

What We're Really Afraid Of When We Call Someone "Basic"

Breaking down why we're actually dismissive of all things pumpkin spice.



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**“BASIC”
IS JUST
ANOTHER WORD FOR
CLASS
ANXIETY**

Jenny Chang / BuzzFeed

“My grandma’s so basic she buys multivitamins at Costco,” a friend joked with me the other day.

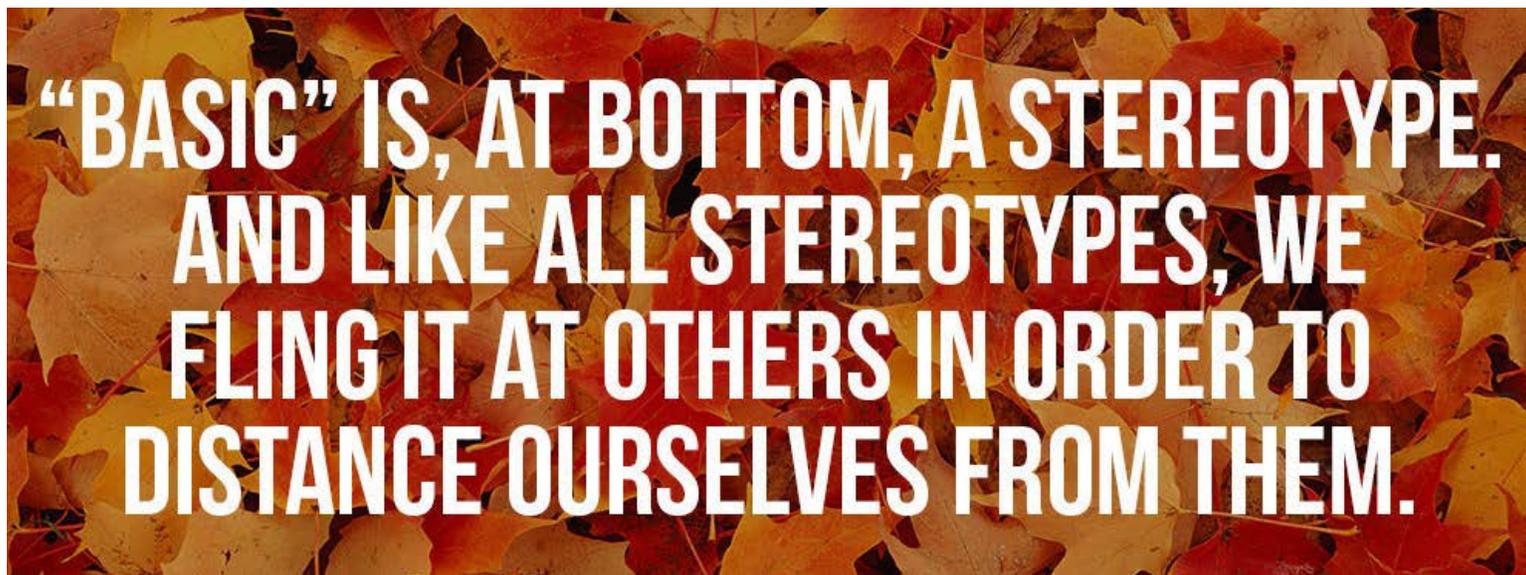
“My grandma’s so basic she reads the *Parade* inserts in the Sunday paper,” he continued. “She’s so basic she owns Harry Connick Jr.’s entire discography. She’s *so basic* she calls Folgers Coffee ‘the good stuff.’” He was joking, but in so doing, he touched on the crux of the rise of the 2014 version of the basic: She’s laughable because she consumes *boringly*.

According to our current definition of “basic” — a shortening of “basic bitch” — a “basic” is a millennial who is inescapably predictable. She (and it is always a she) cherishes uninspired brands — a mix of Target products, Ugg boots over leggings, and Starbucks Pumpkin Spice Lattes (the ultimate [signifier of basicness](#)) — and lives a banal existence, obsessed with Instagramming photos of things that themselves betray their basicness (other basic friends, pumpkin patches, falling leaves), tagging them #blessed and #thankful, and then reposting them to the basic breeding grounds of Facebook and Pinterest.

A grandma who shops at Costco, reads *Parade*, and loves Folgers is, then, just her generation’s version of predictable consumerism. In the ‘50s, basics were called “[men in the gray flannel suit](#)”; in the ‘20s, they were “[Babbits](#).” Back then, the object of anxiety was men’s patterns of consumption, in part because men were still the primary consumers, even for the home; today, women aren’t just consuming more, they are consuming *more visibly* — which is part of why they’ve become the locus of this generation’s critique. That’s how “basic” is used today: as a means for people anxious about their position within both the purchasing and cultural currency to denigrate the purchasing and cultural habits of others.

And as Noreen Malone [pointed out](#) in *New York Magazine*, “basic” is primarily a label wielded against a particular type of woman: one who “likes being a woman, or at least she buys the products that are so inherently female-skewing that they don’t even NEED to be explicitly marketed to women ... she delights in all the things that men dismiss as unserious or that don’t even register for them as existing — celebrity gossip, patterned disposable cocktail napkins that mean something sentimental.”

Malone’s reading is correct, but if a certain swath of millennial white girls is basic, so, too, is a larger swath of white, middle-class grandmas and white, middle-class moms, many of whom live in suburbs. They just consume in feminized (and thus readily dismissible) ways appropriate to their generations: my mom, who lives in northern Idaho, is so basic that she drinks decaf single-shot lattes at Starbucks, shops online at Chico’s, and posts pictures of her heirloom vegetable garden to Facebook. She drinks slightly more expensive white wine and goes to a slightly more erudite book club than the basics half her age, but she too is basic.



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“Basic” is, at bottom, a stereotype. And like all stereotypes, we fling it at others in order to distance ourselves from them. *These people are this thing; therefore, I am this other thing.* Stereotypes are deployed most fervently — and with the most hostility — when the group wielding them is most anxious to distance itself from another group that, in truth, isn’t so distant after all. See: “Fresh Off the Boat,” “White Trash,” “Hipster.” These stereotypes are explicitly rooted in race, but implicitly, and most powerfully, are rooted in class distinction. By calling someone “white trash,” a certain segment of white consumer person distinguishes themselves from another segment of white consumer, thereby bolstering their position within the capitalist hierarchy.

But that’s not how it was used even five years ago. According to a Google Trends map of the [word’s usage](#), “basic” entered the vernacular around 2011. But that original usage had nothing to do with middle-class white girls. Instead, “basic bitch,” like so many things that become commonplace within mainstream (white) culture, was appropriated from black culture, where it had [long been deployed in a slightly different](#), if generally class-centric, matter:

As stand-up comedian LilDuval explained in [2009 YouTube video](#),

“If you’re a black girl and your weave is red, green, purple, or blonde, you’s a basic bitch.”

“If you bend your ass over in all your pictures just to make it look big even though you ain’t got one, you’s a basic bitch.”

“If you sing any Beyoncé song, all day, every day, something like ‘Upgrade’ and there ain’t nothing been upgraded about you since high school in ‘92, kill yourself, and you’re a basic bitch.”

This original usage has more to do with posturing and performance, but that doesn’t mean

that class isn't at its root: If you're pretending to be something you're not, especially when you don't have the means to "upgrade," you're a basic bitch.

Kreayshawn's "Gucci Gucci," released in 2012, [articulated the same values](#), only with a white female voice: "Gucci Gucci, Louis Louis, Fendi Fendi, Prada / Them basic bitches wear that shit so I don't even bother." The video for "Gucci Gucci," which became a viral sensation, seems to mark the beginning of the gradual rise in usage of the word that would eventually spike first in April 2014, when [Emma Stone told *Vogue*](#) that, after googling herself, she'd found herself described as a "bland basic bitch," and again in October, as pieces ridiculing "Things Basic Girls Like" — including nearly a dozen on BuzzFeed — went viral; the most popular of which ("[25 Things That Basic White Girls Do During The Fall](#)") has been viewed 4.9 million times.

Which is all to say that "basic bitch" was a commonplace adjective within black culture, albeit with slightly different connotations, for years before it went "mainstream" over the course of the last few years. It's crucial to acknowledge that just as "basic bitch" was primarily used by black people, toward black people; the deracinated "basic" is primarily used by middle-class white people toward middle-class white people.

So what are those who make fun of basics actually frightened of? Of being basic, sure, but that's just another way of being scared of conformity. And in 2014 America, the way we measure conformity isn't in how we speak in political beliefs, but in consumer and social media habits. We declare our individuality via our capacity to consume *differently* — to mix purchases from Target with those from quirky Etsy shops — and to tweet, use Facebook, or pin in a way that separates us from others.

To make fun of the basic, then, is another way of displacing concern over the increasing difficulty to do so, to cloak concern over the flattening of American consumer and mediated culture in the form of a meme. I'm basic, my mom is basic, and my friend's grandmother is basic because we all grew up in rural or suburban towns where, over the course of the last 50 years, the chain store has come to dominate. My mom shops online at Chico's because her only other choice in her 30,000-person Idaho town is Macy's or Walmart; as a result, she chooses one basic option over another. And she gets a latte at Starbucks because it's the only coffee shop in town. For one of her college-age students to be excited about the September arrival of the Pumpkin Spice Latte isn't an indicator that that student has no taste as much as it's about how there are few other outlets accessible to her.



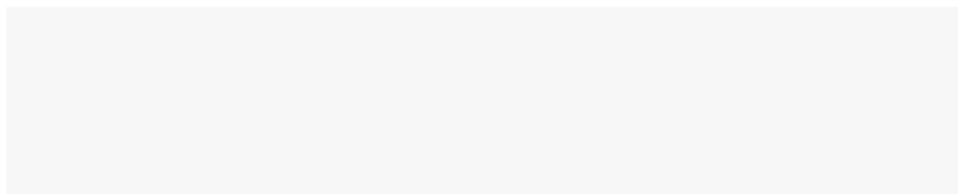
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Unique taste — and the capacity to avoid the basic — is a privilege. A privilege of location (usually urban), of education (exposure to other cultures and locales), and of parentage (who would introduce and exalt other tastes). To summarize the groundbreaking work of theorist Pierre Bourdieu: We don't choose our tastes so much as the micro-specifics of our class determine them. To consume and perform online in a basic way is thus to reflect a highly American, capitalist upbringing. Basic girls love the things they do because *nearly every part of American commercial media* has told them that they should.

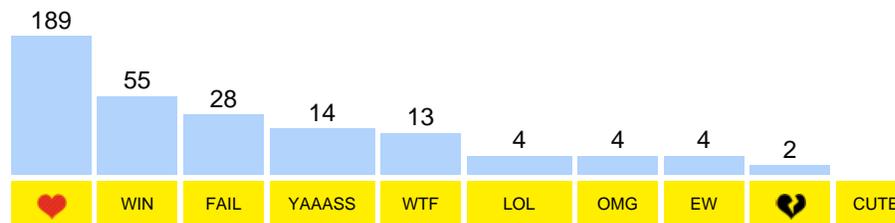
Basics are good and steady consumers of good and steady American businesses, which is another way of saying they're good Americans. But to look around and realize that all of our lofty ideals about the rights of the individual under democracy have in fact yielded a society in which "choice" — at least for a certain demographic — is the difference between two forms of scented body wash... well, that's existentially terrifying.

Instead of grappling with the fundamental principles that have wrought this system, however, popular culture has transformed it into a way of disciplining the women who manifest it most vividly. To call someone "basic" is to look into the abyss of continually flattening capitalist dystopia and, instead of articulating and interrogating the fear, transform it into casual misogyny. And that's a behavior far more troubling — and regressive — than taking pleasure in all things pumpkin spice.

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