

The Depth of Refusing Depth

“It’s Not That Deep” as a Generational Strategy of Irony and Vulnerability

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Scroll through TikTok or Twitter long enough and you’ll see it: someone posts a heartfelt take or a too-serious meme analysis, and the comments are instantly flooded with “*it’s not that deep*”. Even Demi Lovato titled her 2025 album *It’s Not That Deep* with Apple Music promoting it under the tagline “*Sometimes...it’s not that deep*”. The phrase has clearly moved from comment sections into the centre of pop culture. And at first glance, it reads like pure dismissal, akin to the digital equivalent of an eye-roll. But the phrase does more than just shut down overthinking. In a culture where sincerity is risky and “cringe” is the ever-present insult, “*it’s not that deep*” doubles as armour. It is a way to laugh off seriousness before anyone else can laugh at you. Ironically, even writing an essay about the phrase risks violating its own command, going “too deep” into something designed to resist depth. That paradox is exactly what makes it worth unpacking.

This essay argues that the phrase is both anti-intellectual and self-protective: it is a refusal of depth that also reveals the vulnerability of caring too much. In other words, “*it’s not that deep*” is deeper than it looks, it is a code that captures Gen Z’s balancing act between irony and emotional exposure, a generational strategy where surface becomes survival and depth is both desired and disavowed.

“It’s not that deep” as anti-intellectualism

At its most obvious level, “it’s not that deep” works as a shutdown. It is a quick way to dismiss seriousness, analysis, or critique before it even begins. In the comment sections, the

phrase often appears when someone tries to unpack the meaning of a meme, explain the politics of a viral sound, or read too much into a piece of pop culture.

Let's take a real life example. On October 29, the Twitter account Pop Crave (2.2M followers) posted an image of the Girl with Headphones meme with the caption "*Quenlin Blackwell as the Girl with Headphones Meme for Halloween*". Some users pointed out that the image originated from Vistoso Bosses' 2009 music video *Delirious* and argued that Black creators deserve credit. While this critique highlights a broader pattern of what this user saw as cultural erasure, another user replied, "*It's really not that deep. Like, ya'll will survive this, I promise!*" This response illustrates how the phrase functions to trivialise legitimate concerns, reframing them as overreactions rather than justified critiques. At its core, this kind of response doesn't just reject one user's point, it is a way to police the very act of taking culture seriously. As Sianne Ngai Ngai (2005) explains, certain "minor" emotions like irritation or envy reveal the limits of critique itself. The irritation here is less about the specific critique than about the mood of seriousness itself, a mood that digital culture often treats as excessive or joy-killing. Lauren Berlant's notion of *cruel optimism* (Berlant 2011) also resonates: people want to find meaning in cultural texts, but they simultaneously refuse it because in a world of endless feeds and fleeting trends, depth feels exhausting or out of step with fast pace online culture. The phrase "*it's not that deep*" thus crystallises this contradiction. It flattens complex issues into surface chatter and makes critique look like overreaction rather than engagement. The danger is that when dismissal becomes the default, structural concerns like cultural erasure or inequalities are brushed aside as if they were nothing more than bad vibes.

However, the phrase is not only about shutting others down. It also works as a shield for the speaker, a way to pre-emptively deflect the risks of caring too much. That defensive function is where its meaning gets more complicated and where the analysis turns next.

"It's not that deep" as emotional self-protection

If "*it's not that deep*" often works as a dismissal of critique, it can also function in another way as a shield. In online spaces, where earnestness may be punished as cringe, the phrase becomes a pre-emptive defence mechanism. By saying it, speakers distance themselves from their own seriousness before anyone else can call them out. In that case, it is less about shutting others down than about protecting oneself from the vulnerability of caring too much.

Sara Ahmed Ahmed (2004) helps explain this dynamic. She argues that emotions don't just belong to individuals. They circulate, sticking to bodies and shaping how people move

through social worlds. In this sense, “*it’s not that deep*” is a way of managing affect by redirecting intensity so that feelings of investment don’t cling to the speaker in ways that might expose them to ridicule. Erving Goffman’s idea of *face-work* resonates here too: social interaction is indeed a performance in which people constantly manage impressions to avoid embarrassment (Goffman 1955). Online, where the audience is vast and unpredictable, the risks of “losing face” are amplified. By insisting that “*it’s not that deep*”, users perform a face-saving manoeuvre: they signal detachment before anyone else can accuse them of being too sensitive or too invested.

Seen this way, the phrase is less of a rejection of meaning than a strategy of survival in digital culture where your every moves are scrutinised by hundreds of peers. It allows users to participate in discourse without fully exposing themselves to gesture towards engagement while keeping a protective layer of irony intact.

The tension between the two

If “*it’s not that deep*” began as a shutdown and evolved into a shield, its cultural afterlife shows that the phrase can also be reframed as an invitation. The softer variation “*it’s not that deep unless you want it to be*” captures this shift. Instead of foreclosing seriousness, it acknowledges that depth is optional, it is something that you can choose to risk. This flexibility became especially visible when Demi Lovato titled her 2025 album *It’s Not That Deep* and sang the line “*it’s not that deep unless you want it to be*” on the single “Kiss”. Thus, what began as a defensive, almost ironic code in comment sections, was suddenly repackaged as pop branding that circulated through promotional campaigns and absorbed back into online discourse.

This moment matters because it shows how irony and sincerity are no longer opposites but can coexist in the same phrase. Demi Lovato’s lyric doesn’t simply dismiss depth. Rather, it stages a choice. You can stay on the surface, or you can dive in. But either way, the phrase protects you from embarrassment. If you choose depth, you can always retreat to irony. And if you choose irony, you can always claim you were open to depth. In this sense, the phrase functions like what Eve Sedgwick Sedgwick (2003) once called a “paranoid/reparative” oscillation: it allows users to toggle between suspicion and attachment, detachment and investment, without ever fully committing to one.

The commodification of the phrase intensifies the ambiguity. Once a pop star sings it, the phrase becomes both more earnest and more hollow. It gains the sheen of mainstream affirmation but it also loses some of its edge as a defensive code. What was once a way to

avoid vulnerability becomes a marketable aesthetic of ambivalence. The irony is that the phrase now circulates as a product that asks listeners to feel something about not feeling too much.

This is why “*it’s not that deep*” is such a revealing cultural artifact. It condenses the contradictions of Gen Z discourse: the suspicion of overthinking, the fear of cringe, the longing of meaning, and the comfort of irony. In its mainstreamed form, the phrase does not resolve these tensions. Rather, it dramatises them. It shows how depth and surface, seriousness and dismissal, critique and detachment, are no longer stable opposites but fluid positions that users and audiences can slide between depending on the risks of the moment.

Conclusion

What makes “*it’s not that deep*” revealing is not any single use. Rather, it is the way it brings together a set of cultural tensions. It began as a quick dismissal, a way to trivialise critique before it could even be formulated. It then became a shield, a strategy for protecting oneself from the risks of caring too much in a culture that often mocks sincerity. And in its mainstreamed form, it shifted again: a phrase that sits between irony and sincerity, between surface and depth.

This ambivalence is central. The phrase reflects the contradictions of contemporary digital life where people want meaning but are wary of the vulnerability that comes with it, where critique is both necessary and derided, and where irony functions as both armour and constraint. To say “*it’s not that deep*” is to acknowledge the possibility of depth while disavowing it in the same breath. It is a linguistic performance of a generational double bind: the desire to think and feel, tempered by the reluctance to be seen as taking things too seriously.

References

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