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Variables of Blogging: How to Get More Views on Your Blog

Intro

Catchy lyrics and a memorable tune make a song popular. In-depth reporting and interesting interviews get news articles shared. Great shots and compelling audio helps a video get watched. But what about blogs? What characteristics make a blog good and get it read and followed?

More than 152 million blogs were on the internet in 2013 (Gaille 1). With anyone being able to become a blogger and the blogosphere becoming overcrowded, it is difficult to create a blog that stands out and becomes followed by many. Over the summer I was the blogger for Florence for Fun in Florence, Italy. While there, I was given tips by Ashley Buchanan, a blogger who has made her travel/fashion blog a part of her career. Her blog, History in Heels, has thousands of followers. She gave me many pointers to make my blog more readable, popular and to help get more followers. For my honor's thesis I paired with Visit Stillwater to test these pointers to see if they would help make a popular blog. My blog was called Visit Stillwater P.S. Alyssa.

Over the fall 2015 semester I kept the blog and experimented with different features of a post, including length of story, picture placement within a story, and the effects of placing the story on a social media platform. The content of the blog posts covered date ideas, restaurants and just touristy things people visiting Stillwater would want to know. The goal was to try to determine what a writer can do or add to their blog to help it get read. My blog was categorized as a travel blog and promoted by Stillwater's Visitors Bureau, Visit Stillwater. All my blogs

were edited and all uploading was monitored by their media manager and vice president Kylie Vincent.

The purpose of the blog was to give a college student's perspective on things to do in Stillwater, Oklahoma. The one catch was that because my blog was backed by Visit Stillwater I could not say anything negative about Stillwater, Oklahoma State University, or the local businesses. My articles ranged from personal stories like my own Stillwater bucket list to general information. I also had filler articles like "Weekly Dose of Orange" and "Fact or Fiction" to keep my page active throughout most of the week and to draw people to it. As a part of the agreement with Visit Stillwater for their backing of my blog, Kylie Vincent was able to read each blog to OK it and suggest changes before it could be posted. This was meant to ensure that all information was accurate and something Visit Stillwater would support.

I tested five variables over the course of the semester, like which post would get more views, one with pictures or ones without, and how posting the blogs to social media would affect the number of views. To measure these changing variables, I used Google Analytics.

My hypotheses for the semester were as follows:

1. Having photos will get more page views than having none.
2. Having hyperlinks will get more bounces to the page.
3. Shorter stories will get more clicks to other pages than longer stories.
4. Bulleted/numbered posts will get more views than longer stories.
5. Posting the story to a social media site (Facebook) will cause it to get more views than stories that are not posted to social media.

Each of these variables was chosen as plausible possibilities to help a blog post catch and retain the attention of a reader. Photos are pleasing to the eye and produce a pop of color that will continue to drag the eye down a page. Links for a travel blog are important because they give validity to your blog; it also makes it easier for the traveler to find out more information about the things you mention in your blog. Shorter stories take up less time and energy than a longer story allowing the reader more time to browse the other blog posts. Bulleted and numbered stories are more popular than long stories because they categorize information into easier understandable chunks of content according to Susan Gunelius in her story, 'The Science Behind the Popularity of Listicles' (1). Twitter has around 320 million active users every month and Facebook has over 1 billion active users according to a study done by Statista. ("Leading Social Networks" 1). Together, these networks are an easy platform to get the word out about a post and also give it the ability to be networked out further than just mine or Visit Stillwater's acquaintances. Overall, I chose these variables to research because they are important characteristics to making a blog popular.

Methods

Over the course of the semester I wrote 20 posts and 16 pages to test these hypotheses. The first step was to pick a blog topic. Then I would decide which hypothesis would best fit the topic. Which hypothesis I chose to test with each blog post was a personal decision and is the independent variable in the experiment that I chose to change. This could be a big flaw in the experiment because people trying to replicate this experiment might choose different hypothesis for different types of blog posts. To test the hypothesis I would copy the original article then change just one variable, based on which hypothesis I had chosen, to test the theory. I then posted both articles onto my website using A/B testing. According to *The Complete Guide to A/B*

Testing, A/B testing is "where you compare two versions of a webpage to see which one performs better. You do this by showing the variants to similar visitors at the same time. The one that gives a better conversion rate, wins" (1). I kept track of my experiments using Google Analytics.

Results

According to Google Analytics my website, since its creation on September 30, has had 656 page views and a bounce rate of 53.66 percent. A bounce rate is the percentage of single page view visits to a website. According to TechWyse, an internet marketing company, a 53 percent bounce rate is labeled as average. The site also said, "25 percent of sites fall within the 55 percent to 80 percent which is bad in their first few months" (Asha 1). I think one reason my bounce rate might have been so high was because many of my visitors were directed to my site by clicking on a link on the Visit Stillwater Facebook page. This allowed them to read the article they saw on Facebook but they did not click on the overhead menu to read more. Maybe a side bar with pictures and related posts would help decrease my bounce rate.

I had 26.1 percent returning visitors for 171 sessions and 73.9 percent new visitors for 486 sessions. My largest audience was one-timer readers. For a travel blog I do not find this unusual. Travelers are looking for information about a certain place and once they have it, or are no longer in Stillwater, they are less likely to look up travel information.

The biggest problem I had while conducting my experiments is that my readership was not high enough to give me a large amount of data. I think with more time and larger readership the data could better prove or disprove the hypothesis.
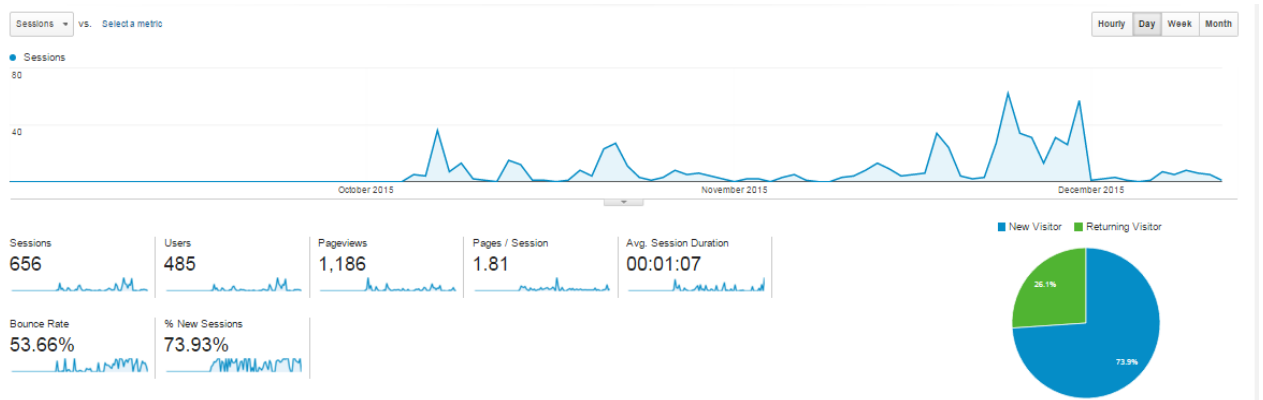
Figure 1: Google Analytics chart with my websites data.

According to Google Analytics, the main demographic for my site is people from Stillwater followed by people from Dallas. Also, my audience is mainly women. The number of women,104, nearly doubles the amount of men, 51. Most people, 52 percent of my audience, accessed my content by a mobile device. 45 percent of the sessions were accessed on an iPhone and 6 percent was accessed on a Samsung device. These were mainly new users, 143 of the 256 new users recorded. 38 percent used their desktop with the main browser being Safari. And 10 percent accessed the content using a tablet. People accessing the content on a desktop usually stayed on the page for, on average, a minute longer than other devices. They also had a lower bounce rate and viewed twice as many pages as the mobile devices. The average time on a page is two minutes and my most popular post has been Stillwater Date Ideas From A to Z with 142 views.

Hypothesis 1: Photos

The first hypothesis was that having photos on the blog post would cause it to get more and longer page views than posts without photos. I based this hypothesis on that fact that the most popular social media sites rely heavily on photos. Jeff Bullas, a marketing blogger, had a similar philosophy; he backed up my hypothesis saying that research has showed that articles with images get 94 percent more total views (Bullas 1). As a travel blogger, I also thought photos were very important since you are trying to convince your audience to spend money going to a location or event.

For the first hypothesis, I believe my experiments proved it was highly plausible that having photos will get a blog post more and longer page views. During my experiment I kept the article exactly the same, the only variable I changed was whether or not the article had photos. After viewing my experiment results, the trend seems to be that blogs with photos received more page views than ones without. I think this had to do with the fact that photos stuck out from all the text, drawing the reader in.

For example, on one blog, "3 Best Cafes in Stillwater", the blog with photos received 60 page views with an average time on page of around four minutes. While the same blog without photos only received six page views with an average time on page of around one minute. These results were similar for the other 6 experiments I did that measured the number of post views and the length of time the reader stayed on the page, articles with photos got more views and the reader stayed on the page longer.
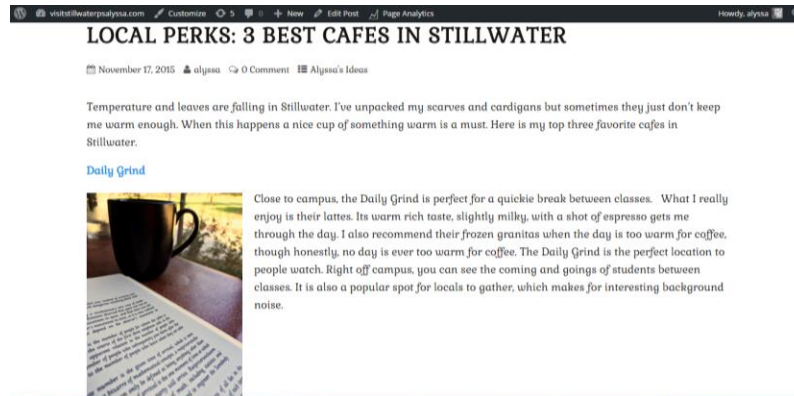
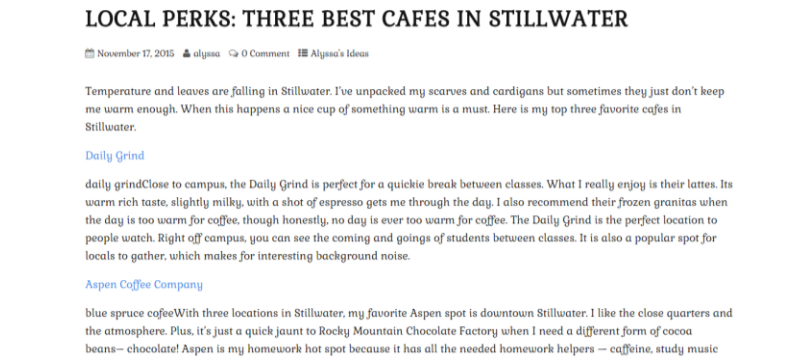Figure 2: 3 Best Cafes in Stillwater post with photos

Figure 3: Three Best Cafes in Stillwater without photos

I think the articles with photos got more views because pictures and color draws the eye in and break up the monotony of words. A blogger for 1st Web Designer compared blog posts to children books, "Remember how much you would rather read a book with lots of pictures versus one with only text when you were a kid? The same applies, even now" ("Why Images Are Important" 1). A picture not only can lure a reader in but also can help tell or enhance a story. And it helps them engage in the story and takes them to the location when words just aren't enough.

Hypothesis 2: Links

The second hypothesis that having links will get more bounces to the page was inconclusive. During my experiment I kept the article exactly the same, the only variable I changed was whether or not the article had links. The blogs with links had lower bounce rates off of the page but no proof was given that the links helped bring people to the page. Links are important though, especially for travel writers because it helps the reader get more information on the topic quickly. If your blog is used as a site for readers to get easy access to information about things to do and see then they are going to your site to get to the gathered information and will leave once they gather it. The links are vital to making it easier for the reader to be able to replicate your experience. Also, there is no way a blog can contain all the relevant information needed without becoming bogged down. So, while linking out might create exit portals for users to drop off, a survey of major newspapers on the web found that those who link out tend to outperform those who don't on many performance metrics ("How Good" 1).

One of my experiments, the Stillwater Bucket List, with and without links concluded that the article without links had more views, 129 while the one with links that had only 22, but also had a higher bounce rate 3 percent while Google Analytics said the article with links had no bounce rate. The higher bounce rate could correlate with the fact though that the article without links had a lot more views and have nothing to do with its lack of links. The article with links did have a longer average time on page though nearly 20 seconds longer than the one without. I think this might be because people were more likely to slow down and read the article knowing that they could get more information about the subject quickly if they found anything they wanted to try.
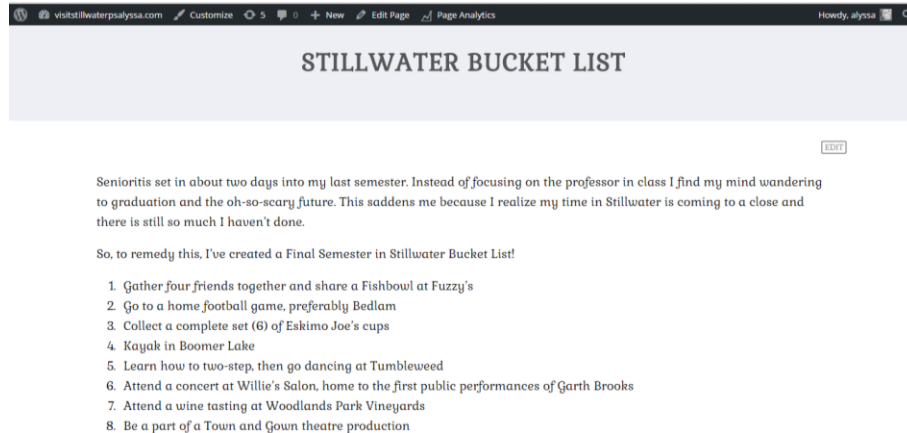
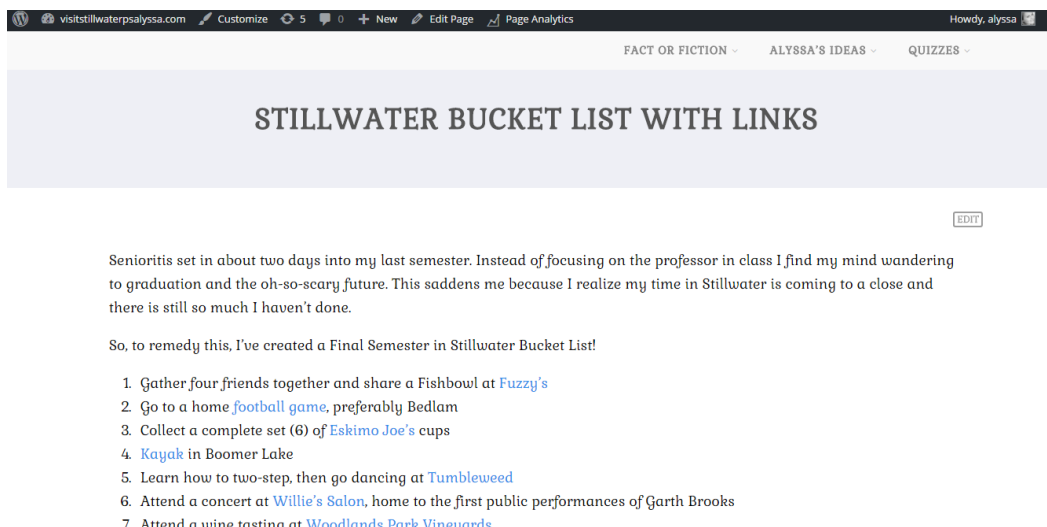Figure 4: Bucket List post without links

Figure 5: Bucket List post with links

Hypothesis 3: Story Length

I think this hypothesis that shorter stories will get more clicks to other stories than longer stories was found plausible with my experiment. During my experiment the articles were not exactly the same because I wrote one long, more than 250 words, and one short, usually around

200 words. Only one of my long stories, "My Safe Spot", received a click to another story. My shorter stories on the other hand received more than three clicks to other stories. Below is a picture of my Google Analytics Behavior Flow, it shows the starting page and then which articles people continued on to read.
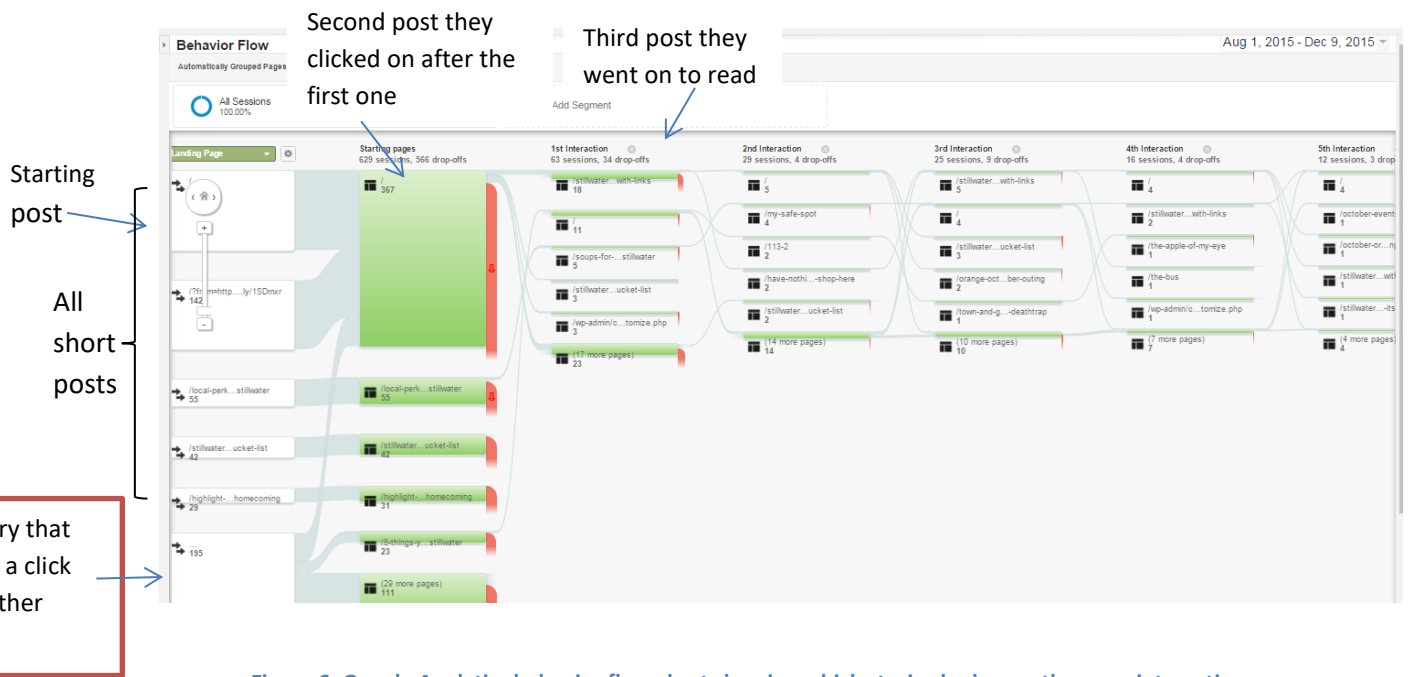

Figure 6: Google Analytics behavior flow chart showing which stories had more than one interaction

The popularity of short articles might have something to do with the fact that a large part of my audience read my content on their mobile device. Short content allowed for a quick easy read. The less time one article takes up the more likely they will be to fill the saved time reading another article. Also, short articles have gained some popularity with the rise of social media, a network of quick and to the point posts. Breaking a long post into more easily processed posts helps keep the reader from feeling overwhelmed and helps cut down their desire to skim over the content.

Hypothesis 4: Bulleted/Numbered Posts

My experiment found the hypothesis that bulleted or numbered posts will get more views than longer stories highly plausible. Based on my own reading habits, and the habits of people I asked, we agreed that posts with numbers in the name, like three best or six facts, were more likely to catch our eye. This has to do with the fact that people know it is going to be a quick read. Numbered and bulleted posts also make skimming easier; making it easier to spot the information you want to read from the rest of the article, according to blogger Shaun Quarton in his blog post "10 Tips to Increase Blog Post Engangement (1). The New Yorker wrote a non-list article expanding on the reasons people's brains love lists. Their reasoning is that, "the headline catches the readers eye in a stream of content…it spatially organizes the information…it promises a story that is finite….Together, these create an easy reading experience, in which the mental heavy lifting of conceptualization, categorization, and analysis is completed well in advance of actual consumption" (Konnikova 1). Konnikova also goes on to say that lists promise a definite ending and that people feel pleasure when they complete a task. Konnikova says, "The process is self-reinforcing: we recall with pleasure that we were able to complete the task (of reading the article) instead of leaving it undone and that satisfaction, in turn, makes us more likely to click on lists again" (3).

During my experiment I took the same information but put one into a paragraph style blog and the other I put the information into a numbered or bulleted list. I found that posts broken down into numbered or bulleted information were clicked on more often and on average had a longer time on page than blogs with long paragraph styled stories. For example I did a showcasing what I thought are the three best cafes in Stillwater. In the long paragraph styled blog I named it "Local Perks: Three Best Cafés in Stillwater", it got 15 page views with an

average time of one minute. The blog that I did in a numbered style format I titled, "Local Perks: 3 Best Cafés in Stillwater" and broke the information into three separately boxed information sections. That blog received 60 page views and had an average page time of three minutes. The other experiments showed similar results with the posts without bullets or numbers receiving usually a fourth of the number of page views as ones that are bulleted or numbered.

Figure 7: Google Analytics chart showing my pages and their number of views and average times

Hypothesis 5: Posting the Story to a Social Media Site (Facebook)

My experiments found the hypothesis that posting a story to a social media site will cause it to get more views than stories that are not posted to a social media site to be highly plausible. This caused many of blogs I had planned to use in this data to not be available. Of the stories she shared, they ended up getting more than triple the views that stories that were not posted got. The stories that were not shared on Facebook had less views, sometimes none at all, compared to the stories that were shared on Visit Stillwater's Facebook page. Of my top 10 viewed stories seven of them were posted to the Visit Stillwater's Facebook page. Of my bottom 10 viewed stories only one of them was posted to Visit Stillwater's Facebook page. According to Liz Wright, the writer of the blog Travellogged, she says "successful bloggers know they have to develop a

following on key social networks as a way to promote their brand and ultimately get more clicks" (1). Social media allows more eyes to see the content and allows the audience to not have to search it out. Because my blog is just starting out, it is not in the top hits of search engines. Social media allows readers to more easily stumble upon my content, content they wouldn't otherwise be able to find unless they knew my website address or had the perfect series of words. I think social media plays an important part of getting readers to my blog.

	Page Title	Pageviews	Unique Pageviews	Avg. Time on Page	Entrances	Bounce Rate	% Exit	Page Value
		491	390	00:01:43	301	8.72%	61.30%	$0.00
		% of Total: 100.00% (491)	% of Total: 100.00% (390)	Avg for View: 00:01:43 (0.00%)	% of Total: 100.00% (301)	Avg for View: 8.72% (0.00%)	Avg for View: 61.30% (0.00%)	% of Total: 0.00% ($0.00)
	1. The Catch of Stillwater	132 (26.88%)	123 (31.54%)	00:03:14	119 (39.53%)	8.40%	84.09%	$0.00 (0.00%)
	2. The Perfect Date for a Girls Night	89 (18.13%)	82 (21.03%)	00:06:29	81 (26.91%)	6.10%	89.89%	$0.00 (0.00%)
	3. (not set)	59 (12.02%)	22 (5.64%)	00:00:56	11 (3.65%)	3.23%	23.73%	$0.00 (0.00%)
	4. Letting the Coaches Make the Call	36 (7.33%)	32 (8.21%)	00:01:28	23 (7.64%)	8.70%	55.56%	$0.00 (0.00%)
	5. About Alyssa	26 (5.30%)	11 (2.82%)	00:00:15	5 (1.66%)	0.00%	23.08%	$0.00 (0.00%)
	6. Local Perks: 3 Best Cafes in Stillwater	18 (3.67%)	15 (3.85%)	00:01:24	13 (4.32%)	23.08%	77.78%	$0.00 (0.00%)
	7. Stillwater Bucket List	12 (2.44%)	4 (1.03%)	00:00:34	1 (0.33%)	0.00%	8.33%	$0.00 (0.00%)
	8. The Spice of Life	11 (2.24%)	11 (2.82%)	00:00:00	11 (3.65%)	9.09%	100.00%	$0.00 (0.00%)
	9. Mile Markers for the Walker	10 (2.04%)	7 (1.79%)	00:02:39	6 (1.99%)	16.67%	60.00%	$0.00 (0.00%)
	10. Stillwater Date Ideas from A to Z	7 (1.43%)	7 (1.79%)	00:01:25	3 (1.00%)	33.33%	71.43%	$0.00 (0.00%)

Show rows: 10   Go to: 1   1 - 10 of 48   < >

Figure 8: Google Analytics chart showing my top 10 most viewed stories.

Discussion

The trend I saw throughout the semester of blogging was that short (especially numbered blogs) with pictures got the best response and most views. Short blogs are popular because people can read them quickly while on the go. Also, short is often to the point. This keeps the information limited to only necessities, which I believe travel readers prefer over long winded descriptive stories.

Hypothesis 1: Photos

I think my experiment proved this to be correct because people like visuals, especially travelers. Photos give the reader a way to see for themselves the things the writer is talking

about. It often does a better job of creating credibility for what the story is trying to sell to the reader. You can say going to Granny's Kitchen to try a warm gooey cinnamon roll topped with homemade icing is a must try but if the reader sees a photo, like the one in Figure 9, he or she are often more likely to be drawn to actually visit the establishment mentioned in the article.

Figure 9: Cinnamon roll from Granny's Kitchen

Photos often catch the eye of a reader before words do. An eye-catching photo can draw a reader to want to click on the article to read and maybe to see if more photos are attached. Many people do not have long attention spans. Often times they just skim the sea of words. If a reader sees a photo they like or a graphic that tells the story better than they are more likely to stay on the page and read the words to find out more. Photos also create a pleasant break in long wordy articles and create some white space/breathing room.

Hypothesis 2: Links

After doing my experiment, I've found the opposite of this hypothesis seemed to be true. I found that blogs with links actually led people away from my sites. I do not know if this is because they had found everything they were looking for or if the link was more interesting than my other articles. Many of the people who usually read blogs do so to gather information quickly or because they are bored. It is easy to get sidetracked when you are not invested in the article so when a link is clicked that leads to somewhere else, especially another blog, the reader will often time just keep going forward instead of taking the time to return to the first blog. For travel writing though linking is a must because it shares travel information easily so readers can replicate your experience that you posted about. But, honestly, tagging an article plays a more important role in bringing people to the blog than linking. I believe the blogger should pick their links carefully. If the information can be cited in their blog post without it bogging down the blog then I would post it but still link it. This will ensure that the reader still gets the information and might make them less likely to follow a link off of the page.

Hypothesis 3: Shorter Stories

This hypothesis proved true because readers were not overwhelmed by the short articles leaving them intrigued and willing to read more. My generation of readers is also the instant, now generation. They have six second vines, 140 character tweets and constant Facebook posts, so they want their information to mirror this format. Aka they want information short, sweet, and to the point. Also, people have a limited time allotted to reading items on the web. The longer the articles the more time it takes to read therefore taking up more of the allotted online reading time. This leaves them less time to explore the website. Plus, people feel accomplished when they are able to read many articles in a short amount of time, making short articles the preferred

method of bloggers. Breaking up longer articles into numerous smaller articles could help increase the readership of these articles.

While my experiment seemed to show that audiences would be more willing to read another article after reading a short article not a long article, longer articles do have some positive points that could be researched. The higher the word count, the better chance it has on getting found on Google results because there are more opportunities for the Googlebot to find words to index for search results.

Hypothesis 4: Bulleted/Numbered Posts

What did even better than short articles, were short articles that were bulleted or numbered. This is because a short article is made even more manageable by breaking it up into numbered facts or bulleted information. Listicles, Top 10s and the BuzzFeed layout all have been very popular over the last few years. These are bare-bone layouts that give the information as simply as it can. The short, easy read is appealing to readers because they can easily skip information they don't care for and pick out the things they find interesting to focus on. It is also a quick read, saving the reader time leaving more time to do other things.

Hypothesis 5: Posting the Story to a Social Media Site (Facebook)

Posting articles onto social media gets the information in front of more eyes. Millions of people use social media. It creates an easy way for readers to share your article making it viewable to an even larger, more diverse audience outside of your small group of followers. Social media is an outlet to reach strangers and puts it in the spotlight, right in front of the reader, instead of making the reader scour the internet to find it.

Future Research and Limitations

There is plenty of room for future research. For example, a researcher could do the hypothesis and see if it varies by blog type/topic. Do fashion blogs do better with links? Are food blogs better when the articles are longer? I feel the type of blog plays is a major part in the results from the experiment because each blog type has a niche readership. And, each type of readership has things they prefer their blogs to have.

Another area of future research deals with photos. While my experiments showed that blogs with photos did better than blogs without is there such a thing as too many photos? Future research could try to better the idea of how many photos a blog should have and how many photos does it take to overwhelm the blog and make the reader leave?

In the area of links there is a lot of room for future research. While links actually caused people to leave my blog, I wonder if what type of link, whether it opens in a new window or on that same tab, creates a different result. What should be linked is another area of research. Do you link every place mentioned or just certain ones? How do you decide? What information should you link and what information should you just put into your story? What about address and times do you link them or write them in your story?

While my research showed that posting articles to social media helped increase their views, future research could look into whether the type of social media outlet (Twitter, Pinterest, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn) makes a difference in the number of views. Or which social media audience was more likely to go to the blog or follow versus those who just look at the picture attached to the post. Even more research could go into when to post to social media and what to post? Should it differ depending on which social media site you are using?

While I did research numbered and bulleted posts versus long paragraph posts, further research could go into seeing if numbers in the headlines cause more people to click. I expect that it will because it is telling the reader that the information has already been broken down and categorized for them to read, making it less work for them.

Also more research could be done for Search Engine Optimization. I don't think my blog was making the most of this. SEO could play a big part in getting readers to your page. Research could go into the best ways to optimize it.

I am a writer not a videographer, but research could be done on how videos rank in views compared to written articles. Do they get clicked on more on social media? Would the audience prefer them over written articles or bulleted blogs?

During the time I kept the blog I encountered many limitations. I ended up getting a late start in blogging because I had many issues with my website not working. Another big limitation was sporadic posting. As part of the partnership with Visit Stillwater, Kylie Vincent was required to read over all my stories before they could be posted. This need of approval caused issues throughout the semester because sometimes Kylie Vincent could not get around to reading the articles until later in the week, if at all, causing my posting to be quite sporadic.

Conclusion

The advice given to me by blogger Ashley Buchanan was harder to prove than I originally thought because each post discussed a different topic. This led me to question if people weren't clicking on the articles because of one of the variable or because they didn't want to read the article. Plus, each blog post topic was different and therefore required different variables to tell it correctly. This made writing to fit the experiment sometimes hurt the post because of the

limitations. But overall my experiment proved that if you want a larger following on your blog

and a bigger readership than you should write short blogs that are numbered or bulleted and that

have plenty of good pictures. I would avoid overloading the article with links and instead link

only necessary things. I would also recommend creating a social media site (Facebook, Pinterest,

Instagram, LinkedIn, etc.) to post your articles on. This will widen your audience and help keep

your blog from getting lost in the blogosphere.

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