

Slang Used By Generation Z High School Students

For most people slang is seen as the language of the “streets”; however slang is more than that. With the spread of social media, slang has become the “world wide vocabulary of young people” (Eble 2012). While there is no single definition of slang, slang can be loosely defined as an ever changing set of spoken words that provides alternate vocabulary for words that have already been named in large (Eble 2012). Slang can be seen as a “counter-language”; a language that was born in the streets and is supremely human (Green 2014). Most slang comes from marginalized groups. These groups include cultural/ethnic/racial groups, women, and people of the LGBTQ+ community. This paper examines how slang vastly is created by marginalized groups and then gains popularity through social media.

“The oppressed create and use slang to build individual and group identity, to separate themselves from the dominant culture” (Dalzell 2010). Generally speaking, slang is exclusive to certain groups of people and related to the concept of an “in-group.” However, sometimes slang can develop into key parts of a language that are no longer exclusive to a particular marginalized group. Many of the popular slang words that have been integrated into high school culture today were first used in the LGBTQ+ community. Below are some examples of slang words that have been taken from the LGBTQ+ community that are currently used by Generation Z.

‘Spilling the tea’¹ was first used in African American drag culture. To spill the tea or T is to tell the truth about disclosed information. The term was popularized by the drag queen Lady Chablis from San Antonio Texas. The phrase became popular through social media when Larry Wilmore used "weak tea" regularly on his 2015-16 Comedy Central show in response to people who weren't telling the absolute truth. Lady Chablis created ‘spilling the tea’ as a euphemism for gossiping.

“Fierce”² came into the gay baseball community as a catchphrase in 1980 and eventually crossed-over into mainstream culture. “Fierce” started becoming popular in 2007 when Project Runway actor, Christian Siriano said the word in an episode at least twenty times. According to 538’s tool, “fierce” reached its height in usage in 2016. The recorded frequency was about .0004%. It is important to note that the word was not coined in 1980. Instead, the origin of fierce is from latin ferus³ which means untamed. It entered the English lexicon and had the meaning of “having or displaying a ferocious aggressiveness.” The gay community changed the word to have the more positive meaning of “bold and independent.

Similar to “fierce”, “queer”⁴ was originally a derogatory name for a homosexual that was used by the nonhomosexual community. In response, gay activists called themselves ‘queer’ in a prideful way. The term first entered the English lexicon in 1513. It had the meaning of something not normal or peculiar. It had no sexual reference. The Oxford English Dictionary states that the noun “queer” was first used to mean

¹ Spill the tea was taken from Urban Dictionary

² Fierce was taken from Urban Dictionary and Wordpress

³ Taken from Dictionary.com

⁴ Queer was taken from Urban Dictionary

homosexual by the Marquess of Queensbury, in 1894. The 1965 printing of *Webster's New World Dictionary* enters "queer" as slang for homosexual. Not offensive slang, just slang. During the AIDS epidemic in the 1990's, 'queer' was adopted as a "positive self-label"⁵ to the LGBTQ+ community. Since then 'queer' has been a very common slang word.

Originally 'slay'⁶ was used in the context of battle. It noted uncontested victory pertaining to war and had an altogether negative connotation. While many of these connotations still hold today, the term is most frequently used in the context of "Beyonce slaying the MTV awards." It is no longer used in the terms of negative cruelty but instead to represent power and strength. The first recorded use of slay in the terms of to do something really well was in the African American gay community. In the 1970-80's, slay came to refer to when an outfit, hair, makeup, dance moves, and attitude were all perfect. It is similar to saying, "You're killing it!". Within ten years, slay spread throughout drag queen culture and was featured in the documentary *Paris is Burning*.⁷ In 2016, Beyonce made "slay" mainstream when she used it. With the advent of social media, the new meaning of "slay" made accessible to the public at large.

Lastly, 'queen'⁸ is a very popular slang word that is used amongst Generation Z high school students. The slang term was first adopted from the gay community and meant something like a flamboyant or extravegant man. However, through the influence of social media platforms like Vine, Instagram, and Twitter the term has broadened into

⁵ Taken from the Columbia Journalism Review

⁶ Slay was taken from Urban Dictionary

⁷ From In the 1970....she used it. was taken from Dictionary.com

⁸ Taken from one of my friends saying 'queen' word all the time. In the context of slay queen.

the meaning of someone who is flamboyant and extravagant. It can also mean “someone who is regarded as the best or most supreme⁹.”

Below are some examples of slang words that have been taken from the African American community that are used today by Generation Z.

“Netflix and Chill¹⁰” first became popular with the African American community in 2009. The first use of the phrase was a twitter post by “NoFaceNina.” The euphemism originally had no sexual connotation and just meant to watch netflix all night. However, with the growing popularity of Netflix the phrase was given its euphemistic character in the African American Twitter and Instagram community. In 2015, the slang phrase became a meme and spread beyond the African American community.

“Lit¹¹” is the past participle of the word light. Light is a native word that was from Germanic. It has the meaning of “the natural agent that stimulates sight and makes things visible.” However now it has the meaning among teenagers as ‘super cool’. It was first said in the 1940’s by African American jazz artists¹². It initially had the meaning of the music being amazing¹³. It then changed to mean being under the influence of drugs. However, rap culture changed the meaning to mean “super cool.” The phrase became popular in 2017 because of Travis Scott’s use of the slang word in his music.

The slang word “basic¹⁴” never actually changed meaning. The slang terms still means ‘unoriginal’. However, it was first recorded in the African American community to

⁹ Definition was taken from the Oxford English Dictionary

¹⁰ Taken from Wikipedia

¹¹ Taken from one of my friends using this word in the context of really cool

¹² Taken from Urban Dictionary

¹³ Taken from Dictionary.com

¹⁴ Taken from Urban Dictionary

apply the word basic to a person. The adjective was originally used to call someone out, normally a woman on her behavior. As the word got more popular because of social media and rap culture it started to apply to material things that people believe to indicate “shallow behavior.”¹⁵ For example, caring about brand names.

“Bae”¹⁶ is a direct result of African American Vernacular. It is a shortening of babe from the original word baby. “Bae” has appeared in countless rap songs and memes since the mid 2000’s.

This paper examined how slang vastly is created by marginalized groups and then gains popularity through social media. The coinage of slang words and terms is not just limited to African American culture and the LGBTQ+ community. In another paper, I would have liked to research slang created by women and other cultural groups. While slang may be considered informal, and the language of the street, it is part of teenage culture today. “Slang represents humanity at its most human, and it's not feathered by borders” (Green 2014).

¹⁵ Shallow behavior was taken from part of the definition of basic on StackExchange

¹⁶ Taken from Refinery 29