

2025's words of the year reflect a year of digital disillusionment

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Many of the year's winners reference the lack of meaning and certainty in our online interactions.

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Which terms best represent 2025?

Every year, editors for publications ranging from the Oxford English Dictionary to the Macquarie Dictionary of Australian English select a “word of the year.”

Sometimes these terms are thematically related, particularly in the wake of world-altering events. “Pandemic,” “lockdown” and “coronavirus,” for example, were among the words chosen in 2020. At other times, they are a potpourri of various cultural trends, as with 2022’s “goblin mode,” “permacrisis” and “gaslighting.”

This year's slate largely centers on digital life. But rather than reflecting the unbridled optimism about the internet of the early aughts – when words like “w00t,” “blog,” “tweet” and even “face with tears of joy” emoji (😢) were chosen – this year's selections reflect a growing unease over how the internet has become a hotbed of artifice, manipulation and fake relationships.

When seeing isn't believing

A committee representing the Macquarie Dictionary of Australian English settled on “AI slop” for their word of the year.

Macquarie defines the term, which was popularized in 2024 by British programmer Simon Willison and tech journalist Casey Newton, as “low-quality content created by generative AI, often containing errors, and not requested by the user.”

AI slop – which can range from a saccharine image of a young girl clinging to her little dog to career advice on LinkedIn – often goes viral, as gullible social media users share these computer-generated videos, text and graphics with others.

Images have been manipulated or altered since the dawn of photography. The technique was then improved, with an assist from AI, to create “deepfakes,” which allows existing images to be turned into video clips in surreal ways. Yes, you can now watch Hitler teaming up with Stalin to sing a 1970s hit by The Buggles.

What makes AI slop different is that images or video can be created out of whole cloth by providing a chatbot with just a prompt – no matter how bizarre the request or ensuing output.

Meet my new friend, ChatGPT

The editors of the Cambridge Dictionary chose “parasocial.” They define this as “involving or relating to a connection that someone feels between themselves and a famous person they do not know, a character in a book, film, TV series ... or an artificial intelligence.”

These asymmetric relationships, according to the dictionary's chief editor, are the result of “the public's fascination with celebrities and their lifestyles,” and this interest “continues to reach new heights.”

As an example, Cambridge's announcement cited the engagement of singer Taylor Swift and football player Travis Kelce, which led to a spike in online searches for the meaning of the term. Many Swifties reacted with unbridled joy, as if their best friend or sibling had just decided to tie the knot.

But the term isn't a new one: It was coined by sociologists in 1956 to describe "the illusion" of having "a face-to-face relationship" with a performer.

However, parasocial relationships can take a bizarre or even ominous turn when the object of one's affections is a chatbot. People are developing true feelings for these AI systems, whether they see them as a trusted friend or even a romantic partner. Young people, in particular, are now turning to generative AI for therapy.

Taking the bait

The Oxford Dictionary's word of the year is "rage bait," which the editors define as "online content deliberately designed to elicit anger or outrage by being frustrating, provocative, or offensive, typically posted in order to increase traffic to or engagement with a particular web page or social media content."

This is only the latest word for forms of emotional manipulation that have plagued the online world since the days of dial-up internet. Related terms include trolling, sealioning and trashposting.

Unlike a hot take – a hasty opinion on a topic that may be poorly reasoned or articulated – rage baiting is intended to be inflammatory. And it can be seen as both a cause and a result of political polarization.

People who post rage bait have been shown to lack empathy and to regard other people's emotions as something to be exploited or even monetized. Rage baiters, in short, reflect the dark side of the attention economy.



Rage baiters have little concern for the people whose emotions they exploit for attention or profit.

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Meaningless meaning

Perhaps the most contentious choice in 2025 was “6-7,” chosen by Dictionary.com. In this case, the controversy has to do with the actual meaning of this bit of Gen Alpha slang. The editors of the website describe it as being “meaningless, ubiquitous, and nonsensical.”

Although its definition may be slippery, the term itself can be found in the lyrics of the rapper Skrilla, who released the single “Doot Doot (6 7)” in early 2025. It was popularized by 17-year-old basketball standout Taylen Kinney. For his part, Skrilla claimed that he “never put an actual meaning on it, and I still would not want to.”

“6-7” is sometimes accompanied by a gesture, as if one were comparing the weight of objects held in both hands. British Prime Minister Keir Starmer recently performed this hand motion during a school visit. The young students were delighted. Their teacher, however, informed Starmer that her charges weren’t allowed to use it at the school, which prompted a clumsy apology from the chastened prime minister.

Throw your hands in the air?

The common element that these words share may be an attitude best described as digital nihilism.

As online misinformation, AI-generated text and images, fake news and conspiracy theories abound, it's increasingly difficult to know whom or what to believe or trust. Digital nihilism is, in essence, an acknowledgment of a lack of meaning and certainty in our online interactions.

This year's crop of words might best be summed up by a single emoji: the shrug (🤷). Throwing one's hands up, in resignation or indifference, captures the anarchy that seems to characterize our digital lives.

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