

# Cheeky Library Builds Social-Media Fan Base

By ANN-MARIE ALCÁNTARA

An older woman walks up to the library's manga graphic-novel section. On-screen text questions whether a 78-year-old should read the comic books. She picks a book off the shelf, sticks her tongue out and flips the bird. More text appears: "I'm 90."

The 12-second video produced by the Milwaukee Public Library has attracted more than 10 million views across TikTok and Instagram since November. A quick scroll through the library's TikTok videos reveals a host of memes and pop-culture parodies featuring Wednesday Addams, Amelia Bedelia and a gaggle of "Stranger Things" cast wannabes.

Lucy Brend, a 29-year-old who lives in London, says she would love to come to the U.S. and visit the library, after being charmed by its TikTok posts. "I like the parallel—the seriousness of a library and using humor to kind of bring it to life," she says.

The Milwaukee Public Library has become an unlikely viral sensation. Its meme-heavy videos and wholesome library messages have earned millions of views.

The Milwaukee Public Library's 13 locations only recently returned to full service after pandemic shutdowns and in November narrowly avoided a potential \$1.9 million budget cut from the city. That is on top of the problems municipal libraries have faced for years, if not decades, with declining use.

That sassy 90-year-old manga lover in the viral video—the library's biggest hit to date—is a former school librarian. She's also the grandmother of Fawn Siemsen-Fuchs, 38, a coordi-

nator of library volunteers who is part of the duo bringing the library's TikTok content to life. Ms. Siemsen-Fuchs teamed up with Derek Reilly, a 32-year-old research and policy coordinator.

"A lot of times people think of the library as a dusty place filled with books where a woman in a bun and glasses will shush you if you talk too loud," says Eileen Force Cahill, director of com-



Fawn Siemsen-Fuchs writes the captions and text for the library's TikTok videos.

munity relations and engagement at Milwaukee Public Library. "We take very seriously the opportunity to improve people's perceptions of the library as a modern place."

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Its first TikTok was a parody featuring base jumper Freddy Chase being "dropped" into the library book drop. Within two weeks, it had reached a million views, and to date it has been streamed 2.9 million times.

Ms. Siemsen-Fuchs writes the captions and text in the videos, and casts their guest stars, while Mr. Reilly shoots and edits. At least 75 staffers have been featured.

One video shows the rapper Saweetie saying "Let's go," then cuts to a superimposed video of her "walking" to different parts of the library as text describes ways to support public libraries: "visit them," "keep an active card" and "use their resources."

One smart-aleck commenter wrote, "Does the bathroom count as resources?" The team quickly posted a second Saweetie video, showing her walking into the library loo. The first video has 3.8 million views. The second garnered an additional 1.4 million.

The library has seen an increase in visits and library-card sign-ups in the past few months. The growth can't be correlated to social-media success, however, since the library has returned to full service and brought back its in-person programming, says Ms. Force Cahill.

However, several posts in October and November about Kanopy, the free

streaming-movie service provided by libraries, helped contribute to the library's two best months of usage, says Mr. Reilly.

The TikTok account has grown to 85,000 followers, and the library's Instagram account has seen a recent surge as well.

Julie Leach, 32, an apartment-building manager, moved back to Milwaukee last fall after living in Los Angeles. The TikTok account inspired her and her sister to get library cards after not visiting a branch in decades, and she has looked into classes and events, she says.

"It's pretty cool for the country to see Milwaukee is very up and coming and we're the most friendly people in the world," she says. "The library kind of reflects that."