

What's the Buzz about BuzzFeed Quizzes?

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With our current obsession with the internet and social media, BuzzFeed seems to be the perfect platform to spread information. In this article, Hope Fairchild uses trajectory and CHAT analysis (specifically representation, distribution, and reception) to look into the depths of BuzzFeed, how it travels, and how people perceive it.

If you would have asked me what BuzzFeed was ten years ago, I probably would have thought it was some kind of strange food for bees. This was long before the BuzzFeed craze even began. Though it was created in 2006, BuzzFeed did not become popular until closer to 2011 (BuzzFeed). If you asked me what BuzzFeed is today, I would say it is a social media site used to keep the public informed through news articles and videos. On BuzzFeed's official website, they describe themselves as, "a cross-platform, global network for news and entertainment . . . [that] creates and distributes content for a global audience and utilizes proprietary technology to continuously test, learn, and optimize" (About). BuzzFeed is most certainly an entertainment site, and the part I find myself most interested in is its quiz section. Even though this media platform offers so much more than mere personality quizzes, the way I first discovered BuzzFeed was by taking a quiz.

Now, you might say I have always been a little, okay a lot, obsessed with personality quizzes. I still remember taking the ones offered on the American Girl website. Years ago, I sat at my boxy old Dell desktop for hours on end finding out what type of shoe I was or where I should travel over summer

break. As you can imagine, when I discovered BuzzFeed quizzes, I was ecstatic! What a great way to procrastinate! I have been an active BuzzFeed user for a few years now, and I have begun to wonder how the website travels to new users and how people accept this genre when looking at it for the first time.

Recently, I have been looking into the site's trajectory and how it relates to aspects of cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT). I will delve deeper into CHAT and trajectory later in the article, but I will give you a brief overview of each of them now. **Cultural-historical activity theory** can seem like a tricky subject. It is a concept used in writing research to describe the production, distribution, reception, representation, socialization, activity, and ecology of a genre. It is simply an approach writing researchers use to study a genre or text recognizing its complex nature, and how the different aspects that make up the genre work together. **Trajectory** is basically the journey of a text. A writing researcher uses trajectory to trace a text or genre's origin and how it is spread to different people throughout time and space. Knowledge of these tools has helped me better understand BuzzFeed quizzes and how they affect people, including myself.

Tracing BuzzFeed Quizzes' Trajectory

Countless hours of my time have been spent taking BuzzFeed quizzes. What makes me want to spend my time this way? As I said earlier, it is a great way to procrastinate. On a more serious note, it is one of the only places to find out what *Friends* character you are without closing out of 10,000 ads. BuzzFeed makes it easy to compare answers with your friends and learn more about yourself by answering admittedly ridiculous quiz questions. Eventually, I began to wonder how they are spread throughout the population. In other words, what is their trajectory?

You may be thinking, *I still don't quite understand how trajectory works*. It is simpler than you would think. The way I understand it is that trajectory is, in a sense, where a text travels and how it adapts as it travels. Trajectory is all about discovering how a text reaches certain audiences and how it moves in relation to different spaces and people. I agree with Tharini Viswanath's article "Tracing the Trajectories of (The) *Humans of New York*" in which she argues that it is extremely difficult to trace the trajectories of information passed around on social media. In the case of BuzzFeed, users may choose to pass on information by sharing it with their friends or followers or choose to keep it to themselves. Therefore, there is no perfect way to find how and where BuzzFeed quizzes end up. However, through primary research, I do

know how and where I have seen them venture and adapt through social media.

I thought back to the first time I encountered a BuzzFeed quiz. It was probably about four or five years ago, around the same time I created a Pinterest account. For those of you who may not be as crazy about Pinterest as I am, it is essentially a virtual pin board where you “pin” different ideas, outfits, humorous GIFs, etc. onto categorized “pin boards.” This is also a website where I spend a lot of time procrastinating, so as you can imagine, I know my way around the site. One day while scrolling through the humor section, I found an image that read, “Which Disney Princess Are You?” And, of course, I had to find out. I continued to the quiz by clicking on the link that took me to BuzzFeed’s website where the quiz was located. After I finished taking the quiz (and finding out I am Belle from *Beauty and the Beast*, if you were wondering), I decided to look around this website I had never heard of before. Simply seeing a picture of Disney princesses led me to taking a quiz and therefore drew me into the complicated world of BuzzFeed. Now, this might be some manipulative advertising from BuzzFeed itself, but it still worked and it is still a part of trajectory. On top of seeing it on Pinterest, I also found out about BuzzFeed through my friend sending me links to the quizzes. I began to wonder: Does BuzzFeed even advertise their own website?

The quizzes, people, and other websites have seemed to be the portal and entryway into the world of BuzzFeed. Why is this? My conclusion is BuzzFeed relies on word of mouth and other websites to help promote its content. Turns out, I am correct in my assumption. BuzzFeed creates its own content and then has “in-house experts help the right audience discover a brand’s content across BuzzFeed and on social [media]” (BuzzFeed Advertise). These experts can track exactly where the content is spread and from there decide where it should go next. This is how they get so many people to look at their website.

You may be thinking, *but how can this be?* Don’t worry. I was confused at first as well. The simple explanation is that BuzzFeed’s advertising is not completely controlled advertising, but it still is in the sense that the BuzzFeed experts decide who sees their content first. From there, the select group of people is likely to pass on interesting quizzes and/or information to their own social networks; BuzzFeed depends completely on their users sharing and therefore spreading around their information. My world was turned completely upside down when I found out BuzzFeed barely advertises and is still so well-known and popular. Being involved with BuzzFeed only through Pinterest and my friends, I thought I was just missing all of the ads

they had put out there since I normally ignore them. However, I was not being oblivious; BuzzFeed truly has no advertising except through its users sharing its content. Apparently, I have done my own share of advertising for BuzzFeed when I share results of quizzes I take or send links to my friends. Most likely, you have taken part in advertising for BuzzFeed at some point if you have taken any of their quizzes or shared them on a website that is not their own. I must say it is an ingenious plan: advertising without really advertising. Who knew?

What Is CHAT and How Does It Relate to BuzzFeed Quizzes?

I realize cultural-historical activity theory can be somewhat hard to grasp at first. To me, CHAT is most simply bringing together aspects of culture, history, and activity to examine a certain text or genre. One way I can better explain CHAT is that it is a way to look at a genre through different eyes and see the different parts that go into making the genre the way it has come to be. There are seven main aspects that are explored through CHAT: production, representation, distribution, reception, socialization, activity, and ecology.

As you can see from Figure 1, there are many different aspects of CHAT to discuss. In my research of BuzzFeed quizzes, I have looked at specific parts of CHAT and found how they relate to this particular genre. In my research,

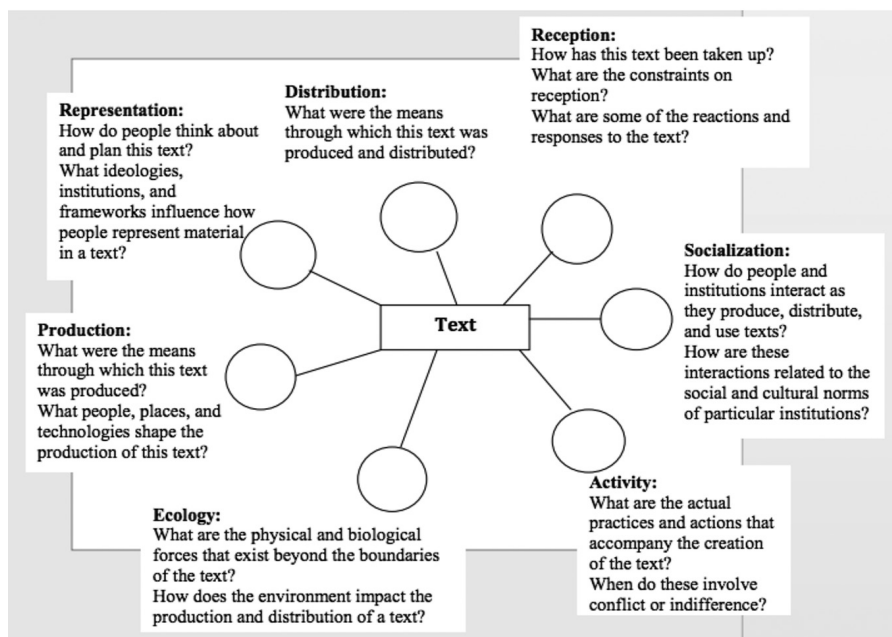


Figure 1: Visual representation of the aspects of CHAT. Retrieved from isuwritingfiles.wordpress.com.

I chose to put my focus on examining representation, distribution, reception, and their relation to BuzzFeed quizzes.

Representation

The quizzes on BuzzFeed are one of the website's main attractions. They truly represent BuzzFeed as a whole. (**Representation** is basically how the creators of a text plan a text and how it will look.) The quizzes are one of the first things people see on the website. As you can see in Figure 2, they are featured on the website at the top in the fast selection menu in order to give its audience easy access. Once you click on the "Quizzes" link, there are a myriad of quizzes available.

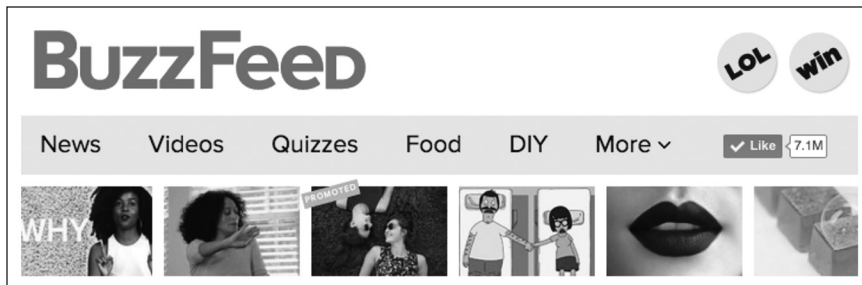


Figure 2: BuzzFeed's main website. Retrieved from *BuzzFeed.com*.

As I previously mentioned, the creators of these quizzes usually intend for them to be humorous and enjoyable, and this is noticeable in the way BuzzFeed represents their quiz section on their website. The quizzes themselves seem to be organized chronologically based on what time they were each uploaded to the website. Each quiz has its own graphic to represent the nature of its content. For example, in Figure 3, there is a quiz entitled "Is This A Teddy Bear Or A Toy Poodle?" with a photograph of a toy poodle and a teddy bear pictured side by side to show their resemblance. How could you not enjoy these two adorable creatures? I certainly do. That is the whole point! This particular quiz is quite humorous even at first glance



Figure 3: A quiz featured on BuzzFeed's website. Retrieved from *BuzzFeed.com/quizzes*.

giving comic relief to its audience. The BuzzFeed employees obviously want to make these quizzes enjoyable for their audience.

Searching through the assortment of BuzzFeed quizzes, I began to notice how all of the quizzes have strange names such as “Is This A Teddy Bear Or A Toy Poodle?” and “Only A Real Chocolate Lover Can Ace This Quiz All About Chocolate.” I thought these kinds of titles and eye-catching pictures were surely purposeful. Each title is unique and draws in a different audience. Even though you may not be a fan of Disney princesses or chocolate, you could want to know what Netflix show you should binge next based on your choice of cheese. Personally, I like to take every quiz I find interesting, the most recent one being “Only A True '90s Kid Can Get These *Reading Rainbow* Lyrics Correct.” Of course, not everyone will want to take every single quiz, but that is the whole point. Each and every quiz BuzzFeed produces is meant to capture the attention of different crowds of people. Some may be huge *Game of Thrones* fans and some may be longtime *How I Met Your Mother* fans. Whatever your interests may be, BuzzFeed has something for you, and if you find yourself interested and wanting more, you will be likely to share them on social media at some point.

Since BuzzFeed does not have any form of advertising, they must have to make the content on their websites appealing at first glance otherwise the visitor may become uninterested. BuzzFeed has to have some way to catch and keep people’s attention while giving them a substantial reason to stay on their website. Thinking back to my first visit to BuzzFeed’s site, I realized that the catchy quiz titles, bright colors, and humorous photographs most certainly caught my eye. Any website that doesn’t look like it was made from a template is eye-catching, and BuzzFeed certainly makes theirs look unique with its bright red font and unique pictures for news articles, quizzes, and more. I decided this site was worth at least a second visit, and after that I was hooked. BuzzFeed is constantly putting out new quizzes, and I always want to see if there are any ones on there I haven’t taken yet. (Once you’ve taken one quiz, I guarantee you will come back. They are quite addicting. I cannot speak for every BuzzFeed user, but my assumption is that most of them have had a similar experience to mine. What represents BuzzFeed is important. Since the quizzes are a part of this representation, it is vital they do their job well.)

Distribution

We have already touched on the distribution of BuzzFeed quizzes through our earlier discussion about their trajectory; distribution and trajectory are closely related. However, we can still talk about the many different means

in which these quizzes are distributed into the public through social media and the Internet in general.

Distribution is the way in which information is passed along. While I am looking at distribution, I am seeing where and how information is already being circulated. Since they are found online, or in other places such as Snapchat and the iPhone app, there are many different mediums in which people can distribute these quizzes. Some of these mediums include but are not limited to Pinterest, Facebook, and Twitter. These quizzes can also be shared through text messages and emails. As you can see in Figure 4, on the BuzzFeed app for iPhone users, you can send these quizzes to other people through Apple's AirDrop, text message, Twitter, and Facebook Messenger (not pictured). There is now even a section on Snapchat's Discover feature devoted solely to BuzzFeed which promotes BuzzFeed to a whole new audience. Although there are not any quizzes typically featured on this section of Snapchat, it still promotes BuzzFeed and might even drive some people who may not otherwise know much about BuzzFeed to visit the website to discover more of what BuzzFeed has to offer. Sometimes I send these quizzes to my friends just to show them how ridiculous they can be, and they will send ones they enjoy to me in return. Laughing at our ridiculous answers is part of the appeal of taking BuzzFeed quizzes. And, of course, by sharing we are contributing to the distribution of them. This leads me to another question: How do people usually receive these quizzes?

Reception

Reception is another part of CHAT relating to our discussions of trajectory, representation, and distribution. I see **reception** as the way people take in the information that is being provided to them (in this case, how they take in BuzzFeed quizzes). As far as first opinions, it seems that most people do not take these quizzes seriously. Seeing that my friends send them to me as a joke, I came to the conclusion that the general audience sees these quizzes as harmless, entertaining, and somewhat ridiculous.

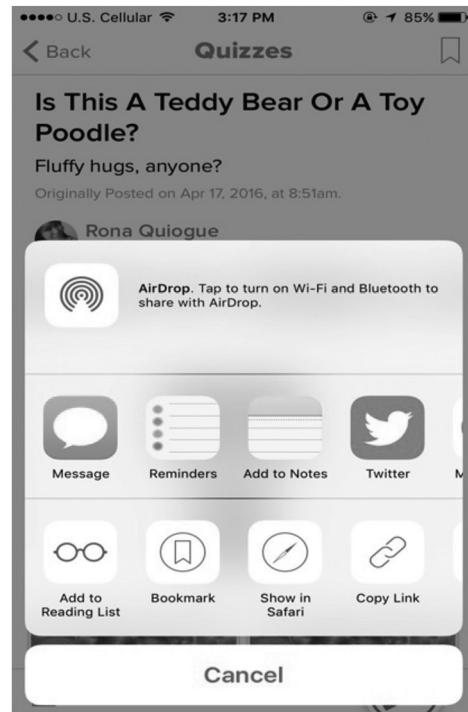


Figure 4: Where you can send a BuzzFeed Quiz. Retrieved from the BuzzFeed iPhone app.

There are many different types of these BuzzFeed quizzes: personality, zodiac, and knowledge-based quizzes. The personality and zodiac ones seem to be the ones I believe are quite bizarre. They are usually not extremely accurate or based on anything that would have a major impact on your life. For example, one friend and I each took the quiz “We Know Exactly What Your College Major Was.” This was a little strange since my friend and I are both still in college, but we were curious to see what BuzzFeed thought of us. It was almost completely inaccurate. My friend, who is a middle-level education major with endorsements in math and science, was told she was an English major. I am an English studies major, and I was told I was a theater major. Neither of us expected this particular quiz to be accurate because the questions (such as what is our birth month or favorite animal) did not pertain to our majors or career choices at all. I did not take my results seriously because the questions were not even closely related to what the quiz was measuring. Therefore, my reception of this genre and particular quiz was affected by its content.

However, this is why we believe these quizzes are fun—because they are typically utterly ridiculous. My friend and I did not have the opportunity to take a knowledge-based quiz, but these are the ones that test what you know about a certain movie, TV show, song, etc. These are usually difficult because of the minor details they ask about, but they are somewhat accurate in your knowledge on the subject. If anything, these quizzes are the ones that frustrate us because they are so difficult. All in all, people seem to receive these quizzes quite well. If they did not have a positive reception, BuzzFeed would not be trending the way it is now.

To Wrap It All Up . . .

BuzzFeed quizzes are definitely their own unique genre. They are seen as modern and typically received well by their intended audience based upon the number of responses and amount of sharing that goes on with them. My research has allowed me to see the complexity and intricacy that goes on behind the scenes. Looking at these quizzes through the eyes of trajectory and CHAT has forever changed the way I see this genre. Instead of seeing it merely as a website, I now see BuzzFeed as an entire web of connections that continuously reworks itself and grows day by day based on where its users decide to distribute it. I now know that trajectory is the framework for representation, distribution, and reception. BuzzFeed is unique in that it allows its users to choose how to share their results and where they are going to share them. It made me realize that there is no one way to distribute

these quizzes; it all depends on your personal preference whether you prefer to post your results on your Facebook page or send quiz links to your friends. I have found I am a part of this community of BuzzFeed users who receives its content well and decides to pass it along for others to enjoy. Since BuzzFeed is found on the internet, its trajectory is extremely complicated as we have discovered. However, that is what makes this genre unique: its unpredictability. There is no way to know how a quiz will turn out until you have reached the end, and your reaction can differ from quiz to quiz. Whether you decide to pass the quiz on to others or discuss it with your friends is entirely up to you. This is our generation. We have the ability to choose what we want to do with this genre. It is completely up to us. I believe this is what makes BuzzFeed quizzes what they are: a messy genre full of surprises.

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