

THE BUZZ ON BUZZFEED:
CAN READERS LEARN THE NEWS FROM LISTS?

by

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A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
in the Department of Journalism
in the Graduate School of
The University of Alabama

TUSCALOOSA, ALABAMA

2014

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ABSTRACT

As the Internet continues to grow, change, and develop, new media forms emerge. Among these new forms is BuzzFeed, an aggregator-type outlet combining humor, entertainment, and news directed toward young adults. Its storytelling techniques—short text blocks with unrelated images—raise questions about information retention and credibility when compared to traditional storytelling techniques used by traditional news messengers. This study uses the Elaboration Likelihood Model and credibility theory to explain BuzzFeed’s place as a form of journalism. An experiment, comparing a BuzzFeed story treatment to a *USA Today* story treatment, was conducted on 438 college-age students during Spring 2014. It found that most young adults preferred BuzzFeed, saying they enjoyed the site for its humor and entertainment. A test of story knowledge showed that students who first read the *USA Today* treatment retained more information than students who first read the BuzzFeed treatment. Implications are discussed.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND SYMBOLS

α	Cronbach's alpha of reliability
CI	Confidence interval: Interval estimate of a parameter and indicates an estimate's reliability
F	Fisher's F ratio: A ration of two variances
M	Mean: The sum of a set of measurements divided by the number of measurements in the set
p	Probability associated with the occurrence under the null hypothesis of a value as extreme as or more extreme than the observed value
SD	Standard deviation: amount of variation or dispersion from the mean
<	Less than
=	Equal to

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

When I applied to the University of Alabama's Graduate School, I knew I would have to write a thesis to receive my degree. I fretted over writing the longest, most exhaustive document of my life, but with the constant help of many, I tackled this beast. This Master's thesis would not be possible without the following people.

Dr. Chris Roberts, Associate Professor in the Department of Journalism, taught me how to understand and think about literature as it relates to the changing state of the media in Contemporary Issues and Ethics in 2013. He went on to serve as my committee chair. He has helped me to understand credibility theory, statistics and an academic writing style to convey my thoughts and ideas. He meticulously edited, knowing when to be direct with changes and when to let me make my own decisions. He also helped me to think about how people understand the news more deeply, propelling me to consider different ways people think and the future of journalism. Thank you for your patience, direction, and most of all, your time.

Dr. Wilson Lowrey introduced me to the Elaboration Likelihood Model in my Communication Theory course in 2012. By providing me with an array of literature and theories that can help explain and predict ideas about journalism, communication and the media, he allowed me to develop the ideas that would become this thesis. By serving as the Graduate Coordinator and now Journalism Department Chair, he has exhibited leadership and guidance that propelled me to earn my degree. Thank you for listening and helping me think.

Dr. Jeffrey Melton, Associate Professor of American Studies and Director of Undergraduate Studies, has been instrumental in helping me understand humor and its relationship to America, allowing me to greater understand great American pranksters such as Benjamin Franklin and Mark Twain. His knowledge was instrumental for the history behind this

paper and helped me to see that we, as Americans, have enjoyed a good joke for a long time. He has allowed this paper to have more depth by critiquing the history leading up to the ideas and hypotheses I present. Thank you for your knowledge and guidance.

Dr. Jennifer Greer provided me with literature and studies relating to my interests as I further developed my hypotheses. Her resources were instrumental in getting me to express what I wanted to study and accomplish. By serving as the Journalism Department Chair and now Interim Dean of the College of Communication and Information Sciences, she sets a strong precedence for what those in this college can accomplish.

Meredith Cummings, Director of Scholastic Media, constantly brainstormed with me, using her experience as an instructor and reporter to further my ideas. When I served as her graduate assistant from 2012-2014, she was understanding of thesis research and deadlines. Thank you for being a teacher, mentor, and friend.

Dr. Mary Katherine Shreves of the Institute for Communication and Information Research taught me the inner workings of Qualtrics and helped me to get my survey rolling. She offered her time, even when she was busy, to help.

Lindsey Conlin, a doctoral student in the College of Communications and Information Sciences, ran some of my statistics and braved through SPSS. Thank you for helping someone with a math phobia dive into the numbers.

Thank you to the Department of Journalism for providing me with enriching opportunities throughout my undergraduate and graduate career. Thank you to the staff, professors, instructors, and fellow students for making me think and ask the tough questions. I will be forever grateful for the lessons learned here.

Thank you to my close friends, Savanna Lauderdale and Allison Englebert, for your never-ending encouragement. Savanna, thank you for staying up late with me as I wrote and answering the never ending question, “Does that make sense?” Allison, thank you for constantly checking on my deadlines and helping me to push forward when I thought I was out of fuel.

Thank you to my parents, Mike and Sharon Bullock, for your constant support, love, prayer and guidance. Thank you for listening to me ramble on communication theory when you could have been doing something more interesting to you. I don’t know what I would do without your constant, uplifting presence. I know that you two are my biggest fans, but I am your biggest fan in return.

Thank you to my fiancé, Kent Burton, for sharing your own research experiences with me and encouraging me throughout this process. Thank you for understanding when I needed time to write and when I needed time to decompress. Thank you for always being proud of me, no matter what.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Humor plays an important role in society. Whether it is a situation comedy or a funny Internet meme, humor is often prevalent in everyday life. It defines culture; “few things tell us much about the collective belief system of a people as do their language customs and their use of humor“ (Nilsen & Nilsen, 1987, p. 68).

Humor also serves a role in the news, as it can help explain issues, poke at political opponents, and draw attention to topics and events across the body politic. As the press began in colonial America, humorous essays provided content for newspapers. Papers during the colonial press were composed of essays by community members and printers and a few international reports from incoming ships, as there were no official reporters or correspondents. Papers were made up of what the printers could find. Some of the most well-known essays filled with jabs of wit and humor were the Silence Dogood letters, written by Benjamin Franklin under the pseudonym Mrs. Silence Dogood (Sloan, 2011). Published in his brother James’ paper, *The New England Courant*, Franklin showed that opinions could be expressed freely when masked with wit, satire and humor. It was more difficult for lawmakers to punish printers for publishing unpopular opinions, which they did repeatedly during this time, when the opinions were covered in humor (Sloan, 2011).

Political cartoons have been around in America since before the American Revolution. Benjamin Franklin’s “Join or Die” campaign in 1754 is considered the first American political cartoon. Political cartoons have been and continue to be part of newspapers and periodicals, offering political commentary through an entertaining lens (Hess & Kaplan, 1968).

Mark Twain furthered the use of humor in newspapers through his work as a reporter, weaving humor into his true, partially true, and false news stories, especially while working in the West during the 1860s (Kaplan, 1966). While there are different explanations about why Twain wrote fake news stories during his time in Nevada and California, most scholars agree that his work as a reporter impacted his career as a novelist. His ability to tell stories – whether were true or not – helped him to write books such as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, giving him the ability to describe intricate details and use witty jabs of humor (Martin, 2004).

Vaudeville performer and movie star Will Rogers brought humor to American newspapers with his syndicated column in *The New York Times* from 1922 to 1935, using his humor and personality to promote aviation and democratic values (Yagoda, 1993). With the popularity of radio in the 1920s and 1930s, political comedy programs began to rise, such as *The Cuckoo Hour* in 1929 (Dixon, 1931). Rogers piggybacked on the success of radio and covered various subjects, relating humor and news, in his popular *The Gulf Headliner*, which aired from 1930 to 1935 (Yagoda, 1993).

Movies also provided a medium for political humor in America. One of the most notable early political satire films is the Marx Brothers' 1933 *Duck Soup*, a comedy about a humorous president/dictator of a bankrupt country (Winokur, 1985). *Duck Soup* satirizes the American government and economy, particularly the perception of immigrants (Winokur, 1985). *The Great Dictator*, starring Charlie Chaplin in 1940, used political satire to show the persuasive nature of humor. The film parodied Adolf Hitler, showing that humor can have a strong effect in persuasion, as seen in other films concerning the Holocaust (Burt, 2008). Political satire films are

still made today, with recent examples being 2012's *The Dictator*, 2008's *An American Carol*, and 2005's *Thank You for Smoking*.

Television programs brought forth a new aspect of political humor, drawing on vaudeville for inspiration. *Rowan & Martin's Laugh-In*, created in 1967, used sketch comedy to express political humor, particularly with the segment "*Laugh-In Looks at the News*." The segment parodied traditional television news programs, sharing news with jokes, music and dancing. The show even featured political guests, such as presidential candidate Richard Nixon. *Laugh-In* creator George Schlatter said that Nixon thought his appearance on *Laugh-In* helped him win the presidential election (Nesteroff, 2010). Nixon appeared on the show two months before the election, and viewers found him to be funny and likable (Nesteroff, 2010). Schlatter said that the show offered a scene to Nixon's opponent Hubert Humphrey, who refused (Nesteroff, 2010). Humphrey later said that not participating in *Laugh-In* may have cost him the election (Kolbert, 2004). By mixing "what had once seemed antithetical—parody and power—had proved not to be," changing political humor (Kolbert, 2004, p. 2). The program inspired *Saturday Night Live's* "Weekend Update," a segment still used on the weekly sketch-comedy. Similar to "*Laugh-In Looks at the News*," "Weekend Update" is a parody news program, sharing news with jokes and colorful commentators. These parodies affect some American voters, sometimes leading them to feel cynical about the election process (Compton, 2010).

When thinking of irony and satire in news today, cable comedy shows, *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, and online fake news site *The Onion* are three major players in the realm of political humor. *The Daily Show*, created in 1996, is Comedy Central's humor news program hosted by Jon Stewart. Stewart utilizes irony to share news while offering commentary and political jabs (Polk, Young & Holbert, 2009). Though he labels himself as a comedian,

Stewart placed fourth in the Pew Research Center's 2007 survey of American's favorite television journalist (Pew Research Center, 2007). *The Daily Show* sparked its 2005 spinoff, *The Colbert Report*, which also provides an ironic portrayal of the news as Colbert plays a buffoonish conservative commentator (LaMarre, Landreville & Beam, 2009). *The Onion*, a parody newspaper created in 1988, produced satirical news stories on its website and boasts more than 15.3 million monthly online visits, even as it ceased print publication in 2013 (*The Onion*, 2013).

Gaining full appreciation of political humor is predicated on having at least a basic understanding of the news story upon which the joke is based. To make political humor work, therefore, comedians often must explain news stories even as they tell the joke. For example, anchors give a brief explanation of a news story on "Weekend Update" before delivering the punchline. Colbert often prefaces his jokes with "Of course you know," as he explains the news story so the audience can understand his joke. Unless the audience is aware of current events, they will not understand these jokes without the explanation. BuzzFeed, created in 2006 by Huffington Post co-founder Jonah Peretti, seeks to do something different, as they use jokes and other humorous approaches to explain a news story, rather than explain the news before telling the joke. They use humor as a means of understanding and entertainment, often through memes. The site began as a home for memes (Hempel, 2012). Biologist Richard Dawkins (1976) describes a meme as a piece of cultural communication. Though he was referring to cells, the term has come to be applied to funny pictures that become characters of the Internet, spreading over the world as they are shared by people via social media (Tsotsis, 2010). Popular memes become characters of the Internet, such as Bad Luck Brian, a meme created from an embarrassing school photo of a young man with blonde hair and a sweater vest. Brian, as his name suggests, has bad luck, and the memes describe something terrible and funny that happens

to him, all using the same school photo. For example, a Bad Luck Brian meme (Figure 1) may say: “Takes S.A.T., Forgot to Use No. 2 Pencil” (Know Your Meme, 2012).



Figure 1.1 Bad Luck Brian. This figure is an example of a popular Internet meme.

The success of a meme depends largely on its ability to be replicated and quickly spread (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007). Its success also depends on its humor. The use of humor in memes relates to peripheral cue of humor in the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty, Brinol & Priester, 2009), an approach to understanding attitude formation and change, which will be explained more fully later. More enjoyable types of communication, such as those that use humor, are more likely to be perceived on the peripheral route, where surface-level thinking occurs (Petty, Brinol & Priester, 2009). When a consumer enjoys a meme that combines humor and some kind of reference to popular culture that can relate to many different people, it spreads rapidly (Knobel & Lankshear 2007). Shifman’s study of YouTube memes showed that memes are successful when they’re humorous, simple and repetitive (2012). The importance of simplicity also relates to ELM, as messages perceived along the peripheral route are generally simple because the

consumer is not thinking deeply about the communication presented (Petty, Brinol & Priester, 2009).

BuzzFeed offers national and international news coverage, describing itself as “the leading media company for social news and entertainment, intensely focused on delivering high-quality original reporting, insight, and viral content across a rapidly expanding array of subject areas” (BuzzFeed, 2013). In a fashion similar to *The Huffington Post*, it uses aggregator-type reporting for many of its breaking news stories. Rather than linking to one story, BuzzFeed typically links to and refers to at least three different news outlets in one of its stories. BuzzFeed also uses screen shots from social media, usually Twitter and Instagram, when appropriate in a story. Though it uses some aggregator-type reporting, BuzzFeed also produces some original reporting. Most of its in-depth pieces, such as stories under the section Longform, use original reporting with multiple sources (BuzzFeed, 2013). The website even gained a spot at the White House Correspondents Dinner in 2013, earning a mention from President Barack Obama and a joke about his past marijuana use: “I remember when BuzzFeed was just something I did in college around 2 a.m.” BuzzFeed’s Peretti responded with a joke via Twitter: “dude, that’s still what buzzfeed means” (Lavender, 2013).

BuzzFeed president Jon Steinberg explained that though BuzzFeed began as an experiment in social sharing and light, entertainment-based content, it has become a place for a younger generation to receive news in a way that makes sense to them. “Young people really have no media that is their own. Arts and leisure sections and real estate sections talking about expensive things doesn’t really appeal to a younger generation where memes and Web culture is their culture,” he said (NPR, 2013). BuzzFeed also hired editors with journalism backgrounds: Pulitzer-Prize winner Mark Schoofs of ProPublica started leading the investigative team in

October 2013, News Corps' Simon Crerar joined as Australia editor in September 2013, and former *New York Times* reporter Lisa Tozzi came on as news director in April 2013, giving the company even more focus on journalism (Kaufman, 2013; BuzzFeed, 2013). Pulitzer Prize winner Chris Hamby joined BuzzFeed in April 2014, leaving the Center for Public Integrity (Romenesko, 2014).

Though the site now posts traditional news stories, explanations of political events with jokes, memes and GIFs also exist. GIF, meaning graphics interchange format, is an image format used on the Internet (Bolton, 2013). BuzzFeed uses animated GIFs, which are moving pictures that loop a segment of movement, like a brief, constantly playing video without sound. They often include a subtitle of what a character or celebrity is saying. BuzzFeed repackages a news story, explaining it with short phrases in a list form, using memes, photos, and GIFs as visual aids. The story becomes more image-heavy than text-heavy, typically. Though BuzzFeed offers a variety of content—video, long form, traditional news stories and editorials—its lists and image-heavy posts are the most popular.

The rise of BuzzFeed raises many questions worthy of research. Is this the new way for a new generation to receive its news? Can the site earn credibility compared to the traditional news organizations who are its competitors? How likely is the new generation to learn from a story composed primarily of GIFs compared to a traditional text-and-photo news story? How does consuming humor news relate to political participation? By comparing BuzzFeed's use of humor in news stories to traditional news stories while examining persuasion and credibility, this study hopes to discover whether BuzzFeed is truly the "New News" company (CNBC, 2013) it claims to be.

The following chapter presents relevant literature and the theoretical framework that will provide context for this research. Chapter 3 outlines the method proposed for the study. Chapter 4 details the study's results, and Chapter 5 discusses the results and their implications.

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review, Research Questions, and Hypotheses

Literature Review

The theoretical framework for this study is provided by the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) and by credibility theory. Elaboration Likelihood Model will help explain what participants learn from a story requiring high mental involvement—a traditional *USA Today* story for this research—versus a story with requiring low mental involvement—a BuzzFeed story created for this research. Credibility theory will help explain participants' views on *USA Today* and BuzzFeed, determining how believable and preferable participants think the two outlets and their stories are. By using both theories, this study will seek to analyze what participants retain from both stories, and perceived source and message credibility.

Elaboration Likelihood Model. Elaboration Likelihood Model, or ELM, is a communication theory that helps explain persuasion and the thought processes that cause someone to be or not be persuaded, including a consideration of how mass media attitude change occurs (Petty, Brinol & Priester, 2009). ELM helps explain persuasion when people are paying little attention to a messenger and/or message, and when people who are highly engaged. Elaboration Likelihood Model sought to advance persuasion theories that were particularly popular between World War II and 1960. Before WWII, many researchers supported a Direct Effects Model that assumed all media were powerful enough to directly affect consumers. Researchers believed news media directly influenced consumers by creating political attitudes and developing ways of thinking, such as racism and different consumer preferences (Petty, Brinol & Priester, 2009). After WWII and the popularity of propaganda, researchers studied the effectiveness of propaganda on soldiers, finding that training films could inform but not cause

mass change (Petty, Brinol & Priester, 2009). Research in persuasion began to wane in the 1960s because researchers were not sure if attitude could ever predict behavior, believing that “attitude change is not the thriving field it once was and never will be again” (Kiesler & Muson, 1975, p. 418). In 1986, however, Richard E. Petty and John T. Cacioppo developed ELM, which allowed researchers to study communication’s persuasive effect based on various levels of mental attention or involvement given by consumers of information (Petty, Brinol & Priester, 2009). Because of the importance of persuasive communication in a consumer-driven society, especially in the United States, ELM is continually used in research that seeks to explain how people think and how communicators can change the listeners’ minds (Wagner & Petty, 2011) .

Before Petty and Cacioppo first developed the model, no other theory could explain persuasion when a consumer was not focused solely on the communication, such as listening to an advertisement as background noise or reading an advertisement while daydreaming. When a consumer is involved in the content, meaning s/he is listening intently and focusing on the message, that is referred to as high involvement (or elaboration.) When s/he is not paying much attention to the communication, that is referred to as low involvement (or elaboration) (Wagner & Petty, 2011). ELM is a “dual process approach to persuasion” that explains persuasion is affected by “the likelihood that receivers will engage in elaboration of information relevant to the persuasive issue” (O’Keefe, 2008, p. 1476). Elaboration, or how deeply one considers arguments in communication, can be thought of as being on a continuum. How much or little someone thinks about, or elaborates on, a message is like “a continuum going from no thought about the issue-relevant information presented to complete elaboration of every arguments, and complete integration of these elaborations in the person’s attitude schema” (Cacioppo & Petty, 1986, p. 130). It is important to note that “the degree of elaboration is not directly related to the degree of

persuasion,” because even though someone might think critically about a topic, he or she might not be persuaded (Shroeder, 2005, p. 252).

ELM also considers factors such as motivation, previous knowledge and interest along with involvement. Routes help explain the different ways and extent to which elaboration can occur: These are the central route and the peripheral route. The central route of elaboration occurs when involvement is high, meaning a consumer is closely listening to and paying attention to the communication. Therefore, the participant is highly engaged in the argument that is presented. Central-route processing usually occurs “through extensive issue-relevant thinking: careful examination of the information contained in the message, close scrutiny of the message’s arguments, consideration of other issue relevant material, and so on” (O’Keefe, 2008, p. 1478). Thinking in a central route way about an argument usually occurs when the participant is interested in the material, and thus he or she wants to pay attention to the message because it is important to him or her. The participant in central-route processing is highly involved with the communication because it is “central to the true merits of a particular attitudinal position” (Cacioppo, Petty & Schumann, 1983, p. 140). When communication is processed in the central route, it will usually result in either a positive or negative decision (Petty, Brinol & Priester, 2009). Either the participant will agree or disagree with the argument presented, meaning the participant will not feel neutral or undecided about the argument. If the participant is neutral or undecided, central route processing most likely did not take place because of the “particular attitudinal position” that is usually the result of processing information through the central route (Petty, Brinol & Priester, 2009, p. 127).

Some factors of central-route processing include attitude discrepant way of thinking, meaning how an individual learns and remembers persuasive communication, a person’s inherent

way of thinking critically, and how/if an individual reacts to information. The attitude discrepant way of thinking relates to levels of discrepancy. High discrepancy in a message means that the message's content is very different from the audience's previous attitudes about the message. Low discrepancy means that the message's content is similar to the audience's previous attitudes about the message. So, in central-route processing, it is difficult to persuade the audience when the message has high discrepancy, because the audience's own attitudes are different from the argument presented and because the audience is processing the information carefully and thoroughly (Petty, Brinol & Priester, 2009). Likewise, it is simple to persuade the audience with messages of low discrepancy. Learning and remembrance of persuasive communication means that people are more likely to learn and remember persuasive communication when thinking along the central route because they are highly engaged with the message (Petty, Brinol & Priester, 2009). This relates closely to a person's inherent way of thinking critically, meaning that people will naturally think critically when using central-route processing (Wagner & Petty, 2011). How an individual combines receiving information with a relative reaction is part of central-route processing. This means that when processing information along the central route, hearing an argument causes a response (Petty, Brinol & Priester, 2009). The audience does not simply hear an argument when thinking with central-route processing and not react. Because the audience is using critical thinking, when audience members hear persuasive communication, their mind will process it, producing a reaction (Petty, Brinol & Priester, 2009).

Because such high cognitive effort is used in central route processing, the decision made after using this process is more likely to remain in someone's mind. This participant will not forget the decision quickly; instead, the decision could change the entire schema of an individual (Petty, Brinol & Priester, 2009). Though central processing is effective in persuasion, it only

works if someone is using high cognitive thinking (Wagner & Petty, 2011). This is difficult to accomplish because it is difficult to engage people in a straight-forward, central manner without them becoming bored (Petty, Brinol & Priester, 2009). Also, central-route arguments usually need more time than a 30-second commercial to adequately express the argument, so it can be difficult to use in advertising (Petty, Brinol, & Priester, 2009). Therefore, central route processing occurs when elaboration likelihood is high and can make a lasting impression; however, though it always causes some kind of decision, it's difficult to use central processing because the participant must be actively engaged (Petty, Brinol & Priester, 2009).

Communication processed via the central route is usually straightforward and information heavy (Petty, Brinol & Priester, 2009). It does not rely on peripheral cues to make an argument, instead relying on the “strength of message arguments” (Wagner & Petty 2011). The message of information usually perceived along the central route is “cogent, coherent and compelling” (Wagner & Petty, 2011).

The peripheral route of ELM occurs when involvement is low, meaning the participant is likely paying little attention to the message. Peripheral route processing depends on different peripheral cues to influence the participants in attempts to persuade them. Peripheral cues are “extrinsic features of the communication situation,” and they are used along with heuristics, which are “simple decision procedures that require little information processing” (O’Keefe, 2008, p. 1479). For example, the term “flip-flop” when referring to politicians switching sides on their platforms is a heuristic, because the audience immediately understands the term and its negative connotation without thinking critically.

Some peripheral cues include attractiveness, use of celebrities, experts, humor, environment, repetition, reward, credibility and preconceived credibility. These cues allow the

mind to find validation in the argument in an abbreviated, less cognitively advanced way. They are mental shortcuts that show the viewer the argument is legitimate. They should “have the ability to affect attitudes in the absence of any argument” (Cacioppo, Petty & Schumann, 1983, p. 139). For example, perfume ads don’t tell viewers how a perfume smells, but the ads use peripheral cues, such as the use of a celebrity, upbeat music and beautiful scenery, to persuade viewers to buy the perfume. Thus the cues have no true tie to the product (Dotson & Hyatt, 2000). For example, Taylor Swift’s Wonderstruck perfume line features the singer in an enchanting, fairy tale-esque environment wearing a ball gown (Figure 2.1). This image is not directly linked to the product, but instead uses the peripheral cues of celebrity and attractiveness.



Figure 2.1 Taylor Swift: Wonderstruck perfume advertisement. This figure illustrates how some advertisements use peripheral cues.

Individuals are more likely to be persuaded by the peripheral route because it does not require the focus and cognitive involvement of central route processing. However, decisions made using peripheral route processing are more likely to be forgotten than decisions made using central route processing. This occurs because high cognitive effort is not used to reach a

decision, so the individual doesn't integrate the new cognition as thoroughly with existing schema or cognitions. The message is not stored in long-term memory where it would take root. Instead, messages perceived through the peripheral route are stored in short-term memory, if stored at all (Petty, Brinol & Priester, 2009).

Humor can serve as a peripheral cue. It is a tool that can “make stories more captivating sources more likable, or arguments more effective” because it allows the audience to feel more relaxed and entertained (Polk, Young & Holbert, 2009, p. 208). Though audience members feel more relaxed when they hear a joke because they don't feel that the information is too serious—after all, it is being made fun of—they can become engaged in this peripheral cue. The peripheral cue of humor, like other peripheral cues, allows the brain to make mental shortcuts, and it helps individuals to reach a decision faster without using critical thinking skills, which relate to the central route of information processing (Petty, Brinol & Priester, 2009). Self-deprecating humor, in particular, serves as a peripheral cue that results in mostly positive reactions (Baumgartner, 2007).

Researchers have continually noted humor as a tool in persuasion, but they have disputed how it works over the years. Recently, though, they have noted that “grabbing an audience's attention, bringing ideas to the top of people's minds, increasing source likability, and inducing a positive affective state may not be the only functions of humor in persuasion” (Polk, Young & Holbert, 2009, p. 208). Humorous programming, through its enticing peripheral cues, also can inform viewers. Hollander's study shows that the viewers of humor-based news programming, who are mostly young people, “may get their news from late-night television hosts such as Jay Leno or comedy programs like *The Daily Show*” (2005, p. 407). Additionally, anecdotal evidence and surveys bring forth the possible answer that for many young adults, late-night talk

shows and comedy programs and their hosts are thought to be important places to find political information and news (Pew Research Center, 2000, 2002, 2004). The audience does not watch these programs for in-depth reporting. Only 2% of *Daily Show* viewers watch the program for in-depth reporting, but 10% watch the program for news and headlines. Entertainment, though, is the biggest factor with 43% of the audience tuning in for the entertainment value (Pew Research Center, 2010). Political humor using satire, such as *The Daily Show*, can lead to cynicism about the democratic process and government (Hart & Hartelius, 2007). However, political humor not using satire, such as a JibJab cartoon of former President George W. Bush dancing, resulted in a more positive reaction. JibJab is a site that produced original political-oriented content and also allows users to put a photo of anyone's head, a celebrity, politician or even family member, on a dancing body. Users upload the photo, select the song, and JibJab puts the information into a video (Baumgartner, 2007).

As of this writing, no researcher has analyzed how readers perceive humorous news reporting on BuzzFeed. By examining the peripheral cue of humor in a BuzzFeed story as opposed to a *USA Today* story, representing traditional news and the central processing route, this present research can determine involvement, retention and preference in participants with the help of ELM.

Though ELM is a well-known theory and gained acceptance, it is not without weak points. Some claim that the Elaboration Likelihood Model has too many conditional factors and is too dense to understand. One of the main critics of ELM is James B. Stiff, who said "the theory doesn't delve into the actual workings of the brain" (Stiff, 1986, p. 79) and fails "to assess directly the cognitive processes themselves" (Stiff, 1986, p. 80). Stiff also criticizes the notion that central cues are only associated with positive results and peripheral cues are associated with

negative results. This can seem true, as central-route processing makes a more lasting impression in persuasion than peripheral route processing, but it is not completely positive. Instead, there are many conditional factors in addition to the processing route including motivation, involvement, and ability. ELM also can be too strict in labeling processing routes. It calls for persuasive communication to be received either through the central-processing route or the peripheral-processing route, but does not. Simply put, ELM might suggest a binary approach in which a consumer is either fully engaged or not engaged at all; reality is much more complicated. Nonetheless ELM has proven to be a useful framework in previous communications research, as it is unique in that it helps to explain involved (central) and uninvolved (peripheral) processing, making it a useful theory for this study.

Credibility Theory. Credibility theory considers how trustworthy, likeable, believable, and/or reliable a messenger or piece of communication is judged by message recipients to be. Credibility examines the believability of both the messenger and the message (Roberts, 2007). After much research, no blanket rule explaining credibility theory as it relates to communication exists. The concept “remains too multi-dimensional, too mercurial, too in-the-moment, and too dependent upon other theories—not to mention the vagaries of humanity—to be shrunk into a covering law” (Roberts, 2007, p. 1). Though it is a vast understanding, credibility can be broken down and understood in its relationship to communication theory.

Credibility thought began with Aristotle in his *Rhetoric*, as the philosopher created the ideas of ethos, pathos and logos (Aristotle, 2013). Ethos mimics proof for a great authority, meaning it deals with the believability of the messenger. Pathos appeals to emotions, usually using emotion to inspire emotion. Logos relates to facts and logic in regard to an argument, seeking for concrete proof. These ingredients of persuasion serve as a means to explain how and

why the audience believes—or doesn't believe—the communicator and/or message. For example, a news story containing facts and statistics may appeal to logos. Ethos relates to brand recognition, such as working for a popular and respected newspaper, and/or a strong personal resume. Pathos relates to how well the communicator can play to the reader's emotions, causing them to feel persuaded because they feel emotionally attached to the information (Foss, 1989).

Credibility as it relates to journalism is important in that a journalist's success may be related to how credible the reader thinks they he or she is. Seeking truth is imperative for journalists as it is the foundation for their careers (SPJ Code of Ethics, 1996). Though a journalist may report with accuracy, the accuracy does not necessarily mean readers will believe the journalist or information. So, credibility comes into play, measuring the likeliness to be believed and what factors contribute to such consumer belief. Without trust, it is nearly impossible for journalists to do their jobs (Gaziano, 1988).

Beginning in the 1940s, researchers examined the significance of source credibility, “examining what characteristics made a speaker persuasive” (Johnson & Kaye, 2004). Studying the credibility of sources arose from the emergence of the radio. The newspaper industry worried about the number of consumers using television and radio for news, so researchers examined credibility of the mediums (Johnson & Kaye, 2004). In 2001, Kioussis examined consumers' opinion of credibility of newspapers, online news sites and television. Newspapers were deemed most credible, followed by online news and television news (Kioussis, 2001). The study showed that people tend to trust what they're most familiar with (Kioussis, 2001). With the popularity of blogs rising in the 2000s, a 2007 study showed that politically interested consumers tend to view blogs as more credible than traditional news sources, such as online newspapers and news sites

(Johnson & Kaye, 2004). However, general users tend to prefer traditional news sites, finding them more credible than blogs (Banning & Trammell, 2006).

Brand recognition and brand trust plays in credibility. If a reporter writes a completely truthful story for a personal, unknown source and for a major media outlet, such as *USA Today* or *The New York Times*, a reader was more likely to believe the story on the major media outlet about fifty years ago (Aronson, Turner & Carlsmith, 1963). However, in Pew's 2012 study on credibility, major media outlets, including national newspapers, national television broadcasts and NPR, have lost credibility in recent years. In 2010, 62% of participants gave major news outlets a positive score in credibility. In 2012, however, major news outlets were give a 56% positive score. The score has fallen every year since 2008 and has not been higher than 71% since 2002. These changes in credibility of traditional news outlets is important to note in relation to the emergence of new media. Since 2002, new media has increased with the rise of the Internet. This abundance of media, including media designed to attract consumers based upon their own political and world views, has caused consumers to question what they read, view and listen to more, placing more responsibility on consumers to be more media literate (Metzger et. al, 2008).

News ownership is also key in understanding credibility. Many media outlets are owned by large businesses, and their reputations affect the public's trust in their messengers and messages (Roberts, 2007). ABC, for example, is owned by Disney. Some may fear that the ideologies of the company may seep into reporting, thus making the news organization less credible. "Who Owns the News Media" (2012), powered by the State of the Media, keeps track of the companies that own news outlets and how many site visitors/viewers/readers they have.

However, media outlets' efforts to be viewed as credible may not matter in the end. The decision of believability belongs to the message receiver. No matter how truthful a message may seem and how respectable a news outlet may appear, the consumer decides the level of credibility (Roberts, 2007). This provides difficulty, as message recipients can vary immensely. Despite the work (or lack of work), credibility is decided by those consuming the message not by its creators or even the message itself (Roberts, 2007). Meanwhile, the emergence of new media and boom of cable news has contributed to the reemergence of a more partisan media press, allowing recipients to select media and messages that reinforce their beliefs (Levendusky, 2013).

BuzzFeed editor-in-chief Ben Smith, a former writer for Politico, has sought to make BuzzFeed more credible by hiring reporters and focusing on producing more original content. He said he hopes BuzzFeed will get more exclusive stories because scoops lead to credibility. Though the site is doing more traditional news media, Smith said he believes that its uniqueness and quirkiness is key to its credibility and identity: "We shouldn't take people more seriously than they take themselves" (Straumsheim, 2012). "I think that we are more like the *New York Times* than we are like Reddit," Smith said, "We're a news organization, basically. Every day, we ask ourselves, 'How are we going to outdo what we did yesterday?'" (Straumsheim, 2012). Reddit is an aggregation site that lets users post stories, videos and photos. Users vote on which stories they like, pushing popular stories to the top of the page, while less popular stories fall to the bottom (Reddit, 2013).

Humor, News and Persuasion. Much has been written recently on humor and the news, mostly relating to satire programs such as *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*. Many of these studies have found a relationship between humor in news as a means of persuasion. Many of these studies also have found a relationship between humor and news as a way to learn.

LaMarre, Landreville and Beam (2009) predicted that participants watching *The Colbert Report* would use the ambiguity of satire to twist Colbert's messages to mean whatever they wanted the messages to mean. Thus, conservatives would want to think of Colbert as serious, not finding his remarks satirical at all, because his statements would more closely align with their beliefs. However, liberals would prefer to think of Colbert as a satirical comedian, finding all of his conservative statements to be tricks of irony. The study found that conservatives believed Colbert was using humor, but truly meant what he thought and said about liberals. The study also found that conservatives were more likely to classify Colbert as a conservative and Republicans were more likely to classify Colbert as a Republican. The study confirmed that conservatives thought that Colbert disliked liberals, too. Colbert's use of humor, therefore, persuaded conservatives to think that Colbert also was conservative. Therefore, political preference can sometimes mask satire, as participants overlook satire to prefer finding a journalist who shares their political preference (LaMarre, Landreville & Beam, 2009). This 2009 study showed that political preference and knowledge is key when analyzing the effects of humor news. Political preference and knowledge can alter how a joke is perceived. Because of this, participants in this study will take a political participation/knowledge quiz.

In a study relating more closely to this study, Polk, Young, and Holbert (2009) used ELM to study the effects of humor in political communication. The researchers examined *The Daily Show*, predicting that irony would result in higher cognitive thinking than sarcasm because irony is more complex. Sarcasm, however, possesses an "overt and simplistic structure" and "requires relatively little cognitive effort to be understood" (Polk, Young & Holbert, 2009, p. 208). The researchers were also concerned with political efficacy in relation to humor-based news. External political efficacy relates to the theory that one is successful when participating politically, and

internal political efficacy means that an individual can understand politics and then participate. An individual with low political efficacy has little faith in the government, while an individual with high political efficacy strongly trust the government. Research from Baumgartner and Morris's 2006 study of political efficacy and *The Daily Show* found that viewers of *The Daily Show* have a negative relationship with external political efficacy. This occurs because the show's critical nature causes viewers to feel critical of the government. However, the study found a positive effect of *The Daily Show* viewing on internal political efficacy. The audience feels as though it can change the way the political system operates through the show's commentary. Thus, the researchers developed their research questions and hypotheses based on this theory of the cognitive differences between irony and sarcasm, and the relationship between these types of humor and political efficacy (Polk, Young & Holbert, 2009). Both irony and sarcasm require a level of involvement for the message to have significant meaning, though irony requires more thought. Using college-age students, the researchers found that irony was more complex, as it the irony clip was more difficult to understand than the sarcasm clip. Also, as far as argument quality, the sarcasm clip was thought to be a stronger argument than the irony clip. Political motivation was shown to be a significant predictor of counterargumentation, and type of humor was shown to predict counterargumentation at a near-significant level (Polk, Young & Holbert 2009). Though the researchers predicted that ironic political messages would be more persuasive than sarcastic political messages, no significant findings were obtained when attitude shift was used as a dependent variable with motivation and humor type as factors. Thus, this study tested with a type of humor that will require more involvement than a BuzzFeed story. The researchers found, however, that humor news can produce a strong reaction, whether feeling cynical to the government or hopeful for change (Polk, Young & Holbert, 2009). Because humor

news can encourage a strong, and sometimes action-based, reaction, it is worthy of studying further. This study will do so by looking at a type of humor requiring less involvement.

In Holbert et. al.'s 2011 study, the researchers used ELM to examine different forms of political satire relating to Hilary Clinton's stance on universal healthcare. The researchers examined two types of satire, juvenalian and horatian, and compared responses from these types of political humor to a traditional piece of political communication. The study found that juvenalian, a more abrasive form of satire, was more likely to change a participant's mind, while horatian, a more light-hearted form of satire, was not. Traditional media remained in the middle of the spectrum, not producing strong results and emotions (Holbert et. al., 2011). The participants involved in the study were all fairly involved politically, so the study did not focus on how different types of communication, whether humorous or traditional, affects different types of people, meaning people with varied political knowledge and participation. This 2011 study did not find significant results because many of the participants were similar. The current study looked at a pool of students from different majors to result in a more varied population.

Holbert's 2013 study further analyzed juvenalian and horatian forms of satire and their levels of persuasion on consumers. The study found that participants can recognize that political satire is attempting to persuade. The study also found that juvenalian satire lies somewhere in the middle of the ELM spectrum, between the central and peripheral routes of processing. Thus, satire humor adds depth to the peripheral cue of humor because participants must think deeper to understand satire (Holbert et. al., 2013). However, Holbert's 2013 study, like the others, does not look at humor that does not require a high level of involvement. This study looked at a less-complex type of humor to offer more interpretations of different forms of humor and to analyze persuasion regarding political humor when involvement is low.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

The literature above suggests that irony and satire, as seen in *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, lead to learning. This is largely because individuals must be fairly knowledgeable about the news or look up news stories relating to the jokes to understand these outlets' use of humor. However, little has been written about more direct humor, such as GIFs and memes, as a means for explaining news. Unlike irony and sarcasm, direct humor requires less thought to understand a joke, presenting it in the open. In BuzzFeed's stories, or at least in its lists, the reader learns about the news with direct humor, not having to be knowledgeable about what's going on in the news to get the joke. Some BuzzFeed lists require knowledge of a television show or movie to fully appreciate the joke, but this experiment will focus on a list using easy-to-understand humor comprised largely of cat jokes, memes and GIFs. Thus, the type of humor will be fairly universal and require little to no prior knowledge, suggesting a peripheral route of persuasion.

ELM also shows that humor can be used in persuasion, causing an individual to prefer a message with humor versus a message without humor (Wagner & Petty, 2011). Though ELM is generally used as a theoretical basis for research into advertisements and persuasive messaging, news stories also require that audiences be persuaded as to their accuracy. The news stories used in this study serve as a serve as representatives of usual offerings by the two outlets. For example, if a viewer likes a television on a particular channel or network, he or she is more likely to have a favorable opinion or preference for that channel or network. Likewise, these stories represent the two outlets, predicting that if a participant prefers the humor-based story, he or she will prefer BuzzFeed and vice-versa . Broekhuizen and Hoffman (2012) used ELM to explain preference and elaboration regarding online newspapers, using Petty's research to determine that

sites' use of more interactive news articles, featuring video, links, etc., influenced preference (2012). They also explained that content can influence source/outlet preference, as explained above. The way communication is presented and personalized represents ELM, with traditional, straight-forward presentation leading to central route processing, and the humor-based presentation leading to peripheral route processing (Tam & Ho, 2005). This study tested direct humor, using silly cat photos, requiring little processing, making it an ideal example of peripheral route processing. However, the meaning of these messages is fleeting and not stored deeply in the mind. Though individuals are more likely to prefer the humor-based news stories, they may be less likely to remember what they read. Thus, the young adults tested in this study would be expected to have better comprehension of the traditional-based news story because they are more likely to process the story via the central route and remember what they read.

The literature leads to these research questions and hypotheses:

RQ1: How does humor in news stories affect messenger and message preference among young adults ages 18 to 24?

H1: Traditional news story presentation will be preferred by young adults with high political/news knowledge over a humor-based news story presentation.

H2: Humor-based news story presentation will be preferred by young adults with low political/news knowledge over a traditional news story presentation.

Credibility theory suggests that participants will find a more traditional news story presentation more credible because of what they are used to and what they prefer. Thus in RQ1, young adults with high political/news knowledge will be more likely to prefer the *USA Today* story because they recognize *USA Today* as a traditional news source. ELM also ties into RQ1, H1 and H2. If young adults have high political/news knowledge, they may be more likely to

better process the central route story, *USA Today*, better because they are more likely to process central-route information more often. Thus, they prefer the *USA Today* story because they're used to processing news via the central route. Meanwhile, participants with low political/news knowledge will better process the story via the peripheral route, BuzzFeed. They will prefer BuzzFeed because they are used to processing news information peripherally.

RQ2: Do people retain more information more from a traditional news story presentation or from a humor-based news story presentation?

H3: Young adults will retain more information from a traditional news story presentation than from a humor-based news story presentation.

ELM explains RQ2 and H3. Though some young adults may not prefer the traditional news story, all participants will have better comprehension of the *USA Today* story over the BuzzFeed story. This is because the *USA Today* story will be processed via the central route, creating a more lasting message. The BuzzFeed story's peripheral cues will make the story more interesting, but difficult to remember.

RQ3: How credible do young adults think BuzzFeed and its story treatment is?

H4: Young adults with high political/news knowledge will perceive BuzzFeed to be less credible than traditional news outlets, such as *USA Today*.

H5: Young adults with low political/news knowledge will perceive BuzzFeed to be as credible as traditional news outlets, such as *USA Today*.

Similar to RQ1, credibility theory suggests that young adults with high political/news knowledge will rate *USA Today* higher in messenger credibility because it is what they are more likely to be used to and prefer. If participants have high political/news knowledge, they are more likely to recognize and trust a news organization such as *USA Today* because they probably read

more stories from *USA Today* and similar traditional-news sources. Meanwhile, participants with low political/news knowledge will prefer BuzzFeed because they will not have as much experience or knowledge of the more traditional brand, *USA Today*, or because they are less likely to seek information involving media that require a central route. ELM also relates to RQ3, H4 and H5, as participants with high political/news knowledge are more likely to find BuzzFeed less credible because they better perceived the central route story, as it is what they are used to. Participants with low political/news knowledge will cling to their peripheral route story, drawing on cues like humor, and find it more credible.

CHAPTER 3

Methodology

This study worked to answer the research questions and hypotheses through an online experiment survey designed to measure a participant's participants' comprehension, liking, and credibility of a *USA Today* story, representing traditional news consumed in a high-elaboration process, and a BuzzFeed story on the same topic, representing humor news consumed in a lower-elaboration process. Half of the participants received the *USA Today* story first, and half received the BuzzFeed story first. Table 3.1 describes this procedure.

Credibility research shows that *USA Today* is likely to be viewed as the more credible brand, based on brand recognition and previous studies showing that consumers trust what they're more familiar with (Kioussis, 2001). *USA Today* is the older and more traditional brand, starting as a newspaper in 1982 before creating a website (Banning & Trammell, 2006). BuzzFeed is a less-traditional media, similar to the blogs researched by Banning & Trammell (2006). Though *USA Today* is more likely to be viewed as credible, recent Pew studies have shown that consumers find traditional news media to be less credible than previously (Pew Research Center, 2012). In 2002, 67% of consumers found *USA Today* credible, but in 2012, 49% of consumers found *USA Today* credible. Though consumers' view of credibility for multiple papers (*New York Times* from 62% in 2002 to 49% in 2012, and *Wall Street Journal* from 77% in 2002 to 58% in 2012) has decreased, there is little difference between Republicans and Democrats in assessing *USA Today's* credibility (Pew Research Center, 2012). For example, 50% of Republicans and 54% of Democrats gave *USA Today* a high believability rating (Pew Research Center, 2012). Meanwhile, 37% of Republicans and 65% of Democrats gave *The New York Times* a positive believability rating, showing a more stark contrast relating to partisanship

(Pew Research Center, 2012). This shows the merits of using *USA Today* in this study, as both Republicans and Democrats trust the paper nearly equally. There is no publicly available data that accesses BuzzFeed's credibility.

Population and Sample

This study's population of interest was young adults ages 18-24. They are the appropriate age cohort for this study, as BuzzFeed President Jon Steinberg said his site was specifically designed for young people (NPR, 2013). BuzzFeed employees are trained to use the social web to make stories sharable and relatable to young people (NPR, 2013). Thus, BuzzFeed's significance as a form of media for young people reflects the age range for this study. The sampling frame for this study was members of this age group who communicate in English and had access to the Internet. They were recruited via email and social media and through University of Alabama mass communication classes that require students to either participate in research or do a different assignment in order to receive a grade in those classes.

The study used the topic of migration data in both *USA Today* and BuzzFeed stories, highlighting a U.S. Census Bureau that post-recession increase in the percentage of Americans who move each year. The *USA Today* story was an edited version of an actual *USA Today* story from November 2013 story that discussed how young Americans are now moving away from home for work and opportunities, as they previously previously stayed in their hometown or college town (Toppo & Overberg, 2013). The BuzzFeed story recreated the *USA Today* story, using memes and GIFs of cats to resemble a BuzzFeed list-like news story. The topic is salient, as it relates to the survey participants, and provided the same information that participants were tested on after seeing the first treatment.

Political/News Knowledge questions

Before reading the first of the two treatments, participants were tested on their political/news knowledge, using questions on current politicians and news events. This was completed by asking five questions (seen in Appendix A) that were used to create an index of general knowledge and was used as measures for hypothesis testing. For the political/news knowledge quiz, participants received a score ranging from 0 to 5, with one point for each question answered correctly. These responses were recorded as an index, with higher scores indicating high political/news knowledge and low scores indicating low political/news knowledge.

BuzzFeed story and questions

Participants who received the BuzzFeed story first received a brief news quiz following the story to determine what they learned or remembered from the story. Participants who received the BuzzFeed story second were asked to rate the credibility/likability of BuzzFeed and the BuzzFeed story treatment.

***USA Today* story and questions**

Participants who receive the *USA Today* story first received a brief news quiz following the story to determine what they learned or remembered from the story. This news quiz was the same as the news quiz given to participants who started with the BuzzFeed story. Participants who received the *USA Today* story second were, after reading the story, asked to rate the credibility/likability of *USA Today* and the story. These were the same questions following the BuzzFeed story. Both stories will have credibility/likability questions and a news quiz, but half completed credibility/likability questions for BuzzFeed and a news quiz for *USA Today* while the other half will completed credibility/likability questions for *USA Today* and a news quiz for BuzzFeed.

News quiz questions

The news quiz followed the first story the participant reads. The questions were the same for both stories and are listed in Appendix A. A 0-to-5 index was built for each participant, with one point for each question answered correctly.

Credibility/preference questions

Credibility/preference ratings followed the second story the participant read. The statements are the same for both stories, and the same used by Roberts (2007, 2010), which included both a message credibility scale adopted by Flanagin and Metzger (2000) and a messenger credibility adopted from Meyer (1988). These questions used a five-point Likert-type scale for responses, and were used to build scales to test hypotheses related to RQ3.

The message credibility scale was built from these eight statements:

I think this story from BuzzFeed/*USA Today* is:

Unbelievable 1 2 3 4 5 Believable

Inaccurate 1 2 3 4 5 Accurate

Biased 1 2 3 4 5 Not biased

Untrustworthy 1 2 3 4 5 Trustworthy

Unfair 1 2 3 4 5 Fair

Incomplete 1 2 3 4 5 Complete

Hard to understand 1 2 3 4 5 Easy to understand

Poorly written 1 2 3 4 5 Well-written

The messenger credibility scale was built from these seven statements:

I think this source (BuzzFeed/*USA Today*) is:

Unbelievable 1 2 3 4 5 Believable

Inaccurate 1 2 3 4 5 Accurate

Untrustworthy 1 2 3 4 5 Trustworthy

Biased 1 2 3 4 5 Unbiased

Incomplete 1 2 3 4 5 Complete

Unfair 1 2 3 4 5 Fair

Does not tell the whole story 1 2 3 4 5 Tells the whole story

Participants also were asked a “preferred story treatment” question, to determine whether they preferred the *USA Today*, BuzzFeed, neither, or both treatments equally. Participants also were asked to explain why they made their choice; their free-form responses will be included in Chapter 5’s discussion.

Demographics

Participants also were asked a series of demographics questions, including age, race and year in college, which were used as control variables. They also were asked their major—whether part of the media (journalism, public relations, telecommunications and film, etc.) or not. Participants also were asked how often they use the media to follow news.

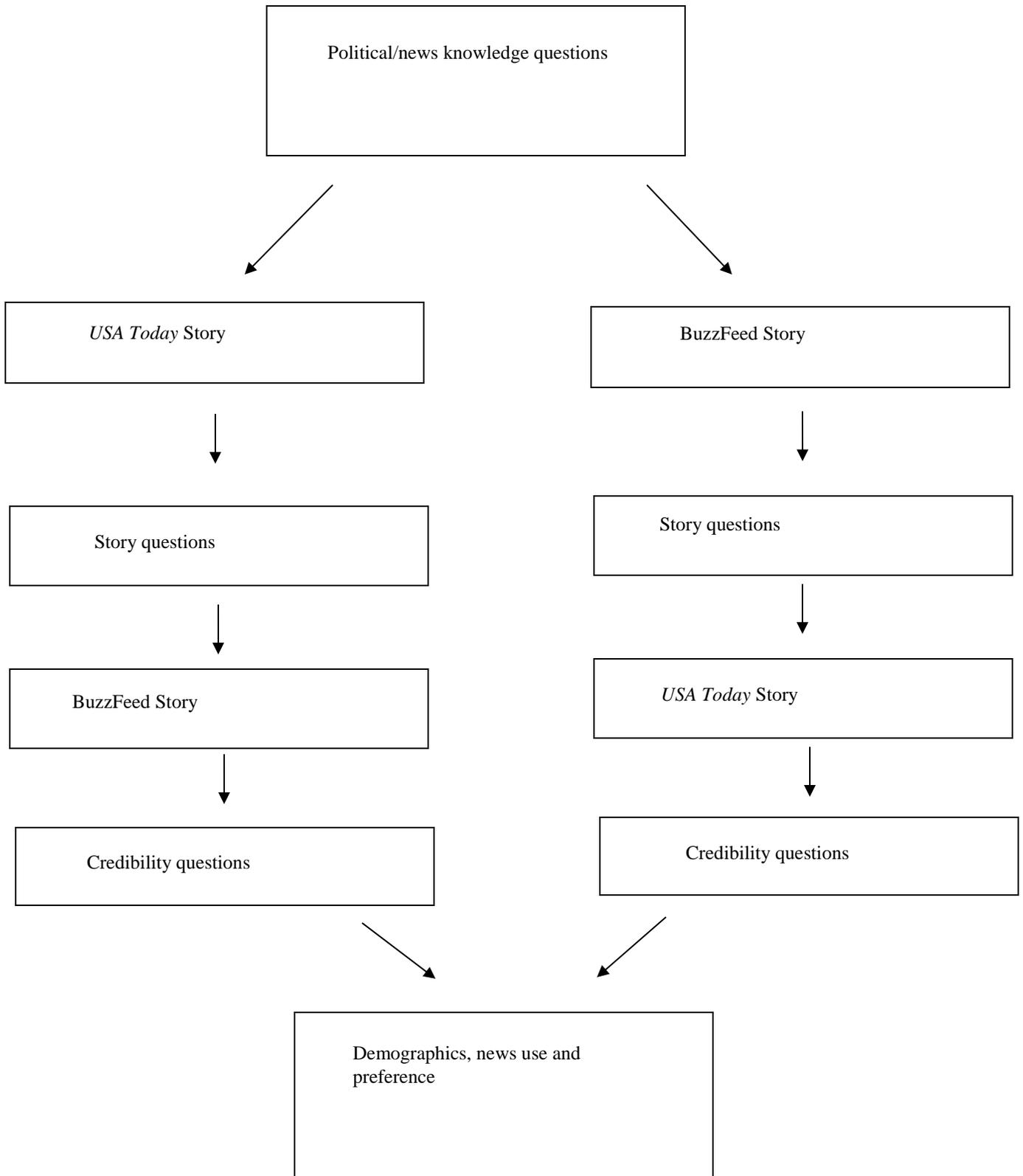
Testing hypotheses

To test H1 and H2, statistical tests compared the “preferred story treatment” responses to the political knowledge scale taken before either story was read. To test H3, the story comprehension questions were compared by story treatment. To test H4 and H5, the credibility scales were compared to the political knowledge questions asked before either story was read.

Other

The survey instruments were placed in Qualtrics, an online survey technology service that provides a platform for surveys and organizes the data (Qualtrics, 2014). The study was approved by the University of Alabama's Institutional Review Board (approval number: # 14-0R-050) on February 20, 2014, and placed online from March 12, 2014, to April 18, 2014. Appendix C shows the pair of surveys.

Table 3.1
Research Procedure



CHAPTER 4

Results

Participant Demographics

To be included in the study's analysis, participants had to be undergraduate students, ages 18 to 24, at the University of Alabama who were enrolled in a communications class during the Spring semester of 2014. Of the 692 responses collected on Qualtrics, 438 met the age and student status criteria. Students in some classes received extra credit, while most completed the study as a course research participation requirement. Students with a research requirement who were uncomfortable completing a study completed an alternate assignment. Qualtrics automatically assigned experimental treatments, with 228 starting with the BuzzFeed treatment and 210 starting with the *USA Today* treatment.

Of the 438 respondents, 7 (1.6%) were born in 1990, 15 (3.4%) in 1991, 54 (12.3%) born in 1992, 97 (22.1%) born in 1993, 160 (36.5%) born in 1994, and 105 (24%) born in 1995.

When describing their political beliefs, 12 (2.7%) identified as Very Liberal; 68 (15.5%) identified as Liberal, 173 (39.5%) Moderate, 168 (38.4%) Conservative, and 17 (3.9%) as Very Conservative.

Participants also were asked about their news use. 7 (1.6%) never followed the news, and 29 (6.6%) followed the news less than once a month. 16 (3.7%) of participants followed the news once a month. 58 (13.2%) of participants followed the news 2-3 times a month. 87 (19.9%) of participants followed the news once a week. 140 (32%) of participants followed the news 2-3 times a week, and 101 (23.2%) of participants followed the news daily.

Analysis showed that 52 participants (11.9%) were journalism majors, 44 (10.1%) participants were telecommunications and film/broadcast majors, 207(47.4%) participants were

advertising/public relations majors, 30 (6.9%) participants were communications majors, and 105 (23.6%) participants had majors outside the College of Communication and Information Sciences (marked as other).

Scale Analyses

Before analyzing results to test hypotheses, message and messenger credibility scales were analyzed to determine their reliability. Results showed that the two scales had very high reliability.

Messenger credibility scale. Seven questions were used to determine messenger credibility for BuzzFeed or *USA Today*. Like the message credibility scale, participants had five choices along a Likert-type scale to determine messenger credibility for each statement, with a higher score indicating higher perceptions of messenger credibility.

The message scale had a mean score of 24.54, $SD=5.97$, with a range from 7 to 35. Using Cronbach's alpha statistic for reliability, the seven items produced a scale with high reliability, $\alpha = .922$, and the alpha score would have fallen if any of the items were deleted.

Message credibility scale. Eight items were used to determine message credibility for the BuzzFeed story or *USA Today* story, and participants rated the credibility of the message and messenger they saw second in the experimental treatment they received. For each item, participants had five choices along a Likert-type scale to rate message credibility. The higher the score, the higher the perceived message credibility.

The message scale had a mean score of 26.52, $SD=6.04$, with a range from 8 to 40. A Cronbach's alpha test for reliability showed that the eight-items together produced a scale with high reliability, $\alpha = .874$. The scale would have risen to .879 if the "hard to understand/easy to understand" question were deleted.

Test of Hypotheses and Research Questions

The hypotheses and research questions in Chapter 2 worked to explain the relationships among humor, traditional news, credibility and retention. The first research question sought to examine how humor affects preference in news stories.

RQ1: How does humor in news stories affect messenger and message preference among young adults (18-24)?

To study RQ1, participants were asked which news story they preferred. Most participants preferred BuzzFeed (229, 52.8%) over USA Today (125, 28 %). There were 47 participants who preferred both equally (10.8%), and 33 (7.6%) participants had no preference. A chi square showed significance in story preference, $\chi^2(3, N = 438) = 216.995, p < .000$, with participants more than twice as likely to prefer BuzzFeed over another source. There was no relationship between the treatment order (whether *USA Today* or BuzzFeed was presented first) and story preference.

RQ1's theme was further explored in two related hypotheses, which examined how humor in news stories affected preference in young adults, relating to how political/news knowledge affected preference. :

H1: Traditional news story presentation will be preferred by young adults with high political/news knowledge over humor-based story presentation

H2: Humor-based news story presentation will be preferred by young adults with low political/news knowledge over a traditional news story presentation.

Analysis of variance (ANOVA) tests, comparing story preference against the index of news knowledge created before exposure to experimental treatments, showed significance, $F(3,$

343) = 3.653, $p = .013$. Tukey post hoc comparisons among groups showed significance between participants who preferred both stories equally ($M = 4.12$, 95% CI [-.96, -.10]) and those who preferred BuzzFeed ($M = 3.59$, 95% CI [-.10, -.96]), $p = .009$. Table 4.1 details the mean score on the knowledge pre-test by story treatment preference; worthy of mention is that people who preferred BuzzFeed rated lowest in accuracy in answering general knowledge questions. Both hypotheses were supported.

Table 4.1
Story preference by general knowledge questions answered correctly

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Min	Max
USA Today	125	3.74	1.137	1	5
BuzzFeed	229	3.59	1.058	1	5
Both equally	50	4.12	0.918	2	5
No preference	34	3.85	1.077	0	5
Total	438	3.71	1.078	0	5

RQ2: Do people retain more information more from a traditional news story presentation or from a humor-based news story presentation?

Both RQ2 and H3 sought to determine which story readers retained more information from, seeking to discover whether BuzzFeed or *USA Today* was easier to remember. The study used ANOVA to test H3.

H3: Young adults will retain more information from a traditional news story presentation than from a humor-based news story presentation.

H3 was tested using an ANOVA to compare story treatment versus the story knowledge index. For USA Today, $M = 3.84$, $SD = 1.214$. For BuzzFeed, $M = 3.53$, $SD = 1.124$. The difference was significant, $F(1,436) = 10.422$, $p = .006$.

Next, an ANOVA to compare story preference (regardless of story treatment assigned) versus the story knowledge index. The result was significant, $F(3,436) = 3.225, p = .022$. Table 4.2 shows the treatment preference by the number of story knowledge questions answered correctly.

Table 4.2

Story preference by story knowledge questions answered correctly

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Min	Max
<i>USA Today</i>	125	3.82	1.180	0	5
BuzzFeed	229	3.64	1.137	0	5
Both equally	50	3.96	1.049	1	5
No preference	34	3.24	1.499	0	5
Total	438	3.69	1.181	0	5

Post-hoc tests showed that though no significance was found between BuzzFeed and *USA Today*, participants who only preferred BuzzFeed scored lower on the story questions than those who preferred *USA Today* or both equally. Significance was found between *USA Today* ($M = 3.82$, 95% CI [0, .117]), $p = .052$ and those who had no preference, and between participants who preferred both equally ($M = 3.59$, 95% CI [0.05, 1.40]), $p = .029$.and had no preference. Again, those who preferred both equally scored the highest on the story index, as they did in the political/news knowledge index.

Story preference was asked after story knowledge questions were asked, but, according to the comments, preference was indicated before the participants read the stories. A participant who preferred BuzzFeed said, “I always read BuzzFeed,” for example. Though it is possible the story treatments in the study affected or determined preference, there is still a relationship between story knowledge and preference.

RQ3: How credible do young adults think BuzzFeed is? RQ3, H4 and H5 sought to determine how participants perceived the sources' and stories' credibility. The credibility scales were used for these questions and tested through ANOVA.

An ANOVA supported the hypothesis for the messenger credibility scale, $F(1, 437) = 30.292, p < .000$. *USA Today* ranked significantly higher in perceived credibility than BuzzFeed for each of the seven credibility measures, as Table 4.3 shows.

Table 4.3

Messenger credibility by treatment, with Analysis of Variance and significance

	BuzzFeed (n=210)	USA Today (n=239)	Total (N=438)	ANOVA	Sig.*
Believable	3.46	3.93	3.68	23.26	0.000
Accurate	3.45	3.82	3.63	15.18	0.000
Trustworthy	3.29	3.89	3.58	43.77	0.000
Biased	3.30	3.51	3.40	4.52	0.034
Complete	3.01	3.75	3.37	57.22	0.000
Fair	3.51	3.80	3.65	9.86	0.002
Whole	2.92	3.5	3.19	33.48	0.000
Total	23.06	26.17	24.54	30.292	0.000

* Each was significant.

An ANOVA also showed significant difference between perceived credibility of the message treatment and source, $F(1, 437) = 8.634, p = .003$. The *USA Today* story was rated much higher in credibility for each credibility variable, as Table 4.4 shows by story treatment.

Table 4.4*Story credibility by treatment, with Analysis of Variance and significance*

	BuzzFeed (n=210)	USA Today (n=339)	Total (N=438)	ANOVA	Sig.*
Believable	3.60	3.88	3.74	8.08	0.005
Accurate	3.54	3.77	3.65	6.18	0.013
Trustworthy	3.21	3.44	3.32	5.20	0.023
Biased	3.44	3.84	3.63	16.79	0.000
Complete	3.05	3.54	3.28	22.06	0.000
Fair	3.66	3.78	3.72	1.62	0.191
Understandable	4.18	3.57	3.89	35.54	0.000
Written	3.17	3.61	3.38	20.01	0.000
Total	29.58	27.86	28.67	8.634	0.003

* All but “Fair” was statistically significant at 0.02 or higher

H4: Young adults with high political/news knowledge will perceive BuzzFeed to be less credible as a news source than traditional news outlets, such as *USA Today*.

This hypothesis was not supported, as an ANOVA showed no relationship between the messenger credibility scale and the general knowledge index.

H5: Young adults with low political/news knowledge will perceive a BuzzFeed story treatment to be less credible than a traditional news outlets, such as *USA Today*.

This hypothesis also was not supported, as an ANOVA showed no relationship between message preference and the general knowledge index.

Credibility and preference are conceptually similar, as supported in an analysis comparing story preference and perceptions of credibility. In regards to credibility, participants thought whatever source they preferred was the most credible source. Those who preferred BuzzFeed thought it was the more credible source, while those who preferred USA Today thought it was the more credible source.

A deeper analysis—rating preference by credibility when looking at individual treatments and not all participants—showed significant differences in perceived credibility for both message and messenger. For participants who rated *USA Today* credibility, there was significance between messenger credibility, $F(3, 193) = 2.648, p = .050$, but no significant interactions among preferences. “Both equally” rated highest ($M = 28.25, SD = 4.767$), followed by *USA Today* ($M = 27.28, SD = 4.913$), BuzzFeed ($M = 25.36, SD = 6.046$), and “no preference” ($M = 25, SD = 5.907$).

Participants who rated *USA Today*'s credibility also had significant differences in the perceived story credibility, $F(3, 193) = 2.899, p = .036$. “Both equally” again ranked highest ($M = 31.59, SD = 5.478$), with *USA Today* again second ($M = 31.02, SD = 5.344$), followed by “no preference” ($M = 28.71, SD = 5.934$), and BuzzFeed ($M = 28.66, SD = 5.995$). People who preferred *USA Today* ranked BuzzFeed lower in BuzzFeed message credibility, ($M = 3.59, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.11, 4.83]$), $p = .067$.

For participants who rated BuzzFeed credibility, there also was even more significance between messenger credibility, $F(3, 219) = 8.935, p < .000$. BuzzFeed ranked highest ($M = 24.82, SD = 5.673$), followed by “both equally” ($M = 22.33, SD = 5.542$), by “no preference” ($M = 20.75, SD = 4.070$), and people who preferred *USA Today* rated BuzzFeed the least credible ($M = 20.50, SD = 5.540$). A post hoc analysis showed significant interactions between BuzzFeed and *USA Today* messenger credibility ($M = 24.82, 95\% \text{ CI } [2.03, 6.16]$), $p < .000$.

Participants who rated BuzzFeed credibility also showed significant interactions among story preferences, $F(3, 219) = 14.570, p < .000$. BuzzFeed's story ranked in credibility for participants who rated BuzzFeed credibility ($M = 30.03, SD = 5.499$), followed by “Both equally” ($M = 27.73, SD = 5.433$), followed by “no preference” ($M = 24.67, SD = 5.483$), and

then USA Today ($M = 24.55$, $SD = 5.925$). A post hoc Tukey showed significant interactions between BuzzFeed and *USA Today* ($M = 30.03$, 95% CI [3.23, 7.75]), $p < .000$, and between BuzzFeed and “no preference” ($M = 30.03$, 95% CI [0.96, 9.77]), $p = .010$.

Post hoc analysis

The data generated by the survey allows for analysis that goes beyond the scope of the research questions and hypotheses. This section discusses five topics:

News use and treatment preference. People who were less likely to follow news were more likely to prefer BuzzFeed. The survey gave participants seven choices to describe their news use—never, less than monthly, once a month, two to three times a month, once a week, two or three times a week, and daily. These were recoded in three variables—once a month or less, one to three times monthly, and weekly or more. An ANOVA showed significance, $F(3, 343) = 3.298$, $p = .020$, with participants who preferred both equally ($M = 2.6$, $SD = 0.606$) and *USA Today* ($M = 2.528$, $SD = 0.654$) to be more frequent news consumer than people who had no preference ($M = 2.47$, $SD = 0.706$) or BuzzFeed ($M = 2.336$, $SD = 0.722$).

Political leaning and variables. There was no relationship seen between political leanings and several variables. Participants were given five choices to describe their political leanings—very conservative, conservative, moderate, liberal, and very liberal. These were recoded into three variables by merging the “very” categories. Analysis showed no relationships between political leanings and the general knowledge index, the story knowledge index, messenger credibility, message credibility, and story treatment preference.

Major and treatment preference. The 52 Journalism majors were more likely to prefer *USA Today* (51%) over BuzzFeed (38%), while no other major had more than a 29.5% preference for *USA Today*. A plurality of students in non-journalism majors were likely to prefer

BuzzFeed, ranking from lowest for telecommunications and film majors (47.7%) to 51.5% of non-communication majors, 53.3% of rhetoric/communications majors, and 58.5% of advertising/public relations majors.

CHAPTER 5

Discussion

Humor has long had a place in news, beginning with mediums such as political cartoons and emerging today into such programs as *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*. BuzzFeed, however, is a new form of media that uses humor to explain news stories, often through memes and GIFs. The company refers to itself as “the leading media company for social news and entertainment,” (BuzzFeed, 2013) but there is little to no academic research suggesting how successful Buzz Feed’s stories are in knowledge retention compared to traditional story, as in *USA Today*.

This study examined the role of BuzzFeed and its use of humor as opposed to traditional news media, using *USA Today* for the study, seeking to discover news form preferences among young adults. This basic question led to other research questions and hypotheses. The study also looked at information retention as a means of understanding what participants remember or do not remember from the two news story forms. The study also examined credibility of both the messages and messenger to understand how the Internet generation felt about traditional media’s credibility as opposed to new media. The study used factors such as political knowledge, course of study, and news use to further examine these questions, determining what affected what participants preferred, retained and trusted.

This chapter summarizes the study’s findings, and then discusses how these findings relate to humor’s role in news, media bias, the future of journalism, and research in this area. This chapter also discusses the study’s limitations and provides recommendations for further study.

This researcher used three research questions and five hypotheses in this study. Three hypotheses were supported (H1, H2, and H3) and two were not supported (H4 and H5).

RQ1. More than half of participants preferred BuzzFeed, at 52.8% over *USA Today* (28%), meaning that humor in news stories positively affected preference.

Participants were asked why they preferred BuzzFeed, *USA Today*, both or neither. Participants who preferred BuzzFeed said they enjoyed its humor. For example, one participant said, “It was funny to read.” Another participant said, “The story made me laugh.” Another participant said, “It was more interesting and comical.” In addition to humor, participants who preferred BuzzFeed enjoyed its overall lighter nature, calling BuzzFeed “interesting,” “entertaining,” and “fun.” Following along with humor and entertainment, those who preferred BuzzFeed enjoyed the use of funny cat images. One participant asked, “Who doesn’t love a good cat meme?” Another said, “The cats made me want to continue scrolling and read more.”

Some participants who preferred BuzzFeed also said they thought the story was easier to understand. For example, one participant said, “It was a quick and easy read.” The layout and use of images was also key for those who preferred BuzzFeed. One participant who preferred BuzzFeed said, “Visuals are huge!” Another said, “The chunking of text on BuzzFeed makes it easier to read and comprehend. It has pictures and doesn’t feel like I’m reading a lot.” Finally, BuzzFeed was popular among those who preferred it because of its target age, being young adults. One participant said, “It’s more prevalent to my life,” meaning it related to a college-age student’s life. Another participant said, “BuzzFeed is geared toward younger people.” Thus, those who preferred BuzzFeed found it to be funny, entertaining and easy to read.

USA Today was the second favorite among participants, many of whom found it to be more trustworthy. For example, one participant said, “*USA Today* doesn’t publish a list of ‘27

Things Only Sorority Girls Understand.’ They said where they got all the statistics, and they didn’t dumb the story down with pictures.” Those who preferred *USA Today* found its layout and presentation of facts easier to understand than BuzzFeed’s method. One participant said, “The layout and presentation has a more reliable and trustworthy appeal.”

Those who preferred *USA Today* might not have preferred *USA Today* as much as they disliked BuzzFeed. A participant said, “I think BuzzFeed is trash, and I know I’m in the minority of my peers on this.” Another said, “BuzzFeed is dumb.” As the data analysis showed, participants who preferred *USA Today* found it to be a more professional and credible source and did not appreciate BuzzFeed’s humor, referring to it as distracting or juvenile.

Participants who preferred both were able to see the benefits of both stories, and scored highest in both the general knowledge index and in comprehension of the story treatment they received. For example, one participant said, “I thought *USA Today* was more clear and easier to understand, but BuzzFeed was more entertaining.” Another said, “*USA Today* was more factual and reliable. BuzzFeed made the important info easy and more interesting to read with graphics.” Some who preferred both equally also seemed to enjoy reading stories in general. A participant said, “They were both entertaining.” Another said, “I like reading all news stories.” Some who preferred both equally were interested in the subject matter. Thus, those who preferred both equally were able to notice positive aspects of both story types.

People who selected neither were not interested in either story, and they scored lowest on the story knowledge index. One participant said, “Both are boring.” Some of these participants did not enjoy reading stories at all. For example, a participant said, “I don’t follow the news. Too negative.” Others felt negatively toward both BuzzFeed and *USA Today*. For example, one participant said, “Neither sources are accurate.”

H1. H1 predicted that *USA Today* would be preferred by young adults with high political/news knowledge over BuzzFeed. Results offered support to this hypothesis. Most participants preferred BuzzFeed, as mentioned in RQ1, but people with higher political knowledge scores preferred BuzzFeed and *USA Today* equally. When comparing BuzzFeed and *USA Today*, participants who preferred *USA Today* had higher political/news knowledge scores. Additionally, the majority of journalism majors preferred *USA Today*, and journalism majors had the highest political/news knowledge scores among majors.

H2. This hypothesis, that BuzzFeed would be preferred by young adults with low political/news knowledge over *USA Today*, had support from the results. The sum of knowledge answers for those who preferred BuzzFeed was lower than for those who preferred *USA Today*. Additionally, post-hoc tests showed that the more likely someone is to read the news (thus obtaining political knowledge), the less likely he or she is to prefer BuzzFeed.

RQ2. RQ2 looked at retention in news stories, asking which story participants would retain more from. Though most participants said they preferred BuzzFeed, they did not learn from it, as those who preferred BuzzFeed scored lower on the story questions.

H3. This hypothesis, which predicted that young adults would retain more information from the *USA Today* story than the BuzzFeed story, was supported by the results. Story question scores were higher following *USA Today* than they were following BuzzFeed.

RQ3. RQ3 asked how participants perceived the credibility of BuzzFeed and *USA Today*. Most participants thought BuzzFeed was credible, as most participants preferred BuzzFeed. Credibility is related to preference in this study, which will be further discussed later in this chapter.

H4. This hypothesis, which predicted that participants with high political/news knowledge would find BuzzFeed to be less credible, was not supported. Though most people preferred BuzzFeed, those who preferred *USA Today* overall scored higher on political knowledge questions than those who preferred BuzzFeed. Respondents who preferred *USA Today* used words such as credible, trustworthy and reliable to describe the source, while those who preferred BuzzFeed used words such as funny, entertaining and easy to understand.

H5. This hypothesis, which predicted that participants with low political/news knowledge would find BuzzFeed to be more credible, also was not supported. Preference and knowledge were related in this study, and those who preferred BuzzFeed tended to score lower on political knowledge questions.

Elaboration Likelihood Model. ELM is one of the two theories key to this study, and the confirmation of the first three hypotheses supported the theory's assumptions about how people understand messages. Overwhelmingly, BuzzFeed was the favorite between the two outlets, when participants chose one or the other. ELM, in turn, says that though people learn more from central route processing, they tend to prefer messages via the peripheral route when involvement is low (Cacioppo, Petty, & Schumann, 1983).

The theory's assumptions were particularly supported by participants who said they preferred BuzzFeed and praised it for its need for less involvement. Participants who preferred BuzzFeed picked it largely because of the peripheral cues. In their responses, participants who preferred BuzzFeed said that they liked the story's humor, entertainment value and use of memes. For example, a participant who preferred BuzzFeed said, "The pictures relate to memes, which are what I enjoy looking at. Reading the *USA Today* study felt like homework." Peripheral route communication is usually shorter than central route communication, and this was true for

this study. (A shortcoming on this research was that the time spent on each story treatment was not calculated, which would have allowed for a test of central versus peripheral treatments.) Participants who preferred BuzzFeed said that they liked that the BuzzFeed story was shorter. For example, a participant who preferred BuzzFeed said, “It got straight to the point. Also, there were funny pictures.” Thus, the use of ELM explains why BuzzFeed was the overwhelming favorite; its peripheral cues were effectively persuasive in causing participants to prefer it.

ELM also helps explain the support of H3. Though participants preferred BuzzFeed, they did not retain as much information from the peripheral-route story treatment as did participants who started with the *USA Today* treatment. Participants prefer the peripheral route because it is shorter, more entertaining and funny, but the route does not necessarily create a lasting decision/impact/impression. Central route processing is usually longer and more information-driven and leads to a more lasting impression and retention, explaining why story scores were higher following *USA Today* than for BuzzFeed.

Participants who preferred BuzzFeed called the *USA Today* story “very dry” and “like homework.” However, story scores show that participants asked to answer information questions about the *USA Today* story retained the information they read, no matter their preference. Thus, retention and preference are not related. Advertising academic literature can also help explain this phenomenon. For example, Cantor and Venus (1980) discussed that though participants enjoy advertisements with humor, a persuasive message with humor is not more effective than a persuasive message without humor. As many participants who preferred BuzzFeed in this story commented that they enjoyed the cat memes or entertainment value, it is possible that participants get caught up or distracted by the humor used and forget the story’s message. Those

who preferred *USA Today* found BuzzFeed to be distracting. For example, a participant said, “The story was chunked up with cat pictures. I prefer a normal page with news content.”

The answers to the story questions were more blatant in the BuzzFeed story, appearing in short sentences/bullet points. Most sentences/bullet points contained an answer to the story quiz, while the *USA Today* answers were within several paragraphs, containing more information that did not come up in the story quiz. Though the answers were easier to quickly spot in the BuzzFeed quiz, the story knowledge scores were lower. This further suggests that BuzzFeed’s list-style with funny pictures can distract from the sharing of information.

The use of images and layout was not specifically researched in this study, as this study focused more on BuzzFeed’s use of humor. Though the site’s humor was mentioned by most of the participants who preferred the source, its use of images and layout is also at play, as participants who preferred BuzzFeed mentioned its pictures and short sentences. Though images and bullet points are not solely related to humor, they do have ties with peripheral route processing. For example, peripheral route messages are usually short (Cacioppo, Petty, & Schumann, 1983). Though the BuzzFeed story required more scrolling, its sentences were short. Images can also be used as a form of peripheral cues, such as an image using humor (this study’s cat memes, for example) or attractiveness (Cacioppo, Petty, & Schumann, 1983).

Credibility. Relating to H4 and H5, this study found that credibility and preference usually aligned. If a participant prefers a message, he or she is likely to think this message is credible. The same applies for messenger credibility. If a participant prefers the messenger, he or she is likely to think the messenger is credible. This is largely because no matter the efforts a news organization makes to be truthful, accurate, unbiased and trustworthy, credibility lies with the consumer (Roberts, 2007). Because most participants preferred BuzzFeed and the BuzzFeed

story, BuzzFeed and the BuzzFeed story were thought to be fairly credible. Preference and credibility are conceptually close, especially for this study. BuzzFeed and its story particularly seemed to play off of Aristotle's pathos, which relates to how the communicator can relate to a reader's emotions (Foss, 1989). Because the BuzzFeed story left readers feeling entertained and happy, according to their responses to why they preferred the source, the communicator was able to play off the participants emotions to lead them to think of BuzzFeed and the story as credible.

None of the sources or messages received an overwhelmingly negative overall score in regards to credibility. Political leanings did not affect credibility in this study. This further supported Pew's 2012 study that showed 50% of Republicans and 54% of Democrats gave *USA Today* a high believability rating (Pew Research Center, 2012). This made *USA Today* a strong source for the study. Though BuzzFeed is considered new media, it was still regarded as fairly credible, suggesting that credibility can come quickly to a messenger in the Internet age. This might have proved differently if this study tested an older age demographic. Younger people are more likely to trust new media because they are used to new media. Additionally, the 2012 Pew study showed that people's trust in traditional media is declining and trust in new media is on the rise (Pew Research Center, 2012).

Also, some of BuzzFeed's credibility could be thanks to *USA Today*. Participants who rated BuzzFeed's credibility read the *USA Today* story first, so they could have thought BuzzFeed was credible because they saw the same information in *USA Today*. Several participants noted the use of the same information; "It's the same information, just displayed differently," one participant said.

The belief that news should be "serious" also may have played a role in this study. A majority of journalism majors preferred *USA Today*, commenting in the response section that it

was more credible than BuzzFeed. A journalism student said, “BuzzFeed makes journalists look bad.” This is because journalism majors are used to traditional media and have a greater understanding for traditional newspapers, such as *USA Today*, because it is what they are used to and presents information in formats traditionally taught to journalism students. They also may consider BuzzFeed’s threat to their profession, creating more shallow stories with limited original reporting.

Non-journalism majors overwhelmingly preferred BuzzFeed. More than half of advertising and public relations majors, communications majors and majors outside the College of Communication and Information Sciences preferred BuzzFeed, and the majority of telecommunications and film majors preferred BuzzFeed. In a 2010 study, researchers found that advertising and public relations students are more likely to positively view social media than other majors because they see how social media could be used in their courses of study (Lewis, 2010). BuzzFeed is not social media, but it is a form of experimental new media. Perhaps advertising and public relations students see how BuzzFeed’s model could work in their fields, allowing these majors to have a more favorable view of BuzzFeed. An ethics study among various media majors showed an ethics gap among media majors. Journalism majors tend to pay more attention to credibility, plagiarism and trustworthiness, while an ethics gap exists with other media majors regarding credibility (Conway & Groshek, 2012). Coleman and Wilkins (2009) also showed that journalists rated slightly higher in moral development than public relations practitioners. Journalism majors who preferred *USA Today* used words such as credible, accurate and complete to describe the source and message, while other majors who preferred BuzzFeed generally did not discuss credibility, instead highlighting easy comprehension and humor.

Knowledge, preference and getting the joke. In the study, story preference was a strong indicator of story knowledge. Participants who preferred both BuzzFeed and *USA Today* equally were likely to have the highest political/news knowledge scores. Those who preferred *USA Today* were likely to have fairly high political/news knowledge scores, and those who preferred BuzzFeed were likely to have low political/news knowledge scores. This can partly be explained by a trend found in this study that the more likely a participant is to read the news, the less likely he or she is to solely prefer BuzzFeed. Thus, participants who preferred BuzzFeed and scored low on political/news knowledge did so because they follow the news less than those who preferred both or *USA Today*.

Participants who preferred both scored the highest average on political/news knowledge and story questions. This result may be explained by literature about those who “get” both the jokes and the news on programs such as *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and *The Colbert Report*. For example, people who understood the news behind the joke and the joke were able to fully understand Colbert’s show, while those who did not fully understand the news, the joke or let their political beliefs strongly determine their attitudes toward the program were more likely to twist the joke to align with their political beliefs (LaMarre, Landreville & Beam, 2009). Thus, participants who prefer both sources are the ones who are likely to understand the straight-forward news of *USA Today* and the humor of BuzzFeed. Because they understand both, they can appreciate both.

Those who selected neither tended to score lower on political/news knowledge and story knowledge questions. These participants seemed to feel apathetic or wary overall, perhaps causing these low scores. For example, one participant who selected neither said, “Both stories

are boring.” Another mentioned that “neither sources are accurate.” Mistrust and lack of interest carried these respondents.

The future of the news media. One goal of this study is to consider how new media forms, such as BuzzFeed, are affecting and will affect the delivery of media. Because this study polled young adults, their responses are a strong indicator of how the news media is and should evolve. The finding that a multitude of participants preferred the BuzzFeed treatment over *USA Today*, despite the fact that BuzzFeed provided much less news, is significant. Participants obviously enjoyed the humor, format and use of pictures in BuzzFeed. Traditional media can take this information and find appropriate ways to incorporate humor and lists into their own content. This is something seen more and more, as lists continue to circulate on social media platforms. For example, *al.com* published “11 Weird Food Combinations Alabamians Eat,” a list style article incorporating self-deprecating humor, jokingly referring to foreigners as “fernern” (Kazek, 2014). This article had 250 comments, showing it was fairly popular. Thus, incorporating BuzzFeed-inspired articles could help traditional news media garner more traffic, especially from the younger community. Disseminating information in a BuzzFeed style may be new (or even anathema) to traditional journalists training to think in terms of objectivity and keeping one’s own thoughts and wits out of a story, BuzzFeed’s light approach may be useful at times for news organizations seeking to engage younger readers. Blogs on news sites give journalists more of an independent voice. Perhaps these BuzzFeed-style posts could be considered more like blog posts rather than stories, saving traditional journalistic values for more serious news.

Though most participants prefer BuzzFeed, they learn more from *USA Today*. If news media hope for a community of informed readers, they should consider making some

entertainment-style pieces geared toward 18-24 year olds, using BuzzFeed style with their own spin. They don't have to compromise original reporting or quotes, but they could break up a light story geared to this age group. This would not work for a serious news story, but a lighthearted piece on a new television show or movie that is geared toward 18-24 year olds would work. The traditional source could incorporate a list as a sidebar to an article, or use more images than they normally would.

Additionally, if BuzzFeed truly wants to be considered as a more serious journalistic entity, it should produce more stories that readers can learn from. These stories could still incorporate humor and lists, but they cannot be as distracting as their typical stories in order for readers to retain information. Some students found the amount of pictures distracting, so BuzzFeed could limit the amount of pictures to an article/list. Although a desire to be a serious news organization may not be BuzzFeed's chief concern, the company will more than likely continue to thrive if it follows its current approach, as it has the support of young adults.

Traditional sources such as *USA Today* also must consider the production of, and the perceived credibility of, a print edition in addition to its online content, whereas BuzzFeed only publishes online. Their print edition could stay the same, because young adults are more likely to read the online edition, where sources such as *USA Today* can incorporate BuzzFeed-esque inspiration into some stories. Those who read print news are declining, so it may not be worth losing a population of loyal customers to experiment in gaining younger readers. If a source wanted to incorporate BuzzFeed-type stories into its print edition, BuzzFeed's layout will not easily translate to print. The traditional news source could produce an article using original reporting on something a BuzzFeed list might bring to light. Stories involving Internet culture, such as how a new, timely meme started, or a current social media trend could make up an

Internet beat for a traditional news source. These stories have the inspiration of BuzzFeed, but would be written like a traditional news story with quotes and original reporting.

Both BuzzFeed and *USA Today* could incorporate a use of central and peripheral routes in their online stories. This could be accomplished by offering a traditional news story with a relating meme and/or GIF. Or, a source could write a piece in list-style, but use news photographs instead of memes and/or GIFs. This combination of central and peripheral routes could allow readers to learn (central) and be entertained (peripheral), keeping readers informed and happy.

This study showed that many young readers prefer a form of infotainment, wanting entertainment alongside information. Infotainment can be useful, as it can be the sugar that pulls in readers who might otherwise ignore information, which could help create a more informed public. However, if it leaves the reader entertained yet uninformed, it is no different from other entertaining, mindless activity. In order for infotainment to be achieved, a balance of central and peripheral route processing must be achieved. Perhaps a peripheral cue, such as an interesting photograph, draws a consumer to read a traditional, central-route story.

The choice of content for a peripheral-route message also plays a role in understanding. In this study, the choice of cat memes was safe because they require little prior knowledge to understand. This study could have been different if memes created were about a particular movie or television show, as some respondents might not have seen or heard of the program and had no prior knowledge to associate with the information. There can only be so many of these easily-understood memes, such as the use of cats, before more people become alienated from a story because they do not understand the memes—or become tired of seeing too many cat memes. In BuzzFeed's case, this is not much of a problem, as the home screen (without scrolling) features

about 20 stories, with a continuous stream of stories that pop up as a user scrolls. Finding relatable memes, jokes and GIFs would be key for a traditional news organization working to incorporate some of BuzzFeed's thinking into their news stories, considering the story's target audience.

When considering creating relatable jokes that are funny to enough people alongside information that is informative but not too boring, one has to wonder whether the reader will be able to understand the news message expressed in a BuzzFeed/*USA Today* hybrid article. With several factors at play, in addition to writing an accurate story, this creates more work for already overworked journalists. Perhaps simply sitting down as a staff at an organization such as *USA Today* or a local paper to talk about what makes BuzzFeed work and what staff members like and dislike about it can be a good start to thinking of ways to provide a little entertainment alongside information. Additionally, it would require fairly simple alterations to put the BuzzFeed treatment or other list-style approaches to some lighthearted stories aimed for 18-24 year olds. News organizations can examine the traffic and feedback they receive from these hybrid stories and decide to continue or not.

The good news for BuzzFeed and *USA Today* is that young adults find the two outlets to be fairly credible. So, they can rest assured that young adults – for the most part – find their content believable, trustworthy, fair, unbiased and complete.

Limitations

Although this study affirmed theories related to credibility and ELM, this study was not without its limitations. It was impossible to know whether the participants read the entire articles because the study was conducted online and participants could not be monitored. Additionally, it was possible participants already held prejudices for or against *USA Today* and/or to BuzzFeed.

Allowing participants to select both stories or neither story led to complications in data analysis, as the researcher had to consider preference as multi-faceted. If a similar study is performed in the future, the researcher should force participants to choose between BuzzFeed and *USA Today*. This would make the data simpler and perhaps lead to more precise findings.

This study dealt largely with students who have majors in the University of Alabama's College of Communication and Information Sciences, as the study was administered to students enrolled in classes in the college. A future study could poll a wider variety of majors and identify those majors, and expand the number of participating students. For the stories used in the study, for example, it would be interesting to see how geography or urban planning majors responded to these stories, because Census data would align with what they study in their courses for their majors.

Though young adults were the goal for this study, a future study could involve more ages to investigate differences in age demographics and the variables in the study. Younger people tend to prefer BuzzFeed because it is what they are used to, and BuzzFeed is marketed toward them. How would older participants feel about BuzzFeed? Adding more age demographics would give a future study depth and bring new information into this realm of research.

It is possible the experiment's BuzzFeed story did not accurately measure up to the actual source, as it was created by the researcher and not by BuzzFeed. Because of the limitations to the software that controlled the study, the researcher was not able to use moveable GIFs in the BuzzFeed stories. Not all BuzzFeed stories use GIFs, but many do.

The story selection also might have caused an artifact. The researcher picked a story that was somewhat related to young people, making it salient, with limited political opinions.

However, a story based on Census data might not have been the correct choice, as several students mentioned that they found the stories to be boring.

It could be argued that a difference between the BuzzFeed and *USA Today* treatments is solely about BuzzFeed's heavy use of images versus the limited images in the *USA Today* treatment. Images play a role in BuzzFeed, but it is more than just the use of images that make the source work. It is the use of funny images (memes and GIFs) coupled with short sentences and a list format that defines the difference between the two sources. That being said, layout is a contributing factor, as briefly discussed in the ELM section of this chapter. Layout can partially be explained by ELM, but it would be useful to ask the participants more about layout and use of images. For example, would the same effect occur if participants were presented with a piece that used heavy images, but they were not funny? This, of course, would not be an accurate representation of BuzzFeed, but it could provide further insight into the relationship between information retention and layout and images.

Though this study focused on humor, general entertainment was also at play for the study. Though BuzzFeed was frequently described as funny or comical, it was also described as entertaining and interesting. Humor can be entertaining, but these terms are not synonymous. Though entertainment in general was not studied, it also relates to ELM, as peripheral cues usually provide some type of entertainment to interest the participant (Cacioppo, Petty, & Schumann, 1983). Some researchers believe humor is better in terms of teaching and instruction than entertainment. For example, an education study argued that "humor is a variable that can be accommodated, understood, and applied to the educational setting," but entertainment is not (Korobkin, 1988, p. 154). It would be beneficial for further study to examine BuzzFeed's use of

humor and entertainment, separating the two as much as possible to determine how they affect credibility, preference and retention.

Finally, BuzzFeed's credibility could have been influenced by the *USA Today* story. As mentioned in the credibility section of this chapter, participants saw both treatments before rating credibility of one message and messenger; people who rated BuzzFeed's credibility saw the *USA Today* story first. Because they knew the same facts were used for both *USA Today* and BuzzFeed, this could have affected the way they viewed BuzzFeed's credibility, perhaps giving the source a higher score than they would have should they not have seen the *USA Today* first.

Conclusion

Though BuzzFeed is well-liked and thought to be credible by people who like it, the results of this study show that BuzzFeed may be hard to learn from. People who do not read the news much or/or know little about political/news knowledge are more likely to prefer BuzzFeed. With its quick lists paired with funny pictures, it makes sense that those who don't regularly read the news would prefer to read BuzzFeed over *USA Today*. Participants who prefer BuzzFeed are more drawn to BuzzFeed's humor and entertainment style over a traditional news story because it is what they are used to. They are also less likely to be able to answer as many political/news knowledge questions correctly as those who prefer *USA Today* or both equally, so it is easier for them to read a BuzzFeed story, though they do not learn from it. They also might not learn from it because they are distracted by the humor, finding it overpowers the information. Advertising literature relates to this phenomenon, as some advertisements are too funny or cute to be remembered, causing distractions instead (Cantor & Venus, 1980). BuzzFeed has power as the media of the new generation, gaining wide popularity and thought of as credible. However, it

will produce an uninformed public if it does not incorporate central route processing into its story or if young people do not consume traditional news media alongside BuzzFeed.

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APPENDIX A

Survey questions

A: News knowledge, political knowledge – before the first story treatment appears

1. What is the official name of Obamacare?
Equality Care Act
Affordable Care Act
Healthcare Reform Act
Obamacare Act
2. Who was the Republican presidential nominee in the 2012 election?
John McCain
Newt Gingrich
Mitt Romney
Paul Ryan
3. Who is the vice-president of the United States of America?
Joe Biden
Hilary Clinton
John Kerry
Dick Cheney
4. Who of the following is NOT a current U.S. Supreme Court Justice?
Clarence Thomas
Antonin Scalia
Ruth Bader Ginsberg
Sandra Day O'Connor
5. The First Amendment specifically protects which of these rights?
Speech, press, property, religion, pursuit of happiness
Speech, press, religion, petition, assembly
Speech, petition, religion, press, pursuit of happiness
Speech, press, religion, assembly, citizenship

B: News Quiz – To be asked after reading the first story treatment

1. What are Americans “doing again,” according to the story you just read?
Moving
Eating foods high in trans fats
Staying in one place
Buying more stock

2. Where are many Americans ending up?
New York and New Jersey
Washington D.C., Virginia and Maryland
California
Florida, Nevada and Arizona
3. What do researchers believe caused Americans to stay in one place?
War with Iraq
President Obama's first term as president
Recession
Rising gas prices
4. Where specifically are home-building rates up?
Las Vegas
Miami-Fort Lauderdale
Orlando
Phoenix
5. Home prices are currently
Higher than they were during the recession
Lower than they were during the recession
About the same as they were during the recession
The story doesn't mention this statistic

C: Credibility/Likability Questions – to be asked after reading the second story treatment.

I think this story from BuzzFeed/*USA Today* is:

Unbelievable 1 2 3 4 5 Believable

Inaccurate 1 2 3 4 5 Accurate

Biased 1 2 3 4 5 Not biased

Untrustworthy 1 2 3 4 5 Trustworthy

Unfair 1 2 3 4 5 Fair

Incomplete 1 2 3 4 5 Complete

Hard to understand 1 2 3 4 5 Easy to understand

Poorly written 1 2 3 4 5 Well-written

I think this source (BuzzFeed/*USA Today*) is:

Unbelievable 1 2 3 4 5 Believable

Inaccurate 1 2 3 4 5 Accurate

Untrustworthy 1 2 3 4 5 Trustworthy

Biased 1 2 3 4 5 Unbiased

Incomplete 1 2 3 4 5 Complete

Unfair 1 2 3 4 5 Fair

Does not tell the whole story 1 2 3 4 5 Tells the whole story

Of the two stories you read, which did you prefer?

USA Today

BuzzFeed

I preferred them both equally

I have no preference

Why? _____

Demographic questions

1. What is your major?
Journalism
TCF/Broadcast news
Advertising/Public Relations
Communications
Not a student
Other
2. How often do you watch and/or read news?
Never
Less than once a month
Once a month
2-3 times a month
Once a week
2-3 times a week
Daily
3. How would do you identify yourself politically?
Very Liberal
Liberal
Moderate
Conservative

Very Conservative

4. Were you old enough to vote in the 2012 presidential election?

Yes

No

5. If yes, did you vote in the 2012 presidential election?

Yes

No

Wasn't Old Enough

6. I was born in...

19__

APPENDIX B

Recruitment Materials

Recruitment email

Dear (NAME),

I am conducting an online survey, sponsored by the University of Alabama, on the effects of new media.

Your participation in this survey is completely voluntary. The information you submit will go to a secure server that does not collect any information about the sending computer. The survey also does not ask for any information that could identify you individually.

To begin this survey, please follow the link _____. It should take around 25 minutes for you to complete the survey, and you can view your progress at the top of your computer screen throughout the survey.

Your responses to this survey will help us understand how young adults (ages 18-24) perceive new media and traditional media.

If you have any questions about this study, you may contact me at tebullock@crimson.ua.edu or you may contact my adviser, Dr. Chris Roberts, at croberts@ua.edu. For questions regarding research participants' rights, please contact The University of Alabama Research Compliance Office at 205-348-8461 or toll free at 1-877-820-3066.

Thank you for your time and thoughtful responses!

Sincerely,

Tara Bullock
The University of Alabama, Department of Journalism
tebullock@crimson.ua.edu

Second recruitment email:

Dear (NAME),

Two weeks ago, I emailed you asking for your participation in an online survey, sponsored by The University of Alabama, regarding new media.

If you have already taken this survey, thank you very much.

If you have not yet completed the survey, please consider doing so at this time. Your responses will help us understand how young adults perceive new media and traditional media.

As I said in my last email, your participation in this survey is completely voluntary. The information you submit will go to a secure server that does not collect any information about the sending computer. The survey also does not ask for any information that could identify you individually.

To begin this survey, please follow the link _____. It should take around 25 minutes for you to complete the survey, and you can view your progress at the top of your computer screen throughout the survey.

Your responses to this survey will help us understand how young adults (ages 18-24) perceive new media and traditional media.

If you have any questions about this study, you may contact me at tebullock@crimson.ua.edu or you may contact my adviser, Dr. Chris Roberts, at croberts@ua.edu. For questions regarding research participants' rights, please contact The University of Alabama Research Compliance Office at 205-348-8461 or toll free at 1-877-820-3066.

Thank you for your time and thoughtful responses!

Sincerely,

Tara Bullock
The University of Alabama, Department of Journalism
tebullock@crimson.ua.edu

Social media recruitment:

I'm researching how young adults perceive new media, and I need your help! If you are between the ages of 18-24, please follow this link to a 25-minute survey and tell me how you react to two news stories so we can better understand the effects of new media. Then just pass the link to your friends and followers. Thanks!

APPENDIX C

Experimental Treatments

Treatment 1 – BuzzFeed news questions, *USA Today* Credibility

You are being asked to take part in a research study being done by Tara Bullock, a graduate student at the University of Alabama. Ms. Bullock is being supervised by Dr. Chris Roberts, a UA journalism professor.

You have been asked to participate because you are a consumer of online content. About 150 other people will be in this study. If you agree, you will be asked to:

- **Read two brief news stories about a current event.**
- **Answer a questionnaire about your reactions to the news stories.**
- **Answer some basic questions about yourself.**
- **Answer questions about basic news and political knowledge**

It should take you no longer than 25 minutes to complete this study. The only cost to you from this study is the amount of time that it takes you to complete. You will not be compensated for being in this study, unless you are in a class that requires you to participate. In that case, you will receive credit towards that class' requirement.

There is little or no risk foreseen if you take part in this study. The main risk is that you will have to answer questions about news consumption habits. Nothing you report can be traced back to you. This study will help communication researchers understand characteristics of different forms of news stories. Society will benefit from a better understanding of people's reactions to different forms of news presentation.

Your privacy will be protected because you will be able to complete this study in your own time, and at your own leisure. No researcher will be able to tell who you are, and what you have revealed. You do not have to answer any questions you do not feel comfortable answering.

Your confidentiality will be protected by keeping your name (which is only recorded so you can receive class credit) separate from the other information you provide. Only two researchers (Tara Bullock and Dr. Chris Roberts) will have access to the information you provide. Data will be deleted once this study is complete.

The alternative to being in this study is not to participate. Taking part in this study is voluntary. It is your free choice. You can refuse to be in it at all. If you start the study,

you can stop at any time. There will be no effect on your relations with the University of Alabama. The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board (the IRB) is the committee that protects the rights of people in research studies. The IRB may review study records from time to time to be sure that people in research studies are being treated fairly and that the study is being carried out as planned. If you have questions, concerns, or complaints about the study right now, please ask them. If you have questions, concerns, or complaints about the study later on, please contact Tara Bullock at tebullock@crimson.ua.edu, or Dr. Chris Roberts at croberts@ua.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a person in a research study, call Ms. Tanta Myles, the Research Compliance Officer of the University, at 205-348-8461 or toll-free at 1-877-820-3066.

You may also ask questions, make suggestions, or file complaints and concerns through the IRB Outreach website at http://osp.ua.edu/site/PRCO_Welcome.html or email the Research Compliance office at participantoutreach@bama.ua.edu.

After you participate, you are encouraged to complete the survey for research participants that is online at the outreach website or you may ask the investigator for a copy of it and mail it to the University Office for Research Compliance, Box 870127, 358 Rose Administration Building, Tuscaloosa, AL 35487-0127.

I agree

Please answer the following general knowledge questions.

What is the official name of Obamacare?

- . Equality Care Act
- . Affordable Care Act
- . Healthcare Reform Act
- . Obamacare Act

Who was the Republican presidential nominee in the 2012 presidential election?

- . John McCain
- . Newt Gingrich
- . Mitt Romney
- . Paul Ryan

Who is the vice president of the United States of America?

- . Joe Biden
- . Hilary Clinton
- . John Kerry
- . Dick Cheney

Who of the following is NOT a current U.S. Supreme Court justice?

- . Clarence Thomas
- . Antonin Scalia
- . Ruth Bader Ginsberg
- . Sandra Day O'Connor

The First Amendment specifically protects which of these rights?

- . Speech, press, property, religion, pursuit of happiness
- . Speech, press, religion, petition, assembly
- . Speech, petition, religion, press, pursuit of happiness
- . Speech, press, religion, assembly, citizenship
- .

· **Please carefully read the following news story.**



Census: Americans are moving again

Those on the move are once again setting their sights on their favorite Sun Belt places like Florida, Arizona and Nevada

posted on February 24, 2014 at 5:31am EST

posted on March 5, 2014, at 8:38 a.m.



Gregory Paul Topoberg
BuzzFeed Staff

 Follow 153

 Follow

 Share 66

 Like 177

 Tweet 9

 Email

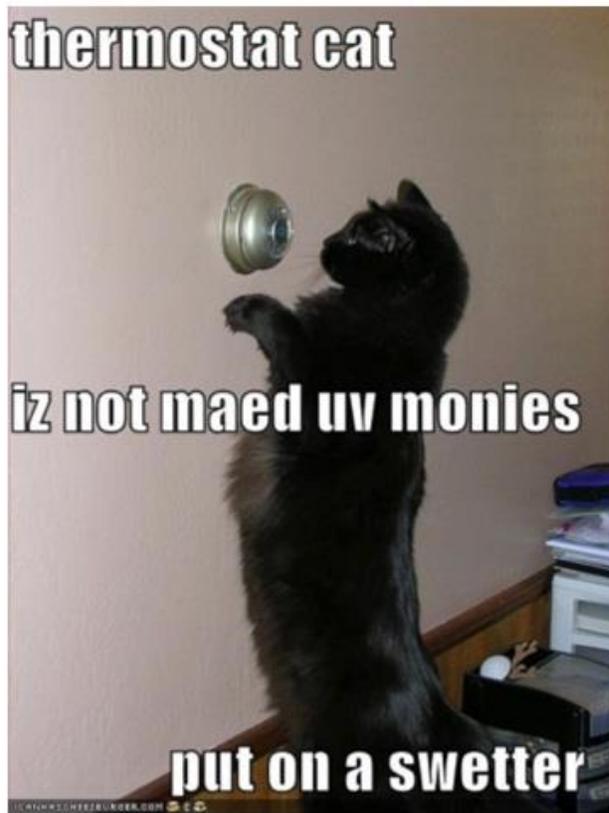
 Pin it

 Share

For the past couple of years, many Americans have been afraid to move.



Americans were staying in one place because of the recession.



They didn't want to move because their homes lost value during the recession.



But now, according to 2012 Census data, Americans are on the move again.



In 2012, "domestic migration" was as high as it's been in the past five years — nearly 16.9 million people moved between counties, with long-distance interstate moves accounting for about 7 million of those, up nearly 5% over 2010.

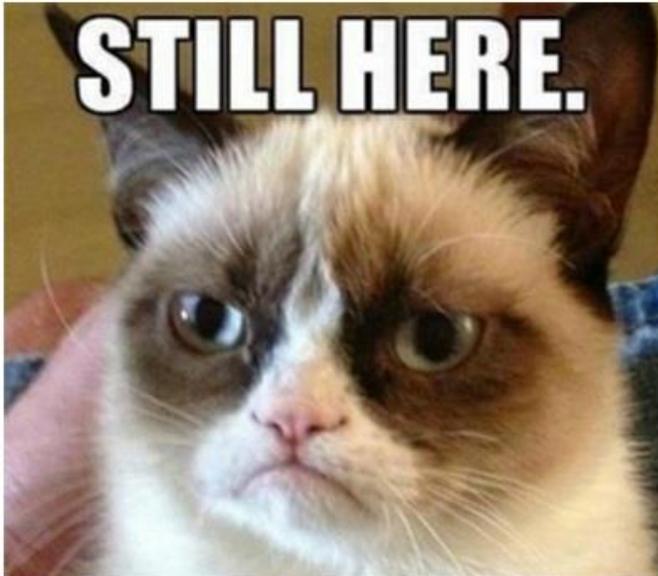
Many Americans are heading to Sun Belt spots such as Florida, Arizona and Nevada.



The 2012 numbers may not represent a full recovery, but they indicate a thawing on Americans who were frozen in one place.



Some states are losing more than others. New York state lost about 136,000 people in 2012. In Massachusetts, the net loss was about 15,600 people.



Home prices are still lower than they were during the recession.



They are higher than they were. The National Association of Realtors (NAR), a Washington, D.C.-based trade group, notes that the median price of an existing home this year rose to \$212,100. As recently as 2011, it was \$166,200, nearly \$46,000 less.



But, home building rates are up.

Contracts in the Miami-Fort Lauderdale area rose 67% last year with residential construction up 87% over 2011.

Keep on moving, America!



Please answer these questions about the story you just read.

What are Americans “doing again,” according to the story you just read?

- . Moving
- . Eating foods high in trans fats
- . Staying in one place
- . Buying more stock

Where are Americans ending up?

- . New York and New Jersey
- . Washington D.C., Virginia and Maryland
- . California
- . Florida, Nevada and Arizona

What do researchers believe caused Americans to stay in one place?

- . War with Iraq
- . President Obama's first term as president
- . Recession
- . Rising gas prices

Where specifically are home-building rates rising?

- . Las Vegas
- . Miami-Fort Lauderdale
- . Orlando
- . Phoenix

Home prices are currently...

- . Higher than they were during the recession
- . Lower than they were during the recession
- . About the same as they were during the recession

- The story doesn't mention this statistic

Please carefully read the following news story.

Census: Americans are moving again

Greg Toppo and Paul Overberg, USA TODAY 8:38 a.m. EDT October 26, 2013

Those on the move are once again setting their sights on their favorite Sun Belt places, like Florida, Arizona and Nevada, a demographer says

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(Photo: Doug Kapustin for USA TODAY)

SHARE f 197 CONNECT t 125 TWEET 10 COMMENT EMAIL MORE

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Census Bureau: 16.9M Americans moved in 2012; long-distance moves up 5% over 2010
- Several cities starting to lose population as recession ebbs
- Demographer: Recession was "freezing people in place," but thaw beginning to change that

REISTERSTOWN, Md. — Everything must go at Baltimore Thrift, including the store.

After nine years in this bustling Baltimore suburb, owner Larry Elavsky is leaving town and selling the place, a sort of hybrid antique/collectible store, with every last item in it.

Elavsky has company. Americans, new statistics suggest, are moving again. New U.S. Census data show that the great slowdown in migration caused by the recession is starting to give way. In 2012, "domestic migration" was as high as it's been in the past five years — nearly 16.9 million people moved between counties, with long-distance interstate moves accounting for about 7 million of those, up nearly 5% over 2010.

Like Elavsky, Americans are once again setting their sights on their favorite Sun Belt places, such as Florida, Arizona and Nevada, said University of New Hampshire demographer Kenneth Johnson.

In a sense, Johnson said, the recession had the effect of "freezing people in place" as they waited for their homes to recover value. The 2012 figures may not represent an actual recovery, but it's "at least a thawing" as conditions begin to improve, he said.

In a few states such as New York and Massachusetts, Johnson found, the thaw has begun in earnest. New York state lost 136,000 people in 2012. Massachusetts lost 15,600 people.

The National Association of Realtors notes that the median price of an existing home this year rose to \$212,100, up 28% since 2011. "When you're retiring, that's a lot of money," said association economist Jed Smith.

Many homeowners "didn't want to sell a house that they viewed as low in price," Smith said. "Now that the prices are up, away we go."

Americans start moving again, they're abandoning places like Baltimore, Philadelphia, St. Louis, Cincinnati and New York, older Northeastern or Midwestern cities that actually benefited from the migration freeze.

Before the recession, Johnson noted, 50,000 New Yorkers moved to Florida each year. During the worst of the recession, only about half as many did. Actually, Johnson noted, in many Northeast cities, those losses most years had been offset by international immigration from Europe and Asia — but the recession took a bite out of that, too.

Now, places like metropolitan New York, Buffalo and Rochester are seeing more people leave again, according to a USA TODAY analysis of Census data: In 2009, the Baltimore metro area gained 25 people per 10,000 residents from other states. Last year, it lost 36 per 10,000.

Meanwhile, places like the Miami-Fort Lauderdale metro area, which had a net loss of migrants in 2009, added them in 2012. Likewise in Las Vegas, Jacksonville and San Jose, among a few others.





Getting a loan is more difficult on the other end of the migration route, too, said Frank Kowalski, a Miami Realtor who's also a regional vice president for the Realtors association. The tightening of credit is slowing home-buying rates a bit, but he said all of the region's states are seeing an uptick in sales.

Home prices are still lower than they were during the recession, Kowalski said, with many homeowners "sitting and waiting these last four or five years" for prices to return to pre-recession levels. But he said a few signs are promising: Realtors in Fort Lauderdale were talking about a housing shortage this week.

"There is a new urgency" in the area, he said. Home-building rates are up — contracts in the Miami-Fort Lauderdale area rose 67% last year, according to McGraw Hill Construction, a trade journal, with residential construction up 87% over 2011.

To get a sense of the change, just look at the Miami skyline, Kowalski said, where his favorite kind of migratory bird has returned. Cranes — the construction kind — dot the Miami skyline. "The Florida bird is back," he said.

Please choose the number that matches your opinions about the story you just read.

I think this story from USA TODAY is unbelievable or believable. (1 being unbelievable and 5 being believable)

1 (Unbelievable) 2 3 4 5 (Believable)

I think this story from USA TODAY is inaccurate or accurate. (1 being inaccurate and 5 being accurate)

1 (Inaccurate) 2 3 4 5 (Accurate)

I think this story from USA TODAY is biased or unbiased. (1 being biased and 5 being unbiased)

1 (Biased) 2 3 4 5 (Unbiased)

I think this story from USA TODAY is untrustworthy or trustworthy. (1 being untrustworthy and 5 being trustworthy)

1 (Untrustworthy) 2 3 4 5 (Trustworthy)

I think this story from USA TODAY is incomplete or complete. (1 being incomplete and 5 being complete)

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I think this story from USA TODAY is unfair or fair. (1 being unfair and 5 being fair)

1 (Unfair) 2 3 4 5 (Fair)

I think this story from USA TODAY is hard to understand or easy to understand (1 being hard to understand and 5 being easy to understand)

1 (Easy to understand) 2 3 4 5 (Easy to understand)

I think this story from USA TODAY is poorly written or well written (1 being poorly written and 5 being well written)

1 (Poorly written) 2 3 4 5 (Well written)

Please choose the number that matches your opinions about USA TODAY.

I think this source, USA TODAY, is unbelievable or believable. (1 being unbelievable and 5 being believable)

1 (Unbelievable) 2 3 4 5 (Believable)

I think this source, USA TODAY, is inaccurate or accurate. (1 being inaccurate and 5 being accurate)

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1 (Unfair) 2 3 4 5 (Fair)

I think this source, USA TODAY, does not tell the whole story or tells the whole story. (1 meaning it does not tell the whole story and 5 meaning it does tell the whole story)

1 (Does not tell the whole story) 2 3 4 5 (Tells the whole story)

Of the two stories you read, which did you prefer?

- . USA Today
- . BuzzFeed
- . I preferred them both equally.
- . I have no preference.

Why?

Answer the following questions.

What is your major? If you are a double major, select your primary major.

- . Journalism
- . TCF/Broadcast News
- . Advertising/Public Relations
- . Communications
- . Other
- . Not a college student.

How often do you watch and/or read the news?

- . Never

- . Less than Once a Month
- . Once a Month
- . 2-3 Times a Month
- . Once a Week
- . 2-3 Times a Week
- . Daily

How would you identify yourself politically?

- . Very Liberal
- . Liberal
- . Moderate
- . Conservative
- . Very Conservative

Were you old enough to vote in the 2012 presidential election?

- . Yes
- . No
- . Not a U.S. citizen

If you were old enough to vote in the 2012 presidential election, did you vote?

- . Yes
- . No
- . Wasn't old enough/Not a U.S. citizen

I was born in 19...

USA Today Story News Quiz/BuzzFeed Credibility

Treatment 2 – *USA Today* news questions, BuzzFeed Credibility

You are being asked to take part in a research study being done by Tara Bullock, graduate student at the University of Alabama. Ms. Bullock is being supervised by Dr. Chris Roberts, a professor of Journalism at the University of Alabama.

You have been asked to participate because you are a consumer of online content. About 150 other people will be in this study. If you agree, you will be asked to:

- **Read two brief news stories about a current event.**
- **Answer a questionnaire about your reactions to the news stories.**
- **Answer some basic questions about yourself.**
- **Answer questions about basic news and political knowledge**

It should take you no longer than 25 minutes to complete this study. The only cost to you from this study is the amount of time that it takes you to complete. You will not be compensated for being in this study, unless you are in a class that requires you to participate. In that case, you will receive credit towards that class' requirement.

There is little or no risk foreseen if you take part in this study. The main risk is that you will have to answer questions about news consumption habits. Nothing you report can be traced back to you. This study will help communication researchers understand characteristics of different forms of news stories. Society will benefit from a better understanding of people's reactions to different forms of news presentation.

Your privacy will be protected because you will be able to complete this study in your own time, and at your own leisure. No researcher will be able to tell who you are, and what you have revealed. You do not have to answer any questions you do not feel comfortable answering.

Your confidentiality will be protected by keeping your name (which is only recorded so you can receive class credit) separate from the other information you provide. Only two researchers (Tara Bullock and Dr. Chris Roberts) will have access to the information you provide. Data will be deleted once this study is complete.

The alternative to being in this study is not to participate. Taking part in this study is voluntary. It is your free choice. You can refuse to be in it at all. If you start the study, you can stop at any time. There will be no effect on your relations with the University of Alabama.

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board (the IRB) is the committee that protects the rights of people in research studies. The IRB may review study records from time to time to be sure that people in research studies are being treated fairly and that the study is being carried out as planned.

If you have questions, concerns, or complaints about the study right now, please ask them. If you have questions, concerns, or complaints about the study later on, please contact Tara Bullock at tebullock@crimson.ua.edu, or Dr. Chris Roberts at croberts@ua.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a person in a research study, call Ms. Tanta Myles, the Research Compliance Officer of the University, at 205-348-8461 or toll-free at 1-877-820-3066.

You may also ask questions, make suggestions, or file complaints and concerns through the IRB Outreach website at http://osp.ua.edu/site/PRCO_Welcome.html or email the Research Compliance office at participantoutreach@bama.ua.edu.

After you participate, you are encouraged to complete the survey for research participants that is online at the outreach website or you may ask the investigator for a copy of it and mail it to the University Office for Research Compliance, Box 870127, 358 Rose Administration Building, Tuscaloosa, AL 35487-0127.

- . I agree

Answer the following questions based on your previous knowledge of American news and politics.

What is the official name of Obamacare?

- . Equality Care Act
- . Affordable Care Act
- . Healthcare Reform Act
- . Obamacare Act

Who was the Republican presidential nominee in the 2012 election?

- . John McCain
- . Newt Gingrich
- . Mitt Romney
- . Paul Ryan

Who is the vice president of the United States of America?

- . Joe Biden
- . Hilary Clinton
- . John Kerry
- . Dick Cheney

Who of the following is NOT a current U.S. Supreme Court Justice?

- . Clarence Thomas
- . Antonin Scalia
- . Ruth Bader Ginsberg
- . Sandra Day O'Connor

The First Amendment specifically protects which of these rights?

- . Speech, press, property, religion, pursuit of happiness
- . Speech, press, religion, petition, assembly
- . Speech, petition, religion, press, pursuit of happiness
- . Speech, press, religion, assembly, citizenship

Please carefully **read the following news story.**

Please answer the following questions based on the story you just read.

Census: Americans are moving again

Greg Toppo and Paul Overberg, USA TODAY 8:38 a.m. EDT October 26, 2013

Those on the move are once again setting their sights on their favorite Sun Belt places, like Florida, Arizona and Nevada, a demographer says

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(Photo: Doug Kapustin for USA TODAY)

SHARE f 197 CONNECT t 125 TWEET 10 COMMENT EMAIL MORE

REISTERSTOWN, Md. — Everything must go at Baltimore Thrift, including the store.

After nine years in this bustling Baltimore suburb, owner Larry Elavsky is leaving town and selling the place, a sort of hybrid antique/collectible store, with every last item in it.

Elavsky has company. Americans, new statistics suggest, are moving again.

New U.S. Census data show that the great slowdown in migration caused by the recession is starting to give way. In 2012, "domestic migration" was as high as it's been in the past five years — nearly 16.9 million people moved between counties, with long-distance interstate moves accounting for about 7 million of those, up nearly 5% over 2010.

Like Elavsky, Americans are once again setting their sights on their favorite Sun Belt places, such as Florida, Arizona and Nevada, said University of New Hampshire demographer Kenneth Johnson.

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Census Bureau: 16.9M Americans moved in 2012; long-distance moves up 5% over 2010
- Several cities starting to lose population as recession ebbs
- Demographer: Recession was "freezing people in place," but thaw beginning to change that

In a sense, Johnson said, the recession had the effect of "freezing people in place" as they waited for their homes to recover value. The 2012 figures may not represent an actual recovery, but it's "at least a thawing" as conditions begin to improve, he said.

In a few states such as New York and Massachusetts, Johnson found, the thaw has begun in earnest. New York state lost 136,000 people in 2012. Massachusetts lost 15,600 people.

The National Association of Realtors notes that the median price of an existing home this year rose to \$212,100, up 28% since 2011. "When you're retiring, that's a lot of money," said association economist Jed Smith.

Many homeowners "didn't want to sell a house that they viewed as low in price," Smith said. "Now that the prices are up, away we go."

Americans start moving again, they're abandoning places like Baltimore, Philadelphia, St. Louis, Cincinnati and New York, older Northeastern or Midwestern cities that actually benefited from the migration freeze.

Before the recession, Johnson noted, 50,000 New Yorkers moved to Florida each year. During the worst of the recession, only about half as many did. Actually, Johnson noted, in many Northeast cities, those losses most years had been offset by international immigration from Europe and Asia — but the recession took a bite out of that, too.

Now, places like metropolitan New York, Buffalo and Rochester are seeing more people leave again, according to a USA TODAY analysis of Census data: In 2009, the Baltimore metro area gained 25 people per 10,000 residents from other states. Last year, it lost 36 per 10,000.

Meanwhile, places like the Miami-Fort Lauderdale metro area, which had a net loss of migrants in 2009, added them in 2012. Likewise in Las Vegas, Jacksonville and San Jose, among a few others.



Getting a loan is more difficult on the other end of the migration route, too, said Frank Kowalski, a Miami Realtor who's also a regional vice president for the Realtors association. The tightening of credit is slowing home-buying rates a bit, but he said all of the region's states are seeing an uptick in sales.

Home prices are still lower than they were during the recession, Kowalski said, with many homeowners "sitting and waiting these last four or five years" for prices to return to pre-recession levels. But he said a few signs are promising: Realtors in Fort Lauderdale were talking about a housing shortage this week.

"There is a new urgency" in the area, he said. Home-building rates are up — contracts in the Miami-Fort Lauderdale area rose 67% last year, according to McGraw Hill Construction, a trade journal, with residential construction up 87% over 2011.

To get a sense of the change, just look at the Miami skyline, Kowalski said, where his favorite kind of migratory bird has returned. Cranes — the construction kind — dot the Miami skyline. "The Florida bird is back," he said.

What are Americans “doing again,” according to the story you just read?

- . Moving
- . Eating foods high in trans fats
- . Staying in one place
- . Buying more stock

Where are Americans ending up?

- . New York and New Jersey
- . Washington D.C., Virginia and Maryland
- . California
- . Florida, Nevada and Arizona

What do researchers believe caused Americans to stay in one place?

- . War with Iraq
- . President Obama's first term as president
- . Recession
- . Rising gas prices

Where specifically are home-building rates rising?

- . Las Vegas
- . Miami-Fort Lauderdale
- . Orlando
- . Phoenix

Home prices are currently...

- . Higher than they were during the recession
- . Lower than they were during the recession
- . About the same as they were during the recession
- . The story doesn't mention this statistic

Please carefully read the following story.



Census: Americans are moving again

Those on the move are once again setting their sights on their favorite Sun Belt places like Florida, Arizona and Nevada

posted on February 24, 2014 at 5:31am EST

posted on March 5, 2014, at 8:38 a.m.



Gregory Paul Topoberg
BuzzFeed Staff

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Share 66

Like 177

Tweet 9

Email

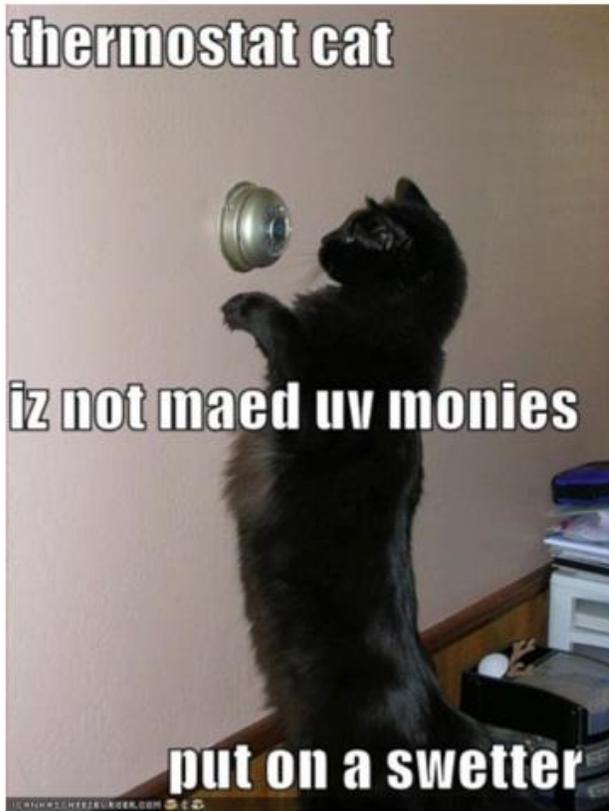
Pin it

Share

For the past couple of years, many Americans have been afraid to move.



Americans were staying in one place because of the recession.



They didn't want to move because their homes lost value during the recession.



But now, according to 2012 Census data, Americans are on the move again.



In 2012, "domestic migration" was as high as it's been in the past five years — nearly 16.9 million people moved between counties, with long-distance interstate moves accounting for about 7 million of those, up nearly 5% over 2010.

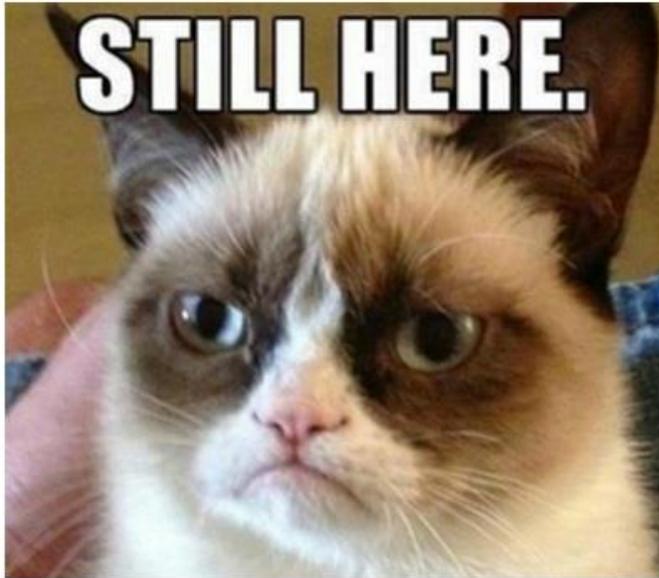
Many Americans are heading to Sun Belt spots such as Florida, Arizona and Nevada.



The 2012 numbers may not represent a full recovery, but they indicate a thawing on Americans who were frozen in one place.



Some states are losing more than others. New York state lost about 136,000 people in 2012. In Massachusetts, the net loss was about 15,600 people.



Home prices are still lower than they were during the recession.



They are higher than they were. The National Association of Realtors (NAR), a Washington, D.C.-based trade group, notes that the median price of an existing home this year rose to \$212,100. As recently as 2011, it was \$166,200, nearly \$46,000 less.



But, home building rates are up.

Contracts in the Miami-Fort Lauderdale area rose 67% last year with residential construction up 87% over 2011.

Keep on moving, America!



For the following questions, select the number that matches your opinion of story you just read.

I think this story from BUZZFEED is unbelievable or believable. (1 being unbelievable and 5 being believable)

1 (Unbelievable) 2 3 4 5 (Believable)

I think this story from BUZZFEED is inaccurate or accurate. (1 being inaccurate and 5 being accurate)

1 (Inaccurate) 2 3 4 5 (Accurate)

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1 (Incomplete) 2 3 4 5 (Complete)

I think this story from BUZZFEED is unfair or fair. (1 being unfair and 5 being fair)

1 (Unfair) 2 3 4 5 (Fair)

I think this story from BUZZFEED does not tell the whole story or tells the whole story. (1 meaning it does not tell the whole story and 5 meaning it does tell the whole story)

1 (Does not tell the whole story) 2 3 4 5 (Tells the whole story)

I think this story from BUZZFEED is hard to understand or easy to understand. (1 being hard to understand and 5 being easy to understand)

1 (Hard to understand) 2 3 4 5 (Easy to understand)

I think this story from BUZZFEED is poorly written or well written. (1 being poorly written and 5 being well written)

1 (Poorly written) 2 3 4 5 (Well written)

For the following questions, select the number that best matches your opinion of the source, BUZZFEED.

I think this source, BUZZFEED, is unbelievable or believable. (1 being unbelievable and 5 being believable)

1 (Unbelievable) 2 3 4 5 (Believable)

I think this source, BUZZFEED, is inaccurate or accurate. (1 being inaccurate and 5 being accurate)

1 (Inaccurate) 2 3 4 5 (Accurate)

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1 (Does not tell the whole story) 2 3 4 5 (Tells the whole story)

Of the two stories you read, which did you prefer?

- . USA Today
- . BuzzFeed
- . I preferred them both equally.
- . I have no preference.

Why?

Please answer the following questions.

What is your major? If you are a double major, select your primary major.

- . Journalism
- . TCF/Broadcast News
- . Advertising/Public Relations

- . Communications
- . Other
- . Not a student.

How often do you watch and/or read the news?

- . Never
- . Less than once a Month
- . Once a month
- . 2-3 times a month
- . Once a week
- . 2-3 times a week
- . Daily

How would you identify yourself politically?

- . Very Liberal
- . Liberal
- . Moderate
- . Conservative
- . Very Conservative

Were you old enough to vote in the 2012 presidential election?

- . Yes
- . No
- . Not a U.S. citizen

If yes, did you vote in the 2012 presidential election?

- . Yes
- . No
- . Wasn't old enough/Not a U.S. citizen

I was born in 19...



APPENDIX D

IRB Approval Documents



February 21, 2014

Tara Bullock
Department of Journalism
College of Communication & Information Sciences
Box 870172

Re: IRB # 14-OR-050, "The Buzz on BuzzFeed: Can readers learn the news from lists?"

Dear Ms. Bullock:

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board has granted approval for your proposed research.

Your application has been given expedited approval according to 45 CFR part 46. You have also been granted the requested waiver of informed consent. Approval has been given under expedited review category 7 as outlined below:

(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Your application will expire on February 20, 2015. If your research will continue beyond this date, please complete the relevant portions of the IRB Renewal Application. If you wish to modify the application, please complete the Modification of an Approved Protocol form. Changes in this study cannot be initiated without IRB approval, except when necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to participants. When the study closes, please complete the Request for Study Closure form.

Should you need to submit any further correspondence regarding this proposal, please include the above application number.

Good luck with your research.

Sincerely,



358 Rose Administration Building
Box 870172
Tuscaloosa, Alabama 35487-0172
(205) 348-0464
We (205) 348-7188
Toll-free (877) 829-3088


Carpaneto T. Myles, MSM, CIM, CIP
Director & Research Compliance Officer
Office for Research Compliance
The University of Alabama

Recruitment email

Dear (NAME),

I am conducting an online survey, sponsored by the University of Alabama, on the effects of new media.

Your participation in this survey is completely voluntary. The information you submit will go to a secure server that does not collect any information about the sending computer. The survey also does not ask for any information that could identify you individually.

To begin this survey, please follow the link _____. It should take around 25 minutes for you to complete the survey, and you can view your progress at the top of your computer screen throughout the survey.

Your responses to this survey will help us understand how young adults (ages 18-24) perceive new media and traditional media.

If you have any questions about this study, you may contact me at tebullock@crimson.ua.edu or you may contact my adviser, Dr. Chris Roberts, at croberts@ua.edu. For questions regarding research participants' rights, please contact The University of Alabama Research Compliance Office at 205-348-8461 or toll free at 1-877-820-3066.

Thank you for your time and thoughtful responses!

Sincerely,

Tara Bullock
The University of Alabama, Department of Journalism
tebullock@crimson.ua.edu

UA IRB Approved Document
Approval date: 2-21-14
Expiration date: 2-20-15

Subject: Research Invitation

Tara Bullock, Principal Investigator from the University of Alabama, is conducting a study called *The Buzz on BuzzFeed: Can readers learn the news from lists?*. She wishes to find out how college-age students perceive the news through different media forms.

Taking part in this study involves completing a web survey¹ that will take about 20 minutes.⁴ This survey contains questions about how often students read the news and what kind of news they prefer.

We will protect your confidentiality by not asking any identity-revealing questions, and your responses will not be linked to your identity. Only the research team members will have access to the data. The data are password protected. Only summarized data will be presented at meetings or in publications.

There will be no direct benefits to you. The findings will be useful to communications researchers to better understand how college-age consumers learn from different forms of news.

The chief risk is that some of the questions may make you uncomfortable. You may skip any questions you do not want to answer.

If you have questions about this study, please contact Tara Bullock at 2053317804 or by email (tebullock@crimson.ua.edu). If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, contact Ms. Tanta Myles (the University Compliance Officer) at (205) 348-8461 or toll-free at 1-877-820-3066. If you have complaints or concerns about this study, file them through the UA IRB outreach website at http://osp.ua.edu/site/PRCO_Welcome.html. Also, if you participate, you are encouraged to complete the short Survey for Research Participants online at this website. This helps UA improve its protection of human research participants.

YOUR PARTICIPATION IS COMPLETELY VOLUNTARY. You are free not to participate or stop participating any time before you submit your answers.

If you understand the statements above, are at least 19 years old, and freely consent to be in this study, click on the _____ (CONTINUE or I AGREE) button to begin.

¹ A statement that the study involves research

² An explanation of the purpose(s) of research

³ A description of the procedures to be followed

⁴ The expected duration of the person's participation

⁵ A statement describing the extent to which confidentiality will be maintained

⁶ A description of benefits to the individual or society that may reasonably be expected

⁷ A description of any reasonably foreseeable risks or discomforts

⁸ A statement that participation is voluntary, refusal involves no penalty or loss of benefits to which the participant may be entitled, and that the participant may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which s/he may otherwise be entitled.

UA IRB Approved Document

Approval date: 2-21-14

Expiration date: 2-28-15