Humorous Academic Library Messaging on TikTok & Instagram

Kellie Sparks
University of West Florida Libraries
ksparks@uwf.edu

Abstract: This study explores how academic libraries use humor to communicate their value and services to their university community through social media. This study is a content analysis of posts created by a sampling of seven academic library Instagram and TikTok accounts. The study reviews and categorizes the multiple types of humor present among the particular content analyzed by looking at the combinations of humor types and then separating them out for individual analysis. This analysis shows that while Comparison and Silliness humor types were the most prevalent in the social media posts reviewed, Exaggeration received the highest average numbers of likes and comments. Sarcasm received the second most average likes, while Comparison received the second highest average number of comments per post. These findings suggest that expanding the usage of Exaggeration, Sarcasm, and Comparison in library social media content strategy could encourage engagement from audiences.

Keywords: Academic Libraries, Social Media, Library Marketing, Social Media Marketing, Communication

Introduction

Academic libraries rely heavily on social media to promote their services, spaces, and events to their university community. As institutions dedicated to the success of their constituents, academic libraries are generally known for enhancing the teaching, learning, and research of those they serve. However,

historically, academic libraries are not known for their humorous social media content. In fact, with rare exceptions, such as "The Librarians" series starring Noah Wyle, stereotypes of shy, puritanical librarians are often perpetuated in the media and film industry.

This study explores how academic librarians who engage in marketing and outreach can use humor to communicate their value and services to their university community. Delving into how humor can be a beneficial way to engage with social media audiences will inform the community of library marketers who facilitate this kind of promotional work. This sample of libraries is pulled from public doctoral universities that are categorized as High Research Activity and Very High Research Activity institutions within the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education. The libraries in these Carnegie Classification categories were selected on the basis of their active social media presence.

The research specifically focuses on Instagram and TikTok social media content created by a sampling of libraries. These two social media platforms were chosen due to their growing popularity and opportunity to expand research in the field. Since academic libraries serve a population of both traditional and non-traditional university students, Instagram and TikTok were selected based on likelihood of target audience and use of humor on the particular social media platform. As Pew Research Center (2024) reported,

"78% of 18- to 29-year-olds say they use Instagram, far higher than the share among those 65 and older (15%)...62% of 18- to 29-year-olds say they use TikTok, much higher than the share among adults ages 65 years and older (10%)" (para. 13). Compared to existing social media platforms such as Facebook and X (formerly Twitter), Instagram and TikTok are favored by Generation Z (people born between 1997 and 2012; 11-26-year-olds) (Pew Research Center, 2019). Usage on Facebook, for example, showed a sharp decline beginning in 2015 with Generation Z, who migrated to TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat. Digital natives spend the majority of their time online connecting with friends and family while consuming engaging content on their preferred platforms (Pew Research Center, 2022). Engaging content, especially that which provokes a good laugh, is content worth exploring.

The examination of humor in various types of TikTok and Instagram content is discussed, such as the use of memes, video, and clever images. This study contributes to the field of communication by analyzing a subset of digital media produced by higher education professionals in the field of Library and Information Science. To study engagement, an analysis of likes and comments was conducted. Drawing inspiration from the study by Catanescu and Tom (2001), the seven types of humor examined in this study are: Comparison, Personification, Exaggeration, Pun, Sarcasm, Silliness, and Surprise. In relation to the types of humor present, Exaggeration received the most average likes per

post (2186), followed by Sarcasm (990). Personification was the next highest (324), followed by Surprise (232), Comparison (225), Silliness (209) and Pun (110) (see Figure 5).

Literature Review

Effectiveness of Humor in Social Media

Humor can be a highly effective tool in social media content creation if used strategically. The art of sparking laughter can build connections between a brand and its audience. Doucett (2008) defined a brand as "shorthand for the story that an organization wants to tell potential users about how it can meet a need in their lives" (p. 3). Light-hearted social media content can be used as an extension of the library's brand story. Barry and Graca (2018) conducted a content analysis along with attitude surveys that examined humorous and non-humorous YouTube videos, their engagement statistics, and related advertising attitudes. The authors concluded that humor outperforms other forms of social content in certain areas, like advertising attitudes. The study suggested that humor should be balanced with more serious forms of entertainment to encourage more engagement with a target audience.

As referenced above, a balance between humor and more purposeful forms of content may encourage social media engagement. However, humor does not always land the right way. When considering the use of comedic content, one must be mindful of their audience to avoid forming an

inadvertently negative brand association. Mcleod, Houghton, and Saavedra (2022) proposed a conceptual framework designed to help brands properly portray their personality in a comedic way. This conceptual framework brings together the brand personality studies of Aaker (1997) and the five types of humor proposed by Speck (1991) to ultimately create a tool to improve the effectiveness of humorous advertisements. Additionally, the authors concluded that limited research on humor effectiveness has been done and that further analysis would be beneficial in determining the role of humor and brand outcomes across media channels. But, what happens if no one associates a specific brand with comedic content? This is one unique challenge that academic libraries face.

Libraries Are Stereotypically Serious

Levity in social media communication can be seen as surprising to an audience if the brand is known for serious pursuits. One distinct example lies in the content analysis of scientific Instagram and Twitter posts containing satire, wordplay, and even anthropomorphism. Su et al. (2022) confirmed the importance of the careful consideration of messaging appropriate to a platform, even if humorous. An essential takeaway for libraries from this study is the insight into how a non-humorous brand identifies how to use certain types of humor in their social media messaging successfully. But what happens when the target audience turns the script around – and creates a parody of the brand?

Larson and Jordan (2021) noted an interesting phenomenon among public university students who engaged with social media parody accounts of their own institutions to highlight a more authentic, humorous interpretation of the college experience. The study illustrated the growing trend of university students incorporating humor into their college student experience through social media and supports the ongoing literature that states this target audience actively seeks out this type of content. Responding well to humor makes sense, especially when humor can be a tool for lessening academic stress (Darabi & Reidy, 2017).

Humor as a Psychological Tool

Perhaps an interesting byproduct of strategic humor within content creation is the ability to diffuse anger and stress within online communication. Elsayed and Hollingshead (2022) reviewed how humor plays a role in the reduction of online incivility. Their experiment concluded that humor did reduce online incivility, feelings of anger, and tensions in negative situations. This illustrated the power of humorous content as it is used in online communication – as a potential diffuser of emotionally charged reactions. For those who interact with their libraries' social media and feel library anxiety, humorous content could potentially be an avenue to dismantle those feelings of nervousness and apprehension towards asking a librarian for help or engaging with a library staff member. Library anxiety can consist of a mix of feelings such

as fear, shame, and helplessness, which can negatively impact the information-seeking behavior of a student (Mellon, 1986). As previously mentioned, humor can be an active tool against academic stress (Darabi & Reidy, 2017). However, this can only happen if users are aware of the library in the first place.

Library Social Media & Brand Awareness

Social media has consistently played a role in the promotion and marketing of academic library services on a university campus (American Library Association, 2013). Building and maintaining relationships with social media users is a common challenge among academic libraries. Many students may be familiar with the physical campus library but unaware that it promotes itself on popular social media channels such as TikTok and Instagram.

Ihejirika, Goulding, and Calvert (2021) elaborated on the interest and awareness level of Nigerian university undergraduates with their university library social media accounts. The study revealed that student awareness of university library social media accounts was limited. Research suggested that libraries should seek to better understand its users' social media preferences before initiating a social media channel, increase awareness of their social media channels through a variety of communication outlets, and create a "library voice" that is consistent and cohesive (p. 10).

The importance of creativity, fun, and interactive methods used alongside library social media is also mentioned. One approach to improving library brand

awareness is to join the #Bookstagram movement that has happened on the social media platform Instagram. A study by Thomas (2021) supported the shared acts of reading on Instagram with the rise of the hashtag #Bookstagram. Thomas' analysis studied how the images selected created a strong sense of reading as an activity and a connection between the reader and the book itself. This study verified the rise of a potential cultural shift that embraces reading and books, which presents an interesting learning opportunity for libraries. Libraries now have the possibility to build relationships with Instagram users that are already engaging with books and creating a visual community of readers through technology.

Library Social Media & User Engagement

Another challenge for academic libraries is the rate of engagement among their social media audience. Researchers examining Facebook and Instagram posts from The University of Hong Kong Libraries (HKUL) collected user feedback from student interviews and performed a content analysis related to social media and academic libraries. The researchers concluded that the content published on the library's Facebook and Instagram was not effective in engaging students; however, their findings did uncover that students welcomed the idea of the library utilizing social media. The students offered constructive feedback toward content improvement such as the desire for more entertaining

and engaging content that was created with social media features native to each platform (Chan et al., 2020).

Another study, authored by Doney, Wikle, and Martinez (2020), reinforced the importance of creating more targeted content to the audience being served. The researchers initiated a content analysis that reviewed the frequency of particular Instagram post categories and the amount of likes and comments associated with each. The study demonstrated the importance of content variety and humanistic (relatable) content creation, which ultimately leads to increased user engagement. One well-known social media platform that has capitalized on the popularity of humanistic content is TikTok. The platform has engaged users with trending audio, silly video clips, and creative video transitions.

Academic Libraries & TikTok: A Tale of Limited Research

The dominance of the social media platform TikTok has impacted how libraries communicate their content to end users. Alley and Hanshew (2022) reported that more academic libraries are attempting to connect with their users through lighthearted content, which directly contradicts the existing stigma that libraries are intimidating and librarians are not approachable. The study confirmed that libraries primarily use TikTok to highlight their collections, services, and library spaces, while not yet fully embracing the

TikTok platform as a whole. These findings are essential to the research librarian community since they clearly examine how academic libraries are utilizing the TikTok platform. The study also emphasized the benefits of future research related to the further exploration of a specific content category - Humanizing/Fun video.

In the same vein, a study by Merga (2021) revealed a rise in the popularity of #BookTok on the platform. This study is valuable because it gives a unique insight into what currently resonates with the younger book-loving community and how libraries can ultimately tap into what engages this dedicated group of TikTokers. The study validated that young people often connect with books for the elicited emotional response. In fact, the study discovered eight recurring themes: book recommendations, reader experience, emotional reader response, reader community and identity, characters and places, writer, personal library management, and reader in the family. #BookTok presents a significant opportunity for libraries to center their social media content on these suggested themes to generate deeper brand advocacy and connection.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Using Humor in Social Media

The use of humor on social media can be advantageous to a brand. Studies have shown that humor, particularly the use of memes, can be used as a source of "self-deprecating relatability" that is often associated with connection within student populations (Ask & Abidin, 2018, p. 834). This relatability can be

used to foster an emotional connection between the library brand and their student audience. Humor can also make a brand much more memorable. Connecting humorous advertising messages to brand claims can also produce better recall among your target audience (Krishnan and Chakravarti, 2003). Creating more memorable and relatable social media content can increase the likelihood of it becoming shared among audiences. Creating shareable content can also contribute to the virality of the social media post. While the advantages of using humor are important to recognize, there are also disadvantages to bear in mind.

The effectiveness of humor should also be considered if incorporating it into a social media strategy is a goal. In some instances, humor could be detrimental to a library brand if the humor does not resonate with the intended audience. Humor could cause unintentional offense or even risk the alienation of an audience if it falls flat. Researchers have found that those that attempt humor should be mindful not to use advertisements that prompt negative reactions, such as risqué humor (Warren et al., 2019).

Another disadvantage of using humor can be that audiences may have differences in the type of humor they prefer. Considering humor styles while creating content is one path towards understanding how humor could impact an audience. In addition to considering humor style, exploring alternative ways to connect to audiences may prove to be effective. Developing content that is

perceived as more authentic and warm, for example, has been demonstrated to increase engagement among social media influencers (Chung et al., 2023). Using humor in a way that is authentic yet cognizant of your brand audience can be a key social media strategy for library marketers.

Social media that connects to an audience through humor can add an element of fun that fundamentally builds library brand awareness and loyalty among library patrons. As we witness the movement towards entertainment-based content, further research is needed to determine how academic libraries are capitalizing on this on platforms such as TikTok and Instagram. Therefore, the following research questions are raised:

RQ1: How do academic libraries incorporate humor in their content creation strategy in order to communicate their value and services to their university community?

RQ2: What types of humor are seen most in academic libraries' TikTok and Instagram posts?

Methodology

Codebook Creation

A codebook was generated to effectively define the specific codes related to our review of academic libraries' TikTok and Instagram accounts. Codes were

designated for the following: university library name and institution, Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, social media platform, format of post, description of captions, type of humor, description of post content, whether comments are positive or negative, and number of likes, shares, saves, and comments. The Carnegie classification system was chosen as a selection tool in order to narrow the focus to academic libraries that reside in top tier public and private universities. The university libraries are also representative of nationally accredited universities in varying regions of the United States.

Humor Types

Humor categorization was modeled after the seven types of humor designated by Catanescu and Tom (2001): Comparison, Personification, Exaggeration, Pun, Sarcasm, Silliness, and Surprise. The following are the definitions of each type of humor utilized in our content analysis:

Comparison – Combining two or more elements to produce a humorous situation

Personification – Attributing human characteristics to animals, plants and objects

Exaggeration – Overstating and magnifying something out of proportion to reality

Pun – Using elements of language to create new humorous meanings (i.e. wordplay)

Sarcasm - Providing blatant ironic responses or situations

Silliness - Making funny faces in response to ludicrous situations

Surprise - Humor arising from unexpected situations

The author of this study agrees with Catanescu and Tom (2001) and their preference for utilizing the seven humor types as a more comprehensive way of categorizing humor. The types are considered to be a "practitioner-oriented classification system" (p. 92). While humor can be subjective, these seven types of humor serve as a point of reference for researchers who intend to analyze humor through advertisements. This expanded classification of humor allows for a unique lens through which library marketers can view humorous social media content.

Development of Sample

To answer the research questions, the researcher utilized qualitative research methods to conduct a content analysis of TikTok and Instagram content created by academic libraries. A content analysis of social video and graphic image posts would best allow for the determination of themes and subjects across the content examined, particularly that which is considered humorous. The sampling of humorous social media content originates from seven academic libraries that are rated as High Research Activity and Very High Research Activity within the public university Carnegie classification system. The following steps describe the research methods used in this content analysis:

Step 1: The author searched TikTok for the keyword "university library" and from results identified if they qualified as High Research Activity or Very High Research Activity institutions. A selection of the first seven qualified university libraries was made.

Step 2: A census was conducted of TikTok videos for the selected universities to identify posts with humor. For Instagram, due to the greater number of posts, the initial data set was limited to posts between August 2022 and December 2022.

Step 3: Based on the university account with the least number of humorous videos, a sample size of four social media posts from each university library account was determined by the author.

Step 4: For the selected TikTok sample, a description of post content, comments, likes, shares, saves, and captions were inventoried. For the selected Instagram posts, only likes, comments and captions were included. Instagram posts were also tagged for video content that was reposted from the TikTok platform.

Step 5: The data was then analyzed to provide insights into the types of humor represented in the sample leading to the results.

Step 6: To gain insights into the engagement based on the type of humor, the number of likes were normalized for each University account, by scaling the number of followers for each account to match the largest account. The

multiplier to scale the number was then used to multiply the number of likes creating an even playing field for analyzing the smaller accounts to the larger.

Results

The goal of the content analysis is to gain richer insight into how libraries communicate their value through humor on social media. A total of 151 posts (21%) with humor content were identified out of a sample of 722 academic libraries' Instagram and TikTok posts (Figure 1). These selected libraries employed social media humor in order to promote a variety of offerings such as events, Ask-a-Librarian services, library hours, and finals week study materials.
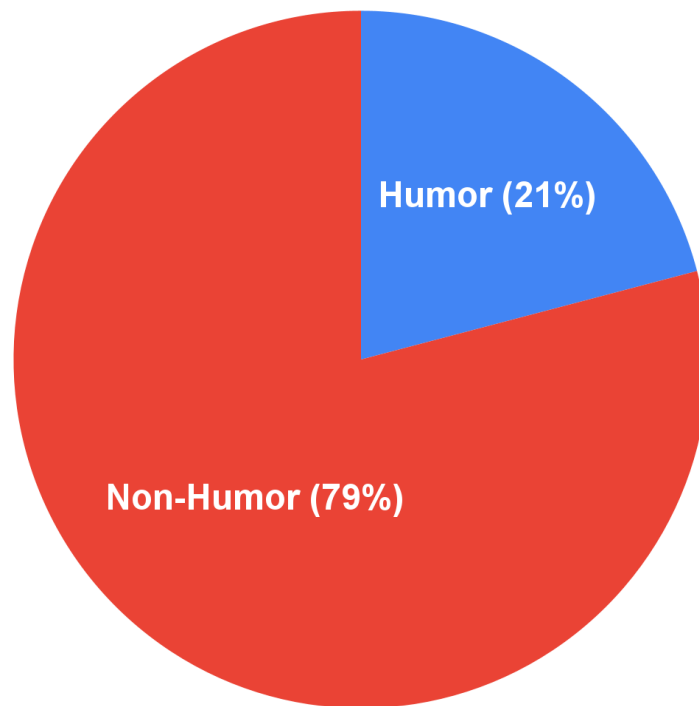
Figure 1: Percentage of humor posts within academic libraries' TikTok and Instagram content

Of the 151 posts with humorous content analyzed, 52.2% contained multiple types of humor. (Figure 2).
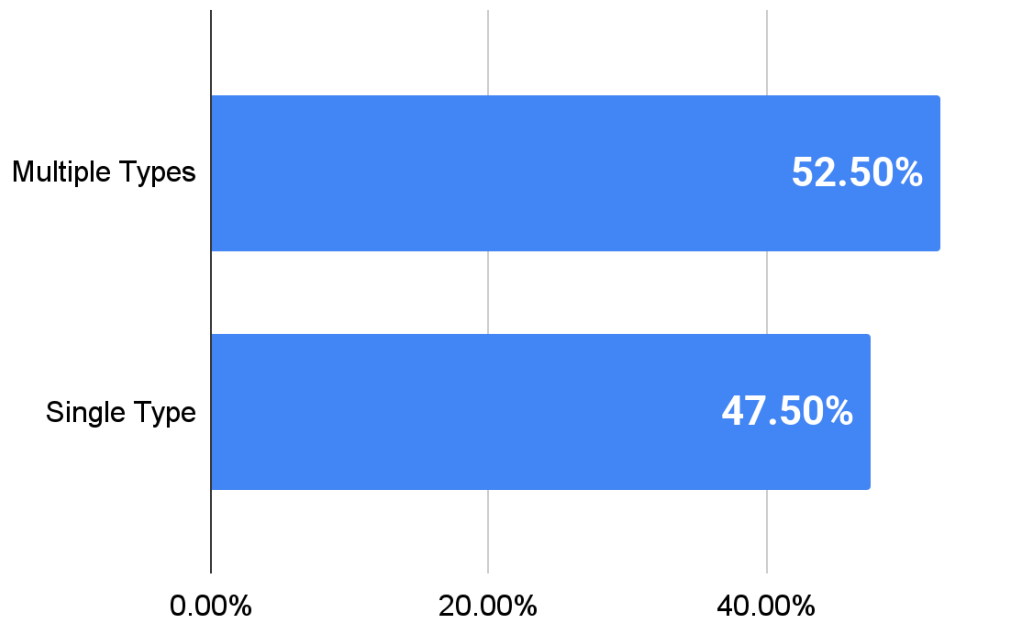
Figure 2: Percentage of single types of humor versus multiple types of humor within content

Of the posts using multiple types of humor, the combination of "Comparison AND Silliness" was by far the most common accounting for 52.4% of the instances (Figure 3).
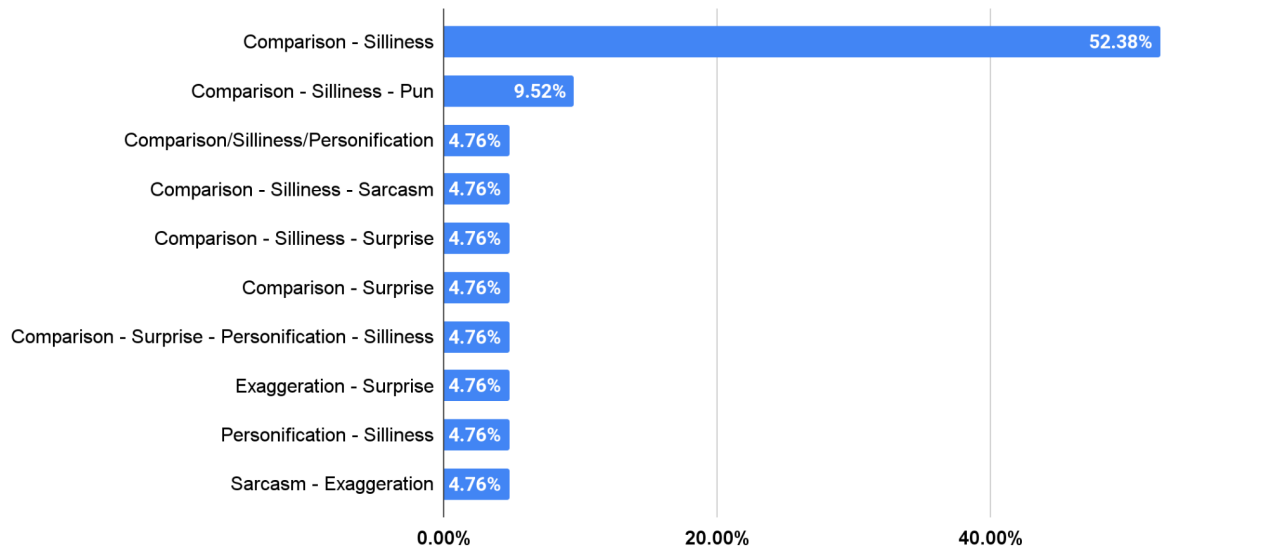
Figure 3:Manifestation of humor types – frequency

As can be seen in Figure 3, while Comparison AND Silliness was the most common combination, these types showed in many other combinations as well. To explore further, the research examined each of the seven types of humor and counted occurrences of each within the dataset.

The results showed that the Comparison and Silliness humor types tied for most prevalent in the social media posts with each occurring 29.41% of the time. Personification (14.71%) was the second most common humor type present in academic libraries' Instagram and TikTok accounts, followed by

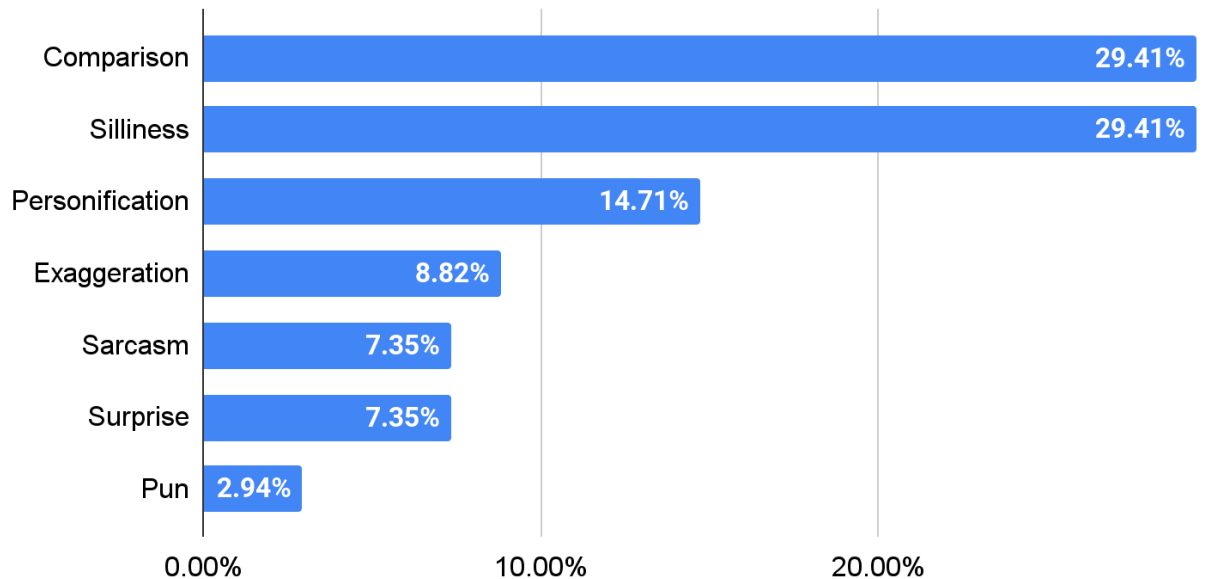Exaggeration which occurred 8.82% of the time (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Prevalence of Humor Types Presented

To study engagement, an analysis of likes and comments was conducted. In relation to the seven types of humor present, Exaggeration had the most average likes per post receiving 2,186 or 51% of the total, followed by Sarcasm with 990 average likes or 23% of the total. Personification was the next highest receiving an average of 324 likes or 8%. Surprise (232), Comparison (225) and Silliness (209) each received approximately 5% of the average likes. Pun had the fewest average likes receiving 110 or just 3% of the total (Figure 5).
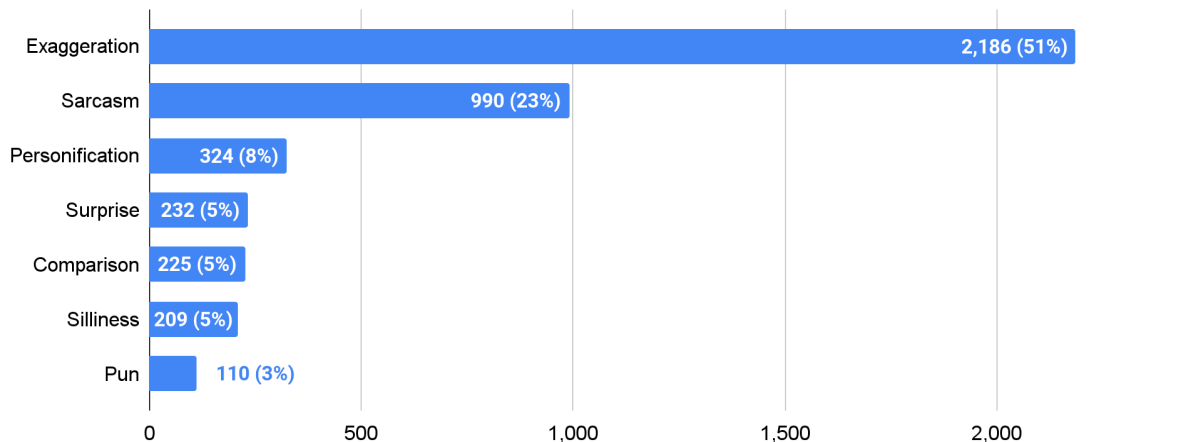
Figure 5: Average Likes Per Humor Type

The author then analyzed the average number of comments per humor type illustrated in the engagement findings. Posts that included the Exaggeration humor type received an average of 12.8 comments or 46% of the total in the data set. The next highest was Comparison which received an average of 4 comments per post or 14% of the total. Next were Personification, which received an average of 3.7 comments or 13%, and Sarcasm, which received an average of 2.3 comments or 8% of the total. Receiving the fewest average comments per post were Pun, Silliness, and Surprise with each average just below two comments or 6% of the total (Figure 6).
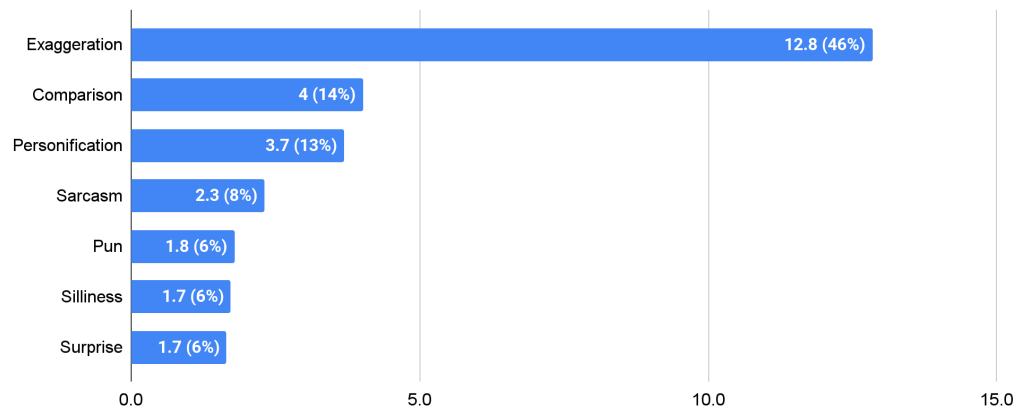
Figure 6: Average Comments per Humor Type

Discussion

The author reviewed the key findings of the content analysis and reflected on the areas of limitation and follow-up research inspired by the results. The reported findings contribute to a small body of scholarly literature that currently discusses academic libraries and TikTok.

Interesting Findings

The content analysis of humorous posts in academic libraries' TikTok and Instagram accounts showed a prevalence of Comparison and Silliness types of humor. The most frequent example of this is the use of comedic trending audio. This is a feature native to both platforms and appears to be central to a libraries' playful content strategy. This evidence aligns with participant suggestions from The University of Hong Kong Libraries' study who desired content created using similar features (Chan et al., 2020).

The use of Personification, Exaggeration, and Sarcasm were also popular types of humor used in library social media content strategies. The content analysis presented further evidence of the use of fun/humanizing video as part of academic libraries' TikTok content strategy, which was previously discussed in research by Alley and Hanshew (2022). The analysis revealed that within academic libraries which have both types of social media accounts, there was a high instance of TikTok video reposts on their Instagram feed.

Limitations

Despite suggesting valuable findings, this study cannot be considered a comprehensive content analysis as other types of humor, such as dark humor and physical humor, were not addressed. Another limitation of the study was the single researcher's viewpoint rather than validation of humor types within the posts from multiple researchers. A larger sample size of university libraries is also recommended.

Areas of Future Research

During the course of this content analysis, several interesting areas of future research were revealed. The first area of interest is to take a deeper look at how humorous social media content impacts library brand perception. The second area of potential interest is to review how humorous posts impact offline library interactions, such as book circulation or reference interactions.

Future research could also investigate how having a humorous library brand reduces the amount of library anxiety students feel in regard to asking for help. Deeper analysis of post comments and the nature of reactions from library users could also benefit marketing and outreach librarians' understanding of humorous social media content. The use of native social media features such as comedic trending audios could also be a source of further research as it relates to humorous library messaging. Investigating the effectiveness of humorous trends versus evergreen social media content could be another avenue of exploration. Finally, it would be fruitful to pursue future research on the analysis of humor type combinations used by academic libraries to explore which are most engaging. By gaining a better understanding of how libraries integrate humor into their content, librarians can create more content that is effective in engaging students.

Conclusion

This content analysis determined how academic libraries assimilate humor into their social media content strategy. This study reviewed the frequency of seven humor types within academic libraries' TikTok and Instagram content and determined that Comparison and Silliness were most present in videos and static images posted on these platforms. The analysis also revealed that Exaggeration and Comparison were most effective in initiating comments from followers. For library marketers looking to incorporate humor

into their social content, Exaggeration proved to be a strong humor type choice for instigating both comments and likes from library followers. The findings also suggest that academic libraries are utilizing a variety of humor types such as comparison, sarcasm, and silliness as part of an engaging social media content strategy. Incorporating these types of humor into a social media strategy offers a solid pathway towards humanizing a library brand with resonating content. Marketing and Outreach Librarians can benefit from this study by gaining a better understanding of how certain types of humorous content can best communicate their library's values and services to their university community.

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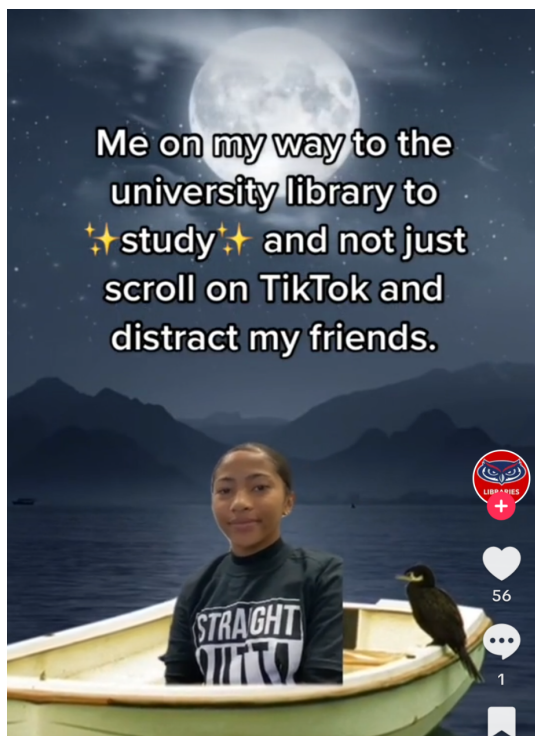
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Appendix: Visual Examples

Humor Type: Sarcasm

graduates knowing they won't
ever have to take another final

Everyone wants to be us.

Humor Type: Comparison/Silliness/Sarcasm

Me on my way to the
university library to
✨study✨ and not just
scroll on TikTok and
distract my friends.

Kellie Sparks is the Marketing and Communications Coordinator and Evening Reference Librarian for the University of West Florida Libraries. She holds a Master's of Science in Information Studies from Florida State University and is currently pursuing a Master's in Strategic Communication & Leadership from the University of West Florida. Her research interests include library marketing and communications, social media, creativity, and mindfulness and the university student experience.