**Social News Sites: Why Generation Y Loves Them and How Facebook Led to Their Rise**

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When members of Generation Y (GenY) go on the computer, Facebook is often their first destination (Junco, 2014). According to a recent Pew poll, 84 percent of 18 to 29-year-olds use Facebook (Pew Research Internet Project, 2014). The website, created in 2004, started as a conduit for making social connections online. Recently, Facebook’s sharing capabilities have led to a boom in news websites. Communication researchers have uncovered a link between Facebook posting and increased readership on various news sites such as The Huffington Post, The New York Times, and CNN. A 2010 study by the Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism found that for five of the top 25 news websites, Facebook was the second or third biggest driver of traffic. Thirty-seven percent of Internet users have experience in sharing news stories through social media websites (Lee & Ma, 2011). In addition, when visitors leave the news site, the social media “share” buttons along the side of most news stories are among the most clicked-on links (Olmstead, Mitchell, & Rosensteil, 2010). Facebook allows for the rise of smaller websites in that their articles are posted on Facebook which generates traffic for the website.  It is common for a college student to browse through their newsfeed and see a link to a BuzzFeed article with a catchy headline like “10 Scientific Reasons To Eat More Pizza“ or a thought-provoking video from Upworthy like “A Man Shows Us a Day in the Life of an Abusive Relationship.”

The goal of this study is specifically to target how often and why GenY shares content from smaller, social news oriented websites. GenY consists of people born between 1981 and 1999 (Bolton, 2013), and they make up 81 percent of today’s daily Facebook usage (Wasserman, 2010). Those in GenY grew up with technology and actively use it in their daily lives. According to Bolton, this group of “digital natives” “contributes, shares, searches for and consumes content – plus works and plays – on social media platforms” (p.245). This generation has a desire to interact with each other, which drives social media use and sharing (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008).

This study will analyze GenY’s social media use through an informal content analysis, a survey, and a diary. Specifically, the informal content analysis examined four popular social news sites (BuzzFeed, Thought Catalog, Upworthy, and Elite Daily) by observing our Facebook news feeds over multiple 24-hour periods of time.  We recorded which sites were being shared, the theme of the content, and the format of the content. The survey questioned members of GenY about their experience with these four social news outlets , as well as their reasons for sharing content on Facebook. The diary asked GenY members to record their social media usage over a 24-hour period. This study uses GenY as the research population because the social news sites focus on GenY with articles such as “23 Problems Only ‘90s Girls Will Understand” on BuzzFeed and “The Types of Guys Every Girl Dates While in College” on Elite Daily.

**Description of Social News Websites**

While Facebook continues to serve as a social “hub” for news, it has also facilitated the growth of smaller social news outlets. A few among of the most popular social news sites include BuzzFeed, Thought Catalog, Upworthy, and Elite Daily.

*BuzzFeed*

Founded in 2006, BuzzFeed  is notorious for light articles and lists of easy-to-read information. Content includes a wide array of topics, including news, politics, business, do-it-yourself and pop culture. BuzzFeed describes itself as a “social news and entertainment company,” priding itself in providing the most “shareable breaking news.” Our content analysis demonstrated that BuzzFeed was the most prevalently shared site of the four we examined, with just over 76 percent of the shares.

*Thought Catalog*

Thought Catalog, founded in 2010, describes itself as a “digital magazine” owned by an experimental media group based out of Brooklyn, New York. It publishes content that is “uplifting and identity-driven,” according to the CEO, Chris Lavergne (Personal Communication, February 2014). Its mission is to have a neutral editorial style on various worldviews and news, along with creating an archive for the generation.

*Upworthy*

Even more recently-founded (2012), Upworthy's mission is to become a viral content website for the most “sharable news.” It contains a plethora of brief videos on a range of social causes and human-interest stories. Upworthy describes its audience as being the “Daily Show Generation”; i.e. people who want news, but want it interesting.

*Elite Daily*

Elite Daily prides itself as being the “premier destination for aspiring men and women of Generation Y” and the “ Voice of Gen-Y.” The website’s mission statement is to provide a daily portrait of the world by consolidating all information that is relevant. Elite Daily contains hard news, as well as lifestyle news, such as dating, entertainment, women, and music.

BuzzFeed, Thought Catalog, Upworthy, and Elite Daily are clearly targeted for the 18 to 24-year-old audience. This is also a heavy population of Facebook users, which has been impactful to these sites. Facebook has been a contributor to Elite Daily, which has seen an increase in web views since August, said Miguel Burger-Calderon, the website’s chief strategy officer (personal communication, February 2014). Between January and August 2013, on average, 45 percent of that traffic was from Facebook. Since then, Facebook now directs an average 65 percent to the site. On average, 50 percent of Thought Catalog’s traffic comes from Facebook on any given month (Chris Lavergne, personal communication, February 2014).  These website traffic statistics lead us to the following hypothesis:

H1: People are more likely to visit social news sites from Facebook versus going directly to the social news site.

It is unclear the extent to which social media users have shifted from sharing hard news on Facebook to sharing social news. This leads to the following research question:

RQ1: Do members of GenY share social news articles or hard news articles on Facebook more frequently?

Across these websites, it is unknown if there are specific topics that social media users prefer to share. This suggests the following research question:

RQ2: What category/theme of article is more likely to be shared on Facebook among members of GenY?

Online readers spend very little time consuming content online. An article published in March 2014 stated that the people spend as little as one minute reading a news website (Grabowicz). Therefore, this leads us to predict the following:

H2: Social news articles formatted as lists will be shared more often than social news articles formatted in paragraphs.

**Why do Social Media Users “Share” Content?**

The concept of sharing has completely changed meaning since the rise of social media. “Sharing,” as it means in terms of Facebook, refers to posting a linked status, which brings users to outside websites. Users can add their own comments or share simply the web page. With Facebook, people can share more content from more sources more often and more quickly than in the past. The type of content that can be shared on Facebook is limitless. With that being said, it is reasonable to analyze the wide spectrum of personal motivations that drive people to share.

Facebook users share content for a variety of reasons. Both the Customer Insight Group (2011) and Lee and Ma (2011) found that people share information to attain social gratification. There is the notion of “anticipatory socialization” that comes from sharing news with a virtual community where people get social gratification from sharing news content (Krishnatray, Singh, Raghavan, & Varma, 2009; Taylor & Kent, 2010). Research done by Baek (2011) on why people share links also discovered that Facebook “accelerates the role of the Internet as a means of social interaction,” (p. 2246). Baek’s study showed that there was a high correlation between creating new virtual relationships and information sharing.

Another common finding for why Facebook users share content is status seeking (Lee & Ma, 2011). If the content that someone shares is perceived by others as credible, that user will in turn appear credible and, over time, have the potential of becoming an opinion leader (Rogers, 2003). In line with this, the Customer Insight Group (2001) found that people share content to define themselves to others and many users that responded to Baek’s (2011) survey agreed that they share information because it could be entertaining for their followers. Therefore, they can be seen as someone who people turn to for specific content.

While researchers have found many reasons for sharing, there have not been studies about this specific age group sharing social news sites. Because we seek to find out more about why GenY keeps posting social news sites’ articles, we pose the following hypotheses:

H3: Need for social gratification is positively correlated with frequency of sharing.

H4: Need for status seeking is positively correlated with frequency of sharing.

In addition, during our content analysis we noted that women posted a majority of the articles shared on our timelines. This led us to suggest the following hypothesis:

H5: Females will be more familiar with social news sites than males.

**Methods**

**Survey**

*Participants*

Our sample included a total of 284 members of Generation Y. There were a total of 103 males and 181 females. They are all enrolled in a Communication class at the University of Delaware and received extra credit for completing this survey and had the option to complete an alternative assignment if they chose not to complete the survey.

*Questions*

To begin the survey, we asked participants about their familiarity with the four social news sites in our study. In addition, we asked how they discovered them (through web browsing, Facebook, Twitter, word of mouth, email, blogs, or other). We then asked which of the websites participants visit more frequently and how they usually get there (directly, through Facebook or Twitter link, from an email, or through a search engine).

Then we proceeded to ask if the participants had a Facebook account. If they did have a Facebook, they would be directed to a series of questions asking about their usage: how many hours spent a day on Facebook, how often they post statuses on Facebook, how often they publicly share links on Facebook, what types of articles/videos they most likely share (lifestyle, social causes, relationships, quizzes, hard news, humor, celebrity, TV/movies). We then asked participants to rank four types of content (lists, quizzes, articles, videos) according to likelihood of viewing.

If they did not own a Facebook account, they would be sent to the end of the survey. We included a few questions related to Twitter to make it less likely that the participants would know the focus of the study.

Another thing we sought to discover was the reasoning behind *why* people share links to Facebook. We did this by giving the following explanations for sharing links: because they’re funny, because they are about important social causes, because they are relevant to their life, because they are helpful, because they are entertaining, because they are important news articles, because their friends would like it, because it makes them feel like their voice is heard, because it expresses their interests, because they want to start a dialogue.

We asked seven questions related to social gratification from Ko, Cho, & Roberts, 2005; Papacharissi, & Rubin, 2000. Participants rated on a five-point scale with the endpoints labeled strongly agree to strongly disagree.  Our measure of social gratification was a reliable measure with a Cronbach’s α of .845.

We asked nine questions related to status seeking; some from Lee and Ma, 2011, others generated by ourselves. Participants rated on a five-point scale with the endpoints labeled strongly agree to strongly disagree. Our measure for status seeking was also reliable, with a Cronbach’s α of .891.

**Diary**

We distributed a guided diary to participants to learn more about their day-to-day Facebook usage. It was a 24-hour self-report on Facebook use with mostly open-ended questions. We requested that participants record in the diary on a day that they were not unusually busy to ensure an accurate representation of their Facebook use. Participants reported their age, gender, number of friend requests made, and number of friend requests received. They copied each status that they posted to the diary, and they also took note of any links shared (with url included). They recorded whenever they visited an external website from a link that a friend posted. Lastly, they were asked to write down any links posted to their wall by a friend (not in a private message).

**Results**

**Diary Findings**

A total of 30 participants completed the diary. There were 26 females and four males, ranging from 19 to 22 years of age. Eleven participants shared a total of 11 links, with 27.3 percent from the social news sites that we were examining. Out of the 56 external links that were clicked on, 25 percent of the links were one of the aforementioned social news sites. Eight of the external links that were clicked on were BuzzFeed articles, making it the most visited social news site from Facebook out of our diary participants.

**Descriptive Survey Findings**

Of the total 284 respondents, only 50 (17.6%) were not familiar with any of the four social news sites, while 234 (82.4%) were familiar with at least one. We found BuzzFeed to be overwhelmingly popular with 231 (98.7%) of the total respondents familiar with it. Elite Daily was the next popular with 101 (43.2%) participants familiar with it. Upworthy and Thought Catalog were less familiar to the respondents with only 70 people (29.9%) and 65 people (27.8%), respectively, noting their awareness of the sites.

The survey also supported the results of the diary, showing BuzzFeed’s prevalence among GenY. In a question asking what site participants find themselves using most frequently, of the 234 people that are familiar with the sites, 192 (82.1%) chose BuzzFeed. The next most popular website was Elite Daily, with 9 participants (3.8%) saying they use this site the most. The least popular or recognizable sites were Upworthy with 6 participants (2.6%) and Thought Catalog with 4 people (1.7%). Twenty-three participants (9.8%) reported they do not use any of the four websites studied in this survey.

We also asked respondents how they discovered any of the social news sites that they were familiar with. Those that said that they were *not* familiar with any of the sites did not answer this question. Respondents could check all ways that they had discovered these sites including: web browsing, Facebook, Twitter, word-of-mouth, email, blogs, and other.

A large majority of participants, 218 (93.2%) discovered one or more of the social news sites on Facebook. Word-of-mouth came in with the next most with 117 participants (50.0%). One hundred and eleven participants (47.4%) discovered these sites through basic web browsing while 109 participants (46.6%) discovered social news sites through Twitter. Blogs came ahead of email as a discovery place with 28 respondents (12.0%) and 10 respondents (4.3%) respectively. Lastly, seven people (3.0%) listed “other” as their form of discovery. Two explanations were “Tumblr” which is actually considered a blog. One respondent stated they discovered BuzzFeed through the BuzzFeed mobile application. Another respondent found the websites by seeing one on the person’s laptop in front of them while another found the site through Stumbleupon. Stumbleupon is a website that brings you to random web pages based on your pre-selected topics and interests. Lastly, two people did not provide an explanation for their “other” choice. It is important to note that all of the people that selected “other” as a source of discovery also listed at least one other way that they discovered the sites.

We were also interested in seeing if the amount of time spent on Facebook affected familiarity with the social news sites as well as if the amount of links/statuses shared impacted familiarity. Of our 284 respondents, 272 (95.8%) had a Facebook account while 12 (4.2%) did not. Of the 272 who have Facebook, 230 (84.6%) are familiar with one or more of the websites. Of the 12 who do not have Facebook, only four (33.3%) are familiar. Difference in proportions is significant; χ2 = 20.79, df =1, p < .001.

Of these 230 people who have Facebook and *are* familiar with at least one of the social news sites, 101 (43.9%) share links and spend one hour or less on Facebook, 91 (39.6%) spend one to two hours, and 38 (16.5%) spend two hours or more. Of the 42 who have Facebook and *are not* familiar with any of the websites, a majority of 28 (66.7%) spend one hour or less on Facebook, nine (21.4%) spend one to two hours, and five (11.9%) spend two hours or more. Difference in proportions is significant; χ2 = 7.53, df=2, p = .023.

Of the 230 people who have Facebook and *are* familiar with one or more of the websites, 101 (43.9%) share links more than once a month, and 129 (56.1%) share links less than once a month. Of the 42 who have Facebook and *are not* familiar with any of the websites, 11 (26.2%) share links more than once a month and 31 (73.8) share links less than once a month. The difference in proportions is significant; χ2 = 4.61, df=2, p = .032.

Of the 103 males, 22 (21.4%) are familiar with Elite Daily. Of the 191 females, 79 (43.6%) are familiar Elite Daily. The difference in proportions is significant; χ2 = 14.23, df=1, p <.001.  As for the social news sites, 72 males are familiar (69.9%) and 162 females are familiar (89.5%); difference in proportions is significant; χ2 = 17.38, df=1, p < .001.

**Hypotheses and Research Questions**

Our first hypothesis stated that people are more likely to visit social news sites such as BuzzFeed, Thought Catalog, Upworthy and Elite Daily from Facebook rather than going directly to the site. Results from our survey supported this hypothesis. The majority of participants visited social news sites from Facebook, 149 (63.7%), while only 55 (23.5%) visited these sites directly. Table 1 displays the results of how all of the participants reached the websites. None of the respondents visited the websites via email.

**Table 1: Popular methods to visit social news sites**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Method** | **Frequency** | **Percent** | **Valid  Percent** |
| **Valid** | Direct | 55 | 19.4 | 23.5 |
|  | Facebook | 149 | 52.5 | 63.7 |
|  | Twitter | 11 | 3.9 | 4.7 |
|  | Email | 0 | 0 | 0 |
|  | Web | 4 | 1.4 | 1.7 |
|  | Don't visit | 15 | 5.3 | 6.4 |
|  | **Total** | 234 | 82.5 | 100.0 |
| **Missing** | System | 50 | 17.5 |  |
| **Total** |  | 284 | 100.0 |  |

The first research question asked whether members of GenY were more likely to share hard news or social news articles on Facebook. Thesecond research question asked which category or theme of article would most likely be shared on social media by GenY. Data relevant to both research questions can be found in Table 2. For RQ 1, everything that was not categorized as “hard news” was considered social news. Results indicated that social news articles are shared much more frequently than hard news, being shared 84.2% of the time. Overall, humor was largely the most popular theme, with 84.2% of the shares.

**Table 2: Common shared article themes**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Humor** | **Causes** | **Quizzes** | **TV** | **Lifestyle** | **Celebrity** | **Hard News** | **Relation-ships** |
| 84.2% | 35.5% | 34.6% | 30.8% | 29.5% | 19.2% | 15.8% | 8.5% |

Hypothesis two suggested that GenY shares social news articles formatted as lists more than articles in the more traditional paragraph form. The data supported this hypothesis with students choosing that they share lists (m=2.42) more often than articles (m=2.81). This difference is significant at .01 (t=3.93, df=283). However, they are most likely to share videos (2.17), with quizzes intermediate in popularity (m=2.61).

Hypothesis three was also supported by the data. Participants who shared more Facebook links scored higher on the Social Gratification measure. The correlation between Facebook link sharing and Social Gratification is .267 and is significant (p<.001).

Hypothesis four stated that the need for status seeking is positively correlated with frequency of sharing. The correlation between status seeking and the frequency of sharing .202 and is significant (p<.001).

Of the 234 respondents who are familiar with at least one of the social news sites, 162 (89.5%) are female and 72 (69.9%) are male. Difference in proportions is significant; chi square = 17.38, df=1, p < .001. This supports ourfifth hypothesis that females would be more familiar with social news sites than males. We also chose to get a bit more specific by looking at Elite Daily by itself, which is a GenY focused social news site that is best known for its relationship articles. Of the 103 males, only 22 (21.4%) are familiar with Elite Daily while out of the 191 females, 79 (43.6%) are familiar. Difference in proportions is significant; chi square= 14.23, df=1, p <.001.

**Discussion**

Our study aimed to discover if Facebook was truly the hub for social news sites such as BuzzFeed, Elite Daily, Thought Catalog, and Upworthy. These sites have been growing in popularity, especially among Generation Y. We examined general Facebook usage via self-response diaries and surveys to learn how and why people share content. Furthermore, we analyzed the data to see if having a Facebook was correlated with familiarity with these social news sites. Lastly, we focused on status seeking and social gratification as possible motivations for sharing social news content.

The results strongly supported our hypotheses. Members of GenY are more likely to visit BuzzFeed, Elite Daily, Thought Catalog, and Upworthy through a link posted on Facebook rather than by directly typing in the URL. We also predicted that the format of the content on the social news sites would have an effect on how often they were posted. As predicted, social news articles in the form of lists were shared significantly more often than articles in paragraph form. Lists are quick and easy to read through, and prior research has shown that web users spend less than a minute browsing a web page. Therefore, it makes sense that lists would be a popular format to read and share.

Our research questions looked at the types of articles shared, and which theme would be most popular. Social news sites were shared much more often than hard news sites. More specifically, the most commonly shared theme was humor, leading the other themes by a large margin.

*Motivations*

We specifically examined two possible motivations for sharing content on Facebook: status seeking and social gratification. These were two common motivations that we found through our literature research. Lee & Ma (2011), Baek (2011), and The Customer Insight Group (2011) all found that people share content as a form of status seeking. Our survey results supported this. In addition, Lee & Ma (2001), Baek (2011), and The Customer Insight Group (2011) also found social gratification to be a motivating factor for sharing content. This was also supported by our survey data.

Further research on this topic could compare specific content with motivations for sharing. For example, the category of humor was shared most often among the survey participants. However, it would be interesting to see if the category correlates with that individual’s motivation for sharing. In addition, another topic inviting further work is whether the type of content one shares is correlated with how they want to be perceived.

*Limitations*

A potential issue in our study is the underreporting of familiarity with the websites. Facebook users may see articles but are unaware of where the information comes from. This limits our study because the misunderstanding of website origin skews our results. The study was also limited in that the Diary Study was short in duration, only covering a 24-hour period of time. Depending on whether participants filled it out during a weekday rather than weekend could also have a significant effect on their Facebook usage. Additionally, some participants neglected to complete the diary in the correct way, which also distorted some results.

Social news is a broad topic, and encompasses many more websites than the four that we included in our study. Because we did not document the sharing of other popular social news sites, our findings might have underrepresented how much is posted and shared in general. For example, social news articles on Huffington Post were shared frequently, but we did not include this in our data collection and analysis.

We were surprised that humor was the most shared theme, rather than lifestyle. However, it is possible that the theme classifications were unclear and too subjective. The categories were not fully described, and different participants might have interpreted the same article as a different theme, skewing the results.

*The ephemeral nature of social news sites*

Our research demonstrated that BuzzFeed is the most popular social news site among our participants. Compared to recognition and use of the other three social news sites, Elite Daily, Thought Catalog and Upworthy, BuzzFeed dominated. In the early stages of our research, we believed these four sites were the most frequently shared and clicked-on sites on Facebook. However, during the course of our study, we noticed that many other sites rose and fell in popularity quite rapidly. For example, during the Facebook content analysis, Huffington Post suddenly became prevalent and popular on Facebook. Interesting to note, at the same time, Huffington Post started to resemble sites like BuzzFeed much more than it used to. It would be interesting to analyze what characteristics of these social news sites make them more “trendy” or fleeting than others, compared to the ones that endure.

Another observation was that people are sharing more traditional print-originated publications, such as Cosmopolitan, and traditional news websites, such as Huffington Post. For future research, the effect of the popularity of social news sites on hard news websites can be studied. Some hard news websites are changing their formatting to lists, which can be viewed as a reflection from the trends of social news websites. Researchers can look into whether hard news website content presentation is swayed by how more popular social news websites present their information.

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