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## Bitch

I first became interested in the word “bitch” when I noticed that it wasn’t censored on some TV programs, despite those same programs censoring other swears and insults of a similar level of vulgarity. From there I noticed the way “bitch” was thrown around, by others in conversation, by people on social media, and even by myself, sprinkled every now and again throughout my texts and tweets. Previously, the only usage of the word “bitch” that I had been consciously aware of was as an insult used primarily against women, particularly when they are viewed as being rude, mean, or aggressive. If someone were to have asked me what my understanding of the word was, I would have told them that I associated the word with misogyny, and people that tried to police and shame women into following their traditional gender role. However, once I began paying attention, it quickly became clear to me that that was not the only meaning to the word “bitch”. From what I observed, several other usages of this word have cropped up over time, each with a distinct flavor and a varying distance from the original oppressive, pejorative meaning. Many of these usages are especially widespread and accepted among young people, particularly online. In this paper, I will analyze the various usages and meanings of the word “bitch” with a special focus on the ways it is used by young people, as well as what this rich point reveals about the worldview of young people.

The ethnographic methods that I used to investigate the meanings of the word “bitch” were media analysis and survey. For my media analysis, I examined 8 different memes and social media posts sourced from Instagram, Twitter, and Tumblr. For my survey, I asked the participants to rate how comfortable they would be with the word “bitch” in various contexts,

and then asked them to write a short explanation for their rating. I got 7 total responses, with 5 female participants and 2 male participants, all within the age range of 17 to 19 years old. I distributed this survey first to three of my close friends, and then asked them to pass it along to any of their friends that may be willing to participate. I distributed the survey in this way to ensure that the number of responses I got would be manageable. Since the survey included written sections, I didn't want to have too many responses to read and analyze. I also knew that this method would ensure that I got results only from young people, which is the community that I intended to focus on.

Through media analysis, I found three distinct ways in which the word "bitch" was used. The most prevalent use of the word was as a self-deprecating descriptor of oneself. This use often included another negative descriptor alongside "bitch". For example, one Tumblr post reads "i'm trying2be kinder to myself but this bitch is so fucking stupid". In these types of self-deprecating posts, adjectives denoting low intelligence, for example "stupid" and "dumb", were the most common. When another negative descriptor was not used, the context of the usage was self-deprecating. For example, one tweet reads "bitches really be needing constant validation and reassurance or they overthink themselves into insecurity lmfao..... it's me. i'm bitches.", implying that the author of the tweet is socially needy and insecure. Interestingly, in these uses, the authors of each post are not being self-deprecating about any of their own traits that fit under the traditional definition of "bitchiness", for example, bossiness, aggressiveness, meanness, or pettiness. Another use of the word "bitch" was as an empowering term, particularly in the phrase "bad bitch". When used in this way, it has a connotation to being bold or strong. For example, one meme reads "fuck being good i'm a bad bitch". I interpreted the phrase "fuck being good" to be a way of rejecting what is traditionally considered "good" in a woman, for example

agreeableness and obedience, and the phrase “i’m a bad bitch” to be an endorsement of strength, confidence, and other traditionally “unfeminine” qualities. Finally, the third use of the word “bitch” was as an antagonistic way to refer to others. For example, one post reads “jealousy is a disease, get well soon bitch!”. In this context, “bitch” is meant to be insulting, making it much closer to the original use of the word compared to the other usages. This is especially true considering how the post is criticizing someone for acting jealous, which could fall under the traditional umbrella of “bitchiness”.

My survey results also revealed three distinct views regarding the meaning of the word “bitch”. One usage of the term that my respondents reported was as an endearment or joking insult used between friends. For example, one participant said, “it’s an endearing term to me cuz you only call those who you’re close with a bitch”, explaining that “it’s like when you call your friend stupid or an idiot ... both of you don’t take it seriously”. Additionally, when asked about different situations in which the word might be used, the participants on average reported higher levels of comfort with being called a bitch by their friends, as opposed to being called a bitch by a stranger. One participant explained that she would not be comfortable with a stranger calling her a bitch, saying “since there is no familiarity between us, I would perceive it negatively”. This shows that the use of “bitch” as a positive, friendly term is restricted to interactions between people who know each other well. Another meaning of the term “bitch” that I found through my survey was as an empowering descriptor. For example, one participant said, “I use boss ass bitch often because it feels like I’m reclaiming the word and using it as a form of empowerment”. The specific mention of reclamation indicates that the empowering usage of the word “bitch” comes from the desire to reject the oppressive, derogatory connotation of the word as well as the traditional gender roles that are implied by the original usage of the word. The final usage of the

term that my participants reported was as an insult directed towards “someone who is rude or mean”. This is very much in line with the traditional meaning of the word. When asked to rate their impression of this term, the majority of the respondents rated it squarely in between “negative” and “positive”, with no one rating it as “very negative” or “very positive”. This indicates that among young people, the word “bitch” is considered a far milder insult than it has been historically. Interestingly, only two out of the seven respondents stated that “bitch” is an insult directed specifically or predominantly towards women. From this, I gathered that the term is considered more gender neutral by young people. My participants’ responses indicated that “bitch” now has less of an association to women who do not fit their traditional gender role and is more often considered an insulting way to refer to “someone acting petty, annoying, [or] being frustrating”, regardless of gender. That being said, the word’s past as an oppressive term specifically for “unfeminine” women was not completely absent from my participants’ responses. One female participant stated that, in her experience, “bitch” was used to degrade a “dominant” woman and added that “as a woman I feel I have the right to reclaim the word and use it as a self-referential form of empowerment”. Another female participant stated that the word could be “negative or positive depending on what gender used it”. Both of these responses stem from the viewpoint that “bitch” is a misogynistic term often used by men to oppress women and keep them from acting in “undesirable” ways. It is worth noting here that every participant mentioned the negative meaning of the term “bitch”—that it is an insult directed towards someone who is mean or rude—though not every participant mentioned the more positive usages of the term—that it is an empowering term, or that it is a joking endearment shared between friends. Altogether, this indicates that though the usage of the word “bitch” as a positive or neutral term has increased, the strongest association that people have with the word is still as an

insult, and that the positive meanings are only accepted in situations where both parties are on friendly terms. The final trend that I noticed was the slight difference in attitude between my male and female participants. Though the small number of respondents and uneven distribution of male and female participants make it difficult to draw definite conclusions, I believe it is important to note that the female participants on average seemed to be more uncomfortable with being called a bitch in certain situations. For example, though all participants were more comfortable being referred to by the word “bitch” by their friends as opposed to a stranger, the level of discomfort they would feel if a stranger were to call them a bitch was higher among the female participants than the male participants. When I asked how comfortable they would be if a stranger were to use the word “bitch” to refer to them, three of the female participants responded that they would feel uncomfortable, and one female participant stated that her response would depend on the context. In contrast to this, both male participants merely stated that they wouldn’t care. Overall, the female participants also rated their impression of the word “bitch” to be more negative than the male participants did. This indicates that though young people of all genders seem comfortable using the word “bitch”, women tend to have slightly more reservations when using this word and are more sensitive to the context of usage.

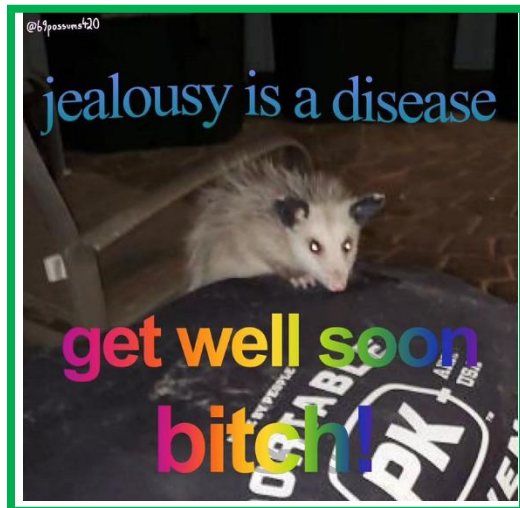
From the social media posts that I analyzed and the survey that I conducted, I found that the three main ways in which young people use the word “bitch” are as a sincere insult directed towards those they perceive as mean, as a playful insult directed towards themselves or towards their friends, and as an empowering term. There was also some recognition of the word as an insult used specifically against women that don’t fit the gender norm, although this use was not as prevalent as the others. As I stated before, the word is considered less gendered now than it has been in the past and can be used as an endearment or an insult towards a person of any gender.

This is indicative of the more relaxed, less rigid ideas that young people have about gender. The use of the term as an empowering way to refer to oneself reflects the strong feminist beliefs of some young people. However, the widespread, casual usage of the word as a term of endearment or self-descriptor, whether positive or negative, shows that the reclamation of the word is no longer shocking or revolutionary, and has become normalized. This reveals the attitude of casual egalitarianism among young people. For young people, supporting gender equality has become the norm. Young people are less concerned with enforcing gender roles or prescribing behavior based on gender, an attitude that has transformed the primary meaning of “bitch” from a socially unacceptable, unfeminine woman to an all-purpose insult. However, these more liberal ideas about gender among young people don’t mean that gender roles are gone, or that they don’t still affect people. When looking at attitudes toward being called a bitch, it becomes clear that women are still more strongly oppressed by gender roles. As I mentioned before, between friends, both men and women were comfortable using the word and having it used to describe them. However, when it came to being called a bitch by strangers, their attitudes differed, with women tending to feel more uncomfortable, and men tending not to care. This is reflective of the fact that being called a bitch can have different connotations based on one’s gender. For men, being called a bitch by a stranger is just a surface level insult. For women, on the other hand, it is potentially another way in which they are pressured to fit the outdated ideas of how they should behave. This issue is particularly pronounced when the person using the word “bitch” is a stranger, because it is harder to determine what intentions they are using the word with. Recall also that the only participants to mention the misogynistic uses of the word “bitch” were women. These two facts combined reveal the power dynamics and tensions present among young people when it comes to issues of gender equality. Thanks in part to the progress gender equality has

made in recent decades, many young people are under the assumption that true equality has already been reached, and no more work needs to be done. This is especially true of people that are less impacted by gender inequality, namely men. The male participants considered the word “bitch” to be a gender-neutral insult and a joking label between friends, which is a viewpoint consistent with this broader trend of men being able to ignore gender inequality because it affects them less. Conversely, when examining the responses of the female participants, the greater amount of discomfort regarding the word “bitch” and the responses mentioning the misogynistic uses of the word are consistent with the idea that women are more sensitive to the unequal power dynamics between genders because they have to experience them more often. Through the process of writing this essay, I have discovered that “bitch” is a deceptively simple word with a complicated web of meanings and implications reflecting the current youth’s ideas about gender and gender inequality. As these ideas evolve, so too will the uses of the word “bitch”, as language and society continue to shape each other.

## Appendix 1: Media Analysis Images

Note: Red boxes indicate self-deprecating uses, green boxes indicate insulting uses, and yellow boxes indicate empowering uses.



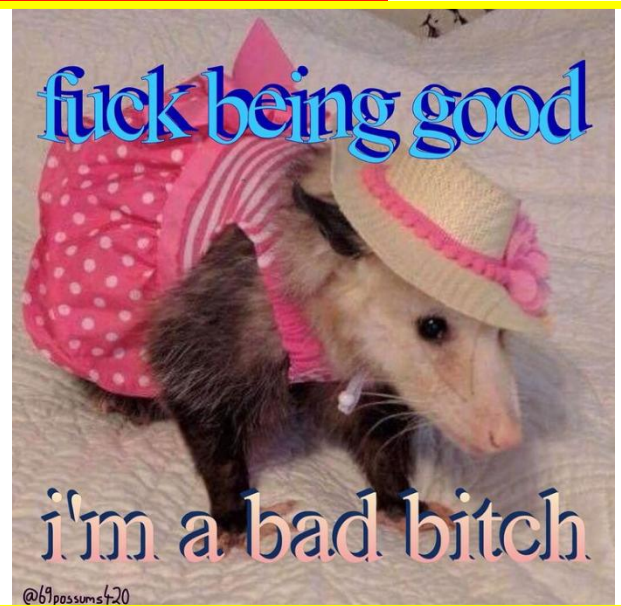
earthcomet

I'm suffering from dumb bitch syndrome  
donate to my charity



sloane (sîpinkopiyesis) ✓  
@cottoncandaddy

not to sound like such a dumb **bitch**  
but I just learned this year that honey  
mustard is literally just honey and  
mustard



asia  
@sadlilthingx

bitches really be needing  
constant validation and  
reassurance or they overthink  
themselves into insecurity  
lmfao..... it's me. i'm bitches.



read-me-to-wonderland Follow

i'm trying2be kinder to myself but this bitch is so  
fucking stupid



sam | 65  
@avgeroftmorgan

Follow

once i change literally everything about  
myself it's over for you bitches

4:54 PM - 11 Mar 2018



## **Appendix 2: Survey Questions**

1. What is your overall impression of the word “bitch”? (Rate on a 5-point scale from 1 = very negative to 5 = very positive)
2. Please list the connotations you have of this word. What does it make you think of?
3. How comfortable do you feel using this word among friends? (Rate on a 5-point scale from 1 = very uncomfortable to 5 = very comfortable) Please explain/provide context for your answer.
4. How comfortable do you feel using this word among people you don’t know well? (Rate on a 5-point scale from 1 = very uncomfortable to 5 = very comfortable) Please explain/provide context for your answer.
5. How comfortable do you feel using this word online? (Rate on a 5-point scale from 1 = very uncomfortable to 5 = very comfortable) Please explain/provide context for your answer.
6. How comfortable would you feel with a friend using this word to describe you? (Rate on a 5-point scale from 1 = very uncomfortable to 5 = very comfortable) Please explain/provide context for your answer.
7. How comfortable would you feel with a stranger on the internet using this word to describe you? (Rate on a 5-point scale from 1 = very uncomfortable to 5 = very comfortable) Please explain/provide context for your answer.
8. How comfortable would you feel with a stranger in real life using this word to describe you? (Rate on a 5-point scale from 1 = very uncomfortable to 5 = very comfortable) Please explain/provide context for your answer.
9. What is the most common/situation/way in which you see this word being used by others?
10. What is the most common situation/way in which you use this word?
11. Please list your age and the gender you identify as.
12. Any other thoughts?