

## From Paradise to Punchline: How the Media Has Shaped Public Perception of Florida

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**Abstract:** *Florida has always encompassed an otherness that separates it from the rest of the United States. However, the exact nature of what makes Florida unique has shifted overtime. This essay examines how the media's portrayal of Florida has impacted the way the state is viewed by the rest of the country. Starting after the civil war, Florida was portrayed as an exotic paradise. Today, the Florida Man trend has caused Florida to be viewed as place for lawlessness and strange crimes. To avoid a negative impact on Florida's tourism industry in the future, Florida needs to be reinvented once again. This time, Florida's rare beauty and ecotourism opportunities need to be highlighted in order to appeal to the desires of millennial travelers.*

**Keywords:** Florida, social media, meme, millennials, tourism

When Florida became a state in 1845, the first flag that flew over the capital of Tallahassee read, "Let Us Alone" (Pittman 1). From the very beginning, Florida has stood as a separate entity from the rest of the United States. It is a state like no other, offering year-round sunshine and the magic of Disney, while also being home to hurricanes and giant reptiles. It has miles of white sand beaches and crystal blue water along its two coasts, while the interior consists of muggy, mosquito infested swamps. Florida is indeed a land of contradictions, to the point where "to some people, it's a paradise. To others, it's a punchline" (Pittman, *Home*). Diane Roberts, professor of English at Florida State University, argues that "[e]verybody knows Florida isn't really America, not part of the South, not part of the Caribbean. It's as if Florida has been granted some dispensation placing it outside of time" (x). Florida has always possessed a certain otherness, created by a combination of its unique environment, history, and population. However, the way this otherness has been perceived by the rest of the country has evolved over time by taking on the qualities of whatever aspects of Florida the media focuses on at that moment.

Immediately following the civil war, businesses in Florida were struggling, so they used the media to portray the state as an exotic paradise to attract northern tourists. Over the years, Florida has kept this idyllic reputation, as new hotels and theme parks solidified the perception of a paradise. Recently, social media has given the state a new, less favorable reputation. The Florida Man trend, which consists of posting headlines of strange crimes that occurred in Florida to social media, has led to Florida being mocked as a safe haven for the criminally insane. These circulating memes created a negative perception of Florida, making it a less appealing place to visit. The state is now seen more as the butt of countless jokes rather than the perfect vacation destination, which could harm Florida's tourism industry in the future. Florida has been reinvented by the media several times before, and to keep its tourism industry strong, social media needs to be used to reinvent the state once again. Millennials are a generation seeking unique and impressive travel experiences, so the natural beauty and ecotourism opportunities of Florida should be emphasized to attract them.

### **How the Media Created Florida's Image as a Paradise**

In the late nineteenth century, not long after the civil war had ended, Florida businesses wanted to attract tourists to help the economy which was in shambles. Like the rest of the south, the state was unable to return to prosperity through reconstruction (Benner 92). Local businesses needed to sell people on the idea of visiting a hot and humid swampland, but to do so, they also needed to obscure a rather questionable history. Florida was the third southern state to leave the Union in 1861, and its Confederate, pro-slavery past was unlikely to attract many northern tourists. Instead of telling a more truthful story, the local and national media portrayed Florida to outsiders as an exotic land, separate from the rest of the south. This rebranding was achieved in large part by heavily emphasizing Florida's history as a former Spanish colony. Reiko Hillyer, associate professor of History at Lewis and Clark College, explains how "[a]s one of the earliest southern destinations to attract northern tourists after the civil war, St. Augustine, Florida, had the task

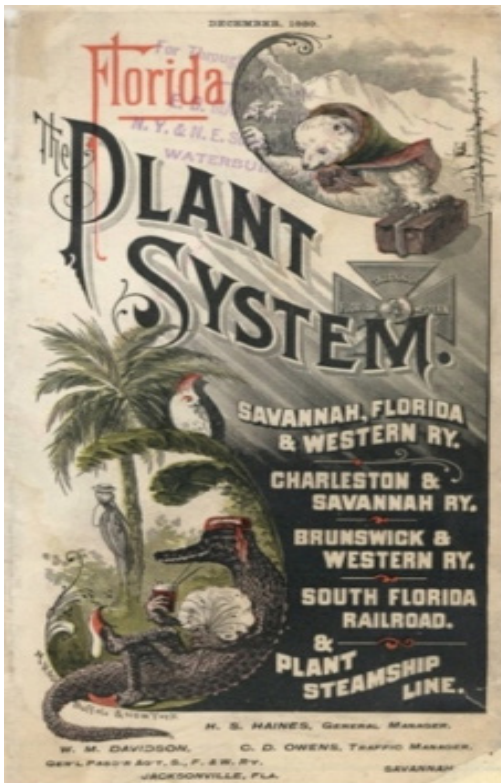
of fashioning a relationship to its southern past and putting forward a history that appealed to northern visitors" (105). As the oldest continuously inhabited city in the United States, originally founded by Spain in 1565, St. Augustine's history helped "to mute its southern heritage and create an iconography that was at once exotic and uncontroversial" (Hillyer 105). This focus on Florida's Spanish roots contributed greatly to its image as being different from the rest of the country, and from this otherness, the image of a tropical paradise was born.

A substantial portion of Florida's positive press in the late nineteenth century came from William Drysdale, a writer who traveled around the state and wrote letters about his experiences. His letters were published in the *New York Times*, creating a direct connection between Florida and New York. In one letter titled "Under the Orange Trees: Random Notes of a Journey to Florida," Drysdale described his trip to Maitland, a city about six miles north of Orlando. Drysdale noted several small details along the way, such as the changing orange blossoms and a sea that is "smooth as glass," that created beautiful images for the reader (17). Of the towns he passed through, Drysdale lamented that "everything looked so attractive that I was sorry the running of trains prevented my stopping" (17). Upon arriving in Maitland, he wrote, "from this little cottage in Florida, with its guava trees brushing up against my windows and its back yard full of orange trees, I can see it was a wise choice" (17). Drysdale's descriptions created a relaxing and alluring image in the minds of his readers. The words he used in his descriptions, specifically "flourishing" and "wonderful," led potential travelers from the north to imagine Florida as a prosperous, relaxing oasis, far away from the hectic life of the big city.

A rival paper, the *New-York Tribune*, also highlighted Florida's beauty to its readers. In a 1916 issue, an article titled "Phenomenal Development of Florida's West Coast Has Completely Changed Its Character" described the state as "the land of sunshine and flowers, of tropical plants and fruits, of birds, butterflies, wild fowl and game animals, but the west coast has a character so complex and laden with possibilities that, to the eye and imagination of the first time visitor, it is like placing a

table of sweets before a child" (8). Such vivid descriptions made visiting Florida, especially the Gulf Coast, seem like a pleasurable experience that was almost unparalleled. Another segment in the January 7, 1917 issue titled, "Winter Winds are Tamed to Summer Zephyrs for These Southland Bathing Places" praised Palm Beach, St. Petersburg, and Seabreeze. The caption for one photo of a crowd of swimmers and sunbathers read, "Palm Beach continues to attract thousands of the wealthy, the fashionable and the beautiful" (9). This gave the impression that Florida was the place to visit for anyone with the means to do so. The readers of the newspaper were clearly treated to an alluring, and somewhat fantastical, perception of the state as a paradise.

**Figure 1:** Image courtesy of the Henry B. Plant Museum, Tampa, Florida.



The tropical climate and unique species of flora and fauna found in Florida further contributed to its exotic and almost utopian image. For example, in the article "A Journey to Lake Worth," Drysdale described his expedition to Lake Worth, emphasizing the "great variety of tropical trees and plants," including guavas and coconuts (3). He called them a great attraction that to "visitors of the North" gave a "tropical appearance that is not to be found in more northern parts" (3). Alligators, manatees, large fish and other animals native to Florida only added to this idea that Florida is practically a foreign land. For example, a 1922 issue of the *Washington Herald* featured a picture of a giant fish hanging next to a man and woman of similar size, that was captioned, "this is not a prehistoric monster in the National Museum, but a Florida swordfish, caught in the Indian River, Florida" (4). Similarly, alligators were perceived as "prehistoric monsters" and a symbol of the state. As seen in Figure 1, the map cover shows an alligator relaxing against a palm tree with a drink in its hand and tropical birds surrounding it. This image suggests that people are traveling to Florida to experience its exotic nature, which not only increased its separateness from the rest of the country, but also persuaded people to vacation there.

At the turn of the twentieth century, a number of new grand resort hotels helped to solidify the image of Florida as a premier vacation destination. In 1884, Henry B. Plant brought the railroad to Tampa. To encourage tourists to come to the city by train, he began constructing the Tampa Bay Hotel, now known as Plant Hall. As it was being built, Drysdale wrote, "this will be not only one of the Greatest hotels of the State, but one of the wonders of the country. It is difficult to give Northern people who have not visited Florida any idea of what such a hotel is" (17). The hotel was indeed grand, consisting of 511 rooms and "revolutionary inventions of the time period" (Benner 91, 99). As Marcella Benner explains, "Plant was able to make his hotel the pinnacle of all luxury resorts. This, in turn, made the city a new, popular destination for travelers and put Tampa's name on the map" (93). The Ponce de Leon Hotel in St. Augustine, also built at this time, was equally impressive. According to

Drysdale, "there is nothing whatever anywhere in this country to compare with [these two hotels]" (17). This added even more lavishness to the vision of Florida that the rest of the country was receiving from the media.

Throughout the twentieth century, entrepreneurs continued to develop Florida's unique reputation, this time with the added attraction of theme parks. Walt Disney was perhaps the most notable of these when, in 1963, he selected Orlando as the location for Walt Disney World. According to Richard Fogelson, scholar of urban development, Disney did so specifically because, at the time, Orlando was mostly virgin swampland but had accessible roads (90). Leading up to Disney World's grand opening, NBC's *the Wonderful World of Disney* debuted "Project Florida," a show designed to excite viewers about this new theme park. It featured Disney himself pointing to a map of Florida and proclaiming, "we have a perfect location in Florida, almost in the very center of the state. In fact, we've selected this site because it's so easy for tourists and Florida residents to get here by automobile" (01:21-01:32). The show also featured sketches of the future park including Cinderella's castle, as well as footage of the construction.

Once Disney World was completed, the theme park went on to "transform Orlando from a sleepy agricultural community, more dependent on citrus than tourism, into one of the most popular tourist destinations in the world" (Fogelson 91). Disney World was designed to be a utopia closed off from everything else. According to William Borrie, professor of Forestry and Conservation at the University of Montana, "Disney aims to construct a world apart. The visitor is asked to suspend belief and enter into a land far away from the reality of the world outside its gates" (73). Everything done in Disney World, from the dimensions of buildings to the curving walkways, is a strategically planned element that adds to the fantasy experience (Borrie 74-75). Disney World was intended to be a "Magic Kingdom" of its own, but it also further catalyzed Florida's reputation as a paradise and attracted tourists at unprecedented rates.

Around the same time that Disney World opened, another phenomenon was beginning to attract a new generation of

visitors to Florida: spring break. This pilgrimage of college and high school students to the state's sandy shores began with the Colgate University swim team's annual trip to Ft. Lauderdale in the 1930s to escape the cold. By the 1950s, the small trip had transformed into 20,000 college students descending to the city every March and April. The idea of spring break gained even more traction after Glendon Swarthout, professor of English at Michigan State University, took the trip to write about what was happening. In 1960, Hollywood transformed Swarthout's novel, *Where The Boys Are*, into a movie, and the following year, "50,000 students showed up for spring break in Fort Lauderdale, making it the epicenter of collegiate spring partying" (Moss). More movies and an MTV series followed, attracting more young people every season, until the end of the 1980s when laws were passed in Ft. Lauderdale to combat this yearly takeover. Other Florida towns soon became popular spring break destinations, including Panama City Beach (Moss). The spectacle of spring break gave high school and college students the perception of Florida as a place for sunshine and surf, but also for partying and breaking the rules. Spring break culture provided the first glimpse of Florida being viewed as a home for lawlessness as much as for leisure.

### **How Social Media Transformed Florida into a Punchline**

Today, Florida's reputation as a paradise remains, but it now coexists with the darker reputation of being a place where absurd and disturbing things often happen, particularly strange crimes. Because of this, Florida has become America's punchline. For a growing number of people, stories of drunk people harassing alligators and drug addicts committing unbelievable crimes have replaced the beautiful images of white sand and Mickey Mouse.

Underlying social, economic, and environmental problems have always existed in Florida, but only recently have they become part of the state's perceived otherness. In the article "Florida: The Mediated State," Julian Chambliss, professor of English and History at Michigan State University, and Denise Cummings, associate professor of Critical Media and Cultural

Studies at Rollins College, examine the state's split characteristics and the forces that have shaped it as both a "geographic place" and a "symbolic place" (276). They contrast how Florida is idealized as an exotic paradise, but in reality, is "linked to nightmarish prophecy" and struggling with issues of "urbanization, immigration, and environmental despoliation" (276). Chambliss and Cummings conclude that "Florida has been and continues to be marketed by the interplay between imagined expectation and real experience" (276). Indeed, these real, negative parts of Florida are now shaping society's perception by turning Florida into a place to mock and pity. As Roberts argues, Florida itself is an entity encasing nothing more than "an exploitable present," meaning people take advantage of Florida for a laugh (x). Florida is increasingly becoming more of a place to poke fun at from a distance, rather than a place to actually visit.

Today, Florida's otherness stems not only from it being perceived as a paradise, but also as a strange place where absurd things happen. The main source of this growing perception is the Florida Man viral trend, which was created on Twitter in 2013. It stemmed from the idea that the people of Florida, especially (but not exclusively) men, are constantly in the news for committing unusually bizarre crimes. For example, a tweet posted in 2019 by @MaiahCapel with a screenshot of a news article, headlined, "Police: Florida man, 88, burns raccoons for eating mangos" or a tweet by @trindorka of a Fox News article headlined, "Florida Man who allegedly threatened family with Coldplay lyrics ends standoff after SWAT promises him pizza" are the kind of stories that now come to mind when people think of Florida.

*New York Times'* best-selling author and St. Petersburg resident Craig Pittman has argued that, in Florida, "[c]rimes tend to be weirder and scams tend to be bigger" (4). In his book *Oh, Florida!*, Pittman gave a list of such crimes from December 2014, which included someone who "faked a heart attack to steal a Barbie toy from Walmart," another who "kidnapped a seventy-pound giant African land tortoise and made taunting calls to the owner," and even "a brother vs brother sword fight" (4).



According to Pittman, there is no shortage of these headlines, where a male Floridian is reported committing an unusual, and often unbelievable, crime. However, it is not necessarily that more strange crimes happen in Florida, but instead that the crimes are more easily accessible to the press and therefore more open to public ridicule due to the state's Sunshine Laws, which require all records of crimes committed in Florida to be public knowledge. The Florida Man trend consists of finding these headlines and posting them online as a form of humorous entertainment for others to enjoy. Countless men and some women have earned the title of Florida Man, also known as the "World's Worst Super Hero," by virtue of their newsworthy actions. Thousands of people from across the country, including Floridians themselves, have taken to social media to join in on the fun.

One of the threads, started by Twitter user @g\_pratimaaa, instructed "EVERYBODY google "florida man" followed by your birthday (florida man august 22) and tell me what you get. mine is Florida Man tries to attack neighbor with tractor." This tweet received almost 100,000 interactions. This shows that people were confident that Florida is full of enough unusual happenings to take the time to search Google for a funny Florida headline on their birthday. Twitter user, @the\_real\_dgraz, wrote "This was mine," with a picture of a screenshot of a Fox News article headlined, "Florida man arrested for throwing alligator through drive-thru window." This tweet reflects the stereotypical association of Florida and alligators, but instead of it being an alluring, exotic characteristic of the state, these animals are now seen as being exploited as part of a criminal act. Twitter user @kaylawaylaish added to the thread, asking, "Can my Florida man please be my spirit animal" with a screenshot of a news article with the headline, "Florida man rides manatee, dares police to arrest him, gets arrested" and a picture of a man hovering over the giant aquatic mammal, thus idealizing this Florida Man. From these tweets, it is evident that to an outsider, many of the events that take place in Florida are a source of comic relief from everyday life.

This social media trend gives insight into how people now view Florida's otherness as a joke. Other memes with Florida as their focus have emerged from the Florida Man viral trend as well, further emphasizing that the online community considers the state to be a laughing matter. In Figure 2, a picture was posted in a thread by Twitter user @JoyRoseM, who wrote, "Also, this. 🇺🇸 #FloridaMan" with a screenshot from the movie *The Babadook* that reads, "Why can't you just be normal?" At the top of the meme is a picture of an American flag, and at the bottom is a picture of the state of Florida with the caption, "\*Screams\*." This meme shows that people view the rest of the United States as normal, and Florida as abnormal.

Figure 2: Image posted on Twitter by @JoyRoseM.



The Florida Man viral trend blew up so much that a Twitter account, created by user @\_FloridaMan in January 2013, was dedicated solely to posting variations of this meme. Before its retirement in 2019, the account had 421,000 followers. The user behind the account, Freddie Campion, eventually came forward and was interviewed by writer Logan Hill in his *New York Times*'

article, “Is It Okay to Laugh at Florida Man?” where Campion explained that he began to grow uneasy with the feeling that he had “created a monster.” Campion had originally created the account just for the laughs, but said he now feels guilty about entertaining the masses at the expense of real individuals with often tragic stories. Hill also interviewed one of those individuals, Brandon Hatfield, who enjoyed a moment of fame after this headline was retweeted around the world: “Florida Man Wearing Crocs Gets Bitten After Jumping into Crocodile Exhibit at Alligator Farm.” Hatfield is now in jail for a combination of drug charges and his venture into the alligator pit. In his interview, he disclosed his struggles with addiction, as well as losing family and friends to drugs (Hill). When hearing the actual details of Hatfield’s life, it becomes harder to laugh at the meme. There are real people behind these jokes and making Florida the laughing stock of the country may have more long-term, negative repercussions.

### **The Threat and Promise of Florida’s Social Media Presence**

The negative attention garnered by the Florida Man social media trend may be causing damage to Florida’s tourism industry, although clearly the perception of Florida as a paradise is still widespread and no noticeable decline in tourism has occurred yet. In fact, Florida attracted a record number of 126.98 million visitors in 2018 (Turner 201), and according to the US Census Bureau, the state’s population grew by 14.2% in 2019. However, the Florida Man trend could become a deterrent for millennials, who are replacing baby boomers as the largest generation of potential travelers. Millennials may not choose Florida for their vacations in the future because the negative perception social media has promoted does not align with the desires of the generation. Millennials are the oldest generation that is fully immersed in internet-based technology, including meme culture, and they have contributed to the negative perception of Florida by sharing and even creating Florida Man memes. This image of Florida, while amusing, could have an adverse effect on millennial’s desires to actually visit the Sunshine State.

Millennial travelers seek out unique and memorable expe-

riences, and Florida's current perception does not support this aim. According to Tousley Ann Leake, who researched how to attract more tourists to St. Francisville, Louisiana for her honors thesis at the University of Michigan, members of this generation "feel purposeful in their travel when they are able to find something new and different" (15). In the past, people flocked to theme parks like Walt Disney World and Universal Studios, and to popular beaches such as Clearwater or Cocoa Beach. These attractions have remained popular for older generations of tourists for the past several decades, including millennials who came with their parents when they were children, and thus are unlikely to fulfill a yearning for unique experiences by returning to Florida.

Millennials also highly value how their peers view their social media posts, and it is important that the places they travel to impress others when posted on sites like Instagram. Leake explains that "the opinions and approval of other Millennials are driving factors in purchase and travel habits, so a destination gaining a social media presence with Millennials is important and places the brand at a competitive advantage" (17). Since Florida has become the laughing-stock of the country on social media, posting vacation photos and stories from there is less likely to be viewed positively by others on social media. Millennials want to travel to destinations that will excite their peers, and Florida's current reputation as a punchline is likely to dampen that excitement.

Clearly, Florida's current reputation does not align with millennial tourists' desires, but that does not mean Florida does not contain the kinds of experiences that millennials are looking for. Specifically, ecotourism is a popular travel experience which encompasses an array of travel options with the singular goal of visiting natural environments and becoming educated about how to protect them (Fetters). Clark et al. studied how social media can be used to market ecotourism to millennials and found that most "would choose an ecotourism destination over a nonecotourism destination if money were not an issue" (38). Furthermore, many millennials said they wish to visit an ecotourism destination within the next year and are particular-

ly interested in opportunities concerning animal conservation and natural environments (Clark et al. 38). With 175 state parks, eleven national parks, and animal sanctuaries for wolves, big cats, and crocodiles, Florida is readymade to offer such experiences. Throughout the state, tourists can visit natural springs, go camping, hiking, canoeing and kayaking, and do many other activities that fit millennials interests, but social media currently does a poor job informing them of these opportunities.

Florida's ecotourism opportunities should be promoted more on social media, which would not only help shift Florida's image back into a more positive light but would also be the most efficient way to attract the attention of millennials, who gather their information mainly online. As Clark et al. noted, "marketers can better the chances of attracting this target market by utilizing social media sites to communicate with involved, millennial decision makers" (38). Florida's marketing teams and businesses need to utilize social media to promote ecotourism in order to help rehabilitate the state's image. A domino effect would then be created, as more millennials find out about these ecotourism opportunities through social media, and then post their experiences to Instagram or Facebook, which would in turn encourage their peers to consider doing the same. Social media has been a powerful tool in shifting the perception of Florida from paradise to punchline, and it needs to be used again to rebrand Florida as a unique place with rare natural beauty and exciting ecotourism opportunities.

## **Conclusion**

Florida has always encompassed a certain otherness, although the specific nature of this otherness has evolved and shifted over time to reflect whatever positive or problematic aspects of the state the media was currently focusing on. In the past, its uniqueness was used to create the image of a paradise. More recently, the outlandish crimes that have taken place in Florida have given the state a bad reputation on social media. To turn this perception around and continue to attract new tourists, and millennials in particular, the very things that make Florida different from the rest of the United States, from the Everglades to the mangroves and from alligators to manatees,

should be brought to the forefront once again. A place with such natural beauty and unique experiences is much more desirable to millennials than one with overpriced amusement parks and exaggerated crime rates. The Florida Man trend has shown how quickly social media can be utilized to create a new perception of the state, and it should be used again to attract the next generation of tourists. Marketing teams and local businesses need to use social media to reinvent Florida yet again by highlighting its unique environment, along with specific ecotourism opportunities that cater to the desires of millennials. Florida's image has shapeshifted into many forms over the past 160 years, but its perceived otherness has never gone away. This distinction should be used as an advantage to attract a generation of tourists who are looking for natural beauty and experiences that do not exist elsewhere.

*Note: This essay was composed in Dr. Ashley Palmer's AWR 201 class.*

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