VISUAL RHETORIC: FINAL

A Critique of GSU Transit and Student Dialogue

GRACE DAVIS

HOCKS, MALONE | ENGL 3135

7 DECEMBER 2019

Table of Contents

Introduction

In the summer of 2019, I lived an hour away from Georgia State University. I was taking five courses, and I could not afford to park in on-campus decks. For those three months, I had to wake up at 5 in the morning, drive for nearly two hours in rush hour traffic, and then walk the two miles to my class because the shuttles were nowhere to be found. I was usually the only one on those streets at that time, besides a few homeless people, and there was one lonesome police car in the parking lot. By the time my 8am began, I was exhausted.

The online dialogue surrounding commuter students' issues is largely made up of quirky and positive blog posts and how-to articles. GSU's the Signal published an article last year on the emotional struggle of a commuter to feel connected, but it completely glossed over other struggles. It focused on the responsibility of the student to do more. Fresh U also posted an exploration of the problems commuter students face – a fun little list that is hardly serious about presenting any solutions.

Georgia State University and its campus are a microcosm of the surrounding Atlanta area: we have similar safety, transportation, transit, and housing issues, and the students who pay thousands of dollars each year to attend GSU must deal with these issues every day. One such issue springs from the transit options provided by the university. As a majority commuter school, Georgia State is home to twenty-one thousand students who park on various campus properties. The cheapest of these properties are Blue and Green Lots – the only "free" student parking, which are a mile and a half south of the university's campus. From there, students must either walk or take the provided shuttles. The shuttles although recently bolstered in number, are known to be unreliable, and at peak commute times, the waiting line can get dozens-deep, which forces many to wait for several shuttles to come before they can get to class. Those who wait for

the shuttles have no shelter from the elements, and the police presence leaves much to be desired. Given that the students who park at the Blue and Green Lots usually opt for them because of financial issues, Georgia State University marginalizes its poorer students to unreliable transit to campus.

Interfaces Involved
Passio GO! Interpretation
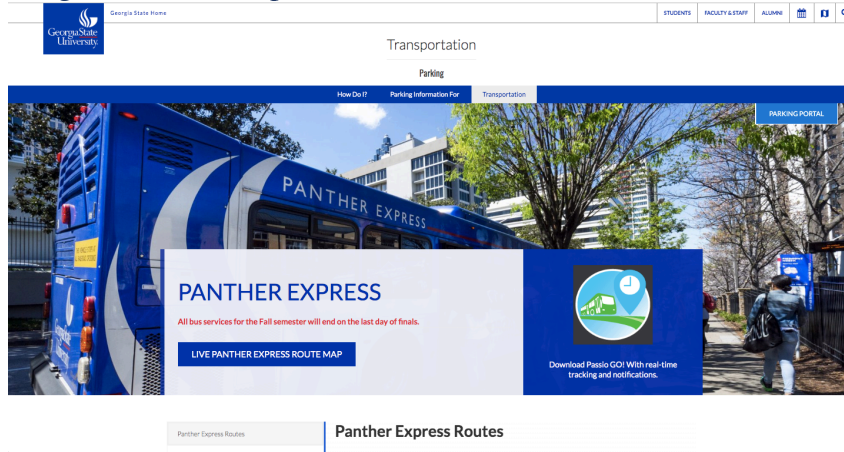
Image 1: Panther Express
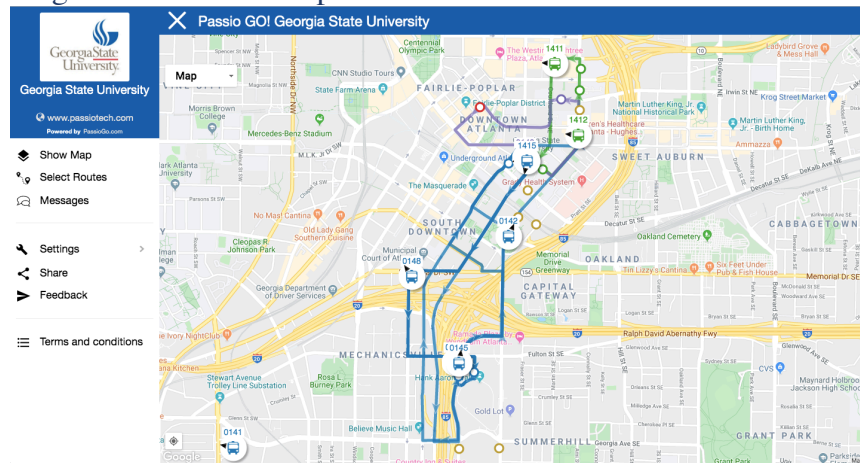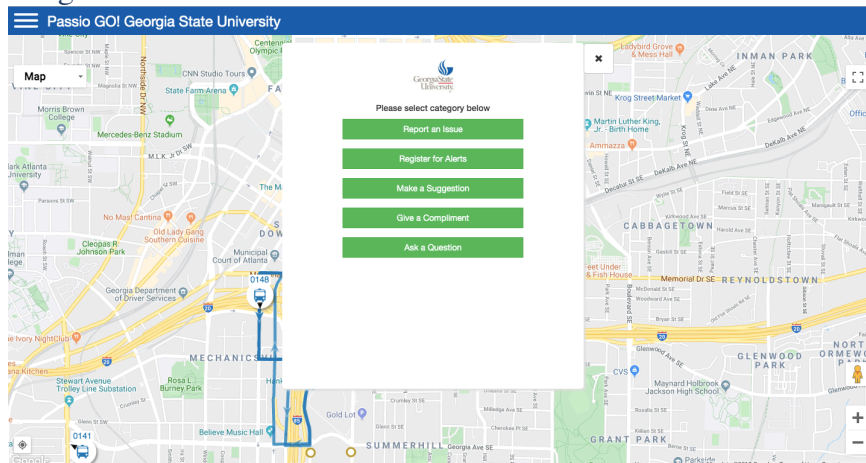

Image 2: Passio GO! map

Image 3: Passio GO! feedback

Georgia State University extends little information about its shuttles and offers no conversational aspect of problem-solving. The university shuttles' windows have small stickers which explain the phone number students can text for transit updates and news, and the school's official "Transit" and "Panther Express" website pages lead users to nearly the same page. Once one has reached the most useful and informative page ("Panther Express"), the layout is overcrowded by information and buttons, and it is overwhelmed by the image heading. Georgia State has made affordances for links and announcements rather than static information about the shuttle system (how many shuttles in use, exact pick-up and drop-off locations, as well as approximate wait and commute times). The page's commitment pushing Passio GO! constricts it from its purpose of distributing information about the shuttles.

If entered, the desktop site for Passio GO! reveals a Google map of the area surrounding the campus. The map displays the routes that the shuttles take, how many shuttles are in operation at the time, and where those shuttles are on their routes. It takes up the entire screen. Other than the analogous scheme of greys, yellows, and greens of the map, the page follows the color-branding of Georgia State University: blue and white. The typeface font remains the same throughout, leaving only the typeface's color to vary, which builds an easy readability for users. When one wants information aside from the shuttle map, she must click the menu icon, which presents a limited number of options. One can simplify the routes by opting out of certain shuttle runs; one can read the informational messages that the university sends to update Passio GO! users (which are in a red boldface font); one can change the display settings; one could share (not functional yet since the app is just a demo).

One could submit feedback. Clicking on the feedback function leads students to an even more restricted list of functions that departs from the established blue and white color palate.

The feedback menu is as one-sided the floor. It is all unbending and unflexible. Georgia State's partnership with Passio GO! conveys an ideology of restriction and disconnection. Students are very much on their own with reporting problems with the shuttles, and even if they were to submit a report, where is the accountability? Not having a public forum to show the problems shields the university from having to actually handle them. Any reports, complaints, or suggestions are just shouts into a digital void. I find the interface cold and unyielding, and I believe that the structure built into the interface conveys an ideology of intimidation and unaccountability. This is an example of structural violence, which Fleckenstein et al. say, "occurs through the uneven distribution of power systematized on the institutional level" (17). While Passio GO! presents with easy accessibility and open informational distribution, the interface's normate body is a student who has no complaints. Since the hierarchy of the menu options leaves feedback as the last option, the site conveys a carelessness for assistance. It is leading students to give up. Moreover, the fact that the majority of students who need the information in Passio GO! are the among the poorer attendees reinforces the ideology of socioeconomic marginalization. Through the one-sided nature of the app, Georgia State builds a system of low accountability and disproportionately allocated authority.

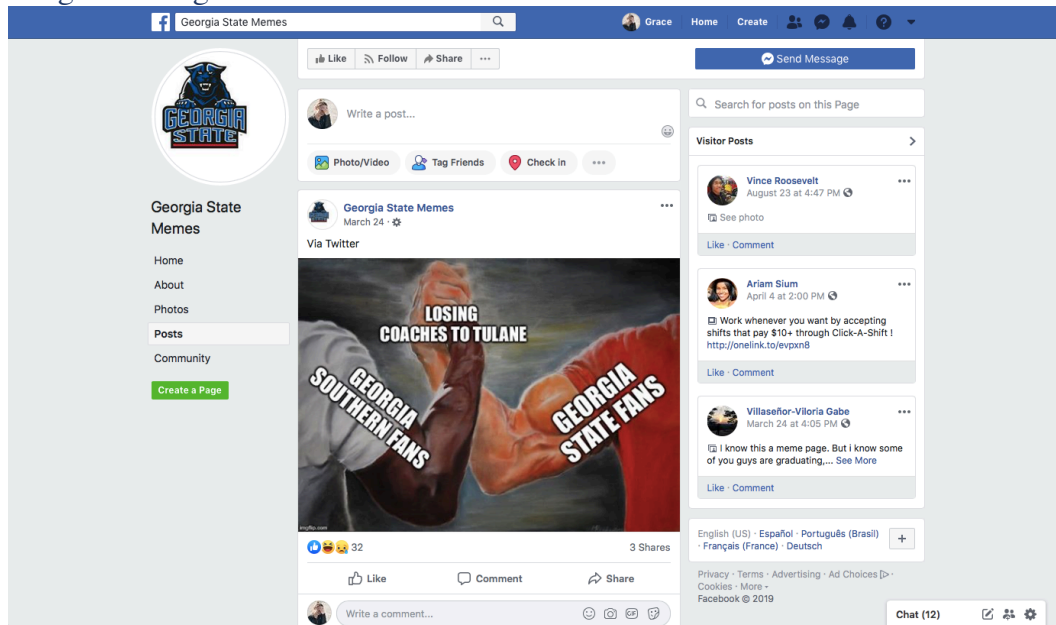## What Do You Meme?

Image 4: Georgia State Memes

Image 5: Meme example

In the twenty-first century, memes have established themselves as a foundational way for people to communicate with each other. Meme in this case refers to a unit of cultural transmission, as defined by Richard Dawkins in 1976. Now, his definition precedes our modern understanding of the term, which has grown more complex in the last decade. Memes function as either a representation of someone's challenges or experiences, or as an account of someone's opinion. They are also inherently humorous in tone, and including a comical element helps ease tension in situations of overwrought political or cultural debate. Erhan Aslan writes in his article "The surprising academic origins of memes," "Trivial as they may seem, memes contribute to this shared culture by fostering people's imagination, creativity and involvement in society through new media." Within the post-postmodernist era, a meme functions as a message to future generations (or university class) which convey the social issues of their predecessors.

I found the pictured meme example on a Facebook page called, "Georgia State Memes." Created in 2012, the page allows anyone to create and share relatable content – usually images with overlaid text, usually with a humorous edge. Each of these memes critique the university's programs and problems. The image above hones in on the problem of the provided shuttles. Picturing dozens of people trying to fit onto a train, the dynamic movement of these people, their downcast, dissatisfied faces, and the drained color palate convey a sense of life emptied. Three men in uniform keep the peace and structure, forcing as many people onto the train car as possible as the commuters wait for their turn to be herded as cattle. There is nothing humorous about the original image. However, the text adds a layer of wit. Written in white boldface font, it says, "No Seats on Turner Field Bus… Challenge Accepted." The font's whiteness, however, does not contrast well with the rest of the image,

and it contributes poor readability. Combining the reality of the commuters with the lighthearted language of a game creates the perfect meme.

Although meant in jest, memes like this one contain messages of real issues and suffering. Nevertheless, an important distinction should be made: memes are not an example of activism in this case. I believe that they are meant as a way for students to relate to each other and blow off some steam. Housing the congregation of images on a Facebook page also creates friction. Some groups of students are left out of the conversation. The normate body is Georgia State University student with sight (no alternate texts to describe the image to a blind person included). Also, since humor is involved in the viewing of memes, the audience has to be skilled in reading social cues and understanding current cultural and social dialogues – which might exclude some students on the autism spectrum. Given the definition of a meme as the act of conveying personal and collective issues with humor, memes can be an act of cementing those issues into history. The ideologies behind Facebook are connection and interaction, but those connections and interactions are exclusive. There we find an example of cultural violence. Fleckenstein el al. write, "[C]ultural violence is… a kind of brutality so deeply intertwined within the fabric of a culture," and it "occurs when people are influenced in such a way that the current status of their physical and mental health is less than the promise of both their physical and mental potential" (17). Internet access and social media are privileges. Those who do not have a secure connection or a profile cannot engage in the ongoing conversations and jokes – they must endure the commuter's issues on their own, without the comfort of identification with a larger group. However, Facebook's exclusion does not undo the engagement of the included. Where Passio GO! fails to start a conversation, Facebook thrives.

As far as interfaces go, Facebook is not the worst. It is easy to convey emotions (the react

button) and thoughts (the comment function), so the page for "Georgia State Memes" enables anyone to start or add to a dialogue about common issues. Viewers can also send the account a private message. The account is not private, so it is accessible to anyone with an account, allowing them to interact with others in the audience. (One of the more popular memes has over sixty-three thousand likes, thirty-one thousand comments, and fifty-eight thousand shares.) A constraint is that the only person who can post directly onto the home page is the person who runs the account, and the last time someone posted to the main account was last spring. Since then, other students have posted their own memes that have been relegated to a smaller timeline on the right side of the interface.

Intervention

Georgia State University has failed to acknowledge seventy-nine percent of their student population. Students have few options when it comes to voicing their opinions and needs, and we have reverted to funny social media groups and quiet suffering. Although Facebook stands as a decent interface, the platform in regards to the issues conveyed by memes on Georgia State Memes fails to project. Since it is only a meme page, the administration would not consider engaging in a serious dialogue, and the page becomes a bin of recycled complaints and jokes without a solution in sight. Meme pages have been fine as a placeholder for the last few years, but it is time to get serious about commuters' issues. However, even the serious nature of Passio GO! is undercut by the nondescript feedback options. I propose a website or a forum as an intervention or answerable action. The suggested forum would have to be public and partnered with by Georgia State – a move that would convey to the twenty-one thousand commuter students the university's commitment to solving their problems. That way, they would not be able to ignore us and the problems we face.

Additionally, a public online forum is accessible by all with a device and an internet connection. No Facebook profile necessary. It would promote a productive conversation between all affected students, as well as engagement between students and the university staff. An open dialogue might lead to suggestions and constructive solutions to problems – a co-creation. Just as discussion posts on iCollege can help facilitate learning and cooperation, my online forum would facilitate an exchange of advice, support, and cooperation. According to a study at the University of Texas at Austin, "The effectiveness of the emotional and informational support that online forums provide has been reported." Online forums would encourage collaborative problem-solving as well as individualize support for each student's parking and shuttle experiences. The

ideology presented behind such an interface would be more flexible than both Passio GO! and

the Facebook group; it would be more inclusive, informational, and communicative. Erasing the

humorous aspect of the memes would give way to a more serious approach to commuters' issues,

and fostering conversation adds a layer of productivity. My approach takes the positive attributes

of both of my interface examples (like community from the Facebook page and structure from

Passio GO!) and removes their negative aspects, and it bridges the gap between the marginalized

and the university.

Limitations

All online forums – all social dialogues, in fact – face the problem of the internet troll. Internet trolls hold no reverence for constructive online conversation, and they waste the time and mental space of those on the forum for assistance and understanding. In his article, called "Troll Theory? Issue 22: Trolls and the Negative Space of the Internet," Glen Fuller writes that "to aver that someone is trolling is to allege that their participation conceals the aims of their disruption." The limitation of my proposed solution is that we would more than likely encounter such a disruption. Additionally, there is the concern of moderation. Would the forum operator have the authority to delete unconstructive or malicious comments? Would it moderate entries and comments for appropriate language? We would not want to create an atmosphere of structural violence by enforcing too much power on one side of the exchange, but if left on their own, users might contribute their own cultural violence against each other. The forum operators would have to find a balance between open communication and constructive conversation without introducing tension through censorship and functional constraint.

Works Cited

Aslan, Erhan. "The Surprising Academic Origins of Memes." *The Conversation*, 16 Oct. 2019.

Fuller, G, Wilson, J & McCrea, C 2013, 'Troll Theory? Issue 22: Trolls and the Negative Space of the Internet', *Fibreculture Journal*, vol. 22, pp. 1-15.

Fleckenstein, Kristie S. … et al. "A Pedagogy of Rhetorical Looking: Atrocity Images at the Intersection of Vision and Violence." *College English*, vol. 80, no. 1, Sept. 2017, pp. 11 – 34.

Im, Eun-Ok, and Wonshik Chee. "An online forum as a qualitative research method: practical issues." *Nursing research* vol. 55,4 (2006): 267-73.