

'LibraryTok' flips the script on public libraries and their relevance to Gen Z

Libraries around the country are using Shrek memes and 'Stranger Things' cosplay to meet younger generations where they're at — and get more visitors through their doors

By **Emma Glassman-Hughes** Globe Staff, Updated November 8, 2023, 2 hours ago



Evan Szymkowski (left), Fawn Siemsen-Fuchs (laying), and Christine Murphy (right) filmed a video to promote a World Chess Day library program. GWENDOLYN LONG

An older woman in a stylish sweater hobbles toward a book stack and reaches for a slender green title. She gives it a loving lookover as text appears on the screen: “You’re 78, you can’t read manga.” She turns to the camera, sticks her tongue out, and flips a forceful middle finger. “I’m 90,” the text flashes. She shrugs on a pair of sunglasses and struts off screen with her graphic novel and a final withering glare.

[Grandma Betty](#) is one of an expanding ensemble of performers making social media content for the Milwaukee Public Library, which has over 250,000 followers across platforms and has become a stand-out in the TikTok community known as LibraryTok. MPL accounts are run in part by Betty’s granddaughter, Fawn Siemsen-Fuchs, a volunteer coordinator who’s worked for the city’s library system since 2015. Her co-manager, accounting assistant Evan Szymkowski, joined the team in early 2022.



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Since then, Siemsen-Fuchs and Szymkowski have overseen dozens of videos — some of which have millions of views — that repurpose trends and memes to showcase the breadth of resources available at the local library. Their pages are full of internet-friendly fodder: With a paper-thin budget, they pull off cinematographically impressive homages to “Beauty and the Beast,” “Stranger Things,” “Barbie,” and Stephen King’s slate of horror

classics. Szymkowski, a theater school grad, performs professional-grade dance numbers to [promote library apps](#). A graphic of a primordial-looking Shrek highlights [available DVD rentals](#). And there's plenty of sassy lip syncs and cameos from community kids, senior library staffers, and, of course, Grandma Betty, advocating for early literacy, LGBTQ+ liberties, and an end to censorship.

ADVERTISING

The advertisement features a black background with the 'FOX NATION' logo in a stylized, metallic font. Below the logo, the text 'America is Streaming' is displayed in a similar font. At the bottom of the graphic, the website 'FOXNATION.COM' is shown in a glowing, digital font.

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Especially since the pandemic, library staffs around the country have shared concerns about slow visitorship, dwindling budgets, and a generation of young people unfamiliar with their local libraries. The MPL's social media is part of a larger effort from branches across the country to woo younger, more diverse patrons with Gen Z catnip: funny, well-made videos that preserve an air of DIY scrap. "We want to dispel notions that libraries are stuffy," Siemsen-Fuchs said in a recent Zoom call.



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Here in Boston, Lisa Pollack, chief of communications and strategy at the Boston Public Library, told the Globe that her staff is especially focused on leveraging Instagram Reels, which have seen “exponential success.” The main Instagram account, which has over 54,000 followers, is full of short, informative videos, though they tend to be more subdued than their Milwaukee counterparts.

From Watsonville, Calif., to Pima County, Ariz., and Chesterfield, N.H., library staffs are getting creative online, gussying up geek humor for the cool kids of the internet. Cincinnati social media specialist Paul Wellington recently [told TODAY.com](#) that libraries “have evolved into the 21st century.” And the internet is rapt: The hashtags [#librarytok](#), [#librarytiktok](#), and [#librariansoftiktok](#) have together accumulated over a billion views on TikTok.

But few accounts have reached the star status of the MPL, which counts Reese Witherspoon among its followers and has been studied by [social media marketing experts](#). In Milwaukee, the social media team members have become local celebrities, sometimes getting stopped on the sidewalk. And after multiple out-of-state commenters said they would plan a trip to Milwaukee just to visit the library, the MPL has become an unofficial cultural ambassador for the city, working with Visit Milwaukee on promotional tourism materials.



Fawn Siemsen-Fuchs (left) and Evan Szymkowski attended an event where the Milwaukee Public Library was awarded Visit Milwaukee's Dear MKE Award. SAMERGHANI

In their quest to prove the relevance of public libraries, Siemsen-Fuchs and Szymkowski aren't afraid of a little cheek. (Cue the irreverent grandma.) Videos addressing contemporary issues like book bans, literacy rates, ableism, and ageism prompt (mostly) polite debates in the comments.

“Libraries are known for going ‘Shh, quiet,’ but who says we can’t be a place where you can have fun conversations, or where the community answers each other and helps each other out?” Szymkowski said.

To the list of everything a public library is — a meeting space, a local archive, a home to dusty VHS copies of “Schoolhouse Rock” and “The Princess Bride” — the MPL has added nationwide viral phenomena, harnessing pop culture to support a free, inclusive, and fundamentally democratic institution.

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