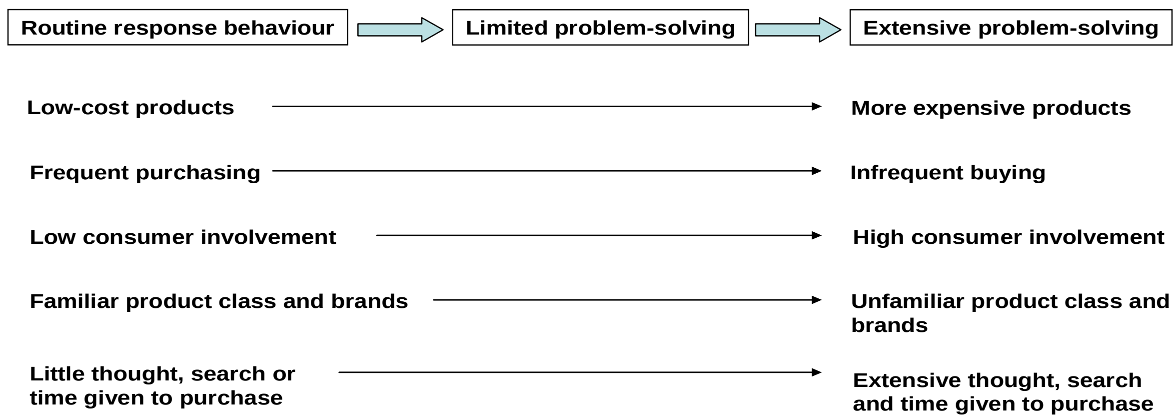

Figure 2-7 *A Continuum of Buying Decision Behaviour (Solomon et. al., 2002, pp. 237)*

Even though critics have suggested other than the rational perspectives neither these perspectives nor the ones suggested can alone describe a consumer's decision process. Therefore we emphasize the importance of reflecting over both perspectives to find a better understanding for the consumer decision process.

2.5.2 Rational perspectives and the FCB grid

Rational perspectives have been around for more than one hundred years and are also often referred to as *hierarchy-of-effects models* (De Pelsmacker et. al. 2004). These models assumes that the consumer experiences certain sequences in their purchase decision process (Vakratsas and Ambler, 1999) and the majority of the models state that the consumer experience a cognitive-affective-active sequence, or a think-feel-do sequence (De Pelsmacker 2004). Well-known models are AIDA and DAGMAR, where DAGMAR is an extended and further developed variation of AIDA (Ibid.). However there is no need to reflect over the DAGMAR model since this model covers post-purchase behaviour.

AIDA is a shortening of the sequence a consumer is experiencing when reaching a purchase decision according to the model, *attention, interest, desire, and action* (De Pelsmacker et. al. 2004; Barry and Howard 1990). For our research the opinion leaders are spreading word of mouth to the consumers. In theory it should be possible to measure what influence the opinion leaders exert on other consumers and in which sequence the influence is the greatest. However the AIDA model is quite basic even though it incorporates relevant and important insight into how consumers make purchase decisions. Therefore one more model, the FCB grid needs to be considered. The model reconnects to the critique against rational models and divides the decision process into different sequences depending on involvement and think – feel aspects (De Pelsmacker et. al. 2004; Vaughn 1980; Vaughn 1986; Vaughn 2001).

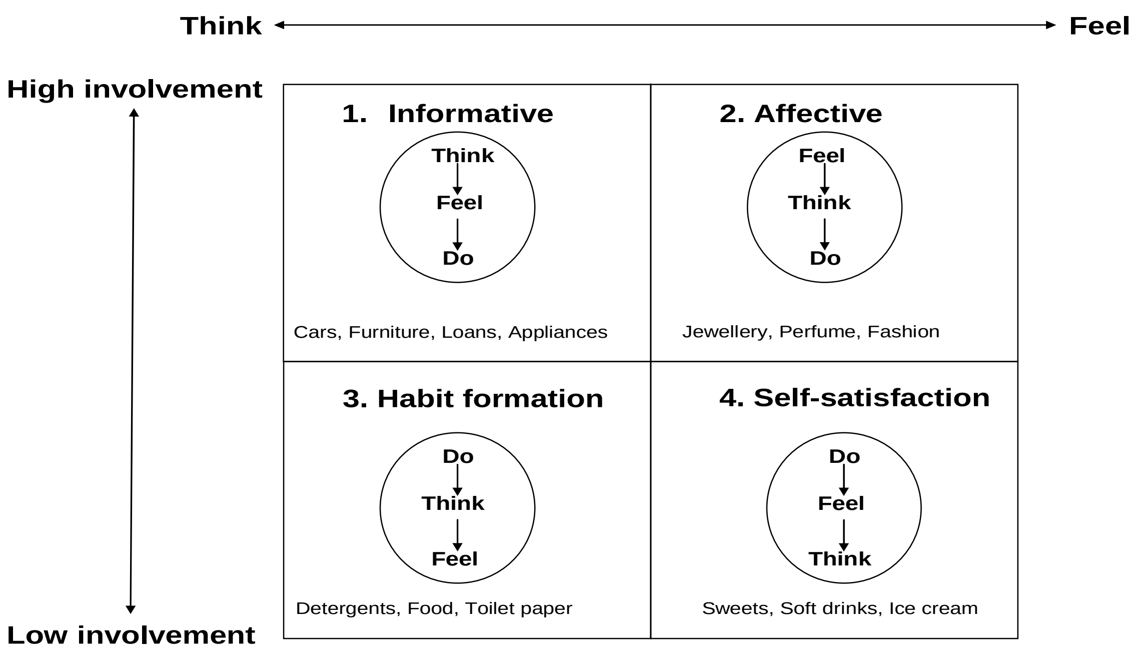

Figure 2-8 *The FCB Grid (DePelsmacker et. al., 2004, pp. 70-71; Vaughn, 1980; Vaughn, 1986; Vaughn, 2001)*

Depending on the product or service, consumers are more involved in the purchase decision, they request more information, direct or indirect experience, product tests, turn to what experts and other peers have to say about the product, etc. On this dimension high involvement products tend to be more expensive. High and low involvement products could also often be distinguished from each other by their frequency of purchase and usage (De Pelsmacker et. al. 2004; Solomon et. al. 2002; Vaughn 1980; Vaughn 1986; Vaughn 2001). For our research this plays an important role since it in some sense determines if opinion leader's word of mouth is enough to reach a purchase decision and to what extent the opinion leaders need to increase another consumer's involvement. This can be done through giving information, repeat recommendations or more psychological convincing. On the other dimension, think and feel, refers to rational and emotional based decisions (De Pelsmacker et. al. 2004; Solomon et. al. 2002; Vaughn 1980; Vaughn 1986; Vaughn 2001).

The FCB grid is based the importance of consumer's involvement and rational or emotional issues. It categorizes products into four different sequences the consumer needs to experience in order to reach a purchase decisions and it also explains how the consumer behaves. Although the model groups products into four separate categories it is important to understand that these categories can vary between consumers and are not consistent (De Pelsmacker et. al. 2004; Solomon et. al. 2002; Vaughn 1980; Vaughn 1986; Vaughn 2001).

2.5.3 Drivers of Recommendations and Purchase as a Result of Word of Mouth

The role of word of mouth as a trigger for purchase is documented through researches by Sheth (1971), Zeithaml (1992), Herr,Kardes&Kim (1991) and Robertson (1971). The researches have focused on the input of word of mouth during the evaluation stage of the buying process and the diffusion of innovations. The studies indicate that mass media communication attracts awareness and interest of the innovations. The function of the word of mouth is the main influencer when evaluating the product before a possible purchase. According to Sheth (1971) most word of mouth communication comes from opinion leaders. Further Zeithaml (1992) suggest that depending on how hard the consumers experience the evaluation process determines the use of word of mouth recommendations. Products that are easy to find information about are not as influenced of word of mouth since the product's qualities can be easily determined and found in a pre-purchase stage, such qualities are for example colour, style, fit and price. Word of mouth recommendations are more demanded when products have high experience qualities, for example taste, wearability and satisfaction, which can only be suggested by those who have used the product in a post purchase stage. According to Herr et al. (1991), the products that are the hardest to evaluate even after a purchase are those with credence qualities. It can for example be if the product has any medical effect on the consumer, often recommendations of such products are sought through experts. Further they argue that products that have both high experienced and credence qualities, consumers find it hard to evaluate and therefore seek word of mouth to minimize their perceived risk. According to Robertson (1971) visual display of a product can improve the credibility of the word of mouth. They expand their argument by saying that visual displays together with word of mouth improve the input's value. Further Buttle (1998) argues that to stimulate a recommendation from word of mouth improve the likelihood of a purchase.

Different stimuli he suggests are visual display increase the consumer's involvement and create novel experiences to the product.

2.6 Further development of our research questions

After having reviewed the existing theoretical base with reference to our research area, we realized that our research question is too broad to answer within the time and resource restraint we are working with. We have argued for seeing word of mouth through the theories presented about communication, and opinion leadership through the revised King and Summers (1970) scale. With this in mind, and looking back to what is said in the introduction about opinion leaders and word of mouth, we have decided to further elaborate on the research question posed. Within the research area of opinion leaders and word of mouth, we want to further emphasize the link between opinion leaders and word of mouth through these developed research questions:

1. How do opinion leaders differ from the rest when it comes to age, type of message received and who they are influenced by?

2. How does the message sent and received differ for the opinion leaders compared to the rest?

3. What are the dominant driving forces that lead to a recommendation of a product/service to others?

4. What are the dominant driving forces to get others to purchase a product/service?

By narrowing the questions down to these four, we can gain a better understanding in how opinion leaders differ from the rest and how they affect word of mouth. We will also gain and understanding in how influential the opinion leaders are when actually getting people to buy a product/service. Question 2 will also give us insight into if and how opinion leaders change the content of the message when they received it and when they send it.

3. Methodology

This chapter presents the research strategy and research design. A rather detailed presentation is written in order for the reader to be able to fully evaluate the research. This chapter is written with the belief that the reader is well acquainted with methodology. The chapter further provides a presentation of the cross-sectional case study on MBT and in the end a reflection the evaluation of this research.

3.1 Research Strategy

3.1.1 Philosophical stance

3.1.1.1 Deductive, Inductive and Abductive approach

Theories arise from the nature of the relationship between theory and research (Bryman & Bell, 2003). A researcher can approach a given problem by going through existing theories and develop hypothesis which are to be tested and this approach will first and foremost characterize this research (Bryman & Bell, 2003; Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, and Lowe, 2002). This method is called deductive theory and is closely related to the positivistic philosophical stance that will be discussed in the next chapter (Ibid).

This research has been conducted through previous knowledge within communication and opinion leadership. From the theory presented we have been able to develop certain questions that could be described as loose hypothesis. Some of these questions are not said, rather it is a creation of thought as a result of the knowledge gained from the theory collected and presented. When researchers are starting from existing theory, even though they do not explicitly create their research questions as hypothesis, it could also be seen as a deductive approach. It is because of the lack of objectivity and beforehand collected theories this approach also is being called inductive (Bryman & Bell, 2003). In general, quantitative researches are said to be based on a deductive approach because the researcher is developing structured questions or observations out of the collected knowledge and to suit the research questions (Ibid). For this research we are able to characterize the measuring of opinion leaders as a pure deductive approach since this is an existing quantitative measuring scale which does not allow any answers outside its framework. (A presentation of this scale will be done further on.)

Even though the above discussion indicates a deductive approach we are lacking previous knowledge within certain aspects. This is true for most part of the word of mouth area were existing knowledge is rather scarce. The lack of previous knowledge forced us to work in the opposite direction of the deductive approach, called inductive (Bryman & Bell, 2003). Working out of an inductive perspective has its advantages, the researcher is said to be objective and not control the data collected (Ibid). The inductive approach is characterizing for some aspects concerning the data collected upon the message were we have been as open minded as possible.

Since there is a combination of the deductive and inductive approach one can argue for describing our approach as what some call an abductive approach. This means that the researcher takes his or her starting point within certain theories and after the collection of data he or she is forced to go back to theory again and revaluate the selected theories (Patel & Davidson, 2003), and this has also been the case for this research. What was just said correlates to what is going to be discussed in the next chapter about our favouring of mixing methods and philosophies, and will be further emphasized. The actual complete process of this research has also been forcing us to return to theories in order to be able to analyze some parts of the material collected. We found out that our theories taken into concern before the data collection were not able to cover all aspects we on beforehand thought it would. We also collected empirical data on an inductive approach at the same time as we were able to extract empirical data which we did not foresee that forced us to add more theories in order for us to be able to analyze these empirical findings.

A concluding is that this research has been touching upon both an inductive as well as a deductive approach at the same time as it has been abductive. It will however be able to be seen that the objectivity is rather restrained since most of our data collection has been structured and this advocates the deductive approach as most penetrative for this research. The mixing of different approaches will be characterising for this research and will be further stressed as already said.

3.1.1.2 Epistemology and Ontology

The way we look upon the world, ontology, and how we best inquire to the nature of the world, epistemology, has been the foundation of philosophical debates (Easterby-Smith et. al., 2002; Bryman and Bell, 2003). Several traditions have emerged within both ontology and epistemology and the debates have been fierce about which tradition that is best suited in delivering satisfactory outcomes from a research activity (Easterby-Smith et. al., 2002; Bryman & Bell, 2003). The deductive, inductive and abductive theory discussed in the previous section tends to lead the researcher in their philosophical reasoning (Bryman & Bell, 2003; Easterby-Smith et. al., 2002).

The epistemological approach for this research is best described as the positivistic one. According to positivism the social world exists externally, and its properties should be measured through objective methods (Easterby-Smith et. al.: 2002). The positivistic epistemological assumption is that knowledge is only of significance if it is based on observations of this external reality independent from us as observers (Easterby-Smith et. al., 2002). When we look upon the research questions we perceive these in some aspects as being hypothesis or laws which are to be tested for their falsity or truth and when doing so, the positivistic approach is seen as the most appropriate (Easterby-Smith et. al., 2002). This correlates to our aim which is to identify knowledge about the social world where we through external and objective factors try to indicate different causes rather than the epistemological approach of social constructionism which try to understand these causes (Easterby-Smith et. al., 2002). Further the positivism reductionism push that problems are better understood if they are reduced into the simplest possible elements. This fact has been essential when choosing the philosophical stance due to the lack of resources together with the advantages of the positivistic approach to be fast and economical. For the positivistic approach there is also an importance for the results to reflect regularity in the answers and importance is also put upon the researcher's independency from what is being observed (Easterby-Smith et. al., 2002). A result that could be generalized will provide a basis for the law of the hypothesis (Bryman & Bell, 2003).

Ontology and epistemology are closely related, if one looks upon the world in a certain way then one also tends to interpret the world in a certain way. The view upon the ontological issue for the positivistic approach is that reality is external and objective (Easterby-Smith et. al., 2002). It correlates to what Bryman & Bell (2003) discuss as objectivism. Objectivism according to Bryman & Bell asserts that social phenomenon exists on its own, without influence from social actors. The ontological positioning for this research is best described as what Easterby-Smith et. al., (2002) label as representationalism which asks the question of whether the research results are an accurate reflection of reality.

In accordance of what Easterby-Smith et. al. (2002) say the understanding of philosophical issues have helped us to formulate what kind of evidence that is needed, how to gather the needed data, and how it is to be interpret. The understanding of these issues has also been of great help in recognizing what research design that will be suited to solve the given problem. Easterby-Smith et. al. (2002) further discuss that the acceptance of a particular epistemology usually result in the fact that a researcher adopts methods that are characteristic for the tradition. As researchers we have accepted the different traditions and their methods as such. We can argue for the methods, their relevance and connection to each other, although we do not accept the narrow view that one single tradition offers. We are of the strong opinion that one cannot belong only to one philosophical tradition. Our opinion is rather that one must choose the ontological and epistemological stance according to the nature of the research problems. Even though the discussion above primarily promotes the positivistic and objectivistic/representationalism traditions they are foremost chosen upon the methods connected to them. It can be said that we belong to those who are in favour of what Easterby-Smith et. al. (2002) discuss as mixing methods and philosophies. Mixing methods and philosophies are said to provide more perspectives on a phenomena investigated (Easterby-Smith et. al., 2002), and we are of the perception that this is true. We started to emphasize this in the previous section and we further emphasize this since we, besides a quantitative perspective also include a qualitative perspective. We gather rich data in order to increase the general understanding of what is being spread through word of mouth, and this is normally perceived to connect to the epistemological stance of social constructionism (Easterby-Smith et. al., 2002). Even though researchers, including ourselves, often chose to go with only one philosophical tradition we are certain that this is so because of lack of resources that would have given the opportunity to attack the research problem in several different ways.

This research will not be limited due to one narrow philosophical stance. We have been mixing methods and philosophies as we found it necessary in order to reflect our research questions and later on the further developed research questions. This research can however be to a large extent characterized as belonging to the positivistic stance.

3.1.2 Influences on the conduct of business research other than the philosophical issues

When developing a research design the researcher’s stance within epistemology and ontology usually plays an important role (Easterby-Smith et al., 2002). However, theory, values and practical considerations also have a significant influence upon the researcher’s choices when developing and conducting research (Bryman & Bell, 2003). Bryman & Bell (2003) reflect upon the influences the researcher's values may have upon the research. Values represent personal beliefs and feelings of the researcher and are today considered impossible to not influence a research. Although the common belief that values have influences upon a research, there remains a continuing discussion around the ability researchers have to be objective or not (Bryman & Bell, 2003, Easterby-Smith et. al., 2002).

The influences of practical issues are not to be forgotten (Bryman & Bell, 2003). As for the development of research for the given research question, there are certain premises that need to be followed. Further Easterby-Smith et al. (2002) adds experience, stakeholders and the field of research as factors influencing the research question. For this specific research we have been given an opportunity to research a given case and with the case certain premises follows which cannot be disregarded.

3.2 Research Design

3.2.1 Quantitative and Qualitative Method

Our mainly promoted ontological and epistemological stance combined with the deductive theory indicates that the quantitative strategy would be the most appropriate method for this research (Bryman & Bell, 2003; Easterby-Smith et. al., 2002). That is to collect data in form of numbers, either as natural measurements or as a symbol for a word or answer (Jacobsen, 2002). By using a quantitative method we are able to describe opinion leaders since the measurements of such individuals are to be done with a quantitative measurement. We will also be able to research a quite large sample and handle the amounts of information even though the limited resources we are working with. By doing so we can describe how things are through statistical analysis (Bryman & Bell, 2003). This correlates well to our further developed research questions where we want to describe relations and differences rather than come to a conclusion on why things are the way they are. By using the quantitative method a high external validity should be reached due to the large number of respondents (Bryman & Bell, 2003), however with a high external validity the internal validity is questioned since the controlling influence of us as researchers. Instead of letting the respondents control what information is to be generated we as researchers control what information which is gathered and the trustworthiness of the results can therefore be questioned due to the influence of unidentified variables (Jacobsen, 2002).

Although a quantitative method will primarily be used we find it necessary to use a qualitative method when answering some aspects regarding the message which is based on our second research question found in chapter one. The qualitative research collects data in form of words which contribute meaning (Jacobsen, 2002). By using the qualitative method for this question we should reach a more nuanced explanation on the content of the word of mouth which could not be reached by using a quantitative method (Bryman & Bell, 2003). If a qualitative perspective had not been introduced there had been difficulties in studying the message since a quantitative approach to it had never been able to generate any useful data for this research since we are unable in beforehand identify certain word of mouth which we could measure. However a qualitative approach to the message made it possible to generate quantitative analysis on the message on such aspects as if it was an emotional and rational message.

3.2.2 A cross-sectional case study design on MBT

As earlier mentioned this research is based on a case with certain limitations but also with unique opportunities. The case is built around a brand called Masai Barefoot Technology, MBT, which was first launched in the year 1996. The product is a shoe and its secret function is that the shoe creates a natural instable underfoot, which stimulates and exercises the body's supporting muscle system. (www.swissmasai.se, MBT Footwear Sverige AB, 2007-04-01) The shoe (Ibid):

- Activates neglected muscles
- Improves posture and gait
- Tones and shape the body
- Can help with back, hip, leg, and foot problems
- Can help with joint, muscle, ligament, and tendon injuries
- Reduces stress on knee and hip joints
- → **The shoe activates the whole body**

The shoe is developed by Swiss engineer Karl Müller to make the natural instability and soft ground such as Korean paddy fields or the East African savannah accessible also to those who have to walk on hard surfaces. The invention is inspired by the African Masai tribesmen who seldom have any back or joint problem, a population of exceptional athletes with well-formed bodies and practically no experience of shoes at all (www.swissmasai.se, MBT Footwear Sverige AB, 2007-04-01, Fotkultur, 2007-04-04). The product is today classified by the European Union as a medical training tool / equipment (Fotkultur, 2007-04-04). The shoe is priced approximately between 2000 to 3000 SEK which is comparable with the price of four to five pair of regular shoes.

The brand and product are quite new on the Swedish market and our research is built upon the first MBT concept store that opened in late 2006. The store is an independent owned store in Malmö, Sweden, which is named Fotkultur. The name Fotkultur is barley promoted at all, instead it is mostly the name MBT which is promoted and the MBT products. We can because of this disregard the store's name Fotkultur. The store has not invested in any form of marketing and is only relying on the insignificant marketing done by MBT and the word of mouth conducted among people and institutions in society such as the medical institutions recommendations (Fotkultur, 2007-04-04). This situation provides us with a unique opportunity to investigate how the word of mouth is spread and with what effects since the product is new, the store is new, and the store undertakes no significant marketing efforts which could have an effect upon the word of mouth. The store was keen to participate in this research and have during their three first months in business been helpful and collected respondents among their buying customers.

According to above discussed we are doing what Bryman & Bell (2003) call a case study design. They describe that a case can be a study upon a single organization, a single location, a person, or a single event. Our case is focusing upon one single organization and at a single location. A case study is also often associated with qualitative research (Bryman & Bell, 2003), however for our study the main focus will be upon a quantitative approach. Since case studies usually are associated with qualitative research they are often criticized as such, that is low external validity and low generalizability of the results (Ibid). They are also criticized for not being able to represent a larger population since the researcher is focusing too much on the specific case (Ibid). Yin (1994) on the other hand argues for the case study to reach the same degree of validity as more positivistic studies. To reach high internal validity Yin stresses that case studies need to be built over time. This is a negative aspect for this research since it is not possible due to a narrow restriction in time. On the other hand the case study can reach external validity according to Yin (1994). Although Yin pushes that external validity for a case study should rely on analytic rather than statistical generalizations. This aspect has been well thought of and there will be more discussed later. While Yin (1994) defends the case study from attacks (Bryman & Bell, 2003; Easterby-Smith et. al., 2002) others does not see the need of putting high interest in the evaluation of the research design (Bryman & Bell, 2003).

Even though it is said to be a case study it is not to be seen as a totally pure case study. The case has giving us a unique opportunity for a study but the case is not leading this study, merely supplying us with the results which are to be discussed on a more general level than for the case in itself. Because of this we do not wish to characterize this research as being a pure case study. This goes in line with what Bryman & Bell (2003) discuss about case studies. They argue that the case study sometimes is hard to distinguish since they are mixed with other research designs. But as one must be objective, some of the critique against the case study is not to be rejected since there is a strong case involved and due to the case actually came with some limitations that we could not foresee, such as how the respondents were gathered. What just said ends up in that the research is based on a case study where we as researchers are interested in discussing the results as not being case specific even though the possibility of doing this is rather restrained.

Merely to mention that a case study design is being used is not enough to bring an understanding to the process of the research conducted, and especially not since this research is not to be perceived purely as a case study. The fact that we separate the case and the overall aim of the research and have several respondents to our help brings us insights to another form of research design, the so called cross-sectional design. The cross-sectional design, also called social survey design, is described by Bryman & Bell (2003) as to entail a collection of data on more than one case at a single point in time to collect a body of quantitative or quantifiable data in connection with two or more variables, which are then examined to detect patterns of association. Since the research includes several respondents where each one could be described as a single case and our search of indication of causes rather than understanding, the cross-sectional design is well suited. It would have been of interest to make a longitudinal design in which the observations are collected on more than one occasion (Bryman & Bell, 2003), but due to our resources, not at least the time frame, this is not an alternative. The case study and the longitudinal design are otherwise often used together (Ibid). Due to our limitations, we chose to make a cross-sectional case study design. With the cross-sectional design it is only possible to examine the relationships between variables since the collection of data is only done more or less simultaneously on one occasion in time (Ibid). The negative aspects of this is that we are not able to be certain if a relationship between two variables denotes to a casual relationship, we are only able to say that the variables are related. Bryman & Bell (2003) concludes that this negative aspect of the cross-sectional design results in a lack of internal validity.

The combination of a case study design and a cross-sectional design enhance our mixing of philosophical stance and methods. Easterby-Smith et. al. (2002) plot the case study to belong more in the field of social constructionism while the cross-sectional design are seen as belonging to the positivistic stance. When combining these two the researcher easily falls in between. As we further are using both quantitative and qualitative method it distinguish the research from purely qualitative or grounded research and at the same time the researcher is seen as involved with the subject of the research on some aspects while the researcher can stay detached on some aspects, or the researcher plainly falls somewhere in between (Easterby-Smith et. al.).

3.2.3 Sampling

We have briefly touched upon how the respondents have been found but there is a need for a better description of the sampling. The sampling is to be categorized as a non-probability sampling which basically means according to Bryman & Bell (2003) that the results from the given respondent are not likely to be generalized into a greater population. We have earlier classified our research as a social survey research and for these kinds of researches there is normally a great deal of importance put upon a generalization of the results and because of this a need for a probability sampling (Ibid). A reason for this research's non-probability sample is however due to the limitations within the case and the lack of resources which made it impossible to scope a probability sampling. The non-probability sampling covers a wide range of different forms of sampling which cannot be covered under the requirements for the probability sampling (Ibid). Bryman & Bell (2003) distinguish between three main types of non-probability sample: the convenience sample, the snowball sample, and the quota sample. For this research the convenience sampling has been used and we will below continue to discuss why the research is built upon the convenience non-probability sampling.

As said before the respondents have been collected among Fotkultur's buying customers by the store employees without any involvement from us but upon the request of the faculty of business administration at Lund University. When we came in contact with this case the respondents were already collected. Therefore we have had no chance of affecting how the respondents have been chosen but we are however able to describe how the process has been done. The store employees have basically asked the buying customers during the stores first three months in business if they would like to take part in a business research around the store, and the MBT brand and products. One hundred respondents have given their permission to be contacted. The store has randomly approached their buying customers during these three months, even though this is so, the sample cannot be regarded as a probability sample for the general population (Bryman & Bell). This is so since the research is built upon a case which is separated from "the common world" and since all the respondents actually are buying customers.

We described the non-probability sampling as a convenience sampling. When using this sampling, members of a population are chosen based on their relative ease of access (Bryman & Bell, 2003; Malhotra & Birks, 2003) and this is a fairly good description on how the respondents have been sampled. The main criticism against this sampling strategy is that it is impossible to generalize the findings because the researcher does not know of what population the sample is representative of (Ibid). This is true for a greater population or for consumers as such but we do know that they represent the buying customers. Although the criticism against the strategy it comes in handy for several different types of research although it might not be the ideal strategy (Ibid). The opportunity the case gives us to research word of mouth and the opinion leaders role in the word of mouth represents what Bryman & Bell (2003) call an opportunity "too good to miss" and because of this the convenience sampling is fairly acceptable. They further discuss that the data for such a research will not allow definite findings to be generated because the problem of generalization. Instead the results should be viewed as a springboard for further research or what they call allow links to be forged with previous findings in a research area. Our research can be said to call upon both these two description of how the results are to be used. Word of mouth is a rather new research area which requests further research to be done before the area can distinguish itself as a pure research area with its own theories. While both communication and opinion leadership is well developed, the results from this research can be linked to these areas.

Finally, the convenience sampling plays a more prominent role within business and management research where it is rather common. In fact the sampling strategy has been able to generate results that have had major impact on research in many areas and should therefore not be rejected and perceived as not playing a great role within research (Bryman & Bell, 2003).

3.2.4 The Questionnaire and the Data Collected

We have shown that there barley exist any previous research and information upon the research question, so called secondary data, therefore there is a need to collect primary data. This is true also for the existing case the research is built upon since there has not been any data collected from the existing respondents. The advantages of primary data are many, the most important one is that the data is collected for the use of the specific research, and are due to this in general perceived to be able to generate better answers and not reduce the research into the fields where the secondary data has been collected (Bryman & Bell, 2003; Malhotra & Birks, 2003; Jacobsen, 2002; Christensen, Engdahl, Carlsson, and Haglund, 2001). The negative aspects for the research in using primary data is that it in general requires more resources such as time and knowledge about how to collect data (Ibid) which in turn leaves us with less time for other parts of the research due to the limitations in mostly time that we have to consider. Following out of the need of collecting primary data, interviewing has been the strategy to gain access to primary data from the respondents. There exists several different techniques/strategies to gather data such as interviews, observing, questionnaires, etc. and within every one of those strategies there exists several more techniques such as telephone interviews, personal interviews, internet questionnaires, etc (Bryman & Bell, 2003; Malhotra & Birks, 2003; Jacobsen, 2002; Christensen et. al., 2001). The case gave us the opportunity to contact one hundred respondents through the contact information given by the customers themselves. We had the choice of collecting data from the respondents in several different ways and we could immediately eliminate observing since it would be impossible to take part in the whole process from where a customer is met by word of mouth from another or from a marketing activity which led to the purchase and in the following to word of mouth from the buying customer towards other consumers. The contact information given to us about the respondents was plainly telephone numbers and names. Due to this, the resources needed in order to collect further contact information about the respondents such as addresses to which a self-completion questionnaire could be sent to was so great that we would not be able to cope with it. The same was true for contacting the respondents in order to get together for such data collection methods as focus groups, etc. This left us with almost one possibility left, the telephone interview.

The telephone interview has, as all other strategies for the collection of primary data, both advantages and disadvantages. Due to the format in which we received the information about our respondents, we are left with barely any choice besides the telephone interview. We found that it is a well working strategy for our research. Telephone interviews are far cheaper and quicker than other interviewing techniques since there is no need for us as researchers nor the respondents to travel between each other (Bryman & Bell, 2003; Malhotra & Birks, 2003; Jacobsen, 2002; Christensen et. al., 2001). Bryman & Bell (2003) also push for the advantage of telephone interviews to be easier to supervise than the personal interview. All this has been taken into consideration due to the restricted time frame, budget and personal resources we have to work with. We got one hundred respondents telephone numbers and the resources needed for other techniques of collecting data had gone far out of the limitations we had to set up in lack of resources. To connect back to the quantitative and qualitative discussion earlier, a fully qualitative research would have generated such amounts of data that it had not been possible to handle with the resources we had to work with. We felt it necessary to combine quantitative and qualitative research to the point where we were able to handle the techniques. With the telephone interview we could further dispense with the personal influence upon the respondent and her/his answers which are common for personal interviews. The influence of other respondents during the time of collection of data was eliminated since they had no opportunity to be influenced by each other, which is common in focus groups (Bryman & Bell, 2003). Although the advantages of telephone interviews, they can also prevent certain data to come to our knowledge since it might require influences from the interviewer or from other respondents. Further it is not possible to express visual emotions and for the researcher to engage in observations as well as employ visual aid (Ibid). There is also the possible risk that the respondent in reality are not the same as the ones who accepted to participate in the research by leaving their contact information to the store, this due to the difficulty of identify the individual (Ibid). We do however believe the risk of that to be minimal for this research. On the other hand we have found difficulties in reaching all of the respondents which have given their approval to be contacted. Bryman & Bell (2003) discuss this aspect but in a rather different perspective where the researcher is trying to get in contact with respondents who have not given their active permission to be a part of the research. Although the different explanations of the disadvantages for the telephone interview we would like to mention that it occurs even in a case like the one for this research. Out of the one hundred respondents according to the list we were given we only came in contact with fifty-nine. We can imagine two possible causes for this outcome. The first is the time limit we determined for reaching the respondents. Because of different circumstances it is possible that we unfortunately could not reach the respondents during those hours we were trying to call them even though we were working flexible hours and both week days as weekends. The second reason we found is simply that the respondents were no longer available.

3.2.4.1 The interview guide questions

The questions in the interview guide are created for the reason to answer our further developed research questions. It seems fairly obvious that we would not have found any answer by merely asking our respondents the given research questions. As for most researches there is a need to find a way to access data that makes it possible to generate some form of answers and results (Bryman & Bell, 2003; Jacobsen, 2002). For an interview that way is often through questions, more or less structured or by using unstructured questions, which basically determines to what extent the respondents has freedom in her/his answers (Bryman & Bell, 2003; Malhotra & Birks, 2003). For our interview guide we are working with both structured and semi-structured questions since we have found this combination to be best suited in answering the research questions. We further found that some of the aspects we needed to study in order to answer our research questions, primarily the aspects concerning the messages and its content, could only be done through a semi-structured qualitative question since a quantitative approach would have had no possibility to generate an answer to what is said in the word of mouth. If we would have had used a quantitative approach to gather information regarding the message we would have found ourselves interfering to a high extent in what the answers should be that the result basically could not be deemed acceptable. However a quantitative approach was found suitable when studying some aspects of the content of the word of mouth which was, as earlier mentioned, looking upon the messages form rational or emotional. Rational and emotional can not in itself be measured quantitatively. Instead we can code this into quantitative data by simply identifying them each with a number such as 0 and 1 which works as indicators for rational and emotional messages (Bryman & Bell, 2003). This has been the case for the larger part of our interview guide where structured and semi-structured questions made it possible and defendable to use numbers as indicators for answers in order to measure the results quantitatively / statistically (Easterby-Smith et. al., 2002).

The interview contains of two different parts, one which focuses upon the respondent and how he/she came in contact with the brand, product, what messages they have received, their perception of the product bought, and if they can be characterized as an opinion leader. The second part considers in what sense the respondents are actively taking part in any word of mouth. First we needed to find a way to measure opinion leaders and this was found in opinion leadership theory where Flynn, Goldsmith and Eastman (1994) had revised a former ameasuring scale for opinion leadership. This measuring scale is built upon certain questions where the respondents are to answer on a likert scale of 1 to 5 and those who receive high scores are said to be more of an opinion leader than those who score low results.

Flynn, Goldsmith, and Eastman's (1994) revised version of The King and Summers' Opinion leader scale used in this research for the identification of opinion leaders can be found in appendix 1. The opinion leadership scale is the most central within this research. In order to answer our four further developed research questions there is a need to distinguish the opinion leaders from the rest. The scale is made up of six questions on a likert scale of one to five. The sum of the answers is therefore 30, and also the highest score a respondent can receive. In order to distinguish opinion leaders from the rest, there needs to be a "cut point". Chaney (2001) uses the scale and calls the upper quartile of the scores opinion leaders, whilst Weimann, Tustin, Vuuren and Joubert (2007) remove the upper and lower quartile of their results and only analyse the middle results for their study. What we can see here is that there is no canonical method to be used to identify where the "cut point" should be (Weimann et. al., 2007; Chaney, 2001). For our study, since we are dealing with early adopters of a new product that exist on the market, we cannot split our respondents the way that they do. Instead, we will split the respondents at a cumulative percent of 50. This because theory discusses that early adopters will score higher on the scale and therefore will be opinion leaders (Chan & Misra, 1990; Silverman, 2001). This means that the respondents that score above the cumulative 50% are deemed to be opinion leaders whilst the ones that score lower are not opinion leaders.

In this first part we also began with some basic questions about the respondents, gender, age, marital status and occupation, which is normally done when interviewing respondents (Bryman & Bell, 2003; Malhotra & Birks, 2003). These questions are essential when we want to do demographical segmentations among the respondents to find certain patterns in different segmentations groups which can be useful (Ibid). Segmentations could also be done through the scoring from the opinion leader scale and could be just as interesting as looking upon demographical groupings. By using demographical segmentations we are able to further distinguish our opinion leaders, the ones they are affecting, etc. As we know that the respondents have some knowledge about MBT and Fotkultur and are also buying customers we found it interesting to find out where from they got their information about the shoes. As we know, there has been little marketing communication done for the product. Hence, we found it interesting to focus upon word of mouth in this phase. If the respondent had heard of the product through word of mouth we were interested in what message they have received and from whom (the relation to the person who spread the word of mouth). As our study focuses on the research field of word of mouth, we found no reason for deeper questioning if the respondents had received the information through other channels than word of mouth. The three last questions in this part were included not only out of curiosity, but also in hope of finding something interesting for this research and also for supplying the store Fotkultur with some more direct answers as an appreciation of their willingness for letting us conduct this research with them as a case. The first question was if the respondents actually had been using the shoe and if they had how often. Depending on how often the respondents had been using the shoe then we saw the possibility to interpret the respondent's answers differently and the opportunity to make segmentations depending on the frequency in the usage of the shoe/shoes. The other two questions asked were if the respondents were satisfied with the shoes and the store, and the respondents were to answer these two questions on a nine point likert scale. The satisfaction aspect could possibly exert high influence on our further developed questions. Our curiosity about the satisfaction aspect became stronger after looking upon the four minus and plus levels regarding the word of mouth presented by Silverman (2001). These different levels were one among many things which made us develop research question number three. According to what Silverman says more or less satisfied or dissatisfied respondents should spread the word differently and to different amounts of people.

For the second part we were asking how many the respondents had told about the product and how many recommendations they had done, they told us that they did not make any difference between give word of mouth of a product and recommend. We had to make one question out of these two since the respondents perceived the word of mouth as always being a recommendation. We then further asked in how many cases the recommendation led to a purchase. We found this part interesting to investigate since earlier research on opinion leadership told us that opinion leaders affect other customers to a larger extent than those who are not perceived as opinion leaders. Interesting in relation to this was if the respondents, if a word of mouth process had taken place, were the ones who initiated the discussion since opinion leader theory also suggested that opinion leaders to a larger extent initiate discussions in order to create an opinion. The relationship between the respondent and to those who he/she are spreading the word of mouth to are also of relevance, in order to find out if there are any differences for the word of mouth process between different relationships. For the word of mouth process it also includes the content of the word of mouth and once again a semi-structured qualitative question was asked which also made a quantitative measurement to be done upon rational or emotional appeals on the content. For the second part the focus was upon the content of the discussion. This was not done per every one the respondent had spread the word of mouth to; instead we made an assembled collection of the content of the word of mouth spread for every respondent since it is unreasonable to demand that the respondents remember everyone they have spoken to about the product. In this step we also asked about of the content of the word of mouth the respondent spread.

The questions have been built upon knowledge gathered from previous knowledge within opinion leadership and communication theory as well as the scarce knowledge there is about word of mouth. Our intentions are to conduct a research with best results possible in accordance to the predominate circumstances. The perfect research with the perfect result should be perceived as an impossible task to do since the research area is rather new and further experience within the field is needed before it could distinguish itself as a pure research area. Instead we are conducting a research which has been carefully planned as we strive to be perceived as one of the now more and more pioneers within the word of mouth research area who are generating knowledge which are to be further built upon which in turn hopefully will result in a pure research area of word of mouth in the following years. What we mean by this is that we are defending our questions out of the situation we are in and with reservations for the resources we had to our hand. The interview guide was also tested among both respondents given to us by the store and respondents we found which also had bought the shoe from another reseller than Fotkultur. When we did this we found out that we had to make some minor changes in the questions asked in order for the interview guide to work.

The complete interview guide is provided as an attachment to this research and is found in the very end. The respondents have given their permission for us to use their first names in this research. Even though we have been given the permission we did not find any purpose as to why we should be using them, therefore we will keep our respondents anonymous.

3.3 Evaluation of the research quality

There exist several different criteria to consider when evaluating a research's quality. Some are developed for specific designs but first and foremost there is an ongoing discussion whether quantitative and qualitative researches should be evaluated in the same way or not. (Bryman & Bell, 2003; Malhotra & Birks, 2003; Easterby-Smith et. al., 2002; Jacobsen, 2002; Christensen et. al., 2001; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). We have been using mixed philosophies and methods for this research and correct method would therefore be to consider all different criteria for the evaluation of our research. However, we will not supply an evaluation for this research which embodies all existing criteria. Instead, we will only provide a reflection over the major criteria to consider when evaluating this research and how we reason around these criteria. Since the study mainly has been characterized by a positivistic philosophical approach and a quantitative research method we will provide an overview of the evaluation criteria for these approaches. Quantitative research reflects positivistic beliefs and its evaluation criteria are grounded in the positivistic philosophy (Easterby-Smith et. al., 2002).

3.3.1 Reliability and Validity

A common way of evaluating the research's quality is through reliability and validity (Bryman & Bell, 2003; Jacobsen, 2002; Christensen et. al., 2001, Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Reliability and validity are especially used when it comes to quantitative research with positivistic beliefs since the terms and their meanings have been developed specifically for this belief and method (Bryman & Bell, 2003; Easterby-Smith et. al. et. al., 2002; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). There has been an ongoing discussion if the terms reliability and validity are the correct ways of evaluating a qualitative research and Guba & Lincoln (1994) have developed alternative methods for the evaluation of qualitative researches (Bryman & Bell, 2003; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). However reliability and validity have been commonly used for the evaluation of practically all research (Bryman & Bell, 2003; Jacobsen, 2002; Christensen et. al., 2001, Guba & Lincoln, 1994). For this research we see no need to stress the application of the alternative evaluation methods for qualitative research even though this research deals with mixed methods and the qualitative method is used. This is so because of the strong focus upon the positivistic beliefs and the quantitative method.

A good reliability for research is reached when it is determined that the research's data is reliable and trustworthy (Bryman & Bell, 2003; Jacobsen, 2002). This is reached when the researcher is able to minimize or eliminate coincidences and interfering elements which cause the measuring instrument for the research to generate inaccurate data (Andersson, 1998). The data is collected at one single time, and the research has never been conducted before it is impossible to see whether the results would be the same twice and reach what Bryman & Bell discuss as stability. They also discuss something called internal reliability which is a way of measuring if indicators relate to the same thing or if there is a lack of coherence. When thinking about the reliability one should also think about inter-observer consistency which tells us if there have been lack of consistency when more than one researcher is involved in the collection and analyzing of the data because of the individual subjective judgement involved (Bryman & Bell, 2003). For this research we have been three researchers involved. We are of the opinion that we have been able to control individual subjective judgement to the extent that its influence upon the research can be regarded as insignificant. What we can say is that for the quantitative questions the room for individual subjective judgement is reduced compared to the more open qualitative questions where the data is collect in words.

High validity in its turn is reached when there is a confirmation to the correctness in what has been measured, has the right data been gathered and could this data be transferred to other contexts. In other words validity discusses if the data is valid and relevant (Jacobsen, 2002). The evaluation process validity are commonly divided into several different sub-categories (Bryman & Bell, 2003) but we will however only discuss upon the two most common ones which we already have been connecting to a couple of times before, that is internal and external validity (Jacobsen, 2002). Internal validity deals with if the measured is what actually is to be measured and if the results come on a correct basis of the data (Jacobsen, 2002). When developing and conducting this research we have as closely as possible been trying to find the correct variables to measure in order to answer our research questions. This has been done through extensive pre-research, through the theory earlier presented, and through previous knowledge in how to conduct a research. Although all these precautions we will never be able argue without any qualms for the possibility that we actually have been able to conduct the perfect measurements and in the following results. This is so especially since the research area is new and there has never before been any research like this before at the same time as we as researchers have generated the questions in order to collect predetermined data.

3.3.2 The preoccupations of a "qualitative" research

We have been stressing the primarily importance of the positivistic philosophical approach and the quantitative method through the whole discussion and it might not come as a surprise that the main preoccupations according to the research methods chosen are measurement, causality, generalization, and replication (Bryman & Bell, 2003, Easterby-Smith et. al., 2002). These preoccupations might not suit the qualitative method included into this research as well as for the quantitative research but even though this is so there is no wrong in discussing these aspects for the qualitative method as well. We have not said it before but it has been quite obvious that we have constantly wedging which way we were to go because of the mixing methods used. This is the mixed methods main negative aspect according to us.

As the study is researching a phenomenon, word-of-mouth, that has been given a lot of attention quite recently and the previous knowledge within the area is scarce this has had negatively implications upon the *measurement validity* since there are no previous researches backing up what is actually measured within this research (Bryman & Bell, 2003). We touched upon this when we discussed internal validity and this is the fact for all researches conducted within areas with scarce knowledge, and can only be improved by further researches within the area. But in return we include opinion leadership and communication into the research, areas where several researches have been conducted with a result in well developed theories which are used as a base in this research both when constructing the research and when analyzing the empirical results. This in turn should be taken into account when evaluating the measurements.

For cross-sectional designs theory says there is less confidence to be enjoyed in *causal findings* than for other quantitative designs. This is so due to that quantitative researchers are invariably concerned to develop techniques that will allow casual inferences to be made (Bryman & Bell, 2003).

Searching for results that are able to *generalize* often characterize the quantitative researchers (Bryman & Bell, 2003). The quantitative researcher is eager to make her/his sample to be as representative as possible because if he/she can reach a representative sample it is possible to say that the results are not unique to the particular group studied (Ibid). It feels almost nagging to once again come back to the concept of generalization. We will however once again mention that the results from this research are not to be generalized upon a common population. However, it could possibly be done within the limited world the case has to offer, that is all buying customers of the MBT shoe from the store Fotkultur in Malmö, Sweden.

Researchers within the social science find it important to be able to replicate a research. The reason for this is the same as within natural science. The common view is about replications is that if there is a failure to replicate the research and its findings, serious questions would be raised about the validity of the research (Bryman & Bell, 2003). As we put no importance upon the research’s results to be able to be generalized for a common population the importance for replication outside the case is reduced. Although we were given a unique opportunity for this research, a specific case, it could be argued that a replication under resembled prerequisites a replication could possibly be done.

4 Empirical Data

This chapter presents the empirical data. It is a detailed description containing both charts and diagrams together with short texts. The chapter is divided up according to the further developed research questions presented in chapter 2.

4.1 Descriptive statistics

4.1.1 Demographics

This section will describe the empirical data collected during the course of the study. As mentioned before, we have 59 respondents that we interviewed by telephone. At first we will briefly describe the demographics of the respondents and some of their characteristics. After that we will display graphs and tables that are needed to analyse our research questions posed in our introduction and in the theory chapter.

We started with a list of 100 names that we wanted to interview. Due to time constraints and resources, we were only able to receive answers from 59 of the 100. This fall out is not one that will damage our results statistically, as we will see further down, our results are still accurate.

This is how the sex is divided between the respondents. Of 59 total respondents, we have 20 men and 39 women. We have almost double the amount of women than men, as shown in the table.

Sex

		Frequency	Valid Percent
Valid	Man	20	33,9
	Woman	39	66,1
	Total	59	100,0

Figure 4-1 *Sex dispersion of the respondents*

A brief description of the age dispersion shows us that the youngest respondent is 24 years old, and the oldest 82 with a mean of 49.

Age description

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Age	59	24	82	49,05	11,840
Valid	59				

Figure 4-2 *Age Dispersion of the respondents*

This however, does not give an accurate view of how age and sex is related. Therefore a population histogram would suite better.

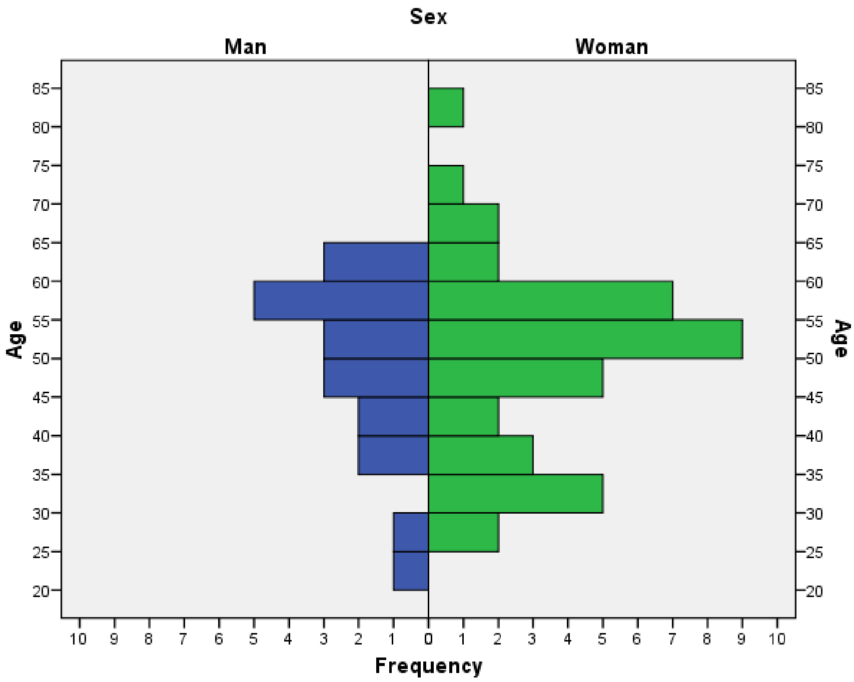

Figure 4-3 *Histogram of age divided by sex*

The following table shows the marital status of the respondents, with most of the respondents being married, girl/boy friend as second place and divorced last.

Maritial status

		Frequency	Valid Percent
Valid	Married	29	49,2
	Divorced	5	8,5
	Boy/girl friend	14	23,7
	Single	11	18,6
	Total	59	100,0

Figure 4-4 *Marital Status of the respondents*

The occupations of the respondents also varied greatly. For the most part, there were nurses, doctors and others within medicine, but also librarians, office employees and handy-men. The most frequent occupation is “retired”. This is though not a majority by many percent, rather a small majority. This means that we have a good distribution in occupations, leading to better results since they will not only reflect opinions from a certain occupation.

4.2.1 General information

This section will cover information that is not relevant for our research questions, but is still needed in order to understand the results presented. For further insight into the question, please look at our method or in the appendix. Below you will see the alpha measurement of the opinion leadership scale (this term is referred to as OLS in the graphs and tables presented below).

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
,757	6

Figure 4-5 *Cronbach's alpha value of the OLS*

The Cronbach's alpha value is used to measure the internal reliability of a scale. According to Bryman and Bell (2003), the threshold value should be above 0, 6, but the rule of thumb is that it should be above 0, 7, which we succeed in achieving.

Below is a histogram of the complete distribution of results from the opinion leadership scale.

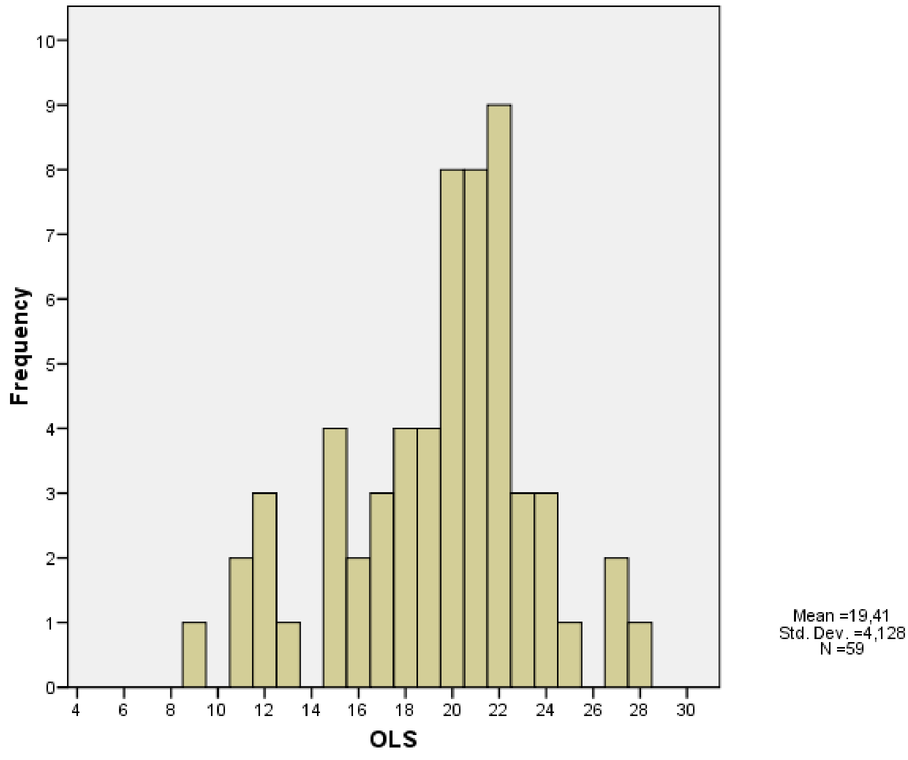

Figure 4-6 *Opinion leadership score histogram*

The following graph will show statistics of how many our respondents have spread the word to.

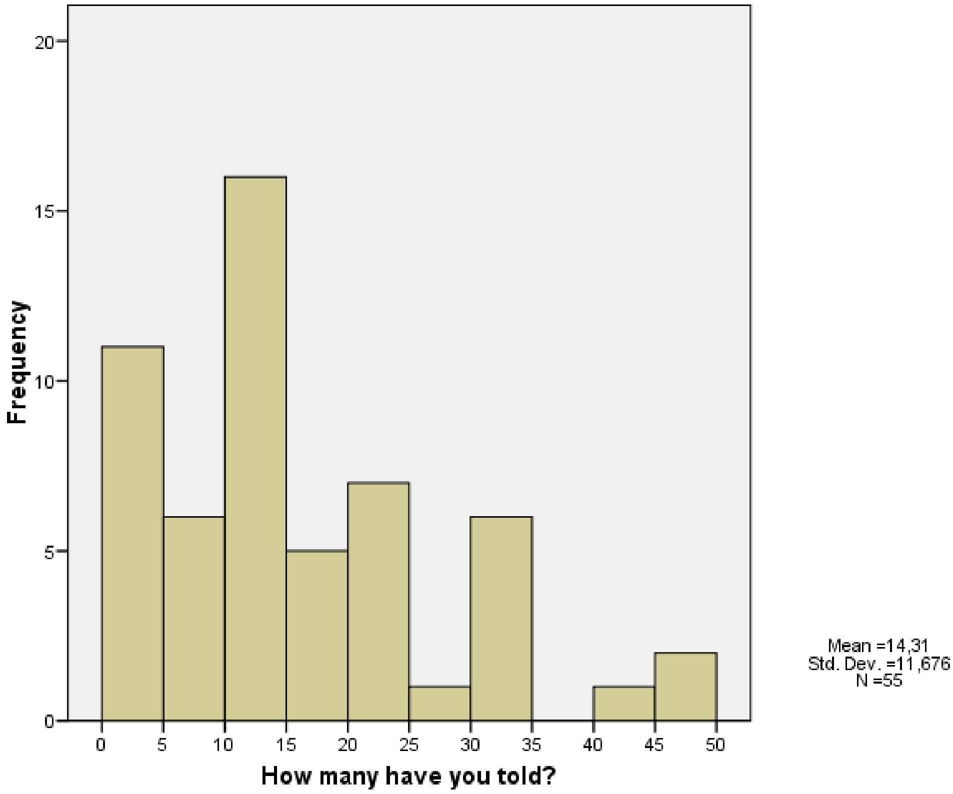

Figure 4-7 *How many the respondents have spread the word to histogram*

As we can see, there is a great variety of how many the respondents have spread the word to. Below we see a table of the relationship between our respondents and the ones they spread the word to.

Relationship?

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Family	92	11,2
	Friend	293	35,7
	Colleague	315	38,4
	Acquaintance	118	14,4
	Total	818	99,6
Missing	System	3	,4
Total		821	100,0

Figure 4-8 *Relationship of the ones they spread to word to*

This figure tells us what relationship our respondents have to the ones they spread the word to. Most of them spread the word to colleagues, with friends at a second place, then acquaintances and last family.

4.2 Research question 1: How opinion leaders differ from the rest

Firstly we will be looking at the opinion leaders and how they differ from the rest of the respondents.

Summary of the opinion leadership scale

		Frequency	Valid Percent
Valid	Not Opinion leaders	24	40,7
	Opinion leaders	35	59,3
	Total	59	100,0

Figure 4-9 *Opinion leadership score split*

According to this table, there are 35 opinion leaders among our respondents, 59 %. The variable is split by the cumulative percent (as mentioned in our method). The result was that the ones who scored 0-19 are not opinion leaders and 20-30 are opinion leaders.

The age dispersion of the opinion leaders is presented below. We can see that overall, the opinion leaders are younger than the rest. The independent sample t-test of these variables shows us that there is a difference between the opinion leaders and non opinion leaders (significance of 0.02). Also the mean age of an opinion leader is 46 and of the non opinion leaders 56.

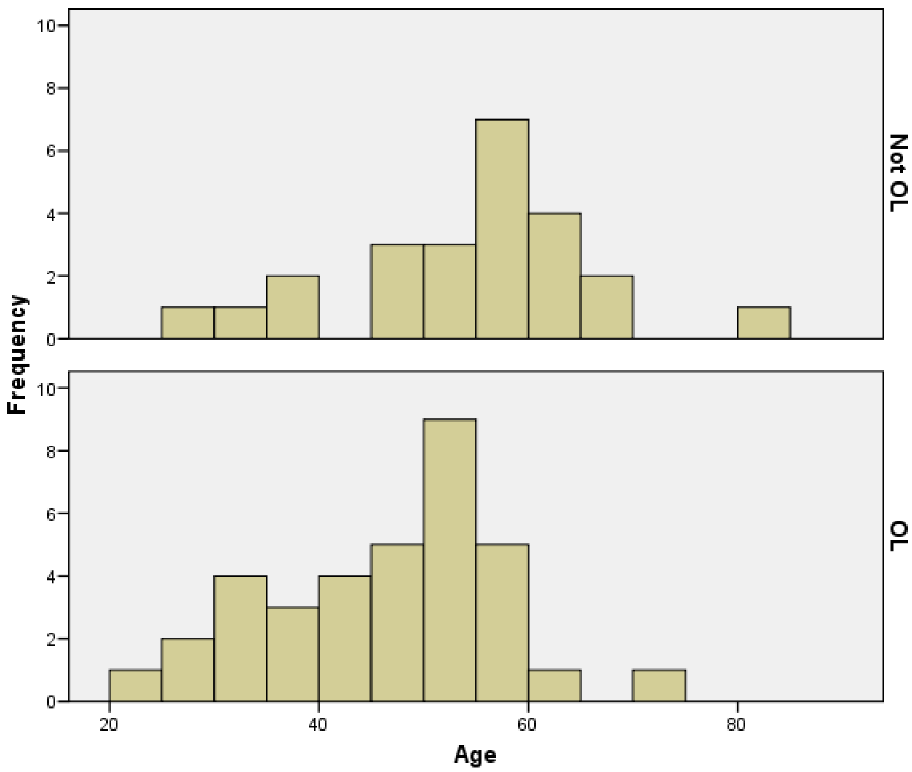

Figure 4-10 *Histograms or the age dispersion of the opinion leaders*

Below is a table displaying the occupations of the respondents.

Occupation * OLSnew Crosstabulation

Count

		OLSnew		
		Not OL	OL	Total
Occupation	Accountant	0	3	3
	Administrator	1	0	1
	Assistant	1	0	1
	Assistant nurse	1	3	4
	Banker	1	1	2
	Barber	0	1	1
	Communicator	0	1	1
	Controler	1	1	2
	Dentist	0	1	1
	Entreprenueral engineer	1	0	1
	Handler	0	2	2
	Human Resources	0	1	1
	Industrial services	0	1	1
	Industrial worker	1	0	1
	Librarian	0	1	1
	LSS Handler	1	0	1
	Make-up artist	0	1	1
	Masseus	0	1	1
	Nurse	4	2	6
	Photographer	0	1	1
	Postman	0	1	1
	Psychologist	0	1	1
	Real estate broker	1	0	1
	Receptionist	0	1	1
	Retired	8	2	10
	Roofer	0	1	1
	Sales man	0	2	2
	Secretary	0	1	1
	self-employed	0	1	1
	Self-employed	0	1	1
	speech pedagogue	1	0	1
	Student	0	1	1
	Teacher	1	2	3
	Warehouse team leader	1	0	1
Total		24	35	59

Figure 4-11 *The occupation of the respondents*

This table merely describes the professions of our respondents split by if they are opinion leaders or not.

High or low education divided by opinion leadership

			Not OL	OL	Total
	Low education	Count	3	8	11
		% within Occupation1	27,3%	72,7%	100,0%
	High education	Count	13	25	38
		% within Occupation1	34,2%	65,8%	100,0%
Total		Count	16	33	49
		% within Occupation1	32,7%	67,3%	100,0%

Figure 4-11-a *Crosstab of high/low education and opinion leadership*

We divided the occupation into two categories, the occupations requiring a over high school education and those where that is not required. The crosstab is not significant (an independent sample t-test gave us 0.67 with a 95% level).

Below you will find a table dividing the sex of the opinion leaders.

Gender of our opinion leaders

			OLSnew		
			Not OL	OL	Total
Sex	Man	Count	8	12	20
		% within Sex	40,0%	60,0%	100,0%
	Woman	Count	16	23	39
		% within Sex	41,0%	59,0%	100,0%
Total		Count	24	35	59
		% within Sex	40,7%	59,3%	100,0%

Figure 4-12 *Sex of the ones that became opinion leaders*

The chi 2 test of this crosstab tells us that the results are not statistically significant (significance of 0.58 at a 95% level). Hence, this table shows that it does not matter that we have more women respondents than men, and that there is no difference in the share of opinion leaders divided by gender.

Now we will look how well the opinion leaders spread word of mouth. We did an independent sample t-test of the two variables. The mean opinion leader spread the word to 17 people, and the non opinion leader to 9. The difference is statistically significant (significance 0.01 from the t-test at a 95% level).

Group Statistics

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation
How many have you told?	Not OL	21	9,10	10,681
	OL	34	17,53	11,223

Figure 4-13 *Group statistics of the independent sample t-test of how many our respondents have told*

Next we will see how the opinion leaders depend on what relation they have to the people that told them about the shoes in the first place. A crosstab of these variables revealed a significance of 0.67 (through an independent sample t-test and 95% level).

Relationship of the ones who told our respondents

			Not OL	OL	Total
relation	Family (=1)	Count	4	4	8
		% within OLS	26,7%	16,7%	20,5%
	Friend (=2)	Count	4	6	10
		% within OLS	26,7%	25,0%	25,6%
	Colleague (=3)	Count	4	11	15
		% within OLS	26,7%	45,8%	38,5%
	Experts (=4)	Count	3	3	6
		% within OLS	20,0%	12,5%	15,4%
Total		Count	15	24	39
		% within OLS	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%

Figure 4-14 *Crosstab of the relationship to out respondents*

4.3 Research question 2 How the content of the message differs

In order to answer our second research questions, we need to analyze the message that was both received by the respondents and the message that was passed on by the respondents to the ones they spread the word to. The qualitative data we gathered from the respondents were collected during the interviews when asked opened questions, also when we found any answer to be a bit strange we asked what they based their answer on.

When asking in the qualitative part of the interviews, how many the respondents had told about the product and how many recommendations they had done, they told us that they did not make any difference between give word of mouth of a product and recommend. Since the answers were the same from these questions we have brought these two questions into one. Where we call this question; to, how many have you spread recommendations through word of mouth about the product?

4.3.1 Message received

As seen in the statistical data here in the empirical section, colleagues to the respondents have been the most common word of mouth spread about the shoes. It was often through them they first heard about the MBT shoes. They gave a rational message in most cases where they described the functions and features of the product. Some of the respondents felt that the input from the sender was enough to enable a purchase while others sought for a second opinion from others, often from a so called expert (doctor or physiotherapist), a popular media to get more information was Internet where they for example “googled” the product.

Below we see a crosstab of the opinion leaders and what kind of message they received. This crosstab is not significant with a significance of 0, 51 from a chi 2 test and a 95 % level.

Tpye of message received divided by opinion leadership

			Pure rational	Emotional content	Total
	Not OL	Count	15	9	24
		% within OLSnew	62,5%	37,5%	100,0%
	OL	Count	23	12	35
		% within OLSnew	65,7%	34,3%	100,0%
Total		Count	38	21	59
		% within OLSnew	64,4%	35,6%	100,0%

Figure 4-15 *Type of message received by the respondents*

Examples of how the respondents first heard about the product are presented below and a further analysis will be presented in the analysis chapter.

> *A colleague told me about the shoes´ functions and lends me a pair for a week; I was immediately convinced right after I began to use them and decide to go through with a purchase.*
>
> *They are good for the health and comfortable to wear. A friend in Ängelholm who has a gym there, on the gym´s notice board there was a poster of the shoes, when she saw me looking at the poster she recommended them. She already had a pair and offered me to borrow a pair which I did and then decided to purchase.*
>
> *My daughters´ boyfriend knew that I had problems with my feet and he had heard that the shoes gave a positive effect on such problems. I consulted my physiotherapist who confirmed the functions of the shoes.*
>
> *A friend told after he had been recommended by his physiotherapist, I had problems with my back so I became interested and started to google the shoes on Internet and later gave the material found to my physiotherapist who gave his comments. Today I own two pair of shoes.*
>
> *A customer talked about the shoes during a session, he said among other things that they were good for the back.*
>
> *My son´s wife had heard about them and told that they were good for the balance and the back. Asked her doctor to give a second opinion so she could further evaluate them.*
>
> *Heard from a colleague that they were a hype in the United States and spread positive effects onto the body.*
>
> *Two others at work had the shoes and recommended them and told me the location of the store in Malmö.*

Walked by the store´s shop window in Malmö and went in. I am a shopaholic so it was the kind of a product I bought impulsively.

Saw a notice in a senior magazine, asked my physiotherapist if she knew anything about them. She recommended them and convinced me to buy them.

4.3.2 Message sent

Depending on whom the message was sent to they adapted the nature of the message but even here rational messages were the most used, second was a mix between emotional and rational and least emotional. When conducting word of mouth they often talked about the characteristics of the shoes and those who seemed really interested of the product, they offered to test shoes if they had similar shoe size. Those who did not spread information of the product to so many had different reasons for it. One were because they were a bit dissatisfied with the product since they rarely used the shoes they felt the shoes were an unnecessary purchase and did not for that reason want to recommend them. Another reason was also because they had not used the shoes enough so they had not been able to create an opinion of them yet. Besides these, respondents found the shoes a bit ugly and did not think their friends would get a physical attraction and also they knew the price was too high for the majority of their acquaintance. The last reason was that some of the respondents´ circles of friends were strictly limited often due to retirement and age.

The respondents who recommended to many receivers had less knowledge if their word of mouth had led to a purchase. But they were convinced that they had influenced quite a few to a purchase but were only able to give answers of absolute purchases on some of the receivers.

This next table shows the type of message that the opinion leaders sent to the people they talked to. This table is significant (significance of 0.02 from a chi 2 test and a 95% level) therefore we can see a tendency that opinion leaders spread more messages with an emotional content.

Type of message passed on divided by opinion leaders

			Pure rational	Emotional content	Total
	Not OL	Count	14	9	23
		% within OLSnew	60,9%	39,1%	100,0%
	OL	Count	10	23	33
		% within OLSnew	30,3%	69,7%	100,0%
Total		Count	24	32	56
		% within OLSnew	42,9%	57,1%	100,0%

Figure 4-16 *Type of message sent by the respondents*

Examples of what (if) they thought about what to say to the receivers:

I consider who can be interested and have a need for such a product like this then I give them information about the shoes, price, benefits and so on as well as I tell them where the store is located in Malmö.

I adapted the nature of message depending on what relation I had to the receiver and what preferences they have when choosing a product.

Since me myself would not buy an expensive product like the MBT shoes without testing, I offered those who had similar shoe size to borrow my pair.

I gave the same message to everybody, just told them about what benefits the shoes have had on my body.

Examples of the type of messages the respondents passed on:

Nice guys in the store, good to have when I am walking which give positive effects on the health.

The shoes have positive effects on my body, feet and back especially. Nice to wear at work since the floor is hard.

They have helped me a lot and have had a positive bi-effect on my posture.

The shoes have helped my back, which enabled the chance for me to play 18 holes of golf again.

The shoes are comfortable, good effects on the body, 2000-2500 SEK is a cheap price to get a better health.

4.4 Research question 3 Driving forces to recommend the shoes

This part will focus on what drove the respondents to spread the word further. We will be looking at their opinion leadership score, their satisfaction of the shoes as well as the satisfaction of the store. These factors will be linked to how many they spread the word to, in order to see if there is a link. This is done through regression analysis. We have done the regressions with a 95%, or 0, 05 significance level. The highest adjusted R square value is for the opinion leadership variable. The satisfaction to the store is not significant at all, leaving us with two variables that are significant. This means that the driving force to recommend the shoes further is dependent on either the opinion leaders, or how satisfied the respondents are with the shoes. The opinion leadership score has a higher adjusted R square value, telling us that it is this variable that can explain the best why they have recommended the shoes further. The dependent variable was how many they have spread the word to, and the independent variables are the ones in the table. The variable with the best explanation of how many they have told is the opinion leadership scale, with an adjusted R square value of 29%. Graphs of the two significant variables are presented below. They are all tested at a 95% level.

	Adjusted R2 value	Significance	F-value
Opinion leadership score	0,29	**0,00**	22,75
Satisfaction shoes	0.12	**0,01**	8,17
Satisfaction store	-0,02	**0.93**	0,01

Figure 4-17 *Table of regressions about how many they have spread the word to*

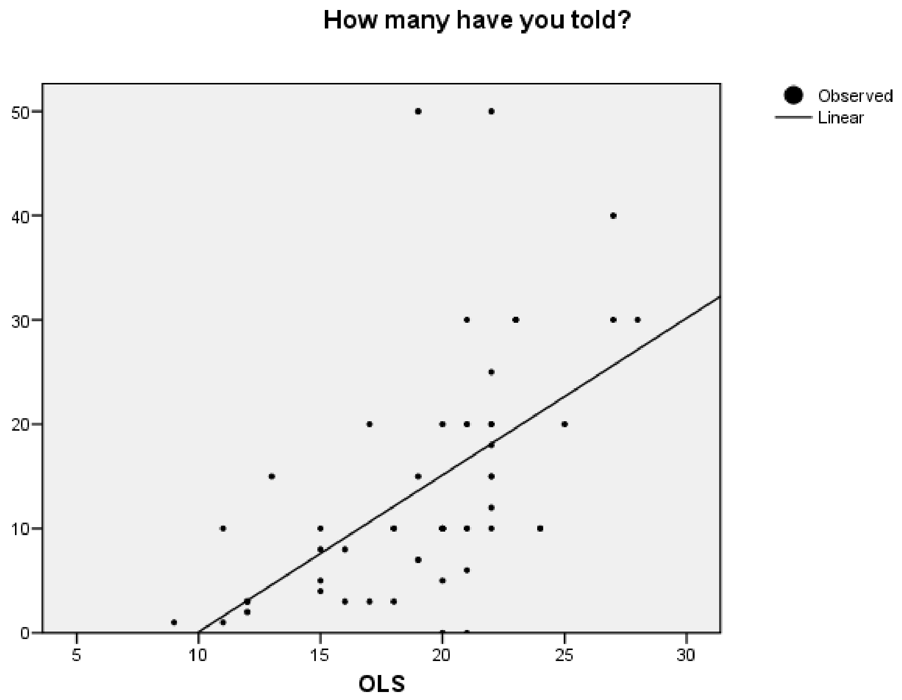

Figure 4-18 *Graph of opinion leadership score and how many they have told*

NOTE: In the two graphs presented here, the vertical axis is how many our respondents have told about the shoes. In order to make the graphs legible the label has been moved to the top of the graphs.

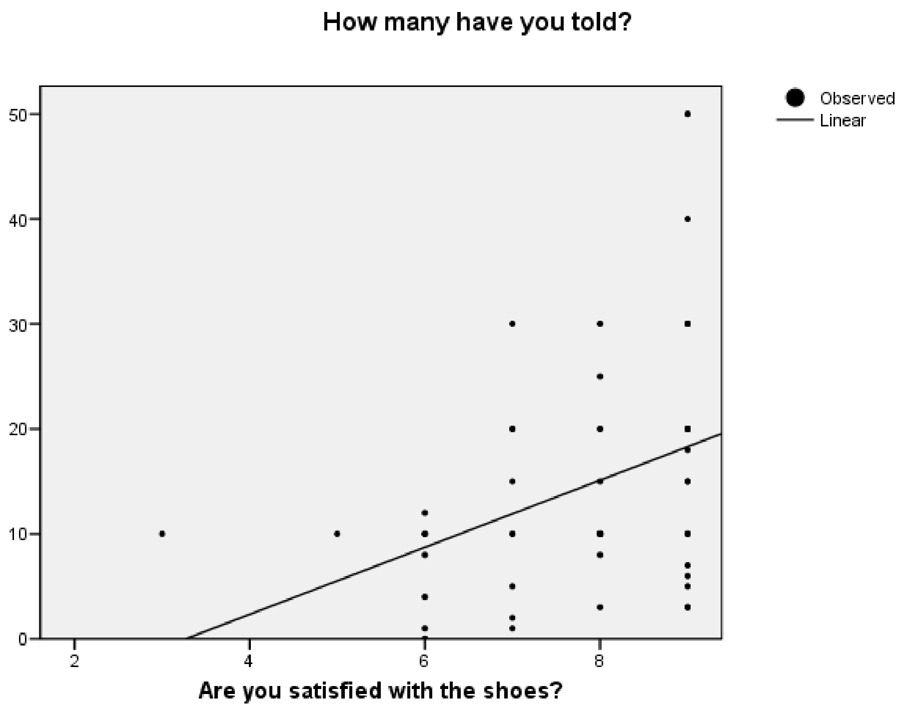

Figure 4-19 *Graph of shoe satisfaction and how many they have told*

4.5 Research question 4 Driving forces to getting people to buy the shoes

After looking at what inspired the respondents to spread the word, it would be interesting to look at what force was the strongest in getting others to buy the product as well. Therefore we looked at how many that actually bought the shoes after a recommendation and the factors opinion leadership score, rational or emotional message passed on and the relationship between the respondents and the ones they talked to. In contrast to the last set of regression analysis, this is not significant at a 95% level. This means that the opinion leadership score has no effect on getting people to buy shoes after a recommendation.

	Adjusted R2 value	Significance	F-value
Opinion leadership score	0,01	**0.25**	1,37

Figure 4-20 *Table of the regression opinion leadership score and how many have bought the shoes*

A crosstab of the kind of message passed on and if they bought shoes is presented below.
The variable how many bought the shoes has here been re-coded, so that the people our respondents are unsure about are considered fall-out. This gives us a certain number of bought or not of 310 instead of 818 (which is the total number of people our respondents told).

Type of message passed on and if it lead to a purchase or not

			No buy	Bought	Total
Type of message	Rational	Count	103	38	141
		% within Type of message	73,0%	27,0%	100,0%
	Emotional content	Count	115	54	169
		% within Type of message	68,0%	32,0%	100,0%
Total		Count	218	92	310
		% within Type of message	70,3%	29,7%	100,0%

Figure 4-21 *Crosstab of buying pattern and type of message passed on*

Clearly, most of our respondents spread a message with emotional content. The chi 2 test showed a significance of 0.20, meaning that the table is not statistically significant at the 95 % level.

A crosstab of the relationship our respondents spread the word to and if they bought shoes or not is presented below. The independent sample t-test gave us a significance of 0.15 at a 95% level.

Relationship to the ones our respondents told and if they bought shoes or not

			No buy	Bought	Total
Relationship	Family	Count	35	24	59
		% within Relationship	59,3%	40,7%	100,0%
	Friend	Count	67	27	94
		% within Relationship	71,3%	28,7%	100,0%
	Colleague	Count	110	35	145
		% within Relationship	75,9%	24,1%	100,0%
	Acquaintance	Count	6	6	12
		% within Relationship	50,0%	50,0%	100,0%
Total		Count	218	92	310
		% within Relationship	70,3%	29,7%	100,0%

Figure 4-22 *Crosstab of relationship and if they bought the shoes*

NOTE: For some of the analysis, due to the re-coding of the variable and hence its fall out, we will disregard the acquaintance relation.

Below is a summary of the amount of people our opinion leaders and none opinion leaders that bought or did not buy shoes. The chi 2 test revealed a significance of 0.32 at a 95% level, which is not statistically significant.

Summary of people that bought or did not buy shoes split by opinion leadership

			Not OL	OL	Total
	No buy	Count	57	161	218
		% within Opinion leadership	73,1%	69,4%	70,3%
	Bought	Count	21	71	92
		% within Opinion leadership	26,9%	30,6%	29,7%
Total		Count	78	232	310
		% within Opinion leadership	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%

Figure 4-23 *Summary of the amount of people that bought or did not buy shoes and opinion leadership*

Seeing as none of the crosstabs are significant, we went one step further back to see how our respondents were influenced. First we looked at how our respondents heard about the shoes. 39 of our respondents heard about the shoes through word of mouth, and it is those 39 that we will focus upon in the next two tables.

How did you hear about the shoes?

	Frequency	Valid Percent
word of mouth	39	66,1
mass media	17	28,8
other	3	5,1
Total	59	100,0

Figure 4-24 *Table of how the respondents heard about the shoes*

Out of those 39, most heard about the shoes through colleagues, with family members second and experts last, as seen in the table below.

Relationship

		Frequency	Valid Percent
Valid	Family	8	20,5
	Friend	10	25,6
	Colleague	15	38,5
	Experts	6	15,4
	Total	39	100,0

Figure 4-25 *Table of the relationship to our respondents*

Looking at what kind of message all our respondents (not divided by opinion leadership) received, if it was rational or emotional gave us these results.

Rational or emotional message received by our respondents

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Pure rational	38	64,4
	Emotional content	21	35,6
	Total	59	100,0

Figure 4-26 *Table of the type of message our respondents received*

5 Analysis

An analysis of our findings with reference to the theoretical base is provided in this chapter. The chapter is built around the four further developed research questions discussed in chapter 2, and a thorough analysis is given for each of those.

Our research questions implied that we are interested in looking at how opinion leaders differ from others when spreading word of mouth. We have shown, with reference to earlier research and studies that opinion leaders are in fact very powerful when they firmly believe in a certain product. If a company has opinion leaders on their side they stand a better chance of having positive word of mouth, spread to more people, and getting more people to adopt. Looking back at our introduction, we have shown that there are multiple studies involving opinion leaders, as Katz and Lazardsfeld (1955), Weimann (1994) amongst others. As well there is research done on word of mouth too. There are a number of books, also mentioned in our introduction such as Silverman (2001), Rosen (2000), and McConnell & Huba (2007). Watts (2007) somewhat emphasized in an article in Harvard Business Review the importance of word of mouth as a future research field. Our ambition with this study is to tie these two areas together, opinion leadership and word of mouth. What this analysis will show is a strong link between opinion leaders and word of mouth. The first part of the analysis concerns more descriptive information about our respondents. In the second part, the opinion leaders and word of mouth will be linked together. Thirdly, a more qualitative account of the messages being sent and received will be presented. Finally we will look at the driving forces for recommendation and purchase as well as what factors that influenced our respondents.

5.1 Descriptive information about our respondents

We have a good spread of both sexes and age in our respondents. There is almost double the amount of women than men in the group (*Figure 4-1*). However, we believe that the results will not be biased as a consequence of this. This is also what Fotkultur's owners said when we interviewed them, that there has been a majority of women buying the shoes. This does not explicitly correlate with the store's target group, as they would like to target both sexes equally, and all age groups. Looking at the age dispersion (*figure 4-2*), with the mean age being 49 years old, we also have a good spread. A better overview of the respondent's age and gender is presented in *figure 4-3* (a histogram of the age divided by gender). The nature of the product, as mentioned earlier in the presentation of Fotkultur, is mainly to aid consumers in a medicinal sense. As we humans grow older, there is a natural tendency to be more concerned with the well being of our bodies. Younger people are of course also concerned but not to the same extent and often with a different motive, elders go to physiotherapists while younger go to the gym to gain a good body. This can partly describe the relative high mean age of our respondents. The majority of our respondents are married, with boy/girl friend at a second place (*figure 4-4*). Our respondents cover a large area of occupations. This helps us in giving a larger field to our study, and not forcing us to be narrowed down into the field of medicine. This, however, is actually surprising since, in an interview with the owners of Fotkultur, they said that they thought that most people who bought the shoes work within medicinal care.

They also mentioned that they perceived a majority of their customers buying the shoes due to some medical condition that required treatment. Quite surprising, looking at *figure 4-25*, which will be described in more detail later, we can see that only six people heard about the shoes from their medical consultant (so called experts). The difference of what Fotkultur and our empirical data say about how our respondents used medical consultants will be analysed in the message part.

5.2 Research question 1: Opinion leaders

In order to answer the first of our research questions, we decided to identify and see how our potential opinion leaders differ from the rest.

Using the revised King and Summers' opinion leadership scale (revised by Flynn, Goldsmith and Eastman, 1994, referred to here as the King and Summers' opinion leadership scale) gives us a reliable and valid ground for the opinion leadership questions we asked the respondents about. Looking at Cronbach's Alpha value (*figure 4-5* which is over 0.6) we can see that the results we received are reliable. *Figure 4-6* is a histogram over the different scores from our respondents on the opinion leadership scale. The mean is 19,41, telling us that on average, the respondents rated themselves above the median score, which for this scale is 15. What is interesting to see here is that the score that is most frequent is 22. This is interesting because it tells us that a large part of the respondents rate themselves quite high on this scale, since the maximum number of points a respondent can receive is 30.

Figure 4-7 shows how many the respondents have spread the word to. The majority has spread the word to 15 people, and on average to 14,31 people. This is a relatively high number, considering what Silverman (2001) says about spreading positive and negative messages. Since most of the customers are satisfied with the shoes, there are mostly positive messages to send. If, however, there would be the same number of consumers that are dissatisfied, following Silverman's (2001) theory, they would spread the negative messages to a far greater number of people. There is therefore almost vital to keep the experiences with the shoes positive.

We decided to split the respondents into two categories for some of the analysis. We took the cumulative percent of the total opinion leadership scale and split them halfway. The results (*figure 4-9*) was those who scored from 0-19 on the scale were called "not opinion leaders" and the ones who scored from 20-30 on the scale were called "opinion leaders". This is done in order to clearly distinguish between the opinion leaders and those who scored lower on the scale.

What we found, was a difference in the age dispersion of our opinion leaders and the rest. *Figure 4-10* shows the frequencies of age divided up between the two groups. We can see that, in accordance with Gatignon and Robertson (1985), Midgley and Dowling (1978), Robertsson, Zielinsky and Ward (1984), and Rogers (1983), our opinion leaders are in fact younger than the rest of the respondents. The same authors draw the conclusion that opinion leaders are generally better educated than the rest of the population. When looking at *figure 4-11* and *4-11-a*, we perceive our opinion leaders to be higher educated than the non opinion leaders. However, we cannot draw a solid conclusion from this, merely a vague tendency, since the crosstab is not significant. Since most of our respondents are women, it is not that surprising that the majority of our opinion leaders are women too, as shown in *figure 4-12*.

However when taking a closer look at the gender of the opinion leaders and divide the numbers with the total number of each gender of our total respondents we see that 60% of all men and 59% of all women came out to be opinion leaders. Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) mention that what gender an opinion leader has, plays a role in which topic they are specialized in. The shoes can imply a form of either fashion or medical aid, and, according to Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955), women listen to women when about fashion. Building on their theory, we assume that our female opinion leaders have spread the word mostly to other women. However, this is not a fact that we can support with our empirical data since most of our respondents could not remember what specific sex the people have that they told. When the shoes were used as a physiotherpistical aid, experts were often approached for advices.

Reynolds and Wells (1977) also mention that sometimes opinion leaders are being imitated instead of being followed. They have a point, since some of our respondents mentioned that they had been approached while walking with the shoes with the reaction that the shoes looked “interesting and comfortable to walk in”. We can therefore suspect that some of these people have gone to the store to try a pair of shoes or they have spent some time to gather more information about them.

As we can see in *figure 4-15*, our opinion leaders received more rational messages than the non opinion leaders. This can be due to the source of the recommendation. Some of our respondents received their recommendation from physiotherapists and family members that probably highlighted the function of the shoe, not so much their own experience with it. However, it could also be explained through the communication models and their noise aspects discussed in chapter two. The product as such is best described out of rational information due to its medical and health benefits (www.swissmasai.se, MBT Footwear Sverige AB, 2007-04-01; Fotkultur, 2007-04-04). We can look upon the product characteristics as being noise in the communication process if the sender’s intention of sending an emotional message is being decoded by the receiver as being a rational message. This can be due to the high levels of rational information needed to describe the product. Even though this could be an explanation there seems to be a more likely explanation according to the theories presented in chapter two. The *Uses and Gratifications Model* told us that receivers are able to select media on their own preferences (Larsson, 2001). This goes well in hand with one of Littlejohn’s (1996) active audiences characteristics, the selective audience which are selective when deciding what media to use. So far it bring us no clear explanation to why our opinion leaders received more rational messages but when looking into what we presented by Baumgarten (1975) in our theory chapter we are able to see it in another light. Baumgarten points out that an opinion leader is seen to prefer information oriented media rather than entertainment oriented, and since we have discussed that people are able to be selective when it comes to media this might be the case.

Looking at *figure 4-16*, we can see how the characteristics of the message changes when our opinion leaders spread the word. Muniz and O’Guinn (2002) and McAlexander et. al, (2002) mention that opinion leaders primarily spread emotional messages, which do not correlate with our results. The messages shift from being received as rational, and being spread mostly through a mix of emotional and rational and then rational. This can be explained partly because the product relies on consumers actually using it and evaluating it. After that, they can spread their recommendations based upon their experience, not only due to rational product descriptions. This suites well with what theory, namely DePelsmacker et. al, (2004), Larsson (2001) and Solomon et. al (2002) say about emotional and rational messages. They mention that emotional messages are primarily chosen when a consumer is familiar with a product. However, looking at *figure 4-15*, most of our respondents received rational messages and mixed messages. Looking at what DePelsmacker et al. (2004), Larsson (2001) and Solomon et. al. (2002) say, a mixed message can be very suitable for our product, since the functionality of the shoes and the experience one has with them are both important.

To further analyse the way that our opinion leaders differ from the rest of the respondents, we decided to look at how many each of the respondents have spread the word to. We did this through a independent sample t-test with the opinion leadership score and how many they have told. In *figure 4-13,* we can see the results of the test. In *figure 4-18* we can see the linear relationship between the two variables. We can see a clear linear relation, and we can also see that the regression is statistically significant.

Our opinion leaders are not at all influenced by who told them about the shoes, as we can see in the next crosstab we executed. *Figure 4-14* shows the results of the crosstab between opinion leadership scale and the relation our respondents had to the ones who recommended the shoes to them. The relationship is not statistically significant. This tells us that our opinion leaders did not emerge as such from whom they were influenced by. Most probably they would score just as high on the opinion leadership scale if they read about the shoes in a magazine or saw a mass commercial about them. This is interesting because if further enhances our opinion leaders as being genuine, and not a product of how they themselves are influenced.

5.3 Research question 2: The message

The MBT shoe is a product which has medical and health benefits on the user. When you have a product like that people are likely to find the product hard to evaluate without having any references to refer to. Therefore it is no wonder that most of the respondents heard about the shoes through word of mouth (*figure 4-24*). The effect of word of mouth and the message if it has been successfully sent is that it shortens down the sequences of the AIDA model during the buying process (De Pelsmacker et. al. 2004; Barry and Howard 1990). Some of the respondents got their information through doctors and physiotherapists, so called experts (Silverman, 2001), as a first step, others got information through relatives, friends or colleagues first but in some cases later consulted an expert to get a second opinion. However most often the word of mouth came from colleagues (*figure 4-25*) who told about the shoes during lunch- alternatively coffee breaks. They told about the shoes functions and features and gave descriptive information of them. Descriptive information of a product is something that characterizes rational messages.

The respondents often thought that the information they got through word of mouth was not enough to make a purchase. This could be described out of what Solomon et. al. (2000) discuss in *A Continuum of Buying Decision Behaviour*. We found out when we presented the case and the product that it is a rather new product with a rather high price tag. According to Solomon et. al., unfamiliar product classes and brands as well as products which are more expensive priced require a more extensive problem-solving purchase decision process. The MBT shoe should also be perceived as a product which is bought rather infrequently and such products also calls for a rather extensive problem-solving purchase decision process according to Solomon et. al. Although the received word of mouth attracted interest of the product which led the respondents, in particular the opinion leaders, to seek more information, this behaviour correlates with what Herr et. al. (1991) states in the theory as well as what Solomon et. al. say, that an extensive thought, search, and time given to the purchase is needed for a product such as the MBT shoe. MBT shoes belong to the group of products which has high experience – and credence qualities. Because of this Herr et. al. (1991) explains that they want both information from those whom already bought them, since they cannot know the effects themselves before using them, and further in many cases consult someone who has medical knowledge. When it comes to these kinds of products they also prefer a demonstration or a real test of the shoes before deciding to purchase. Vaughn (1980) supports Herr´s ideas through his FCB-grid, where the MBT shoes fit into the informative box, which describes the pre-purchase evaluation process when buying products of this kind. Informative products demand that you think first before you feel which possibly ends up in a do phase, where you actually buy the product. Further the model explains that informative products are evaluated through high involvement. This information further declares that it was not surprising that rational messages were used most often when word of mouth was given to the respondents.

In the empirical section we can see that almost everyone of the respondent have ranked the product and store highly. We asked them further if their satisfaction was enough to recommend the shoes to their relatives, friends and colleagues. Most people thought so, but there were a few respondents that stated themselves as dissatisfied with the shoes. Usually it was because they had not been using the shoes which made them think that the shoes were an unnecessary purchase. These did not recommend the shoes to anyone. These customers can be placed in Silverman´s (2001) nine levels of word of mouth spreading where they belong to the minus1-level-group. Except from these (dissatisfied) customers the rest are placed in any of the boxes on the plus-levels. Those who only recommended to one or two people, was mainly because either they had a smaller circle of friends than others, retired or did not use the shoes much. One respondent said that she did not dare to tell her friends because she was afraid what they were going to think, her preconceived notion was that they would think she was a "moron" to spend that kind of money on a pair of walking shoes.

Our respondents felt that the receivers of their communication needed information to learn about the product because it in most cases was new to them. Those who were satisfied with the MBT shoes had a goal to convince most of their targeted receivers to buy the shoes. Therefore expound on their views to the receivers together with product information to create an attitude so it in a later stage could lead to a purchase. This strategy agrees further that they have in most cases unconsciously used the convincing strategy confirmed by rhetorical researchers (Larsson, 2001; Johannesson, 2002).

Common for most of the messages our respondents sent to other consumers was that the information given away focused on the shoes´ features. Information of this kind is seen to have a rational character according to De Pelsmacker et. al. (2004), Larsson (2001) and Solomon et. al. (2002). The content of the message distinguishes depending on the relation between the sender and the receiver. Family members tended to use a combination of rational and emotional message. An assumption we made before conducting the study was that those who received either emotional or rational message further used the same appeal when they spread the message to others. This assumption appeared to be wrong, what appeal they used in the message had no correlation with what appeal they apprehended themselves from start (*figures 4-15* and *4-16*). Instead they adapted their message for each one of the receivers depending on the relation they had with them.

The majority of the respondents we talked to described how they were selective considering what word of mouth they spread. They were also cautious regarding what information they passed on. Senders with this kind of selectiveness is as McQuail (2000) call them; Gatekeepers. They are characterized by regulating the flow of information in the communication just as the majority of our respondents did.

On the question why some of the receivers of the respondent's positive word of mouth still had not bought the shoes, the respondents gave different reasons. Some receivers found the form of the shoe unappealing while others wanted to wait and see. The most common reason was that a lot of the receivers felt the shoes were too expensive, they did not represent the value for the money, and statement like this can be a proof that those senders were not good enough as convincers. None of these scored more than at most average high on the opinion leadership scale. A reason for why these respondents were not able to convince others to buy the shoes could be due to lack of rhetorical skills. This is most likely but as we have found that it is rather common that our respondents spread the word of mouth to family and colleague's one could argue that the recommendations through word of mouth came out of a conversation. If conversations have been taking place, failure to reach a mutual understanding for respondents when trying to convince their family members and colleagues could be seen out of interaction and network models. The presented communication models *Social Relations Perspectives* and *Convergence Model* are rather alike (Larsson, 2001). According to the former the communication process taking place when our respondents were spreading the word may have been distorted in the coding and decoding process. A result when the message is diluted could be that the respondent and the other person are unable to reach a mutual understanding according to the convergence model. The failure in reaching mutual understanding could however also be described due to the lack in rhetorical skills or the plain situation where two individuals simply cannot think in the same way.

According to Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet (1944) the primary function of opinion leaders is to spread word of mouth through their networks, to create an interest and desire for the product. We have seen a pattern where the opinion leaders have more often than others influenced the receivers to a purchase. Though there is no statistical evidence in our empirical data that opinion leaders create adoption among their receivers. A reason for this is that the opinion leaders have spread to so many people that they are not able to share any interest, and to keep track of who buys or not.

5.4 Driving forces to recommend the shoes

In this next part we will analyse the driving forces that lay behind our opinion leaders in recommending the shoes to others. Basically three regressions were tested. The dependant being how many they told, and the independent variables we decided to look at were (*figure 4-17)*:

1. Opinion leadership scale
2. Satisfaction with the shoes
3. Satisfaction with the store

Both the opinion leadership score and the satisfaction of the shoes have linear equations (*Figures 4-18 and 4-19*). The figures show us that the higher a person scores on the opinion leadership scale or the more satisfied they are with the shoes, the more people they spread the word to. Since the opinion leadership scale has a higher adjusted R square value that relationship is of greater importance. This confirms our thoughts presented earlier that opinion leaders are in fact powerful in spreading word of mouth. The regression in *figure 4-18* tells us that the higher a person scores on the opinion leadership scale, the more people they will tell about a product. We should however not rule out the fact that being satisfied with the shoes also contributes to the spreading of word of mouth, but not to the same extent as being an opinion leader. The satisfaction to the store is in this case not significant, however, we cannot rule out the fact that it probably also has some impact on the word of mouth. The satisfaction of the store might lead to better word of mouth about the store which is something that we did not integrate in our study.

5.5 Driving forces for the others to buy the shoes

In this section we found it relevant to look at what actually made the people our respondents talked to buy the shoes. The three factors that we wanted to include are:

1. Opinion leadership scale
2. Type of message received
3. Relationship the opinion leaders have to the people they talked to

According to Rogers (1982) opinion leaders are a key factor in spreading information about new products on the market. Littlejohn (1996) argues that the relationship between the opinion leader and their audience is of importance when it comes to the actual purchase of the item. We decided to do a linear regression of the opinion leadership scale and crosstabs for the other two variables. The linear regression did not give us any reliable information, since it is not statistically significant (*figure 4-20*). This means that we could not see any connection between the score our respondents received on the opinion leadership scale and if the people they recommended actually bought a pair of shoes or not. However, looking at the crosstabs, *figure 4-21* and *4-22*, we can see that there is a connection between the message the people received and if they bought a pair of shoes or not. There is a slight majority of people receiving a message with emotional content. We could draw the conclusion that a message with emotional content therefore is the best driving force to get people to buy and one can argue if this is the cause of emotional messages penetrating the surrounding noise, described within the communication models, better than rational messages. It could also be argued if emotional messages are a better rhetorical technique to use when convincing others and create an opinion. Since mixed messages seem to be the most effective, this should be the type of message our opinion leaders use the most. This is also the case, as Rogers (1983) argues, opinion leaders tend to create their own mix and individualises the message depending on the receiver. This is what is happening with our opinion leaders. They seem to isolate and identify what type of message their receiver wants and then delivers that message to them (*figure 4-16*). Although Rogers argues for the opinion leaders to create specialized messages depending on the receiver it could according to the *Uses and Gratification Model* and the interaction and network models be the receiver or the conversation taking place that stress for an individuated message rather than the opinion leader herself/himself that decides for an individuated message to be sent.

Looking at *figure 4-22*, the relationship to those that our respondents spread the word to, the crosstab is not significant. The most frequent relationship that our opinion leaders told is their friends. It is therefore not surprising that the highest percentage of buyers also belong to this relationship. However, looking at the percentages within the relationships, the highest percent there is within the family relationship. This tells us that our respondents influence family members the most when it comes to buying the shoes.

Mixing messages could possibly be a result of interaction between the respondents and the one he/she is spreading the message to and in such a situation it is possible according to the *Convergence model* to reach mutual understanding and most certainly a deeper discussion. Looking at the relationships, it is not surprising that the most frequent relationship is friends since many respondents said they use their shoes at work. However, opinion leaders told their friends most often. Looking at the percentage of how many that actually bought shoes, family members come out on top (since we re-coded the variable, and we decided not to include the acquaintances) both for opinion leaders and non opinion leaders.

Getting others to listen to the advice given to them and then persuading them to buy a pair of shoes is basically what Johannesson (2002) says about rhetorical persuasion. With the question that we are looking at here, being how our opinion leaders got the ones they told to buy the shoes, the question of persuasion is interesting. Solomon, Bamossy and Askeegard (2002) mention that opinion leaders are good at influencing others when in a purchase decision, however, our empirical data does not really concur with this. What we found instead is that the relationship the opinion leaders have and what type of message sent has a greater impact. The rhetorical issues here of course are of the conversations taking place. In a conversation about the shoes, the opinion leader can be more or less persuasive towards the recipient. Solomon et. al. (2002), Corrigan (2006), Elliot and Wattanasuwan (1998) argue that an opinion leader can gain authority and credibility through what occupation and position in a social group they have. This suites well with our findings, since some of our respondents and opinion leaders are nurses and other practisers of medicine, which can imply deeper knowledge in the functionality and advantages of the shoes. Our analysis here is that convincing and persuasion is important in the actual conversation, however, our interviews did not reveal any such information. Further and deeper interviews and perhaps case studies that emphasize this aspect could be done to further gain an understanding of the effect of rhetorical issues and the word of mouth process.

5.6 What influenced our respondents?

We know that all our respondents bought a pair of shoes, since they are all customers of the store. We also know that some of our respondents are opinion leaders, and we have shown in the previous analysis how much of an impact they have on the spreading of word of mouth about the shoes. We have also shown what the best combination is to partly promote the shoe, and also what actually drives people to buy the shoes. What we finally wanted to look at is what influenced our respondents to buy the shoes in the first place. This is done through simple frequency tables.

Figure 4-24 shows in total how our respondents heard about the shoes. 39 heard through word of mouth, 17 through mass media, being either advertisements in newspapers and magazines or walking by the store, and 3 heard about the shoes from other sources.

We thought it would be interesting to look at, within the ones who heard through word of mouth, what relationship they have to the ones that told them about the shoes. *Figure 4-25* shows these frequencies. Only 8 respondents heard about the shoes from family members, whilst most of the respondents heard from colleagues. This correlates well with our other findings, that most of our respondents spread recommendations most often to other colleagues, and acquaintances the least. The high frequency of colleagues in this table strengthens our suspicions that most people talk about the shoes where they use them the most, which is at work. However many of the respondents used the shoes at home and often told people at home about the shoes, but since most people have more colleagues than family members it becomes natural that they told more colleagues for that reason. Only six received the word of mouth from "experts", that is doctors or practisers of medicine. This could be due to some medical condition our respondents have that the shoes can help remedy. The issue raised earlier in 5.3, said that the respondents did not in the first stage hear about the product through doctors alternatively physiotherapists, instead these were used in the next stage to confirm that the function of the MBT shoes are as promised. They provided the true recommendation of the product. We touched up this earlier that it is rather common for a product such as the MBT shoe which according to Solomon et. al. (2002) require a more extensive problem-solving purchase decisions process. As we were well acquainted with this theory before starting with the collection of data we were not that surprised that we found a tendency for an extended information seeking process among our respondents for this given product. The fact that our respondents were seeking further information than what they had been given from the very beginning strengthens the use of the *Uses and Gratification Model* we have been able to include in this research through Larsson (2001).

It is also interesting to see what kind of message our respondents received before buying the shoes. *Figure 4-26* shows the following results. Most of our respondents received a rational message. This could be a standard recommendation from a physiotherapist or likewise that the shoes are good due to the bare functionality of it. Messages containing emotional factors were not used that much, probably since emotional messages often comes from people's own experiences with the shoes. We say this since we showed in the theory presented that emotional messages often evolves from product involvement. If this theory tells the truth our research presents results that tell us that the people who influenced our respondents probably do not have that much of experience of the shoes in order to send emotional messages. We touched earlier upon a rhetorical perspective were it might be better in a rhetorical point of view to spread emotional messages about the MBT shoe. If this is so it could be said that those who were not able to spread emotional messages are lacking rhetorical skills. The nature of the product implies that a rational message should be used according to the models *A Continiuum of Buying Decision Behaivour*, *AIDA*, and *The FCB Grid* presented in chapter two. The manufacturer of the shoes only sends out rational messages in advertisements. Because of just said we found it interesting that our empirical data tells us that a mixed message is the most effective. However it is difficult for MBT to spread emotional messages, and since rational messages is what the product demands then the opinion leaders are doing a good job of transmuting the rational messages into messages that the receivers want.

6 Conclusions

This chapter will conclude the discussion about Watts' influentials and provide a broader application of our findings. Further, we will touch upon managerial implications for Fotkultur and finish with suggestions for future research and this research's limitations.

In our introduction we focused upon two specific research questions. After discussing the theories surrounding these questions, we developed sub-research questions still under the same broader research questions. This was done since we deemed the research questions in the introduction to be broad and our restricted resources would not lead us to satisfactory answers. However, the four other research questions that we developed are still under the general research questions, and we will here discuss how the answers we received can be used to, at least partly, answer and give us some insight into the main research questions.

6.1 Why are opinion leaders so essential for good word of mouth?

Information about new products flow among consumers in a market through diffusion (Rogers, 1983). Further, diffusion is the process in which innovations are communicated through channels into networks of members in social systems. Rogers describes that the key channel to effectively communicate innovations is through opinion leaders, since opinion leaders are seen as spreading word of mouth more than those who are not (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955). According to Richins & Root-Shaffer (1988) and Riecken & Yavas (1986) opinion leaders are actively seeking media and information which they have an interest in. The information collected, out of their own experience of a product, service, and subject, the opinion leaders spread the information to others (Ibid). When spreading the information the opinion leaders take the role of being a gatekeeper (McQuail, 2000) to the extent where they decide what information is being sent. Although everyone who communicates acts more or less as gatekeepers the opinion leaders are seen as more important than others since it those who have great power to influencing others according to Chan and Misra (1990). We also found that the opinion leaders did not see any difference in the terms "telling people about the shoes" and "recommending the shoes to someone". This is interesting since it tells us that they naturally see themselves as recommending a product actively, not only spreading information about them.

First of all we shall go through the demographics of a mean opinion leader of our respondents. Opinion leaders are generally younger than the non opinion leaders and they are better educated. We believe that their professions reveal academic backgrounds gained for the occupation they obtain. These facts found correlate with what Gatignon and Robertson (1985); Midgely and Dowling (1978); Robertson et. al. (1984) and Rogers, (1983) claim as typical characteristics of an opinion leader

We can look at the results obtained from our first developed research question in order to gain an understanding of the demographics. The difference of the percentages of men and women who are opinion leaders is minimal, so no real conclusion can be drawn from this data, except that there is no real gender preference regarding if a man or a woman is more likely to become an opinion leader. This can be due to the fact that we live in a somewhat equal society and that men and women are regarded as equals. These numbers would according to us be most likely different if the study was carried out in a different society.

35 of our 59 respondents showed to be opinion leaders according to our use of the revised version of King and Summers´s opinion leadership scale (Flynn et. al., 1994). They represent 59 % of all respondents. This is seen to be a relatively high figure, but there are explanations. MBT shoes are quite new to the market in the south of Sweden and all our respondents come from the group early adopters. As theory implies most opinion leaders arise/can be found from early adopters (Chan & Misra, 1990 and Silverman, 2001). Further our respondents decided themselves if they were going to aide us, since them, on their own approval, filled out their names and telephone numbers when they bought the shoes. The conclusion we can see after researching the topic is that opinion leaders are more likely of approving to interact with interviewers regarding the nature of their personality, preferences and word of mouth.

6.2 Research question 1:

Does word of mouth evolve/spread primarily out of opinion leaders and do those customers have the most influence upon other customers purchase decisions for a single retailer?

Word of mouth is the primary source of delivering information about both an unknown and known product. Further it has another function which is acting as a channel for recommendation (Rogers, 1983).

In order to answer this question, we incorporate the results from research question 3 and 4. This is because they fall under our first research question, and by analyzing the results of those questions we can reach a conclusion about the broader research question as well.

The majority of the respondents in our study heard about the product for the first time through word of mouth, a conclusion is that most information is spread through word of mouth as Thorstenson, (2006) and Silverman, (2001) suggests in chapter 1. We do not know if our respondents heard about the shoes from other opinion leaders, since we did not have access to those people for questioning. Sometimes the word of mouth was enough to influence an adoption of the product which confirms the theory by McConell & Huba, (2007) and Silverman, (2001). When it did not, they often consulted experts with the motivation that the product is seen by most of its users as expensive with a supposed positive medical effect. In other words the shoe is a product with high experience- and credence qualities. This kind of product often calls for a second opinion from an expert who is able to confirm if the product has trustworthy outcomes or not (Herr et. al., 1991).

The opinion leaders had a tendency to gain product information in the first stage through word of mouth. Then in a next stage they searched for more information as theory implies (Bloch and Richins, 1983), either from the Internet or from other sources of word of mouth, from so called experts for example. The opinion leaders did so to obtain a greater knowledge for the product.

Our 59 respondents spread recommendations of MBT through word of mouth to at least 787 consumers (at least is used since it is practically impossible to remember everyone someone has talked to). Our opinion leaders stood for 596 of the 787 recommendations. Using this fact we are able to answer the first part of the first research question; Does word of mouth evolve/spread primarily out of opinion leaders. We draw the conclusion from our empirical material that it is quite clear that opinion leaders are the base of most word of mouth spread about a product. This conclusion supports the theory by Katz & Lazarsfeld (1955), Rogers (1983) and Herr et. al. (1991).

In average an opinion leader spread recommendations through word of mouth to 17 people which is a significant difference from the non opinion leaders who only told 9 people, as we can see in the developed research question three. Even though there are two factors that are significant, the factor that has the most influence is the opinion leadership scale. The higher a person scores on this scale, the more people they recommend through word of mouth about the product. The other factor is how satisfied someone is with the product. We found that the more satisfied someone is with the product, the more people they tell just as the theory by Silverman, (2001) expresses in the theory. However, the factor that has the more influence on how many people they recommend a product to depends on if they are opinion leaders or not. Since our results are statistically significant, they are applicable to our broader research question as well, since we can see the trends of the regressions.

We found that 71 of the opinion leaders' recommendations led to a purchase while it was only 21 for the non opinion leaders (f*igure 4-23*). These numbers support the theory by Sheth (1971), Zeithaml (1992), Herr et. al. (1991) and Robertson (1971) in 2.5.3. Our research question four deals with this aspect too. Our result for this question poses some problems. We did not find any link between the opinion leadership scale and how many that actually bought shoes. This contradicts the raw numbers presented earlier, where we can see that the opinion leaders' recommendations led to more purchases. There is no significant result of the opinion leaders actually making people buy the shoes. However, our results indicate a tendency that opinion leaders can in a first stage intrigue people to be aware of the shoes. When opinion leaders were involved in the process, we can suspect that a purchase will happen in the future. The factors that were statistically significant in this question are the type of message sent by the respondents and the relationship they had to the ones they told. The results we can see here is that the closer relationship someone has to the person they are recommending a product to, the higher the chance is that they will buy the product which collaborates with what is said in section 2.3 (Silverman, 2001). With the type of message it is a bit more difficult. There it is depending on the product, but in general, sending a message that correlates well with the product attributes should influence the receiver more. During our qualitative interviews we got the feedback from the opinion leaders that since they had told so many more than the others, they had trouble keeping track of who had bought shoes or not to the same extent as the non opinion leaders did. This information fall out is due to the fact that we recoded the variable into two values, either a certain purchase or not, leaving the "do not know" as fall out. This information further proves that the answer to the second part of the first question (do those customers have the most influence upon other customers purchase decisions for a single retailer?), is yes they do according to the numbers and theory (Sheth, 1971; Zeithaml, 1992; Herr et. al., 1991; Robertson, 1971) supporting our numbers however as mentioned earlier the regression was not significant.

6.3 Opinion leaders versus influentials

In our introductory chapter, we discussed the contradictive idea that Watts (2007) no longer sees opinion leaders as valuable and not connected necessarily enough in order to successfully spread information in a market. He further argues for the increasing interest in many easily influential people to spread the information that the traditional opinion leaders do. He sees the role of the opinion leaders as diminishing and viral marketing as being the next big thing. However, the results we have obtained from this case study, points to the contrary. We can see that opinion leaders are in fact very influential when spreading word of mouth and to a certain extent getting other people to buy the product. Their word of mouth is more influential than that of other customers. Watts' key argument is that opinion leaders are not connected enough leading to their spread of information not reaching out to the maximum number of consumers as it could. He states that the so called influentials are more connected, hence reach out even more than the opinion leaders. However, our empirical data shows that the opinion leaders reach out to all the different relations being asked for in this research, which are family, friends, colleagues and acquaintances which supports what Solomon (1994) mention that opinion leaders are well interconnected. To evolve this discussion further it says that the opinion leaders have broad social networks and reach out to all nodes in a satisfying way. If Watts (2007) were to be right, then our results from the opinion leadership scale and the regression of how many they have told would not yield to such conclusions as they do. Instead, if Watt´s arguments were to be correct our respondents should not have had the correlation they have between their opinion leadership score and the amount of receivers they reached and further, would not reach out to all social networks to the extent they do. Watts (2007) is more concerned with the connectivity of the influentials in their social networks instead of focusing on how knowledgeable they are within a certain area. Watts sees his influentials as easily influenced as well as connected, so that the information barrier is low, leading the influentials to "soak" up information easier in order to quickly spread it to more people. We cannot find any support for these arguments in our results, since they clearly show that our opinion leaders are the foremost actors involved in the spreading of word of mouth. Our results are not specifically measuring the connectivity of our respondents, however they would reflect the connectivity of our respondents in how many they have told and what relations they have to their receivers. If our respondents are as connected as Watts' influentials, then they would naturally spread the word to at least as many people as our opinion leaders, and therefore score higher on the opinion leadership scale. This leads us to believe that Watts' influentials act in that sense the same way as opinion leaders, since we can suspect that they would also score high on the scale.

When the opinion leaders in our study first heard about the shoes they searched individually for more information about the product, through primarily other MBT shoe owners, the Internet and they also consulted physiotherapists and doctors. This implies that the company only needs to make information of the product accessible for the opinion leaders while they in turn seek themselves extended product knowledge. In Watts' idea of how the information flow is, regarding influentials, it rather leans towards the fact that companies actively reach the influentials with information and then their function is to spread it further. The conclusion of this is that companies themselves need to invest more resources into actually identifying the influentials and further reach them with information while opinion leaders only need the information accessible. This can be seen as what Rosen (2000) and Hughes (2005) identify as buzzmarketing, since the initial contact with the influentials is undertaken by the company wanting to spread information. Watts' idea is therefore a mix between word of mouth and buzzmarketing. There are though some differences, Hughes (2005) argues that for buzzmarketing, sometimes company representatives mingle with customers of a potential market in order to create buzz and to make the company have a personal face towards their audience. Watts (2007) sees viral marketing more as using traditional media to reach influentials and they in turn use word of mouth. As we have shown in earlier discussions, we argue for the decline of the effectiveness of mass marketing, leading us to believe that viral marketing would it its initiating phase, have trouble reaching its audience.

An important aspect of this analysis and conclusion is that we are dealing with a single case for a single retailer in our study. However, for our case, we can see that there is no direct advantage of looking further into the idea of having influentials. Since Fotkultur has a limited marketing budget, and we can see no evidence in our empirical data that would suggest that opinion leaders are not influential and that they would reach less people than influentials, there is no need to try and target the influentials and to engage in marketing activities aimed at them. As mentioned earlier in the conclusion, opinion leaders see themselves as actively recommending a product instead of merely spreading information about it. This differs from the influentials as Watts describes them, since he sees influentials as mostly spreading information about and persuading people to perhaps try a product, not actively recommending it through their own experiences.

6.4 Research question 2*:*

Does there exist a difference in the content of the message spread between opinion leaders and other parts of the customer base which could not be said to act as opinion leaders?

For traditional and relationship marketing, the message sent to consumers is made by the corporation while in word of mouth marketing the consumer carries and passes on the message to other consumers. Opinion leaders work as gatekeepers (McQuail, 2000) of new product´s information to a certain extent, where they are selective regarding what information to spread, making them able to adapt the message completely regarding what information a receiver would want. When selecting, they keep in mind that the receiver is and why he/she possibly would be interested and in what motives he or she could have to desire the product. Depending on the motive and who the receiver is they adapt the message’s content which correlates with what Lazarsfeld et. al. (1944) stated in 2.1.1. Examples stated during the qualitative interviews were that someone might have a motive that the product is able to improve the body’s health or they just might have a motive that to own a product would be cool and would give them some sort of status.

Further it is important what way the opinion leaders think the receiver would prefer to apprehend the input. The opinion leaders in adapt this phase as well, as some receivers want to receive a message during a discussion in a group (example, during a coffee break at work) while others want the message in a one to one discussion, since then they are able to ask specific questions and always get an answer without so much disturbance from the surroundings. To consider the audience preferences of how to apprehend a message as our opinion leaders did supports Littlejohn (1996) theories in 2.1.2.3. The non opinion leaders did not think so much if a specific content of a message would be suitable for the receivers to apprehend. They did not have any real desire to spread word of mouth, but if they were really satisfied with a product they told about it at home and in work most often. Here we found another difference separating opinion leaders and non opinion leaders, to whom they spread the word. As said non opinion leaders primarily sent the message to their family or colleagues. Opinion leaders spread the word to a more variety of contacts just as the theory suggested (Solomon, 1994, *figure 4-8*); the empirical data showed that they have a greater width of their social networks. What can be said is that the type and content of the message differs vastly depending on the product and its attributes. What we could see in our data however, is that opinion leaders have a tendency to send more emotional and mixed messages. For a different product and company, these results may be completely different.

As said opinion leaders adapt their messages, theory has said that they do so in an optimal way to create adoption. We found differences in what appeal they used during the word of mouth, opinion leaders had a quite even spread over the two options with the ranking, a mix between rational and emotional, and rational. Another fact found was that messages with mixed appeal were with a large margin the one that most often led to a purchase. The best driving force to get people to buy a pair of shoes from a recommendation is a mix between the type of message passed on and the relationship of the people our respondents talked to. From this as well as from what the discussion above states we can draw a conclusion saying that if an opinion leader sends a message with mixed appeals to a family member it would most certainly lead to a purchase. Opinion leaders used the mixed appeal on family members which mentioned was the most effective, they used the most effective appeal for all other relationships as well. These facts together create the conclusion that the theory by Lazarsfeld et. al. (1944), that opinion leaders adapt their message in an optimal way so they can influence the receiver in the best way fitted to create an adoption, is supported since it corresponds with our empirical data.

The best driving force to get people to buy a pair of shoes from a recommendation is a mix between the type of message passed on and the relationship of the people our respondents talked to. From this as well as from what the discussion above states we can draw a conclusion saying that if an opinion leader sends a message with mixed appeals to a family member it would most certainly lead to a purchase. Opinion leaders used the mixed appeal on family members which mentioned was the most effective, they used the most effective appeal for all other relationships as well.

6.5 Concluding words

We have shown, proven and illustrated that opinion leaders are active and important in the word of mouth process. We can see a distinct connection between the two, and having opinion leaders in a company’s customer base is vital. Regarding the content of the message, we can see that it differs from being received to being sent. Both the content and the type of message differ, further opinion leaders consider to whom the message is being sent to and for that reason adapt the message so it will be apprehended most suitable for the receiver. However as being questioned above, they did not succeed to do this in an optimal way.

6.5 Managerial Implications

Directed towards Fotkultur explicitly

This section is a conclusion of our findings directed towards the owners of Fotkultur explicitly. It does not necessarily presents all the facts that are relevant, but offers some insights into our findings that can be helpful for the store.

Most respondents were satisfied with the products, and if they were not, they did not use the shoes as often so it represented enough value for the money spent. Further, all customers were more than happy with the store personnel; the only criticism that came up was that Fotkultur could have a wider assortment.

We found that a target group they in some way have succeeded to reach is the group of people within medical care. A tip would be to have information handed out to them about the shoes and that they had a form of discount. One reason is because most customers of this group wore the shoes at work, and therefore become a live marketing tool. The display of the product will encourage an interest for MBT shoes. This target group was in general also those who spread recommendations to most people as well as they work as experts whom consumers have more faith in regarding this kind of product. The information handed out to them will be as an information source so those who do not are proud owners to a pair of MBT shoes can act as experts and give interested consumers who consult them an (positive) opinion.

Further their customers spread word of mouth mainly at their work places to their colleagues so our recommendations is to seek for work places which have high employee rate at the same time as there could be a need for these kind of shoes. Perhaps, somewhere the work environment includes hard floors. Some respondents said that they used the shoes primarily for the reason that they were comfortable to wear at hard floors.

The store personnel who have professions within physiotherapy should push this information to the consumers. Consumers tend to listen more to those who are so called experts of an area. Within the MBT shoes it is people with medical profession.

General Managerial Implications

This research has brought light to a marketing technique on its upcoming. Many marketers have not fully understood the great effects of word of mouth and the opinion leaders’ role in it. We have been able to show for the specific case in this study that opinion leaders are to be given attention since they are highly influential in the word of mouth process and that a specific store can gain great benefits from the opinion leaders among the buying customers. For a large company there is certainly much to learn and advantages if they are able to use their opinion leaders and word of mouth in a positive direction. The results we have been able to presents are relevant for the larger company but is however more suited for the smaller company since the research has been based on a small company.

When there are no or little resources to put into marketing activities a company should consider the effects opinion leaders could have in spreading a positive word of mouth. There seems to be less need for mass marketing for the smaller company if they can attract the right consumer's since they will spread the word and even give away product demonstrations, which we saw when some of the respondents offered others to try out their shoes. If a company were able to find those customer's just mentioned there should be great advantages in putting a tryout product in their hands which they can offer others to try out. There should however be caution to not infer too much due to the risk of losing the benefits of the independence the word of mouth has from the company.

By using opinion leaders in a favoured way a company we once more want to emphasize that a company can gain from a powerful marketing tool at rather low costs. This research cannot speak in general on how to use opinion leaders and word of mouth out of the results due to its base on a case. What this research however can is to provide strong indications on what an importance opinion leaders and the word of mouth can have. The opinion leaders did spread the word to far more people than the so called non-opinion leaders. This does however not say that non-opining leaders are to be given no attention at all. It was not only opinion leadership that boosted the chance for a customer to recommend the product, so did satisfaction as well.

Even though we have been promoting and showing positive results of the use of opinion leaders and word of mouth we do not preclude the need for other marketing techniques. We rather emphasize that companies should consider and evaluate how they can benefit from giving attention to opinion leaders and word of mouth. Can a company decrease their activities in other marketing techniques and gain better results from the effort they put into opinion leaders and word of mouth, probably if they can stimulate it in a positive way. This could possibly be done through e.g. redirect current information spreading towards opinion leaders.

For the new company we would like to suggest that they look into the use of opinion leaders and word of mouth. The company, Fotkultur, in this study has been able to build a customer base without barley no marketing efforts. In lack of marketing the customers have come in contact with the product and store through word of mouth in many cases which has caught their interest. However many of the customers tended to request more information and went out to collect that information. Sometimes it was found from the store itself, sometimes from physiotherapists or from other sources. If a company is relying to a high extent on word of mouth and opinion leaders they should at least make additional information easily accessible for potential customers', and how much depending on the product characteristics. Fotkultur could probably attract more consumers and boost sales if such information had been more easily reachable.

For those who have influence on how a company's marketing is conducted, we strongly suggest to look into word of mouth and the opinion leaders' potential…there is money to be saved, money to be earned, and much to be learned.

6.6 Limitations and future research

> Once again we want to stress that this study has been based on a cross-sectional case study design. When working with this kind of design, it is only possible to examine relationship between variable since there is not time ordering to the variables. It is therefore important to understand that we only with certainty can say that the variables are related and we cannot draw any casual relationships. We have presented some tendencies that are not significant and these tendencies could possibly be proven if a comparative study had or will be carried out.

The research conducted has been followed by several limitations which made it impossible for us to consider and study all aspects wanted. Primarily we have been heavily restricted in resources, in the form of money and time. This research has been conducted with a time limit of ten weeks without basically any financial resources available. The implications of the scarce resources considering time and finance, are further limitations upon what is being covered by the study, when the study is conducted, how extensive the study is, and to what extent it is possible to use. There have been discussions within the methodology chapter upon the methodological choices made and we will here first and foremost present limitations upon the research subject. The aspects we were unable to cover by this research are further to be considered as our suggestions for future research.

Due to the lack of knowledge of the respondents, they could not differ between spreading information about the shoes and actually recommending the shoes. They saw that these two questions were asking the same thing which led us to also these as the same thing hence the cross reference of the terms.

We have been looking upon one step in the word of mouth process and our interest in studying a word of mouth network became too extensive for us to perform within this research's limitations. We therefore suggest that it would have been of interest in future research to uncover a word of mouth network in order to see how the word is spreading. Just thinking about how the word spreads covers numerous aspects in itself. These aspects could be to study if the word of mouth changes in character along its journey and how, if the word of mouth is decreasing or increasing as it gets further away from the original source, and if it is losing in effectiveness. Such a research could have been conducted in a way where the word of mouth from opinion leaders and the non-opinion leaders is being compared. We believe that such a research could provide interesting results that further analyse the difference in effectiveness between opinion leaders and the influentials promoted by Watts and Rosen.

We touched upon different types of opinion leaders, the polymorphic and monomorphic. This research has not been taking the difference between these two types of opinion leaders into a great concern. Our own thoughts tell us that it should be evident that a monomorphic opinion leader is better promoters of a product or service since they are considered opinion leaders for a given area only. This assumption could, however, be a totally wrong since a polymorphic opinion leader can also assert an overall better opinion leadership since they tend to be opinion leaders in a wider sense, within multiple areas. This led us to consider that if there may be a difference among different opinion leaders such as described, they could then be further compared to the so called influentials.

The insights in the effect word of mouth had on another consumer's purchase needs to be further researched. The majority of our respondents were unable to tell us in how many cases their word of mouth led to someone purchasing the product they spread the word about.

The word of mouth network provides several aspects which we believe are of interest to study. As previously said, this study covered only one step in the process and there are undiscovered areas if one studies the wider network. We have been combining both a quantitative and qualitative method and we see interest in deeper research such as ours on both a quantitative perspective and qualitative perspective. There is also interest from our side to go beyond the limits of a case. Because such an operation is deemed to be too extensive we have not been able to conduct a comparing study either which could possibly indicate difference upon our research results depending on place, time, and case. This is of great importance since a case, especially when it is not done on a comparing ground, could never exhibit any generalization beyond the case.

The fact that Harvard Business Review has been promoting Watts and his ideas, they emphasize that there will possibly be a growing interest in the idea of influentials being more important than opinion leaders. Our results contradict Watts' (2007) idea of disregarding the opinion leader theory for the benefit of influentials. We did find such strong indications for the opposite of Watts' ideas that we became curious of what the results may be if several more researches would be conducted. The results presented in this research indicate that opinion leaders still are strong and this demands further research.

We have now given suggestions for future research to be done which we have been interested in covering as well but were unable due to the said limitations. When doing this we have given the reader insights into the limitations for the research conducted. Our suggestions became further enhanced as a result of our results. We could however give an unending number of suggestions that because the research area is rather undiscovered. By saying this we hope we emphasize the great opportunities the research area is giving those who are interested in discovering new facts and developing new theories and knowledge.

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Appendix I: Questionnaire for the telephone interview

PART 1, Personal questions about the respondent and questions concerning the message the respondents got:

Name: ____

Gender: Male = 1 Female = 2

Age: _______________ years old

Marital status: Married = 1 Divorced = 2 Widow = 3
Boy/Girl-friend =4 Single = 5

Occupation: ____

How have you heard about the shoes? 1: word of mouth 2: mass media 3: Other. Specify_______________

If word of mouth, who told you about it?
Family = 1
Friend = 2
Colleague = 3
Acquaintance = 4

More detailed description of the source of word of mouth:
____
____
____

What was the message? ____
____

How often have you been using the shoe/shoes? Daily = 1 A few times a week = 2
A few times a month = 3 Once a month or less = 4

Satisfied with the shoes: Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 Very pleased
Satisfied with the store: Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 Very pleased

Opinion leader scale:

1. In general, do you talk to your friends and neighbours about new __________?

   Very often 5 4 3 2 1 Never

2. When you talk to your friends and neighbors about the product, do you give a great deal of information?

   Give a great deal of information 5 4 3 2 1 Give very little information

3. In the past six months, how many have you told about a new __________?

   Many 5 4 3 2 1 Not many

4. Compared with your circle of friends, how likely are you to be asked about new __________?

   Very likely to be asked 5 4 3 2 1 Not at all likely to be asked

5. In discussion of new ______________, which of the following happens most?

   You tell your friends about 5 4 3 2 1 Your friends tell you about

6. Overall in all of your discussion with friends and neighbors, are you?

   Often used as a source of advice 5 4 3 2 1 Not used as a source of advice

PART 2, spreading the word, to how many, to whom:

Relationship:	**Did your recommendations lead to a purchase:**	**Did you initiate the discussion:**	**Type of message:**
Family = 1 Friend = 2 Colleague = 3 Unknown = 4	1 = Yes 2 = Do not know 3 = No	1 = Yes 2 = No	1 = Rational 2 = Emotional 3 = Both

To, how many have you spread recommendations through word of mouth about the product?

How many? Number	Name if possible:	Relationship	Did you initiate the discussion:	Did your recommendation lead to a purchase:	Summarized content of the discussion:	Type of message:
1						
2						
3						
4						
5						
n*						

n* varies between the respondents