
On being intense: Shallow girls, affective style, and digital intensifiers

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Sociolinguistics has identified affective practice as a central but under-researched factor of stylistic variation and social meaning. Recent work zooms in on affective dimensions of calmness and coolness: Pratt (2023) identifies *having chill* as a meaningful category of affective positioning at a California high school, and Levon and Holmes-Elliott (2024) discuss *ease* as an affective style of privileged distinction. Their affective counterparts – enthusiasm, excitability, intenseness – and their social meanings have received less attention. In this paper, I seek to explore the gendered affective contours of intenseness. I argue that *being intense* is an affective disposition that links indexically to structural linguistic forms of marking intensification and has become particularly salient for certain traditions and forms of digital linguistic practice (Cotgrove 2025). Yet intensification markers are not simply linguistic items available for usage; they are tied to stylistic practice through the sociolinguistic enregisterment of communities and identities, so that patterns of intensification become associated with gendered social meanings of non-masculinity, in particular feminine and queer ways of speaking.

In my study, I examine digital characterological figures of intense femininity as embodiments of intensification. I offer a micro-diachronic reading of how characterological figures of the shallow-but-intense woman emerged in early meme culture of the late 2000s by providing semiotic and linguistic analysis of three canonical memes and their variants. I identify digital intensifiers such as grapheme reduplication and nonstandard spelling and how they became indexically linked to embodied intenseness such as wide-open eyes. These depictions of young women are not just characterized by an affective mode of being intense, but by discourses of being excited, enthused or shocked by banalities. The figures of digital femininity bring forth ambivalent affects of annoyed enjoyment (Heyd forthc.). In the discussion, I outline how gendered figurations of intensification continue to impact digital linguistic practice into the present, from *Karen* to Stanley Cup Moms. This paper is intended as a rereading of digital intensifiers through the sociolinguistics of affect and thus contributes to our understanding of what it means to be intense, and to do intensification online.

References: • Cotgrove, L. (2025). Entstehende Arten von Intensivierung in der digitalen Kommunikation junger Menschen. *Deutsche Sprache* 1/2025, 2–18. • Heyd, T. (forthc.). Discursive Practices of Digital Affect. Bloomsbury. • Levon, E. & S. Holmes-Elliott (2024). Voices, bodies, and the cultural organization of meaning. *Signs and Society* 12(1), 58–82. • Pratt, T. (2023). Affect in sociolinguistic style. *Language in Society* 52(1), 1–26.