

5-2021

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Maria Atilano

University of North Florida, m.atilano@unf.edu

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Recommended Citation

Atilano, Maria, "How to Make Memes and Influence Students" (2021). *Library Faculty Presentations & Publications*. 100.

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Feature | By Maria Atilano

How to Make Memes and Influence Students

One of the many challenges of reaching and engaging users via social media is how to relate to them. When I first began creating and curating content for the University of North Florida's Thomas G. Carpenter Library accounts (@unflibrary) more than 10 years ago, I was only slightly older than the average undergraduate student. I felt I could effortlessly create content that would also appeal to me, a young woman under 30 years old and a graduate student myself.

Like many librarians, academic and otherwise, I still struggle with the age-old questions: What should I post? How do I frame my message so my users will respond? This task was made even more difficult from March 2020 to July 2020, when COVID-19 forced the closure of our campus and library building, pushing our services and resources entirely online. Rather than taking a back seat to traditional marketing outlets (fliers, posters, yard signs), social media suddenly became our main way to reach our approximately 18,000 students, most of whom are traditional college students between the ages of 18 and 24.

Those of us in the library's small outreach team have long prided ourselves on our ability to use online and popular culture references in our marketing. Finals week events and activities are promoted using themes from TV shows like *Game of Thrones* ("Finals Are Coming"), *Friends* ("We'll Be There for You"), and *Survivor* ("Outstudy, Outsmart, Outlast."). Every year, we dress up as colorful characters and obscure literary references for our Haunted Open House event. But with in-person pop culture efforts off the table during the pandemic, we soon realized that social media memes could not only solve our problem of what to post, but they could also create shared connections that would help our messaging stand out.

What Are Memes?

"All your base are belong to us." Grumpy Cat. Distracted Boyfriend. If you recognize any of these references, congratulations! You're familiar with at least one viral meme (pronounced "meem").

As an older millennial, I remember when memes were flash-based or featured dancing, pixelated hamsters. Nearly 20 years later, memes aren't just for the young crowd—they are created,

repurposed, and embraced by all demographics across the internet. In the hands of teens and young adults, however, memes truly shine.

According to Merriam-Webster, a meme is "an amusing or interesting item (such as a captioned picture or video) or genre of items that is spread widely online especially through social media." The ability for the item to "spread widely" is key, since a meme is only as good as how far it goes. If I were to take a silly photo of my dog begging for a treat and post it to Twitter, where it gets five likes, that's a good tweet. If my silly dog photo is seen by a blue-checked Twitter celebrity who adds a funny caption and then retweets it so it's seen and emulated by thousands of users, that's the origin story of a meme.

Memes can be image-based or text-based. They can be wholly original in content or can refer to a pop culture element like a movie, television show, or famous photograph. Memes are seen across social media channels, but some work better on certain platforms. When it comes to library marketing, the great news is that memes work on all of our usual channels: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and more. Where there's a will, there's a way to meme.

The Legality of Memes

Coming up with original content for social media is a pain. I know it, you know it, and our supervisors (hopefully)

know it. The beauty of memes is that the content is already there, ripe for the taking and remaking.

For those concerned about copyright, trust me: As an academic librarian who teaches the importance of attribution and the dangers of plagiarism, I understand. Along with other like-minded librarians, I believe that memes fall under the Fair Use doctrine (<https://www.publicknowledge.org/blog/copyright-for-meme-makers>). Memes are by their nature both derivative and transformative, and they often have very little to do with their original sources. If your employer is concerned about the legal ramifications of social media memes, I recommend sharing the following resources that explain why memes are seldom litigious:

- "Memes, Fair Use, and Privacy," ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom (<https://www.oif.ala.org/oif/?p=16873>)



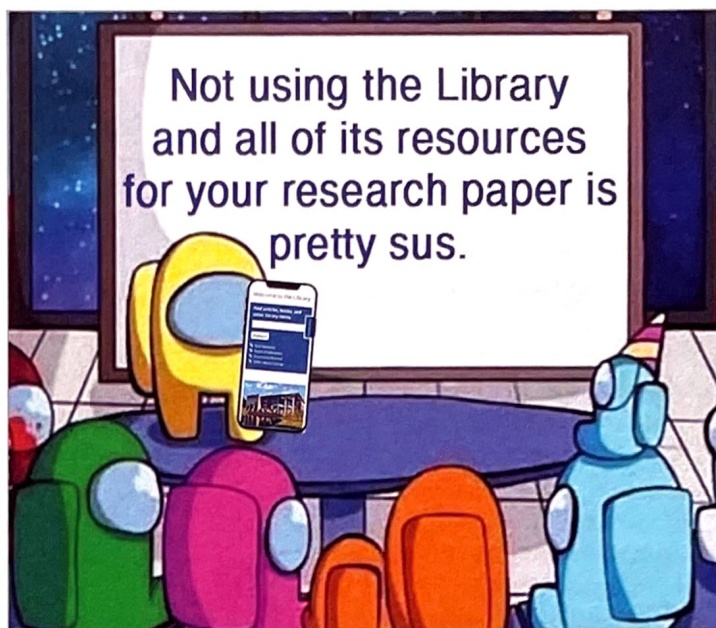
This meme was posted by @unflibrary on Sept. 17, 2020, with the caption, "When the library building closes at 10pm tonight, our late-night library staff springs into action! Questions? Need help? Text us, email us, or chat with us any time and we'll get back to you ASAP 🐱"

- “The Problem of Modern Monetization of Memes: How Copyright Law Can Give Protection to Meme Creators,” by Mark Marciszewski, Pace Intellectual Property, Sports & Entertainment Law Forum (<https://digitalcommons.pace.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1076&context=pipsself>)
- “Copyright and the Bernie Meme,” Plagiarism Today (<https://www.plagiarismtoday.com/2021/01/26/copyright-and-the-bernie-meme>)

Finding and Researching Memes

If you're concerned that current memes are too “hip” or geared toward Generation Z for your library to use, don't be. Not only will you be surprised by the number of memes you might recognize or understand, but there are also many ways to make sure you're in on the joke. Here are my go-to resources for learning more about trending memes:

- **Know Your Meme** (KYM; <https://knowyourmeme.com>)—This website is pretty much the Wikipedia of all things meme. Not only is it a great resource for finding memes, but it also explains the origins, the trajectory, and all other minutia of “Internet phenomena” such as “viral videos, image macros, catchphrases, web celebs, and more.” For example, if you're interested in how or why the popular doge meme morphed into Bitcoin/DogeCoin currency, there's a KYM entry for that (<https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/doge>).



“Not using the Library and all of its resources for your research paper is pretty sus. 🐼”
Posted by @unflibrary on Oct. 27, 2020

- **/r/Memes** (www.reddit.com/r/memes)—This subreddit bills itself as “the original since 2008,” and for good reason. Red-

MEMES *continued on page 6*

MEMES *continued from page 5*

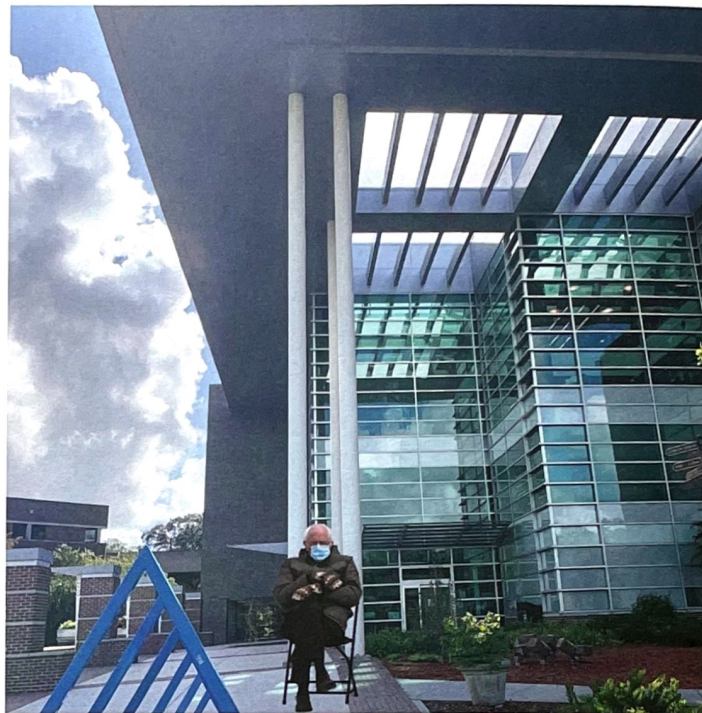
dit caters to a predominantly young, male audience, but that audience is also responsible for the creation of prime meme content that appeals to other demographics. I often peruse /r/ Memes to view its top memes of the week, where posts feature graphics that are “upvoted” by thousands of users. Reddit as a social networking site isn’t for everyone, but its user-friendly design and sortability make meme research painless and accessible.

- **Memebase** (<https://memebase.cheezburger.com>)—On the opposite side of user-friendly, Memebase is not pretty. It’s riddled with ads, but it has pedigree behind it as the website that popularized the “I can has cheezburger?” meme featuring the fat, hungry-looking cat that broke the internet back in 2007. Whereas the original Cheezburger site is known for its cat and other animal memes, Memebase features trending memes.

When I’m doubting a meme choice or when I fear that my library’s social media posts are becoming too staid or professorial, I ask my younger staff members and student assistants if they’ve seen any good memes lately. Even with numerous sources at my fingertips and years of research experience, sometimes I need to ask for guidance. If you have meme-savvy Digital Natives at your library, don’t be afraid to tap them for suggestions.

Even if you think you know a meme, it’s important to keep in mind that they are often fluid and cyclical. Memes with staying power can fade away, then come back several months or years later. Their viral nature can lead to changes in intent and meaning, sometimes not for the better. Some memes start off innocent and lighthearted, then morph after being appropriated by inflammatory groups (<https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/pepe-the-frog>). This is why I recommend research to ward off any unintended unsavoriness.

However, some memes are a flash in the pan—they’re here for a few days, maybe a week, and then disappear into the ether. If you happened to scroll through Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram after the January 2021 inauguration of President Joe Biden, you



“I am once again asking for you to bring your Osprey 1Card when you visit Tommy G’s.” 🍷 Posted by @unflibrary on Jan. 21, 2021

may have seen the photo of Bernie Sanders looking cold and impatient as he sat in a folding chair. The image of the senator’s grumpy expression and recycled mittens was digitally added to photos of locations worldwide. Yet, after appearing around countless cities, countries, and even libraries, #BernieMittens went away as quickly as it began.

Re-Creating and Customizing Memes

While some memes are textual in nature, especially on Twitter, most recognizable memes come as graphics or videos. Like many library marketers, I have no formal training in image editing, but after more than 20 years of trial and error, I’m capable enough.

The great news about memes is that design skills and image quality don’t really matter. In fact, the more rudimentary a meme graphic is, the funnier and more accessible it seems to be. Sometimes, I use Photoshop, but most of the time, I use one of these free websites:

- **Kapwing** (<https://www.kapwing.com/meme-maker>)—Not only does Kapwing provide a free online image, GIF, and video meme maker, but it also showcases new and trending memes. Make your own meme from scratch, or click on an already-existing meme to customize it.
- **Imgflip** (<https://imgflip.com/memegenerator>)—This site includes a Hot Memes section that you can peruse if you’re looking for inspiration, and the meme generator is fast and easy when you’re on a deadline.



This attention-getting image came from the intro clip (<http://bit.ly/carkar-rocketman>) for an episode of *Carpool Karaoke* that actors Taron Egerton and Richard Madden did to promote their Elton John biopic *Rocketman*. The library posted it on Feb. 2, 2021, with the caption, “If you don’t know, now you know 🍷 We are the Thomas G. Carpenter Library, but our biggest fans call us ‘Tommy G’s’ for short!”

- **Canva Meme Generator** (www.canva.com/create/memes)—If your library doesn't already subscribe to Canva, make it happen. While its collection of memes isn't as extensive as the previously mentioned resources, Canva is a favorite tool of marketing teams everywhere, including mine.

Making Memes Work for Your Own Library

When I see a meme that makes me laugh or instantly hit Share or Retweet, I tend to ask myself, "How can I make this work for my library?"

The Thomas G. Carpenter Library's social media accounts are business casual. Our overall tone is friendly and supportive, and we don't take ourselves too seriously. We often refer to the library by its nickname, Tommy G's. Yes, we use emojis and the occasional dad joke, but every post has a goal, a call to action, or an angle. If I'm trying to promote our students' ability to chat or text with a librarian from the comfort of their own home, I could post a link to our contact page and call it a day. But how many users would want to engage with that content? Would you?

Memes allow us to connect an amusing moment in pop culture to something library-related, making it appeal to our young adult audience and therefore (hopefully) making the info easier to relate to and retain.

My key to success is to look at what our team is trying to promote, see it from the users' point of view, and then find the humor in it. Here is an example of how we do this, using the #BernieMittens meme mentioned earlier. In January, our access services librarian requested that we remind students to bring their Osprey 1Cards (school ID) when they visit the library, since they cannot enter the building through our turnstiles without one.

- Meme image: Bernie Sanders grumpily sitting in front of the Carpenter Library
- Caption: "I am once again asking you to bring your Osprey 1Card when you visit Tommy G's." (This was actually a reference to another Bernie Sanders-related meme, making this post a twofer!)
- Results: Posted less than 24 hours after the presidential inauguration, this post spread widely across Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook. On Instagram alone, it received more than 560 likes and 20 positive comments from students and faculty/staff, including this gem: "Whoever is in charge of the social media deserves more recognition."

My advice for library marketers who want to get into the meme game is to have fun with it. If you're bored with the same old mes-

saging, or with tired stock photos of your library, memes can provide a lighthearted, culturally savvy alternative to get your point across. The very essence of social media is to create connections and share experiences. If you need to reach a younger audience and prove your value as an institution, the only way to do that is to speak their language. If that language happens to be Baby Yoda adorably holding your library card, then go for it with gusto.



"Ospreys, you might be tempted to step outside the Carpenter Library to greet a friend or grab some Starbucks, but don't forget your Osprey 1Card! Even Baby Yoda knows: need your card to get back inside the building, you will." Posted by @unflibrary on Dec. 2, 2019

Keep Calm and Meme On


Like all things related to social media, it's best to cater to your general audience. Memes that are extremely niche, difficult to librify, or sensitive in nature might need to be bypassed, no matter how much engagement they happen to get on other brands' Instagram or Twitter accounts. If you work for a library with a strong Catholic population, for example, you wouldn't want to use the "Pope holding stuff" meme that was popular in late 2020. When it comes to memes, cultural awareness and sensitivity are as important as an understanding of pop culture.

When in doubt, play it safe. The great thing about memes is that there's a new one seemingly every day. If one meme doesn't fit your au-

dience, another will come around.

Memes are here to stay. Library marketers and social media managers who need to engage with young adults should embrace and experiment with any medium that gets them front and center. The speed with which memes spread and change, with no end

If you need to reach a younger audience ... the only way to do that is to speak their language.

in sight, is a testament to how younger audiences crave connection with online communities. So, utilize memes not just because they're trendy, but because they're the perfect vehicles to carry your library's messaging to the users you need to reach. 

Maria Atilano is the student outreach librarian at the University of North Florida's (UNF) Thomas G. Carpenter Library in Jacksonville. She holds a B.A. from the University of North Carolina–Greensboro, an M.A. in English from UNF, and an M.L.I.S. from Florida State University in Tallahassee. She has managed her library's social media accounts (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube) since 2009 and has worked in academic libraries since 2002. Her email address is m.atilano@unf.edu.