

The Listicle as a Communication Medium

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The listicle is a portmanteau of 'list' and 'article', and is exactly what it says- it is an article in the form of a list. It is in a bulleted, or, more commonly, numbered format, and their content is very easily identified by the title.

Listicles are not a particularly new form of media. While there is no specific date for when they first started to be written, articles with titles like 'The Top 20 Pop Songs of the Decade' have been around since the tabloid first appeared and continue to grace the covers of a wide assortment of different magazines to this day. However, the true rise of the listicle happened once the digital era of media came about, giving them an explosion in popularity (Vijgen, 2014).

Nowadays, it is common to find articles written in the listicle format everywhere online. They are so ubiquitous that, more likely than not, whatever topic one types into a search engine will have one of the top results be a listicle. There are many, many, news sites that specialise in listicles, enough that there are listicles listing a list of top listicle sites. (Top 10 HQ, n.d.). While exact statistics on the usage are hard to find, Vijgen (2002) mentions that BuzzFeed, one of the most prolific listicle sites, has an average of 51.4 of such articles produced in a day. Furthermore, the site alone receives more than seven billion views per month, with their articles receiving up to several hundred thousand shares each (Brantner, 2016). Adding on the hundreds of other sites specialising in this sort of article, as well as the many, many other articles that occasionally produce one or two, one can imagine just how widely read the listicle is.

What makes a listicle a listicle? At its barest form, it is simply some form of article written as a list. The topics range wildly from gossip to informative science pieces.

Notoriously, however, the word 'listicle' is near synonymous with the term 'clickbait' (Dodson, 2016). Clickbait, as defined by Merriam-Webster, is 'something (such as a headline) designed to make readers want to click on a hyperlink especially when the link leads to content of dubious value or interest'. The term is one derogatorily associated with cheap, unsubstantial and unsourced content, designed for website clicks rather than substantial content. The association comes from the fact that listicle titles are often a prime example of what one can expect from clickbait ads.



Fig 1. Example of listicle titles as clickbait

This use of clickbait, however, is part of what makes the listicle successful. Taking Okrent (2012)'s article, '12 Mind Blowing Number Systems from Other Languages', as an example, the general format of a listicle title can be observed. Firstly, a number, indicating the amount of content in the list. Secondly, an exact description of what the list contains. Within the title itself, the prospective reader is presented with all the information he needs to know, i.e., exactly what the article is about, and the number provides a rough gauge of how long the article will be. With this, readers are more likely to click when they know that what they are in for, making them more likely to either read it straightaway, or save it for later, rather than just plain ignoring it (Team Hallam, 2015).

Furthermore, Vijgen (2014) determines that the following features in the title contribute most to the success of the listicle: a prominent number, commonly one between 6 and 25, that appears at the beginning, being around nine words in length, and containing direct, personable language with strong nouns and adjectives that imply a sense of authority.

That is not to say, however, that listicles are inherently sensationalist news. Due to the design of the article, though, the title is what attracts clicks, and more often than not, is the bulk of the hyperbole.

Within articles themselves, the format is generally as such: each point is split into a short paragraph, preferably beginning with a short, catchy header. Then, the paragraph briefly describes the point. Each is generally, although not necessarily, accompanied by a related image. This is highly variable depending on the sort of listicle, with the more informative ones having less images and more substantial paragraphs, while others could merely have each item on the list being a short phrase or sentence and the paragraph replaced by an image.

26 Things Literally Everyone Experienced As A Kid But Never, Ever Talks About

Were you really a kid if you didn't do these things?

1. Developed a "smoking" habit:

5 year old me pretending to smoke when it's cold outside



E-Commerce Scams

1. 90% Off?! Bargain Hunters Beware

Bargains – who doesn't love them? All of us are guilty of searching for the best deals, and when it comes to online shopping, the discounts seem endless. However, while online shopping platforms offer ease of transaction and communication between parties, this also makes things much easier for scammers. Here are some things you should look out for:

- Exercise caution when you come across unrealistic bargains.
- Read through ratings and reviews of sellers before each purchase.
- Think critically to make an informed decision.

2. Are You for Real?

Trust is a two-way street. Buyers and sellers should both verify their accounts and allow transactions to be subject to enhanced security measures. Some online shopping platforms are already playing their part. For example, in July 2019, Carousell took account verification up a notch with their latest collaboration with GovTech by allowing Carousell users to verify their identity with SingPass.

3. See No Touch, Touch No See – See and Touch, Pay Money

Don't be too quick to part with your money! Take advantage of online shopping platforms that only release payments to a seller upon confirmation that items have been received. Platforms such as Carousell offer such services – in fact, Carousell uses Caroupay, which allows payments to be held temporarily. Only when a buyer has confirmed receipt of an item are funds released to the seller. This is especially useful for big-ticket items such as hotel stays and concert tickets.

Fig 2. Examples of listicles from both ends of the spectrum. Left: '26 Things Literally Everyone Experienced As A Kid But Never, Ever Talks About' (Stopera, 2020). Right: 'The Ultimate Survival Guide to Scams' (Soh, 2019).

What they do have in common, however, is the language used in the article. A common tactic used is to directly address the reader and to use friendly, personable tones. As the concept of the listicle itself is very informal, this is easily seen reflected on the tone of the article itself. Even articles that aim to be more proper seem to adopt this, although the inclusion of pictures is rarer, as can be seen in the right picture in Fig 2. above.

As the aim of listicles is to be widely spread and shared, they aim to reach as wide an audience as possible within their demographic. To achieve this, the language used to write is generally very simple and easy to read. Vijgen (2014) finds that almost all listicles examined in his research are scored as 'easy', according to the Gunnig Fox (FOG) index. On a numerical scale, 6 indicates that something is easy to read, while 20 is difficult. Six of the examined papers even managed to score lower than a 6.

The concept of a listicle has been spread to mediums further than through text. Youtube, for example, now has many examples of similar concepts, just through the form of videos.

governments have capitalised on the format. While the title is atypical, the content is very much that of a listicle.

The proliferation of the listicle is hypothesized as being due to its short, easy-to-read nature. Nowadays, the popularity of easily digestible content is in demand, which can be seen in the popularity of platforms such as Twitter, which restricts posts (or ‘Tweets’) to a mere 280 characters. While some argue that listicles are responsible for being one of the causes of our shortened attention spans in the digital age, others explain that, rather than being the cause, are the answer. Chyi (2009) find that the general public of today already have a lowered demand for news, even without listicles being taken into account. Thus, rather than being something we have adapted to, they can be seen as something that have adapted to us.

Speech like	Text like
time bound	space bound
spontaneous	contrived
face-to-face	visually decontextualized
loosely structured	elaborately structured
socially interactive	factually communicative
immediately revisable	repeatedly revisable
prosodically rich	graphically rich

Table 1. Crystal (2006)’s seven features

With reference to Crystal (2006)’s seven features of language, shown in Table 1., listicles are mostly text-like, due to being a form of writing. It is space-bound and mostly permanent. As a web article, it is disseminated online to a general audience disconnected from the author. However, they can be timebound in the sense that they are targeted to specific readers. ‘14 Details in Pokemon You Never Noticed’, for example, would clearly be targeted towards an audience that plays, or is familiar with, the mentioned game.

Being a form of article, listicles are contrived and not spontaneous. The boundaries are especially clear, due to the list formatting. They are also visually decontextualized, with the lack of ability to include gestures, facial expressions and deixis through writing. However, arguably, this could be presented in the form of having reaction .gif images, as demonstrated by the last picture in Heinrich (2020)’s ‘18 Jokes About College That Prove It’s Pretty Much The Same As High School’. They serve as a proxy for the writer being unable to convey facial or bodily expression, and thus could possibly serve as extralinguistic cues.

Due to their more casual, accessible nature, listicles lean towards being more loosely structured. As earlier discussed, they are written with the intention of being more personable, and, if more on the informal side, are liberal with the use of slang, which

generally makes them read like a written version of spoken language. As previously managed, listicles are designed to be simple to read, and it is not uncommon to find whole articles that do not include full, properly written sentences in lieu of short phrasal headers and images.

While listicles are generally factually communicative, due to being text, they can also include elements of being socially interactive. The tone of an article can differ wildly, depending on the author of the post. As mentioned, there are more serious-toned, informative written pieces that happen to be in the format of a listicle, as well as the slightly more common gossip-based, millennial-appealing ones. For the latter, like previously mentioned, it is not uncommon to see reaction gifs as in-betweens for the different points, as well as language that implies that the author is interacting with the reader.

Being a form of text, listicles are repeatedly revisable.

Lastly, they are graphically rich. Aside from the possibility of incorporating images, videos, or other visual aids into the article itself, the text often contains various forms of formatting in itself, from giant, bold, headers to italicised slang. The format in itself demands it be graphically rich, as a matter of fact, by the property of it being displayed as a list.

In conclusion, the listicle is a communication medium becoming more and more prominent as the digital age advances. With being easy to read and comprehend due to their heavily visual and bite-sized content, as well as being designed to attract readership and sharing, it is unlikely that this will change. Rather, it can be seen as an adaptation for the current generation of readers, who prefer the short and sweet. Thus, despite its controversy, the listicle is here to stay.

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