

## “Things that Matter, Pass them on”: *ListSite* as Viral Online Genre

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Is it just me or has the Internet been consumed by lists? Offering information on *25 Reasons Why Getting In Shape Actually Sucks* or *The 30 Teeniest Tiniest Puppies Being Adorably Teeny Tiny*, such list-sites seem to have recently gained prominence on the Web. List-sites are typically provided by commercial media start-ups. In their endeavour to create valuable advertising space, they intend to produce content that goes *viral* on the web, i.e. reaching vast amounts of user within short periods of time.

This contribution is based on the assumption that professional web authors design content in such a way that it is likely to succeed in achieving virality. The recurrence of communicative practices (and, thereby, the likely emergence of a genre I call *ListSite* here) seems of vital importance in this respect. It allows for quick reception in accordance with users' expectations and may facilitate their decision to *curate* the content by sharing it on social networking sites like Facebook.

By means of an empirical analysis of 50 *ListSite*-exemplars, I hope to shed light on how this genre works with regard to its communicative situation, multimodal structure, topical organisation, and textual function – and how these aspects relate to virality.

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### 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

So, what does President Obama do when no one is around? On Feb 12<sup>th</sup>, 2015 the World Wide Web got the answer. In a cleverly-arranged marketing campaign by the US government, content provider *buzzfeed.com* portrayed Obama ‘trying out new looks’ and ‘using a selfie stick’ to raise awareness of healthcare reforms. Together with further multimodal items such as ‘checking himself out in the mirror,’ ‘making funny face,’ and ‘sketching pictures of his crush,’ all entries are arranged in form of a list that unfolds as users scroll down the site (see Figure 1). So far, the list has scored almost 2,000,000 views and shows quite plainly that an online text, if designed and distributed in a certain way, can potentially reach a vast number of users in a short period of time.

The recognition of communicative patterns seems to be a central prerequisite for *virality*. It bases on recurring communicative forms and the idea of *genre* as important devices for sense-making both in text production and reception (Lomborg 2014: 3; Santini

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Peter Schildhauer (Bielefeld), Volker Eisenlauer (Salzburg), and Michaela Hausmann (Vechta) for making valuable comments on earlier versions of this contribution.

He tries out new looks...



BuzzFeedVideo / Via Facebook: video.php

He busts out a selfie stick to get the perfect angle...



BuzzFeedVideo / Via Facebook: video.php

**Figure 1:** Screenshots of *ListSite*-exemplar *Things Everybody Does But Doesn't Talk About*. Feat. President Obama.

et al. 2011: 4). The following observations of a web user indicate, in my view, that lists such as *Things Everybody Does But Doesn't Talk About*, Feat. President Obama are, in fact, exemplars of an emerging (viral) online genre, which I will henceforth call *ListSite*:

Is it just me or has the Internet been consumed by lists? Every day I see more and more lists of things,

most of which are absurd, humorous, and arbitrarily numbered. Like, 14 Interesting Facts You Did Not Know About Pizza (I made that one up, just FYI). Usually said list is paired with an intriguing photo and I just can't help myself—I have to click on the link and spend time scrolling through a list of stuff I don't really need to know. (Kinser 2013, 26 Dec)

Text exemplars are typically created by professional media start-ups (e.g., *buzzfeed.com*, *cracked.com*, *reddit.com*, *listverse.com*, *omg-facts.com*, and *iwastesomuchtime.com*) that sell advertising space on their list-sites in exchange for the attention of online users. In their strife for the highest possible amount of site views and shares onto social media sites, content creators are likely to (re-)produce patterns that are most successful in achieving virality.

It seems therefore plausible to assume that the list-sites we find online were produced with the intention to go viral. Their textual features may reveal how viral marketing strategies translate into textual characteristics at a micro-level. These assumptions prompt the following research questions:

- (1) What medial-technical and cultural developments have enabled and motivated the virality of web content (Section 2)?

- (2) How can a viral online genre such as *ListSite* be characterised in terms of communicative situation, multimodal structure, topical organisation, and communicative function (Section 3)?

I will approach these questions by, first, providing some theoretical reflections on virality and related concepts such as *spreadability* (including *share-ability* and *share-worthiness*) and, second, by an empirical investigation of a corpus of 50 text exemplars of the genre *ListSite* sampled from the viral content provider *news.distractify.com*.

## 2. Viral Genres on the Web

### 2.1 Click and Share: The *Zeitgeist* of Online Communication



If these pictures of share buttons were clickable and if you decided to click on it, this journal article would virtually travel around the world. Depending on the buttons you choose, it would appear on your *Facebook* (Fb for short) timeline, your *Twitter* page, or your *Pinterest* board, and thus, be visible to your Friends (Baron 2008), Tweeples, and



**Figure 2:** This selfie taken at *The Oscars* 2014, showing host Ellen DeGeneres together with winners and nominees was shared 2 million times within the first 2 hours causing *Twitter* to break down on the night of the *The Oscars* (Baertlein 2014). (TheEllenShow 2014)

Pinterest followers – who might share the information with their online community and so forth. Within hours – minutes – seconds, a piece of information could spread from a single computer screen onto millions of others (see Example in Figure 2).

Updating constantly, the live statistics on <http://www.internetlivestats.com/> translate the increasing amount of Internet users (and their networked devices) into growing numbers shimmering on the computer screen. The Internet nowadays connects roughly 40 percent of the world's population. Once passive content-consuming recipients now find themselves in online environments that encourage participation and social networking (Bender 2008: 132). Plat-

forms such as Fb – founded in 2004, Twitter – founded in 2006, Pinterest – founded in 2010, make available new ways of reaching but also producing content (cf. Runkehl 2012: 10), communicating with each other and engaging in social networking.

As more networking devices are constantly added to the shelves, terms such as mobility, interactivity, and individuality (Moraldo 2011: 9) have become common labels for communication by means of *social media*, i.e. *digital media* that seem to "facilitate a particular way of being social, [...] a sort of everyday togetherness and relationship maintenance among participants" (Lomborg 2011: 56). Social media feature "relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing creations" (Jenkins 2009: xi). In describing these phenomena, Jenkins famously coined the term *participatory culture* (e.g. Jenkins 2006, 2009; or *participatory digital culture* as Wiggins & Bowers 2014: 6 suggest).

Activities carried out via social media have "diffused more profoundly into the everyday" (Lomborg 2014: 1). Nowadays, US users of laptop/desktop computers spend a daily average of almost 3 hours online (cf. eMarketer 2014) and a considerable part of

it on social networking sites (see boyd & Ellison 2007): In 2014, they spent an average of 42 minutes on Fb<sup>2</sup> (cf. eMarketer 2015), which is the most intensively and widely (71% of US Internet users, cf. PewResearchCenter 2015) used social networking site, U.S. users engaged "several times a day" in 2013 in updating their statuses (4%), sending private messages (10%), commenting on other people's photos (15%), and, most importantly in the context of this paper, *liked* other people's statuses and content (29%) (cf. PewResearchCenter 2014). On a global scale, 685,000 pieces of user-generated content were shared every minute by Fb users on the platform, and 100,000 Tweets were sent every minute by Twitter users (ColumnFiveMedia et al. 2013).

## 2.2 Curating Online Content

Apart from *creating* content in a narrow sense, i.e. generating and uploading content onto online platforms, a second kind of information diffusion (cf. Zappavigna 2013: 8) can be distinguished: In 2013, 47% of adult Internet users engaged in "tak[ing] photos or

videos that they have found online and re-post them on sites designed for sharing images with many people," which caused them to be labelled *curators*, rather than *creators*.<sup>3</sup>

The social networking site Fb, which I will focus on here, has always revolved around users sharing information with others users of the platform (see also Eisenlauer 2013). However, the idea of *sharing* content has developed into a relatively specific and increasingly distinct communicative action in its own right ever since Fb was launched. The communicative action of *curating* content, offered in shape of *share buttons* (cf. Figure 3) that nowadays permeate the platform, only emerged over time. Its development can roughly be modelled in five chronological steps. The progress made in the technological *share-ability* of content, and its *share-worthiness* seems vital in understanding how content manages to go viral:<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Age-specific surveys showed that 18-29-year-old users even spent 51 min. on Fb (eMarketers 2014).

<sup>3</sup> Looking at *curators* more closely, women (53%) were more likely to *curate* content than men (42%), and images (42%) were shared more often than videos (36%). With almost 70%, young people (aged 18-29 years) were most likely to act as *curators* (cf. PewInternet 2013).

<sup>4</sup> Other *social buttons* (see Gerlitz & Helmond 2011, 2013), such as the *like button* on Facebook, also play a role in the distribution of content on social networking sites. In contrast to *liked* content, however, users can determine *where* content gets forwarded

A first step towards establishing *sharing* in its narrow sense involved a number of smaller developments that took place prior to the introduction of the share button itself: In 2004, the year of Fb's launch, profile pages simply featured a wiki-like text box which allowed users to post and erase all sorts of information on their own and other users' pages. As of August 2005, posts started to appear as single entries on a user's *wall* which suggests that messages and updates were now organised into 'digestible chunks' that were more *share-able* (see also Figure 4). A year later, the *news feed* was introduced which allowed keeping track of recent activities (cf. Sanghvi 2006, Sept 5; see Figure 4). It seems plausible that both the organisation of messages into single posts as well as users knowing that updates were visible to others made feeding information onto the platform an even more meaningful thing to do.

A second major step towards *sharing* (in the sense of *curating* content) was the launch of the sharing function in October 2006

(Hughes 2006, Oct 27). Now, *curating* was technically possible: For the first time users could feed external web-content onto the platform by entering URLs into a respective box. Also, they were able to click a share button that now appeared in the upper right corner of every wall post in the news feed (cf. Figure 4).

*Curating* content became even easier when Fb developers provided instructions for webhosts of how to implement share buttons into their external websites which would enable users to directly publish content into the *MyShares*-section. As more and more share buttons appeared outside of Fb, they started to enter people's everyday routines. They seemed to be strategically placed like 'button-shaped baits' ready to lure users onto the platform. With regard to intention, the external share button functioned as a virtual short cut for returning to the platform's services (Hughes 2006, Oct 31), and, on the other hand, it succeeded as a constant reminder of the service's existence even to those not clicking the button at once.

to, a preview is added, etc. Also, the fact that, for instance, *distractify.com* gives the number of its shares (not likes) in the upper right corner of every text exemplar has led to my decision to focus on the development of the *sharing* function in particular. I view it as most central to content going viral.

**Figure 4:** Facebook feature news feed and share button, Oct 2006 (anonymised screenshot, taken from IdeaStream.org 2015).



**Figure 3:** Shared content and share button 2015 (anonym. screenshot taken by author on 10<sup>th</sup> Mar 15).





In July 2007, as a third step, progress was made regarding the *share-worthiness* of content: Users were now able to post photos and videos onto other users' *walls* which is likely to have caused *sharing* to become more attractive (cf. Der 2007, Jul 27).

A fourth step in establishing *sharing* on Fb concerns the infrastructure offered to *curate* posts, i.e. their *share-ability*. The introduction of *liking* (Pearlman 2009, Feb 9) caused a functional re-organisation of the clickable cluster *Comment – Like – Share* (see Figure 5). *Liking* was intended as an "aggregation of the sentiment 'I like this'" (Pearlman 2009, Feb 9) that was congesting comment sections in a specifically designed area. *Sharing* could consequently stand out with the specifics of forwarding content on and onto Fb "where it can be re-shared over and over so the best and most interesting items get noticed by the people you care about." (Kinsey 2009, Oct 26)

A final step that revealed the Fb share button as a key to content spreading *virally* on the web was the complementation of the button with a counter, showing the number of shares for a specific piece of content (Kinsey 2009, Oct 26; see Figure 6). This way, the *commercial* potential of shared content on Fb became more evident: The coun-

ter tells us something about a content's relevance to users and its *share-worthiness*.



Figure 5: Facebook wall post with like and share button, Feb 2009 (anonimised screenshot, taken from Pearlman 2009, Feb 9).

Today, the share button permeates both Fb and the web. It seems to meet the requirements of *participatory culture*, a culture in which keeping communication flowing (cf. Jenkins 2009: vii) has more relevance than choosing content considerately. *Sharing* allows curators to associate themselves with the content they forward to make social

statements (see Gerlitz & Helmond 2011). Nevertheless, *curators* do not become content-authors by the click of a button (sensu Levinson 1988: 171-172; Schildhauer 2014: 33): *Curating* entails participation, but does not cause responsibility. If nothing else, this seems to be a reason why *sharing* fits the zeitgeist of the Internet age.

Figure 6:

above: share button with counter, Oct 2009 (screenshot, taken from Pearlman 2009, Feb 9);

below: new design in 2013.



## 2.3 Content Going Viral

Distributed by hundreds, thousands, millions of users at the mere click of a button, *curated* content flows across media platforms (cf. Jenkins 2006: 3) which has been captured in the concept of *virality*:

Virality is a social information flow process where many people simultaneously forward a specific information item, over a short period of time, within their social networks, and where the message spreads beyond their own [social] networks to different, often distant networks, resulting in a sharp acceleration in the number of people who are exposed to the message. (Nahon & Hemsley 2013: 16)

As this quote indicates, social networking constitutes "the backbone of social media sites" (Lerman & Jones 2007: n. pag., qtd. in Müller 2012: 51) as users look to find distraction in the communicative "interaction around the ordinary" (Lomborg 2014: 1).

It seems that it is *share-worthy* and *share-able* content that determines both demand and supply. Sites such as *news.distractify.com*, *buzzfeed.com*, or *upworthy.com* function as virtual counters with distractive content on offer. They constitute external providers (cf. Runkehl 2012: 10) typical of the Web 2.0 landscape. Compared to search engines like *google.com* or video-sharing platforms like *youtube.com*, however, they seem to cultivate yet another kind of providing information: *Distractify.com* and the like put on display assorted and re-edited content they have created by drawing on a variety of online resources. They are commercial in nature. As media start-ups, they specialise in providing *share-worthy* contents, hand-picked by "an unlikely group of creatives" (*distractify.com*), and that have the potential to become "[one] of the most popular stories on the Web, exploring culture, lifestyle, human insight, and current events." (*distractify.com*)

By designing content in such a way that it seems *share-worthy* to as many people as possible, and catches people's attention in the first place, they look to squeeze profit from "selling the eyeballs of the site visitor" (Jenkins et al. 2013: 5).

As advertising rates depend on the numbers of page impressions and clicks on an ad (Jenkins et al. 2013: 5), drawing people to a website and "keeping them there indefinitely in ways that best benefit the site's analytics" (Jenkins et al. 2013: 6) are key principles of what Jenkins et al. call *stickiness*. By "monitoring and generating specific data on the actions of each site visitor" (Jenkins et al. 2013: 5), media companies try to understand their audiences, and design their sites in such a way that they function like *walled gardens* (Dworschak 2010: 177, qtd. in Runkehl 2012: 15) in which users wander from one flower to another.<sup>5</sup>

Complementing the *stickiness*-concept, which conceptualises audiences as relatively

<sup>5</sup> Dworschak trenchantly remarks: "'In Wahrheit ist es eher eine Weide: Die Leute dürfen nach Herzenslust grasen, werden dabei aber regelmäßig gemolken. Computer registrieren bis ins Detail, was immer sie tun. Die Werbewirtschaft zahlt gut für Daten aus derart frei laufender Nutzerhaltung'" (Dworschak 2010: 177)." (Dworschak 2010: 177, qtd. in Runkehl 2012: 15)

passive, Jenkins et al. (2013: 6-7) suggest the notion of *spreadability* to account for audience interaction and understand it first and foremost as "the potential – both technical and cultural – for audiences to share content for their own purposes" (Jenkins et al. 2013: 3). The emphasis lies on technical easiness of forwarding content in social networks, i.e. its *share-ability*, and their topics and multimodal structure that motivates users to forward content, characteristics that make a text *share-worthy* (Jenkins et al. 2013: 4).

Using *spreadability* as an umbrella term, I will keep the distinction between *share-ability* and *share-worthiness* as it allows a more differentiated discussion. List-site providers like *distractify.com*, on the one hand, produce easy-to-access texts featuring hyperlinks to more of the same kind, thereby creating *sticky content* for site visitors to dwell in distraction. On the other hand, they produce content that is easy to forward and worthy of being forwarded by users. By intentionally drawing on the principles of *stickiness* and *spreadability*,<sup>6</sup> they look to create content that has the potential to go *viral*.

<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Dobelet al. speak of "consumption and forwarding behaviour" as the two-fold goal of viral marketing (Dobelet al. 2007: 302).

On way of measuring *virality*<sup>7</sup> is keeping track of how quickly content spreads and how many people it reaches (Nahon & Hemsley 2013: 16). Table 1 shows the results of a small study on how *ListSite*-exemplars spread when shared onto Fb. It becomes apparent that some exemplars did not seem *share-worthy* to a larger audience while others were: 24 *Cartoon Doppelgangers Spotted In Real Life* (cf. Figure 7), for instance, was shared by 299 and liked by 1,348 users within the first two hours after being posted. Compared to other exemplars, these numbers indicate a *share-worthy* story, one that seems to have "something uniquely powerful about the message" (Dobele et al. 2007: 292). As "'post and pray' is not an option," (Jenkins et al. 2013: 195) companies are likely to orientate towards characteristics of

<sup>7</sup> Jenkins et al. are critical towards the *virality*-metaphor as it seems to suggest "passive audiences becoming infected by a media virus" and, according to them, it "does little to describe situations in which people actively assess a media text, deciding who to share it with and how to pass it along" (Jenkins et al. 2013: 20). Nevertheless, I will continue referring to web-content as spreading virally; I do not consider the metaphor problematic. In my understanding, not the passiveness of the affected, but entities circulating with high speed, reaching many people in short time periods, seems to be foregrounded by the metaphorical mapping.

viral content that have been identified in psychological studies. According to Dobele et al. (2007), emotionally-appealing online content is most likely to cause virality and can be explained by the phenomenon of *social sharing of emotions*: Only "10% of emotional experiences are kept secret and never socially shared with anyone (Rimé et al., 1992)" (qtd. in Dobele et al. 2007: 292). Whereas both positive and negative emotions such as anger or anxiety may cause people to forward New York Times articles (Berger & Milkman 2009, qtd. in Guadagno et al. 2013: 2313), content offered on social media websites – such as *YouTube* videos – is most likely to be forwarded when they are "cute" or "humorous" (Cashmore 2009, qtd. in Guadagno et al. 2013: 2313). This does not come as a surprise as Nisbett and Wilson (1977, qtd. in Guadagno et al. 2013: 2313) found that "people prefer passing on good news because recipients of this good news will then associate the positive mood with the mes-



Figure 7: ListSite-exemplar as shared onto Facebook, 13 March 2015.

senger." In an age of online social networking, then, Goffman's "presentation of self" (1959) seems to be governed by the principle *what you post is what you are*, and creating your "best day" (Baron 2008) appears only a few clicks away.

**Table 1:** Measuring how *ListSites* go viral on [www.facebook.com/distractify](http://www.facebook.com/distractify). In 5-min. intervals Fb likes and shares were counted for each of the five text exemplars. They were observed for 120 min. each after their publication. Data elicited on 13 March 2015.

time passed since shared on Facebook	Likes										Shares									
	Fast Food 14:15 CET		Name Puns 14:30 CET		Bubble Soccer 15:00 CET		Cartoon Doppelgangers 15:30 CET		Mentos Bikini 16:00 CET		Fast Food 14:15 CET		Name Puns 14:30 CET		Bubble Soccer 15:00 CET		Cartoon Doppelgangers 15:30 CET		Mentos Bikini 16:00 CET	
5 min.	5	+5	42	+42	2	+2	59	+59	6	+6	0	---	0	---	0	---	11	+11	0	---
10 min.	16	+11	71	+29	13	+11	151	+92	7	+1	1	+1	1	+1	0	---	35	+24	0	---
15 min.	19	+3	86	+15	26	+13	257	+106	21	+14	1	---	2	+1	15	+15	51	+16	0	---
20 min.	21	+3	100	+14	41	+15	344	+87	29	+8	14	+13	12	+10	24	+9	77	+26	0	---
25 min.	26	+5	117	+17	53	+12	403	+59	35	+6	15	+1	14	+2	28	+4	96	+19	0	---
30 min.	27	+1	125	+8	75	+22	479	+76	37	+2	15	---	15	+1	36	+8	108	+12	0	---
35 min.	29	+2	138	+13	101	+26	574	+95	41	+4	17	+2	15	+1	49	+13	131	+23	13	+13
40 min.	30	+1	151	+13	118	+17	625	+51	45	+4	17	---	16	+1	59	+10	140	+9	14	+1
45 min.	34	+4	157	+6	135	+17	677	+52	59	+14	18	+1	16	---	68	+9	153	+13	16	+2
50 min.	34	---	166	+9	152	+17	718	+41	67	+8	18	---	18	+2	70	+2	162	+9	17	+1
55 min.	34	---	172	+6	166	+14	798	+80	77	+10	18	---	19	+1	75	+5	182	+20	19	+2
60 min.	38	+4	177	+5	177	+11	820	+22	83	+6	21	+3	19	---	81	+6	186	+4	21	+2
65 min.	41	+3	179	+2	197	+20	874	+54	91	+8	22	+1	20	+1	89	+8	195	+9	25	+4
70 min.	taken off Facebook <sup>8</sup>		185	+6	208	+11	957	+83	97	+6	taken off Facebook <sup>13</sup>		20	---	92	+3	216	+21	27	+2
75 min.			192	+7	219	+11	982	+25	106	+9			20	---	96	+4	221	+5	29	+2
80 min.			195	+3	226	+7	1,023	+41	112	+6			20	---	100	+4	229	+8	31	+2
85 min.			198	+3	241	+15	1,067	+44	121	+9			20	---	110	+10	239	+10	32	+1
90 min.			205	+7	252	+11	1,121	+54	128	+7			21	+1	112	+2	246	+7	32	---
95 min.			208	+3	266	+14	1,163	+42	134	+6			21	---	115	+3	252	+6	32	---
100 min.			210	+2	291	+25	1,205	+42	139	+5			21	---	122	+7	262	+10	32	---
105 min.			216	+6	299	+8	1,234	+29	145	+6			21	---	126	+4	268	+6	34	+2
110 min.			228	+12	317	+18	1,274	+40	146	+1			22	+1	130	+4	280	+12	36	+2
115 min.			228	---	341	+24	1,314	+40	150	+4			23	+1	141	+11	291	+11	39	+3
120 min.			230	+2	344	+3	1,348	+34	159	+9			24	+1	149	+8	299	+8	40	+1

#### Text exemplars

Fast Food = 20 Fast Food Items That Are Definitely Trying To Kill You

Name Puns = 35 Celebrity Name Puns So Bad They're Brilliant

Bubble Soccer = Bubble Soccer Is Here And It Looks Glorious

Cartoon Doppelgangers = 24 Cartoon Doppelgangers Spotted In Real Life

Mentos Bikini = Girl Wearing A Mentos Bikini In A Tub Of Diet Coke Is Our Favorite Fail Of The Week

<sup>8</sup> The exemplar 20 Fast Food Items That Are Definitely Trying To Kill You was taken off Facebook after 65 min., probably due to disapproving comments ("all I can say is YUK") and a relatively small number of likes/shares: "if it doesn't spread, it's dead" (Jenkins et al. 2013: 1).



Jenkins et al. (2013) formulate more specific assumptions about *share-worthy* topics that also involve emotional arousal. According to them, users are likely to forward content related to commodity culture that revolves around 'escapist themes' such as "personal expression, freedom, upward social mobility, escape from constraints, enabling new possibilities" (Jenkins et al. 2013: 203). Nostalgia where users dwell in "personal and collective histories of reading, listening and viewing" (Jenkins et al. 2013: 204) is of similar importance. "[O]perating within familiar social patterns" allows strengthening social ties (Jenkins et al. 2013: 203) and makes sharing a relevant option. Humour and parody (Jenkins et al. 2013: 204, 207) lend themselves to shared emotions.

All this shows that the information spreadable content offers is geared towards the satisfaction of social needs. The informative value on offer seems secondary and "determined by the number of laughs it provides" (Postman 1986: 115). The fast-paced 'contemporary' seems to assume shape as an *age of ordinary involvement* afforded by a participatory culture in which the spirit of Postman's sense of "disinformation" (1986: 109) still reverberates.

## 2.4 Spreadable Content and Genre

As the satisfaction of social needs is deeply intertwined with communicative exchanges between individuals, it seems plausible that particularly effective patterns in achieving communicative goals tend to recur. Single instances of successful communication then leave imprints in a language user's perception. Due to similarities in terms of, for instance, purpose, structure, style, content, and conception of audience (Swales 1990: 58; Schildhauer forthc.: ch. 2), communicative patterns evolve. Due to differences to other patterns, they become distinct (cf. Lüders et al. 2010: 952). The abstract concept of *genre* has been put forth to account for such conventional patterns (Brinker et al. 2014: 139) or "familiar forms" (Lüders et al. 2010: 948) that are "shaped by the communicative practices and social needs of the users" (Lomborg 2014: 16; cf. Swales 1990: 42, and Berkenkotter & Huckin 1993: 478). They are described as "historisch gewachsene Einheiten" (Hauser et al. 2014: 7) situated "at the interface of language and sociality" (Giltrow 2013: 717; see also Miller 1984).

The notions of conventionality and familiarity point to the fact that *genres* – and

text exemplars as their instantiations (cf. e.g. Heinemann 2000: 509) – are omnipresent in the daily lives of language users (cf. Heinemann 2000: 507), and are likely to be rooted in their minds. As cognitive categories with prototypical organisation (cf. Swales 1990: 49; Sandig 2000), *genres* are important "devices for sensemaking" (Lomborg 2014: 3) and provide orientation. For online environments in particular, the guiding function of *genres* in both text reception as well as text production has been described (cf. Giltrow & Stein 2009: 22):

'Genre' denotes a certain 'horizon of expectations' that manifests itself as a set of textual conventions, guiding media producers and recipients toward alignment and mutual understanding in the communicative process. Media producers draw upon genre knowledge to produce texts that adhere to – or transgress – certain conventions, and thus are likely to fulfill or challenge the expectations of the audience, and the recipients use genre knowledge to select and make sense of relevant media content. (Lomborg 2014: 3)

This seems relevant in the context of list-sites. Generally, they are produced by media enterprises whose commercial success hinges on whether the texts they put on offer become meaningful to users. Fierce competi-

tion for users' attention and appreciation is likely to have caused content creators to produce functionally and formally similar content and it might be even more important in fast-paced online communication.

Users do not necessarily invest time in searching for spreadable content on the Web but rather encounter them by accident and need to render them meaningful. The occurrence of familiar features that can be related to a certain genre seems of vital importance; they can serve as triggers to call up respective genre knowledge. Even though this does not guarantee that users forward the text exemplars offered, it can at least be ensured that it is interpreted as an instance of the genre *ListSite*, which then raises 'horizons of expectations'. The fact that members of the online community notice these emerging communicative patterns (see introductory quote) indicates furthermore that there are "classes of communicative events that they [i.e. members of a community] recognize as providing recurring rhetorical action" (Swales 1990: 55; see also Miller 1984).

### 3. The Genre *ListSite* by the Example of *news.distractify.com*

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#### 3.1 Corpus and Method

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The corpus which constitutes the basis for my subsequent empirical investigation consists of 50 text exemplars of the genre *ListSite*. In order to warrant for a randomized sampling, the first 50 text exemplars appearing in consecutive order on Oct 24<sup>th</sup>, 2014 were retrieved from the main page of *news.distractify.com*. Each text was saved into a data base as html-file (cf. Appendix).

In what follows, I will try and characterise the genre *ListSite* by means of a multi-layer-analysis. Having roughly outlined the cultural context and the medial-technical basis of the *ListSite* in Section 2, my analysis of concrete text exemplars shall allow drawing tentative conclusions about the genre's communicative situation, its topical organisation, its multimodal structure, and finally its communicative function (see Figure 8).

Next to qualitative analysis, the data was partly processed automatically with the help of the POS-tagging software *TreeTagger* (see Schmid 1994). Subsequently, some results were quantified. For the purposes of

this contribution, I will focus on the genre features that presumably contribute to the viral nature of certain exemplars.

#### 3.2 Corpus Analysis

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##### 3.2.1 Communicative Situation

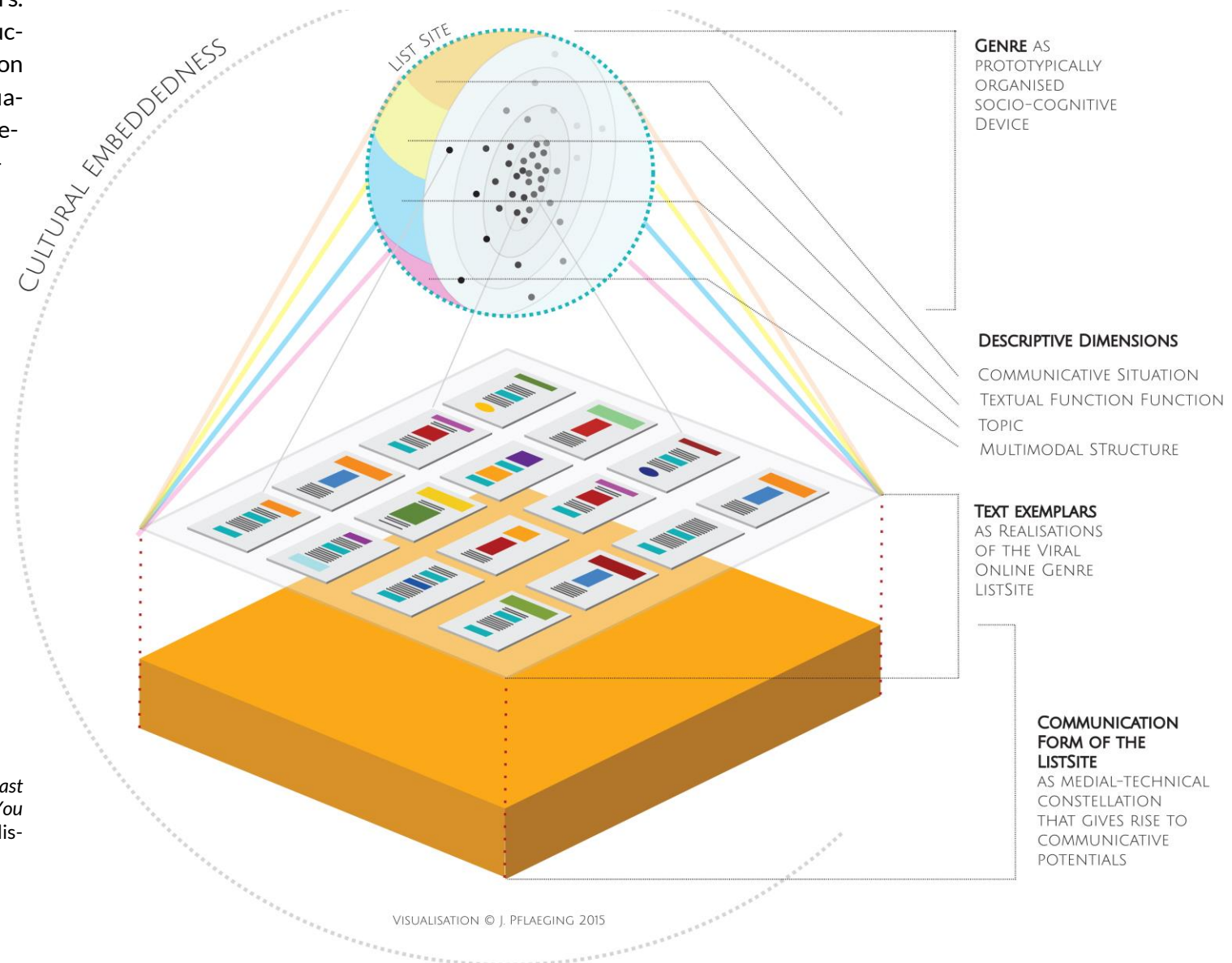
A key to analysing and describing the situational factors influencing the production and reception of *ListSite*-exemplars is paying particular attention to the dynamically shifting nature of the communicative situation. In a first phase, potentially viral content is produced and posted onto social networking sites such as Fb, and subsequently received by a relatively large audience. From the perspective of content producers, the situation is coined by commercial interests; the communicative "purpose" (Herring 2007) a professional one. The participation structure could be modelled as one-to-many or, possibly, many-to-many (cf. Herring 2007), depending on whether the single author presented in the top right corner of each text exemplar is seen as single individual or as representative of the collective sender *distractify.com*. On their website, the company present themselves as "a leading entertainment company" employing "an unlikely

group of creatives" who possess an "understanding of content creation and social sharing" (*distractify.com*), which identifies them as proficient and experienced content authors. In this light, it could be argued that producers and – unconsciously – recipients function as business partners in the creation of valuable advertising spaces. As it has been described for *official* communicative situations ('offizieller Handlungsbereich', Brinker et al. 2014: 143), such communication is generally governed by rules or "norms" (Herring 2007) that often are compulsory for content creators.<sup>9</sup>

However, in order to cause as many users as possible to forward content on offer, it seems plausible that this commercial interest generally resides in the background and might not always be obvious to recipients. For this reason, I argue that content creators try to establish a second communicative level within the participation framework at which professional authors are staged as 'one of us'.

<sup>9</sup> This can also be seen by the example of *20 Fast Food Items That Are Definitely Trying To Kill You* which was taken off Facebook due to a general disapproval of the community.

**Figure 8:** Infographic relating to one another the concepts of *cultural embeddedness*, *communication form* as a medial-technical basis that gives rise to communicative potentials, the level of *concrete text exemplars* (center), and, finally, the concept of *genre* as socio-cognitive devices for sensemaking. The graphic illustrates that genres are prototypically organised and can be described along several dimensions, such as *communicative situation*, *textual function*, *topical organisation*, and *multimodal structure* by means of scrutinising concrete text exemplars.



The authors of the corpus texts are introduced by means of a picture that resembles a private snapshot rather than a professional photograph (cf. Figure 9). With the exception of one author, *Pinar*, all other writers *appear* to provide their real names (Alex Scola, Mark Pygas, Beth Buczynski, Megan McCormick, Jake Heppner, Averi Clements etc.). Although we cannot be certain whether they conceal their real-life identity by means of a pseudonym, it can be assumed that the impression of non-anonymity is intended (see also Schildhauer forthc.: ch. 5.6).

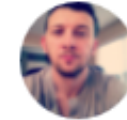
Finally, synchronized information on the time at which the respective list was posted onto *distractify.com* constitutes a temporal frame of the communicative exchange. This seems particularly relevant since it provides orientation as to the topicality of the *ListSite*-exemplar and allows the recipient to make assumptions about a text exemplar's share-worthiness. The pieces of information given, as well as their placement, in my view, suggest certain similarities to profile pages on social networking sites which sets the tone for both the production and reception of list-sites. The authors of list-sites (and the media start-ups they represent) intend to meet their recipients on an equal footing offering mainstream topics or themes (Herring 2007)

in a playful, casual, and friendly manner. The recipients themselves remain rather passive up until the communicative exchange enters the second phase.

In the second phase, the situational constellation shifts as recipients become senders in *curating* the list-sites by forwarding them to other users. In this phase, communication tends to be more private as the shared content often does not appear publicly on someone's Fb timeline but is only visible to Friends. The list-sites and their content remain unchanged but may now spread virally in users' social networks on the basis of, for instance, the phatic exchanges they allow for (see Section 3.2.4).

The communicative situation changes as we proceed from its production and primary reception in the first phase, to its curation and secondary reception in the second phase (and so forth). The blurred boundaries between mass communication and interpersonal communication that Lomborg describes for contemporary everyday communication may be due the fact that "messages typically associated with private, one-to-one communication [...] may be communicated to a much larger, and often unknown audience of family, close friends, acquaintances, and strangers" (Lomborg 2014: 9). In the case of

list-sites, however, the lines also blur because of the dynamic restructuring of a text's communicative context.



Rob Fee 23 hours ago



Pinar 2 days ago



Alex Scola 2 days ago

Figure 9: Authors of *ListSite*-exemplars of the *ListSite*-corpus.

### 3.2.3 Multimodal Structure

Compared to the diverse communicative landscape of our offline-lives, many websites of the early 1990s seem unnaturally logocentric (see e.g., Eckkrammer 2002: 43; Schildhauer forthc.: ch. 5.4.4). As the medial-technical affordances of the web developed, the integration of pictures and verbal language into complex *multimodal* texts (see Bateman 2014 and Stöckl forthc.) became possible (Holly 2011: 46; Jakobs 2011: 60). The communicative potentials of the different semiotic *modes* could now be combined effectively in the creation of viral content.

Verbal language, for instance, is well-suited for conveying concrete and abstract concepts in a relatively precise manner due to its symbolic signs. Capturing an audience's



attention and arousing interest in a ListSite-exemplar does not require much language material. Deictic expressions are convenient for direct reader address. Adjectives and adverbs are able to communicate evaluative and emotional remarks. Numerals give a clear impression of the quantity of list items to be expected.

Typically, the meaning-making by means of visual signs takes place on the basis of iconicity, i.e. a resemblance with the things they stand for (see e.g., Nöth 2000: 481). In the context of virality, the assumptions that pictures are strong in connotation, are able to "signify infinite subtleties which seem 'beyond words'" (Chandler 2002: 46), convey sensory impressions, and may evoke emotions, is of vital importance. As parts of list-sites, pictures provide enough detail for concrete reference, for stirring up emotions, and associations, and may be used equally well, I argue, for denoting an entire set of similar experiences that recipients can identify with (see Figure 10, a girl dancing in her pyjamas). The integration of verbal as well as visual signs into multimodal texts is a natural and communicatively effective choice, particularly for genre-exemplars intended to spread virally on the Web.

#### 4. You boogie down to all the "horrible" music on your playlist.



In these four walls, there is no boy band that is off limits.

Source: awesomememes.com

The networks of hyperlinks that pervade the multimodal texts of list-sites are not only relevant for sharing the list-sites on and onto social networking sites but also for their textual composition. Hyperlinks enable a restructuring of larger texts into smaller modules that may then be linked to one another, and allow for linear as well as non-linear consumption modes (Jakobs 2011: 59-60; Moraldo 2011: 12; Holly 2011: 46; Campagna et al. 2012: 10). Due to the limited space on the screen (Holly 2011: 46), *distractify.com* offer their list-sites by means of a thumbnail picture combined with the respective list-site's headline, and organize the layout of the page in such a way that a fair number of these multimodal clusters appears on the screen (see ❶ in Figure 11), with more on offer as recipients scroll

down.<sup>10</sup> All these modules seem to function as teasers that attempt to persuade recipients to move on to the actual list-site by the click of a button.

**Figure 10:** List item showing a girl dancing in her pyjama bottoms.

My corpus analysis has shown that ListSite-exemplars generally consist of three areas, which I will label *header area*, *list area*, and *bottom area* (see ❸ in Figure 11). The layout of the header area (see ❹) of all exemplars is identical in their placement and contains similar information: The headline usually appears at the top and indicates the exemplar's topic (cf. Section 3.2.3). The author's picture and name/pseudonym are placed on the left side, below the headline. The share buttons as well as a counter for the number of shares on *distractify.com* appear right in the centre of the header area

<sup>10</sup> The page design of the main page of *distractify.com* resembles the main pages of other social media offers such as *Instagram* or *Pinterest*. It seems plausible that the producers draw on genre knowledge here that can be expected from a social media-experienced user group and, thereby, providing orientation in a seemingly familiar online environment.

and on the right side, respectively, and may point to the *share-worthiness* of an exemplar. Their exposed position is likely to attract attention (see ❸ and ❹), and to increase the chances of users curating the content by sharing it onto Fb. In addition, most of the list-sites include a *lead paragraph* that appears at the bottom of the header area and links, both formally and content-wise, this section of the site up to the list area. Whereas the *header area* and the *bottom area* cover rather small parts of the entire list-site, the *list area* takes up considerable space and typically accommodates a mean of 20 list items (see ❸ and ❺),<sup>11</sup> i.e. smaller text clusters that mostly integrate both verbal language as well as visual elements (70% of the list areas) or consists of visuals only (30% of the list areas). List areas that contain visuals only tend to be noticeably shorter ( $\bar{x} = 13.33$  list items); sequences of list items that consist of language-image-clusters tend to be much longer ( $\bar{x} = 23.03$  list items). One of the reasons may lie in the communicative peculiari-

ties of the verbal and the visual: In most cases, sequences of images seem to require some verbal context in order to form a meaningful whole. While a recipient would scroll down the list area in search for coherence, it seems that it is a verbal contextualisation – be it an argumentation building up, or a given number of list items to go through – that increases chances of reading through a list till the bottom area is reached. More generally speaking, an average of about 20 items as well as the modular organisation of the list area itself seems to be a text length accessible to both the observant gaze and the quick glance.

Finally, the list area blends into the bottom area where a second set of share buttons appears in central position (see ❸ and ❺). Also, components that could be labelled *list-site teasers* come in the shape of a teaser image plus a headline, information on the author, and sharing time. They are hyperlinks to other *ListSite*-exemplars so that recipients stay on the sites and leave profitable clicks and shares.

A micro-level analysis of genre-typical language use has shown that a text's headline comprises 11.92 word forms on average and indicates that they are kept relatively concise, probably to allow for quick recep-

tion. This is furthermore facilitated by the fact that, typically, every single word in a list-site's headline is capitalised. It seems plausible that these typographical choices ease a headline's reception.

The core components of a list items are visual (element) that list-site authors typically assort and copy-paste from similar content providers such as *reddit.com* or *9gag.com* (cf. source of the visual in ❸). 850 instances out of the 1006 visual elements I coded fell into the category of photographs (84.5%). Most of them are snapshots taken by everyday people showing everyday scenes, rather than professional photographs (except for the topic *art/design*). The second most prominent category (76 instances, 7.5%) was pictures that incorporate verbal language as well, e.g. memes or screenshots of men's *Tinder* profiles. 5.5% (55 instances) of all list items contained animated gifs (see e.g., Figure 10). Only relatively few paintings (1.1%), comics (0.9%), and videos (0.5%) were embedded into the corpus texts. The relatively small share of videos in particular might be due to the fact that animated gifs fulfil all relevant functions of videos, e.g. creating the impression of a moving image (if a sufficient number of frames-per-second is used), but

<sup>11</sup> Although the calculated average for the *ListSite*-corpus is 20 list items per text exemplar, the list area may contain only one list item (e.g., an embedded video in *Have You Ever Wondered What a Porcupine Sounds Like? Spoiler Alert: It's Adorable*) or up to 50 list items (e.g., in *Fall In The 50 States: 50 Beautiful Images Of Autumn In America*).

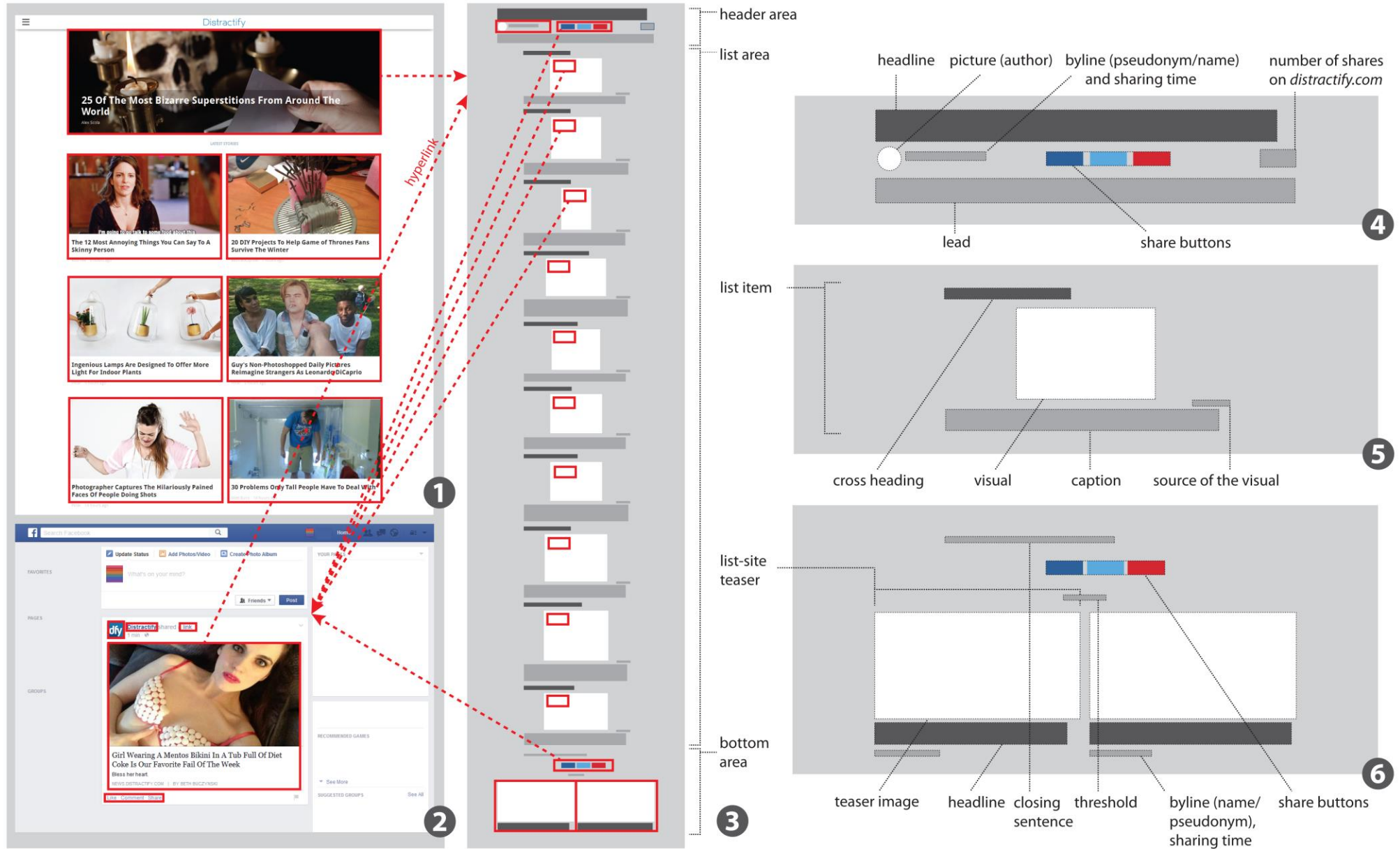


Figure 11: Multimodal structure of ListSites (macro-level).

do not come with the drawbacks of proper video sequences that typically require much more attention. Although a much more differentiated analysis is required to describe the picture types used in list-sites, this broad categorisation based on technical aspects of (primary) image-production indicates that non-moving visuals seem to be most suitable for quick glimpses and scrolls.

In the multimodal list items, visual elements are typically accompanied by an average of 14.16 word forms. Mostly, content-related linkages between language and image are characterised by *elaboration*, so that “one mode is used to explain, illustrate or specify the other” (Stöckl 2009: 216). In a list item contained in the text exemplar 34 *Isolated Houses That Are As Far Away From Busy As You Can Get* (see Figure 12), picture and text elaborate on one another by showing a beautiful, isolated house and specifying the geographical reference by a verbal label. Such elaboration sometimes involves surprising turns and unexpected hyperboles that may serve to create humour (cf. Stöckl 2009: 219), as in the example of a girl “boogieing down to all the ‘horrible’ music on your playlist” with her pyjama bottoms pulled up to her shoulders (see Figure 10).

**Figure 12:** List item “Drina River, Serbia” exemplifying elaboration as typical language-image-linkage.

### 3.2.3 Topic

As creators of spreadable content (see Section 2.3) often attempt to reach their audiences with emotionally-appealing content, it seems relevant to pay particular attention to the topical choices of list-site authors. The *topic* and *content* of a text seem to be intuitively deducible: the *topic* refers to what a text is about, the issues, actions, or objects it deals with. Such an everyday understanding of the term is often used as a starting point of many linguistic treatments (Adamzik 2004; Stede 2007; Brinker et al. 2014) that describe analysing a text’s subject matter as a highly complex task. In linguistics, a number of different approaches to topical analysis have been put forth resulting in terminological vagueness (Stede 2007: 73). A generally shared assumption, however, is that every text possesses a semantic-thematic basis (van Dijk 1989; “semantisch-thematische Textbasis”, Brinker et al. 2014: 52) that can be modelled by means of linguistic description: Brinker et al. (2014: 53) suggest that, on the one hand, a text covers a core theme, which could be deduced from the text’s content by means of identifying the recurring

Drina River, Serbia



and, hence, dominant textual referent(s) of verbal as well as visual signs, and augmenting these findings with directly related information on the topic. In many cases, the topic is made explicit in one of the textual segments (e.g. the headline, Brinker 2014: 52), or the genre label itself (Linke et al. 1991: 249), and can, furthermore, be formulated by subsuming certain lexemes or phraseological units under a more abstract label. Furthermore, texts unfold according to *descriptive*, *argumentative*, and *narrative principles* in both text production and reception. These assumptions translate into an analytical framework that enables a rather transparent process of analysis (Brinker et al. 2014: 52) and that I will draw on in the following.



Table 2 gives a number of examples of how both a keyword analysis of the text exemplars<sup>12</sup> and an analysis of the text exemplars' headlines could be used to deduce the core theme for each exemplar. The core themes were grouped together and assigned to more abstract categories. Generally, the corpus texts seem to fall into the categories *animals*, *art/design*, *lifestyle/culture*, *food/cooking*, *health*, *language*, *nature/ environment*, and *politics*.<sup>13</sup> Quantification has shown that *art/design*, *lifestyle/culture*, as well as *animals* stand out as the most prominent categories (see Diagram 1). These topics are typical of everyday communication in social media as they allow "establishing and maintaining a sense of mutuality and togetherness, and a common 'definition of the situation' (Goffman, 1959)" (Lomborg 2014: 7-8). In contrast to categories such as *food/ cooking*, *health*, *language*, and *politics*, they are particularly suitable for arousing positive emotions

<sup>12</sup> The verbal data was tagged with the help of *Tree Tagger*. For each text, the nouns were elicited and sorted by frequency.

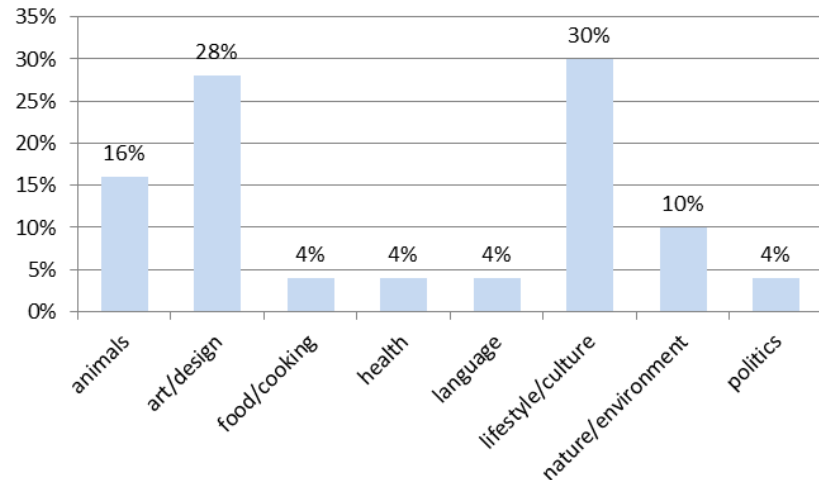
<sup>13</sup> It goes without saying that the category boundaries are fuzzy; several text exemplars could have been assigned to more than one category. In accordance with Brinker et al. (2014: 54), I have opted for the most prominent theme present in the text ("Ableitbarkeitsprinzip").

Table 2: Examples of keyword analysis to deduce core topics of ListSite-exemplars

corpus text	lexeme analysis (by the example of the 10 most frequent nouns)	headline (topical keywords in bold)	deduced topical category
09	ROOMMATE (4), TIME (3), OUTFIT (3), KITCHEN (2), BED (2), CHAIR (2), DOOR (2), NIGHT (2), BEEP (2), ICE (2)	23 (Somewhat) Shameful Things That Happen When You <b>Live Alone</b>	lifestyle / culture
12	COCKTAIL (35), MOVIE (29), MARTINI (6), PUNCH (5), SIP (5), HALLOWEEN (5), HOUSE (4), FILM (4), NIGHTMARE (3), MOON (3)	26 Of The Best <b>Halloween Movies</b> Of All Time (And What To <b>Drink</b> While Watching Them)	
24	LUCK (7), WORD (5), BELIEF (7), NIGHT (4), DEATH (3), COUNTRY (3), EXAMPLE (3), BABY (3), NIGHTMARE (3), MOON (3)	25 Of The Most Bizarre <b>Superstitions</b> From Around The World	
08	PORCUPINE (3), SOUND (2), SPOILER (1), IDEA (1), PET (1), LOVE (1), OWNER (1), PUMPKIN (1), TEDDY (1), BEAR (1)	Have You Ever Wondered What a <b>Porcupine</b> Sounds Like? Spoiler Alert: It's Adorable	animals
34	OWL (2), BIRD (2), CREATURES (2), HAIRDO (2), BAR (1), HEART (1), POSE (1), DISGUISE (1), FACE (1), HUMAN (1)	28 Photos That Prove <b>Owls</b> Are The Most Magnificent Birds In the <b>Animal Kingdom</b>	
36	CAT (10), REASON (3), LIFE (3), KID (3), YEAR (3), TALK (3), HOUSE (2), HOME (2), DINNER (2), PARENTS (1)	34 Indisputable Facts That Prove <b>Cats</b> Are More Awesome Than Kids	
02	BUILDING (19), CATEGORY (3), LOCATION (3), PHOTOGRAPHER (15), RUNNER-UP (7), SENSE (5), PLACE (5), IMAGE (5), ARCHITECT (5), ARCHITECTURE (5)	Amazing Winning Photos From The 2014 Arcaid Images <b>Architectural Photography</b> Awards	art / design
26	THRONE (6), HOUSE (4), <u>DIY</u> (3), EGG (3), TIME (3), NECKLACE (2), IPHONE (2), QUOTE (3), ART (2), COVER (2)	20 <b>DIY Projects</b> To Help Game of Thrones Fans Survive The Winter	
42	ART (9), PAINT (4), GLASS (4), YARN (3), PARK (3), COLOUR (2), BOMBING (2), RICE (2), WALL (2), ORIGAMI (2)	45 Pieces of <b>Urban Art</b> Making The World More Beautiful	

by means of awe-inspiring artwork, cunningly cute cats, and surprising superstitions. The information that is presented, then, does

seem superficial; it is not a detailed, reflected treatment of a topic but rather an entertaining glimpse.

**Diagram 1:**

Relative frequency of topics in the corpus texts.

The analysis of my corpus data has furthermore shown that, typically, the topic of a *ListSite*-exemplar unfolds along the lines of a complex pattern integrating *descriptive*, *argumentative*, and *narrative* structures. I will subsequently show how and in which parts of the multimodal text the individual patterns are typically realised, and how they are integrated into a more complex network of description, argumentation, and narrative.

As we saw above, the texts present themselves as fulfilling a referential function and seem to be organized along the lines of a *descriptive* pattern in which the main topic unfolds "nach der Teil-Ganzes- oder Enthalt-

tenseins-Relation" (Brinker et al. 2014: 63) and experiences specification (Brinker et al. 2014: 60). In most of the cases, the multimodal clusters that make up the main body of the text exemplars appear in random order; objective criteria such as alphabetical sorting serve to justify a more specific order of component texts.<sup>14</sup>

Taking these observations a step further, it can be argued that, on top of that, the descriptive patterns are embedded into an *argumentative* framework that is in many cases triggered by the genre's typical headlines: I would like to suggest that headlines such as *25 Reasons Why Getting In Shape Actually Sucks*, *25 Of The Most Bizarre Superstitions From Around The World*, *The 12 Most Annoying Things You Can Say To A Skinny Person*, or *The 16 Greatest Battles Fought By The Most Courageous Cats Of Our Time* postulate

<sup>14</sup> In *Fall In The 50 States: 50 Beautiful Images Of Autumn In America* or in *31 Beautiful Japanese Gardens Off The Beaten Path*, for instance, the initial letters of the sub-headlines (introducing the multimodal items) are used to arrange the sub-texts in alphabetical order: "1. Alabama," "2. Alaska," "3. Arizona," and "Aoi-den and Kasui-en," "Chion-in," "Engaku-ji" respectively.

They make the best faces.



and know how to strike the perfect pose.



**Figure 13:** Argumentative thematic unfolding in the text exemplar *28 Photos that Prove Owls Are The Most Magnificent Birds in The Animal Kingdom*.

theses largely by means of superlatives (e.g., *most*, *greatest*) and/or emotionally-charged verbs, adjectives, and adverbs (e.g., *sucks*, *bizarre*, *annoying*, *courageous*). In my view, these peculiar phrasings generate bold statements that call for further explanation and verification from the recipient's point of view.<sup>15</sup> The expected argumentation is then developed by means of the numerous multimodal clusters that constitute the main body of the multimodal text. In case of *28 Photos That Prove Owls Are The Most Magnificent Birds In the Animal Kingdom* (Figure 13) the arguments "They'll melt your heart.", "They're truly majestic creatures.", or "They make the best faces [...] and know how to strike the perfect pose." are put forth and are each illustrated by at least one pho-

tograph. In combination with such sets of arguments, the theses seem to adopt an *argumentative pattern* of thematic unfolding (cf. Brinker et al. 2014: 73) that draws on *description* at a lower level to introduce necessary information. According to Brinker et al. (2014: 64), this is a common type of pattern integration with texts fulfilling an appellative function.

#### 16. The Battle of Cat vs. Sandal



GIFSec.com

Source: giphy.com

With four limbs against none, the battle seemed all but won by the feline attacker. A swift turn of events, however, left the cat trapped, defeated, and motionless.

Battle Victor: Sandal

So here's to the history-makers. May we never forget!

do not introduce any protagonists, specific locations, or temporal contexts of an action. Furthermore, only few corpus texts showed narrativity with respect to *representing* a process or action sequentially (Brinker et al. 2014: 64ff.). In *The 16 Greatest Battles Fought By The Most Courageous Cats Of Our Time*, for instance, we find a narrative reporting of a quarrel between a cat and a bedroom slipper: "With four limbs against none, the battle seemed all but won by the feline attacker. A swift turn of events, however, left the cat trapped, defeated, and motionless." In this ListSite-exemplar, we also find an example of a *résumé* which is typical of narrative patterns: After introducing 16 *list items* about battles between cats and paper bags, ham, octopuses, and garbage cans, the author concludes: "So here's to the history-makers. May we never forget." (see Figure 14)

**Figure 14:** Narrative thematic unfolding in the text exemplar *The 16 Greatest Battles Fought By The Most Courageous Cats Of Our Time*.

#### 3.2.4 Textual Function

Adamzik presents a number of more narrow conceptualisations of the communicative function of a text, which is most generally understood as "alles [...], was eine sinnvolle

<sup>15</sup> Both Fiske and Jenkins et al. call spreadable content *producerly*, "in that it leaves open space for audience participation, providing resources for shared expression, and motivates exchanges through surprising or intriguing content" (Jenkins et al. 2013: 227).

Finally, we may observe, although to a lesser degree, some indication of *narrativity* in the texts. As the sets of multimodal clusters of most list-sites work along the lines of a *descriptive pattern*, most of the text exemplars

Antwort auf die Frage ist, wozu Texte produziert und rezipiert werden" (Adamzik 2004: 111). The fundamental difference between more specific approaches by Bühler and Jakobson on the one hand, and Searle and Brinker on the other hand (Adamzik 2004: 107-111) become manifest in comparison: Whereas the latter approach comprises a more or less fixed set of functional categories out of which only one is present in a text, Bühler's and Jakobson's models share the assumption that "we could [...] hardly find verbal messages that fulfil only one function" (Jakobson 1960: 353). This view is, for instance, shared by Swales who states that "it is not uncommon to find genres that have sets of communicative purposes" (Swales 1990: 47; see also Schildhauer 2014: 49, *forthc.*). Due to its descriptive flexibility, such an approach seems suitable for analysing ListSite-exemplars, which seem to fall into the category of "Gebrauchstextsorten" (Rolf 2000: 422) similar to advertisements.

The communicative function of a text – in the following based on Jakobson's (1960) model – can be deduced from the knowledge about the communicative situation in which it is employed in combination with the multimodal structure as well as the topic it deals with (cf. Brinker et al. 2014: 89). As empha-

sised by Schildhauer (2014, *forthc.*), both the production and reception side of genre-exemplars, and hence possibly differences in prominence of individual functions, need to be accounted for. On their way to virality, ListSite-exemplars are at the centre of two distinct communicative situations of text production and reception, and involve different sets of textual functions.

Within the first phase, the professional content creators pursue commercial interests and, therefore, seek to capture the attention of as many users as possible. In order to do so, content authors seem to adopt a *persuasive* strategy similar to the communicative patterns described in advertising research (Janich 2005: 85-87; see also Stöckl 1997). The decision to share the content onto or on Fb (and similar platforms) can be compared to consumers deciding to *buy* a product. It seems that the text producers of *distractify.com* attempt to achieve the first steps of the famous formula *attention – interest – desire – action* (cf. Janich 2005: 22) by, for instance, formulating the headlines in such a manner that the linguistic means fulfil an appellative function and cause the recipient to click and scroll through a list of things they did not know they needed to learn about.

My exemplary analysis of the headlines indicates the (over-)use of specific adverbs (e.g. *absolutely*, *definitely*, *extremely*, *genuinely*, *more* (5x), *most* (5x) and *unbelievably*) and adjectives (e.g. *adorable* (3x), *amazing* (2x), *beautiful* (3x), *best* (2x), *bizarre*, *greatest*, *indisputable*, *magnificent*, *new*, *perfect*, *smart* (2x), and *weird*). These linguistic choices suggest impressions that seem to question recipients' prior experiences in terms of degrees of *perfection*, *magnificence* and *weirdness*. Thereby, they challenge recipients to click and see for themselves. Similar to advertisements, the appellative act is expressed indirectly by expressing a positive attitude towards the product, i.e. the list-site on offer (see Brinker et al. 2014: 113). Also, imperatives and questions appear in the headlines that may indicate the appellative function of a text (cf. Brinker et al. 2014: 103-104). In addition, the direct reader address by means of person deixis (*you* used in 20% of the text exemplars' headlines) contributes to raising users' awareness and could be described to operate on the conative level of Jakobson's (1960: 355) model. It seems to prove beneficial in strife for successful persuasion.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> The very same mechanisms are at work when recipients encounter the list-sites in their thumbnail



To increase the likeliness of accepting the communicative offer, content creators indicated the length of the list in 62% of the cases by giving the numbers of the multimodal clusters to be expected (as in *30 Problems Only Tall People Have To Deal With* or *The 22 Most Unbelievably Colorful Places On Earth*).

It seems that the chances of getting the users' attention and, more importantly, reaching the final stages of *desire* and *action* to *curate* the content by sharing it on and onto Fb (i.e. buying the product in advertising terms), are increased by the thematic choices outlined above. Topics such as *life-style/culture* or *art/design* are likely to appeal to a majority of the potential recipients who pass by *ListSite*-exemplars when scrolling through their Fb timelines, looking for distraction. Also, list-sites lend themselves to phatic communication "with the mere purport of prolonging communication" (Jakobson 1960: 355) and can lead to "establishing and maintaining a sense of mutuality and togetherness" that Lomborg (2014: 7-8) describes as a core communicative aim in social

media environments. Therefore, in a second phase, social media users *share* the content onto their own Fb timeline or their Friends' timelines, the referential and appellative function that are still inherent in the text exemplars are likely to fade into the background while the phatic function is foregrounded. Besides informing about *40 Powerful Photos of Love And Its Many Beautiful Forms*, sharing this list-site also allows users to wallow in feelings of friendship and love.

With a dynamically changing set of primary functions, the genre *ListSite* presents a complex instance of shifting from institutionalised mass communication to interpersonal communication, in which the actual functions of the professional content authors still prevail under cover. By foregrounding the referential function and a potential for phatic communication, the producers are able to hide their appellative interests, which in turn constitutes the foundation for virality and, hence, commercial success.

#### 4. Conclusion

*Is it just me or has the Internet been consumed by lists?* When surfing the Web, and particu-

larly social networking sites like Fb, we encounter multimodal lists that offer to inform us about *34 Isolated Houses That Are As Far Away From Busy As You Can Get* or *The 30 Teeniest Tiniest Puppies Being Adorably Teeny Tiny* – lists that have been carefully designed by commercial media start-ups like *distractify.com* in their endeavour to create content that goes viral. Based on the assumption that *distractify.com* produce their list-sites in such a way that they are likely to succeed in achieving virality (and in creating valuable advertising space), their specific textual features enable insights into strategies for viral communication.

The empirical analysis I outlined in this contribution allow for drawing tentative conclusions in this respect: list-sites are typically embedded into a communicative situation that shifts from their commercial production by professionals to interpersonal communication between (smaller groups of) individuals when content is *curated*. By means of a multimodal representation of information employing photos, gifs and videos in great numbers, the lists remain relatively short and show a language use (superlatives, numerals, deictic expressions) that is just as well geared towards attracting recipients' attention, enabling quick orientation

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version on Facebook or *distractify.com* itself (see ❶ and ❷ in Figure 11) where next to the headlines a teaser image is meant to attract recipients' attention and cause them to proceed to the actual list-site.

and reception. Topically, list-sites revolve around lifestyle and culture, around art/design and cute kittens. These topics in particular lend themselves to both referential and phatic communication.

I regard the recurrence of these features and the emergence of socio-cognitive devices for sensemaking, i.e. a genre I called *ListSite*, as crucial in viral online communication. Achieving viral spreads of content on the Web seems to at least partly hinge on users' quick recognition of communicative patterns and intentionality and pave the way for the *curation* of content as users are encouraged to share it with their social networks. Social networking sites have been described as the backbone of social networking. I tried to show by the example of Fb that the development and improvement of the *share-ability* as well as an increase in its *share-worthiness* of content has led to its growing *spreadability*.

By the click of a button, *ListSite*-exemplars travel swiftly from one screen to another offering both information and a mutual sense of togetherness. Upon encountering such lists, we are quite likely to simply follow a list-site provider's dictum:

*Things that Matter, Pass them on.*

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**Appendix** *ListSite Corpus*: 50 text exemplars of the genre *ListSite* sampled on 24 Oct 2014 from *distractify.com*

#	Text Exemplar	Author	Posted ... ago	Shares on <i>distractify.com</i>
1	25 Reasons Why Getting In Shape Actually Sucks	Averi Clements	15 hours	319
2	Amazing Winning Photos From The 2014 Arcaid Images Architectural Photography Awards	Pinar	16 minutes	--- <sup>17</sup>
3	Paralyzed Artist Learns To Use Her Mouth To Paint Masterpieces	Pinar	16 hours	231
4	26 Delicious Ways To Get More Real Pumpkin In Your Life This Fall	Beth Buczynski	18 hours	919
5	18 Extremely Unlikely Fusion Cuisine Dishes That Look Downright Delicious	Alex Scola	18 hours	---
6	30 Flowers That Look Like They're From Another World	Mark Pygas	18 hours	610
7	40 Powerful Photos Of Love And Its Many Beautiful Forms	Megan McCormick	19 hours	809
8	Have You Ever Wondered What a Porcupine Sounds Like? Spoiler Alert: It's Adorable	Rob Fee	20 hours	1,588
9	23 (Somewhat) Shameful Things That Happen When You Live Alone	Averi Clements	20 hours	10,892
10	14 Things You Get Way Too Excited About When You're Broke	Rob Fee	23 hours	175
11	Amazing Photos Of Microscopic Subjects From The 2014 Nikon Small World Competition	Pinar	2 days	283
12	26 Of The Best Halloween Movies Of All Time (And What To Drink While Watching Them)	Beth Buczynski	2 days	3,609
13	Artist Carves Pumpkins Into The Creepiest Faces Of The Season	Pinar	2 days	1,435
14	34 Isolated Houses As Far Away From Busy As You Can Get	Mark Pygas	2 days	9,613
15	14 Words You Hear in the South and What They Actually Mean	Rob Fee	2 days	326
16	Old Photos Are 3D-Printed As Sculptures For The Blind To Relive Their Memories	Pinar	2 days	832
17	21 Catchphrases That Only A Parent Could Get Away With	Megan McCormick	2 days	2,616
18	32 Halloween Decorations That Were Definitely The Talk Of The Neighborhood	Mark Buco	2 days	6,763
19	Fall In The 50 States: 50 Beautiful Images Of Autumn In America	Alex Scola	2 days	11,398
20	31 Beautiful Japanese Gardens Off The Beaten Path	Alex Scola	2 days	177
21	Artist Builds A Quirky Typewriter That Only Types In Comic Sans	Pinar	2 days	567
22	Watch This Hilarious Video of a Cat Trying To Apologize to His Sibling	Rob Fee	3 days	1,090
23	29 Hilarious Soldiers Having Heroic Levels Of Fun	Mark Pygas	3 days	891

<sup>17</sup> In three cases, the number of shares for the respective text exemplar was not retrieved from the original html-file and remains unknown.

24	25 Of The Most Bizarre Superstitions From Around The World	Alex Scola	3 days	2,329
25	The 12 Most Annoying Things You Can Say To A Skinny Person	Rob Fee	3 days	24,526
26	20 DIY Projects To Help Game of Thrones Fans Survive The Winter	Beth Buczynski	3 days	752
27	Ingenious Lamps Are Designed To Offer More Light For Indoor Plants	Pinar	3 days	221
28	Guy's Non-Photoshopped Daily Pictures Reimagine Strangers As Leonardo DiCaprio	Pinar	3 days	769
29	Photographer Captures The Hilariously Pained Faces Of People Doing Shots	Pinar	3 days	1,242
30	30 Problems Only Tall People Have To Deal With	Matt Buco	4 days	39,241
31	15 Animals Whose Lives Were Changed Thanks To Prosthetics	Averi Clements	4 days	6,485
32	The 16 Greatest Battles Fought By The Most Courageous Cats Of Our Time	Megan McCormick	4 days	8,824
33	28 Clever Protests That Found The Perfect Way To Deliver The Message	Mark Pygas	4 days	1,503
34	28 Photos That Prove Owls Are The Most Magnificent Birds In the Animal Kingdom	Jake Heppner	4 days	17,329
35	Adorable Cat Naturally Has A Face That's Always Saying "OMG!"	Pinar	4 days	1,081
36	34 Indisputable Facts That Prove Cats Are More Awesome Than Kids	Beth Buczynski	4 days	4,339
37	30 Delightfully Creepy Animatronic Shows From Our Childhood Remind Us How Weird Things Once Were	Matt Buco	4 days	3,869
38	Hilarious Blog Proves That Tinder Is Filled With Guys Who Love Posing With Art	Pinar	4 days	---
39	The 22 Most Unbelievably Colorful Places On Earth	Matt Buco	4 days	109,000
40	35 Pictures Of Genuinely Creepy Playgrounds That Will Give You Nightmares	Huey Berk	4 days	5,669
41	23 Places You Absolutely Must Poop Before You Die	Megan McCormick	4 days	139,000
42	45 Pieces of Urban Art Making The World More Beautiful	Mark Pygas	4 days	1,372
43	Adorable Baby Wears A New Costume Each Day This Month Until His Very First Halloween	Pinar	5 days	763
44	The 10 Best Things Ever To Come Out Of Street Harassment	Averi Clements	5 days	132
45	This Company Is Paying Its Employees \$1,500 Each To Take A Vacation	Pinar	6 days	556
46	Smart Pocket Breathalyzer Will Let You Check More Than Your Alcohol Level	Pinar	6 days	71
47	RocketSkates Is The Motorized Smart Footwear Of The Future	Pinar	6 days	114
48	Photos Of Male Celebrities Are Actually The Expert Makeup Transformations Of One Woman	Pinar	6 days	1,263
49	Adorable Sweeper Cover Makes It Look Like You're Cleaning With A Penguin	Pinar	6 days	1,285
50	The 30 Teeniest Tiniest Puppies Being Adorably Teeny Tiny	Megan McCormick	6 days	58,526