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COMM 432.02: Special Topics: Research Thesis

# Feeding our Identities: BuzzFeed Quizzes as a Tool for Personal Identification in the Social Digital Age

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Final Research Thesis, Dr. Anjali Ram  
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Feeding our Identities:  
BuzzFeed Quizzes as a Tool for Personal Identification in the  
Social Digital Age

A thesis submitted to the Roger Williams University College of Arts and Sciences  
Department of Communication and Graphic Design

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## **Abstract**

Specializing in “listicle” media and personality identification quizzes, BuzzFeed is enormously popular among college students. Audiences apply the identities they are ascribed through Buzzfeed quizzes to inform their communication within a discourse community, and as individual expression. This paper examines college students’ discourse that surrounds their use of BuzzFeed identity quizzes. The goal of this study is to understand how the consumption of these quizzes constructs personal identities and informs the communication of these identities.

## Introduction

“Can we tell if you're an axe murderer by this one question?”; “Which cookie are you?”; and of course “Which “Grease” pink lady are you?” These questions are part of a never ending litany of BuzzFeed quizzes. A clickbait website specializing in “listicle” media and the ever-popular personality identification quizzes, BuzzFeed is a multi-million-dollar internet company. BuzzFeed’s diverse portfolio of viral media includes news updates, how-to videos, recipes, viral videos, and the ever-popular quizzes. BuzzFeed’s quizzes have become a media sensation, circulating over all major platforms of social media at a rapid pace and accounting for a large percent of the traffic to the site. Not only have BuzzFeed quizzes taken over the internet, but they have taken over the discourse surrounding the self-identification of many college age students, and the communication of this identification is reflected in the social media presence of these quizzes. Much of the research on digital identities concludes that audiences use BuzzFeed quiz results to have identities related to them through the algorithmic quiz calculation system. In short, audiences apply the identities they are ascribed through BuzzFeed quizzes to inform their communication within a discourse community, and as individual expression. The results, content, and commentary that BuzzFeed users choose to share on social media makes a statement not only about their interests (based on their quiz selection), but also about their perceived identity (based on what quiz results they share) and their self-view (based on the commentary they choose to share or not share). In this paper, I examine college students’ discourse that surrounds their use of BuzzFeed identity quizzes. The goal of this study is to understand how the consumption of these quizzes play a role in the construction of self and identity among college students.

This study consisted of one focus group, five individual interviews, and online textual analyses of participants' social media accounts, to identify themes and patterns in audience use, discourse, and communication of these quizzes and the identity relation that occurs with them. Participants in the focus group were asked to discuss their use of BuzzFeed personality quizzes; specifically, they were asked to discuss the needs or desires that the results of these quizzes fulfill, the reasons behind their use of these quizzes, what kinds of quizzes draw their eye, and how they interact with their results. Following the focus group, five participants voluntarily participated in brief individual interviews in order to develop certain themes and ideas from the focus group more deeply. Through the use of online textual analyses, the social media accounts of college age students were observed (analyzed) for interaction with BuzzFeed quiz material, with specific attention paid to the type of quiz, the interaction with the quiz, and any commentary added by the poster or their peers. These varied methods of observation and data collection uncovered patterns regarding the uses and gratifications of these quizzes, as well as the discourse surrounding them in a candid social setting, an online (public) social setting, and a private social setting. These observations and participant feedback were used to answer questions about the use of such media in college students. Specifically, the research questions that propel this study were:

**RQ1:** How do online personality quizzes mediate the communication and construction of self among college students?

**RQ2:** What kinds of pleasures, meanings, uses, and gratifications do Buzzfeed quizzes provide to college students?

**RQ3:** What is the discourse surrounding college students' personality constructions from BuzzFeed quizzes?

## **Rationale**

As the BuzzFeed phenomenon continues and evolves into the next popular media, it is important to understand the way that modern audiences are interpellated by social media. Interpellation is a concept originally discussed by Althusser (1970) and Hall (1983), but has been drawn upon by many scholars of consumer behavior, including Grossberg (1998). BuzzFeed's website defines itself as a "global, cross-platform network" that strives "to connect deeply" with a "next generation, highly engaged audience" (Buzzfeed.com). In other words, BuzzFeed and other interpellation-fueled media is here to stay, and it will only become more powerful as it continues to gain audiences and popularity.

In the digital world today, the rise of native advertising and other disguised marketing techniques are constantly seeking to track our digital footprint. With an understanding of who we are, media can better identify us and interpellate us accordingly (Grossberg et.al., 1998, p. 205). This is particularly prevalent today in the digital age, since consumers have more than just their personal identities, but also their digital identities. Berberick & McAllister (2016) argue that such quizzes are "prevalent tools for the declarations of one's online identity" (p.3424). Understanding how BuzzFeed quizzes interpellate consumers is a step toward developing critical media literacy. Furthermore, analyzing how we experience and interpret such online quizzes provides important insights into the persuasive power of social media and the construction of consumer identities (Grossberg et. al., 1998, p. 206). While there has been ample research on the construction of consumer identities as they relate to social media (Leung, 2013), the data pertaining specifically to personality quizzes is limited, which is concerning given the cultural significance of them as a form of self identification.

The most relevant study found to the topic of personality constructions from online quizzes comes from Berberick & McAllister (2016) which focuses on the online quiz phenomenon and the various ways in which we construct personal identities from these. This study explores the ways in which the interaction with one's quiz results online is an identifying activity, as the way one discusses one's results is almost as classifying as the results themselves (Berberick & McAllister, 2016, p.3424). BuzzFeed is "the leading independent media company," with content reaching hundreds of millions of users worldwide, and it is still a relatively new media (Buzzfeed.com). All media that will come after BuzzFeed will continue the same patterns as BuzzFeed, but will likely be more advanced. Therefore, from the perspective of a business trying to advertise, it is crucial to understand how to use these phenomena to one's advantage to selling. The industry of native advertising, especially that which is viral, could be a highly fruitful one if more research is done to understand the uses and gratifications (Blumler et. al., 1974) of such media, as well as how different audiences respond to it. Research (Wang, 2012) suggests that media is a needs-driven industry. Some progress has been made in determining the specific "consumers' online brand-related activities," (COBRAS) and there are general understandings of some of the primary needs that are fulfilled in consumers by online media (Muntinga et. al., 2011, p. 14).

This research seeks to use the understandings that currently exist about the question, *what drives media use*, and apply that to the online personality quiz phenomenon. With this information, I aim to answer the questions: How do online personality quizzes mediate the communication and construction of self among college students? As well as: What kinds of pleasures, meanings, uses, and gratifications do BuzzFeed quizzes provide to college students?

Through this research, I intend to answer these questions on BuzzFeed quiz uses, gratifications, and discourse.

## Literature Review

### Introduction.

Leading in the world of modern student procrastination tools is a website called BuzzFeed, a clickbait website famous for its “listicle” media (e.g. “13 puppies who are just as tired as you), more common-term news articles, viral content, and, arguably most famously, its personality quizzes. BuzzFeed’s official “about” web page identifies itself as “the leading independent digital media company delivering news and entertainment to hundreds of millions of people around the world” (About, n.d., n.p.). The concept of BuzzFeed originated when the founder, Jonah Peretti, contacted Nike about getting personalized sneakers with *Sweatshop* written on them to make a political statement. (Meikle, 2016, p. 73) The correspondence between Peretti and the Nike corporation went viral, which began Peretti’s fascination with the question, *what makes ideas and media spread?* (Shontell, 2012, p. 1). BuzzFeed was created explicitly as a media company designed for the social age, and it thrives on active audiences sharing its content with others, hence creating a metaphorical marketplace of content on the Internet (Shontell, 2012, p. 2). BuzzFeed has become a sensation, receiving over 30 million visitors per month, over half of which come from recommendations and “shares” on social media, as opposed to organic Google searches or intentional website visits (Shontell, 2012, p. 1). Some of the most commonly shared materials from the BuzzFeed site are the personality-based quizzes. These can range from “what character from *The Office* are you?” to “can we guess your age based on your taste in cheese?” While these may sound like silly, mindless entertainment, the use of such quizzes can

actually reveal important information about the users, as well as about user media consumption. This review will look (replace with “looks”) at the specific uses and gratifications of BuzzFeed quiz use, what this use tells us about ourselves as consumers of this media, and how science has studied the phenomena of our personality quiz fascination in the past.

**How do we choose the media?** In order to understand the meanings behind the use of media such as BuzzFeed quizzes, it is important to first understand the ways in which users choose the media they interact with. Daniel Muntinga and his colleagues at the University of Amsterdam conducted extensive research to identify the intentions of users’ media use, and they identified many intentions behind “specific consumers’ online brand-related activities,” or COBRAS (Muntinga et. al., 2011, p. 14). COBRAS are used to learn why audiences view the content they do, why they choose to contribute content, or why they choose to interact with content, three primary functions of BuzzFeed content. This study identified several motivating factors behind COBRAS, including *self-presentation* (users contributing to content in order to promote their own personality), *self-assurance* (users contributing to content in order to receive recognition and acceptance), *social interaction* (users contributing to content to meet and interact with like-minded users), and *social identity* (users contributing to content to set themselves apart from users of other media) (Muntinga, 2011, pp. 29-31). These uses of media are commonly connected with social media, since social media is where users can share about themselves (*self-presentation*) and receive feedback (*self-assurance*) as well as interact with others (*social interaction*) and establish a *social identity*. BuzzFeed gains over half of its site traffic from users who share content such as quizzes or articles on social media. Therefore, it is especially important to understand the COBRAS associated with Buzzfeed, so that BuzzFeed can continue producing content that meets the needs and desires of its fans. It is also vital to understand the

ways in which users discover content; Andrew Rice, in an interview with Jonah Peretti, explained that BuzzFeed's content is more commonly accessed on social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter, and it only exists on the Buzzfeed website as a formality for search access (Rice, 2013, n.p.). Therefore, BuzzFeed relies heavily, if not almost exclusively, on users sharing content with their friends on social media. Over 50% of BuzzFeed users were directed through Facebook, which is why Buzzfeed is deliberate with its relational marketing methods.

In the modern age of social media being used as a platform for advertising, brands must be purposeful in the ways they call out to audiences and grab their attention. It is imperative, therefore, that brands use material that is relatable and relevant to the consumers, as this is the only way they will attract the attention of a consumer. Native advertising, like BuzzFeed uses, has become a common method of advertising, since audiences often view the content as something other than advertising when they first click on it. This approach can be seen as deceptive, but in reality it is a highly effective way to entertain audiences while also succeeding in promoting their brand or product. A similar method (concept) of audience connectivity is interpellation within the media. Grossberg et. al (1998) define interpellation as when "individuals are placed into (and take up) particular (social) positions within cultural codes" (p. 227). Interpellation, as discussed by Althusser (1970) and Hall (1983), is a way for the media to group an individual into a particular social category based on categories like demographics, past experiences, interests; using this category, the media targets consumers within that group through a specific direct message, which the individual can identify with and therefore be drawn in. In other words, interpellation coaxes media users into identifying with their message (which has been crafted carefully and deliberately) and therefore being 'hailed' by their media. BuzzFeed participates in the act of interpellation by placing certain material on the pages of people they

believe would react to it, based off of BuzzFeed's ascribed identity of that person. While somewhat deceptive, interpellation is not an inherent infringement on users' freedom and privacy, it is simply an extension of modern-day media use. Grossberg (1998) explains that, in any case of media advertising, "by linking individuals together within the category of a market, at least a part of their identity is defined within their participation in this market (210). BuzzFeed material interpellates and attracts users by aligning prospective consumers with content they are likely to find interesting. Interpellation, while sometimes seen as an act of deception, is simply a branch of modern advertising practices that does, in fact, require the consumer to accede to the message.

After a conversation with Jonah Peretti, Alyson Shontell from *Business Insider* learned that "people are what spreads the media" (2012, p. 2). In today's digital age, audiences are very influential on the content they see, and very impactful on the regulation of media on social networks (Muntinga et. al, 2011, p. 13). In a way, audiences are in charge of the advertising of certain media. This is why content needs to properly relate to its desired audiences, and be designed in a way that will encourage users to share and promote it. Sometimes, due to the ability of modern media to gather information about audiences and create an identity profile about them, these methods of relation to the audience will include interpellation. Social identification is a large part of this, since audiences will interact with media that they can identify with, and this is what keeps media moving along (Shontell, 2012, p. 2). Media sites know that "every person can be described as and has a sense of himself or herself as both an individual and a member of various social groups," and sometimes it is up to the media to assist an individual in relating to, and interacting with, these identities. (Grossberg et.al., 1998, p. 205). In fact, oftentimes users will enter an interaction with a particular media with an idea of what the

media will say, or what identity the media will ascribe to them, but simply be curious about the way in which it will say it. Grossberg (1998) explains this phenomenon when he writes,

Sometimes when we interpret a text, we are not looking for its meaning. Instead, having already decided what its meaning is, we might be more interested in understanding how the text produces the particular meaning we assume it has. The question becomes less what the text communicates than how it communicates (p. 151).

As a result of this inherent need for individuals to feel as though they belong somewhere, “the media’s ability to produce people’s social identities, in terms of both sense of unity and difference, may be their most powerful and important effect” (Grossberg et. al., 1998, p. 206). More relevant to brands than social identification is personal identification, which makes individuals vulnerable to interpellation from the media. By seeming to call out directly to them individually, and drawing on their individual identities, brands can interpellate specific individual consumers using the media. Personal identifications are especially vital in social media content, since social media is largely about the promotion of one’s self-brand (Muntinga et. al., 2011, p. 20). Often, websites will use specific algorithms that will identify exactly what a user wants to see (based off of internet history, social media interactions, and the use of Internet cookies); in the case of BuzzFeed, however, being the socially-charged medium that it is, algorithms for personal identifications are less effective than social identifications (Shontell, 2012, p. 2). Because BuzzFeed is created to be shared, they will distribute their content in a number of places; therefore, even if a quiz does not apply to one user, they are likely to see it and think of a friend to whom it is relevant and share it with that friend. In this interaction, which often takes place on Facebook, other users will see this quiz and do the same thing. Berberick (2016) explains that online personality quizzes such as those on BuzzFeed “create and spread

widely digestible virtual identities” (p. 3435). Because quizzes tell users about themselves, the sponsored content or theme of the quiz is often irrelevant in the user’s decision of whether or not to take it; users are simply interested in learning more about themselves.

Although the content on BuzzFeed is intended for all audiences, and is intended to not be algorithmically targeted to specific people, there is a certain demographic that interacts with Buzzfeed material more than others based on studies of media use by group. Correa (2012) sought to determine patterns in social media use by age group, as well as by personality. For BuzzFeed quizzes, it is important to have an idea of different personality types that interact with media most, since the quizzes are usually personality-based, and are created to provide specific personalities as the quiz results. Correa’s team found that in young adult males and females people who are more extroverted, insecure, and/or people who have lower satisfaction with life are the most frequent media users (Correa et. al., 2012, p. 252). The connection between extroverted people and insecure people is interesting and somewhat surprising, since more insecure people often have a tendency of being more introverted. For BuzzFeed, however, this is good news; extroverts and people who are insecure and therefore might be more introverted are both frequent social media users and have a wide range of personality types accessing their content. Furthermore, insecure men were found to use more social media than more confident men; data on insecure women versus more secure women was inconclusive (Correa et. al., 2012, p. 252). It was determined, however, that women place more importance on connecting with others and creating a community atmosphere on social media, which indicates that they are more prone to sharing content with friends in order to build a type of discourse community over the content of the media (Correa et. al., 2012, p. 252). Although BuzzFeed aims to have its content featured all over the internet to invite users to share content with others and begin dialogues

about the content, there are certain places that BuzzFeed can benefit from advertising, or even simply sharing, its media, such as Facebook and Twitter. Since these media are used widely by young people, and the aforementioned personality types of frequent social media users apply to these media, BuzzFeed gets significant traffic from placing content on these sites. Black (2015) found that through the use of interactive images and sections, listicles, quizzes, and articles have become significantly more popular among young adult media users (p. 96). There is a definite rise in the use of such media by young adults, which means that BuzzFeed content has a higher likelihood of views on these sites. However, most of the advertising for the BuzzFeed brand is done through user activity; as Burke et. al. (2009) wrote in a study presented at the Boston CHI (Computer-Human Interaction) Conference in 2009, “social networking sites are only as good as the content their users share” (p. 1).

It may appear as though BuzzFeed’s content is randomly distributed, and therefore it would be difficult to track the ways some quizzes become more popular than others, but in reality, clickbait (the use of catchy headlines that almost manipulate users into clicking on the article) is an art. In an interview with *The Daily Beast*, Jake Beckman, the man behind the Twitter account @SavedYouAClick, explains that clickbait purposely leaves information out of the copy in order to raise the viewer’s curiosity so they feel as though they have to click on the article to find out what was missing (Shire, 2014, n.p.). Beckman’s account, @SavedYouAClick, tries to discourage the use of clickbait by tweeting the missing information from the title, or the answer to the question posed, so that viewers only have to look at his tweet to get the full story, and therefore the website using clickbait will get fewer clicks. Christina Manzo of the *University of Michigan Journal of Library User Experience* reports findings that headlines that consist of eight words have a 21% higher click-through rate than headlines with more or fewer than eight

words (2015, n.p.). Manzo continued to explain that BuzzFeed's content is successful because it is shareable; it is "usable, interactive, personalized, and timely," which makes it more appealing and more apt to be shared (2015, n.p.). There are, however, certain trends in quiz popularity that are observable as a social media user, but are underrepresented in the research field; this is the use of titles such as "Find out how popular your opinion is on..." or "We can guess your age based on your taste in...". It could be estimated that these titles are targeted towards insecurities in media users, perhaps someone wondering if they think the same way as their peers do, or someone trying to make sure that their interests are 'age appropriate' as a part of the *self-assurance* function of the COBRAS determined by Muntinga (2011, p. 30). Since insecure audiences are likely to use social media, the media targets these insecurities in order to attract clicks. Significant research to definitively determine the popularity of such headlines has not been done, but this phenomenon definitely connects back to the idea of manipulation of audiences that Jake Beckman of @SavedYouAClick recognized in his interview with Shire (2014).

**How do we interact with the media?** With an understanding of how content is discovered and how audiences identify and access their media preferences, it is important to have an understanding of how audiences are interacting with media. In the case of BuzzFeed quizzes, the primary interaction, aside from taking the quiz, is sharing the quiz with friends. Muntinga (2011) determined that one primary driving factor for people choosing to upload and pass on media is the intention to declare oneself as part of a discourse community of like-minded people who have the same interests, almost like joining in a conversation (p. 33). BuzzFeed and similar websites truly do rely on their users sharing their content, especially since 2014 when Facebook

announced that it would begin “cracking down” on sponsored clickbait articles promoted by companies (Berberick, 2016, p. 3427). However, BuzzFeed’s strength is that its users are its advertising. Even if they choose not to share the quiz they took with someone else, people will often share their own results (connecting to the *self-presentation* function of COBRAS), which still serves the purpose of the quiz being brought to social media and being seen by other users (Mutinga et. al., 2011, p. 29). Burke (2009) discuss their findings in “Feed Me: Motivating newcomer contribution in social network sites” which was research presented at the Boston CHI Conference in 2009, in which they found that there are two types of social systems: information commons and online discussion groups (p.1). Information commons are where media users can contribute to the content of the page or discussion, while online discussion groups are exclusively for users to discuss a common topic (Burke et. al., 2009, p.1). The findings of the study discuss how in these environments, (BuzzFeed being the former) the primary elements of the interaction include the people, the media content or artifacts contributed, the interaction between users, or feedback, and the distribution of the content to a larger audience (Burke et. al., 2009, p. 1). This means that, in the case of a BuzzFeed quiz, the typical process might consist of a person sharing a quiz with their friend, and then that friend taking the quiz, sharing their results, people commenting on their results, and others sharing the same quiz. Although this sounds like a highly involved process, the social aspect to it makes it all feel like a natural process to digital natives and heavy social media users. Studies have found that there are certain social ‘pressures’ that encourage people to take part; Burke et. al. (2009) reported that, according to the social comparison theory, if a media user sees their friends contributing content and interacting with content, that user will want to “keep up with the Joneses” and contribute to or interact with that media as well (p. 7). It is beneficial for BuzzFeed that this process occurs

naturally, since it is this process upon which the success of a media depends. Wang (2012) concluded from a longitudinal experiment on the uses and gratifications of social media use among college students that “the experience that users of social networking sites have is primarily a function of the content their friends contribute” (p. 9). This means that users with more active friends will have a more positive and entertaining experience on social media, and therefore they are more likely to interact more with the media content than someone with inactive friends. In other words, the more use social media use gets, the more gratifications it will get for the users.

A key aspect of the BuzzFeed quiz phenomenon to consider is the way that users of Buzzfeed identify themselves, and how their use of BuzzFeed quizzes impacts their personal identities. Since BuzzFeed quizzes are usually personality-based, users have an opinion on the result they get. BuzzFeed quizzes use algorithms to avowal an identity to the user, so these results can be quite correct or quite incorrect. However, to users of BuzzFeed quizzes, the results are “key identity-construction materials,” and these constructions can lead to strong reactions. Berberick (2016) has done significant research on the online quiz phenomenon, and has determined that, no matter what the results of the quiz results say, the user sharing their results makes a statement about themselves; whether the results were correct and the user shares this identity with others, or the results were incorrect and the user shares the results in a humorous way, the results and the user’s interaction with the results will always make some sort of statement when shared (p. 3424). Berberick research led to the determination of two distinct types of discussion that users take part in when they share their results: sharing or comparing (Berberick et. al., 2016, p. 3433). When one simply shares their results, they might just copy and paste their results; perhaps they will add a brief affirmation or dismissal of their results (such as

*I'm happy with this!* or *There's no way that's the character I'm most like!*), simply to share this part of their identity. In comparing, however, users will disclose more of their personal identity by adding commentary on their personal view of themselves (such as *I've always known I was like that!*), or their appreciation for their result (such as *Yay! She's my favorite character!*) (Berberick, 2016, p. 3433). More scholarly research is still needed in order to fully understand the impacts of BuzzFeed quiz results on the personality and personal identification of users, but it is clear that those who choose to share their results share their identity with the world no matter if the results were viewed as positive or negative.

Grossberg (1998) discusses the ways in which the content we share with the world is constructed deliberately in order to deliver the correct message to the world. It is well-known that “often, authors do intend to, attempt to, and succeed in placing meanings in their texts” (Grossberg et. al, 1998, p. 152). On one hand, individuals create social media posts as a presentation of self, which indicates that these are accurate representations of self, however, various amounts of self-editing often occur before the content is actually publically posted. Social media posts are created as a way for users to represent themselves to the world, and Grossberg (1998) explains that “the word *representation* literally means ‘re-presentation.’ To represent something means to take an original, mediate it, and ‘play it back.’.... this process almost necessarily alters the reality of the original” (p. 179). While it is widely understood that online content is often fabricated, the irony is that many still try to deny that their content is edited, even taking specific precautions to hide their own intervention in the construction of the message so that audiences feel as though they are the ones in charge of their media experience. Grossberg writes, “...producers have to try to hide their own presence in and operating on the text.... A producer who is aiming for realism will avoid editing practices that emphasize his or

her own interventions...” (1998, p. 179). The truth, however, as Grossberg states, is that when it comes to the portrayal of a message (in the case of BuzzFeed quizzes, this message being oneself), there is no actual reality; “people live within the systems of representation; they experience the world according to their codes of meaning” (1998, p. 191). This idea of the social constructionism perspective proposes that social media is what many in today’s social digital age consider to be ‘reality,’ but it’s really just a series of artificially constructed messages and edited photographs, all tailored to fit the standards of life and the aesthetics put in place by society. As a result of this baseline of falsehood, “Representation is no longer a matter of accuracy and distortion but of identities that are produced and taken up in and through practices of representation” (Grossberg et. al., 1998, p. 220). And how do we establish the codes and identities that media users construct messages to conform to? According to Grossberg (1998), this is a complex question, as “identities never proceed in some linear and coherent story from falsity to truth, or from truth to falsity. The codes of identity are always complex and contradictory, defining a field in which different meanings battle to become the dominant articulations” (p. 233). There is still more research to be done on the ways in which online social codes are constructed, and the ways in which they catch on and spread throughout the internet, but through the work of Grossberg (1998) we begin to understand the process by which content producer’s construction of a message is edited and represented to the world.

**What can we learn from this phenomenon?** The activity of social media users, particularly BuzzFeed quiz takers, clearly demonstrates the principles of the Uses and Gratifications theory that Blumler et. al. (1974) wrote about. In this report, Blumler (1974) explains that this approach is intended to explore and explain “the way in which individuals use

communications, among other resources in their environment, to satisfy their needs and to achieve their goals, and to do so by simply asking them” (p. 510). Many examples of uses and gratifications accompany social media, and this approach paints for us a new picture of audiences as active, rather than passive. In uses and gratifications research, “the audience is conceived of as active, i.e., an important part of mass media use is assumed to be goal directed,” which implies that audiences are not as vulnerable and passive as they are sometimes perceived to be (Blumler et. al., 1974, p. 510). Wang (2012) also concluded that audiences are active media users, and that they choose the media they interact with based on a variety of needs (pp. 1829-1830). This indicates that there are not only a few specific needs that are being targeted, but in fact audiences interact with a wide array of media based on their needs at that particular moment in time. Wang explains that the “reciprocal causality perspective” on social media uses & gratifications indicates that media use is needs-driven, meaning that users are constantly adjusting their media use or behavior to accommodate for their needs at that time (2012, p. 1830). The conclusions to this research did note, however, that the most common needs that direct users towards social media use are social needs (Wang, 2012, p. 1830). This idea connects to the observable use of BuzzFeed quizzes by many college students; as different quizzes are shown, the user will feel the need to take that quiz, and some users can get stuck in a cycle of quiz taking for long periods of time. This is similar to the idea of channel-flipping on a television; Wang (2012) references a 2006 study of his in which participants were given the freedom to change television channels at will; Wang observed the viewing durations and sequential channel choices and determined that the content on the channels motivated new needs and encouraged the viewer to change the channel to suit those needs. This connects to a uses and gratifications approach, as the channels either provided gratification, or they urged the viewer to

change the channel to seek gratification (p. 1830). In fact, Wang (2012) notes that a similar relationship of uses, gratifications, and media use exists in our everyday use of media (p. 1830). In the case of BuzzFeed, we will either feel gratification from the result of a quiz, or we will keep taking quizzes until we are gratified. We are comfort-seeking creatures, and we utilize the tools we have to benefit ourselves until we are satisfied.

The uses and gratifications approach can also demonstrate the reasoning for why users make the media choices that they do. Leung (2013) studied uses and gratifications of social media and connected them to different levels of narcissism, as well as different age groups, and one of the findings of this research was that “recognition needs” are a driving factor for us to use media; this includes the ways users use social media to promote their knowledge, establish their personal brand...or gain respect or support (p. 1000). Grossberg (1998) writes that “the audience is composed of individuals who are each members of one or more social groups that define their identity.” (p. 218) These needs can also encompass personal comfort needs; users are often motivated by “social and affection needs, the need to vent negative feelings, and recognition, entertainment, and cognitive needs” (Leung, 2013, p. 1003). Berberick (2016) found that personality quizzes such as those on BuzzFeed serve great purpose for users because they are a quick, simple, “prepackaged” content that they can share to easily represent their “self-brand” to the people in their social media followers (p. 3436). In other words, users can let the results of the quiz speak for themselves, or they can use their results as an excuse to promote themselves, but either way, they are engaging in some level of self-promotion. Berberick (2016) also discusses the gratification of bonding and acceptance that occurs with the social comparison of sharing the results of a personality quiz; these results bring people together in agreement or in discussion, and this is often considered a gratification of sharing one’s quiz results (p. 3436). The

active audience approach to media use is what makes the Internet into what it is: an “outlet of self-construction” rather than simply one of social interaction (Gonzales & Hancock, as cited by Liberman (2013). If users choose to use it as such, the Internet can actually be a prominent tool with which to declare one’s identity (Berberick, 2016, 3424). The Internet is truly what the audience makes of it, and due to the large volume of active audience participation in constructing media, the Internet is a great place to create one’s own image and make the most of it.

This phenomenon of social media users inquiring into their personalities and obscure identities is not a new one; the phenomenon of horoscope reading has always been treated in a similar way. Astrology believers have been known to construct their world view and personal brands based off of their horoscope readings and the personality traits commonly ascribed to members of their specific star sign. Bader (2010) writes about a trip he took to a psychic, Leighton Haverty, to research the ways people identify with horoscopes and astrology. Bader first found her flyer that stated,

There is no better tool than your Birth Chart for helping you be the best you can be. Your Horoscope is a road map for this lifetime and gives a greater understanding of yourself and others. Use it as a tool for Self-Awareness and it gives great insights to the person who is seeking within (Bader et. al., 2010, p. 30).

This is not simply an anomaly, or an abnormally interested fan of the supernatural; Bader (2010) reports that over 14% of Americans surveyed believe in supernatural abilities such as those that enable us to read the stars and identify by our star signs (p. 33). In recent years, it was discovered that the horoscope chart had been misread since the start of time, and a new star sign was added, causing many people’s star sign to change. During this time, *CNN* reported that over 25% of Americans polled believe that the moon and stars are actually influential on our lives, and

therefore many people felt lost and uncertain when their star sign identity was stripped from them (New Astrology, 2011, n.p.). The irony is that, according to Joseph O. Baker as quoted in the *CNN* report, “people believe in astrology because it helps relieve uncertainty” (New Astrology, 2011, n.p.). Much like the ways in which users of BuzzFeed quizzes seek out new parts of their identity to connect to by taking personality quizzes, many people look to astrology to help shape their identity and understand the different parts of their personality.

BuzzFeed quizzes and astrology are not the only ways in which we study personality and construct our identities; however, the idea of personality quizzes is not a new concept, and people have been constructing their self views and brands around them for years. The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, arguably the most well-known personality assessment which is based off of psychologist Carl Jung’s theory of personality types has been around for over 40 years, and has been used in many settings ranging from career counseling to leadership development (Pittenger, 1993, p. 467). In an evaluation of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) for the *Review of Educational Research*, David Pittenger (1993) explains that the MBTI provides users with a framework of predictions for their personality type based off of their responses to the survey, and with these individuals are left to interpret their behavior accordingly (p. 467). The MBTI is often successful in identifying a basis upon which to predict an individual’s behavior in different situations; however, these identities can lead to people developing their own theories or self-perpetuating certain identities to an extreme extent in order to render the results accurate (Pittenger, 1993, pp.467-468). These liberties that some users take can cause people to behave differently than they would if they had not viewed their results, much like the ways in which people can adjust their behavior to fit the results of their BuzzFeed quiz, in order to self-perpetuate. Many people choose to identify by their MBTI personality type; some professionals

will include their personality type in their email signature, companies will conduct trainings with their employees in an effort to better understand each other, and some people will ask their dates their personality types in order to predict whether they will be a good match. Some people take this phenomenon to an advanced level, but when used in moderation, understanding one's personality type can be helpful in order to understand the motivations behind our actions.

Another popular 'personality quiz' that is used often in the professional world is the Gallup Strengthsfinder, which is a personality evaluation much like the MBTI that strives to identify an individual's strengths so they can understand the way they can maximize their abilities. Gallup Strengths results are used to show an individual what the strongest parts of their personality are, so they can use their skills without focusing on their weaknesses (Snyder et. al., 2011, p. 55). Unlike the MBTI, Gallup Strengths results do not try to predict behavior, but instead explain what areas one can thrive in. Much like the MBTI, however, users often identify strongly with their results, once again including them in their email signatures and conducting employee trainings around them. Among others, personality evaluations such as MBTI and Gallup have been around for years to help individuals better understand themselves and the parts of their personalities that they may not have been able to identify within themselves; BuzzFeed quizzes act as a descendent of such personality evaluations, and instead of including BuzzFeed quiz results in our email signatures, we share them on our Facebook walls.

**Conclusion.** In reviewing the literature that exists surrounding the uses and gratifications of social media, it has become clear that, since personality quizzes as a means of social media is a relatively new concept, there is a lack of research on the uses and gratifications of personality quizzes aside from the work of Berberick (2016). Through the proposed study, I

used focus groups, open-ended interviews, and textual analysis to learn more about the uses and gratifications that college students associate with BuzzFeed. It was helpful to gain more insight on the ways that users of BuzzFeed quizzes self-identify, as compared to those who do not use these as a form of self-identification. This provides insight on the question, *how does the consumption of online personality quizzes play a role in the communication and construction of self and identity among college students?* I also look deeper into whether people commonly use these quizzes as entertainment, or if they seek out these answers for personal fulfillment. Per the literature reviewed, there clearly is a wealth of scholarship on the use of social media, and the phenomenon of self-presentation on social media, but a paucity of literature on obtaining or constructing the self awareness to then share on social media. Literature on BuzzFeed's strategies for gaining site traffic, their emphasis on sharing as a form of marketing, and the history of personality constructs being an identifying factor of individuals' personalities are all well-documented, and from here it originally seemed as though the qualitative data that can be obtained by interviewing users (and non-users) was the biggest hole in the data. Once I got an understanding of how people talk about their use of BuzzFeed quizzes, the personal identities that they construct from BuzzFeed media (as well as social media in general), the reasoning behind their use of BuzzFeed, and their habits of sharing their results and the quizzes themselves with their friends, I gained a fuller perspective on the actual implications of this media use on users' personalities and understand how this media affects its users. I look not only at the use of Buzzfeed content as a medium, but also the interaction of this content with other media, such as social media. A key part of the self-identification that I explore within BuzzFeed use is connected to the interaction with the media after the quiz is taken; this interaction includes sharing the quiz, posting one's results, making commentary on one's results, and engaging others

in discussion surrounding one's quiz results. With the background literature on uses and gratifications, active audiences, interpellation, and native advertising in place, the next step in this research was to gain real user perspective on the topic and bring in qualitative research methods to reach a conclusion on how college age students talk about their BuzzFeed use.

## **Methodology**

**Introduction.** Qualitative methodology is a broad, exploratory approach to research which uses smaller sample sizes and more subjective questioning in order to produce an in-depth description of a phenomenon or behavior. In qualitative research, researchers aim to find trends within data and analyze these trends to determine the reasons behind them. Lindlof & Taylor (2011) explain that qualitative methodology studies the “performances and practices of human communication” on a more specific level (p. 4). Qualitative methodology also deals with a smaller sample size than quantitative research does, enabling qualitative researchers to obtain much deeper data from each sample. Therefore, the findings of qualitative research tend to be more localized, specific, and detailed.

**Procedures.** Due to the nature of this study, the most appropriate data collection methods are those which focus directly on candid reflections from participants. Therefore, I draw on data elicited through a focus group, open-ended individual interviews, and online textual analysis of participants' social media accounts. By getting these different perspectives from users, I have gained an understand the way that users talk about their BuzzFeed quiz use in a public setting (focus group), in an online social setting, and in a private social setting. I was also

able to gain the benefit of the “group effect,” which refers to the habit of people in groups to draw from a shared wealth of experiences (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p.183), as well as the “*been there and done that*” value of participant observation in the form of social media analysis (Lindlof & Thomas, 2011, p.136). This enabled me to differentiate the constructions of self-identity from the forced constructions of society-influenced identity, as well as provided me with a holistic view of the use of BuzzFeed quizzes, all the way from the intentions of use until the social interactions with the results and the actual identity-forming based on quiz results.

**Demographics.** This study focused on college students between the ages of 18 and 22 at Roger Williams University in Rhode Island. This study did not have specific constraints on demographics including socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, gender, sex, sexual orientation, or specific age (as long as the age falls within the 18-22 category). Students did not need to be from any specific location. The reasoning behind the broadness of the demographics was to reflect the broadness of the BuzzFeed audience. If I had gathered a group of like students, it is highly possible that they would have interacted with the same BuzzFeed material in a similar way, which would have greatly limited my findings on the use of BuzzFeed by average college age students. For my focus group, I used social media to invite BuzzFeed users who were interested to participate, and I received inquiries from nineteen people. The selection process was not highly selective, since I wanted a diverse representation of BuzzFeed users, but I used an online application to find a time where the most people were available, so I had ten people for my focus group. My digital textual analysis was on a volunteer basis, and selection was based on permission granted by focus group members.

BuzzFeed has found its popularity from its ability to “connect deeply with [their] audience,” on a mass scale (Buzzfeed.com). My audience reflected the diversity of BuzzFeed’s audience to the best of my ability within the constraints of this campus. Lindlof & Thomas (2011) believe that there is a wealth of difference within one culture; differences are not exclusive to different cultures (p. 143). The gender breakup within the focus group (based solely on who volunteered and was available) was largely female, which I perceive as somewhat reflective of BuzzFeed’s overall demographic. I did not feel as though the inequality of males to females affected my data strongly, as my questions were not gender-targeted, nor were most participants’ answers. Furthermore, qualitative research methods do not involve making generalized claims of predication that pertains to specific population groups, but instead, are employed to examine meaning -making practices within a localized social and cultural context.

**Focus Group.** This study commenced with one focus group consisting of ten willing Roger Williams University students (age 18-22) who identify as BuzzFeed users (as opposed to non-users). Only participants who signed consent forms (See Appendix 1) and expressed verbal agreement to partake in the study were included. Students were asked to sign these consent forms in the presence of the researcher (myself), at the beginning of the focus group, once the study was explained to the participants verbally. I began by reading the focus group script (Lindlof & Thomas, 2011, p. 195), which outlined the way the focus group would run, introduced the purpose of a focus group, set ground rules for the session, and then I opened the floor to participant introductions (Appendix 2). The first question I asked was regarding participants’ typical use of BuzzFeed quizzes, simply to set the tone of casual conversation and open sharing. After this first question, the discussion flowed based on participant commentary, with my

occasional prompt. I began with questions regarding the background reasoning behind students' BuzzFeed quiz participation; these inquired about details on the motivation for participating in the quizzes (intrinsic vs. extrinsic), the sources where the quizzes are found, the reason specific quizzes catch the eye more than others, and the desires that they feel quizzes satisfy. I then asked questions regarding students' reactions to the quiz results that they get, including: whether they take them seriously or find humor in them, whether they ever find their responses disappointing, or whether they ever enter the quizzes with specific desired results. The next questions I asked referred to the actions taken after the quiz is complete; these included questions about sharing their results. I inquired about whether or not they share their results on social media, and about how they interact with their results, if they do. I entered the focus group with a specific set of questions and topics to cover, but remained open to all of the nuances the conversation took.

I used a focus group before I conducted interviews because there are specific patterns in the BuzzFeed quiz-taking phenomenon that many people experience, but only some may make note of. I figured that a dialogue between a group of students who use this media would inspire ideas to freely flow, with students building on the thoughts of others, and I was pleased with the result of this plan. Lindlof & Taylor (2011) refer to focus groups as *complementary interactions*, meaning that group participants agree on the topics under discussion and add their own individual observations and meanings (p. 183). This focus group was held in a classroom in Global Heritage Hall where students were able to form a circle with their chairs and desks, amplifying the ease and comfortability of discussion. As indicated on my consent sheet, I audio recorded this focus group so that it felt like more of a conversation, rather than an interrogation. I used a notepad for any scratch notes I felt I must record, and to keep track of questions that

might arise while someone spoke, but the majority of the annotation and transcription of these notes occurred after the fact based on the audio recordings (Lindlof & Thomas, 2011, p. 156).

After the focus group, I was able to identify several holes in my questioning, as well as some wording that could be improved, and I brought these holes to my individual interviews. These informal, conversational focus groups were intended to be free-flowing, without frequent pauses for me to take notes, which is why immediate reflection on the observations, findings, and specific conversations of the event based on the audio recording was important and helpful (Lindlof & Thomas, 2011, p. 157).

The second step in the research process consisted of five independent interviews with five participants from the initial focus group. In these brief, private interviews, I discussed several themes from the original focus group, and even repeated questions, if I felt as though a specific participant might have important insight that was not shared in the focus group. These interviews were held in a private setting, were conversational and informal, and were also recorded and kept on a password-protected device. Because of the informal nature of these interviews, the conversation flowed to incorporate anything that the participant brought up. The interviews were a great addition to the focus group, because the group consisted of several participants with stronger personalities and several who got fewer opportunities to talk because they felt shy, needed time to think, or prefer listening to sharing. Lindlof & Thomas (2011) write that “interviews are particularly well suited to *understand the social actor’s experience and perspective*” (p. 173). In this study, it was important to gain a thorough understanding of the participants’ experience and perspective in a more intimate way than the focus group may have been able to provide. These interviews provided me with “stories, accounts, and explanations” of participants’ use of BuzzFeed material, providing me with a profile similar to that of a case study

through which to understand the ways in which college students interact with BuzzFeed material (Lindlof & Thomas, 2011, p. 173).

Once I had gained an understanding of how participants talk about their interactions with BuzzFeed content, I performed textual analyses of their social media accounts, with their written permission. In these analyses, I looked specifically at the interaction of the participants with BuzzFeed quizzes, whether they were sharing them publically, posting them on a friend's wall, or interacting with a quiz that a friend shared on their wall. This practice excluded the observation of BuzzFeed quiz interactions privately (via text or Facebook message) or in person, but they still gave an authentic account of how participants actually interact with BuzzFeed quizzes on social media. The idea to textually analyze the social media of participants was inspired by Lindlof & Taylor's (2011) participant observation practices, which is the term used to describe the professional craft of experiencing and recording events in social settings" (p. 134). These textual analyses were similar to participant observation because they recorded the events in a social *digital* setting, which is a somewhat less-private setting. The textual analyses provided me with a visual account of BuzzFeed quiz use among college students.

The original plan for this study was to simply conduct a series of focus groups, and to compare the discussions of each one. Upon conducting the first focus group, however, I found that I had various gotten opinions on every topic I had desired, plus more, and the component missing from my research was an even more in-depth look at the feelings of participants regarding these actions. In some cases, I asked participants to further elaborate on things they had discussed vaguely, and in other cases the conversation in the focus group led to more personal accounts about BuzzFeed quiz use. In the end, the textual analyses were not helpful in

gathering new ideas of interaction with BuzzFeed material, but rather in finding examples of behaviors that participants discussed previously. In the end, the combination of the focus groups, the individual interviews, and the textual analyses created a full, well-rounded profile of the participants as college students who interact with BuzzFeed material; this combination created excellent supplementary research to the literature reviewed previously.

## **Discussion**

**Introduction.** Upon conducting a ten-person focus group as well as individual follow-up interviews with several participants, a surprising finding arise was that my participants rarely, if ever, share BuzzFeed quizzes or their individual results to their social media pages as a form of communication or self-presentation. While participants revealed that they find a majority of the BuzzFeed material that they interact with on social media platforms or through a friend sharing it directly with them, they all identified as non-sharers. Despite this lack of evidence related to the public communication of self-presentation, participants did disclose that they use BuzzFeed as a method of self-identification. In other words, rather than sharing the identities given to them on social media, they reflect on their results intrinsically, obtain whatever sense of self-fulfillment they desire, and occasionally share results privately or with a small group in a semi-private setting. While participants still extract a strong value from being assigned an identity by their media activity, and they do still use these identities to inform their interactions and their view of self, they do so in a more private manner. The reluctance to share their Buzzfeed quiz engagement in more public way contradicted my assumption going into this research project. I had expected to find that my participants would reveal their interaction through various social media platforms, since a wealth of literature of personal identification and personal online

branding discusses the outward projection of these identities through sharing, rather than the internal examination of self that participants described. As a result of the intrinsic satisfaction of my participants when taking BuzzFeed quizzes, my research project focused primarily on the motivations, gratifications, and possible uses of BuzzFeed quizzes among participants.

**What's in a Name?** One of the largest and most fundamental themes that emerged from my focus group and individual interviews is that participants unanimously agreed that the results they receive from BuzzFeed quizzes can reinforce their existing self concepts. Grossberg (1998) writes that,

Cultural codes, and especially the media in the contemporary world, also articulate the meanings of the various positions people occupy. In this way, we can think of the media as actively constructing the meanings and expectations that are associated with, or linked to, particular social identities (p. 229).

As Grossberg states, media (in this case, BuzzFeed) is being used to articulate the meanings of individuals' positions within society and construct the meanings and identities associated with these. Individuals interact with BuzzFeed quizzes, often, to find a written description of who they are. As one participant said in an interview, "it's just a written version of who they are...socially they're this person, and now BuzzFeed is allowing that to be written down, and now they're just pairing up with this quiz in a certain way." In other words, BuzzFeed is not changing the person that they are, it is merely providing them with a new way to qualify themselves, or sometimes even a new way to see themselves, as well as the validation or legitimization of one's identity that comes with seeing it written down. Grossberg (1998) writes that "The audience is composed of individuals who are each members of one or more social

groups that define their identity,” (p.218) and BuzzFeed is merely providing these individuals with a list of the social groups and identities that they align with.

Aside from the intrinsic desire to understand oneself and the reinforcement of one’s self-concept, my research uncovered several other primary reasons why individuals might take a BuzzFeed quiz. These are:

***Procrastination.*** When asked why participants take BuzzFeed quizzes, the first answer that emerged, in both focus group and individual interview settings, was *procrastination*. Since BuzzFeed material circulates widely on social media, which is a common culprit in the procrastination of media users in the social digital age, participants come across quizzes while they are scrolling through their timelines and often choose to take them as a way to pass time. One participant referred to BuzzFeed quizzes as “a great source of mindless wandering.” Several participants agreed that, while they often find the first BuzzFeed quiz that they take on social media, they then get sucked into what they referred to as “the black hole of BuzzFeed,” in which they get interpellated by suggestions for other quizzes and they end up taking quiz after quiz, losing track of time. This particular phenomenon makes sense, given that social media, since its conception, has been used as a tool for procrastination and mindlessness; an activity such as taking a BuzzFeed quiz, with very few words and the simple action of clicking a button, therefore, is a perfect tool for this sort of procrastination. Bechmann and Lomborg (2013) cite a research study done by Quan-Haase and Young (2010) in which it was found that “procrastination” and “goofing off” were two primary motivations behind the use of Facebook and Instant Messenger (IM), two early forms of social media, in American college students (p. 770). The use of BuzzFeed for procrastination is not surprising, since many of today’s social media (with BuzzFeed being a quasi-social media) are used for this purpose.

***Entertainment.*** BuzzFeed quizzes are not simply taken when users have nothing better to do; another motivation for taking BuzzFeed quizzes, as discussed by a focus group, was entertainment. Muntinga et al. (2011) discuss “entertainment” in a study of the motivations behind media use of media including social media by stating that “The entertainment motivation covers several media gratifications that are related to escaping or being diverted from problems or routine; emotional release or relief; relaxation; cultural or aesthetic enjoyment; passing time; and sexual arousal” (p. 19). In this particular focus group discussing BuzzFeed quizzes, users seemed to identify most with “emotional release or relief,” “relaxation,” “cultural or aesthetic enjoyment,” and “passing time.” Sexual arousal was not discussed, and is rarely a subject in BuzzFeed material. One participant discussed their search for entertainment by saying that “I feel like a lot of times I take it it’s because I think it’s almost fun to hear somebody tell me something about myself.” Another participant echoed the sentiment by sharing that “It’s just kind of fun to get a certain identity associated with your stupid mac ‘n’ cheese choices or something like that.” It seems as though the desire to have one’s identity qualified for them is more than a self-reflection-based need, but it also is a form of entertainment to some.

***Interaction with pop culture, society.*** A large part of the draw towards BuzzFeed is the extent to which the site’s material is kept up-to-date, and the fact that BuzzFeed content is circulated so much through social media means that the content being shared at any given time is what’s ‘trendy’ at that particular moment in time. Therefore, users taking the material feel as though they are keeping up with pop culture and being relevant members of society by partaking in the same quizzes as all of their friends. In a study of user interaction online, Burke (2009) described this phenomenon as “keeping up with the Joneses”; the idea that social media users are

always trying to stay up-to-date with whatever is popular at the time, or whatever their peers are doing. Grossberg et. al. (1998) explain that this phenomenon could be due in part to the fact that we are all identified as not only individuals but as members of a culture; “every person can be described as and has a sense of himself or herself as both an individual and a member of various social groups,” and sometimes it is up to the media to assist an individual in relating to, and interacting with, these social groups (p. 205). These social groups make up a large part of one’s environment, especially in the modern age of social media, in which one’s peers are always right in their pocket, easily reachable. Because of this easy access, many individuals feel as though they have no excuse for falling behind on current trends, which is why they entertain media such as BuzzFeed that will keep them updated. One participant stated in an interview that BuzzFeed quizzes provide them with “little social cues, little hints to what society is like nowadays.” This particular motivation, “the information motivation,” was researched by Muntinga (2011), and it was concluded that “sub-motivations include, for instance, surveying what relevant events and conditions are taking place in one’s direct daily environment and in society” (p. 20). A sense of belongingness is one of the most primary human needs according to Maslow (who originally referred to this need as “the love needs”), so it seems obvious that humans would take advantage of the opportunity to be a part of a group to which they feel they belong and are accepted. BuzzFeed quizzes show users what society is talking about at that particular moment in time, so it provides users with a tool with which to interact with others in their environment to obtain a feeling of love and belongingness, while also enabling them to be entertained by the most current information and material. With BuzzFeed, there is always something new to interact with, which opens a door to new people to interact with.

*To “challenge the machine.”* As the world evolves and technology evolves with it, many individuals are growing skeptical of the technology we see gaining intelligence and, in many cases, crossing boundaries of privacy and theoretical personal space. In the case of BuzzFeed quizzes, which are known to be designed purely from a creative, entertainment-based point of view, relatively few are skeptical and feel betrayed, but the culture of a weary technology user remains prevalent in today’s society. Several comments were made by focus group participants pertaining to the fact that they are, in many cases, designed to provide a “correct” (or general enough to be *perceived* as correct) answer, which provides users with a sense of skepticism. One participant introduced this idea by stating, “I feel like I literally take them to see if it’s accurate. I’m literally like, ‘okay, wanna go?’” Other participants echoed this thought, and when asked whether they want the results to be right or to be wrong when approaching these quizzes from a challenging standpoint, the opinions varied. While some participants shared that they want the results to be right (which makes sense in a generation of digital natives who place higher trust in technology than older generations), some feel a satisfaction in the quiz being wrong, so they feel a superiority over the computer. One participant said that while they do enjoy getting “correct” answers, they “also sometimes want them to be wrong so I can be like, ‘ha! You don’t know me!’” One possible explanation for this desire to be “unidentifiable” by a computer could be related to social constructionism theory, which “denies that there is any access to a reality outside of representations that would allow one to measure the truth or falsity of representations” (Grossberg, 1998, p. 191). While this theory does not necessarily explain the participant’s competitive view of the media, it might explain why users take into account the fact that there is a “right” and “wrong” answer to these quizzes, and why it was difficult for them to come to a consensus over whether they wanted to be identified in a way they agree with or not. The social

constructionism theory might argue, in this situation, that nobody can actually be “correctly” identified, since there is no actual identity to match, but merely different representations of one’s *self*. One participant shared that they find it interesting when BuzzFeed quizzes identify them because “either I’m very generalized, I’m a very basic person,” or the quiz was designed well enough to apply to a wide range of people. Much like the phenomenon of horoscopes being used to predict someone’s future, BuzzFeed quizzes have a way of making answers sound specific but also being generalized enough that they can be related to many different people, interpellating users into certain categories and coaxing them to place themselves into these categories and see themselves in the positions set fourth for them. One participant believes that “they make [them] general enough to touch upon different peoples’ wants and needs so they can make those more serious quizzes overarch more groups of people.” Manzo (2015) believes that BuzzFeed material is designed so that “even if the reader doesn’t agree with every item on the list, the personas are often general enough to ensure at least some measure of success” (p.1). Because BuzzFeed quizzes are often so *seemingly* specific, there is also a possibility that each quiz an individual takes connects to one small part of their cumulative self identify, which some may see as one different representation of their self. Whether or not one true *self* does exist for each of us, it is certain that users are slightly skeptical of an algorithm’s ability to qualify their identity based on random questions pertaining to, for example, their cheese preferences.

***Self-fulfillment, reinforcement of identity.*** Not all BuzzFeed quiz results are actually a surprise to users. In fact, many times, users enter an interaction with a BuzzFeed quiz with a specific answer they are hoping for or expecting. As one focus group participant observed, when taking these quizzes, “you’re hoping it actually reinforces what you think about yourself and what your preferences are.” Another participant put this thought into other words, saying that

“we do them for a sense of self-fulfillment.” In a society based so strongly on belongingness and acceptance, it is important to many individuals that they have a strong understanding of who they are, which enables them to be the best version of themselves. When a user gets an answer that they believe is “correct,” or is an answer that they view as positive, or an answer that they agree with, they feel as though they have portrayed themselves in the way they intended, and society sees them the way they want to be seen. While many users take BuzzFeed quizzes using honest answers (as do many focus group participants), there are times where a user might purposely (whether consciously or subconsciously) select answers that will frame them in the way they want to be identified, in order to provide them with a sense of self validation. A participant shared a theory that “some of the answers that you can get can almost be like a self-fulfilling prophecy,” meaning that users can interact with the media in a certain way in order to ensure that their prediction matches the result. Grossberg (1998) discusses this idea of viewing media with a specific goal or idea, and this means that instead of worrying about *what* the meaning of the media is, but about *why* that is the meaning; to put it in the context of BuzzFeed, a user might take a “which Disney Princess are you?” quiz hoping to get Ariel, and answer questions the way they believe Ariel would answer them, so that rather than wondering *if* they will get Ariel, they wonder *what it means* to be Ariel. Grossberg (1998) writes that,

Sometimes when we interpret a text, we are not looking for its meaning. Instead, having already decided what its meaning is, we might be more interested in understanding how the text produces the particular meaning we assume it has. The question becomes less what the text communicates than how it communicates (p. 151).

Pittenger (1993) has studied the ways in which users have been behaving this way with personality quizzes for years, and knows that people can adjust their behavior to fit the results of

their personality quiz in order to self-perpetuate specific identity characteristics (pp.467-468). In a way, BuzzFeed quizzes encourage users to perpetuate themselves based on a certain identity, since BuzzFeed quizzes are vehicles of interpellation, leading someone to take up a certain identity and interact with the media based on their existence within that identity. Grossberg (1998) explains that interpellation “can define someone into a subordinate position, but the person has to accede to that interpellation. He or she has to take up the position.” (p. 229) Therefore, interpellation is a two-way street, and it takes a user connecting to a particular identity (often the one they were seeking out in their interaction with the media) to actually be drawn in by the content.

*To position oneself within society.* One of the most popular types of BuzzFeed quizzes at this moment in time is the one that requires users to vote on their opinions of different things ranging from foods to television shows, and provides them with an immediate view of what percent of other BuzzFeed users voted for the same opinion. In such a belongingness-centered society, the need to fit in is crucial, and the ability to know when one does not fit in with the norms of society is important. Many users find these quizzes to be frustrating, particularly when their own opinions do not align with those of the majority of other users. “Those just really get me pissed off; if I’m not in the majority I get really annoyed, like, ‘why isn’t everyone like this?’”, remarked one participant. “Whenever I [am] in the minority, I [am] like, ‘everyone else is stupid; I’m right!’”, remarked another. One participant shared that even when they are in the majority, these quizzes cause them to stop and think and try to figure out *why* others who voted a different way voted that way. In other words, these quizzes make users try to see other perspectives and understand the societal makeup, in order to understand where they fall within it. Due to BuzzFeed’s shared material being viral, the material that users are encountering and

interacting with is material that society has deemed popular at that moment in time, and this mass interaction with certain material creates a trend of content. Such trending material is what other BuzzFeed quiz takers will see, and “this active creation of content shapes the character of the community and also determines the influences of users and participants on each other” (Laroche, 2012, p. 1757). As a result of this influence of users on one another, many users, as shared by some focus group participants, feel as though they are being judged by society itself for their answers. Participants noted that “the answer [to whether or not a user’s opinion ‘fits in’ with society] isn’t really BuzzFeed’s answer, it’s *society’s* answer.” Another format of BuzzFeed quiz that makes users consider their place in society is the format in which users will check off boxes based on things that they do, say, like, or feel, and based on what they check off, the quiz will tell the user something about themselves. An example of such a quiz that arose in the focus group was the quiz “How basic are you?”. Users checked off things about themselves such as *you own a pair of Ugg boots, you love Diet Coke, and you watch “Love Actually” every year during the winter*, and based on the number of “basic” things that a user checks off, they are given a percent of “basic” that they are. One participant shared that after taking this particular quiz and getting assigned a “basic” grade, “I was like, ‘...huh.’ I just kind of thought about what it means, the slang “basic,” and then I was like, ‘why does society do that?’” Another participant shared a similar point, believing that “if you check off all these things, if you choose this food, if you check off this stuff about your favorite show, this is how society sees you.” The idea that a simple algorithmic internet phenomenon can hold such power over the way individuals see themselves in relation to everyone else around them is a direct reflection on the power of social media and the strong impact of social media and shared content on the construction of personal identity in the social digital age.

Aside from the aforementioned motivations behind users' decision to interact with BuzzFeed quiz material, several other patterns in user interaction with and intrinsic reaction to such content have emerged. One idea studied was the impact of quiz results on a user's idea of self from an emotional perspective. Participants were asked if quizzes that result in unsatisfactory or seemingly "wrong" answers ever leads to negative feelings of self, and it was found that this is not the case. One participant noted that "The ones that gave us the answer we did not like... we view them as not being legitimate or as just a bad like test... or that there's a lack of options, because of the fact that we don't like what we receive." In other words, if the quiz is wrong, it is the quiz's fault, not the quiz-taker's fault. Grossberg's (1998) research might explain this phenomenon using the anti-essentialist view that "identity is always an unstable and temporary effect of relations that define identities by making differences" (p. 220). While it is believed that we all have a specific identity, there are so many complex parts to everyone's identity that it is not possible for identity to be wholly grasped by one single channel; therefore, when users do not receive the result they desired, they are able to brush it off and assume that the quiz simply did not understand them, or was not made properly. After all, the answers that a user gives a quiz are merely a representation of their self, and "Representation is no longer a matter of accuracy and distortion but of identities that are produced and taken up in and through practices of representation" (Grossberg, 1998, p. 220).

Although participants did not believe that negative, undesirable, or "wrong" quiz results do not have a large impact on their ideas of self, an interesting irony in this research was that the same participants do find that they feel validated and affirmed by "correct," desired, or positive results. As previously discussed, quiz results are a product of an identity that the user has taken

up through a process of interpellation, and therefore the quiz results are based strictly on the user's responses, which are based on the user's identity. This is why users are not always surprised by their results, as they are aware of who they are and often take the quizzes simply to see the identities that they have seen within themselves get written down, and, therefore, *officiated*. Due to the direct impact of user activity on their results, many users are able to pinpoint the different parts of their personality that exist within their quiz results, and this provides them with a sense of validation. Even further, these "correct" quizzes are the ones that users see as more accurate. While negative answers are viewed as an error, and do not play a role in changing a user's concept of self, positive answers actually provide users with a sense of validation. As noted in a focus group, "the ones that we get the satisfying answer from are the tests that we see as more legitimate." This could be due to the fact that, as Grossberg (1998) points out, the essentialist view "assumes that every category exists naturally, in and of itself...and the meaning of the category is always intrinsic to the category itself, determined ahead of time" (p 219). This idea connects back to the phenomenon of users entering a BuzzFeed quiz with a desire or prediction of what they will get as a result, as it assumes that representations of us are always pure and based on what actually exists. The irony is that users' reaction to negative results connects to the anti-essentialist view that identities are not innate but are all representations, while their reaction to positive results connects to the essentialist view that identities are innate and genuine. There is still more research that can be done on this imbalance of ideas in order to figure out why users take these opposing positions on the same phenomenon.

While the original focus of this study was how these quizzes are used as a public form of communication, my data found instead that participants use these quizzes for intrinsic

satisfaction much more than for public displays of self. One participant explained that they “just take it for [them]self and that’s pretty much it.” Another participant elaborated, sharing that “I usually just take the quizzes for myself, I don’t really, like, share my results or anything. I just kind of do it to pass the time.” This connects not only to this idea of intrinsic satisfaction being derived from these quizzes, but also to the theme of BuzzFeed quizzes being used for procrastination. Muntinga’s (2011) research on motivations for interaction with certain brands online cites “personal identity” as a primary motivation; within this, “Sub-motivations include, for instance, gaining insight into one’s self; reinforcing personal values; and identifying with and gaining recognition from peers” (p. 20). These sub-motivations appear to correlate strongly with participants’ experience, particularly the idea of “reinforcing personal values.” The sub-motivation of “gaining recognition from peers” would connect more to any possible action that would be taken by the user upon receiving their identity (i.e. sharing publically, discussing with friends, viewing statistics of comparison). However, the intrinsic motivation of taking these quizzes, the need for a personal understanding of self, connects to the sub-motivation of “gaining insight into one’s self.”

The internal motivations behind taking quizzes provide an insight into the inner desires and identities of BuzzFeed quiz takers. Focus groups demonstrated, however, that even outside of the identities ascribed to users by BuzzFeed quizzes, there is much that can be shown about a person through their interactions with BuzzFeed material. In fact, the *type* of quiz a user takes can make a statement about that person; it tells about their interests, their media consumption style, and their membership in discourse communities. One participant noted that,

people will click on things and choose to look at them based on if it draws them in or not, and I feel like based on who you are as a person, then [those are] the things that you choose to interact yourself with

When asked what types of quizzes participants interact with most, there were two types of answers: preference of quiz structure (i.e. checklist, trivia-based, etc.), and preference of quiz content (i.e. TV-show related, food-related, etc.). BuzzFeed has a wide variety of quizzes spanning almost every category, created using a variety of quiz structures. One focus group participant explained that they “tend to gravitate towards the ones that are like checklists,” while another mentioned that they “love the zodiac sign quizzes because they basically make no sense but [they] love seeing what they say.” It seems as though this preference of quiz type stems from the type of information a user associates themselves with; one participant feels as though

I definitely like the ones that have challenging words, the ones that are like, ‘only a true expert would really know this show’ or ‘you’ll only pass this quiz if you actually know what you’re talking about,’ or something like that... like those types of like quizzes that are testing your knowledge....It’s weird, but that’s who I am as a person, I’m a challenger.

While the type of quiz a user interacts with shows the way they think and the type of interactions they choose to have (more knowledge-based versus mindless box-ticking) make a statement about a person’s personality, the content and topics they choose to interact with makes a big statement as well. Users interact with content that draws them in, and they are drawn in by things they recognize and are interested in. Participants made note of different quizzes they enjoy: “I usually only take the Disney BuzzFeed quizzes because I’m a Disney fan;” “I’ll take the quiz if it has to do with food...just because I love food so much, and usually they post a dessert or, like,

mac 'n' cheese, and that's really appealing to me." A statement is made about a person's interests when they interact with a BuzzFeed quiz because users interact with quizzes they feel that they could succeed in (or quizzes they are curious to see if they could succeed in). One who has never seen and has no interest in *Game of Thrones* is unlikely to take a "Which *Game of Thrones* character are you?" quiz, because they will not understand the questions, and without knowing the personality of the character, they will be unable to extract any meaning from the quiz results. A user finding out that they are most like Jon Snow from *Game of Thrones* will make no sense if they have ever seen the show, because they do not know what characterizes Jon Snow, and they will have no context with which to construct a meaning or identity. The reason BuzzFeed is so popular and widely used is because "Buzzfeed has something for everyone because their articles are based on different personas" (Manzo, 2015, n.p.). Users will also interact with quizzes based on values that they covet; for this purpose, BuzzFeed creates quizzes containing "personally meaningful themes, such as family, friendship, personal anecdotes and/or future plans to initiate deeply personal conversations with consumers" (Tafesse, 2016, p. 15). Even outside of the simple satisfaction of interacting with content users are interested in, identity is formed and developed through the creation and maintenance of discourse communities online. Social media aids in the formation of discourse communities in the digital age, especially when users are using social media to interact with branded content, such as that on BuzzFeed. BuzzFeed quizzes, especially when interacted with on social media with other users, promotes a sense of community because "A common passion – the brand – makes people feel a strong connection with one another, and generates a bond" (Muntinga, 2011, p. 31). Discourse communities can be based on interests or values; one participant, who identifies as a frequent television watcher, explained that "when I finish a TV show I want to go on BuzzFeed and see

everything they've written about it." This participant enjoys viewing others' opinions of the content they enjoy, and also finds satisfaction in feeling like a member of a group. While personally enjoying and interacting with content is a great form of personal identification, being a part of a discourse community is beneficial because it provides members of that group with a sense of belonging. One participant believes that BuzzFeed is useful for establishing and promoting discourse communities, because,

I think BuzzFeed is categorizing people based on the answer so it's putting people in groups kinda like the Myers-Briggs test where you get the 4 letter combination, you don't necessarily talk to the people in the same group but it does mean that you are in the same group.

Whether a BuzzFeed user is taking a quiz alone, sharing their results, or conversing with other quiz-takers with similar interests, there are many layers of self-identification and self-presentation that occur, both internally and externally. With the foundation laid by understanding the implications of one's ascribed identities on one's everyday life and self-view, users are able to make decisions of how to interact with this material.

**To Share or Not to Share?** It is an established fact that the taking of BuzzFeed quizzes provides users with identities, which they can then choose to interact with publically, or to internalize privately. In fact, it seems as though one's identity can determine if and how they are going to interact with their BuzzFeed content. There are many different factors that play a role in determining a user's interaction with their BuzzFeed material, ranging from their personality, to their social media brand, to the content of the quiz itself. Some users share their results publically, some share them semi-privately with a small group, and some choose not to

share them at all. Focus group and interview participants discussed the various deciding factors on whether or not they share BuzzFeed content, publically or privately.

The first primary determiner of if and how a user will interact with BuzzFeed material is the personality of the individual. Leung (2013) writes that “Personality traits are the other determining factors influencing internet users to produce UGC [user-generated content] using social media” (Leung, 2013, p. 1003). Focus group participants agreed that there are essentially two types of digital citizens on social media: sharers and non-sharers. One participant, who identifies as a non-sharer, explained that “having the posts of the BuzzFeed quizzes [is] just like not really my personal brand because I’m just like not a poster/sharer person.” There are different real personalities of people, some who are more open with their thoughts and some who are not, and online is no exception. According to Grossberg, (1998) we share what we want the world to see, and we construct these messages intentionally to share the correct message (p. 152). Therefore, if someone wants the world to see less of their personality online, they will share less online. Muntinga (2011) identifies the different online personalities as “lurkers” and “socializers.”, explaining that “While lurkers observe other people’s conducts and contributions on online communities, socializers engage with other people, provide feedback and maintain relationships with family, friends and other acquaintances” (p. 15). Another factor that could come into play is narcissism; Leung (2013) conducted research on the sharing activity of different social media users, and determined that,

Previous research found that narcissism was positively related to levels of social activity and intentions of self-promotion; that is, the more narcissistic a person was, the more he or she was likely in interact with other people in the online community, and the more he or she would be likely to post-self-promoting content (Leung p. 999).

Some studies have found narcissism levels rising throughout the digital social age, as it has become easier than ever to promote oneself online, which can go to users' heads. Narcissism can be seen in many users on a minor level, and evidently can contribute to a user's comfortability in sharing online.

It should come as no surprise that, just as in real life, digital life consists of different individuals with different personalities and levels of openness. These personality traits are arguably the most fundamental factor in determining a user's sharing activity, as they determine how a user manages their online presence.

Based on the way a user presents themselves in real life, assumptions can be made regarding how they will present themselves online. In a focus group, participants discussed the ways that they balance their digital social lives with their real social lives. There were several different balances: share on social media *and* in real life or *only* share in real life. While statistics show that a majority of BuzzFeed quiz takers share their results online, focus group participants did not fall into that majority. A majority of participants feel more comfortable sharing their results in person than online; one shared, "I'd definitely be more inclined to talk about it in person rather than on social media." Another echoed the same sentiment, explaining that "I would talk about a quiz that I took in person with someone." A similar interaction participants shared was sharing results with a select group or individual, if not in person, through direct communication. One participant shared that "If it's something I have in common with my friend I'll just text them or talk to them separately." Although the majority of participants rarely share, one participant explained that "in my perspective, you post it, and then you talk about it in person after." The participant who shares *and* discusses also identified as an "extroverted" person, which connects back to the theory that a user's personality affects their online

interactions. It was interesting to interact with a group of non-sharers or rare sharers, since there is so much evidence from BuzzFeed's success and circulation that the sharing of BuzzFeed content is a common activity.

The irony demonstrated in the focus group was that, while participants rarely, if ever, share their BuzzFeed results or quizzes on social media, they all claimed that they *find* almost all of their BuzzFeed content on social media. When asked about the reasoning behind their hesitation to share their content, there were several different reasons. One participant claimed that they keep their social media to themselves, explaining that "I normally don't post them on my Facebook cause it's more like a private thing I keep to myself." Another participant had a more self-conscious response, worrying that "if I shared them publically, people would know how much I procrastinate, and how much of a life I don't have. If I just shared every BuzzFeed quiz that I took, I probably wouldn't have as many friends." While there were several different concerns behind users choosing not to share their results, it seemed as though all participants were very secure in their decision. Leung (2013) writes that "the behavior of media gratification-seeking is regarded as goal-directed and utility-driven," which means that social media users have specific goals in mind for their social media interactions, and these goals frame the way we interact with the material (p. 998). When it comes to an online personality, much like a real personality, it is rare for change to occur, which is why the polarization between sharers and non-sharers exists.

A fascinating finding that came from conducting a focus group of participants who rarely share BuzzFeed content on social media was the belief shared by participants that Facebook, the most common BuzzFeed sharing platform, is a "less-professional LinkedIn," and therefore not appropriate for sharing content that is less than professional. One participant introduced this idea

by stating that “I don’t [share BuzzFeed content] because Facebook is kind of like a less professional LinkedIn so I wouldn’t put a BuzzFeed quiz on a LinkedIn, so.... I like think it’s a little unprofessional to do so.” Another participant elaborated, stating that “It’s more of a professionalized social media at this point; I think it’s the most common one, but...we’re getting to a point now of being a bit more cautious in relation to that particular social media.” A third participant echoed, “I try not to keep it more professional, I don’t like outside links.” Aside from the argument of professionalism, Facebook was explained by participants as a platform that family members follow, and therefore they are very selective with the content shared on it. On the difference between sharing content on Facebook versus other social media, one participant shared,

I don’t really share them much on Facebook, because on Facebook I have my aunt, my mom, my grandma.... when on Twitter it’s just my immediate friends or people on campus. And on Twitter I just post anything, it doesn’t really matter. Whereas on Facebook, I post specific things.

An interesting finding from the focus group was that not only is the personality of the user a large determining factor in an individual’s media use, but so is the personality of the social media platform. Even though the focus group participants do not share their results frequently, that does not mean they are unable to construct their identities. Liberman (2013) explains that the internet is an “outlet of self-construction,” not just of social interaction; therefore, the internet is what a user makes it, and they user can choose to use it to share their thoughts, or not to share their thoughts. The reason why the internet is such a widely used tool is, likely, because it can be used for whatever kind of gratification a particular user is looking for.

Aside from the personality of the user, as well as the personality of the social media platform, it seems as though the quizzes themselves have a personality too: either public or private. As explained by a focus group participant, “the more private quizzes are the ones that tell you more about yourself, not like your height or something, but, like...your best quality.” As for a more ‘public’ quiz, something that would be considered more socially acceptable to share on social media, it was explained by a participant that “food’s ok, movies are ok, what Disney princess you are is okay, but if its like your romantic life, any of that, that’s where the line is.” It seems as though things that would be comfortably discussed in everyday conversation would be more acceptable to share online, while participants believe that “There are some BuzzFeed quizzes where the answers aren’t just something you post about on your social media, it’s a little bit weird. Some of them are literally only for personal use.” It was discovered, however, that in the case of private quizzes, sharing is acceptable in a private setting. For example, one participant shared that “my friends and I also like send links back and forth like with things that we’re interested in” in a more private setting. Muntinga (2011) conducted an interview over Instant Messenger and found that “IM encourages people to reveal more personal information and to express themselves uninhibitedly” (p. 23). It seems as though this would explain why users might be more willing to share even private content over text messaging (another form of Instant Messaging). Another participant agreed, explaining “I post them more publically on Twitter but but if it’s more like a private test I guess, or a quiz or whatever I’ll send it in a group chat with my friends or send it to one of my best friends individually.” Grossberg (1998) writes, regarding the public vs. private content sharing phenomenon, “most of our judgments about media are private and shared only among close friends (Did you see *Melrose Place* Last night? What do you think of the new Wallflowers?)” (p.363). Research conducted by Muntinga (2011)

explains that a common motivation for sharing content on social media includes “gaining a sense of belonging; connecting with friends, family, and society; seeking support/emotional support, and substituting real-life companionship” (pp. 19-20). While social media is commonly used for public displays of identity, more personal, intimate connections are often made on it as well. It is likely that the personality of the user, the social media platform, *and* the content itself determines whether a user will share specific content. Aside from these different personalities interacting, however, is one more factor: the culture of today’s internet. A common lesson taught to digital natives nowadays, in an age of such frequent sharing, is to be conservative with what is shared; according to one participant, “I feel like on social media we’ve always, since the beginning of our time on social media, had it beaten into our heads that you’re supposed to be not revealing too much on social.” This could be one explanation as to why users censor the content they see as “shareable,” and why there exists such a concept as ‘private’ quizzes. It is vital to understand these personality components to sharing-related activity before considering the actual sharing activity of users.

Of those who share on social media, there is certain material that is considered to be more “shareable” than other material. BuzzFeed quizzes provide users with an ascribed identity, which means that the quiz result that a user shares acts as a personal statement of their identity. Therefore, it is more likely for users to share the results to their BuzzFeed quizzes with other people (whether it be public or with a small group) if they agree with the results, and feel as though the results are an accurate depiction of them. This theory was discussed by focus group participants, one participant agreeing that “I think the only ones that I would really want to share are the ones that I, like, agree with. I mean, I don’t think if you [dis]agree with something you’re gonna share it... you don’t want it being a representation of you.” Social media is so often used in

the social digital age as a tool for self-identification and presentation, so if and when users actually share their results, they are sharing them with a specific purpose in mind. Social media can serve a number of purposes, and “Boyd (2008) and Bumgarner (2007) respectively identified impression management and identity expression as important motivators of using social networking sites” (Muntinga, 2011, p. 20). As aforementioned, different social media platforms have different personalities, and Facebook’s reputation as a more “professional” social media means that only positively-identifying content is typically shared. Leung (2015) found that in a study, “social media users tended to use Facebook and blogs to socialize and to show affection and blogs to get recognition and to share interest, thoughts, and experience, while they tended to participate in forums to vent negative feelings” (p.1001). Facebook, the most common social media platform for BuzzFeed content, is used mainly for messaging that represents someone in a positive, accurate light, since it is a family and work friendly platform. One focus group participant shared that “The only instance that I would share something on a quiz is like if it’s so weirdly accurate that I have to like tell someone about it.” Even though sharing BuzzFeed material was not a common phenomenon among this focus group, sharing on social media is a common event worldwide, and therefore it is important to consider the motivation behind the occurrence that users do share. “Boyd (2008) found social identification to play a major role in people’s contributions to social networking sites,” and since Facebook is a more intimate platform, those who do share often do so for a sense of identification and of portrayal of an *accurate* self (Muntinga, 2011, p. 20). While focus group participants admitted to rarely sharing BuzzFeed content publically, there was still an understanding of the reasons behind sharing, and the content that they *might* consider sharing, because of the prominence of the BuzzFeed sharing phenomenon.

Social media such as Facebook is where an individual can be characterized by the world, and the content shared on it is therefore intended to be the most accurate, positive portrayal of a person. BuzzFeed quizzes are intended to use accurate answers, just as social media accounts are intended to contain accurate portrayals of their users. However, in both cases, this is not always the case. Framing, as discussed by Brake (2008), is a common phenomenon on social media by which users will select certain information to share and withhold other information in an effort to “edit” the image of oneself. In taking BuzzFeed quizzes, framing is certainly possible; one could choose specific answers, making assumptions of what result they will yield, for example. Focus group participants were familiar with this phenomenon, one admitting, “I will occasionally take it 1 or 2 times just to see...I want one answer but I don’t get it so I’ll; change my answers to get it.” In this instance, explained the participant, these results are not to be shared, but more for fun or curiosity. However, in many instances, actions like this are taken with the specific goal of getting a specific answer to share. One focus group participant who personally identifies as a non-sharer believes that “maybe people who like constantly share them, if they start the quiz knowing they’re going to share it, then maybe their answers might change because they know that they’re going to be posting about it on social media.” This is no different, really, than Instagram users editing their photos before posting them to ensure they look their best, but the difference is that a BuzzFeed quiz provides identifying information about one’s personality, which pulls more weight in a person’s identity than a picture of them containing a zit. This may sound like a form of ‘cheating,’ or sound dishonest, but it is an example of social media users taking advantage of the freedoms that they enjoy. Leung (2015) explains that “social media allows one to have almost full control over self-presentation” (p. 1004). With this control, some choose to present an honest, untouched self-image, while some choose to present an edited self,

typically in an effort to appear as one's best self. Given the established knowledge that one's identity is both constructed and exhibited through BuzzFeed quizzes and on social media, it is vital that one portrays themselves in the way they want to be seen, whether that is authentic or retouched, since the social media, including shared BuzzFeed quiz results, is arguably one of the most important tools for self-identification in the digital social age.

**Self-Editing/Branding.** One very important part of the identity of today's digital natives is their definition of their *personal brand*. A personal brand refers to the aesthetic or attitude that an individual try to portray through their interactions, self-presentation, and digital accounts. Digital natives are taught from the moment they create their first social media account that they must remember to be true to their personal brand, so as to keep their posts appropriate and consistent to their personalities. Focus group participants agreed that "people are very passionate about their personal brand, whether they know it or not. Your interests and hobbies and personality traits are your personal brand." Based on these personality traits, social media users shape the content they share. One participant shared,

"I consider myself to be a really professional person, and in the past people have described me as more of a serious personality and a go-getter, an achiever.... And so really I'm really concerned with how I appear socially.... It's more about how I appear professionally, and that is how I choose to use social media."

As previously demonstrated, the quizzes that a BuzzFeed user takes correlate with their interests and personality; in other words, the quizzes we take correlate with our personal brands. This means that users who share the content they interact with need to be extremely careful with selecting this content, as the content they share makes a statement about them as an individual.

Discussion with focus group participants showed that social media users do in fact construct an opinion about a person based on the content they share. One participant admitted that,

“If I were to see like someone only posting like a whole bunch of BuzzFeed quizzes like, ‘which Disney princess am I?’ ‘what kind of sushi am I?’, all of like that kind of thing, I feel like, it’d be a bit childish compared to, like, science articles or technology articles or that sort of thing.”

While this comment may sound judgmental and critical, it is true that the content a person interacts with is dependent on their personal identity, so it is sensible for social media users to be held responsible for what they share. Here again the concept of interpellation is useful to understand the ways in which participants talk about Buzzfeed. When discussing interpellation, Grossberg (1998) talks about codes,

“Interpellation literally means putting into the space. Theorists use it to describe the way in which different codes-- the codes of language or the codes of the cinema, for example--place people into particular positions that define their subjectivity and experience of the world. It is a bit like walking down the street and hearing someone say, ‘hey, you.’ You turn around thinking that perhaps they have called to you. In that instance, you have been hailed and positioned-- interpellated by that single simple utterance” (p. 194).

Quizzes interpellate users based on their subject matter and wording. Users who identify with a certain topic or brand will accede to the interpellation of material that connects to this topic or brand, and they will be coaxed into interacting with this content. While this sounds like a form of deception, or manipulation of audiences, “the actual people receiving this message are not necessarily as passive as this makes them sound. Interpellation can define someone into a

subordinate position, but the person has to accede to that interpellation. He or she has to take up the position” (Grossberg, 1998, p. 229). Therefore, audiences are not simply hypnotized into interacting with certain content; they have the choice of whether or not they wish to be drawn in by the material, and then after the interaction with the content, they have the choice of whether or not they wish to share the content.

Focus group participants actually believe that the decision of whether or not one wishes to share their BuzzFeed quiz results is contingent upon one’s personal brand standards. For example, one participant shared that “I would never share a BuzzFeed quiz result about a guilty pleasure of mine because it’s not part of my brand. My personal brand is basically how I want the world to perceive me and what I share helps shape that.” This means that one’s personal brand is not dependent solely upon one’s interests, but in the interests one chooses to share with the world. Muntinga (2011) writes that “A brand can also be used to express and shape one’s identity and/or personality: who you are and what you stand for,” which means that the brands or topics that users choose to publically interact with are an expression of one’s identity (p. 29). Interview participants shared that their concerns surrounding posting BuzzFeed content on social media are related to any potential judgment that they could get for their posts: “People would be like ‘this girl’s weirdly obsessed with BuzzFeed and she needs a life,’” and “I feel like if I shared them publically, people would know how much I procrastinate, and how much of a life I don’t have, like if I just shared- if I shared every BuzzFeed quiz that I took, I probably wouldn’t have as many friends” were included in the discussion of why participants are not frequent BuzzFeed quiz sharers. While not necessarily beneficial for the original intent of this project, these responses demonstrate the importance of maintaining a flawless personal brand in the digital age, where so many impressions are made through viewing another’s social media account. Personal

brands are meant to act as a 'resume' of someone's interests, hobbies, traits, and skills; a personal brand does not showcase every single part of a person, it merely highlights the parts that that person chooses to share and identify with. Therefore, they must be regularly updated and maintained in order to ensure accuracy and consistency.

One of the primary ways that digital natives showcase their personal brands in the social digital age is through their social identity, or digital "aesthetic." This refers to the general tone, voice, and style with which a social media user communicates online. One interview participant shared that "I have a certain style for how I post to my Facebook page, and so I try to stick to that way." Digital aesthetics could include makeup tutorial videos, political posts, or frequent status-posting. Social media users must be choosy with the content they post to ensure that their digital aesthetic is not compromised. Muntinga (2011) shared a quote from an interview with a participant who shared that he is frequently invited to interact with different brand fan pages on social media based on brand-related content that he already interacts with, and he shared that "some invitations I'll accept, others I'll throw away; it depends on whether I want to be associated with that specific brand" (p.29). Individuals need to understand the brand identity of content to decide whether or not it aligns with the individual's own identity before they publically associate themselves with it on social media, or else they run the risk of gaining a negative association due to ignorance and a lack of careful assessment of content.

Because there is importance placed in the content a social media user interacts with, as well as the identities portrayed by such content, it is believed that some users frame themselves a certain way in order to construct a personal brand that is more idealistic than realistic. Although BuzzFeed quizzes are typically intended to be taken with honest answers, focus group participants unanimously agreed that some BuzzFeed quiz takers, particularly those who are

frequent sharers of their results, may intentionally select specific answers to quizzes that they believe will give them a certain result, in order to construct an ideal self on social media.

Muntinga's (2011) research on social media users' interaction with online brand and fan pages indicates that, in the case of online quizzes, "positive feedback for having accurately answered a brand-related question makes someone feel appreciated and respected for who they are and what they are capable of, and subsequently boosts that person's self-confidence" (p. 30). This theory would explain why users may frame their results: to connect to the desire for acceptance within society, as well as the validation of self (even if this "self" is not completely authentic), and to publically display the aspects of one's personality (or the falsely constructed parts of it) that one chooses to identify with.

## **Conclusion**

While the original intent of this research was to observe the ways in which BuzzFeed quiz takers use their quiz results as a form of self-identification by sharing them on social media, the focus shifted due to the population sampled in the focus group and interviews, and it became more of an exploration of the intrinsic identification that occurs when an individual interacts with a BuzzFeed quiz. The irony of the research was that a majority of BuzzFeed users do, in fact, share their results on social media, and this constructs over half of the site's visitors, and yet in a sample population of ten students from Roger Williams University, none identified as frequent sharers, many even identifying as non-sharers. The findings and goal of the project would have likely turned out to be very different, given a different group of people, but the findings from this particular group provide a solid foundation with which to further explore the BuzzFeed phenomenon. With more time, it would be fascinating to explore the reasoning behind this

group's aversion to sharing BuzzFeed content; does social media protocol vary by age? By geographic region? By university? The call for participants asked for "fans of BuzzFeed quizzes," but should it have been more specific, asking for people who *share* BuzzFeed material regularly? Or would that have not been a natural group? It would be interesting to speak to a larger group of people, to see if the ratio of sharers-to-non-sharers would have been different.

This research, focusing on the inner motivations of BuzzFeed quiz takers to determine why we take BuzzFeed quizzes, lays the groundwork for future research on the sharing habits of users, if granted a group of sharers. BuzzFeed is an ever-growing company, and the different needs, uses, and subject matter of the website will evolve constantly, as will those who use it. It will be fascinating to continue to watch for the different types of quizzes that are popular, as well as to see if sharing frequency and styles evolve over time. Social media trends are fleeting, but the breadth of content that BuzzFeed distributes makes them very relevant media for so many people, and they are on track to be popular for quite some time. With this research, hopefully future research will be able to look at the identity construction that occurs when users share their content, but, for now, an understanding of the importance of BuzzFeed from an intrinsic perspective is useful. With this knowledge, different media companies, BuzzFeed included, can gain an understanding of how their consumers think, and what consumers are looking for in media such as this. Not only is this research interesting, but it is valuable and applicable.

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# Appendix

## **Figure 1.** Informed Consent (Lindlof & Taylor, p. 120)

### *Consent to Participate in a Research Study*

#### *BuzzFeed Quizzes as a Tool for Personal Identification*

#### **1. Why are you being asked to take part in this research?**

You are being invited to take part in a research study investigating college students at a medium liberal arts university in Bristol, Rhode Island. You are being including in the study because you are a student of this university between the ages of 18 and 22. If you choose to take part in the study, you may be one of the 40-50 individuals interviewed.

#### **2. Who is doing the study?**

I, Sarah Quinn, am an undergraduate student at Roger Williams University in the College of Arts & Sciences focusing on Communication and Media Studies. I am being guided in my research by Dr. Anjali Ram, Associate Professor of Communications at Roger Williams University.

#### **3. What is the purpose of this study?**

I am conducting this study to make meaning of the phenomenon of BuzzFeed personality quiz-taking in college students. The objectives of the study are:

- (1) To understand how online personality quizzes mediate the communication and construction of self among college students
- (2) To learn what kinds of pleasures, meanings, uses, and gratifications Buzzfeed quizzes provide to college students
- (3) To explore the discourse surrounding college students' personality constructions from BuzzFeed quizzes

With this research, I hope to gain a better understanding of the uses and gratifications behind modern media use and how it contributes to the construction of our identities.

#### **4. What will you be asked to do?**

Your involvement in this study will consist primary of observation and focus groups that will include 10-20 open-ended questions and will last 40-60 minutes each. The focus group will be recorded on an audio recorder to aid in the accuracy of the study.

### **5. What are the possible risks and discomforts?**

All interview questions are related to identity construction, your social media use, your use of personality quiz technology and media consumption. As such the material covered in the interview is not likely to pose any risks.

### **6. Do you have to take part in the study?**

All involvement is entirely voluntary and you do not have to answer any questions with which you are uncomfortable. Moreover, you may choose to end the interview at anytime for any reason.

### **7. What will it cost to participate?**

There are no costs associated with participating in the study

### **8. Will you receive any rewards for taking part in this study?**

There is no physical reward offered in association with participation in this study. However, your time and effort in contributing to the study are greatly appreciated.

### **9. Who will see the information that you give?**

These reports may be used for class projects, included as part in my undergraduate thesis, and published in various scholarly journals. If you agree that I may use your actual name and other identifying information, please initial next to this question. However, if you do not give me permission will replace the name with a pseudonym.

### **10. What else do you need to know?**

The interviews may be ongoing. I may wish to contact you with follow-up questions and concerns that arise as the study progresses.

### **11. What if you have any questions, suggestions, concerns, or complaints?**

Before deciding to participate in the study, please ask any questions and/or share any concerns that come to mind now. You may contact me at [squinn184@g.rwu.edu](mailto:squinn184@g.rwu.edu), or my advisor, Dr. Anjali Ram, at [aram@rwu.edu](mailto:aram@rwu.edu), with any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this study. Upon request, I can provide you with a copy of this form for your future reference.

**Social media profiles you agree to have textually analyzed for activity directly related to this study: (\*\*VOLUNTARY\*\*)**

---

Please indicate your agreement to participate in this study as explained above by signing below:

---

(Signature of person agreeing to take part in the study)

---

(Date)

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(Printed name of person agreeing to take part in the study)

## **Figure 2.** Focus Group Script (Lindlof & Taylor, p. 195)

### **I. MODERATOR INTRODUCTION**

*[Note: A conversational approach sets a tone that relaxes people, making it more comfortable for them to share their intimate thoughts. This part of the script can be easily remembered and delivered naturally by moderators.]*

Hello! My name is Sarah Quinn, and I am working with Dr. Anjali Ram from the Roger Williams University Department of Communications. You were all invited here today because it is important that we hear from young adults like you. However, don't worry that anyone outside of our group will know exactly what you said, no names will be used when your comments are used in our research project. Also, we ask you to respect the privacy of the other group members by not discussing anything that anyone else says. So we all agree that our conversation will be confidential? *[Be sure to make brief eye contact with each person at this point.]*

Let's imagine that you go outside this building and ask someone, "What is the temperature right now at this spot?" There is a right answer that you can check with a thermometer. However, what we are discussing tonight is how you or your friends feel about things, and there could be as many different opinions as there are people in this room. Guess what? Every one of those opinions is right! Remember, we aren't here to convince anyone of something in particular or to change anyone's mind. We are here to discuss things and hear what each and every one of you has to say.

Sometimes, you will find that many people in the room have your opinion, and other times, you will be the only one with that opinion. But it is important for us to learn about all of the opinions, because even if you are the only one in the room who holds that opinion, there may be hundreds or thousands of other people in our community who feel just as you do. Most importantly, every opinion counts, so please feel free to share your thoughts.

You will notice the carefully hidden tape recorder. *[This is a joke!]* I will be recording our conversation because we want to be able to remember everything you share and to really listen to you now instead of spending time scribbling notes. The tape recorder does have one problem. It is hard to hear voices when more than one person is speaking. So I'm asking you to please speak one at a time.

If you need to leave the discussion for some reason, please feel free to step outside, but I ask you to hurry back to join us. So, sit back and relax. I know you will find the next [60] minutes very interesting and enjoyable.

## II. PARTICIPANT INTRODUCTIONS

First, please turn your name cards so I can see everyone's name. Thanks. I'd like to begin by finding out about [the most recent BuzzFeed quiz you remember taking].

*[Note: this is a discussion-training exercise. You call on people by their first name and ask one follow-up question about whatever they say. The follow up question can be anything that makes it clear you have been listening and that encourages the participant to add something more. That will help get the participants used to your probing for more information. A good approach is to call on people in a seemingly random order, rather than moving around the table, because the randomness better approximates how the focus group discussions happen. Moving around the table sets a different tone and could lead to people patterning their comments after their neighbor who has just spoken.]*

### **Figure 3:** Focus Group Questions

1. What do you use BuzzFeed quizzes for?
2. What usually motivates you to take a BuzzFeed quiz?
3. How do you usually find the BuzzFeed quizzes you take?
4. What type of BuzzFeed quizzes draw you in the most? Why?
5. Do you provide honest answers on BuzzFeed quizzes, or do you intentionally frame yourself? Why?
6. What needs or desires do BuzzFeed quizzes help you satisfy?
7. Is there a specific type of person who takes BuzzFeed quizzes?
8. How public or private are you regarding your answers to the quiz questions?
9. Do you ever go into a quiz with a specific result you desire?
10. How do you feel when the quizzes respond differently from how you expect them to?
11. How do you feel when the quizzes respond with the results you wanted or expected?
12. Do you share your quiz results on social media? Why or why not?
13. If yes to 12, what might a typical post look like in which you share your quiz results?
14. Is it more common for your peers to share their own responses or share the quiz itself?
15. How do your peers interact with their quiz results
16. How do you think taking these quizzes impacts your view of your personal identity?
17. How does your thinking about a person change when they share BuzzFeed quiz results?
18. Tell me about a time when you have found a BuzzFeed quiz result to be insightful
19. Do you ever feel as though you have to provide a “correct” answer on BuzzFeed quiz questions? Why?
20. What helps you determine whether or not you will share BuzzFeed content on social media?

