

ALGOSPEAK

**How Social Media Is Transforming
the Future of Language**

Adam Aleksic



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How to Play Linguistic Whac-A-Mole

REMEMBER WHAC-A-MOLE? The slightly unhinged arcade game where new characters keep popping up no matter how many times you smack them with your mallet? It might seem ridiculous to use coin-operated violence as an analogy for the serious linguistic changes we're experiencing online, but Whac-A-Mole truly is the perfect metaphor for explaining how humans react to censorship. As soon as a word is banned, we find a way around it; that is, until content moderators catch wind of the new word and ban that, too. Then another word pops up, and the cycle repeats, trapping users and platforms in a never-ending loop of new spellings and substitutions that disappear once the algorithm catches on and the mallet comes down again. The faster and better the moderation tools are, the more words will be created. This is because the underlying idea—and our desire to talk about it—remains.

People have been playing this game since the early days of the internet. Frustrated with text filters on bulletin boards in the 1980s, netizens turned to “leetspeak,” a hacker dialect characterized by creatively respelled words. Since terms like “suicide” were censored in some chat rooms, leetspeakers wrote out coded replacements like “5U1C1D3” in much the same way that people began using “unalive.” If the chat-room moderators caught on, they could just change the spelling to another easily recognizable form, like “\$U!C!D€.”

The tools being used have since grown more sophisticated, but the underlying process remains the same. Rudimentary word identification scripts might have been upgraded to fancy, AI-powered algorithms, but censorship is

still driving linguistic creativity. If anything, the algorithmic era has spurred more innovation, because the game is happening faster, with more guesswork involved. Due to intellectual property concerns, not much is known about how these apps actually recommend content. Influencers are often subject to the whims of unknown and unfair criteria, with only opaque community guidelines as reference points.

This marks a major difference between leetspeak and algospeak: You could always immediately tell when leetspeak worked, because you would see your comment successfully posted onto a message board. For algospeak, however, the goal is to make it onto a user’s “recommended page,” and it’s much harder to tell when you’ve successfully done that. Videos with sensitive keywords aren’t always removed outright. Sometimes, they’ll be “suppressed,” or shown to fewer followers. Creators can also be “shadowbanned” without warning or notification. We—and I’m including myself here—receive very little communication from the platforms, so we’re not sure whether videos do poorly because they’re bad or because they’re being censored. Understandably, then, we’ll err on the side of caution when it comes to euphemization.

Creators *can* sort of tell what does and doesn’t get onto the recommended page by looking at our video analytics. If I usually get most of my views from the recommended page, and then all of a sudden a video is getting views only from the “followers” feed, that’s a semi-reliable indication that some part of my video made the algorithm unhappy. Through this kind of trial and error, influencers can extrapolate a pretty good idea of what the algorithm rewards and penalizes, and it’s in this context that “unalive” was forged. When the word “suicide” wasn’t getting views, people turned to the next best term to tell their story.

While linguistic innovation like this is an exciting and normal thing, it’s reasonable to be alarmed at the way community guidelines are shaping important conversations, especially as people increasingly turn to short-form video for news or advice. Oftentimes, the mysterious rules governing social media are arbitrary or outright discriminatory. TikTok has historically been proven,^[1] for example, to artificially suppress videos by “ugly,” old, and poor

creators, because they're not as appealing to new users. This means that it's often difficult to include larger audiences in discussions about things like disability, age, and income inequality. Nevertheless, we have no choice but to play the game and tiptoe around community guidelines wherever we can.

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In 2022, the Charles Dickens Museum began a desperate social media campaign to get itself un-shadowbanned from TikTok. Whenever users would search for the museum's account, nothing would show up. Instead, they would be cautioned^[2] that "this phrase may be associated with behavior or content that violates our guidelines" and that "promoting a safe and positive experience is TikTok's top priority."

Of course, the Charles Dickens Museum wasn't doing anything wrong. They were mostly posting house tours or excerpts of old letters. Instead, the problem was with the TikTok algorithm, which was flagging the museum's videos as obscene because they included the keyword "dick." For all its fancy high-tech machine learning, the algorithm had fallen victim to a classic internet pitfall: the Scunthorpe problem, named for an English village where residents discovered they were unable to create AOL accounts because their hometown contained the word "cunt."

Following an intense #FreeDickens campaign on Twitter, TikTok eventually agreed to unblock Charles Dickens-related search terms. However, it still remains difficult to curse—intentionally or accidentally—on any platform. While your videos won't get removed outright, they'll often be suppressed in search just like the museum's. Especially if you're cursing too much or too severely, your content will be hampered by the algorithm. If a video is eligible for the recommended page but still contains mature language, TikTok and Instagram will prevent it from appearing in clusters of similar videos in a user's feed, which means that it'll be pushed to a smaller audience than its work-safe competitors.^[3]

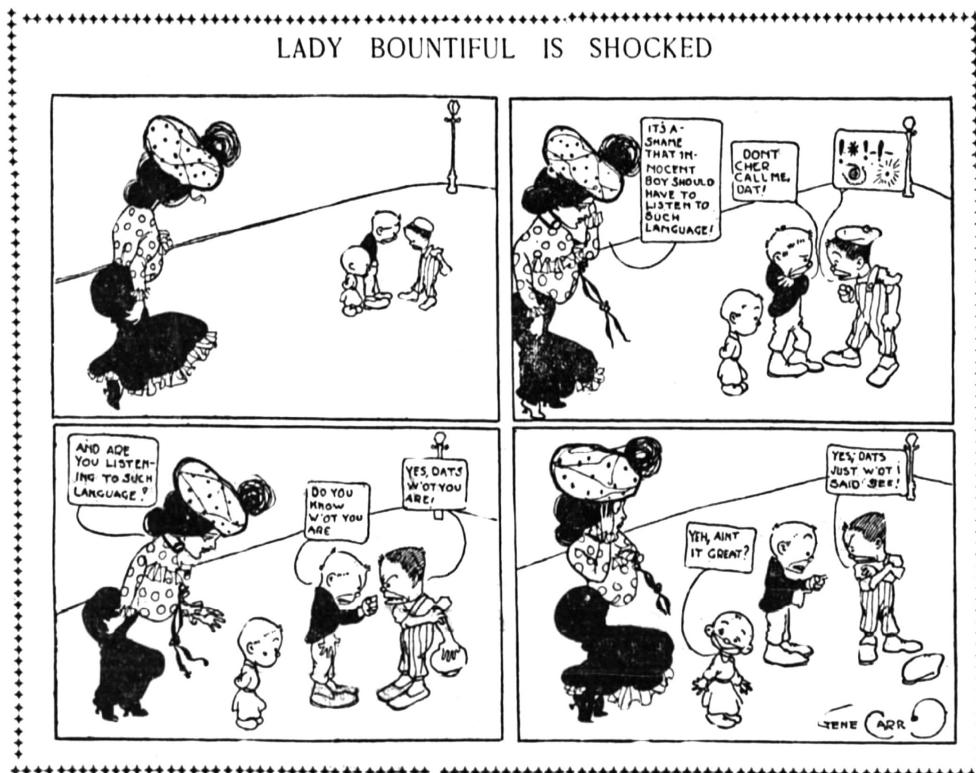
Likewise, on YouTube, creators posting videos with severe or repeated profanity have to contend with "demonetization," where they lose the ability to earn revenue from advertisements on their content. This is especially scary

to influencers whose livelihoods depend on a steady income stream from their videos.

All this means that we have a lot of reasons to respell our swear words creatively online. If you look up the keyword “bitch” through TikTok’s search function, for example, you’ll likely encounter variations such as “btch,” “b!tch,” and “b*tch” in the video captions. Same with “fuck,” which will probably give you “fck,” “fvck,” and “f*ck”—none too different from the leetspeak letter substitutions of the past.

The practice of respelling offensive words is a centuries-old tradition known as *bowdlerization*, named for the Englishman Thomas Bowdler, who is mainly remembered for publishing some egregiously family-safe edits of William Shakespeare’s plays.

Self-bowdlerizing to avoid media constraints is not new: People have been doing it since at least the days of early newspaper comics, where sequences of graphic characters called *grawlixes* are still used instead of swear words to circumvent stringent syndication standards. The earliest known example is from this 1901 *Lady Bountiful* comic by Gene Carr:



Over time, some grawlixes got less thinly veiled as cultural norms against profanity loosened up. Cartoonists began drawing on symbols with a visual similarity to the letters they were replacing: “@##” and “\$#!” are now industry standards for the words “ass” and “shit.” Fast-forward to today, and influencers are re-creating this process in social media captions. Words like “fvck,” “b!tch,” and “@ss” are born out of the same motivations, drawing on the same cultural tradition of bowdlerization.

Until the twentieth century, the preferred method of bowdlerization across all media formats was the double em dash (—), typically replacing the entirety of a word save for a few identifiable letters. Grawlixes marked a turning point, and the asterisk (*) became more widespread for its ease and simplicity. Around this time, symbolic swearing also shifted to replace individual letters, specifically vowels. The primary reason for this is intelligibility: There are simply fewer options to go through when guessing the meaning of “f*ck” than with “*uck,” which could also mean something like “suck.” It’s the same reason the vowel is omitted in truncations like “fck” and “btch” on social media.

Another option is to change the word to something similar, but funnier. If you’re trying to sneak past robotic censors, why not make it a little silly? You can easily swap letters to spell words like “fukc” and “bicht,” or drop them entirely to make “fuk” and “bich.” You can also up the goofiness by replacing consonants entirely, like with “fucc” for “fuck” or “ahh” for “ass.”^[*1] One can also add humor or shock value by “swearifying” relatively innocent words, like “m*n” for “men” in some feminist circles of social media, or “Tr*mp” for “Trump” in political circles. However we choose to bowdlerize, there are so many profanity options that we don’t have to stop at evading content moderation filters—we can also parody that reality.

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Back when I was just getting started on TikTok, one of the first videos I made was on how the words “pen” and “pencil” are entirely unrelated.^[*2] In the video, I described how “pencil” actually traces to the Latin word *penis*, meaning “tail”—and, yes, that’s also the source of the English word “penis.”

Being uninitiated to the platform, I included the full word in my captions and received a content warning that TikTok wouldn't let me post the video. I went back and edited the spelling to *pen**s, which worked, although the video still performed much worse than other videos I was posting around that time. I realized that my video was probably being suppressed by the algorithm and felt very frustrated that I was restricted from making certain kinds of educational content.

Because I wanted my content to be seen, I begrudgingly refrained from discussing any other sexual etymologies. This, however, isn't an option for the many creators on social media making educational content on health, medicine, or sex positivity—which should have been permissible according to the TikTok community guidelines, but was still suppressed. It's easier for the algorithm to categorically penalize a word than to distinguish between use-specific exceptions.

As a result, even trained medical professionals on social media will regularly replace the word “penis” with “p3nis,” “pen1s,” and the eggplant emoji, 🍆. If they want their content to be seen, these creators have to get inventive with captions.

Well beyond doctors and sex educators, emojis are by far the most common way to substitute pornographic words on social media. It's very common for any creator talking about sex to use 🍆 instead of “penis” in their captions, and 🍑 instead of “ass” or “vagina,” to a point where I've seen people physically say “eggplant” and “peach” when describing genitalia online. Along with 💋 for “boobs,” these substitutions all draw on visual similarity to the things they refer to, which I think is rather poetic. Written language emerged from the increasing abstraction of pictographs, and now we're looping back around. [\[^{*3}\]](#)

The entire field of semiotics is dedicated to studying “signs” like these. In the same way that public facilities use ☎ for “phone” and 🛁 for “restroom,” the eggplant, peach, and cherries are symbolic substitutions for a concept. Emojis are just repopularizing that kind of communication through a new medium.

Many risqué creators have also used 🌶, literally interpreted as “spicy” or “spicy time” but figuratively understood to mean “sexy” or “sex.” While these terms were already around before social media, they’ve definitely been popularized by short-form video: Google Trends shows searches for “spicy time” escalating in recent years, and I’ve been noticing more and more friends saying “spicy” since TikTok popularized the phrase.

Most of our sexual emojis are notably based on some kind of food product, drawing on a long-standing link between food and sexuality. Fruits, especially, have a history of symbolizing sensuality in art, while their names often function as colloquial terms of endearment, so it’s not surprising that we would revert to more evocative emojis for pornographic algospeak.

Outside sexual food emojis, there are a few other algospeak symbols drawing on shared meanings (think 💩 for “shit”), but many others instead rely on acoustic similarity. The ninja emoji (🥋) stands in for the n-word, the corn emoji (🌽) works as a replacement for “porn,” and the grape emoji (🍇) is understood as a common stand-in for “rape.” These substitutions depend not on physical resemblance but on rhymes or slant rhymes.

I’ve seen a lot of criticism of these emojis online, but this is exactly what Cockney rhyming slang was doing in the early nineteenth century. The expression “blow a raspberry,” for example, came from “raspberry tart” being a common slang stand-in for the word “fart,” in the same way that “corn” now replaces “porn.” Once again, we see people drawing on age-old processes to sneak past online censorship.

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Emojis are just one of many ways that people self-bowdlerize naughty terms. You’ll still come across sex educators spelling the word “sex” as “s*x” or “s3x,” but the most frequently used alternative in the early 2020s didn’t involve a creative substitution or respelling. Instead, it introduced an entirely new sound sequence by modifying the *k* sound to a *g* sound.

I’m talking, of course, about the word “seggs,” wholeheartedly embraced by creators in the infancy of TikTok. The hashtag #seggs has been used in more than 100,000 posts, #seggseducation shows up in more than 40,000

informative videos, and I've also heard my friends ironically use "seggs" offline.

Rather than just respelling the word to something immediately phonetic like "secks," people chose to make the word sound a little sillier, which is a very common pattern on social media. There's also "nip nops" for "nipples"; "peen" for "penis"; and "kermit sewerslide" for "commit suicide." These terms are all examples of *diminutives*—words meant to sound smaller, cuter, or less intense. It's the same reason a little kid might refer to his penis as a "weenie," "pee-pee," or "willy." Diminutives make words sound friendlier, and many people may be more comfortable using them online for that reason. Plus, sex is funny. These terms are all slightly goofier than their more serious counterparts, making them catchier and therefore more likely to go viral.

Many of these examples of sexual algospeak fall into the category of *minced oaths*, euphemisms created by slightly altering the spelling or pronunciation of offensive words. We've been mincing our oaths forever: That's why we say "heck" instead of "hell" or "gosh" instead of "God." Much like "peen," these words sound like a less intense version of what they represent, making them more palatable to easily offended audiences. We still understand what the words mean, but they lack the shock value to really upset societal sensibilities.

Minced oaths can also involve replacing entire phrases. In late 2021, the chant "Let's Go Brandon" served as a MAGA minced oath for the words "Fuck Joe Biden." Is that really so different from using "kermit sewerslide" instead of "commit suicide"? Both allude to more serious phrases through phonetic similarity, both became popular through their PG silliness, and both spread beyond meme status: I recently caught my Harvard linguistics friend ironically saying "sewerslide" in real life, which is exactly how these words start to enter the mainstream lexicon.

Upon finishing his 1948 book, *The Naked and the Dead*, the American novelist Norman Mailer was famously told by his publishers that he used the word "fuck" too many times for the book to be published. In response, Norman went through and replaced every "fuck" with the minced oath "fug," and the publication process went forward. I love explaining "seggs" through

this anecdote, because creators using it instead of “sex” are doing exactly the same thing. By switching out a *k* sound for a *g* sound, they can skirt media censorship, even if we all still fully understand what they really mean.

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The more sensitive a topic is, the more it will be censored, and the more we’ll find ways to talk about it. Multiple euphemisms for the same concept can fit slightly different contexts, making it harder for an algorithm to pick up on. If someone wants to talk about a sexual assault but doesn’t want the frivolous connotations of the grape emoji, they can instead use the abbreviation “SA.”

Initialisms like this have also been used to avoid censorship for thousands of years. Early Christians, for example, used a secret symbol called the Jesus fish to indicate their religion, since the Greek spelling of “fish” doubled as an acronym alluding to Christ. The Jesus fish was used as a signal between Christians to indicate to each other that they were in the same group, without being discovered by their Roman persecutors. Although the stakes for secrecy are not as high, “SA” is similarly employed by the survivor community to create a safe space for talking about experiences and sharing resources.

I recently came across another video in my recommended feed where a female college student posted about getting “red zoned” in her first week of college. This refers to the Red Zone of sexual assault, a statistical window between August and November when 50 percent of all sexual assaults happen at American universities. This sort of indirect speech is an example of *metonymy*, or referring to an idea through another, closely associated idea. The textbook example of this is referring to the executive branch of the United States as the “White House.” When the student chose to describe her assault through the “red zone” metonym, she phrased her euphemism such that it would both be seen on TikTok and avoid triggering other assault survivors.

This type of evasive language has been getting more common, especially in political discourse. Rather than direct algospeak translations or euphemisms, many creators may skirt a topic while heavily implying its existence. In one 2023 video, a TikToker referred to Hitler as “the top guy of

the Germans” because he was afraid of uttering his actual name on the platform.

The social media researcher Emily van der Nagel calls this “Voldemorting,” since people are deliberately avoiding keywords in the same way wizards avoid saying the name “Voldemort” in *Harry Potter*. Van der Nagel first identified the concept in an era when people were using discreet language to prevent their content from showing up in searches for that keyword, which remains a very valid reason for skirting a specific topic. Almost every young person has at some point engaged in “subtweeting,” the act of talking about someone online without directly mentioning them. Tricking search engine optimization tools like this can be especially helpful for creators who want to prevent trolls from finding and harassing them, and have plausible deniability if confronted.^[4]

Much like Voldemort himself, though, the practice of Voldemorting has taken on a new life. It’s now more about algorithmic optimization than search engine optimization, but creators can also use it humorously. Many influencers choose to refer to Donald Trump with words like “cheeto,” “45,” and “orange man,” even if search results are unimportant to them and it’s unclear whether social media apps actually suppress politicians’ names. In effect, they choose to treat “Trump” as a *taboo word*—a term restricted due to a social purpose.

Taboos exist across a variety of cultures to avoid offensive practices like naming the dead or discussing menstruation, and creators are intentionally using that as a form of political and expressive power. By imposing a taboo on “Trump,” or inserting an asterisk in the middle of “men,” playing into algospeak puts the linguistic narrative back into the hands of the oppressed. The act of Voldemorting can indicate a lack of respect for the subject; it can also make a statement by reclaiming the act of censorship. By not talking about Trump directly, people signal that his name is filthy, too offensive to be uttered. Language, then, becomes an act of resistance.

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Following the outbreak of the Israel–Gaza war in October 2023, social media users around the globe began voicing concerns that their posts about the conflict were being restricted on social media. TikTok and YouTube videos about Palestine were getting fewer views or outright getting removed, and the Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Azmat Khan reported that her Instagram account had been shadowbanned for posting a story about the war.

Usually, platforms ignore addressing these kinds of concerns, or justify them through very vague policies. TikTok, for example, has rules nebulously prohibiting “highly controversial topics” and promotion of “violent or hateful actors,” which it uses to suppress or remove content that can even adjacently be interpreted to praise Hamas. Because this process is automatic and relies on detection of specific keywords, many innocent videos ended up also being affected.^[5]

I experienced this firsthand when I posted a video analyzing the phrase “from the river to the sea.” The video was about how it is linguistically curious that two different groups can interpret a meaning so differently; I was just trying to educate my viewers and didn’t take any stance on the conflict.

Of course, that didn’t matter to TikTok’s algorithm, which I suspect shadowbanned me for three days. My video flopped, with very little of my traffic coming from the For You page, and the new video I posted the next day got ten times fewer views on TikTok than when I cross-posted on Instagram. As someone relying on TikTok as an income source, I was terrified of losing my platform, and didn’t know which phrases I could and couldn’t say, so I stopped making content addressing the situation altogether.

But just as sex educators on social media had to find work-arounds with words like “seggs,” people making educational content about ongoing conflicts are forced to improvise. The month the war started, algospeak “translation tools” popped up online to swap out words like “Gaza” with content-safe replacements like “gaza.” Terms like “IDF” got replaced with substitutions like “IOF” (a derogatory shortening of “Israel Offensive Forces”). People began metonymically using the flag emojis ☮️ and 🇮🇱 instead of writing out full country names.

Once the algorithm caught onto the 🏳️ emoji being used in “highly controversial” contexts, the game of Whac-A-Mole naturally continued. People began replacing the flag with the watermelon emoji, 🍉, in reference to its historical representation of Palestine during the Six-Day War. Due to its similar colors to the Palestinian flag, the emoji became a widespread symbol of solidarity and defiance.

Starting primarily with the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests, creators talking about race have similarly been abstracting their language online. It can be risky to say the words “Black” or “white,” since TikTok has a policy suppressing or removing videos “exaggerating the ethnic conflict between black and white.” Instead, influencers find loopholes like spelling “white” as “yt” and using the ⚪ emoji. Others take it a step further, simply using the palm of their hand to indicate the color white. This insertion of sign language isn’t all too different from an emoji; both are symbols standing in for a concept.

In many of these cases, the creator is knowingly critiquing the algorithm at the same time as they acquiesce to it. Many pro-Palestine creators will start out their videos with an unrelated topic or a pro-Israel sentence before baiting and switching into their views on the conflict. This is intended as a wink to the audience, reminding them that the platform is always listening. In a way, the same is true for all of traditional algospeak: Even the eggplant emoji doubles as a metalinguistic reminder that your content had to pass through a layer of algorithmic perception.

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Every work-around goes out the window when we get to hate speech and slurs. All social media platforms are extremely clear on not allowing hate speech, and they enforce that guideline more deliberately than any of their other rules. Like other guidelines, however, these fail to capture nuance; as ridiculous as it sounds, there is a time and place for slurs.

For example, I once posted a video on how the word “fascist” is etymologically related to the “f-slur for gay people,” which is the way I phrased it out loud. On-screen, I included the bowdlerization “f*ggot.” Like

my “river to the sea” video, it was entirely presented educationally, did not seem to offend anyone in the comments, and did not violate any rules.

Nevertheless, the algorithm must’ve caught on, since the next day I received a notification that my video was removed for a “Community Guidelines violation” and that my account would be suspended upon two more violations.

Evidently, self-censoring hate speech for pedagogical purposes can still be out-of-bounds for short-form video apps. How, then, is someone supposed to fully discuss the history of a marginalized community or the challenges they face? In many cases, the community guidelines designed to prevent hate speech end up impacting the very group they’re supposed to protect. Consider the n-word, which the Black community should be entitled to use without repercussion. Instead, they risk removals and bans, meaning they must get clever with avoidant speech or ninja emojis.

In an unfortunate catch-22, this problem happens because minority groups’ identities are considered “politically sensitive issues” by the algorithm. The keywords used by Black creators may overlap with the keywords used to talk about racism, because racism is frequently directed against the Black creators. But since discussion of racism is suppressed in the algorithm, many Black creators are inadvertently silenced. The same problem happens with homophobia and the queer community, or ableism and the disabled community. Now these groups can’t even talk about the very problems that content moderation is trying to protect them from.

To make matters worse, actual bigots will use this knowledge to their advantage. Rather than making hateful content that’ll get immediately removed, they’ll often opt to mass-report videos of creators they dislike. Since reports on videos with “politically charged language” tell the algorithm to remove those videos, trolls find that they can effectively harass creators through this method.

Many creators are already afraid to use their community’s vocabulary because of the perception that the algorithm is working against them. TikTok in particular lost a lot of trust due to occasional “glitches” like the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag showing up with zero views^[6] or the exposés

showing how it prevented undesirable creators from showing up on the For You page. Reading between the lines, these creators choose to find algospeak replacements instead of using their own language.

This is an incredibly relevant concern in the LGBTQ+ space. Beyond mass-reporting trolls and built-in bias politicizing queer identity, the community has to contend with direct geographic suppression. TikTok has openly admitted to censoring hashtags like #gay and #trans in conservative regions like Russia and the Middle East,^[7] so, again, there's been ample reason to be suspicious of the platform. Murky or incomplete feedback only worsens the issue. Several American trans creators have complained about being banned without explanation—contributing to the justifiable paranoia even if their incidents had valid but uncited rationale.

As a result, many queer creators feel they must resort to algospeak to best express their identity. You'll see people use the word "zesty" or the 💅 emoji as a metonym for "gay." In other instances, they've replaced the term "LGBTQ+" with phrases like "leg booty" or "alphabet mafia." The most famous example in the early 2020s was probably "le\$bian" for "lesbian." While this might seem like a typical grawlix substitution, TikTok's text-to-speech function clearly didn't understand that, and would instead read the phrase aloud as "le dollar bean." This pronunciation was so wholly embraced by the online lesbian community that many creators started saying it out loud themselves.

"Le\$bian" was always a joke for the chronically online. Kids in schools were never going to start unintentionally pronouncing the dollar sign, but it *was* a bellwether poking fun at how the algorithm is shaping our speech. Since its peak in 2021, the term has gradually been replaced by other substitutions like "wlw" for "women loving women," but I see these new terms as ironically *better* examples of algospeak, because people really are saying these terms offline.

The shift from "le\$bian" to "wlw," the shift from "suicide" to "unalive," and all these other instances of linguistic Whac-A-Molery exemplify the *euphemism treadmill*, a concept introduced by Steven Pinker to describe the continuous motion of evasive words in the English language. The euphemism

treadmill is why we're constantly updating our words for offensive things. The words "idiot," "imbecile," and "moron" all used to be serious words for classifying mental disability, but then they became negative, so we replaced them with the word "retarded," which also became negative, so we replaced that with "mentally disabled," which is also becoming negative.

The same process happens with terms for racial and sexual minorities as the words they use to describe themselves become poisoned over time. That's why "colored" became "black," and why some people now prefer capital-*B* "Black." Once words are used maliciously, we replace them until the cycle continues, as if moving along on a treadmill. This is a normal and inevitable linguistic process that can only really be solved by addressing the underlying societal problems causing the treadmill to move in the first place.

When the algorithm prevents people from saying "sex" or "suicide" or any other sensitive word, it becomes a proxy for human behavior. Instead of people turning a word negative over time, the platform labels it as undesirable for social media, causing the treadmill to move faster rather than actually preventing discussion of forbidden topics.

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Our colorful potpourri of euphemisms, bowdlerizations, and circular language is more than a collection of individual strategies to defeat content moderation tools. It's an entirely new style of communication serving a distinct social purpose.

What we're actually doing on social media is building up a common vocabulary to reflect our shared experiences. Human language is all about finding the best way to express our reality for others to understand us, and the "best way" constantly differs based on factors like social setting, communicative medium, and audience. In some academic or formal contexts, for example, the word "sex" is better expressed as "intercourse." On early TikTok, the best way to express the concept of sex was through the word "seggs." This wasn't just because it was algorithmically favored, but because of the cultural context in which it appeared.

“Seggs” became an indication that you understood the social expectations and dynamic of the online community. By opting to say it instead of a perfectly fine but lesser-used alternative like “secks,” creators accepted the role the word played in shaping past online conversations and expected it to be a recognizable term for their audience.

This explains why words like “unalive” and “seggs” survived well after it became clear that the terms were also being filtered by the algorithm. The terms took on a function of familiarity in the social media space, becoming shared terms serving an important purpose.

When considered together, these words constitute a *sociolect*, a form of language used by a particular social group. Sociolects are everywhere. The casual way you speak to your friends is a sociolect. The unique style of communication you use at home is a sociolect. The words you use online are the *algospeak sociolect*. In this mini-language, the “social group” encompasses all other people using social media.

American frat bros have a great example of a sociolect. When you observe them in groups, they speak the same coded language. Their voices will typically drop to a lower register and take on glottal fry. They’ll talk about bringing brewskis to darties. Just like Instagram influencers, frat bros use shared terms of communication to better express ideas to each other and signal that they’ve accepted certain shared cultural norms.

When a frat bro addresses another frat bro in frat-speak, the communication is seamless, because it fits the social context. But imagine if Chad told Brad he was bringing “alcoholic malt beverages to the day party.” Chad’s meaning would still be communicated, but less effectively than if he used the words “brewski” and “darty.” It would be weird for Brad because it’s not in their shared sociolect.

At the same time, Chad would be much less likely to use the word “brewski” around his grandmother. This is classic *code-switching*—shifting between sociolects depending on the environment. Just as it’s weird for Chad to suddenly lapse into stilted formal English when talking to Brad, it would be weird for TikTok sex educators to actually say “seggs” in real life. The context matters.

Linguists separate these sorts of situations into *domains of use*. Chad's frat house is a very different domain of use from Chad's grandmother's house, and he uses this information to speak differently in those environments. In the same vein, most people think of algospeak as exclusive to the online domain, so they won't say words like "seggs" in real life, unless the domains of use begin to break down or they're too young to fully distinguish them.

We get domains of use because of a psychological phenomenon called *communication accommodation*. Essentially, we're constantly making adjustments in our language (accommodating our communication) to be more or less like the person with whom we're interacting, because we innately try to attune to the behavior of others. Through this trial-and-error process, we determine what is and isn't appropriate in certain domains of use.

I think it's great for the English language that we're able to switch in and out of the algospeak sociolect. It's not some apocalyptic, these-kids-are-ruining-how-we-talk scenario, but rather an extra way of expressing ourselves that we've developed to fit a specific environment with specific constraints. We have the power to both use and not use it, and can seamlessly slip in and out of it to best articulate our thoughts depending on the domain.

One might expect this sociolect to internally differ between apps, due to slight differences in content moderation. However, algospeak on TikTok, Instagram, YouTube Shorts, and every similar platform is nearly identical. Successful creators rarely generate content for just one app, but instead cross-post to all of them, and as such try to work within the most severe algorithmic constraints (historically those on TikTok). Users, culture, and expectations will also often overlap across apps. Successful creators are usually in tune with that and make content that aligns with all at once.

Other commenters have previously pinned down the idea of an internet sociolect—the British linguist David Crystal identifies our exclusively online jargon as "netspeak"—but algorithms have now created an entirely new sociolect of their own. This goes well beyond the mere euphemisms we've previously associated with "algospeak," and instead characterizes the totality of how we understand each other on social media. As we'll start exploring in the next chapter, all "internet slang" words are brought to you by the

algorithm, and all define the culture of being online. Whether it's "unalive" or a meme word like "skibidi," each linguistic innovation counts as "algospeak," and each constitutes a part of our collective identity.

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Looking back at leetspeak—the earliest online sociolect, indicating belongingness to an elite group of internet-savvy users—a lot of its patterns are strikingly similar to algospeak. The word "porn" was often stylized "pr0n," to the point where it was eventually pronounced "prawn." Modern social media users are switching letter placements in the same way when they spell out words like "fukc" and "bicth," and also arrived at a food word with their euphemism "corn."

Both in the past and today, we progressively add layers of abstraction. Just as "white" became "yt" and "yt" became the gesture of holding one's palm up, leetspeak had levels of coded speech. The phrase "Alex is a boy" could be written in basic leet as "413x !z 4 b0j," but that could be taken up a level with the "extreme leetspeak" translation "413><!2 4 l30`/." At a certain point, it's barely recognizable, but then again someone new to TikTok might be equally confused by a creator just holding their palm up to the camera.

Although leetspeak preceded emojis by more than a decade, that didn't preclude early experimentation with pictographs. Message board users relied heavily on computer text art created out of common characters, like "8==D" for "penis." How different is that really from an eggplant emoji? Both are representations depending on a visual similarity, each a beautiful testament to humanity's commitment to finding new ways to depict male genitalia.

Leetspeak, too, was more than censorship: It was a *culture*, defined by its environment. There's no text-filtering reason to spell out "413x !z 4 b0j," but sentences like that were shaped through the zeitgeist of the early internet era, nuanced by the unique circumstances in which the sociolect was forged.

Is leetspeak any indication of the future of algospeak? It's definitely an imperfect comparison, because leetspeak had its own dynamic and was used by a much smaller group. The very reason it died out was that more people simply got on the internet, overwhelming the leet population and making

h4x0rz behavior appear “cringe.” Algospeak, meanwhile, is around in a time when *everyone* is on the internet and using these words, not just a select few. If anything, it’s set to be around much longer and have a much wider impact than leetspeak.

Nevertheless, leetspeak had a pretty big legacy, considering its relatively small population of users. In many ways, it was at the forefront of a lot of linguistic internet trends, like “the” being spelled as “teh” in lolspeak. It also gave us actual mainstream terms, like “pwned” for “owned” and “noob” for “newbie.” If that’s any indication of where things are going, we’ll probably see far more algospeak words reach offline usage, not least because of the breadth and speed of algorithmic language change.

Outside both leetspeak and algospeak, I’m again reminded of Cockney rhyming slang, created by petty criminals in London’s East End to avoid detection by the police, but going beyond that to define a culture of its own. Whenever our speech comes under scrutiny, we respond by inventing sneaky solutions that in turn shape our identity. Language is, and will remain, one of the most important forms of power and belongingness.

When it comes to Whac-A-Mole, algospeak is just the latest iteration of a human constant. Like its historical equivalents, it has a certain domain of use, undergoes code-switching, and uses modified language to evade notice by the authorities. Our new video medium both influences and reflects innate cultural patterns, including—as you’ll read in the next chapter—how those ideas spread.

[SKIP NOTES](#)

*¹ Both of these examples are taken from African American English; we’ll discuss how that happens in chapter 7.

*² Still one of my all-time favorite etymology facts.

*³ While writing this book, I decided to test the algorithm by posting a video about the semiotic implications of these emojis. It was very well put together, but unsurprisingly received a hundred times fewer views than my usual videos, with very few of those views coming from the For You page.

Sticking Out Your Gyat for the Rizzler

IT SEEMS AS THOUGH everything happens faster on the internet. Each week brings a dizzying parade of new memes, fads, and slang words that evaporate as quickly as they materialize. It can be hard to keep up with the latest references unless you're spending hours a day catching up on social media trends.

Of course, it wasn't always like this: Look at Middle English six hundred years ago. Language was far more insular. Each city and region had its own, different dialect, to a point where there can scarcely be any discussion of a uniform "English" language as we understand it today. The only reason to adopt a new word was that it helped you better communicate with your fellow townspeople, so of course change came about more slowly.

Then England centralized, and the dialects of London and the East Midlands became the basis of what we now think of as Standard English. It was as if a switch had flipped: The upper class suddenly had a set vocabulary they could point to as "correct," meaning that all other dialects became "incorrect." By the 1750s, the word "slang" emerged as a catchall term to describe the nonstandard words used by the lower classes.

Around that same time, England became more connected than ever, meaning that more communities could coalesce to come up with slang. The lower classes especially felt freer to create new words since they weren't bound by the same rules, and wider social networks helped those words spread more quickly. If the upper class eventually started using those same words too, they stopped being called slang and became everyday language.

This acceleration was directly aided by the rise of print media. For example, in the mid-nineteenth century, there was an American slang fad to give words incorrect abbreviations, like “O.K.” for “all correct.” That was then printed in a Boston newspaper, helping it reach mainstream usage, which is how we have the word “okay” today.

However, newspapers had their limitations. They were—and still are—written in Standard English, which means they operate under the rigidity of upper-class linguistic norms. The later advent of radio and television media allowed more people to hear unfiltered communication, although even those mediums came with unique sets of content expectations.

Enter the World Wide Web, where anybody could post content for anybody else to see. Mankind finally became released from centuries under the reign of the language police, and new words sprang up from all the new corners of the internet. As early as the 1980s, internet users started making up slang like “lol” and “noob.”

But this early internet era was the digital equivalent of medieval England: It was decentralized and disconnected in a way that didn’t see much language change beyond the broad need to invent shared vocabulary. As the internet subsequently coalesced around large social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, our social networks (and thus our avenues for language change) expanded like a newly industrialized Great Britain, preparing us for the next great linguistic shift: the rise of short-form video.

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As a middle school student in the mid-2010s, it felt like every cultural reference could be traced back to Vine. During its short-lived but influential existence, the platform allowed users to post up to six-second clips, usually replicating a dance move or funny catchphrase. The videos dominated our collective consciousness in a way that only my generational cohort can truly understand. You couldn’t walk down a school hallway without seeing someone dab, whip, or hit the nae-nae—all dances popularized by the site.

With these videos also came a slew of new slang words, like “on fleek,” meaning “perfect,” or “yeet,” an interjection said while throwing something at

high velocity. It also popularized existing words from African American English, such as “bae” and “fam,” both terms of endearment for one’s close friends.

These words were able to spread in the way they did because of the emergence of viral “trends”—popular internet fads characterized by rapid recombinations of some source material. The earliest trends replicated dances, but later iterations also spread as meme formats. “Yeet,” for example, became widespread through a series of videos of a boy named Lil Meatball doing a dance, but humorously edited so that his friends would say “yeet” as he scored a basketball three-pointer or shot someone. The more edits that popped up, the more the term spread, until it began spawning its own trending formats, like another widely replicated video of a woman throwing a soda can while yelling, “This bitch empty! Yeet!” From there, “yeet” became an established piece of Gen Z slang.

This new dominance of rapid social media “trends” was uniquely enabled by Vine’s short-form video style, since its content encouraged repetition unlike any previous medium. Although the platform was shut down in 2017 due to monetization issues, it had clearly tapped into something unique, and other companies were paying attention.

As Vine began dying out, another app named Musical.ly was emerging as its obvious successor. Like Vine, it relied on trend-based short-form videos, although the structure was more flexible (up to a minute), more focused on lip-syncing, and primarily filmed vertically (a response to the rise of smartphones). By 2017, it had reached 200 million users and caught the attention of ByteDance, which wanted to replicate the success of its own Chinese video app, Douyin.

Musical.ly was acquired and merged into TikTok, which is where ByteDance perfected the recipe by engineering the most addictive social media website imaginable. As soon as you opened the app, a rectangle of video would command the entire screen, while flashy colors and exciting content would make you completely forget about the existence of an outside world. Easily accessible in-app editing made it possible for anyone to hop onto the latest trend, go viral, and become a celebrity. Gone were the barriers

to stardom posed by previous, long-form apps like YouTube. Now anything could and did happen overnight, while the only way to stay in touch was to constantly use the app.

But TikTok's main strength lay beyond its already impressive user interface. The platform's most important characteristic was undoubtedly its algorithm, which did far more than censor words. Powerful machine learning tools additionally analyzed every move you made: They tracked what you liked, what you commented on, how long you watched a video, and which profiles you viewed. All this got synthesized into your ever-changing feed, which predicted your preferences without you ever having to think about it. Don't worry, TikTok knew.

The algorithm was, of course, designed to maximize the amount of time you spend on the app, and it's worked: The average global social media user now spends more time on TikTok than anywhere else, which has left the other companies scrambling to catch up. In August 2020, Meta launched Instagram Reels, a similarly algorithm-driven vertical-video feature, and Alphabet followed suit with YouTube Shorts just a month later. It's clear that this style of content is the best way to hook viewers, and will be the dominant style of social media as long as we remain reliant on our smartphones.

The massive success of the personalized recommendation algorithm relies on a few tricks, but the underlying principle is quite intuitive: If you like a certain kind of content, you'll probably like other content similar to it. For instance, I recently liked a video of a man singing "Barbie World" by Nicki Minaj to the grave of President Lyndon B. Johnson. The algorithm correctly inferred that I enjoyed the song and sent me more funny "Barbie World" videos, which improved my experience on the app. It also probably pushed those videos to people who fit the same demographic profile as me, since they're also likely to respond positively.

When these songs accompany a meme or dance that people want to re-create, a trend is born. At its core, this process is the same as those on Vine and Musical.ly, just spread through a more sophisticated recommendation system. The videos are now especially compelling because they make it seem as if *everyone* were hopping onto a trend (a perception exacerbated by your

biased recommendation feed). Because we're social creatures, your recommendation page will pressure you to watch or participate in these trends, so you can feel caught up on the latest cultural references. This turns into a positive feedback loop that has irrevocably changed the music industry: Numerous songs, from Doja Cat's "Say So" to Lil Nas X's "Old Town Road," reached *Billboard* No. 1 status primarily by becoming TikTok dance trends.

Songs like this were particularly important in the early days of TikTok, when it was still a music app and people wanted to consume videos of people dancing to songs they liked. Since then, of course, the app branched out to also play the roles of educator, journalist, and comedian, but the underlying strategies remained the same. If you're an entertainer trying to make someone laugh, you might set your video to a trending audio of a funny catchphrase.

In January 2023, for example, TikTok was inundated with the same sound bite of a woman saying, "Side-eye. SIDE-EYE." People around the world flocked to film themselves looking suspiciously to the side, captioned with a humorous explanation. The audio clip went viral in the same way that "Old Town Road" became popular: It turned into a trend that people were excited to replicate.

A few weeks later, a second, similar audio also went viral, of the phrase "bombastic side-eye. Criminal, offensive side-eye." Drawing on the popularity of the initial meme, but fresh with a newer, funnier catchphrase, the clip went viral in much the same way as "This bitch empty! Yeet!" rode on the coattails of the first "yeet" video.

It's easy to write off "side-eye" as yet another meme, but TikTok isn't some isolated, inconsequential vacuum. In the wake of the "side-eye" videos, Google Trends showed searches for the word spike tenfold and then consistently remain at a much higher search interest than before. People offline were saying the phrase far more frequently than they were in 2022, all because it was popularized online.

While the underlying linguistic process is quite similar to what happened with "yeet" in 2014, the rise of "side-eye" was amplified by TikTok's algorithm to have a much larger impact than it might have had a decade prior. Vine's video recommendation process was simple: It showed everyone the

same popular videos, with the expectation that most people would like them. TikTok changed the game through its highly personalized recommendations. Rather than pushing just any video to your For You page, it cleverly learned to send you videos that should individually resonate for you.

Once the algorithm became aware that I enjoy both educational content and Nicki Minaj, for example, it sent me a video of the Depths of Wikipedia creator explaining how undersea fiber-optic cables work to the beat of Nicki's song "Super Freaky Girl," which is exactly the kind of content I want to see on my recommended page.

As soon as I reacted positively to the video, I got more videos about fiber-optic cables, because TikTok picked up on the fact that I'm interested in learning about them and sent me more videos with that metadata. (I really did enjoy the additional videos.)

The information felt special to me because I now had a personal connection to it, and this is how most people encounter viral memes nowadays. Audios like "side-eye" are introduced to your recommendation page through whatever unique iteration works the best for your specific profile, making you connect with it more than you might've on a more general platform. While I can count on ten fingers the relevant words from Vine, TikTok churns out new terms like "side-eye" every few weeks because everybody's seeing different things. Words have the ability to evolve coterminously without being overshadowed by a single popular "yeet"-style video that dominates everyone's recommended feed.

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Creators are very familiar with how social media platforms recommend content, and we actively use this knowledge to our advantage. We very intentionally incorporate trending audios into our videos, because we're aware that the algorithm is more likely to push them to people who've previously shown interest in other videos containing that audio. As we've seen with "side-eye," this can mean that we unintentionally spread slang words at warp speed. My favorite example of this phenomenon is the "Rizzler song," a TikTok audio that went massively viral in late 2023 for its slang-heavy lyrics:

*Sticking out your gyat for the rizzler
You're so skibidi
You're so fanum tax
I just wanna be your sigma
Freaking come here
Give me your ohio*

While this may seem like gobbledegook to the uninitiated, each slang word referenced in the Rizzler song was already trending at the time for being associated with Gen Alpha comedy. “Gyat” is a synonym for “butt”; a “Rizzler” is an individual skilled in rizz, or seduction; and a “sigma” is a successful male. The words “skibidi,” “fanum,” and “ohio” mostly serve as nonsense words coming from other popular memes at the time.

When recombined into this song, the slang words formed an annoyingly catchy anthem heralding the emergence of a distinctly Gen Alpha style of humor. The internet was obsessed: Older generations were morbidly curious about this harbinger of their obsolescence, while Gen Z took to saying the words ironically or in intentionally “cringe” contexts. Posting even mildly interesting videos with the Rizzler audio was virtually guaranteed to get a lot of views, because so many people had shown interest in the song. As a result, videos using the song proliferated.

Just as social media now pushes trending songs or audios, it also pushes trending metadata, like words, captions, and hashtags. After all, the same people who were categorized as liking Rizzler-related content would probably also be interested in other videos containing the words “skibidi” or “gyat.” The algorithm knows this. It looks at everything that might hint at your preferred content, and words are no exception.

Again, creators are very tuned in to this. That’s why we use trending words, or even make certain videos in the first place. We know they’ll do better if we talk about specific topics. In the wake of the Rizzler song, for example, we saw an explosion in remixes, covers, and explanations of it, from emotional piano remakes to a tutorial for how to sing the song as a liturgical-

style Gregorian chant.^[*1] The creators of these videos made them because they *knew* the metadata would make them go viral.

I myself capitalized on this trend by making content explaining the etymology of the Rizzler lyrics. I racked up a million TikTok views for a video talking about the etymology of “rizz”; 2.5 million for “sigma”; 3.5 million for “skibidi.” Yes, the topics personally interested me, but there are so many other topics that also interest me. I chose to focus on these particular words because I wanted my videos to perform better. Clearly, it worked, and I know I’m not alone in this: A 2023 University of Oxford study found that essentially all influencers are “purposefully minimizing their own creativity in order to pander to perceived algorithmic tastes and subsequently enhance their visibility.” This affects not only our choice of content but also our aesthetics, creative processes, and overall strategies (more on that in the next two chapters).^[1]

Algorithmic pandering makes slang terms inextricable from the metadata that help them spread. As early as the summer of 2023, people were making “rizz” content because the keyword “rizz” was trending, and the keyword “rizz” was trending because the algorithm decided that it would be so. I call this the *engagement treadmill*. As certain types of content get engagement, more creators make those types of videos, so more people engage with it, so more creators make it.

Each individual word in the Rizzler song went through this cycle. They were already trending keywords before the meme went viral, and then they became even trendier afterward.

Social media platforms reward using keywords because they want the information: Metadata can be turned into index terms that are easier for the algorithm to categorize, and thus know what to recommend to viewers. Creators want their content to be discoverable, so they mold it around what the algorithm wants. Keywords are a win-win.

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The impact of the Rizzler song, and its subsequent spin-offs, cannot be overstated. It defined a pivotal turning point in the social media zeitgeist. It

spawned an entire genre of “brainrot” comedy that redefined how we talk about social media and language. Most important, it gave its words a platform to spread—and spread they did. Three months after the song came out, I surveyed seventeen hundred middle school teachers and parents about these words. Fifty-five percent reported hearing their kids say “gyat,” and 80 percent had heard the word “rizz,”^[*2] which became so popular that the *Oxford English Dictionary* chose it as its 2023 Word of the Year. A year later, and you couldn’t find a middle-schooler who didn’t know these two words. All the Rizzler slang terms had reached a point where they were being used regularly and unironically by Gen Alpha children, who had gotten them straight from short-video sites like TikTok and YouTube Shorts.

The Rizzler song is also emblematic of the post-Vine era of etymology—a time when language change is more overtly tied to viral memes, when trending words are more frequently replicated in new contexts. After the initial audio did the rounds, the original meme died out, but the words were still trendy, so creators found creative ways to replicate them through new formats. Some of the words, for example, took on an additional expletive function, as in the popular interjections “what the sigma” or “on skibidi.”

Here, “sigma” and “skibidi” replace the words “fuck” and “God,”^[*3] but they also fit into what we call *phrasal templates*—familiar, repeatable phrases where any word can be inserted into a sort of verbal formula. For “on skibidi,” the word “skibidi” fits into the phrasal template “on X,” where an oath can be sworn on any noun. In the past, these oaths were often serious (you might sub in “my dead grandmother” or something similarly macabre), but the template has since expanded to include humorous words: Around the time that “on skibidi” was trending, it would also not be out of place to see the phrases “on sigma” or “on gyat.”

As ridiculous as those examples seem, phrasal templates are nothing new. You already use them every day. The template “X is the new Y” is a sentence format where you can insert any two words to indicate a successive relationship (a famous example being *Orange Is the New Black*), but that’s just an easy-to-point-to example. These kinds of grammatical skeletons shape a

huge portion of our conversations, and it's simply easier to fit our words around linguistic archetypes we're familiar with.

Likewise, there's a certain humor in applying new words to existing phrasal templates. That's why replacing "fuck" with "sigma" sounded so funny to the people who were saying "what the sigma." That's why other phrasal templates are so widespread. The format "she *X* on my *Y* till I *Z*" is seen as funny with pretty much any substitution, so we got sentences like "she rizz on my gyat till I ohio." It's mostly nonsensical, yes, but the value of these templates and the way they can be combined with each other allows the words to stay in circulation much longer than they would otherwise. Each reiteration lengthens the lifespan of the term, outliving the initial meme while retaining an original feel.

It's also just a fun opportunity to goof around with grammar. The British linguist David Crystal argues that this type of "language play" helps with language development in children and gives us more ways to express ourselves. Essentially, we're stimulating our brains by playing Mad Libs through our slang words, so it's not necessarily a bad thing if your middle school kid comes home saying something like "I went to gyatville and everyone knew you," drawing on a popular template of "going to *X*-ville."

In the past, phrasal templates existed only as particularly catchy turns of phrase. They were still structures for words to spread, but the internet took them to a completely new level through meme culture, building our humor out of easily combined patterns of mutual references.

Tellingly, these patterns are called *meme templates*. Whenever an image or video is accompanied by a caption, that caption uses some kind of phrasal template to convey a humorous idea, drawing on a shared knowledge of that format. These are often instrumental in spreading modern slang. Look at the word "function" becoming a synonym of "party"^[*4] in 2023: The shift entirely happened because of meme templates like "White people when there's *X* at the function," later evolving into "When the function has *X*." Both formats relied on the creative motivations people had for attending parties, and both relied on "function" as a contextually humorous word. Since the

jokes were funny, the meme templates spread, and the meaning of “function” changed.

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It isn’t new for slang to spread with memes. We’ve already learned how the word “okay” became popular through what was essentially a meme fad in Boston newspapers. People have always been using words and phrasal templates that they find funny.

Despite this, it’s hard to pinpoint what exactly a meme *is*. The modern concept of a “self-replicating unit of culture” traces back to the 1976 Richard Dawkins book, *The Selfish Gene*, but the label has since been applied to various definitions across disciplines. Most interpretations agree that it’s a type of idea characterized by its ability to spread between people.

Memes have always been kind of like a virus. Whenever you learn a new word, you can think of it as coming into contact with a parasite. Either your guard is up and you reject the word, or it breaks through your defenses and you become a “host,” using and replicating the word for it to reach a larger population. Then there’s the uncanny similarity between how we talk about the ways that words and diseases spread: We say they move through social networks in a “viral” manner, hence the phrase “gone viral.” Many linguists even use epidemiological models to show the spread or lifespan of ideas.[\[2\]](#)

Just like viruses, memes compete against each other in the wild. In the days of Vine, for instance, the funniest or catchiest meme would receive the most “likes” and then rise up higher in a user’s feed, thus reaching a larger audience because it was more “evolutionarily fit” to spread. If the meme was replicable, it would survive longer in our collective consciousness, like with the various “yeet” meme formats.

Since then, however, the qualifications for an evolutionarily “fit” meme have changed with algorithmic video recommendations. The new social media platforms are more deliberate about keeping users engaged as long as possible, and now reward a new host of metrics for creators to optimize for. A “fit” or “viral” video needs so much more than just “likes”; it needs a long

average watch time, a lot of comments, and a lot of shares, in addition to all the other constraints of the algorithm.

Arguably, slang words—already inextricable from their metadata—have also become inextricable from memes. The word “sigma” became popular through the sigma meme templates, and the sigma meme templates became popular because the algorithm rewarded content containing that word. TikTok knew that the people liked sigma content, because it consistently generated more interactions than other words for “successful male.” As a result, “sigma” assumed a more prominent position in our slang, outcompeting potential synonyms. Its funniness made it catchy, which is probably why so many algospeak words like “seggs” and “nip nops” also sound a little funny, or why we immediately think of memes as funny ideas.

Importantly for its success, “sigma” was an easily replicable meme. The fact that it could be recombined into templates like “what the sigma” and “on sigma” meant that it could be used and applied in more contexts than just the original joke, giving it more opportunities to “infect hosts” and help the “virus” survive. Same thing with “side-eye”: New trends give words the ability to outlast the previous meme’s lifespan.

Linguists have known for a while that words are more likely to succeed if they appear in many grammatical situations. If a slang term shows up across multiple phrasal templates and linguistic contexts, it’s more likely that it’ll stick around in at least one of those templates or contexts. Modern memes give us a new lens to consider this. Words can now also reproduce if we adapt them to different trends and meme templates—all of which are spread by the algorithm.

At its core, our “modern slang” is spreading exactly as our “old slang” did, only through a new medium. Before the internet, ideas would move across geographic territory between people in similar social circles. Now the various corners of social media have replaced physical territory, but individual words will still spread between people in the same “social networks.” There’s still regional variation—people will talk distinctly on different platforms or in different online communities—and new slang still shocks people when it

subverts a “standard dialect” (which is why the Rizzler song was so effective in capturing our attention).

However, the role of “slang” in popular culture has fundamentally changed because of the internet. Since the emergence of Standard English, the rule makers of language have been in charge, and their prescriptive norms about a “correct” version of the English language have dominated our channels of communication. If you wanted your voice to be heard by the public, you had to work within their constraints, conforming to the stringent expectations of either print or broadcast media.

Social media completely shattered that barrier. The playing field is now level, and public access is democratized. Anybody and everybody can become a public figure on the new communicative platforms, meaning that nobody’s left to enforce the old rules. TV presenters and journalists might not have been able to use slang, but content creators can. We regularly use words like “function” and “side-eye,” and our influence both legitimizes these terms and gives them a large platform to spread quicker than they could have before.

Content creators also come from a greater variety of backgrounds than people working in traditional media. This means that slang can more naturally transcend the economic and social barriers that once hampered its growth. Black and queer people, for example, have a larger voice than ever before, meaning that Black and queer slang has diffused into the popular vernacular with unprecedented speed. The loose social networks that previously connected us geographically are simply stronger online, and memes are now transmitted at breakneck pace.

If you’re taking notes, you’ll notice the definition of “slang” has subtly changed since the start of this chapter. In the eighteenth century, the word was very intentionally targeted toward the language of the lower classes. The elitism is still there—that’s why we disproportionately talk about “slang” when it’s being used by minority communities—but now you’d be hard-pressed to find someone who doesn’t admit to using slang occasionally; now the term simply refers to “informal speech” in general. Everybody speaks informally, especially because everybody participates in the social media

sociolect. We just understand it's something to code-switch in and out of, which is why we mark off words as "internet slang" or "Gen Z slang."

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In September 2021, the TikToker Anthony Mai posted a video urging his followers to participate in a prank: For no reason, everybody should suddenly start commenting the chair emoji (🪑) in lieu of the laughing emoji for all videos by KSI, another social media influencer. The video went extremely viral, and for the next few weeks it seemed as if everybody on TikTok was spamming 🪑 in not only KSI's comments but under every successful video. Google searches for "chair emoji meaning" spiked, and people began speculating whether the emoji had officially become the new laughing emoji.

Within a month, however, the chair emoji virtually disappeared online. Search trends came crashing back down, and by November almost everybody had forgotten about the fad. It was yet another ephemerality briefly occupying the incessantly mesmerizing carousel of trends, memes, and emojis that constantly grip the social media space.

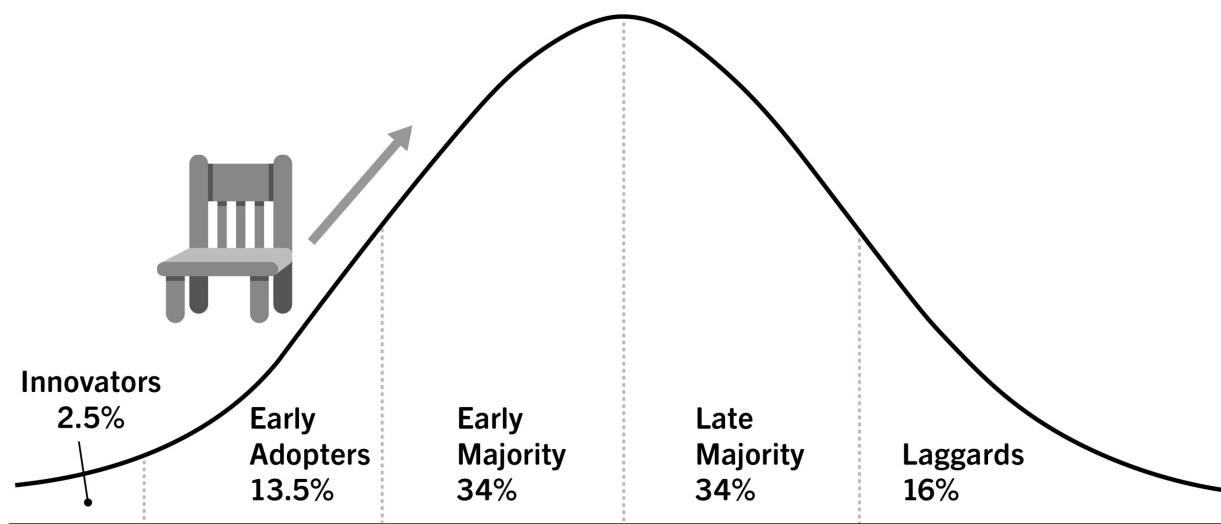
Why, though? Why did 🪑 die out, while the laughing-crying emoji came back in full force? What causes a word or meme to fizzle out, while others stay around for much longer?

The American sociologist Everett Rogers attempts to answer this question in his 1962 book, *Diffusion of Innovations*. In it, he breaks down how all information moves across five categories of "adopters":

1. The innovators—a small group of people, like Anthony, who are willing to take risks by coming up with new ideas.
2. The early adopters—people comfortable with adopting new ideas, who don't take much convincing. In this case, Anthony's followers.
3. The early majority—people willing to hop onto a trend once they see it taking off among a small group.
4. The late majority—those who adopt a trend once they see the majority using it. Once this group started using the chair, it really

started showing up everywhere.

5. The laggards—the last people to adopt an idea; the ones who had to google “what does the chair emoji mean?”^[3]



“Adoption” doesn’t mean that the word is around to stay. After someone makes the initial decision to start incorporating a slang term into their vocabulary, they later make another decision either to continue using the term or to abandon it. This is often sociologically conditioned: As soon as the laggards start using a word, the innovators and early adopters will either begin to see it as uncool or find a permanent use for it (after which the rest of the population will follow). In the case of the 🪑 emoji, its initial appeal was that it was part of an in-joke. Once everybody caught up, it lost its value, and there was no particular reason to keep it around.

Curiously, around the same time, the skull emoji (💀) began to widely replace the laughing-crying emoji as the preferred Gen Z expression of humor, through the idea of being “dead” from laughing. By the end of 2022, even the laggards on TikTok were socially pressured into using the emoji, but the key difference is that it didn’t die out like 🪑. After the adopters reached critical mass, they chose to keep it around, because it served an important purpose differentiating them from older generations who still predominantly used the 😂 emoji for laughing online.

There are a few reasons why one meme might survive while another fails to stick the landing. It all comes down to what Everett calls the “innovation-decision process”: whether the adopters decide to continue or stop using an idea. This is influenced by a number of inter- and intrapersonal factors.

One of these factors is *frequency*: Is the term culturally trending? Humans are social creatures who adopt words if they have a social purpose. Both 🤣 and 💀 had a social purpose as cultural references to bond over, even if 💀 trended more in the long run. Once people see other people use a word, they want to be in on the reference and use the word themselves. This means that a word can continue trending simply because it was trending in the first place, and we’ve already learned how social media really accelerates this into a positive feedback loop.

It’s also important for a word to be *unobtrusive*, meaning that it shouldn’t feel too noticeable or forced. As entertaining as the 🤣 meme was, it never really had a chance because people knew it was artificial. The entire joke revolved around the fact that it was an unnatural way to express laughter, and once the joke was over, it stuck out like a sore thumb.

Although the chair emoji was an extreme example, obtrusiveness will always kill a word in the end. That’s why we no longer say “yeet” or “on fleek.” The words stuck out as examples of “Gen Z slang,” and thus were tied to our expectations about what “slang” is. Once the laggards (that is, millennials and Gen X parents) started saying the words, they rapidly lost their cool factor and were quickly replaced by other funny interjections and adjectives.

Meanwhile, consider the word “cancel,” which began to take on a definition of “socially ostracize” around the same time as the word “yeet” got popular. “Cancel” was also “Gen Z slang,” but it wasn’t thought of as such. Instead, it was an unobtrusive word. Nobody noticed it entering our vocabulary; it felt quite natural, as if it had always been there. By the time the laggards began using the word, it didn’t feel surprising or alienating.

Whenever people make fun of the “Gen Z slang” or “Gen Alpha slang” being spread on TikTok, they usually point to obtrusive words. It’s much easier to notice ridiculous-sounding words like “gyat” and “skibidi,” but those

never had staying power because they were far too in-your-face about it. Slang terms like “function” and “side-eye,” however, are much more likely to fly under the radar, because they consist of already familiar words and are remarked on much less frequently. A good rule of thumb is that if someone can make fun of you for saying something, it’s probably obtrusive. That’s why Gretchen couldn’t make “fetch” happen in *Mean Girls*: It was too noticeable.

Paradoxically, memes help words spread, but if a word is *too* tied to a meme, it attracts attention and becomes obtrusive. Trends in general are a double-edged sword: They bring slang terms to prominence, but their transience can sabotage those terms’ success. If an idea is overly tied to a fad, it’ll die with that fad, unless it can find a way to jump between many different grammatical and social situations. The algorithm doesn’t care. It’ll just amplify the next trend—whatever it takes to keep the masses entertained.

At the same time, the more memes a word can hop between, the better chance it has for survival, because it’s generating more potential opportunities to survive. Even if a word has both high frequency and low obtrusiveness, it needs a reason to be used, known as an *endurance* factor. That’s why phrasal templates are so important: They give words different contexts to appear in.

In the end, a word will stick if it serves a new role in the English language. If, as with “cancel,” it defines a necessary concept, then we say that it’s filled a *semantic gap*: a concept that we didn’t previously have a word for. Had there already been an entrenched word for the same idea, we would have had no need to cancel people. Sometimes, though, the new word also provides a better or funnier way to express a concept than existing synonyms, which is why “function” was able to slowly start supplanting “party”: It filled the semantic gap of a silly way to talk about social events.^[4]

It’s pointless trying to predict which individual slang words will succeed and which will fail. Language is a chaotic, entropic thing with too many variables at play, and we can only really identify correlations.

What we do know, however, is that memes are more than jokes: They’re conveyors of culture. Their influence, now adapted to short-form video platforms, isn’t going anywhere. Nor are the platforms. Between TikTok, Instagram Reels, YouTube Shorts, and other apps like Douyin or

Xiaohongshu, social media companies have cracked the formula for your attention. With every swipe, you unlock another hit of dopamine, and it's all too easy to immerse yourself in a highly personalized stream of entertainment. Until a more addicting media format is invented, these apps will continue their stranglehold on how we communicate, thereby influencing the language we use.

Words, which have always been tied to trends, are only going to continue being pushed by algorithms engineered to reward those trends. The old boundary between slang and “proper speech” has been dissolved and redefined. Now all slang terms have a new avenue for spreading to a larger audience than ever before, faster than ever before.

Memes, meanings, and metadata are one and the same, building up our vocabulary through humor and hashtags. And, as you’ll find out in the next chapter, the name of this game is your attention.

[SKIP NOTES](#)

[*1](#) The “Barbie World” singer mentioned earlier also ended up performing “Sticking Out Your Gyat for the Rizzler” at the final resting place of Lyndon B. Johnson.

[*2](#) The real numbers are probably much higher, since parents are always out of the loop.

[*3](#) Drawing on the Gen Z slang expression “on god.”

[*4](#) The word previously had an association with formal events, but only recently came to be associated with drunken college ragers.

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