

THE LISTICLE: AN EXPLORING RESEARCH ON AN INTERESTING SHAREABLE NEW MEDIA PHENOMENON

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ABSTRACT. These days the internet hosts an interesting phenomenon individuals tend to fall in love with, the so-called listicle; a portmanteau of 'list' and 'article'.² Although the concept of the listicle in its own right is not new, it got booming in the digital era. This exploring research on the article-as-numbered-list, in which 720 listicles during a period of two weeks were analysed on Buzzfeed.com, reveals that the popularity of the listicle in terms of success and shareability is easily explainable. The key lies not only in the power of the format in and by itself, but also in 'shareable factors' that are related to the individual listicle. In other words, the success and shareability of a listicle depends on the extent to which the following factors are present: the suggesting of authority, the capacity to establish existence and structure, the level of seduction and the simplicity of recognition and content, but also its public range, originality/diversity and the four factors of the concept of shareability that were in an earlier stadium composed by professor Harry Jenkins.³

Keywords: *listicle, exploring, shareability, BuzzFeed, success*

Introduction:

4 Awesome Reasons You Should Start Reading This Article Right Now

1. An interesting new media phenomenon will be introduced. A rather popular one, because it's shared fairly often, especially on social

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² Friedgen, Andrew. '12 Reasons Why the Listicle Format is Great'. *University Wire* (Carlsbad), January 08, 2014.

³ Jenkins, Henry; Li, Xiaochang; Domb, Ana - With: Joshua Green. 'If It Doesn't Spread, It's Dead: Creating Value in a Spreadable Marketplace'. *The Convergence Culture Consortium*, p. 6. http://convergenceculture.org/research/Spreadability_doublesidedprint_final_063009.pdf

network sites, mostly because of its accessible format and easy content, but also due to its triggering titles (clickbait) such as '17 Ways Disney Movie Scenes Could Have Gone Way, Way Worse'⁴ or '21 Things You're Doing Wrong In The Bathroom'.⁵ This phenomenon is called a '*listicle*', a portmanteau of 'list' and 'article'. Although the concept of the listicle (an article in the form of a list) is not new, it was already picked up by the traditional media in an earlier stage, and got booming in the digital era; the concept went viral on the internet. It was the birth of a new media phenomenon.

2. Following a new, hidden path. Because the listicle in itself is a new phenomenon, at least in a new media environment, there is a lack of significant academic research on the topic. Thus, the listicle still holds quite a lot of secrets. For example, where does the phenomenon come from? And how can we properly define it? But the most important question of this exploring article on the matter of the listicle will be: *What makes the listicle so successful, but mostly shareable?* Because if one already refers to these times as 'The Listicle Era'⁶, a proper research on this particular phenomenon is most welcome.

3. Suitable research and ditto tools ensure it's a very lively kind of article. In order to comprehend the success and shareability of the article-as-numbered-list the research will be concentrated on BuzzFeed.com, a website that made a name for itself by providing listicles on a daily base. In the used research design, 720 English-written listicles were analyzed during a period of two weeks. This was done by scraping, a technique in which a computer program extracts data from human-readable output coming from another program⁷, the individual listicles one by one- this in combination with *content analysis* and *observation*.

⁴ Yapalater, Lauren. '17 Ways Disney Movie Scenes Could Have Gone Way, Way Worse'. *BuzzFeed*, January 30, 2014. Accessed January 30, 2014.

<http://www.buzzfeed.com/lyapalater/ways-disney-movie-scenes-could-have-gone-way-way-worse>

⁵ Lee Yandoli, Krystie; Wang, Kimberly; Flaherty, Keely. '21 Things You're Doing Wrong In The Bathroom'. *BuzzFeed*, January 30, 2014. Accessed January 30, 2014.

<http://www.buzzfeed.com/keelyflaherty/things-youre-doing-wrong-in-the-bathroom>.

⁶ Marshall, Jack. 'The Listicle Era is (Sadly) Here to Stay'. *Digiday*, August 15, 2013. Accessed January 22, 2014: <http://digiday.com/publishers/listicle-era/>.

⁷ Wikipedia. 'Data Scraping'. Accessed January 30, 2014.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Data_scraping

4. And all that in a easy, accessible article. Just to avoid reactions as 'TLDR' (Too Long Didn't Read), since most individuals tend to have a short attention span in this internet era. Studies show that the time one can hold its focus has decreased rapidly in the last ten years; dropping from twelve to around five minutes.⁸ To meet the needs of the average readers, this article will be easy and to the point.

Literature:

The irresistible magic of the list

'The list is the signature form of our time'⁹, the magazine *The New Yorker* stated last year. It underlines the meaning of lists (a non-syntactic formation of items¹⁰) in daily life. Because if there is one thing that has become clear over time, it's the fact that the list in itself has a prominent place in our society: think of shopping lists, simple to-do-lists, but also the Yellow Pages, encyclopedias and the world wide web. Thus, the concept of the list is important for us. And that's because it helps to make sense of the world around us. "*The list is the origin of culture*", said Italian novelist and semiotician Umberto Eco in an interview with the German magazine *Der Spiegel*.¹¹ "*What does culture want? To make infinity comprehensible. It also wants to create order – not always, but often. And how, as a human being, does one face infinity? How does one attempt to grasp the incomprehensible? Through lists.*"

And the connection between human and lists got even stronger with the introduction of the world wide web. Or as professor Dennis Hall stated: '*The World Wide Web has fueled this human passion for lists, with an unprecedented technical leverage and democratic spirit*'.¹² At some point in this digital age 'the list

⁸ Plumridge, Nicole. 'Is the internet destroying our attention span?' *Psychminds*, August 1, 2013. Accessed January 30, 2014. <http://psychminds.com/is-the-internet-destroying-our-attentions-span/>

⁹ O'Connell, Mark. '10 Paragraphs about lists you need in your life right now. *The New Yorker*, August 29, 2013. Accessed January 17, 2014. <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/books/2013/08/10-paragraphs-about-lists-you-need-in-your-life-right-now.html>

¹⁰ Delbourgo, James; Staffan Müller-Wille. 'Introduction.'. In *Isis*, vol 103, No 4 (December 2012)

¹¹ Beyer, Susanne; Gorris, Lothar. 'Interview with Umberto Eco: "We Like Lists Because We Don't Wanna Die".'. *Der Spiegel*, November 11, 2009. Accessed January 17, 2014. <http://www.spiegel.de/international/zeitgeist/spiegel-interview-with-umberto-eco-we-like-lists-because-we-don-t-want-to-die-a-659577.html>

¹² Hall, Dennis. 'Listomania: The List as Popular Culture Icon'. In *Studies in Popular Culture*, vol 28, No. 1 (October 2005), p. 50.

mated with what we used to call a "news article"¹³ and the result was **the listicle**. More and more offsprings followed, mostly featured by titles as '13 Life Changing Ways To Eat Food'¹⁴ and 'Top 10 Badasses of the World's Special Forces'.¹⁵ So far it looks like the listicle is here to stay indeed: because there are even whole sites dedicated to the concept of the article-as-numbered-list: Listverse.com, TheListicles.net, Cracked.com and many more. The listicle became the 'lingua franca' of the new media.

But despite the tight relationship between the listicle and the new media, the format itself is not new. The traditional media already picked it up before individuals were instantly sharing it on the internet. In the eighties for example the British daily The Sun had quite some success with the '10 things you didn't know about'-concept¹⁶. The only difference was, though, that the format at that time was nameless. The article-as-numbered -list can actually be found through all the history of mankind. Think for example about Martin Luther's 95 Theses. One could even – with a bit of imagination – say that God itself, with a little bit of help from Moses, created the listicle, in the form of the Ten Commandments: because these perfectly fit the generally-accepted definition of a listicle in most available literature on the subject: that of a portmanteau of "list" and "article".¹⁷

The definition of the listicle

This line of thinking comes back in most of the definitions of the listicle that appear in the available articles that circulate on the internet: the same can be said for online dictionaries. In official, written dictionaries the term can, till today, not be found. Only the *Official Dictionary of Unofficial English* made room for the digital phenomenon: *listicle n. a (newspaper, magazine, web site, etc.) article consisting primarily of a list. Media. United States.*

¹³ Cadwalladr, Carole. '35 Reasons Why I Hate Lists: If You Haven't Heard of the Listicle Craze, here are the Things You Should Know'. *The Observer*, December 22, 2013, p. 34.

¹⁴ Stopera, Dave. '13 Life Changing Ways To Eat Food'. *BuzzFeed*, June 1, 2012. Accessed January 30, 2014. <http://www.buzzfeed.com/daves4/13-life-changing-ways-to-eat-food>

¹⁵ Frater, Jamie. 'Top 10 Badasses of the World's Special Forces'. *Listverse*, January 11, 2010. Accessed January 30, 2014. <http://listverse.com/2010/01/11/top-10-badasses-of-the-worlds-special-forces/>

¹⁶ Greenslade, Roy. 'How Digital Revolution Gives Power to the People'. *Evening Standard*, November 06, 2013, p. 41.

¹⁷ Friedgen, Andrew. '12 Reasons Why the Listicle Format is Great'. *University Wire (Carlsbad)*, January 08, 2014.

[list + article] This term is often used in a deprecating way, to describe an article or news story that required very little effort to produce.¹⁸

But this definition simplifies the listicle too much. There are so many more sides to the matter, in terms of structure, origin and characteristics. The definition given by Wikipedia for example is notably wider: *In journalism and blogging, a listicle is a short-form of writing that uses a list as its thematic structure, but is fleshed out with sufficient verbiage to be published as an article. A typical listicle will prominently feature a cardinal number in its title, such as "10 Ways to Warm Up Your Bedroom in Winter", or "25 Hairstyles of the Last Hundred Years", with subsequent subheadings within the text itself reflecting this schema. The word is a portmanteau derived from list and article.*¹⁹

Although this definition is rather good, it's still a questionable one. Firstly, because of the term 'short-form of writing', since that's a bit outdated nowadays. Of course, the listicle is seen as easy content to read, the so-called 'McNews'²⁰, but there are also a lot of these article-as-numbered-lists that wouldn't fit the description 'short'. Secondly, the 'sufficient verbiage' can be specified more explicitly into: 'visual (images), and mostly on the internet, audiovisual content (gifs, videos)'. Give that those types of 'sufficient verbiage' are basically the ones that are being featured in these listicles. And finally, there is still some substantial information missing in regards to its origin, since there is not mention of that origin at all.

In regards to the origin of the listicle, the American etymologist Barry Popik comes up with a nice addition to the definition given by Wikipedia. He says that the 'term "listicle" has been cited in print since at least 2001 and was popularized on the Gawker website'.²¹ That's important to mention: not only to make explicitly clear that the specific term is rather new, but also to emphasize that the format of the listicle was (re)discovered by the new media and got popular in this digital environment.

In conclusion, one could say that a combination of Wikipedia's definition, Popik's etymological approach of the word listicle, plus a bit of clarification would give us a quite fitting definition of the listicle: *In journalism and blogging, a listicle is a **form of writing** that uses a list as its thematic structure, but is fleshed out with sufficient verbiage, in combination with visual (images) and, on the internet,*

¹⁸ Barrett, Grant. 'Listicle'. In *The Official Dictionary of Unofficial English*, 2006, p. 216.

¹⁹ Wikipedia. 'Listicle'. Accessed January 17, 2014. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Listicle>

²⁰ Shenzhen Daily. 'Listicles'. June 10, 2013.

²¹ Popik, Barry. 'Listicle (list+article)'. *The Big Apple*, July 22, 2013. Accessed January 17, 2014. http://www.barrypopik.com/index.php/new_york_city/entry/listicle_list_article

even audiovisual content (gifs, videos), to be published as an article. A typical listicle will prominently feature a cardinal number in its title, such as “10 Ways to Warm Up Your Bedroom in Winter”, or “25 Hairstyles of the Last Hundred Years”, with subsequent subheadings within the text itself reflecting this schema. The word is a portmanteau derived from list and article. The term “listicle” has been cited in print since at least 2001 and was popularized on the Gawker website.'

The list: popular characteristics

The list is undeniably an important part of the listicle in itself. Thus, it's an interesting approach to take a closer look at the characteristics of a list. Except for the general features that go hand in hand with the format of the list, **the suggesting of authority** and it's **capacity to establish existence and structure** to one's life, there are some special features that make the listicle such a strong format, starting with the title of the listicle. Any such title is mostly **seductive**, because its goal is to lure the reader into the story. Or as journalist Mark O'Connell stated it in the magazine *The New Yorker*, they use '*all the interventionist urgency and narrative propulsion that implies*' to do so.²² With this he is referring to the fact that most listicles are too irresistible to ignore, since they give one the impression that one would miss out on anything of importance if one doesn't click on it; clickbait. Thus, the listicles use 'sensational headers' to underline this importance.

Another characteristic that needs mentioning, is the listicles' '**easy recognition' factor**, especially in a new media environment. Because of the fact that the titles of the listicles are constructed so differently in comparison to other available content online, they stand out in an otherwise anonymous stream of content, states the Russian-American journalist and writer Maria Konnikova²³. A number for example will be quite easily seen in a marl of words and images, like the news feed of Facebook.

The listicle also gives one the impression it's an **easy piece of content to read**. Firstly, because the format of the list is perfectly made for the way we tend to read on a screen. Studies have shown that internet users tend to read

²² O'Connell, Mark.. '10 Paragraphs about lists you need in your life right now. *The New Yorker*, August 29, 2013. Accessed January 17, 2014.
<http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/books/2013/08/10-paragraphs-about-lists-you-need-in-your-life-right-now.htm> !

²³ Konnikova, Maria. 'A List of Reasons Why Our Brains Love Lists'. *The New Yorker*, December 02, 2013. Accessed January 17, 2014.
http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/elements/2013/12/a-list-of-reasons-that-our-brains-love-lists.html?utm_source=tny&utm_campaign=generalsocial&utm_medium=twitter

digital content in an F-shaped pattern²⁴, which perfectly suits the list form. Secondly, because listicles exactly tell individuals how much time it will take to finish them. *'The more we know about something – including precisely how much time it will consume – the greater the chance we will commit to it. The process is self-reinforcing: we recall with pleasure that we were able to complete the task (of reading the article) instead of leaving it undone and that satisfaction, in turn, makes us more likely to click on lists again – even ones we hate-read'*, explains Konnikova.²⁵ That's what psychologists refer to as the *'paradox of choice'*²⁶ – the more options one tend to have, the worse one feels. In that case the listicle is an easy pick, since the reader already knows what to expect. Thus, it's clear that *'in the current media environment, a list is perfectly designed for our brain. We are drawn to it intuitively, we process it more efficiently, and we retain it with little effort.'*²⁷

Another playground; a digital one

The fact that the new media environment is partly responsible for the fact that the listicle can exploit its full potential of its characteristics is easily explainable. The change of scenery from a printed playground to a digital one, the world wide web, was one for the greater good of the listicle itself. Mostly because, as stated by Lev Manovich²⁸, the available content on the internet is presented as a **database**; an unordered list of items. In comparison, in the old days the information was (mostly) presented in the form of a narrative (in which the information is ordered). And although new media objects, like a news article, can present themselves as narrative or something else, underneath they are all databases, states Manovich. *'In new media, the database supports a range of cultural forms which range from direct translation (i.e a database*

²⁴ Nielsen, Jakob. 'F-Shaped Pattern For Reading Web Content'. NN/g Nielsen Norman Group, April 17, 2006. Accessed January 17, 2014. <http://www.nngroup.com/articles/f-shaped-pattern-reading-web-content/>

²⁵ Konnikova, Maria. 'A List Of Reasons Why Our Brains Love Lists'. *The New Yorker*, December 02, 2013. Accessed January 17, 2014. http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/elements/2013/12/a-list-of-reasons-that-our-brains-love-lists.html?utm_source=tny&utm_campaign=generalsocial&utm_medium=twitter

²⁶ Messner, Claude; Wänke, Michaela. 'Unconscious information processing reduces information overload and increases product satisfaction'. In *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, vol 21, No. 1 (January 2011), p. 09-13.

²⁷ Konnikova, Maria. 'A List of Reasons Why Our Brains Love Lists'. *The New Yorker*, December 02, 2013. Accessed January 17, 2014. http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/elements/2013/12/a-list-of-reasons-that-our-brains-love-lists.html?utm_source=tny&utm_campaign=generalsocial&utm_medium=twitter

²⁸ Manovich, Lev. *'The Language of New Media'*. MIT Press (2001), p. 225.

stays a database) to a form whose logic is the opposite of the logic of the material form itself – a narrative. More precisely, a database can support narrative, but there is nothing in the logic of the medium itself which would foster its generation.²⁹

Another aspect that is worth mentioning is that the **shareability** of popular content is also being accelerated within a new media environment, since the replication of the original idea (in this case a listicle) gets '*transformed, repurposed or distorted*' more easily than when they pass from hand to hand.³⁰ That's logical because in this new media landscape the world is like a tiny, global village. Thanks to the presence of online social networks it's way easier to share interesting content with a large audience, whether we transmit the original meaning or just interpret it in a totally different way.

Consumers play an active role in this process, since they decide if something goes viral on the web. According to Jenkins and co there are three factors that play a part in the consumers' decision whether or not to spread content: *To bolster camaraderie and articulate the (presumably shared) experiences and values that identify oneself as belong to a particular community ("bolstering their identity")*; *To gather information and explain difficult to understand events or circumstances*; *To establish the boundaries of an "in-group"*.³¹ That's not all, though: the shared content also has to fulfill certain criteria: *the appearance of humor/parody*; *the way in which way it triggers us to seek out more information*; *they are incomplete without our active participation*; *they express themes of community and nostalgia which are central themes of the gift economy*.³²

Methods

Research Design

One could conclude that the listicle is a promising phenomenon in a new media environment. Therefore it's interesting enough to explore what exactly makes the listicle so successful on one hand, and above all shareable

²⁹ Manovich, Lev. 'Database as a Genre of New Media'. *AI & Society*, vol 14, No. 2 (2000), p. 176.

³⁰ Jenkins, Henry; Li, Xiaochang; Domb, Ana – With: Joshua Green. 'If It Doesn't Spread, It's Dead: Creating Value in a Spreadable Marketplace'. *The Convergence Culture Consortium*, p. 2. http://convergenceculture.org/research/Spreadability_doublesidedprint_final_063009.pdf

³¹ Jenkins, Henry; Li, Xiaochang; Domb, Ana – With: Joshua Green. 'If It Doesn't Spread, It's Dead: Creating Value in a Spreadable Marketplace'. *The Convergence Culture Consortium*, p. 71. http://convergenceculture.org/research/Spreadability_doublesidedprint_final_063009.pdf

³² Jenkins, Henry; Li, Xiaochang; Domb, Ana – With: Joshua Green. 'If It Doesn't Spread, It's Dead: Creating Value in a Spreadable Marketplace'. *The Convergence Culture Consortium*, p. 6. http://convergenceculture.org/research/Spreadability_doublesidedprint_final_063009.pdf

on the other. To give a significant answer to that question the research was performed according to the standards of a **case-study**, performed on BuzzFeed.com. This website was selected not only because it offers many listicles, but also because the '*social news and entertainment company*' provides, in their own words, '*the most shareable breaking news, original reporting, entertainment and video across the social web to its global audience of 100M*'.³³ That means BuzzFeed.com is in terms of reliability a good case to investigate the success and shareability of these article-as-numbered-lists.

Research Sample

During a period of two weeks, between **January 2nd 2014 and January 15th 2014** an amount of **720 English-written listicles** have been investigated. This period has been chosen because it gives a proper indication about the way in which listicles get popular and shareable. Ideally, it would have been better to take a bigger time window, but due to time constraints and lack of manpower that wasn't possible. In addition to this all, it's important to state that the research has been done on the 25th of January 2014; ten days after the last date of the chosen time frame. This has been done on purpose, so as to allow the content to become successful and shareable over time.

Research Tools

Subsequently, all the 720 listicles were firstly subjected to a *quantitative research* tool: **scraping**. All the data that was relevant in terms of the popularity (success) and shareability of the listicle was scraped: the publishing date, title, author, category, (most prominent) number in the title, the amount of shares on Facebook and the amount of tweets. Scrapeable content such as Facebook likes, views and comments have been left out of the research; because they - at least to some extent - largely depend on the amount of shares. The same goes for comments.

The quantitative research provided a bunch of general data - and indications - in regards to listicles. It proved helpful to construct a top-10 of the most shared listicles on two massive social network platforms: Facebook and Twitter. This particular data has been used to make a comparison between the 'average' data and the top-10 lists; this was done by performing a mix of **observation** and **content-analysis** on the earlier scraped data and the individual content of the most shared listicles.

³³ BuzzFeed. 'About'. Accessed January 30, 2014. <http://www.buzzfeed.com/about>

Results

During the researched period all (English) listicles were scraped on relevant data. This resulted in the following results, starting with some generalities. In these two weeks the users and actual staff members of BuzzFeed.com provided an average of 51,4 listicles a day. This average was almost reached every day, except for the first Tuesday and every Saturday and Sunday. That the particular Tuesday didn't meet the expectations, was mostly because it was an extraordinary day; the day after New Years Day (thus, not really representative for an average Tuesday). The Saturday and Sunday are no exceptions, rather more a trend.

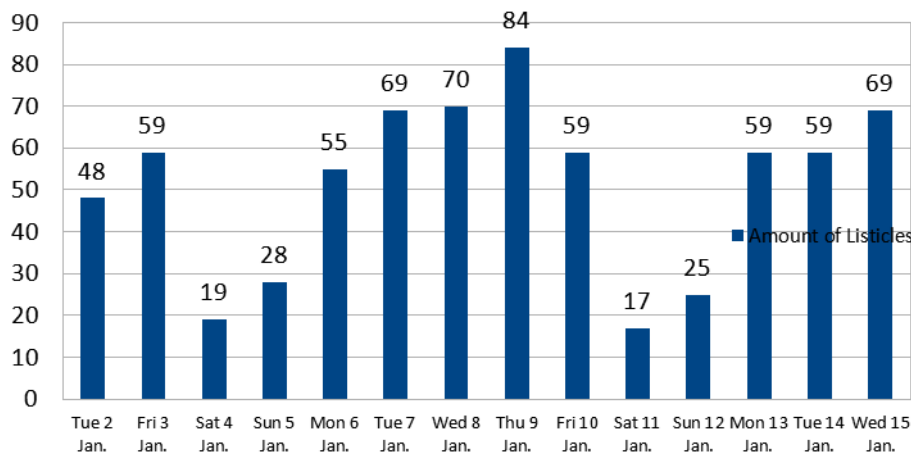
The above mentioned trend could be explained by the fact that many contributors (especially the users) in the weekends most likely have a lot of (social) commitments. However, it's also a fact that the total production of content of BuzzFeed.com drops rapidly in the weekends. So considering the percentage of the total amount of content, the weekend' drop is negligible. To illustrate this point, on January 4th 19 listicles were posted on BuzzFeed, on a total of 54 articles; that means that 35,18 percent of the total content was a listicle. While on the 8th of January of the 186 articles that were posted on the site, 70 of them could be termed as a listicle; so that makes that 27,45 percent of the total content was a listicle. In terms of percentage in the weekends, apparently there are even more listicles posted than on working days.

Of the 720 listicles 314 were contributed by users of BuzzFeed.com and more than half (406) were produced by individuals that are related to the crew of the site, whether in the role as 'Staff Member' or 'Contributor'. What stands out immediately, is the fact that staff-related listicles get more attention and (positive) feedback of the audience. This is not only because of the fact that the 'knowledge' of the BuzzFeed' staff is estimated higher than the average community user (the principle of 'authority'³⁴), but most of all because of the fact that the crew of BuzzFeed is assumed to come up with '*creative and shareable content to produce*'³⁵- they are even trained for that. In that light it's quite hard for a user to come up with a brilliant listicle in the stream of the BuzzFeed-content.

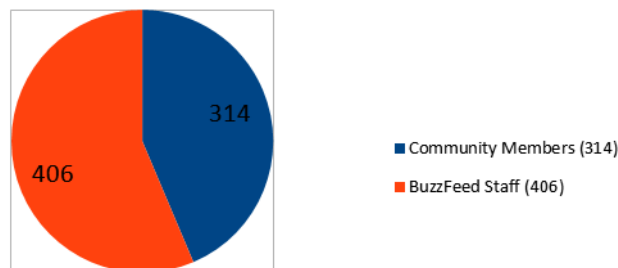
³⁴ Hall, Dennis. 'Listomania: The List as Popular Culture Icon'. In *Studies in Popular Culture*, vol 28, No. 1 (October 2005), p. 53.

³⁵ BuzzFeed PR. 'BuzzFeed: The social news and entertainment company'. *Youtube* (Video), December 18, 2013. Accessed January 30, 2014.
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YZTQoEliGEs>

Listicles A day



The Users That Post Listicles:

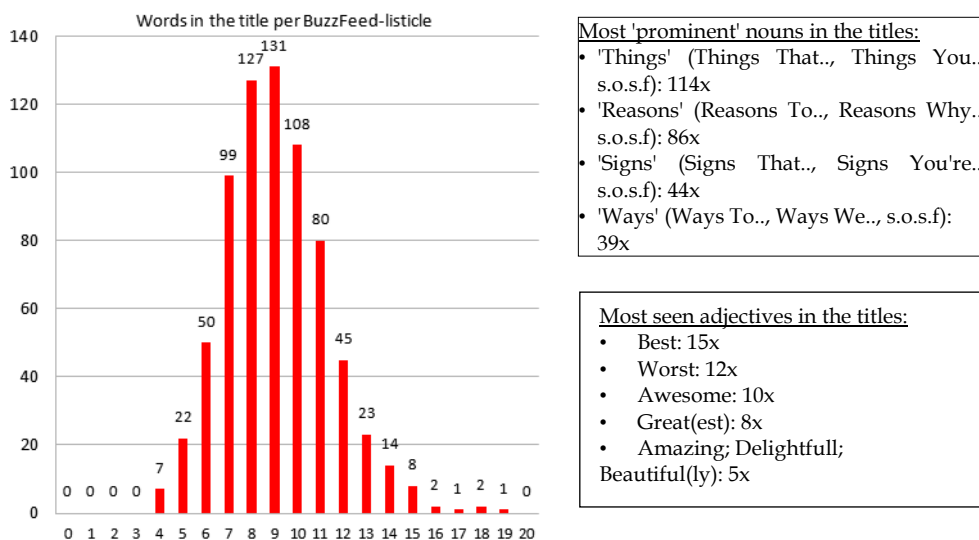


More important to the actual research, were the results that came out of the scraping of the titles of the listicle. The title of a listicle, namely, plays undoubtedly a major role in the decision making process that takes place prior to a member of the audience's decision to actually click, and (maybe) later share, a listicle. From that point of view some extra focus on the title of the article-as-numbered-lists was totally explainable. That resulted in some interesting points in regards to the way the titles of listicles are constructed.

First of all it's notable that some of the lists do not contain as many bullets as the number of the title suggest (although the author sometimes completely forgets to construct his content by actually numbering those

bullets), but in general the number in the title is the same as the amount of bullets that appear in the actual content. Of more importance to the research is the fact that the number 10 (58 times) is by far the most common one to feature in the title of a listicle, followed at a respectful distance by 19 (42 times) and 15 (41 times). Moreover, in particular the numbers between 5 and 25 are popular; 81,25 percent of the total amount of the titles of the listicles contains such a number. Listicles of less than 5 or more than 30 bullets are the exception rather than the rule. And lists as '*The Definitive Ranking Of All 131 Baby-Sitter's Club Cover Outfits*'³⁶ are absolutely unique in and by themselves.

Furthermore it was interesting to take a closer look at the ratio between odd and even numbers, since for long it was – according to BuzzFeed Editorial Director Jack Shepherd – a persistent superstition in the branch of listicle making to prefer an odd number above an even one.³⁷



³⁶ Anne, Burton Summer. 'The Definitive Ranking Of All 131 Baby-Sitter's Club Cover Outfits'. *BuzzFeed*, January 9, 2014. Accessed January 30, 2014.

<http://www.buzzfeed.com/summeranne/the-definitive-ranking-of-baby-sitters-club-cover-outfits>

³⁷ O'Donovan, Caroline. 'The 3 Key Types of BuzzFeed Lists To Learn Before You Die'. *Nieman Journalism Lab*, October 11, 2013. Accessed January 17, 2014.

<http://www.niemanlab.org/2013/10/the-3-key-types-of-buzzfeed-lists-to-learn-before-you-die/>

Nowadays that idea seems to be rather outdated. This is illustrated by the fact that the difference between the odd and even numbers that feature the titles of the listicles is practically negligible: 49 percent (even) and 51 percent (odd). Furthermore, of these 720 listicles 620 have the number directly in front of the title; the best place to get recognition in a stream of content.

But the title of a listicle is constructed by more than only a number, there is also text involved. To the average reader the number that features prominently in the title of the listicle in combination with the related words provide an interesting indication in terms of what to expect of it, indeed. Most likely, the actual text element is even more important in one's decision making process; whether an individual will actually click on the listicle or not, let alone share the listicle. Thus, the title, just as the content, has to be seductive, to lure the visitor into reading the text.

Based on the general trend a title an average listicle contains between 8 and 9 words. Some authors even try to use as many words as the corresponding number would suggest. Thus, in the case of *12 Vintage Photos Of NYC In Winter That Will Warm Your Heart*³⁸ the contributor used 12 words. Still, this is rather more exception than rule. More interesting in this context, though, is the way the various authors try to lure individuals into reading their listicles by the way they construct their titles. In general the majority of the listicles, they are being presented as factual truths or so-called 'factoids', as former US journalist and writer Norman Mailer called the phenomenon of presenting 'unverified or inaccurate information as factual' in contemporary journalism.³⁹

To emphasize the previous, the authors tend to use a rather direct, personal approach to 'sell' their listicles to the audience. This is mostly done through a combination of strong nouns and adjectives that apply a sense of value and authority, even though they leave a lot of room for interpretation. For example, *'21 Delightful Reasons To Have More Sex'*.⁴⁰ This title not only

³⁸ Epstein, Leonora. '12 Vintage Photos Of NYC In Winter That Will Warm Your Heart'. *BuzzFeed*, January 2008, 2014. Accessed January 25, 2014. <http://www.buzzfeed.com/leonoraepstein/vintage-photos-of-nyc-in-winter-that-will-warm-your-heart>

³⁹ Tung, Angela. 'A Brief History of Newspaper Lingo'. *Wordnik*, September 18, 2013. Accessed January 17, 2014. <http://blog.wordnik.com/a-brief-history-of-newspaper-lingo>.

⁴⁰ Chen, Tanya. '21 Delightful Reasons To Have More Sex'. *BuzzFeed*, January 13, 2014. Accessed January 25, 2014. <http://www.buzzfeed.com/tanyachen/delightful-reasons-to-have-more-sex>

contains a strong noun (reasons (to)), but also an adjective that gives a sense of value to the noun: delightful. Similarly adjectives such as: hilarious, bizarre, etcetera. The author always tries to imply a certain form of authority via the title of the listicle. The only way to check if this authority holds up, is to browse through to the listicle itself. Thus, quite a bit of active participation is being asked from the reader's side

Therefore, a general conclusion would be that the title of an average listicle is seductive and contains the following characteristics:

- A prominent number, situated at the front, most likely one between 6 and 25;
- Approximately constructed by the use of nine words;
- Following a direct and personal approach by using strong nouns and adjectives that apply a sense of value and authority.

Bearing this in mind, it was rather interesting to draw a comparison with the most shared BuzzFeed-listicles on Facebook and Twitter, mainly to find out in which way these particular listicles are different from the other ones. According to the scraped data there are only three differences between Twitter and Facebook when it comes to the most shared listicles. Where users of Facebook share '*33 Things You Probably Didn't Know About Disney Parks*', '*27 Unspoken Suit Rules Every Man Should Know*' and '*21 Things That Inevitably Happen When You Work In An Office*', Twitter's users chose '*12 Spectacular Acts Of Wikipedia Vandalism*', '*28 Beautiful Quotes About Libraries*' and '*21 Things That Happen When You Don't Eat Meat*'. Besides these differences, there is also some variety in the ranking they get in the top-10 of the different social media platforms. For example, '*36 White People Who Need To Be Stopped*' scores a 9th place when it comes to the most shareable content on Facebook, but on Twitter it scores a 4th place. This could be explained due to the fact that the Twitter and Facebook platforms are different as well as the people that uses them. Despite these differences there, one thing is absolutely clear: '*16 Books To Read Before They Hit Theaters This Year*' is by far the most shareable listicle of them all.

Most shared BuzzFeed-listicles on Facebook – amount of shares & readability score:

1. 16 Books To Read Before They Hit Theaters This Year – 131.000 / 6.
2. 31 Insanely Clever Remodeling Ideas For Your New Home – 91.000 / 5.2.
3. 21 Truly Upsetting Vintage Recipes – 83.000 / 5.

4. 33 Things You Probably Didn't Know About Disney Parks – 81.000 / 7.4.
5. 28 Things That People With Big Boobs Can Simply Never Do – 62.000 / 4.6.
6. 35 Foods From Your Childhood That Are Extinct Now – 58.000 / 2.8.
7. 27 Unspoken Suit Rules Every Man Should Know – 55.000 / 6.6.
8. 21 Things That Inevitably Happen When You Work In An Office – 43.000 / 5.7.
9. 36 White People Who Need To Be Stopped – 41.000 / 3.9.
10. 25 Things You Didn't Know About The Movie "Fight Club" - 34.000 / 9.1.

Most shared BuzzFeed-listicles on Twitter - amount of shares & readability score:

1. 16 Books To Read Before They Hit Theaters This Year – 7414 / 6.
2. 12 Spectacular Acts Of Wikipedia Vandalism – 3817 / 6.1.
3. 21 Truly Upsetting Vintage Recipes – 3489 / 5.
4. 36 White People Who Need To Be Stopped – 2614 / 3.9.
5. 31 Insanely Clever Remodeling Ideas For Your New Home – 2592 / 5.2.
6. 28 Beautiful Quotes About Libraries – 2590 / 0*.
7. 28 Things That People With Big Boobs Can Simply Never Do – 2580 / 4.6.
8. 25 Things You Didn't Know About The Movie "Fight Club" - 2522 / 9.1.
9. 21 Things That Happen When You Don't Eat Meat – 2070 / 6.
10. 35 Foods From Your Childhood That Are Extinct Now – 1800 / 2.8.

*Readability couldn't be measured.

Another aspect that stands out is the readability of the most shared listicles. On a scale from 6 (easy) to 20 (hard), based on the Gunnig Fox (FOG) index, almost all get an easy score. Six of the most shared listicles score even lower than a six, what indicates that the readability of these particular listicles is even easier than easy. In general, though, one can say that the most shared listicles score 'easy' on readability, making them **easily accessible** to a wide audience.

Discussion

With all of the above in mind, one can state that what makes a listicle successful is a mix of many things. First of all it's about the way a listicle is built up, cause the title is an important part in the decision making process

of the reader to actually click on the article-as-numbered-list and get in touch with the actual content, to actually share it. Based on the results the most shared listicles – on Facebook as well as Twitter – follow mainly the same pattern as the other listicles. There is only one major difference, the most shared ones distinguish themselves in terms of **originality** and **diversity**. Most of the successful listicles, in terms of shareability, don't contain an average number in the title (5-25) and if they do, that number isn't one of the frequently used ones (10, 15, 19). Besides, it's remarkable that none of the most shared listicles contains one of the most used adjectives in the title. The use of adjectives in the most shared listicles is in general rather low (3 out of 13). Most listicles titles do not even contain the most frequently used nouns (5 out of 13). In this light it's not strange that *'16 Books To Read Before They Hit Theaters This Year'* tops the list(s), since it's original in many ways and in a stream of content one is more likely to click on things that are different, in regards to the mainstream.

This in an by itself could be seen as a logical explanation for the listicle's success in terms of views, but in terms of shareability there is more behind the matter. Another aspect to point out, namely, is the *public range* of the most frequently shared listicle, which is a result of one of the four factors that Jenkins gives to shareable content: the way they express themes of community and nostalgia. If the public range of a listicle is bigger, the shareability factor will logically-speaking also be bigger, because more people feel able to identify with it or feel any form of affinity with the subject. If we for example look at the listicle with the most shares *'16 Books To Read Before They Hit Theaters This Year'*, not surprisingly also the one with the most views (!), it might appeal to a big group of people: individuals who like movies, people that fancy reading, people that are planning a visit to the cinema this year, and so on. In fact the scope of the listicle is quite extensive, given that there are not many people who neither read nor watch movies.

Except for these two aspects the factors of the concept of shareability of Jenkins also play a major role in the active process that takes place prior to a listicle becoming successful in terms of shareability. If one takes a closer look at the content of the most shared listicles, it would appear that all of them score high on one or more of the four factors that Jenkins gives to shareable content: the appearance of humor/parody; the way in which way it triggers us to seek out more information; they are incomplete without our active participation; they express themes of community and nostalgia. Again, it's not that strange

that '16 Books To Read Before They Hit Theaters This Year' turned out to be the most popular listicle, since it complies with almost all of the afore-mentioned factors. Besides, it follows the two additional factors of originality/diversity and public range.

Conclusion

In conclusion one can state that what makes a listicle successful and shareable is: **the combination of the power of the format of the listicle in general and the shareable factors that are given to the individual listicle.** The general characteristics of a listicle make the article-as-numbered-list in itself an interesting phenomenon to begin with, but every author of a listicle can raise the shareability-factor by paying more attention to certain individual aspects. Thus, the success and shareability of a listicle depends on the following factors and the extent to which it's present):

General factors:

- The suggesting of authority;
- The capacity to establish existence and structure;
- The level of seduction;
- The simplicity of the recognition;
- The simplicity of the content, in terms of readability

Individual factors:

- Originality/Diversity;
- Public Range;
- The four factors of the concept of shareability (the humor/parody factor; the way in which it triggers us to seek out more information; they are incomplete without our active participation; they express themes of community and nostalgia)

However, since this conclusion is only based on a research project that sampled a time window of two tweeks, it's recommend to do more research on the topic, given that it's most likely that these factors are not the only ones that have influence on the way a listicle becomes popular in terms of shareability. Besides, in general the listicle deserves more attention from

researchers in the field of communication science, since the format is most likely here to stay. 'As long as listicles keep performing, publishers will keep churning them out. Until the data says otherwise, there's a backlash against them, or a better alternative comes along, that's not going to change any time soon'.⁴¹

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