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## A Content Analysis of Queer Slang on Tik Tok

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COMM 460-03

## **A Content Analysis of Queer Slang on Tik Tok**

### **Introduction**

Tik Tok, a video-sharing service created by ByteDance Ltd. has become one of the most popular social media applications on the market, achieving more than 3 billion downloads (Iqbal, 2022). Using a collection of shareable audios, filters, text to speech, and a unique system for user engagement, Tik Tok successfully cultivated a creative space where users can easily access and produce digital content. Due to the ever-changing nature of social media platforms, along with Tik Tok's popularity, videos that are considered "trendy" on the platform change almost monthly, with smaller trends only reaching certain communities within the platform. These trends continuously shape the platform's digital culture, influencing social behavior driven by the need for community acceptance.

The LGBTQ+ community has a strong presence on Tik Tok. Many materials created by, or celebrating, the LGBTQ+ community have gone viral including audios such as "Material Girl" by Saucy Santana, AR filters, and trends celebrating the LGBTQ+ identity. Culture from marginalized groups such as the black and LGBTQ+ communities are often sources of pop-cultural influence, with elements of their cultures becoming adopted by the dominant groups in society to follow trends in fashion, music, and language. Since the development of social media, these changes to the Internet's pop culture have accelerated due to the high concentration of diversity and interactions online.

In this research, an LGBTQ+ trend on Tik Tok is studied to examine the use of LGBTQ+ vocabulary, "-ussy", during the trend's peak, and after the trend's fall, to determine if its original use has changed after being integrated into the Tik Tok community's slang and

if this popularization of minority vernacular for the sake of social media trends can lead to cultural appropriation or it can lead to social inclusivity for marginalized groups.

## **Literature Review**

While the research behind cultural appropriation in traditional media has been practiced and established in the scholarly field, modern forms of cultural appropriation—specifically the appropriation of LGBTQ+ culture in online spaces— is in their infancy. Currently, there are no published research articles on the LGBTQ+ community being appropriated on social media. However, there are studies on the use of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) by non-Black individuals on the internet, and how the cultural appropriation of AAVE in the digital space affects black people. Dr. Christian Ilbury’s “Sassy Queens: Stylistic Orthographic Variation in Twitter and the Enrigsterment of AAVE” examines the presence of African American Vernacular English being featured in tweets from the Twitter timelines of gay men. Ilbury’s method for data collection included a pool of public posts across a 13-month time span that focused on the language used in tweets created by gay men in order to study the use of AAVE by the gay community. Through this study, Ilbury was able to argue that “the stylization of AAVE signals the development of a very specific persona— which relies on the essentialized imagining of Black women... (Ilbury, 2019)”. This “fierce” stereotype is a stylized—or exaggerated— representation of Black Women that is used online to foster social cohesion through the use of memes and trendy social behavior. Ilbury’s study supported this with evidence of gay male users using AAVE within lines of this stereotype to gain social acceptance among their gay peers on Twitter, ultimately using AAVE as a form of cultural capital. While these Twitter users were not attempting to present themselves as AAVE speakers, they selectively used this inauthentic

“sassy queen” style to project a persona that is provocative and holds value in the gay male community.

Along with the characterizations of Black people online, their vocabulary is also being commodified. Phrases such as “lit, bussin’, bae, thirsty, salty, aight, hella, period, and lowkey” all originated from Black culture and became popular on social media sites such as Twitter, leading to their current status as an internet slang (Laing, 2021). As social media users became exposed to AAVE through interactions with Black users, terms became widely used by individuals who were not Black. Much like the memes of Black people going viral, AAVE terms became the “trend” of social behavior—with social media users, particularly on Twitter, seeing the use of these phrases as a way to become socially accepted by the platform’s community—leading to Internet popularity. This behavior not only led to users outside of the Black community using AAVE, but it also led to many using AAVE incorrectly—upsetting Black individuals.

A large element of digital culture that is influenced by trends is slang, the vocabulary used by members to establish group identity (Acar, 2021). Slang is a natural phenomenon in human speech that has become increasingly popular as different online communities emerge. On the Internet, slang is often used in order to affirm digital identity within certain communities (Petrova & Vasichkina, 2021). As trends shape digital culture, the slang used by participating online communities changes as well, as users adopt new language to maintain the integrity of their digital identity. There are instances where slang dies off with the associated trend and is often replaced with new vocabulary; however, there have also been instances where slang from marginalized groups has become integrated into Internet culture even after the trend has passed, such as AAVE. Petrova and Vasichkina, in their study of internet slang and digital culture, argue that Internet's rapidly-evolving nature and concentrated community have created an accelerated state of cultural change online,

compared to pop culture offline (Petrova & Vasichkina, 2021). As more social media platforms develop and become popular, the rate at which Internet slang and digital culture adapt will continue to increase.

Tik Tok is the newest social media platform with trends that affect digital culture. One viral trend, in particular, dubbed the “Yassification” trend by Tik Tok users, has led to new vocabulary being introduced to Tik Tok’s slang even after the trend has faded. The “Yassification” trend peaked in November of 2021 and consisted of photo-editing of people to be hyper feminized, or “yassified”, versions of themselves (Carry, 2022). These “yassified” edits were seen as a way of making someone appear more LGBTQ+ adjacent, and often involved images of male celebrities or cartoon characters. The trend grew so large on Tik Tok, that a Twitter bot, called “Yassify Bot” was created to upload edited photos on Twitter as a way of spreading and participating in the trend. Since the “Yassification” trend was a prominent representation of LGBTQ+ culture, the vocabulary used by members of the community became popularized as well. Much of the vocabulary was adopted from the already popular AAVE language—due to LGBTQ+ individuals being influenced by Black culture (Laing, 2021), it either became a variation of AAVE-inspired slang or died off with the trend’s fall in early 2022. However, a term called “bussy” remained.

The term “bussy” originated in the 1980s as a portmanteau of the word “pussy”. “Bussy” was created by the LGBTQ+ community as a way of describing a homosexual male’s anal cavity in a sexual context, by combining the prefix “b-” from “boy” with the suffix “-ussy” from “pussy”. As part of the “Yassification” trend, “bussy” was used by members of the LGBTQ+ community to approve of the photos being edited. As the trend gained popularity, the language was exposed to users who were not part of the community, and saw the unusual slang as a symbol of the trend; this led to users practicing the portmanteau on other nouns, attaching the “-ussy” suffix to names of celebrities, the name of

objects, and even the names of foods. This act of memefication, a process of forming an internet meme out of something, led to vocabulary being outside of its original trend.

Studies of LGBTQ+ culture being adopted into social media pop culture are underdeveloped in the current landscape. With the addition of this research, I hope to provide qualitative data on the ways LGBTQ+ culture is used on a popular social media platform by members outside of the community and encourage more studies to study how the treatment of the LGBTQ+ community may differ from other marginalized groups online—including the risks of cultural appropriation and the community’s sentiments on outsiders using their language.

## **Method**

Can social media trends promote inclusivity for marginalized groups by integrating minority vocabulary into the community’s vocabulary? Does the meaning of trends on social media change after the trend has passed? To answer these questions, a qualitative content analysis method was conducted, using the deductive approach. A code sheet was designed using themes I observed from the “Yassification” trend and possible themes included after the trend ended. Elements from the “Yassification” trend such as feminine symbols (nails, makeup, clothing, etc) and music from artists such as Meghan Thee Stallion and Saucy Santana were included; LGBTQ+ symbols, like pride flags, and music by queer artists, and behavior were also included, due to the trend’s origins. Another that was added to the coding sheet was the presentation of sex, including any sort of penetrative action that is seen or mentioned in videos, in a suggestive manner. I decided to add this theme due to the “-ussy” suffix’s origin in common English, and the hypersexualization of feminine figures in traditional media.

Tik Tok video uploads were eligible to be coded if they contained any explicit use of the “-ussy” suffix in any element of the upload; this included closed captions, audio, hashtags, comments, text on screen, and the subject of the video’s content. I chose to screen eligible uploads in this broad manner due to Tik Tok’s nature as a platform. Tik Tok’s platform’s engagement is driven by community-produced content and engagement, so it was more likely that the use of the platform’s slang would occur in elements such as hashtags or comments than in the video itself; this choice was also done to gather data on how “-ussy” was being used after the trend passed. Only uploads that happened between January 2022 and April 2022 were considered for coding because the “Yassification” trend died off by the end of 2021. I coded 36 uploads in total, utilizing the home page’s algorithm as well as searches on the hashtag “#ussy”.

Data was largely qualitative. Description of the content and subject in videos, as well as describing how audiences responded to videos were qualitative answers—focusing on the topic, emotion, and behaviors of audiences and creators. Sections to identify any LGBTQ+ content or content depicting or referencing women, in any manner, were included but were Yes/No response sections. This data was to help me determine how general audiences viewed these marginalized groups.

## **Findings**

Surprisingly, there were few videos with LGBTQ+ themes—despite the origins of the trend. Of the 36 videos coded, only 25% of videos included LGBTQ+ elements; this included people who identify as LGBTQ+, symbols of LGBTQ+ culture such as pride flags, music created by LGBTQ+ artists in the videos, and comments that depicted LGBTQ+ slang—other than the practice of the “-ussy” suffix. Nearly half of this 25% consisted of the video creator being a member of the LGBTQ+ community, with their identity declared in their profile’s

biography or in the hashtags (ex. “#nb” for nonbinary identifying). One video used music created by Saucy Santana, an artist in the LGBTQ+ community—but the video’s creator’s sexuality was unidentifiable. Interestingly, 3 videos that included LGBTQ+ elements consisted of audio from Lionsgate’s upcoming animated film *Pinocchio: A True Story* that’s scheduled to release in 2022. The audio features the voice actor delivering the character’s lines in a “yassified”, more LGBTQ+ adjacent, way, creating the image of a queer Pinocchio. This performance was reminiscent of a cadence or accent typically attributed to gay men.

Of all videos coded, 42.9% of videos included feminine elements. This included traditionally feminine symbols, as described in the method, as well as the use of she/her pronouns and sexual commentary referencing female anatomy. Only 16.7% of the data set included dancing.

Videos depicting penetrative actions, referencing the act of sex, made up 30.6% of the data set. An example from the data set is a video of two boys aggressively penetrating the opening with their fists, or “fisting”, of a cushion on the shelf in a store. Another example includes a live streamer discovering the fact that turtles can make sounds like moaning during sexual intercourse after one of her community members shares this fact with her. There was an even split between sexual references occurring in the video material itself and occurring in the comment sections of videos. Comments insinuating sexual acts oftentimes referred to videos of inanimate subjects. One example of this theme was from a video of a store clerk using the “-ussy” suffix slang to make a joke about the location of a barcode on the underside of a bag of dried prunes, dubbing it “the prunussy”. One comment on this video said “they won’t be dry for long”, suggesting a sexual innuendo comparing the dried prune bag to an aroused woman. Another example was a miniature whirlpool in a lake. Commenters replied to the video by saying “at least it isnt choosey”, “you know what to do” with a smirking face, and “u should’ve asked for its age”. Some videos were more explicitly sexual, such as one



talking about a newly purchased Brita pitcher, saying: “y’all check out the Brussy on this new pitcher this is so much more convenient than the 4play you had to do on the other ones”.

Comments on this video included ones like: “I literally have to take mine to dinner, give it a massage, and then finally will it think about letting me fill it up.” and “Need to cop that I’m tired of edging it every time I gotta fill it up”.

The use of the suffix “-ussy” occurred most frequently in the comment sections of videos, 86.1%, with 50% of videos showing the portmanteau with on-screen text. Comments using “-ussy” included: “not the corndussy” on a video of the creator pulling the wooden stick out of a corndog, “quesadussy” on a video of a quesadilla leaking cheese on the stove, “Not the Shrussy!” on a video showcasing an AR filter of the Dreamworks character Shrek in a black latex suit, twerking, and “your explanussy was on point bestie” in the comments of a comedy skit of a Tik Tok user explaining the meaning of the “-ussy” slang to someone from the 1700s. 50% of all videos had on-screen text using the “-ussy” suffix. 47.2% of videos had a hashtag that included the suffix “-ussy”. These hashtags consisted of the “#ussy” hashtag or were hashtags that were subject-specific; for example, a video discussing a character, Mr. Krabs, from the television show *Spongebob: Squarepants* uses the hashtag “#krussy” as well as the “#ussy” hashtag. Only 27.9% of the videos included a person using the “-ussy” suffix aloud.

## **Discussion**

The themes discovered in the findings support the consensus that the meaning of the portmanteau of “-ussy” with nouns has changed on Tik Tok since the end of its original trend. The small percentage of videos containing LGBTQ+ elements suggests that the use of “-ussy” has become part of Tik Tok user’s slang and has had its cultural origins neglected. By definition, the original term “bussy” referred to an orifice used for sex between men. Since the fall of the trend, videos using the suffix, “-ussy”, depict orifices used for sex involving

women. Even inanimate objects receive comments alluding to sex with a woman, substituting the woman with the object. It is likely that users outside of the LGBTQ+ community either misunderstood the vocabulary as a symbol for a women's genitalia (aka "pussy") instead of the LGBTQ+ term "bussy" referring to men. However, the hypersexualization of women in media and the prominence of the male gaze makes a more probable cause considering this study's results. Comments on videos depicting holes in objects associate it with female genitalia by making comments specific to the function of a vagina. Videos alluding to, or demonstrating penetration of objects in these videos are often aggressive, such as the example with the boys aggressively fisting a cushion in a store. The majority of the videos in this study that included feminine symbols were not created by women, supporting this hypothesis. There were even videos involving animals where the subject was given "she/her" pronouns even when the animal was biologically male. For example, a video about a crab with its underside facing the glass of its tank, comparing it to sex workers and entertainers. Many comments were giving the crab feminine pronouns even when the creator clarified that the crab was male.

The meaning of the portmanteau of "-ussy" has changed on Tik Tok since its original, "Yassification" trend; but there are elements from the "Yassification" trend that had appeared in small numbers. Emoticons and Emojis that were prominent in the "Yassification" trend appeared in 25% of videos, coded as LGBTQ+ symbols. LGBTQ+ creators were still uploading videos related to "-ussy" and had achieved thousands of views without needing to use any hashtags to get their video noticed. On social media, it's possible that viral trends representing marginalized groups can work in their favor by creating more opportunities for their videos to be seen by the platform's algorithm. Tik Tok, specifically, is driven by its "For You Page", a home page driven entirely by an algorithm designed around the user's personal data. This feature has made the platform very successful at continuously showing new and

relevant content for each individual on the platform. Trends that become popular will often dominate this algorithm due to the high traction of users its videos receive. The “Yassification” trend, and the following popularity of “-ussy” as comedic slang made videos created by LGBTQ+ users more likely to come across other users’ homepages, leading to the growth of the LGBTQ+ user’s community and helping them gain a sense of acceptance by their peers on the platform.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, the contents of videos on Tik Tok containing vocabulary from the LGBTQ+ community were coded to determine if the portmanteau of “-ussy” was being appropriately incorporated into Tik Tok’s slang, and whether or not this slang gave an opportunity for members of the LGBTQ+ community to become more socially accepted on Tik Tok. From the results, it appears that the meaning of the portmanteau using the “-ussy” suffix has been altered due to heterosexual culture, and has less LGBTQ+ representation than before it became Tik Tok slang. However, the popularity of the slang has allowed LGBTQ+ creators to gain more visibility and social acceptance on Tik Tok through the use of the platform’s algorithm.

This research can be improved by using more than one Tik Tok account to search the algorithm, due to how the platform’s algorithm uses personal data. There can also be a larger pool of videos and the addition of a section on the coding sheet to go into depth on the sexual, and feminine contents of videos. This study could aid future research in evaluating the effects of LGBTQ+ culture and symbols being appropriated by outside groups on social media for the sake of trends, as well as studies about the hypersexualization of women in social media and how they become the focus of trends that are meant to represent other groups due to the actions of men on social media.

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