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Taking Stock of Librarianship: Representations in Stock Photography

Robert Perret

University of Idaho, rperret@uidaho.edu

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Taking Stock of Librarianship: Representations in Stock Photography

Abstract:

This paper explores the representation of librarians within two popular types of online imagery: stock photographs and memes. While the representation of librarians in popular media has been explored before, these particular media have not and are distinct in that they are often created by amateurs with little professional editorial mediation. This study builds upon Seale's librarian archetypes and Attebury's revisions in order to compare these new medias to traditional depictions of the profession. It is found that the image of an Old Maid librarian is waning and librarians are generally presented in a positive light. Some traditional markers yet remain, such as glasses and books.

Literature Review

Issues revolving around librarian stereotypes and the general perception of librarians in the media have been widely discussed. Pagowsky and DeFrain (2014) argue that librarians suffer from a two-fold stereotype. Firstly, that librarians are perceived to possess the "cold" traits of being uptight, meticulous, and introverted. Secondly, they claim that 80% of librarians are women and that women are perceived as subservient caregivers. (p. 5) Traditional stereotypes such as "shriveled prune, loveless frump, prim, introverted, pressed, mild, civil and meek" elicit pity and passive harm through neglect. (p. 12) Yet conversely they caution that depictions of librarians as technology savvy hipsters are "just as detrimental by simply replacing old stereotypes with new ones while still focusing on the inherent feminization of librarianship." (p. 13)

The stereotypes presented in online videos was examined by Attebury (2010). She examined 100 videos created by librarians and 100 videos created by non-librarians. She followed Seale's (2008) categorizations of librarians as old maid, policeman, parody, inept and hero. In addition she added her own categories of sexy, fun and psycho. (p. 5) Examining YouTube videos Attebury found that the "Old Maid" librarians has been surpassed in popularity by the sexy librarian. (p.3) She also found that male librarians were most often depicted under the "policeman" stereotype. (p. 3) She concludes that "librarians should also consider the benefits of creating parodies, not only to render an accurate picture of librarians and what they do, but also to capture the attention of viewers in the first place." (p. 9)

Conversely Vassilakaki and Moniarou-Papaconstantinou (2014) conducted a literature review of studies of librarians in mass media and found that the image of the old maid still predominated and that librarian stereotypes have not changed over time. (p. 355) "In particular, women were perceived as 'old maids', whereas men as 'grim, grouchy, and zealous.'" (p. 365) They identify these negative images of librarians as a failure of marketing. (p. 363)

Shifman (2014) explores the impact of photo-based memes on stereotypes. Shifman argues that, unlike the jokes of the past which were encountered individually and in isolation, memes emerge

from enormous texts of repeated images and messages. (p. 341) They trade in hypersignification, or the overt construction of stereotypes taken to their extreme. (p. 348) Essentially, memes develop a visual shorthand that replaces content, and this process often stymies critical thinking and promotes regressive attitudes. (p. 350)

Adams (2000) also examined the contrary stereotypes of librarians as loveless frumps and hip party girls. She finds that “the old-maid stereotype can neither be wished nor willed away no matter how digitally savvy any of us might be or become.” (p. 288) Adams finds that the most useful strategy to combat this stereotype is to “hijack” the old maid image and have fun with it. (p. 291) “By identifying with the prim-spinster stereotype, the very terms of the composition can be exposed, renegotiated, and made to mean something new.” (p. 292)

Methodology

This study compares two types of images commonly found on the internet. Firstly, stock photos were examined. Stock photos are photographs taken by professionals and often resold for use by multiple clients. So, for instance, you might see the same image of a reading child on the homepages of unrelated library systems. For this study, royalty free images, as identified by the vendor, were utilized.

The second image type examined were memes, which are images that are manipulated by anonymous internet users, usually for humorous effect. Like stock photographs, the same image is often used by different people in different contexts. Further complicating the issue, stock photographs are often used for creating memes.

One distinction is the intended audience. Stock photographs are intended to be desirable design elements for official marketing and communication endeavors. Indeed they exist as images which are superior to those a non-photographer might be able to take themselves to support signage, advertisements and other business communications. Memes are essentially jokes that are meant to be shared across the internet with anyone who might find them humorous.

For this study the popular stock photography website shutterstock was used with the search term “librarian.”¹ Results were then sorted by Most Popular. The first 100 results which met the following criteria were then selected for inclusion:

1. The image depicts a person.
2. A substantial amount of that person is depicted, as opposed to abstracted elements like hands. Most images selected were from the waist up.
3. The person depicted is clearly situated within a library.
4. The person is not depicted as something other than a librarian. For instance, images of children doing homework were not selected.

This study employed the five categories defined by Seale (2008), Old Maid, Policeman, Parody, Inept, and Hero. Also employed were the additional three categories defined by Attebury (2010), Sexy, Fun, and Psycho. In addition this study tracked whether the subject was wearing Glasses, Shushing,

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https://www.shutterstock.com/search?search_source=base_landing_page&language=en&searchterm=librarian&image_type=all

Reading, or Shelving. Finally, apparent gender and whether someone appeared to be a person of color was tabulated.



Figure 1 This is an example of an image that meets the criteria for inclusion. This image represents an Old Maid wearing Glasses, and for the purposes of this study, Shelving.

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Librarian_at_the_card_files_at_a_senior_high_sc

As a point of contrast, one hundred librarian memes were also evaluated. The search term “librarian meme” was used within Google’s Image Search¹. The first three criteria remained the same, however nearly half the memes discovered used images from popular media in lieu of an image of a librarian. As long as the content of the meme was clearly librarian oriented, these images were included and categorized as Non-Librarian.

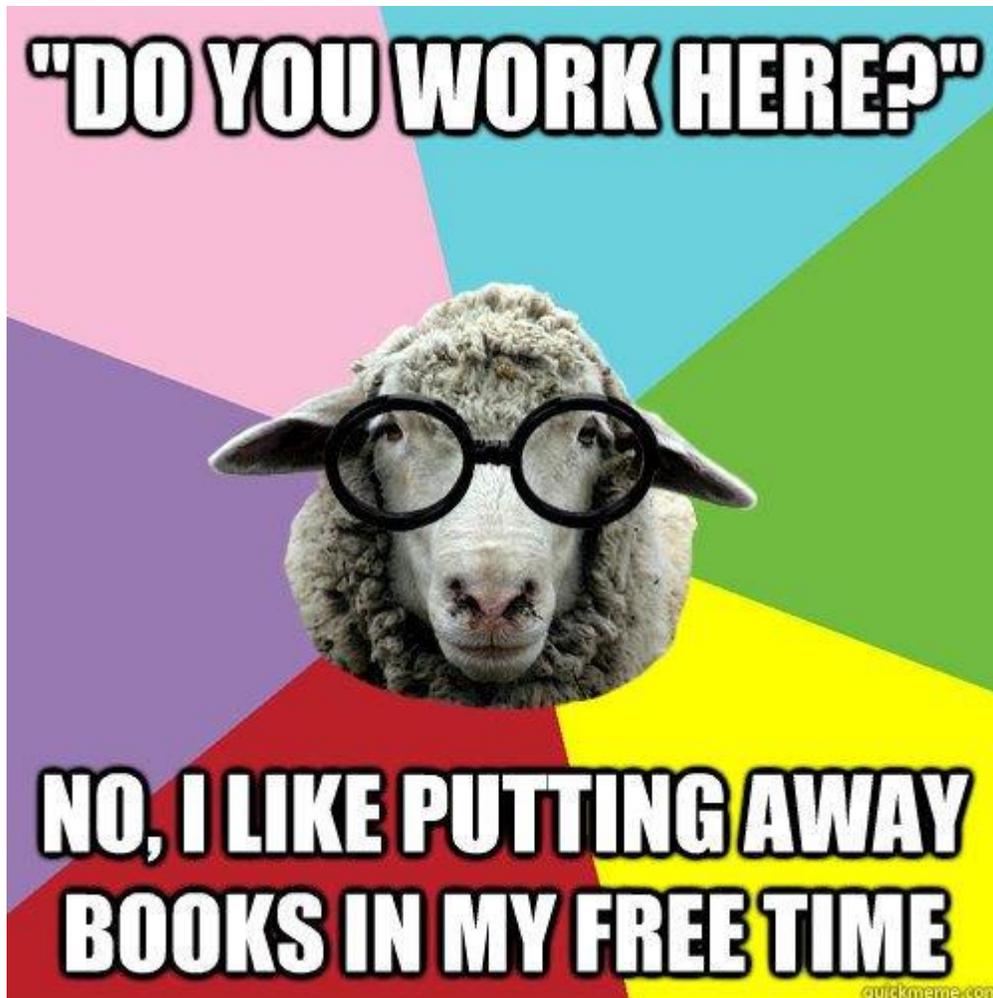


Figure 2 An example of a librarian meme. This would be categorized as Non-Librarian and Parody.
https://twitter.com/milfordlib_de/status/988582835803082752

Results

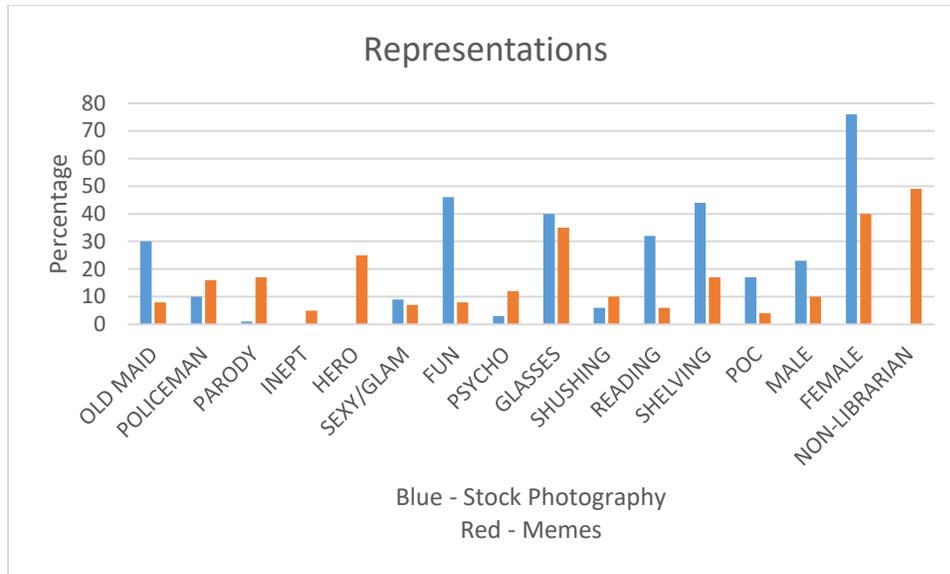
While previous studies have generally identified Old Maid as the prevailing stereotype in traditional media, this study supports Attebury (2010) in finding that in new media the Old Maid stereotype has been supplanted. Only 30% of stock photos, and 8% of memes were found to utilize markers of the Old Maid stereotype, such as frumpy dresses or sweaters, hair buns, prominent glasses and grey haired women. In stock photography Fun was the most prevalent category. Within the context of this study, librarians were categorized as fun if they were smiling, laughing, assisting other people who are smiling or laughing, wearing brightly colored clothes, or engaging in some kind of play. 46% of the stock photographs depicted a Fun librarian. Representations within memes were much more evenly divided; Hero (25%), Parody (17%), Policeman (16%), and Psycho (12%). However only 8% of memes depicted an Old Maid librarian. It had originally been hoped that memes would present an unfiltered outsiders perspective on the profession, but the high percentage of Hero depictions, as well

the Parody memes which were often jokes from inside the profession it is clear that a non-trivial number of librarian memes are created by librarians.²



Figure 3 This image would be classified as a Fun librarian. Note the bright clothing, the smiling demeanor, and the engagement in play. <https://pxhere.com/en/photo/846137>

² A non-trivial number of library memes also featured Ryan Gosling.



Other stereotypical traits were also tracked. In stock photos, 44% of librarians were shelving, 40% of librarians were wearing glasses, 32% were reading but only 6% were shushing. Within memes, after excluding non-librarian popular culture images, 34% of librarians were shelving, 70% were wearing glasses, 12% were reading, and 20% were shushing. This suggests that negative stereotypes are slightly more prevalent within the memes, but most stereotypical traits were still the exception rather than the rule. Gender representation was actually quite close to reality. Within the stock photos 76% of the librarians were female, while with memes it was 80%, which matches the most recent census by the American Library Association. (2018) Persons of color were represented at a rate of 17% in stock photos and 8% in memes, which are both sadly optimistic.

CONCLUSION

This study suggests that within online imagery the Old Maid stereotype has largely fallen away. The categories of Inept and Psycho were also very underrepresented. Depictions of librarians as Fun and Heroes was much more common. Interestingly, persons of color were more commonly represented in these images than in reality. It is beyond the scope of this study to draw conclusions on that topic but further research is certainly warranted. Librarians are still associated with glasses and books (Shelving, Reading) which is not necessarily a bad association, but suggests that the “librarian brand” may still be rooted in traditional roles. At the same time, the stock photos are marketed to librarians, and many of the memes seem to come from librarians, so the attitudes of people outside the profession are not clearly delineated from those within in this dataset.

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