Skibidi Gyatt: What makes a meme word stick?

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Abstract

This thesis is an investigation into so-called ‘meme words’ such as *skibidi*, *blorbo*, and *yeet*, whose origins can be traced back to specific internet memes and were spread into mainstream language through social media. The thesis questions whether these neologisms (novel words or phrases) were formed and spread through the same processes as those that do not have a connection to the internet.

Nine such neologisms were selected for the study, and a pilot study was conducted in the form of a survey to assess their relative ‘success’ (i.e., their spread and usage). Using search frequency data from Google Trends, the usage over time of each selected neologism was examined and compared to the larger sample. Additionally, this thesis investigates the potential role of sound symbolism, lexical meaning, and memes in the spread and long-term success of these neologisms.

The results indicate that sound symbolism likely has a significant role in the success of novel internet words, and that lexical meaning, rate of spread, and meme association are also relevant factors. It is noted that due to the small sample size, these results can only be used as indications. It is recommended that further studies should be conducted with larger samples to reach more definitive conclusions.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The following thesis aims to identify novel words whose use can be traced back to online slang, explore their linguistic and social origins, and attempt to track how and why they entered mainstream usage (or how they failed to do so) both on- and off-line. This first chapter will review relevant literature regarding neologisms (novel words), slang, and the sociolinguistic aspects of social media. Based on this research, I will then present my hypotheses and outline the structure of the following chapters.

1.1 Literature Review

1.1.1 Language Change

All natural languages are undergoing constant and continuous change. These changes can take many forms, including phonemic, lexical, and grammatical, and are influenced in large part by the society and culture that makes use of them (Bybee 2015; McDonald 2004). The process of language change has traditionally been an aspect of historical linguistics as understanding the patterns in language change is a key factor in successful language reconstruction (Bybee 2015). Many modern linguists abide by the Uniformitarian Principle, wherein it is assumed that all past changes in language are a result of the same processes that create change in modern language - historical language change can thus be used as a basis for analyzing and predicting current and potential future changes (Trudgill 2020).

The process of language change involves, among other things, additions to the lexicon in the form of novel words or phrases, called neologisms. Neologisms can form in numerous ways, with different methods having differing levels of productivity depending on the language in question. In English, the most productive methods of formation are affixation (the addition of a suffix, prefix, or infix), compounding (the fusing of two existing words), and borrowing (also known as loanwords) (Anderson 2018a). A more recent suggested method is purposeful misspelling, which is well-documented on the internet (Karanevych et al. 2023).

The lifecycle of a neologism is described by Behera and Mishra (2013) as beginning with the word being limited in usage to a small subculture (unstable) before it slowly begins spreading out (diffused) and gains widespread acceptance (stable). From there, the word (now no longer a neologism) may become lexicalized, integrating into mainstream language. Alternatively, it may lose its novelty (dated) and eventually become culturally obsolete and fall out of favor, often

being completely or nearly completely dropped from the lexicon (passé) (Behera & Mishra 2013).

Novel words come into play in a manner of diverse ways, and although different linguists may use slightly different categorizations, the following is a summary of the most universally accepted categories according to Anderson (2018a) and Karanevych et al (2023).

Table 1.1 Methods of Formation (Karanevych et al. 2023; Anderson 2018a; Kosur 2009)

Method	**Definition**	**Example**
Acronyms	an acronym becoming a word in and of itself.	'laugh out loud' = 'LOL' = 'lol'
Affixation	the addition of an affix (suffix, prefix, infix, or circumfix) to an existing word.	'dis-' + 'proportionate' = 'disproportionate'
Back-Formation	the creation from a word incorrectly interpreted as consisting of a stem and an affix by removing the 'affix'.	'donation' - '-tion' = 'donate'
Blending	a combination of two existing words, with some overlap. Also called 'portmanteau'.	'biographical' + 'picture' = 'biopic'
Borrowing	the implementation of a foreign language word, with or without modification - also referred to as 'loanwords'.	*limousine* (French) = 'limousine' (English)
Clipping	the removal of part of an existing (usually longer) word - also called abbreviation or truncation.	'telephone' - 'tele-' = 'phone'
Coinage	an entirely new word, with no apparent existing base.	'quark' (Kosur 2009)

Compounding	a combination of two existing words - also called fusing.	'doom' + 'scrolling' = 'doomscrolling'
Conversion	when an existing word shifts syntactic categories without the addition of an affix - also called zero-derivation.	'bottle' (noun) = 'bottle' (verb)
Folk Etymology	the modification of a word whose etymology is commonly misunderstood, in line with that misunderstanding.	'crayfish' (actual origin: Old French 'escrevice'; folk etymology 'cray' + 'fish') = 'crawfish'
Purposeful Misspelling	a purposefully alternate spelling of an existing word coming to have its own meaning.	'package' = 'pakidge'
Redefinition	the assignment of a new meaning to an existing word.	'mete' (Middle English; any solid food) = 'meat' (meaning flesh from an animal)

Each of these processes has different levels of productivity depending on the language in which they occur; affixation, compounding, conversion (specifically from noun to verb, or eponyms), and blending produce the largest number of neologisms in English, while coinage is the least productive, with very few novel words being made 'from scratch' (Anderson 2018a). Purposeful misspelling is a newer process that is well-documented on the internet (Karanevych et al. 2023). There also exists some overlap wherein a neologism may result from multiple of these processes or have an unclear or debatable source, and different researchers may categorize these processes differently (such as including acronyms under clipping or separating the conversion of proper nouns from other types of conversion) (Karanevych et al. 2023).

1.1.2 Slang

It is important to establish what this thesis means when referring to 'slang'. By definition, slang is simply any informal register; it is usually spoken, not written, and often associated with a specific social group (Cambridge Academic Content Dictionary 2025). However, from a sociolinguistic perspective, it might be harder to define exactly what the term means. Unlike a

sociolect, slang is limited to words and expressions, but much like a sociolect, it serves in part to define an in-group and an out-group (Androutsopoulos 2000, p. 2; Sabbagh 2018). Based on this presumption, this paper will use the term 'slang' to denote the lexical and phrasal parts of a sociolect.

As a subsection of a sociolect, slang is used in a social context to mark the speaker as a member of a given social group (McArthur 2002; Androutsopoulos 2000, p. 2). However, slang is specifically a component of informal sociolects - slang words are associated with lower social prestige than non-slang synonyms, in part because it is primarily used by social groups who lack social power, such as teenagers or college students, or in some way run counter to mainstream authority, such as criminals (McArthur 2002). Thus, the use of slang can also serve to lower the level of formality in discourse (McArthur 2002). Slang usage can also mark the user as a member of a certain age group or generation.

Rickford & Price (2013) identify three patterns of language change and stability concerning the effects age and generation can have on language choices. The first, age-grading, is cyclical and occurs when the same linguistic patterns are observed in the same age groups across generations, but an individual's language changes as they age (Rickford & Price 2013). For example, certain linguistic features will be used by teenagers across generations (Rickford & Price 2013). The second pattern is lifespan change, wherein a speaker's language changes over time in a manner aligning with a community-wide language change, involves adults and teenagers alike changing their language following the same patterns (Rickford & Price 2013). Finally, generational change, wherein an individual's linguistic repertoire stabilizes after adolescence, occurs when adults use the same speech patterns as they did as teenagers, but the community's language changes (Wagner 2012).

In linguistics, most research investigating language change over time typically assumes the 'apparent time construct', which follows the pattern of generational change (Wagner 2012). In other words, most studies conducted by historical linguists that compare language patterns between different generations make the underlying assumption that the patterns found in older generations are representative of the language those individuals used when they were younger (Wagner 2012). However, as mentioned by Rickford & Price (2013), language change also takes place throughout a person's life, both in line with and independent from language change occurring in their community.

It should be noted that 'generations' are not rigid; not everyone agrees on the exact birth year range of every generation (Bennett Hays & Sullivan 2022; Dimock 2019), and people born at the beginning of a generation have different life experiences than those born at the end. Additionally, according to Louis Menand (2021), "there is no empirical basis for claiming that differences within a generation are smaller than differences between generations". He also argues that it is as abstract and unfounded as horoscopes (Menand 2021). From a strictly empirical point of view, generations are functionally meaningless, and there is no set of behaviors belonging

solely to any given generation (Menand 2021). Regardless of generation, 'the youth' is lazy, self-obsessed, financially irresponsible, and much worse than all the generations that came before them - at least, that is how they are perceived by their seniors (Ruggeri 2017).

Despite this, generation and age can be a part of someone's identity, representing a large social group that they can belong to (De Paula Couto et al. 2022). There are also different stereotypes associated with different generations because the concept of generations has become entrenched in popular culture. Generation Z—generally accepted to be born between 1997 and 2012 (PEW Research Center 2019)—are perceived as confident digital natives who have embraced diversity and intersectionality (Menand 2019), whereas Generation Alpha, born between 2010 and 2024, are seen as chronically online, sassy, materialistic, and poorly educated (Venkatraman 2024).

Generation Alpha is fully aware of their reputation, and according to Venkatraman (2024), appear to embrace it by choosing to use 'brainrot language', a derisive term used to refer to the overuse of slang that originates and spreads online (Press-Reynolds 2024). The use of internet slang is associated with laziness (BBC 2008), overconsumption of social media (Venkatraman 2024; Oxford 2024), lack of intelligence, and youth (Squires 2010). By choosing to use seemingly nonsensical expressions like 'skibidi'—a word that "you don't really use [...] in sentences, you kind of just say it randomly" according to Beryl Peterson (11 at the time of the interview) and doesn't have a lexical meaning - these teenagers are leaning into those same stereotypes (Venkatraman 2024). These expressions are as much generational in-jokes as they are words, serving as a marker of belonging. If older people were to begin using those same words, it would "kill the vibe" (Venkatraman 2024). As time moves forward, many of these 'brainrot' words will disappear—but some of them may well stay.

The use of internet slang when 'offline' is also perceived negatively due to the imperative of containment, a sociolinguistic phenomenon that discourages the use of group- or context-specific registers outside those contexts (Squires 2010). So, when a teenager says 'skibidi gyatt' out loud, it is even more confusing for adults than simply seeing the phrase typed out online.

In her book *Because Internet* (2019a), Gretchen McCulloch observed something she called 'context collapse': the result of the ever-expanding influence of social media on our everyday lives. There is a lower distinction now between our online and offline social groups than ever before (McCulloch 2019a). When all a person's separate social groups can see and interact with the same posts, with no regard for context, adolescents, who may already be finding the navigation of social groups difficult, might find the interconnectedness of the internet to be a burden rather than an advantage (McCulloch 2019a). However, there are strategies to avoid context collapse: the use of multiple social media accounts on different platforms for different social circles; temporary uploads such as Snapchat or Instagram Stories, where posts disappear after a set time; anonymous accounts disconnected from any established social groups, used to

interact with strangers; and adding a distinction between public and private posts (McCulloch 2019a).

A core feature of internet slang and culture is its transience. Memes, in-jokes, acceptable or expected behaviors, and language are all highly changeable and can become nearly unrecognizable over years, months, or even weeks. Neologisms rise and fall at such a rate that those not actively using social media are likely to be lost as to what words are still in use (Venkatraman 2019). As such, there is a noticeable difference between the internet register of the old internet (1990s-2010s) and the more modern register (2010s onwards) (McCulloch 2019a).

Many modern neologisms can have their origins traced back to a single social media post, which either goes viral or inspires another post that goes viral. The word or phrase attached to that meme then slowly gains an independent meaning and enters the mainstream lexicon, shedding its attachment to its origin. When pre-existing words or phrases become attached to a meme or trend, however, this can lead to them gaining an additional meaning originating from that trend, even after the meme falls out of popular use. This is how the phrase 'Roman Empire'—re-coined in 2023 by Saskia Cort on Instagram—came to refer to a topic that fascinates someone, as well as the name of the nation that ruled Europe for four hundred years (Cort 2023).

1.1.3 Social Media

History

Social media, in the form that exists today, is radically different from the more forum-based internet of the eighties and nineties (McCulloch 2019a). To fully understand the current state of social media and the slang that has emerged in its userbase(s), examination of its history and development is necessary. The oldest network that can be included in this thesis' definition of 'social media'—Usenet—was first established circa 1980 by Tom Truscott and Jim Ellis (Encyclopedia Britannica 2025). It is widely considered to be the original precursor to modern internet forums and is still functional today (Coin 2012). Originally, it consisted of only three computers (located at Duke Medical School, Duke University, and the University of North Carolina), but by 1983, the user base had grown massively, and over the years, it has become a public forum used anonymously by people worldwide (Encyclopedia Britannica 2025).

Gretchen McCulloch (2019a) describes internet users as belonging to five distinct categories, defined by when they began using the internet and how they use it. According to McCulloch, those who began using the internet in the 1980s and populated forums such as Usenet and IRC chatrooms are 'Old Internet People' (McCulloch 2019a). Old Internet People

entered the online space during the 'first wave' of the internet, before its use was widespread, when access to the World Wide Web required a higher degree of tech literacy, and people almost exclusively communicated with strangers (McCulloch 2019a). The slang that emerged from these spaces, therefore, originated in part from programming and tech-related terminology.

McCulloch considers the dawn of the modern social internet—the 'second wave'—to have taken place in the 90s. This is the era of Myspace, blogs, MSN, and other services used to communicate with people whom users—Full Internet People, according to McCulloch—already knew from 'offline' (McCulloch 2019a). This era also marks the arrival of Semi Internet People, who primarily used the web for functional purposes such as shopping, work, and news (McCulloch 2019a).

The third wave of the internet, from the 2010s onwards, welcomed the last two kinds of Internet People. Pre Internet People, older individuals who never used the early internet, now primarily use it for social purposes, to keep up with those they already know (McCulloch 2019a). Post Internet People, on the other hand, are younger and began using the internet between the ages of 9 and 14; they arrived on the internet at a time when its usage as both a social and practical tool was already well established and have no experience with the older, pre-social media internet (McCulloch 2019a). This last group is the one to which the author belongs; as such, I will occasionally be drawing on my personal experience as a Post Internet Person and frequent social media user, throughout this thesis.

Today, English is the primary language of the internet, followed by Spanish (in web content) and Chinese (in number of users) (Petrosyan 2023: 2025a). As of this year, the five largest social media platforms (by number of users) are Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, WhatsApp, and TikTok, each with over a billion users worldwide (Dixon 2025). Although most internet users are Chinese, English is spoken as a second language by many users around the world (Korpela 2014; Petrosyan 2025b). Because of this, and because English-language content is far more accessible to me, this thesis will only be examining changes to the English language and not touching on the impact social media has had on other languages.

Communication

As the number of internet users steadily grows, social media has become an increasingly bigger part of our everyday lives. Online interactions in the modern day come with their own sets of expectations and rules, which are in many ways distinct from those that govern in-person discourse. McCulloch suggests that language change through the internet occurs at an accelerated pace, as many social media platforms encourage communicating with strangers outside of one's offline community (McCulloch 2019a). A sizable portion of online discourse is either wholly or partially asynchronous, which creates novel communicative constraints (Squires

2010). This, along with the development of distinct cultural norms and expectations unique to the internet, has given rise to new communicative niches. These niches can be prosodic (imitating intonation, loudness, and rhythm), proxemic (imitating body language), semantic (with new cultural concepts requiring a new lexicon), and sociolinguistic (with a need to distinguish between in-group and out-group and separate online and offline communication norms) (Crystal 2012). In his book *Language and the Internet* (2012), David Crystal explains that social media-based language attempts to represent prosody (variation in the tone, speed, rhythm, intonation, and stress of the voice) through various methods, including unconventional spelling, letter repetition, punctuation, spacing, and capitals (Crystal 2012; Chyrvonyi 2024). Proxemic factors—body language, facial expressions, and gestures—are communicated by emojis, emoticons, and kaomoji (Crystal 2012; Chyrvonyi 2024).

Older internet slang (ranging from the 1990s to the mid-2010s) mostly constitutes 'L33tSp34k' ('Leetspeak', wherein certain letters are replaced by numbers or symbols), acronyms ('ttyl', 'brb', 'fr'), purposeful misspelling ('doggo', 'pupper', 'birb'), and words adapted from more technical computer terminology (Daw 2012; Flamand 2008; Shortis 2007). Newer slang, used primarily by Post Internet People and associated with Generation Z and Generation Alpha (particularly people who spend 'too much' time online), has been colloquially dubbed 'brainrot' speech ('gyatt', 'aura', and the notorious 'skibidi' being prime examples) (Venkatraman 2024). This refers to the notion that people using this slang do so because they spend all their time on social media, don't engage in offline social interactions, and therefore have some form of mental degradation. The term 'brainrot' can also refer to certain behavior associated with these habits, but this thesis will be using the term exclusively for the register unless stated otherwise. This 'brainrot' slang largely consists of coined neologisms, blending and compounding ('brainrot' itself being an example), and turns of phrase ('crash out', 'Roman Empire', etc.), often but not always referencing a specific event or meme.

Memes

The original definition of a 'meme' is an idea that spreads throughout a culture by imitation. Incidentally, the word 'meme' itself is a neologism coined in 1976, inspired by the Greek *mimeisthai* ('imitation') and shortened to a monosyllabic form to match with 'gene' (Dawkins 1976, p. 192). The more mainstream interpretation of the word is as an internet meme, which is spread primarily across social media through various formats (videos, GIFs, images, text); the most successful of these (meaning, the ones that become most culturally relevant and spread the farthest) are usually humorous (Jenkins et al. 2008, p. 86).

In his book *Contagious: Why Things Catch On* (2013), Jonah Berger outlines six factors that cause a post to 'go viral'—a term referring to any media that quickly spreads across many

online users. Memes are more likely to be spread if they: provide positive social currency (making the sharer look good to their audience); contain some kind of distinct trigger, which leads people to remember the meme outside its original context; activate an emotional response (such as anger, joy, or amusement); are already publicly visible and available (therefore making it replicable); have some (perceived) practical value; or are attached to a memorable story (Berger 2013).

In my personal experience as a Post Internet Person and a member of Generation Z who frequently uses social media, the most relevant of these factors when discussing 'viral' words or phrases are triggers, emotional response (almost always humor), stories, and publicity. Many of the words this thesis will be examining have some form of story attached to them in the form of a short post or video in which the word originally appeared. This format also causes the word to have multiple triggers, things that will cause a person to recall the meme even when offline.

As an example of a viral phrase, a Vine (video post of no more than six seconds, posted to the now-defunct app of the same name) made in March 2016 by Drew Gooden features him driving and coming across a sign reading "Road Work Ahead" (Gooden 2016). Upon seeing this, he turns to the camera and declares, "Road work ahead? Uh, yeah, I sure hope it does." (Gooden 2016). The Vine quickly gained popularity, and the attached phrase has since become a meme, as has a screenshot of Gooden's expression, becoming visual shorthand for the same phrase (Downer 2019). It's now considered a 'classic' and is often featured in YouTube compilations of popular Vines (as does, incidentally, the Vine that spawned one of our neologisms, 'yeet') (@SophieOPath 2020).

Analyzing this Vine through the factors proposed by Berger, it appears that the Vine elicits a positive emotional response (that of amusement, since it's a joke), and it seems that the 'Road Work Ahead' sign, one which exists (in different variations) around the world, is a perfect trigger—any time a person sees this sign, they will recall the Vine and attached phrase. The 'story' element is the video itself; Gooden's intonation and facial expression, as well as the position of the camera, give the impression of sitting in a friend's car as they turn and make a joke. As for publicity, the more popular the Vine became, the more it was infused into the online culture at the time and the harder it was to avoid, until even those who never used the Vine app could recite the phrase with a perfect mimicry of Gooden's intonation when prompted by a 'Road Work Ahead' sign.

I have assessed that Berger's other factors—positive social currency and perceived value—are less influential when it comes to viral phrases and words but still relevant; a meme that contains offensive or inflammatory content is less likely to gain traction, as it might alienate certain populations. As for perceived value, I would in this case combine it with emotional response, since for most of these posts, the value of the meme is in its ability to create an emotional response in the audience.

1.2 Issues and Research Gaps

Much of the pre-existing research concerning internet language, often dubbed 'Netspeak' (Flamand 2008) or 'Webspeak' (Murphy & Allen 2008, est.), focuses on prosodic and proxemic strategies such as spelling, emojis, repeated letters, and use of symbols (Crystal 2012). Additionally, such research typically revolves around the reason for the emergence of these strategies, but not their actual origins and spread.

There has been far less interest, it seems, in investigating where these strategies originate from and how they go from (presumably) isolated instances and become adopted into the wider mainstream. Similarly, internet neologisms (novel additions to the lexicon) are also under-examined. Much of the slightly older literature surrounding Netspeak and brainrot tends to revolve mostly around two topics: the differences between in-person speech and electronic communication, and the strategies used to replace parts of speech that cannot be replicated through electronic communication. There appears to be less focus, comparatively, on the emerging lexical additions to the English language that originate and are disseminated online.

1.3 Research Questions and Hypotheses

This thesis seeks to answer three primary questions: How are internet-based neologisms formed? What factors cause internet-based neologisms to enter mainstream language, i.e., to be successful? Are there significant differences between internet-based and non-internet-based neologisms? If so, what are they?

Before beginning the study, I needed to select neologisms that I was confident were internet-based. Therefore, I selected words that were referred to in the literature—see *Table 2.1*—and investigated their origins. Of the nine neologisms which I had seen mentioned in the literature, I identified the specific origin of seven (see *Table 2.2*). As will be discussed in Chapter 2: Methods, I used Google Trends to analyze the frequency of those neologisms appearing in searches over time as a measure of usage (i.e. success). However, it was concluded that in order to examine the data, a pilot study would need to be conducted, to determine which of the selected neologisms were successful and which were unsuccessful.

In Chapter 3: Results, I examine the results of both the pilot study and the primary study and compare them to look for possible correlations. Chapter 4: Discussion and Conclusion contains a summary of the findings, possible avenues for future research, and an assessment of the thesis's success in answering the research questions accurately.

Based on the literature review, I hypothesize that the formation of internet-based neologisms follows the same patterns that appear in non-internet neologisms, and that the primary factors that allow internet-based neologisms to enter mainstream language are the virality of the originating meme (emotional response and triggers) and a distinct lexical meaning that cannot be fully replicated by pre-existing words.

Chapter 2: Methods

2.1 Research Overview

2.1.1 Selected Neologisms

The neologisms selected for this study were based on both peer feedback (asking individuals aged 19 to 29 for examples of 'internet or meme' based words) and the literature (words which were often referenced in both academic works and news articles when discussing 'internet slang', 'brainrot speech', or 'Gen Z/Gen Alpha slang words').

Based on these sources, the selected words were: 'eepy', 'skibidi', 'blorbo', 'gyatt', 'beige flag', 'aura', 'Roman Empire', and 'birb'.

The meanings of these words and phrases were initially assessed using personal experience, academic literature, and news articles. A list of these neologisms with definitions and example sentences was then posted to the r/GenAlpha reddit forum. Reddit is a social media site consisting of forums (called 'subreddits') dedicated to specific topics; r/GenAlpha is "A subreddit for Generation Alpha and the discussion of it!" and members of the forum are largely Generation Alpha (*Generation Alpha*, 2025). The accuracy of the definitions and sample sentences was confirmed by members of the forum.

2.1.2 Categorization and Meaning

The term 'eepy' is formed through clipping by removing the first two consonants from its origin word, 'sleepy'. As might be expected, its meaning is directly associated with 'sleepy', being a near synonym and the primary difference between the two words being that 'eepy' has a 'cuter' connotation.

Several neologisms appear to be coined, with no existing words contributing to their creation. Two of these words ('skibidi' and 'yeet') are the result of video-audio posts (the first coming from YouTube, the second from the now-defunct app Vine); it could be argued that they began as onomatopoeia ('This bitch empty, yeet') (Kennedy 2014). The third, 'blorbo', was coined by Tumblr user @brainless-moe-white-lotus (2021) (whose username was @thelustiestargonianmaid at the time) in a text-only format.

The origin of ‘gyatt’ is debatable—it most likely comes from the phrase ‘goddamn’, but it could be argued to either be a blending of both words or simply a change in pronunciation of the word ‘god’. Either way, there is an element of exaggerated pronunciation, possibly for emphasis or comedic effect. Unlike most of the words in this sample, the term ‘gyatt’ originated in African American Vernacular English (AAVE), particularly through hip-hop and rap music (Ihaza 2023). However, the term became popularized and spread outside the African American community and AAVE when a popular Twitch streamer, Kai Cenat, began using it during his streams (Ihaza 2023). Twitch is a platform that allows users to broadcast themselves live, and many streamers, like Cenat, focus on video gaming content (Lennox 2022). Cenat was named one of *Rolling Stone*’s “20 most influential creators of 2023”, and with 65 million followers on Twitch, he was the most subscribed person on the site in 2023 (Klee 2023). He is known to bring rap artists such as Lil Uzi Vert and 21 Savage onto his streams; based on this it is likely that Cenat’s vocabulary is at least in part influenced by such rap music and therefore explains how ‘gyatt’ transferred from rap music to Twitch to mainstream internet slang (Klee 2023). Cenat’s influence has also led to the popularization of ‘rizz’—another AAVE word—and the phrase ‘fanum tax’ (a reference to an in-joke with his friend Roberto Gonzalez, known on Twitch by the username ‘Fanum’, who is known for taking small portions of food from his friends’ plates) (Ihaza 2023; Ngo 2024).

Modern slang, particularly on social media, has a long-documented history of using words originating from AAVE (Cristal et al. 2021; Laing 2021; Jones 2024). Words like ‘slay’, ‘tea’, and ‘finna’ are used by white influencers as linguistic tools to sound ‘sassy’ or ‘tough’ or as a source of humor (Cristal et al. 2021). This usage is often perceived by speakers of AAVE as mocking and appropriative (Cristal et al. 2021; Laing 2021). However, I suggest that in the case of words like ‘gyatt’, the popularization of the term likely stemmed from imitation of Cenat’s speech by his fanbase, not as a result of mockery. That being said, its status as appropriative is not for me (a white person with little experience with AAVE) to assess, nor is it the focus of this thesis.

The phrase ‘beige flag’ is a collocation - a phrase consisting of a base (‘flag’) and a collocate, a lexical unit chosen to be a modifier to the base (‘beige’). ‘Beige flag’ is a simple variation on the pre-existing terms ‘red flag’ and ‘green flag’, whose color association (beige being boring and neutral) indicates its meaning—the color of the flag, the collocate, has been changed, and thus the implication of the phrase has changed as well (Rhys 2020).

‘Aura’ has come to mean the type of energy that a person gives off to others in a social context, and their character (Ramirez 2024). The evolution of the phrase ‘aura points’ to denote a unit of character can then be easily understood by anybody who knows the contextual meaning of the individual parts. This, too, is a collocation, wherein the collocate (‘points’) is added to modify the meaning of the base (‘aura’). Conversely, the new meaning of ‘Roman Empire’ did not modify the collocate (‘Roman’) or base (‘Empire’)—this is thus a redefinition (Cort 2023).

Table 2.1 shows an overview of the categorization, linguistic source, and meaning of each neologism.

Table 2.1: Neologism Categorization Summary

Neologism	Meaning	Etymology	Type	Example Usage
aura/aura points	The coolness factor of a person.	Aura (the feeling or character of a person) → 'aura' (a person's coolness factor)	Redefinition	"How many aura points did I lose when I went to pick up my coffee mug and only realized the cat had drunk half of it after I took my first sip?"
beige flag	A personality trait or behavior (usually in the context of a romantic partner) that might be considered unusual or odd but has neither positive nor negative associations.	From 'red flag' and 'green flag'	Reference, Collocation	"My boyfriend's beige flag? He won't drink his tea until it's gone completely cold."
birb	A subset of birds, usually small, round, and cute, but can also apply to birds whose appearance is deemed comedic (Elbein 2019).	Bird → 'birb'	Purposeful Misspelling	"This dove is so perfectly round. High-quality birb."

blorbo	A fictional character that one spends much time thinking about.	N/A	Coinage, Reference	"I love Shrek; he's my blorbo."
eepy	Tired or sleepy. Has a 'cutesy' connotation.	Sleepy → eepy	Clipping	"Aww, look at my cat yawning! He's so eepy."
gyatt/gyatt damn	Exclamation of amazement; alternatively, a large posterior.	God Damn → 'gyatt damn' → 'gyatt'	Blending/Pronunciation variation	"Gyatt damn! She's got a big ol' booty!" or "God damn! She's got a gyatt!"
Roman Empire	A topic that fascinates someone and is thought about daily (Cort 2023)	Roman Empire (empire of Rome) → 'Roman Empire' (fascinating topic)	Redefinition: originally a reference	"As a linguist, I spend a lot of time worrying about language death. It's my Roman Empire."
skibidi	Filler word; has no inherent lexical meaning.	N/A	Coinage/Onomatopoeia, Reference	"That's so skibidi of you."
yeet	To throw, usually a small object, with enthusiasm. Often used as an exclamation.	N/A	Coinage/Onomatopoeia, Reference	"And yeet! Wow, look how far that flew!"

Figure 2.1 provides a summary of the formation types present in the sample. It reveals a trend which seems to contradict earlier assumptions; according to Anderson, coinage is usually one of the least productive methods for novel word formation in English, and affixation is the most productive (Anderson 2018a). Based on this limited sample size, however, it seems to be almost the opposite when it comes to these newer, internet-based terms.

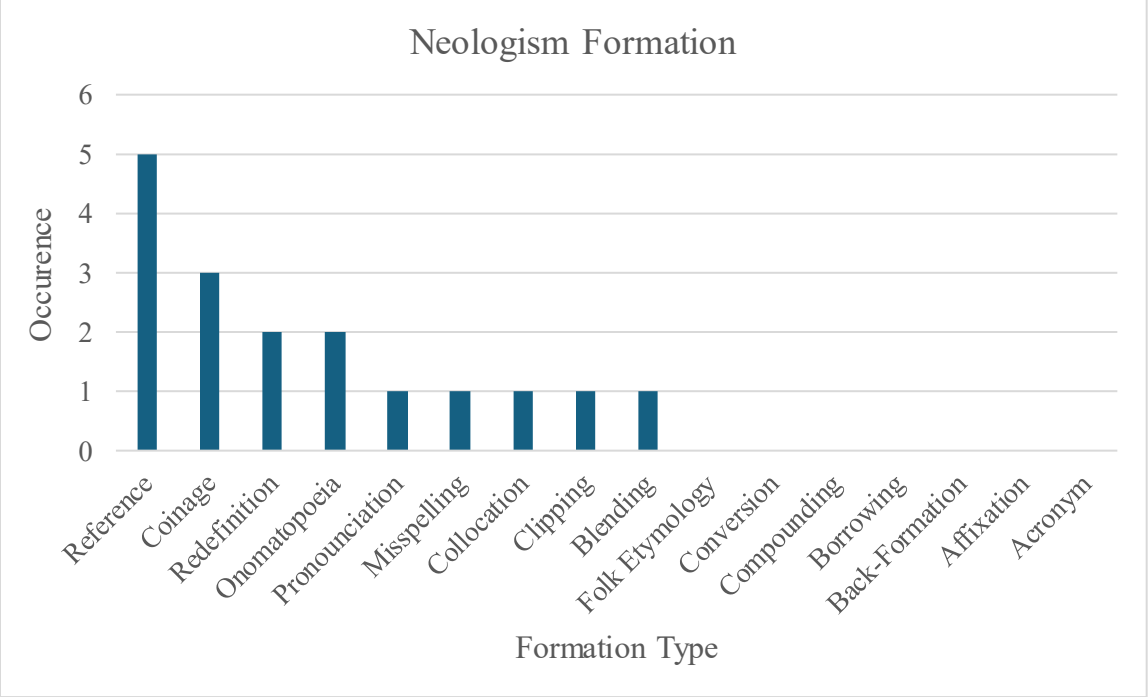


Figure 2.1: Neologism Formation

2.2.3 Origins

While some of the neologisms examined by this thesis have no known exact origin, many of them can be traced back to a single social media post resulting in a viral meme. The Google Trends data (see 2.2.2) of these words can therefore be linked to the date of their 'creation'. They are as follows:

Table 2.2: Neologism Origins

Word	Platform	User	Date
‘aura’	X (formerly Twitter)	@_Hammad7	08-03-22
‘beige flag’	TikTok	Caitlin MacPhail	08-05-22
‘birb’	X (Formerly Twitter)	@ProBirdRights	17-11-12
‘blorbo’	Tumblr	@brainless-moe-white-lotus (Previously @thelustiestargonianmaid)	24-12-21
‘Roman Empire	Original: Instagram English Popularization: X (formerly Twitter)	Original: Saskia Cort English Popularization: @X, @elonmusk	Original (Swedish): 08/08/2022 English Popularization: 15/09/2023
‘skibidi’	YouTube	@DaFuqBoom	07-02-23
‘yeet’	Vine (Defunct)	Original (‘yeet’): David Banna Popularized (‘when a soda can is empty’): Unknown	Unknown Original: Between January 2012 and July 2014 Popularized: Between January 2012 and July 2014

Vine, the platform responsible for the popularization of the word ‘yeet’, was shut down on January 17th, 2017; unfortunately, this means that all the original uploads for those Vines are now inaccessible (Fiegerman 2017). As such, the date on which the ‘yeet’ and ‘when a soda can is empty’ Vines were uploaded can only be estimated based on YouTube re-uploads, and the name of the creator for ‘when a soda can is empty’ remains unknown.

When examining the neologisms in question, it appears that many of the words and phrases which can be traced back to an original viral post began as references—the use of these phrases or words does not make sense without the context of the meme attached to them. I posit that for successful neologisms, as the word or phrase becomes more prevalent, its connection to the meme (which, simultaneously, loses traction) becomes more tenuous, until eventually the neologism becomes fully independent. At this stage, even those people unfamiliar with the original meme would understand and use the neologism because it has gained independent meaning. For an expanded discussion on this topic, see 3.2.2.

2.2 Methodology

2.2.1 Pilot Study

Methodology

To determine which words could be considered 'successful' and 'unsuccessful', a pilot study was deemed necessary. A survey was created and distributed online using Google Forms; see Appendix B for a copy of the survey. The nine neologisms, selected based on peer feedback, personal experience, and presence in the literature as mentioned in Chapter 1, were included in the survey. Additionally, three further words were included as control variables to confirm the accuracy of any conclusions drawn. These words— 'crunk', 'baller', and 'dawg'—are slang terms which were used in the early 2000s, primarily by Millennials (born between 1981 and 1996, ages 4 to 24 at the time) but have since lost popularity and are considered unsuccessful in entering mainstream English (Dimock 2019; Young 2022). Like the nine neologisms used in this study, these 'filler' words were selected using a combination of personal experience, peer feedback, and research (Young 2022).

The survey instructed participants to give their age and indicate, regarding each neologism, whether they recognized the word or phrase, whether they used the word or phrase (online or in person), and whether they would consider the word or phrase 'out of date' (as in, not used anymore, except maybe ironically). An additional optional question was included at the end, allowing participants to leave comments. A copy of the survey and its responses are available in Appendices B and C, respectively. The survey was distributed among students at the University of Leiden and University of Amsterdam, and responders were encouraged to share it with other peers to increase the sample size. The survey responses were fully anonymous and collected over a period of 4 days.

Participants

All participants were individuals who used some form of social media in English. Based on the audience the online survey was initially distributed to, most of the responders were likely international students attending either Leiden University or the University of Amsterdam. It is possible that a portion of the participants did not have English as their first language, but all responders were proficient enough to semi-regularly use English-language social media platforms. Having a diverse sample like this reflects the broader population in question. People of many nationalities use social media in English, even when it is not their first language (Korpela 2014; Petrosyan 2025b). A total of 39 participants responded to the survey.

75% of responders were between the ages of 15 and 25, and half of all responders were between 21 and 25 years of age. The oldest responder was 44 years old, and only 7 participants were over 25. Of the total responder group, nearly 90% were Generation Z (between 13 and 28); the remaining 4 responders were Millennials. This is a homogenous group in terms of age, meaning that conclusions drawn from this study do not consider the perspective of Generation Alpha—those who are generally associated with 'brainrot' words like 'skibidi' and 'gyatt'.

Determination of Success

Based on the results of the pilot study, there was no significant correlation found between the perceived 'modernity' of a word (whether responders selected a neologism as being 'out of date') and its usage. For example, 'yeet' was considered the most 'out-of-date' term, but it was also the most used. This indicates that many people might use a word even if they believe that it is no longer 'in vogue'.

As would be expected, recognition had a positive correlation with both perceived modernity and usage, as participants would only be able to use or form an opinion on neologisms that they recognized. For the full results of the survey, see Appendix C.

Since perception of modernity had such a negligible effect, it was deemed that this variable was not relevant when determining the success of a neologism. Therefore, only recognition and usage scores were used to determine whether a word was 'successful' or not. Each neologism in the sample was recognized by at least a portion of the respondents, and most were recognized by over half the participant group. I feel confident in saying that recognition alone cannot be a determinant in the success of a word. Additionally, many older words might be recognizable without being currently in use. Since only people who are familiar with a given word can use it, I decided to determine success by calculating the percentage of use based on word recognition.

$$S\% = \left(\frac{Use}{Recognition}\right) * 100$$

I determined that a word could be deemed successful if half or more of the population that recognized a neologism were using it. Therefore, as can be seen in *Table 2.3*, the neologisms that can be considered successful among our population are 'yeet', 'blorbo', 'eepy', and 'birb'.

Table 2.3 Success Rates

Neologism	Recognition	Usage	Success (%)
yeet	37	22	59.46
birb	30	17	56.67
eepy	31	16	51.61
blorbo	16	8	50.00
aura	28	10	35.71
crunk	6	2	33.33
Roman Empire	33	6	18.18
baller	28	4	14.29
dawg	34	4	11.76
beige flag	28	3	10.71
skibidi	19	2	10.53
gyatt	21	2	9.52

2.2.2 Main Study

Quantitative Data and Statistical Treatment

The primary aim of the quantitative aspect of this study was to investigate whether the change in usage frequency of each neologism had an effect on their success. Data sourced from Google Trends tracking monthly search frequency of each neologism was used as an indicator for word usage. The changes in search frequency over time of 'successful' and 'unsuccessful' neologisms were analyzed separately. Graphs representing this data were assessed for the presence or absence of any notable patterns in the behavior of search frequency, with a focus on the 'peak' of each word. The 'peak' is defined as the month with the maximum recorded search for any given neologism.

Google Trends is a tool offered by Google in which a sample of the search engine's queries from a given time frame and location can be visualized as a graph. The individual data points are also available for download (Rogers 2016). The tool assesses the relative popularity of a search term, with 100% marking the month in which the query was most popular and 0% indicating that the level of interest in the topic was too low to include (not necessarily that no one searched the term, but that so few queries were made that in the context of the massive amounts of data that Google has on searches, it was functionally none) (Rogers 2016). Because of how these percentages are calculated, it is not possible to directly compare individual data points between words, but it is possible to compare the trends and changes over time revealed by the data.

This data can be visualized as a line graph, wherein the y-axis is search interest and the x-axis is time, providing a visualization of the month-to-month change in popularity of any given search term. This thesis uses worldwide data from January 2004 (the earliest available data) to March 2025.

To compare trends between separate search terms, the data was modified to place the 'peak' (month in which search interest has reached 100%) at the same point on the x-axis for each neologism. Since each data point for each trend remained the same distance from one another, this method was used to better demonstrate the relative changes in popularity for different terms. Additionally, only the section of data located between the first and last chronological point in which the search interest was more than 0% was included.

Based on the findings of the pilot study, 'successful' and 'unsuccessful' neologisms and were separated and subsequently analyzed to determine how the change of a neologism's usage over time can be used to indicate whether it is likely to have staying power.

To best show the trends within the data and reduce the small month-to-month variations in searches, graphs using 10-point moving average trendlines of the data were created. A moving average is a statistical method wherein the data is grouped into sections (in this case, every ten points are combined) and averaged. The average of the first ten data points becomes the first data point, the average of the second ten points becomes the second, etc.

It should be noted that 'birb' and 'eepy', before becoming neologisms, would logically also appear in Google search terms due to a simple typo—'beige flag' might also appear in case a user was searching for a literal flag that was beige. Additionally, both 'aura' and 'Roman Empire' are expected to appear in searches pre-dating the formation of their meme-related meanings, as they already existed as established words. Nonetheless, it is expected that examining the change in usage remains relevant in revealing potential patterns in search frequency in successful and unsuccessful neologisms.

Qualitative Data

Three qualitative variables in the sample were assessed; sound symbolism, meaning, and origin. Each neologism was transcribed into the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). The possible sound symbolism of each phoneme was then investigated and compared to the neologism's definition and associated concepts. Conceptual links between the neologisms' phonemic 'shape' and their documented cross-linguistic sound symbolism were established and analyzed.

Subsequently, the lexical, semantic, and pragmatic meaning of each neologism were examined. Analysis into the uniqueness of each word–their replaceability by established English words–was conducted, with the aim of assessing whether the chances of a neologism's success were increased if the neologism filled a lexical niche which is not yet occupied within the English language.

The last variable examined was the origin of each neologism; as discussed in 2.2.3 (see *Table 2.2*) the first documented usage of the majority of the sample is available for study. Many of the neologisms in this study are associated with a meme (see 1.1.3). The connection between the usage or meaning of each neologism and their respective meme of origin was evaluated, aiming to establish whether this connection may have had an effect on the neologisms' degree of success.

Chapter 3: Results

3.1 Data Summary

3.1.1 Raw Data

To best visualize the patterns in search frequency that may exist in the data, the data of the successful words (‘yeet’, ‘blorbo’, ‘eepy’, and ‘birb’) was combined into a single graph, and the same was done for the unsuccessful words (‘aura’, ‘beige flag’, ‘roman empire’, ‘skibidi’, and ‘gyatt’). As mentioned in 2.2.2, only data located chronologically between the first and last month in which the search frequency was equal to 0% was included. For a clearer comparison, the month at which each word reached its highest search count—the ‘peak’, represented by the 100% point on the graphs—is in the same position along the x-axis, which represents time. The data sampling frequency was monthly. Therefore, the trends in search frequency can be compared between neologisms that became popular at different times. The total time span of the study’s available data was 255 months, from January 2004 to March 2025.

Figure 3.1 and *Figure 3.2* contain the raw data; this data has much month-to-month variation, as words may have been searched slightly more from one month to the next, without that variation being indicative of overall trends. To smooth the data and reduce noise, a second version of both graphs was created using trendlines for each word, representing a 10-point moving average. A ten-point moving average trendline is created by creating groups of 10 consecutive data points and finding their average. Each average then becomes a point on the trendline; this allows for a clearer impression of the data’s trends and patterns by reducing the impact of high month-to-month variation. To make the graphs easier to read, each neologism was assigned to a color, which remains the same in both the raw data and trendline graphs.

The separate, chronologically unchanged graphs of each neologism can be found in Appendix A.

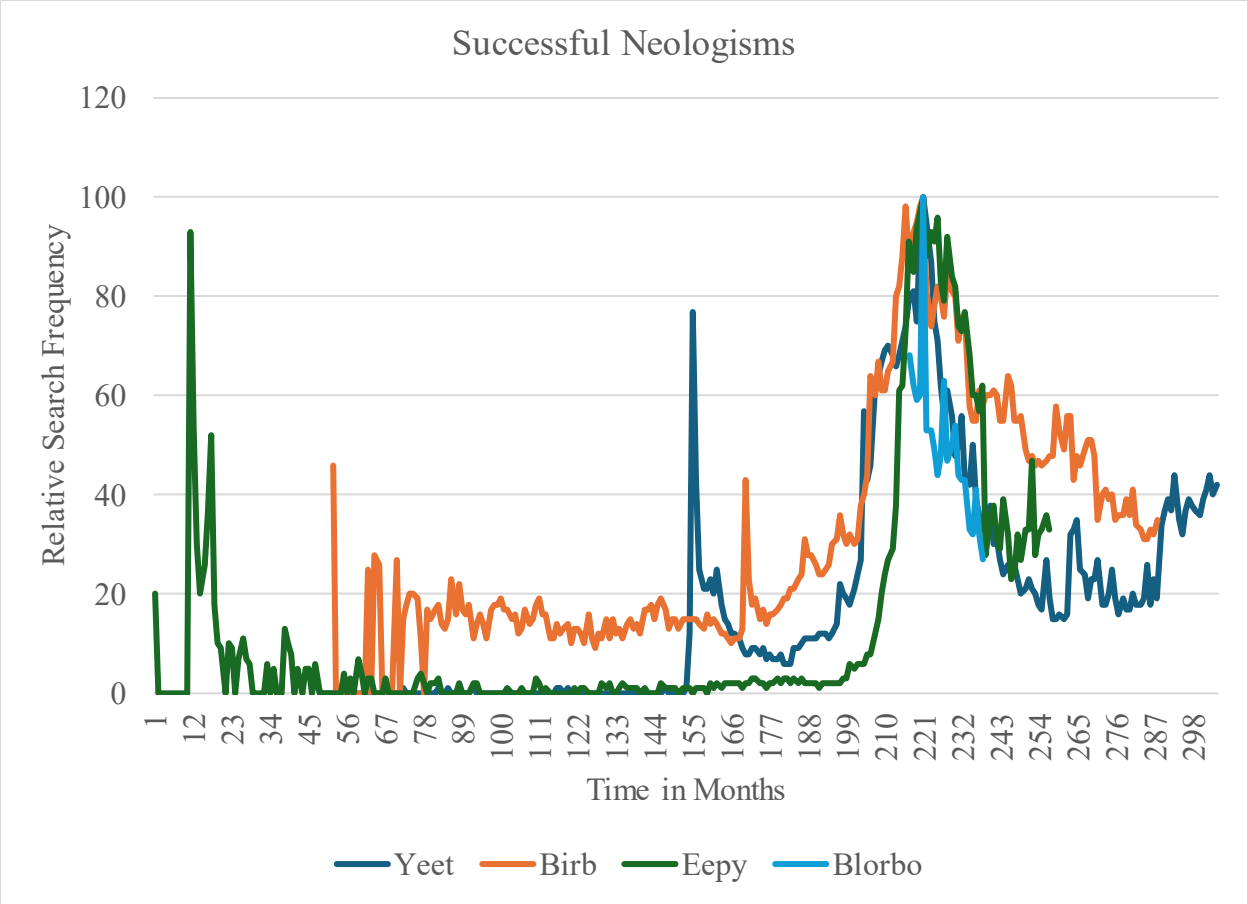


Figure 3.1: Successful Neologisms Raw Data

Figure 3.1 shows the relative search frequency of each successful neologism (‘yeet’, ‘birb’, ‘eepy’, and ‘blorbo’) over time.

The neologisms ‘eepy’ and ‘birb’ are both present in searches before ‘yeet’ and ‘blorbo’; this is most likely because they might be typos of their origin words, ‘bird’ and ‘sleepy’, as discussed in 2.1.2. The word ‘yeet’ has a distinct rise in usage before search frequency reduces for a time, then reaching its peak—this correlates to the estimated post date of its original Vine (‘yeet’ by David Banna) and the Vine that popularized the term (‘when a soda can is empty’ by an unknown user). For further details on exact dates, see Appendix A.

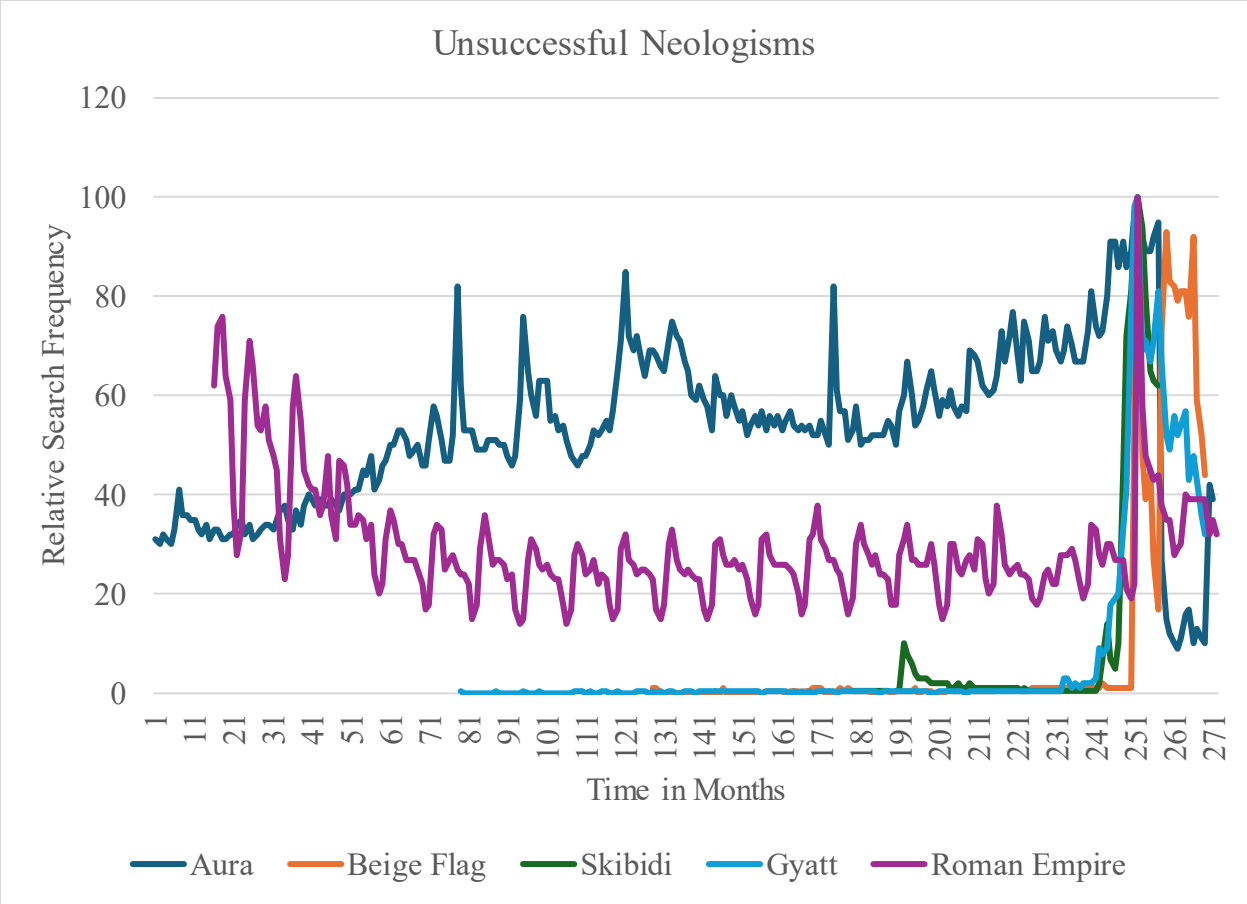


Figure 3.2: Unsuccessful Neologisms Raw Data

Figure 3.2 shows the relative search frequency of each unsuccessful neologism ('aura', 'beige flag', 'skibidi', 'Roman Empire', and 'gyatt') over time.

Notably, *Figure 3.2* appears to have data over a longer period than *Figure 3.1*; this is caused by the data from 'Roman Empire' and 'aura'. As was mentioned in 2.2.2, this is most likely because these word forms existed before their redefinition; therefore, both terms were searched before their neologism counterparts. Additionally, while a section of the data for the word 'gyatt' may appear to be at 0% search on the graph, it is at >1%. This correlates to what was discussed in 2.1.2, that 'gyatt' existed before its entrance into mainstream slang within AAVE, appearing in rap and hip-hop music (Ihaza 2023).

The peaks of 'skibidi', 'Roman Empire', and 'Beige Flag' all align with the time that their respective memes went viral—for insight into these specific dates, see Appendix A.

3.1.2 Trendline Analysis

When examining *Figure 3.3* and *Figure 3.4*, the trends and patterns within the data become more easily visible. It should be noted that in neither graph do any trendlines reach the 100% point - this is because the peak has been grouped with nearby lower data points and averaged, therefore lowering the trendline below 100%.

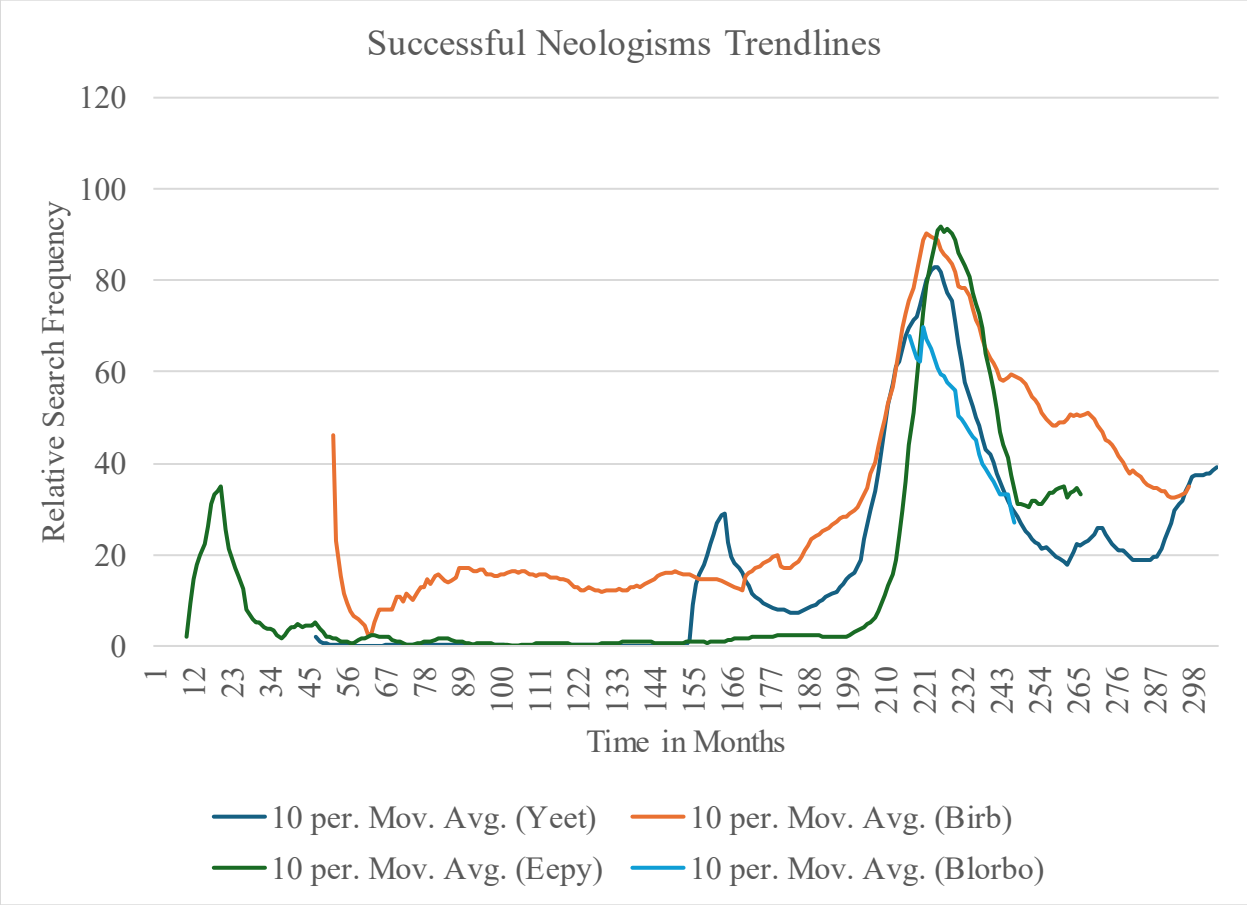


Figure 3.3: Successful Neologisms Trendlines

Figure 3.3 shows the average relative search frequency of each successful neologism ('yeet', 'eepy', 'birb', and 'blorbo') over time, with the average being calculated for every 10 months.

Based on *Figure 3.3*, it appears that successful neologisms undergo a slower increase in usage, their increase towards the peak being gradual and taking place over a longer time. The same trend appears after the peak, with searches decreasing gradually. Additionally, three of the

successful neologisms (‘eepy’, ‘birb’, and ‘yeet’) exhibit a small ‘bump’ in search frequency at some point, with their popularity increasing to a point below 100%, decreasing to below 20%, before beginning their rise to the peak.

After what can be considered the end of their peak, ‘yeet’ appears to reach a point at which its usage remains mostly above 20% and seems steady; its search frequency remains above 20% at the chronological end of the study, March 2025. The post-peak data of ‘eepy’ has similarities, wherein there is a brief period for which its use appears steady after its initial post-peak decline and remains above 20% between its peak and the end of the study. The word ‘birb’ does not exhibit this steady usage; its search frequency still declines between its peak point and the endpoint of the selected data (where the search frequency first hit 0% after its peak).

Looking at *Figure 3.3* and *Figure 3.1*, ‘blorbo’ is a clear outlier - it does not exhibit a gradual increase, instead reaching its peak so quickly after its first appearance in searches that it does not even appear in *Figure 3.3*. Instead, its trendline exists only as a relatively short decline. However, this is because, like ‘birb’, it did not reach a search frequency of 0% between its peak and the end of the study.

To conclude, all four successful neologisms have not reached a 0% search frequency since their peak, indicating that, at least currently, they remain in use and exist as mainstream words.

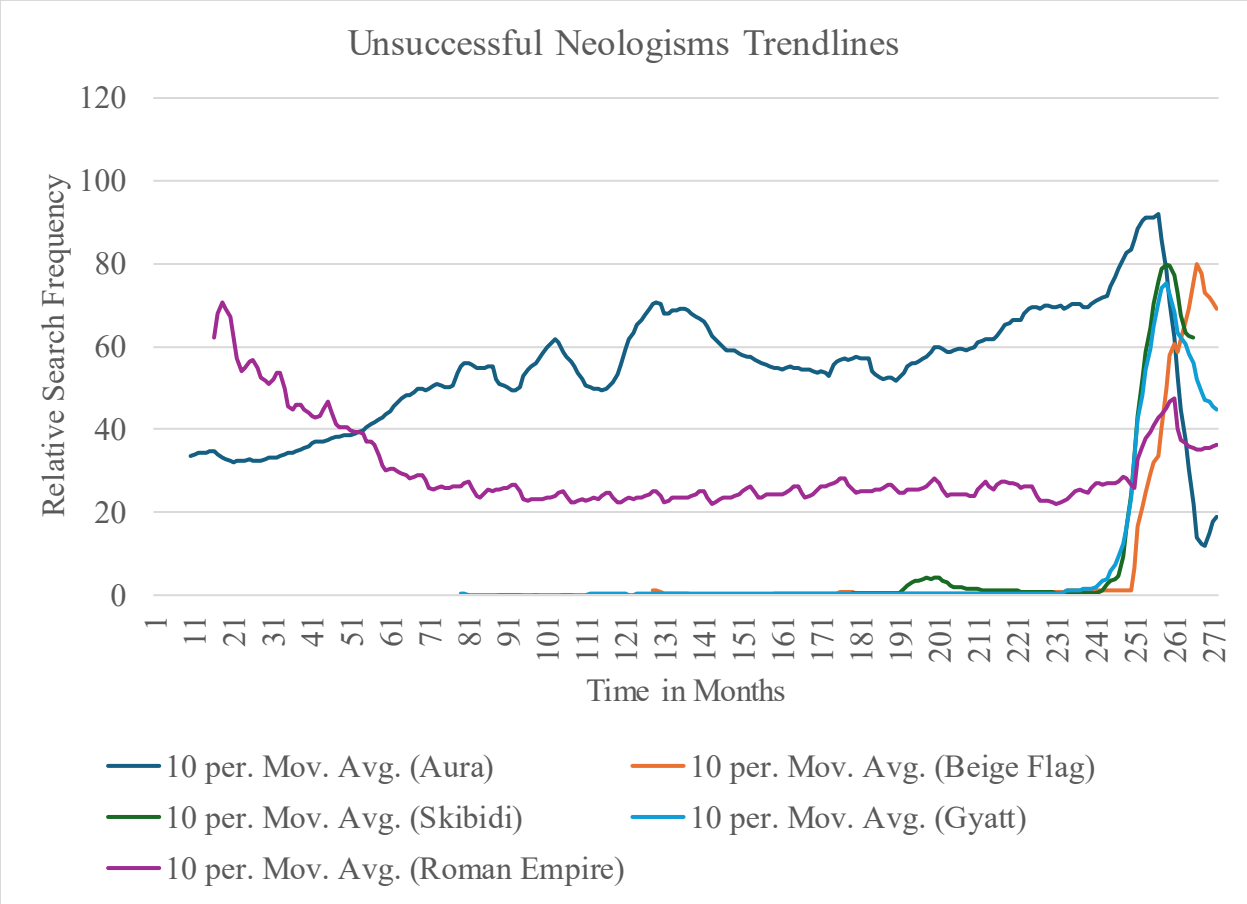


Figure 3.4: Unsuccessful Neologisms Trendlines

Figure 3.4 shows the average relative search frequency of each unsuccessful neologism (‘aura’, ‘beige flag’, ‘skibidi’, ‘Roman Empire’, and ‘gyatt’) over time, with the average being calculated for every 10 months.

The trends present in *Figure 3.4*, however, show very sudden increases for three of the unsuccessful neologisms (‘beige flag’, ‘gyatt’, and ‘skibidi’). Although this change does not appear in *Figure 3.4* for ‘aura’ and ‘Roman Empire’, in part due to their steady presence in searches before their redefinitions were introduced, *Figure 3.2* shows the sudden, short-term increase of ‘Roman Empire’. However, *Figure 3.2* also shows that ‘aura’ did not undergo a notably sudden rise - there is perhaps a small jump in search frequency for approximately 6 months before its peak—see Appendix A—but it is significantly less abrupt than the other unsuccessful neologisms. The post-peak decrease in search frequency of ‘aura’, however, is just as rapid as other unsuccessful neologisms, although based on *Figure 3.4*, it seems to be experiencing a possible resurgence in popularity.

Post-peak, all five neologisms have a sharp decline. However, like their successful counterparts, all these words do not reach 0% between their peak and the end of the study. Additionally, all five unsuccessful neologisms (‘gyatt’, ‘beige flag’, ‘skibidi’, ‘Roman Empire’, and ‘aura’) all reached their peaks less than 24 months before the end of the study. In particular, ‘aura’ only reached its peak 5 months before the end of the study. For the individual chronological graphs of each word, see Appendix A.

3.2 Qualitative Factors

3.2.1 Phonemes

Sound symbolism is a form of linguistic iconicity wherein there is a non-arbitrary association between certain speech sounds (phonemes) and meanings (Imai & Akita 2024). While sound symbolism is most clearly observed in ideophones (‘imitative’ sensory words such as onomatopoeia) it is not exclusive to them (Imai & Akita 2024). Some of these sound-meaning correspondences appear to be cross-linguistic, such as /n/ in ‘nose’ (Imai & Akita 2024) and /t/ and /k/ being associated with smallness (Johansson et al. 2020). The effect of sound symbolism on language evolution (and acquisition) is hotly debated, and it is an area of research among both linguists and cognitive scientists (Imai & Akita 2024).

One of the most well-known examples of sound symbolism is the ‘maluma/takete’ effect (also called the ‘bouba/kiki’ effect), a phenomenon observed in approximately 90% of people globally that exists across the vast majority of cultures and languages for which it has been researched (Sidhu et al. 2021). The phenomenon is observed when presenting participants with two images—one of a spiky shape and the other a rounded shape—and asking them to assign each a word; for example, either ‘maluma’ or ‘takete’ (Sidhu et al. 2021). Across diverse cultures, languages, and ages, most people will indicate that the spiky shape is ‘takete’ and the rounded shape is ‘maluma’ (Sidhu et. al.). This has also been observed with other non-words, such as ‘bouba’ and ‘kiki’ (Imai & Akita 2024). The conclusion that most linguists studying these phenomena have come to is that certain phonemes appear to be cross-linguistically associated with roundness (such as /m/ and /u/), and others with sharpness (such as /k/ and /ɪ/) (Sidhu et al. 2021).

There appears to be a correlation between the phonemes used in successful neologisms (both coined and not) and their meaning. The following table will compare the phonemes of each neologism with the concepts associated with them, as assessed by Johansson et al. (2020, p. 287) in their typological analysis of 344 near-universal concepts across 245 language families, and Sidhu et al. (2021). ‘Roman Empire’ and ‘beige flag’ will be excluded from this section as they

are redefinitions and phrases and thus deemed less relevant when examining sound symbolism. The pronunciation of the neologisms is based on audio-video content containing the word and personal observations of myself and my peers. Phonemes not mentioned in column 3 ('Phonemic Symbolism') were not found to have strong symbolic associations by Sidhu et al. (2021) or Johansson et al. (2020).

Table 3.2: Phonemic Analysis

Neologism	**IPA**	**Phonemic Symbolism**	**Relevance to Meaning**
'birb'	/bəɹb/	/b/ - father, roundness	Roundness; 'birb' refers to a round bird
'blorbo'	/bloɹbə͡uw/	/b/ - father, roundness /l/ - tongue /o/ - pharyngeal, softness, roundness /u/ - airflow, softness, infancy, roundness	Roundness, softness, infancy; 'blorbo' refers to a character which one feels affection for, and may have protective feelings towards
'eepy'	/ipi/	/i/ - deixis, expulsion, roundness /p/ - airflow, angularity	None
'gyatt'	/gi͡jat/	/g/- angularity /i/ - deixis, expulsion, roundness /a/ - gaping, flat, question, mother, father, relative, deixis /t/ - father, uneven, expulsion, smallness, spikiness	Roundness: shape of the buttocks Deixis/expulsion: used as exclamation
'skibidi'	/skɪbɪdi/	/s/ - expulsion, spikiness /k/ - pharyngeal, uneven, smallness, hardness, spikiness /ɪ/ - spikiness /b/ - father, roundness /d/ - roundness /i/ - deixis, expulsion, roundness	None
'yeet'	/jit/	/i/ - deixis, expulsion, roundness /t/ - father, uneven,	Expulsion; 'yeet' refers to a sudden throwing motion

		expulsion, smallness, spikiness	Deixis; throwing as a directional movement
‘aura’	/ɒɪa/	/a/ - gaping, flat, question, mother, father, relative, deixis	None

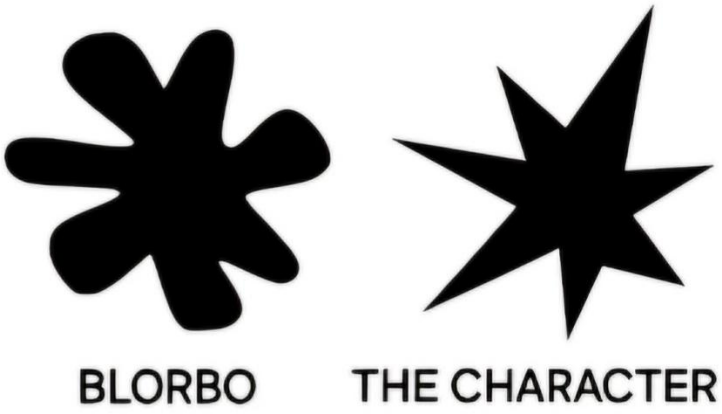
Of the four successful neologisms, I have assessed that three contain some level of sound symbolism relevant to their meaning. Notably, in ‘birb’, the one phoneme difference between the neologism and its origin (bird) is the /b/ phoneme which corresponds to roundness, which is also the key difference between a ‘birb’ and a bird. The two coined successful neologisms, ‘yeet’ and ‘blorbo’ each have multiple phonemes which can be related symbolically to their meaning.

Two of the phonemes from ‘yeet’ (/i/ and /t/) are associated with expulsion which, in my opinion can easily be linked conceptually to the sudden throwing motion that ‘yeet’ refers to. Additionally, Johansson et. al. (2020) observed that /i/ was linked to deixis. Deictic words or phrases are ones whose meaning may differ depending on time, place, and/or speaker – in English, this includes words such as ‘here’ (spatial deixis) and ‘tomorrow’ (temporal deixis) (Anderson 2018b). While ‘yeet’ does not have an explicitly deictic meaning, I posit that its association with throwing something ‘away’ from the speaker is conceptually linked to spatial deixis.

In ‘blorbo’, the conceptual links between sound symbolism and word meaning are more abstract, but I have nonetheless identified some; many of the phonemes in ‘blorbo’—/b/, /o/, and /u/—are associated with roundness. There are also symbolic links to softness (/o/ and /u/), and infancy (/u/). I suggest that these three concepts link back to the meaning of ‘blorbo’—a character for which someone has strong affectionate, sometimes parental feelings towards. Softness and infancy can both be linked more directly, with the theoretical ‘blorbo’ eliciting feelings of care and being perceived as soft—not literally, but metaphorically. As for the concept of roundness, I suggest that like ‘softness’, the metaphorical connotations of roundness as something non-threatening add to the overall phonemic impression of the word as something denoting “a soft round baby-like thing that I care about and feel affectionate towards”.

In fact, this association between the word ‘blorbo’, its meaning, and ‘roundness’ has been made by users of the word. Tumblr user @imsodishy (2025) posted an edited version of the ‘bouba/kiki’ image (*Figure 3.*5), like the one used by Ramachandran and Hubbard (2001), with the rounded shape—the one that most respondents labelled ‘bouba’—titled ‘blorbo’. In the ‘tags’ section of the comment, @imsodishy wrote: “#extremely niche bouba and kiki reference anyone?”.

Figure 3.5 Blorbo and The Character (@imsodishy 2025)



As for the unsuccessful neologisms, I have only found ‘gyatt’ to have any significant conceptual correlation between the word’s meaning and its phonemic symbolism. The phoneme /i/ is associated with roundness, which has a very direct parallel to the word’s meaning, referring to the buttocks, a body part which is prototypically round. Additionally, both /t/ and /i/ are associated with expulsion, which may have a connection to ‘gyatt’ as an exclamation. However, there are also phonemes in ‘gyatt’ whose symbolic association directly contrasts with the word’s meaning; /g/ and /t/ are both associated with spikiness or angularity, as opposed to /i/’s symbolic link to roundness. Considering both this, and the fact that ‘gyatt’ is most likely a result of either variant pronunciation of ‘god’/’god damn’ or a blending of the phrase ‘god damn’, it is unclear to what extent, if any, sound symbolism may have or have had on the word’s success or formation.

Based on these observations, I believe that sound symbolism has a definite influence on the success of internet neologisms, particularly in relation to coined neologisms.

3.2.2 Meaning and Memes

Referring to *Table 2.1*, some neologisms can be identified as having a significantly more distinct meaning than others. Certain unsuccessful words (‘gyatt’ and ‘aura’) have meanings that can be easily replaced with pre-established synonyms (butt/ass, vibe); ‘skibidi’ carries no lexical meaning and is “just [said] randomly” (Venkatraman 2024). Conversely, successful neologisms such as ‘birb’, ‘yeet’, and ‘blorbo’ all carry a more distinct, even unique meaning; a ‘birb’ is a specific category of bird, ‘yeet’ is to throw quickly and with enthusiasm, and ‘blorbo’ denotes a fictional character to which a person has a significant attachment. An exception to this finding is ‘eepy’, which, although it is a successful word as defined in this study, can easily be replaced by its original, less cutesy form, ‘sleepy’.

The unsuccessful phrases ‘beige flag’ and ‘Roman Empire’ do have distinct meanings, but those meanings are heavily entrenched in the specific phrasing of their original memes.

The phrase ‘Roman Empire’ developed after an Instagram user, Saskia Cort, asked her followers what their male partners thought about: many of them responded that their partners frequently thought about the Roman Empire (Cort 2023). From those posts, people began joking that all men were always thinking about the Roman Empire—and when the meme was translated into English, it became popular on TikTok, where users would ask themselves and others “What is your Roman Empire?” meaning, “What topic are you constantly thinking about?” (*What Does “My Roman Empire” Mean on TikTok?*, 2025).

‘Beige flag’ is also strongly connected to a viral Tiktok trend, in which users posted videos or photos of their romantic partners accompanied by text listing that person’s ‘beige flags’; unusual or odd traits or habits which were neither positive nor negative correlations (Holtermann 2023). Thus, it appears that neologisms whose meanings remain tied to their meme of origin, they are less likely to succeed in entering mainstream English.

It can therefore be concluded that neologisms have a higher chance of success if their meaning can be easily surmised by (native) English speakers, if they occupy a lexical or semantic niche which is not filled by an established English word, and if their meaning or usage exists independently from the meme associated with their origin.

3.3 Findings

In summary, it appears that the peaks of successful words exhibit a more gradual increase and decrease in search frequency, which remain mostly above 20% after the decline. The peaks of unsuccessful words are generally characterized by a rapid increase and decrease in search frequency, although neologisms that are a result of the redefinition of an existing word may not exhibit as sharp an increase.

The phonemic ‘shape’ of a word also influences its degree of success; words whose phonemes align subconsciously with concepts and impressions reflected in their meaning are more likely to remain in use by mainstream language.

Successful neologisms tend to have a distinct lexical meaning which cannot easily be replaced by a pre-existing established word, whereas unsuccessful neologisms are often functionally synonyms with a mainstream word. Additionally, neologisms whose meanings derive from viral trends or phrases are unsuccessful; these neologisms struggle to separate themselves from the viral memes from which they originate. If a neologism can separate its meaning from its associated viral trend or meme, then it is more likely to enter the mainstream lexicon.

Chapter 4: Discussion and Conclusion

4.1 Discussion

4.1.1 Limitations

Data Collection

The primary limitation in the pilot study was its small participant group and biased age range. Only 39 people responded to the survey, all of whom were between the ages of 15 and 44, with most participants being between 21 and 25 years of age. As a result, the success of each neologism can only be estimated for people within that age range; it is unknown if any of these neologisms are or are not used by individuals younger than 15 or older than 44. Some of the neologisms in the study, such as ‘skibidi’, ‘gyatt’, and ‘aura’, are considered ‘Gen Alpha’ slang, meaning they are associated with younger adolescents and children, ages 15 and under (Press-Reynolds 2024; Venkatraman 2024; Sun 2024). Since these neologisms are not considered to be typical of older adolescents and young adults— ‘Gen Z’—the seeming lack of success of those words based on the pilot study may be incorrect.

Of the words assessed as ‘successful’ by the pilot study— ‘blorbo’, ‘birb’, ‘yeet’, and ‘eepy’—three can be definitively traced back to posts made between 2012 and 2021 (see 2.1.3; also see Appendix A for individual chronological data). Of the middle 50% of our participants (21-24.5), the youngest would have been 9 years old in 2012 (when the original post for ‘birb’ was made, and the earliest time that the original ‘yeet’ post could have been made), and the oldest would have been between 12 and 13 years old. This age range - 9 to 13 - is close to the current age range of adolescents who are currently credited for using terms such as ‘skibidi’, ‘gyatt’, and ‘aura’ (Press-Reynolds 2024; Venkatraman 2024; Sun 2024).

Due to the age bias present in the pilot study, all conclusions made based on the success or lack of success of any given word can only be attributed to ‘Gen Z’ and should not be generalized to include the entire population.

When examining the primary study, a key limitation was the tools used to gather data. Google Trends only reveals the search frequency of a word over time and only includes searches made using the Google search engine. Searches made using other search engines such as Bing, Yahoo!, or DuckDuckGo are not included. While Google is by far the most popular search engine, making up approximately 79% of the global search engine market on desktop in 2025, this still excludes approximately 20% of all global searches (Bianchi 2025).

Additionally, while search frequency can be used as an indicator of interest in a word or topic, it is not a direct reflection of usage; searches in which these neologisms appear can be about the meaning of the neologism (e.g., “blorbo definition”), its popularity (e.g., “Why does my son say skibidi toilet”), or the meme it is associated with (e.g., “yeet Vine original”). Therefore, Google Trends is not the best tool to use when investigating the usage frequency of a neologism. However, it remains a valuable indicator of general interest in these neologisms, based on the search data of the majority of internet users (Bianchi 2025). Additionally, the format used by Google Trends, which represents relative search frequency as opposed to absolute numbers, makes comparisons between neologisms more straightforward.

A more accurate assessment of neologism usage could have been achieved by creating a specialized corpus consisting of social media posts from various platforms, with each post being tagged by date and platform of publication. This would likely need to be limited to text-only posts, therefore excluding platforms such as Vine, Twitch, and YouTube; as mentioned in 2.1.2, of the nine neologisms selected for the study, six originated from one of these video-based platforms. Therefore, a text-only corpus would be missing an extremely valuable and influential source of data.

The benefits of this methodology would have been a higher degree of accuracy, as it would directly reflect word usage. Like Google Trends, however, the data extracted from such a corpus would only provide information regarding the online usage of such terms, and not for offline speech. Additionally, sorting through such a large corpus would require the use of an algorithm, something which is beyond the scope of this study.

Existing English corpora, such as iWeb (Davies 2018), The Corpus of Contemporary American English (Davies 2008-), and enTenTen (available via http://www.sketchengine.eu; Kilgarriff et. al. 2014), do provide large datasets of English language text, although none of these corpora specialize in exclusively social media language data. Additionally, none of these include data for at least a portion of the neologisms selected (for example, searching ‘blorbo’ in any of the mentioned corpora provides no data). Therefore, this methodology, while having improved accuracy, would have required the creation of a new corpus, something which was not feasible for this thesis due to time constraints.

Additionally, it should be noted that the nature of the qualitative observations regarding phonemic symbolism and the disconnection from memes are based partially on personal interpretation. While I could not find conceptual links between the phonemes of most unsuccessful neologisms and their meanings, someone else may interpret those same concepts differently. The same can be said for the links I did find; some may dispute, for instance, the conceptual relevancy of ‘roundness’ with the meaning of ‘blorbo’.

Neologism Selection

Of the neologisms selected for this study, half ('skibidi', 'gyatt', 'beige flag', 'Roman Empire', and 'aura') reached their current peak of search frequency less than 24 months before the end of the study. As mentioned in 3.1.2, 'aura' reached its 100% search frequency in December of 2024 (for individual chronological data, see Appendix A) —less than 6 months before the end of the study. Therefore, the data regarding the search frequency of these neologisms is comparatively incomplete when referencing the other four neologisms ('blorbo', 'eepy', 'yeet', and 'birb'). As discussed earlier in this section, the fact that only older neologisms were deemed successful by the pilot study is likely a reflection of flaws present in the pilot study.

Additionally, the small sample size (nine neologisms) prevents this study from being able to make definitive statements, as the results are not statistically relevant. Despite this, this study can provide insight into how future studies with larger sample sizes could conduct similar research and might serve as an initial basis for more complex investigations.

The small sample size is due in large part to the difficulty of finding neologisms whose origin or popularization can definitively be traced back to social media. Seven of the sampled neologisms had an identifiable origin post. The origins of 'eepy' are more difficult to assess. However, because it is a result of purposeful misspelling, a formation process for neologisms that is extensively documented as taking place on the internet, this thesis is confident in attributing the origin of 'eepy' to social media (Karanevych et al. 2023). However, as discussed in 2.1.2, while the popularization of 'gyatt' can be reliably attributed to the influence of social media, its origins lie in African American Vernacular English (AAVE), particularly in rap and hip-hop music (Ihaza 2023). Unlike the rest of the sample, it is not technically a social media-based neologism but an existing word. While the origins of 'gyatt' are not on social media, its spread outside AAVE is definitively a result of the internet's influence on language, which is why 'gyatt' was ultimately included in the study.

4.1.3 Further Study

Further studies into the topic of English neologisms originating on or popularized by social media should consider the limitations of this thesis and modify their methodologies to reduce them. More accurate and statistically viable data could be generated by creating a specialized corpus of social media posts and by investigating a larger group of neologisms. By using their own corpus, future studies could also investigate how neologisms spread from one social media platform to another and ascertain whether the platform on which the originating post for a neologism was published affects its success, popularity, and spread.

Additionally, this topic could be approached by focusing specifically on the spread of memes containing such neologisms and assessing how the virality of a meme affects the success of its associated neologism. The offline usage of these neologisms could also be researched by using surveys or audio/video corpora focused on informal discourse. Another potential avenue of research could investigate cross-generational neologisms, and what factors influence whether a neologism remains in use among only a certain age group or spreads out to the general population.

4.1.4 Practical Applications

While the results of this study should not be taken as a full representation of all social media neologisms, some trends did emerge from the results. These trends reveal that social media-based neologisms may behave differently from other neologisms (see 4.2.1 and 4.2.2), which validates further inquiry into these neologisms as a separate category with their own behavioral rules. Additionally, the results of this study, if they are later shown to be an accurate reflection of social media neologisms as a whole, could be used to assess newly forming neologisms and estimate the likelihood of them being integrated into mainstream language.

Neologisms are also useful indicators for social change, as one reason for the creation of a neologism can be the emergence of a new lexical niche; for example, during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, multiple neologisms relating to the disease and its societal effects emerged (such as ‘quarantime’, which describes activities done in the conditions of quarantine or self-isolation) (Ivanov et al. 2023). Therefore, examination of neologisms, including those which emerge through social media, can be used to investigate how certain historical events affect language and society. In the case of internet neologisms specifically, they are likely to reflect how social media and social media usage are perceived and create change in society. For example, the term ‘brainrot’ (mentioned in 1.1.2) has emerged as a descriptor for a person or behavior that is negatively associated with social media ‘overuse’, implying that social media can have a detrimental effect on the intelligence, reasoning, and capacity for independent thought of a person (Roy 2024).

4.2 Conclusion

4.2.1 Summary of Findings

The study conducted in this thesis consisted of a pilot study and a main study. The pilot study was an anonymous survey completed by 39 people between the ages of 15 and 44, with most of the participants being between 21 and 25 years old. This survey asked participants whether they recognized or used each of the selective neologisms, and included three older 'control' neologisms ('baller', 'crunk', and 'dawg') to confirm the accuracy of conclusions made based on the survey. A neologism was deemed successful if 50% or more of respondents who recognized it reported that they used it.

The main study used a tool called Google Trends, which tracks the monthly search frequency of input terms on Google, to estimate the usage frequency of each neologism. The neologisms were separated into 'successful' and 'unsuccessful' groups, and the Google Trends data of both groups was visualized in a line graph. A second line graph for each group was also created using a 10-point moving average trendline to reduce minor month-to-month variation.

Based on the results of the Google Trends data, it was found that successful neologisms appeared to have a more gradual increase and subsequent decrease in search frequency around the time of their 'peak usage' (highest search frequency in the history of the data), whereas unsuccessful neologisms tended to gain and lose popularity much faster, over a smaller amount of time.

Examining the neologisms from a qualitative perspective, two further factors were found to have a possible effect on their success. Neologisms whose phonemic 'shape' was associated subconsciously with concepts that related to their meaning were more likely to be successful. Additionally, successful neologisms tended to have a lexical meaning that could not be easily substituted by already established words and whose meaning was not entrenched in the format of their associated meme, therefore allowing them to separate from that meme, a prerequisite to entering the mainstream lexicon.

4.2.2 Implications

According to Anderson (2018a), most English neologisms form through affixation, compounding, blending, and conversion (discussed in 1.1.1). However, when examining the social media neologisms used in this study (see 2.2.2, *Figure 2.1*, and *Table 2.1*), none of them are formed through compounding, affixation, or conversion, and only one ('gyatt') is a result of

blending. However, the second-most common process by which the neologisms in this sample form is coinage, which Anderson (2018a) states is the least productive in the English language. This could indicate that neologisms formed on social media do so via different processes than their offline counterparts.

The findings discussed in 3.2.1 (see *Table 3.2*), regarding sound symbolism, support the theory that sound symbolism has a significant effect on word coinage and the staying power of neologisms. Based on the sample, it appears that successful neologisms are more likely to have a phonemic 'shape' whose sound symbolism has some conceptual link to their lexical meaning, whereas most unsuccessful neologisms completely lack any such link. The potential role of sound symbolism in language evolution is hotly debated (Imai & Akita 2024), and investigations into modern neologisms such as this thesis may shed new light on the topic.

4.3 Final Remarks

This study aimed to investigate the potential differences in the formation and spread of neologisms originating from or popularized by social media with previously examined trends in the formation and spread of other neologisms. Specifically, the research questions of this thesis were: How are internet-based neologisms formed? What factors cause internet-based neologisms to enter mainstream language? And are there significant differences between internet-based and non-internet-based neologisms? If so, what are they?

Based on the information gathered during the literature review (see 1.1), I formed two hypotheses; The formation of internet-based neologisms follows the same patterns that appear in non-internet neologisms. And the primary factors that allow internet-based neologisms to enter mainstream language are the virality of the originating meme (emotional response and triggers) and a distinct lexical meaning that cannot be fully replicated by pre-existing words.

While the limitations of this thesis (as discussed in 4.1.1) mean that the following remarks cannot at this time be assumed to be fully accurate for all social media-based neologisms, based on reviewed the literature (see 1.1) and the results of the study (see 3.3), I have concluded that social media-based neologisms appear to have different formation patterns than those that appear in non-Internet neologisms; most of them begin as references to specific memes, and coinage is the most common formation type. Unlike the trends previously observed in non-social media-based English neologisms, none of the neologisms in the sample formed through affixation, compounding, or conversion (see 1.1.1, 2.1.1, and *Figure 2.1*).

The primary factors that seem to determine whether a social media neologism will become successful are (in no specific order);

- Gradual increase in popularity: successful neologisms increase in search frequency (which is assumed to correspond to the popularity of neologism) over a longer period than unsuccessful neologisms (see 3.1.2).
- Phonemic 'shape': the pronunciations of successful neologisms have sounds which are subconsciously associated with concepts related to their lexical meaning (see 3.2.1).
- Lexical meaning: successful neologisms are not easily replaceable by existing words, and have some lexical nuance which is not present in the established lexicon (see 3.2.2).
- Ease of understanding: the meaning of successful neologisms can be easily identified based on their etymology (see 3.2.2).

Although this study cannot be described as successful in definitively answering its research questions, both the results and limitations of this thesis demonstrate that this is a topic worthy of more in-depth investigation. Specifically, the results include promising indications that sound symbolism may play a role in word formation and language evolution, providing valuable insight into an ongoing cross-disciplinary debate (Imai & Akita 2024). Regardless of these same limitations, this thesis concludes that both the formation and spread of social media-based neologisms do behave differently, both in formation and spread, than their offline counterparts.

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Appendix A: Individual Search Frequency Data

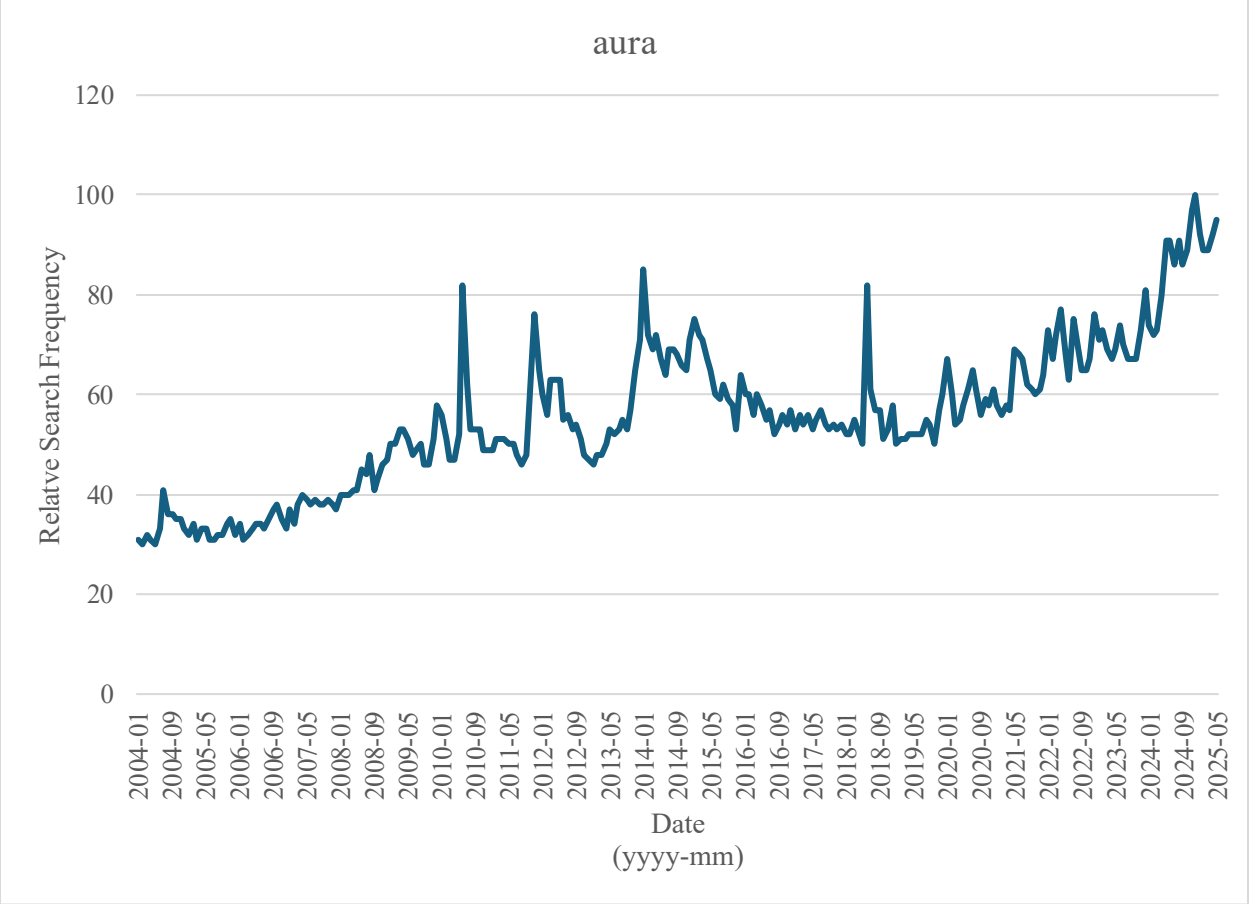


Figure A1: 'aura' Chronological Data

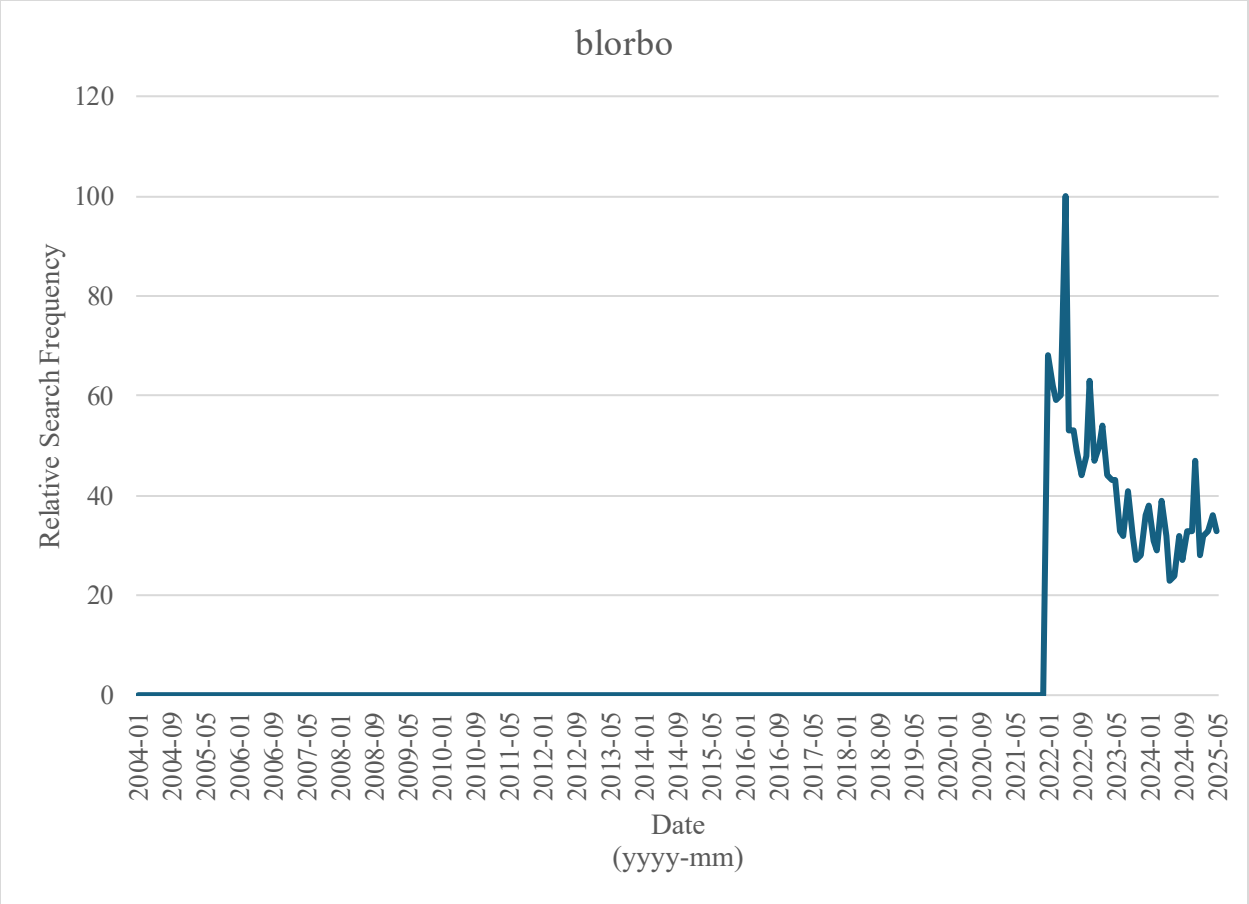


Figure A2: 'blorbo' Chronological Data

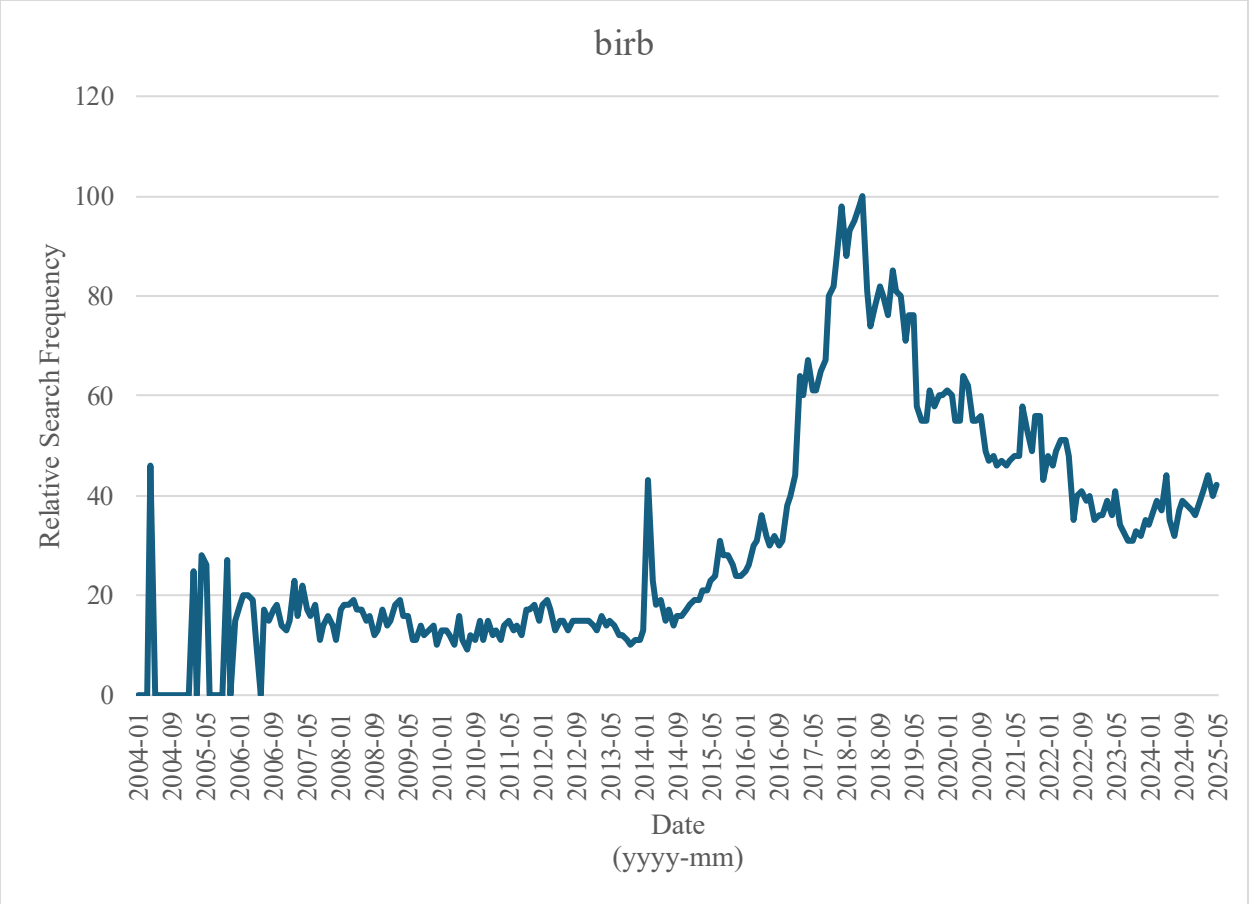


Figure A3: 'birb' Chronological Data

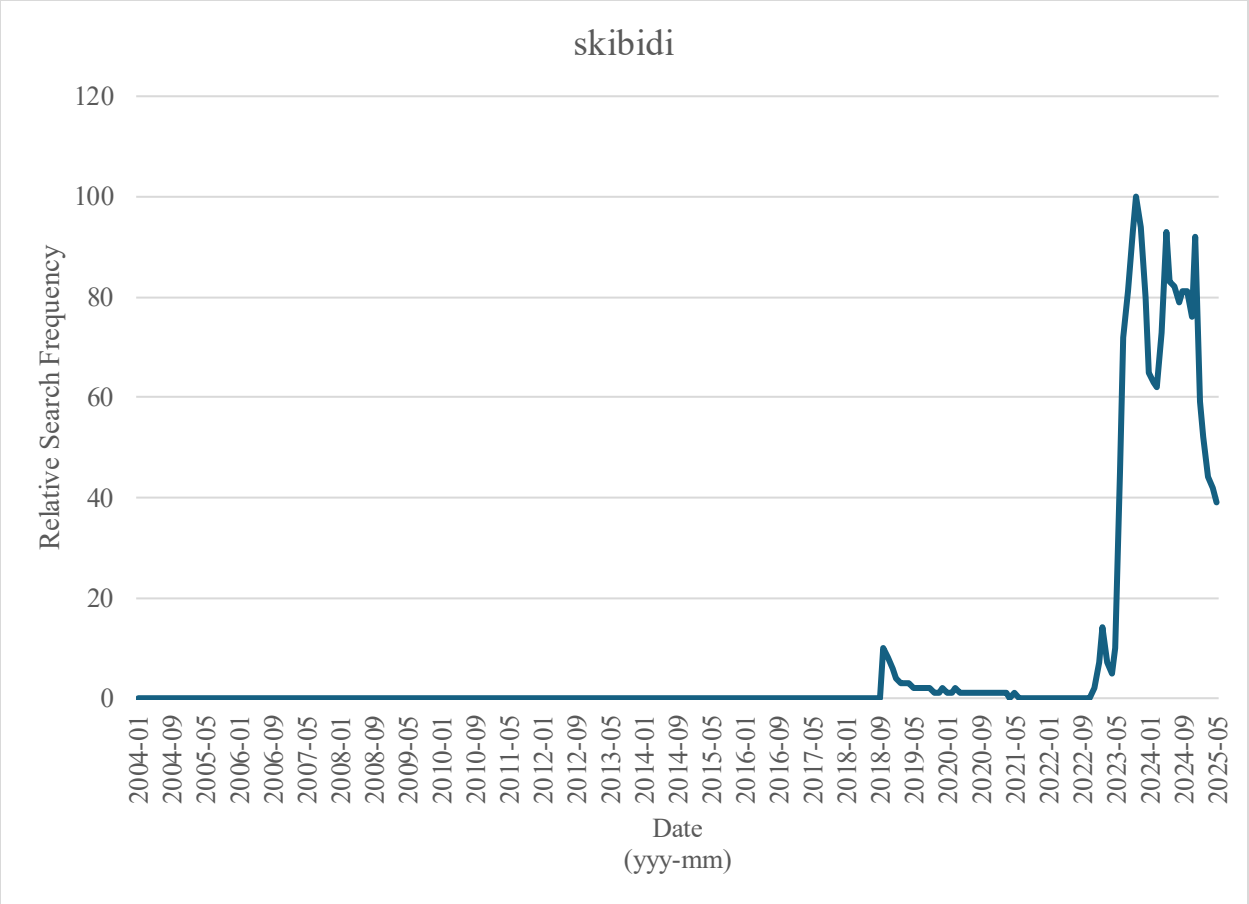


Figure A4: 'skibidi' Chronological Data

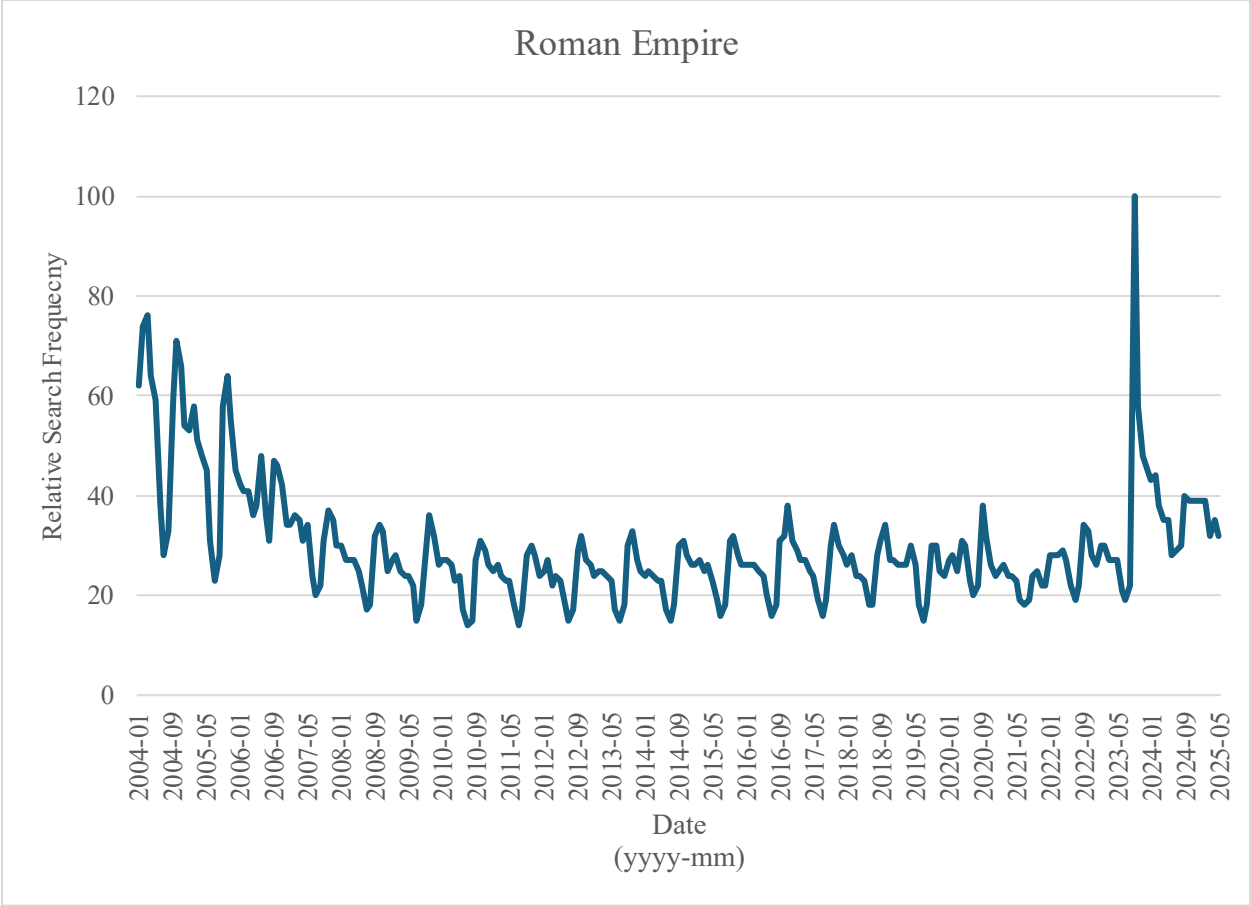


Figure A5: 'Roman Empire' Chronological Data

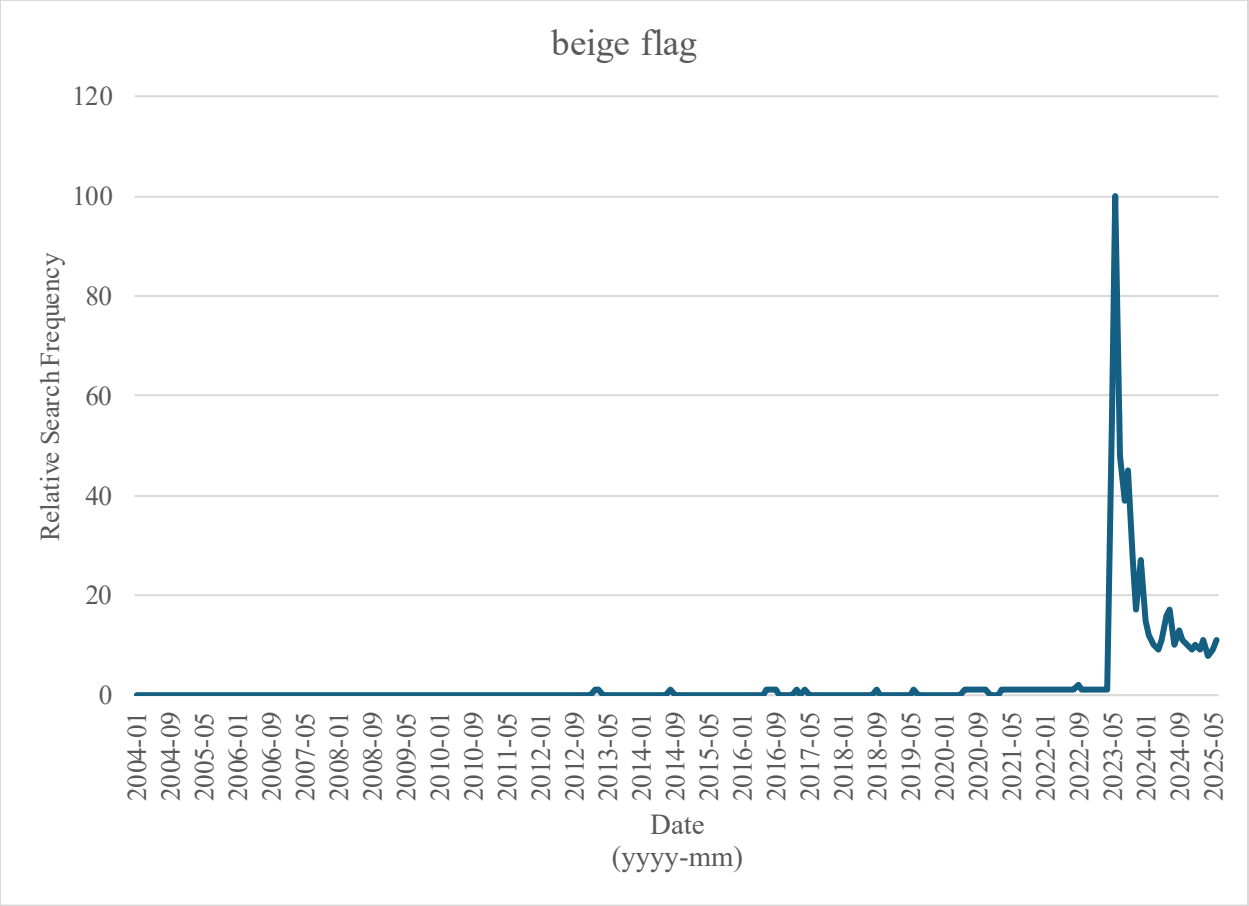


Figure A6: 'beige flag' Chronological Data

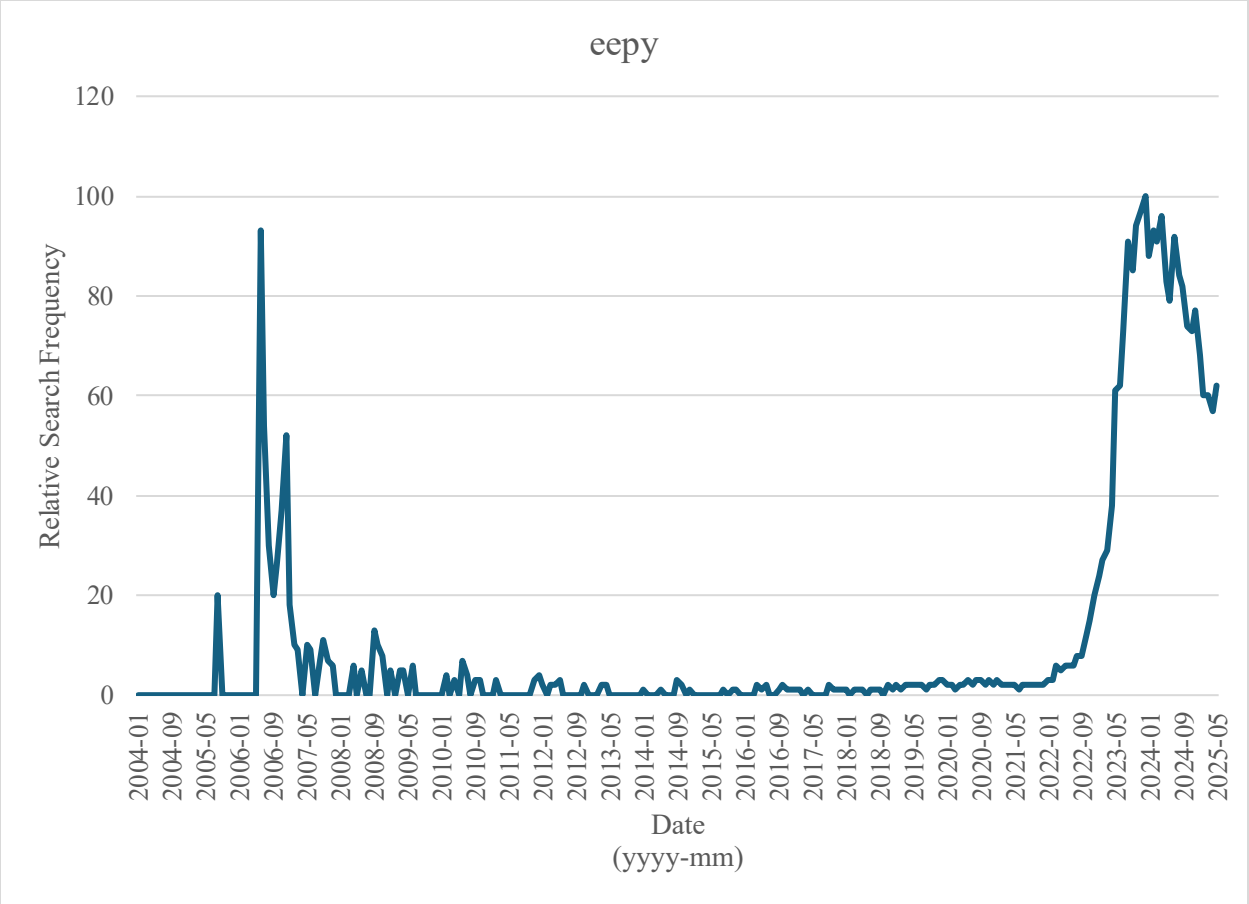


Figure A7: 'eepy' Chronological Data

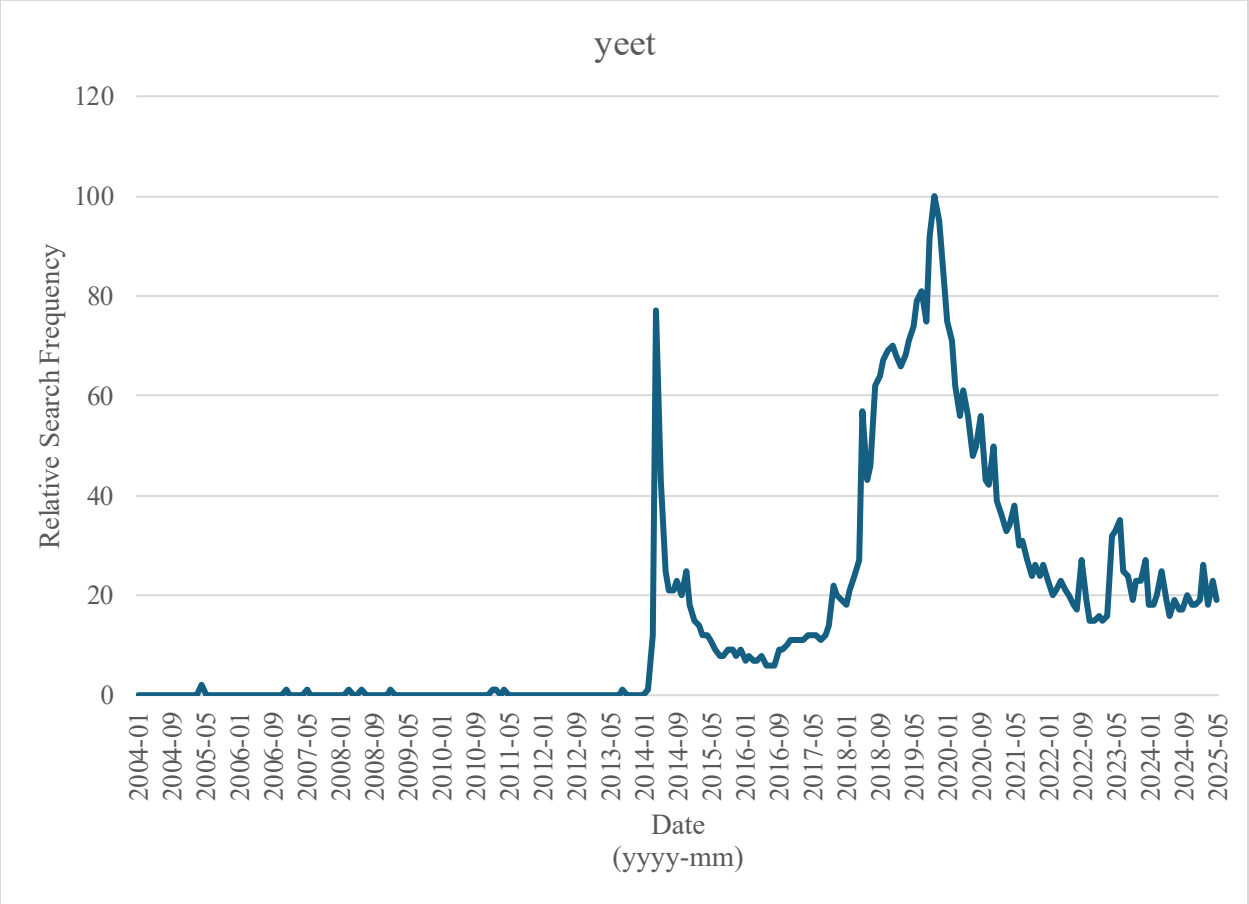


Figure A8: 'yeet' Chronological Data

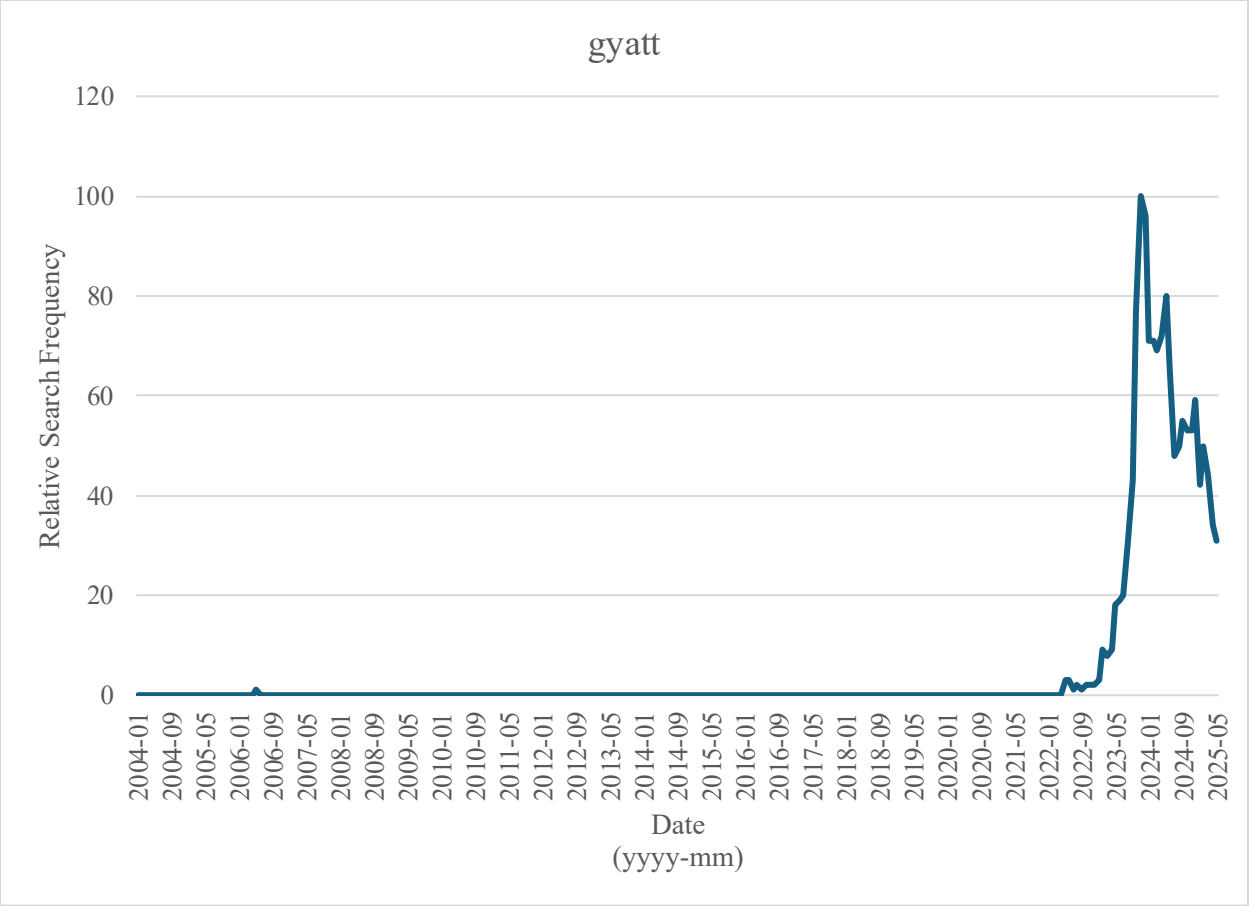


Figure A9: 'gyatt' Chronological Data

Appendix B: Pilot Study Survey

Internet Words

** Indicates required question*

1) How old are you? *

_____

2) Please check every word that you recognize and would know how to use in a sentence, even if you don't use it. *

☐Yeet

☐ Blorbo

☐ Beige Flag (as in, a personality trait)

☐ Skibidi

☐ Gyatt

☐ Aura/Aura Points

☐ Eepy

☐ Roman Empire (as in, a topic someone thinks about often)

☐ Birb

☐ Dawg

☐ Crunk

☐ Baller

☐ None of the above

3) Please check every word or phrase that you use, either online or in person.*

☐Yeet

☐ Blorbo

☐ Beige Flag (as in, a personality trait)

☐ Skibidi

☐ Gyatt

☐ Aura/Aura Points

☐ Eepy

☐ Roman Empire (as in, a topic someone thinks about often)

☐ Birb

☐ Dawg

☐ Crunk

☐ Baller

☐ None of the above

4) Please check every word that you'd consider 'out of date' (as in, not used anymore, except maybe ironically). *

☐Yeet

☐ Blorbo

☐ Beige Flag (as in, a personality trait)

☐ Skibidi

☐ Gyatt

☐ Aura/Aura Points

☐ Eepy

☐ Roman Empire (as in, a topic someone thinks about often)

☐ Birb

☐ Dawg

☐ Crunk

☐ Baller

☐ None of the above

5) Do you consent to these answers being used for research purposes, knowing that the data will be fully anonymous? *

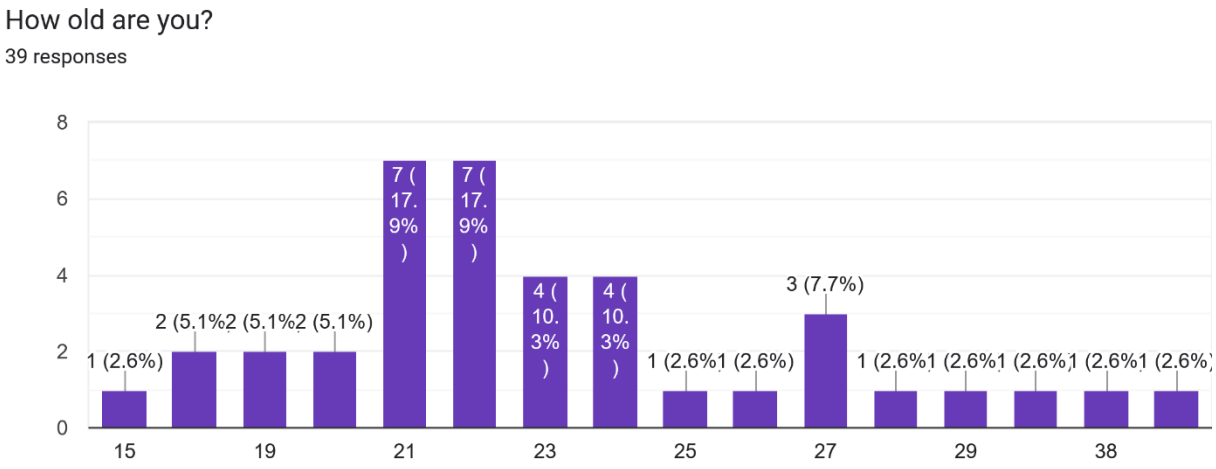
☐ Yes

6) Do you have any remarks?

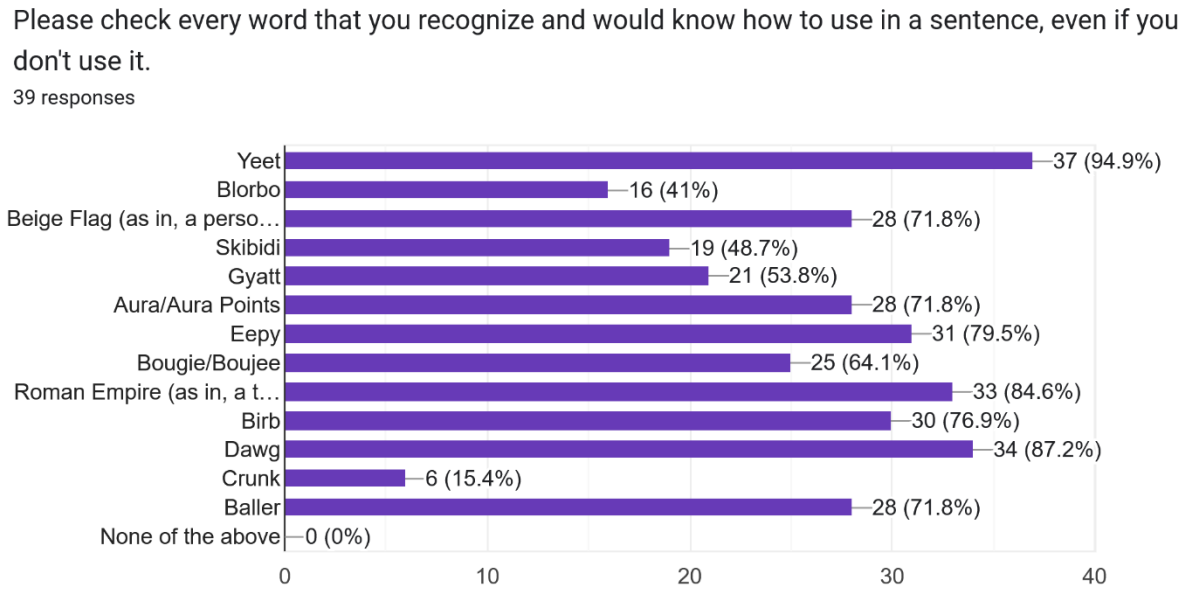
_____

Appendix C: Pilot Study Results

1)



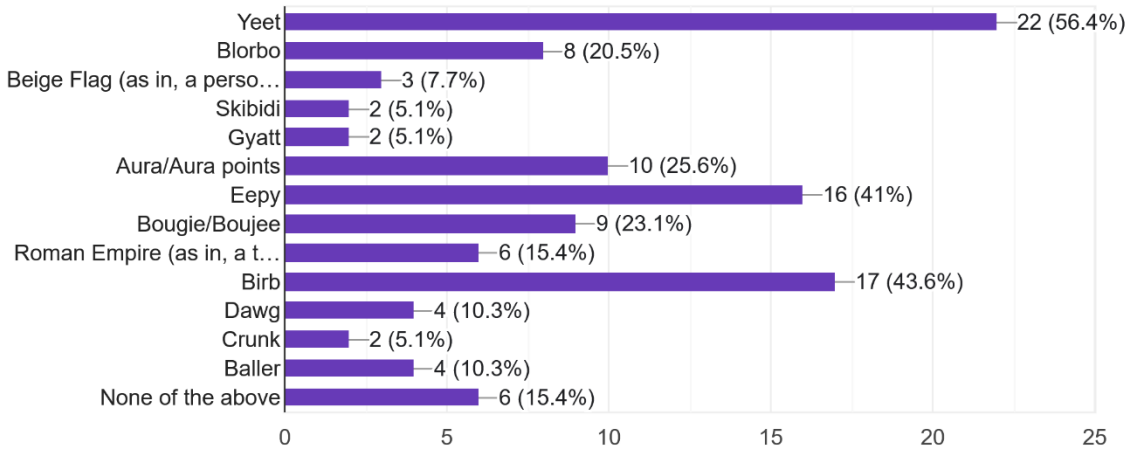
2)



3)

Please check every word or phrase that you use, either online or in person.

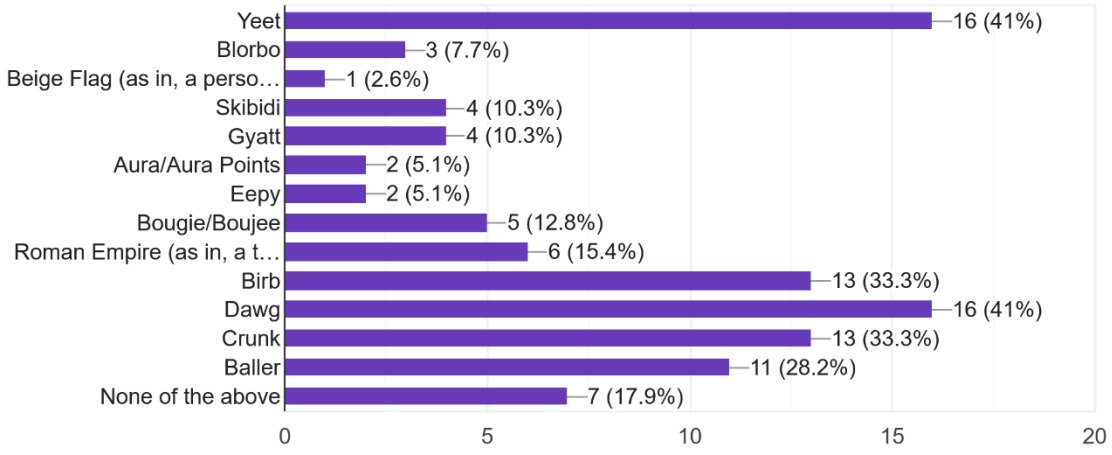
39 responses



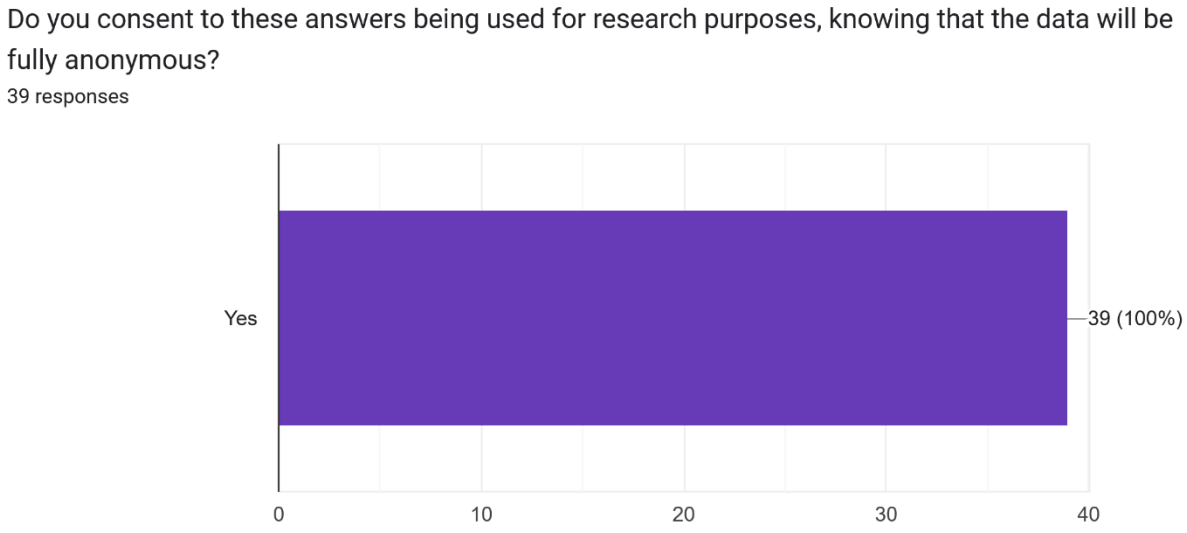
4)

Please check every word that you'd consider 'out of date' (as in, not used anymore, except maybe ironically).

39 responses



5)



6) Do you have any remarks?
13 Responses

"*Nah I'm vibing with these scrunkly mewing Ohio sigma rizzlers*"

"*Type shi*"

"*This quizz was rizzilicious*"

"*I used to say "yeet" around ca. 2017-2018, but I don't anymore, which is why I haven't ticked it.*"

"*Also, many of the gen-alpha terms listed above (like skibidi and gyatt) I do use, but only ironically (I've no clue how to use them correctly in a sentence), which is why I haven't ticked them in the first list.* "

"*how many aura points did i gain for doing this*"

"*My friends all still say "eepy" but it's fully in "cringe" territory for me right now. (Obviously cringe culture is dead, but it feels so strange to hear nowadays!)* "

"*Nice selection of terms from across time.* "

"*beige flag and skibidi are things where i feel like i know what's going on there, but i don't think i would be able to explain what exactly they mean and i wouldn't be able to actively use them in an appropriate context*"

"*I checked the words I didn't recognize as out of date*"

"*I am a little surprised by the lack of some words, like Rizz or pog*"

"*Crunchy*"

"*These questions have made me think deeply about my status as a Zillennial who was there when millennial meme culture took off in the 2010s lol. I recognise a lot of newer words but I have no idea how to use them. It really do be like that song about teenagers scaring the shit out of you. It also didn't occur to me that bougie is technically just as much internet slang as these other words. I still miss Vine*"

"*I would say all of these phrases, including ones that have recently entered general vernacular (as I believe most of them have longer usage in their AAVE roots?), are used at least ironically when they are used.*

Also, I excluded 'gyatt', 'skibidi' and 'aura' from my used terms as they entirely used as joke terms when I use them."