

That Slaps!

An Exploration of BYU Slang and How It Is Interpreted

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In this article, the author presents common slang terms used by students at Brigham Young University (BYU), collected from current students. After selecting the top twenty submitted slang terms, the author provides a definition for each term. From a survey, the author learns how different demographic groups interpret slang terms, and how accurately members of each demographic group could come up with their own definition for each term. Through this method, the author learns which demographic groups best understand current slang. This article particularly focuses on the demographics of gender, age range, location, and association with BYU.

Language is always changing. Its change is something we can't stop, and we shouldn't try to. But some aspects of language change so quickly that it's hard to keep up with them. We see this happening specifically with slang. Because social media dominates everyday life, slang can grow and spread like never before. Slang is a great breeding ground for language change, and seeing how different demographics understand slang in a certain region makes for riveting research.

The slang that interests me most is, not surprisingly, the slang I'm surrounded with on a daily basis. The slang at Brigham Young University (BYU) is unique in many ways. Since BYU is a private institution and a religious school, students often have to get creative with their slang to avoid unclean language. They choose which slang terms to borrow, which ones to reject, and which ones to creatively change in order to better incorporate them into their religious environment.

Along with that, BYU is a collection of many students from all over the country—many who have served missions for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in numerous places outside of Utah. Because of this, BYU collects a melting pot of slang from other states and even other countries. These slang terms get all mixed together and baked into a unique breed of slang. These factors, along with others, make BYU a particularly interesting university to study slang and language change.

I'm particularly interested to see how different demographics understand the slang used at BYU. Studying a wide range of demographics, such as gender, age, and location, will help me understand how language changes and see how various people react to and adapt to language change. This study will examine the connection between language and group belonging. For example, will a BYU alumnus or a younger person understand BYU slang better than people who are outside of Utah or never went to BYU?

I collected slang from BYU students and distributed the slang to people who do not currently attend BYU to see how well they understood the terms. I focused on people who were over the age of forty and hypothesized that a participant's age would play a bigger role in understanding slang than the participant's location or affiliation with BYU. I expected to see that younger people would understand the slang at BYU even if they were not part of an in-group (e.g., alumni, Utah natives, etc.) because they may be

more used to adapting to and learning slang in general. It is also a possibility that slang might be shared across the college age group and not be unique to BYU alone. Along with that, because of the slang mixing pot that BYU is, many of the terms likely will not be unique to BYU alone.

Literature Review

Although there isn't a lot of published research about BYU slang or slang used within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the sponsoring religion of BYU, there is a lot of research about Utah's variety of English and Utah's slang in general, which are all important factors contributing to my own research.

The United States is often divided into several distinct regions when studying accents and dialects. Of course, each of these regions could be broken down into smaller regions, and each state could claim to have its own unique variety of English (with more variations between regions within that state). Utah English is very unique, and research has shown that Utah English is a distinct variety of English. The most heavily stigmatized aspect of Utah English is the way Utahns pronounce *mountain*. There are all kinds of research done regarding this feature. Eddington and Savage (2012) investigated three possible phonetic correlates of "t-dropping" by recording participants from Utah and other Western states. Other research about Utah English has studied the correlation between religious affiliation and linguistic behavior in Utah, the cord/card merger, the tense-lax contrast, and much more. These unique traits of Utah English may contribute to BYU slang because of the university's location.

As shown, the features of this variety have been heavily studied; however, not much research had been done about the positive or negative attitudes people hold toward it until David Savage's research. Savage (2014) learned that Utahns themselves (ironically) may judge speakers of Utah English more harshly than people from other regions. Many of the slang terms at BYU that I studied can be found in other places of the world and would be easily recognized in other regions. This may be because BYU attempts to adopt slang terms from other varieties since Utahns are more judgmental of their own variety. Thus, they may be more likely to move away from any Utah-based stereotypes and embrace more widespread slang terms.

There has been surprisingly little legitimate research done regarding slang used in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Even finding non-scholarly information such as blog posts or opinion pieces on the subject was difficult. That is a gap in the research that my study could help fill.

However, there is slightly more information to be found on university slang, although there is not often a distinction made between college slang and general American slang used by college students (Hummon, 1994). Hummon's research is likely far outdated, and it's a revisit to Kratz's work on college slang done in 1964 (Kratz, 1964). When searching for more current information, I could only find very niche articles such as Muhartoyo and Wijaya's 2014 article "The Use of English Slang Words in Informal Communication Among 8th Semester Students of English Department in Binus University." I'm hoping that the research I have done will help this topic become much less niche and will contribute to what little research has been done on the subject.

Luckily, there is a more extensive collection of general information and research about slang. However, the rapid change of slang occurring in pop culture poses an interesting problem in studying it. Slang is constantly changing, so a study that is only five years old could be very irrelevant today. For example, there are whole books written about slang, like *Slang: Today and Yesterday*, *The Life of Slang*, or even *Slang: The People's Poetry*. While these books may give us good insights into what slang used to be like, none of them can keep up with contemporary slang, especially when some were written before the year 2000. Keider et al. (2022) analyze the semantic change and frequency shift of slang words and compare them to those of standard, non-slang words. I found this to be a more productive way to study slang.

While slang is constantly evolving and, therefore, its research is becoming outdated, I still feel comfortable including my research because I'm not as focused on the nature of current slang as I am on how it's understood by different outside groups. This way, we can better learn how different demographics understand and interact with slang. The fact that language is always changing, especially slang, is actually a benefit rather than a crutch in this setting. Even if the slang goes out of style, the research won't because it will show a discussion on people's understanding of slang instead of just a discussion on slang itself.

Methodology

My first task for this project was to collect slang. I wanted to authentically collect slang from BYU students so that it would be as accurate as possible. Instead of choosing words that I've heard on campus, I created a survey and sent it out to current BYU students to share with me the slang they hear at BYU (see the appendix for an example of the types of answers I received from the survey). I then collected this slang, put it in a new survey, and redistributed it to non-BYU students to learn how accurately certain demographics could understand the slang terms. In order to keep the survey short, I included three demographic questions and seventeen slang terms.

Based on the slang terms I collected from BYU students, I narrowed it down to the top seventeen most submitted answers. These terms were: *bussin'*, *Provo bro*, *DTR*, *NCMO*, *cap*, *ghosting*, *slay*, *servng*, *tea*, *lit*, *suicide swipe*, *slaps*, *bop*, *devo*, *preemie*, *durf*, and *soaking*. Using several online dictionaries and double-checking with different BYU students to make sure they agreed on the definitions, I created a list of definitions for each slang term (see figure 1 on the next page). Before I provide those definitions, I will warn quickly that the last two terms are of a sexual nature. I considered leaving them out of my survey, or even this article, but I decided they are important to my research. While most of the other slang terms are commonly heard at BYU, the last two (along with *Provo bro*, *devo*, and *preemie*) are particularly unique to BYU and were thus essential to my research.

I started the survey for non-BYU students with three demographic questions: gender, age, and affiliation with BYU. I wanted to target people who were over forty years old, so I broke the age question down into four categories: 40–49, 50–59, 60–69, and 70+. There were some people under forty who were interested in taking the survey, so I included an “other” option as well. None of the participants that fit in that category were current BYU students. I decided to keep the data and analyze it because I was interested in how non-BYU students understood slang heard at BYU regardless of age. To test affiliation, I asked participants to choose which of the following best described them: BYU alum, Utah native, Utah resident 5–15 years, Utah resident > 5 years, and non-Utah resident.

Figure 1

Definitions for each slang term

bop	a song that has a good beat that makes you want to dance
bussin'	extremely great, delicious
cap	lying or faking
devo	a devotional
DTR	define the relationship
durf	dry humping, denim surfing
ghosting	the practice of ending a personal relationship with someone by suddenly withdrawing from all communication without explanation
lit	something is really good, intense, fun, or exciting, often refers to party
NCMO	non commital make out
preemie	a young man who hasn't yet served a mission
Provo bro	a 18–30 year old man living in or around the city of Provo. Typically a return missionary who spends his time chasing girls, hitting the “grind,” and working summer sales.
serving	dishing out looks, to bring it
slaps	to be excellent or amazing, especially in reference to a song
slay	to do something spectacularly well, to “kill it”
soaking	to engage in sexual activity with penetration but without thrusting or movement
suicide swipe	continuously swiping right on every person on a dating app (typically Mutual) without looking at the profiles to see if you get any matches
tea	the gossip, the latest, the 4-1-1

After the demographic questions, I asked the participants to provide their best guesses for what each slang term meant. I asked them to avoid saying “I don’t know.” I did warn them that the last two questions were of a sexual nature and to write “choose not to answer” if they did not feel comfortable answering. With each slang term, I provided the word and the word in a sentence where it would likely be used (see figure 2), and asked the participants, based on the sentence, what they thought the word meant. (For examples of these survey questions, see the appendix.) I tried to provide sentences that would provide context but wouldn’t give away the meaning of the word.

Figure 2

Complete list of sentences given for each slang term

bop	Oh man, this song is a total bop!
bussin’	That burger was bussin’ bussin’!
cap	No cap, dude. I really like Sarah.
devo	Hey, did you catch the devo on Tuesday?
DTR	He’s giving me mixed signals—I wish he would DTR.
durf	I mean . . . durfing isn’t technically prohibited in the honor code.
ghosting	We went on a couple of dates, and then he totally ghosted me!
lit	The party on Friday was lit!
NCMO	I feel a little guilty stopping by for NCMO and then ignoring her text messages.
preemie	I kind of like him, but he’s a total preemie
Provo bro	Yeah, he’s cute, but he’s a total Provo bro
serving	Wow, Claire is serving the looks today!
slaps	That new restaurant on 5th totally slaps!
slay	Taylor Swift’s new album slayed!
soaking	It’s technically not sex if you just soak.
suicide swipe	Funny story—my wife and I actually met because of a suicide swipe I did on Mutual (a dating app) once.
tea	I need the latest tea on the whole “Josh situation.”

I sent out the survey on several social media platforms and asked friends and family to share it if they found it interesting. I collected fifty total results, which was enough to give me information on each demographic without giving me so much information that I was overwhelmed with data. For a larger-scale project where I have more time, I would like to collect more data.

Once I had the data collected, I divided it into each demographic so I could compare how everyone performed. I first organized the data from men and women. Then I organized it from each age group. Lastly, I created separate sheets for BYU alumni, Utah natives, Utah residents 5–15 years, Utah residents less than 5 years, and non-Utah residents. In total, I had the data divided between twelve spreadsheets.

With the data divided, I then had to code the data for accuracy. I decided to use a 1–5 scale for the answers provided for each question, 1 being not accurate at all, and 5 being most accurate. To use the term *Provo bro* as an example, here are the types of ratings different answers received:

“I don’t know” - 1

“Utah native” - 2

“Mormon Boy who goes to BYU” - 3

“Return missionary who chases after girls” - 4

“RM, summer sales, NCMO, gym-going type dude” - 5

Using these codes, I was able to find the average of how each demographic was understanding slang terms with twelve different spreadsheets for each demographic (see the appendix for the example). In the spreadsheet, each slang term is listed in the left column. Then I listed the responses from each person in the demographic as numbers ranging from 1 to 5 based on the accuracy of answers for each question. On the far right, I highlighted the averages for each word in yellow. I completed this task for all twelve spreadsheets.

Results

Collecting and reading through the results was more entertaining than I would have guessed. Before I jump into a breakdown of the demographics, I want to talk about some of the most interesting “not correct” answers I got when collecting the data. As shown in figure 3, these are real answers, copied and pasted from people who took the survey.

Figure 3

Examples of wrong answers for each term

bop	loser, bust, fail, flop, lame, childish
bussin'	good but covered in a lot of stuff, busy, hot, maybe moving (?), huge, eating, it had hot sauce on it.
cap	boobs, dang, looks great with or without a hat, captain, worth it, judgement, condom, keep it a secret
devo	guy, TV show, band, development, game
DTR	ditch the routine, decide the right, determine the return, do the right, drive the road, don't tip right
durf	slightly bending the rules, kissing, necking, petting, sexting, being crazy, drinking, gossiping, see with clothes on, being gay, lying
ghosting	left the other person
lit	drugs involved, drunk/high/lit-up, smoking
NCMO	night cap min option, new college manual order, non committal but making overtures
preemie	a baby, mama's boy, new to something
Provo bro	not sophisticated, boring, brother/friend, good upstanding person, friend zone
serving	giving the evil eye, glaring, daggers, making certain faces at someone, giving someone a "dirty look"
slaps	is bad, sucks, maybe a surprising or edgy menu or atmosphere, slapping the table to say how good the place is, it's the place to be
slay	maybe loosely derived from how the word slayed can mean "cut to the heart," best or maybe worst
soaking	holding hands, hot tubbing together, oral, masterbation, make out, skinny dip, horny, grinding
suicide swipe	putting your feelings out there, a dare swipe, a date that doesn't show up, killer picture, dumb get together, totally deleting someone from your dating options
tea	time expected arrival . . .

I find it important to include these to show what kind of answers are being provided for slang terms that people are unfamiliar with. I think it's interesting to see how subjects chose to interpret the words based on the context they were given, especially when they really had no clue what the word meant even when seeing it in context. For example, even though the sentence for *cap* was "No cap, dude. I really like Sarah," someone who couldn't figure out the meaning chose to stick with what they knew about the word *cap* when giving the answer "Complete guess here, but perhaps she looks great with or without a hat?"

It was also interesting to see that with some of the answers, many of the wrong answers were the exact opposite of what the word meant. For example many people defined *bop* as "fail, flop, or lame," even though *bop* is seen as a positive term among BYU students. This pattern occurred with *lit* and *serve* as well.

It's also important to note that despite my attempts at being as accurate as possible because of the way answers are scaled, the data could be skewed a little bit since some terms scale easier than others. For example, the scale for *Provo bro* can easily include all kinds of answers that range from 1 to 5, as we saw in the methodology section above. But for terms like *DTR* or *NCMO* that are acronyms, the answers were more likely to either hit a 1 or a 5 on the scale, because they knew it or they didn't. Only a couple of answers were scaled somewhere in between. If the subject got the *NC* part of *NCMO* correct but not the *MO* part, or if they got the gist of *DTR* (e.g., determine the relationship instead of define the relationship) without guessing the acronym 100% correctly, they were scaled between 1 and 5.

The results were eye-opening and sometimes surprising. Let's first take a look at the results of everyone who took the survey before we dive into the different demographics. Figure 4 shows the results of how everyone understood each slang term on average.

There is definite variation when it comes to each slang term and how well it was understood. The top three most understood slang were *ghosting*, *tea*, and *slay*, while the top three least understood were *cap*, *soaking*, and *durf*. I think part of what contributed to this was the provided sentences. The top three most understood were pretty easy to figure out based on context. Not only that but those terms are used very commonly outside of BYU as well. The three least understood terms didn't come as much of a surprise either, since the last two were sexual. An audience of forty

years and older may have had a harder time coming up with definitions for those, especially since there were several participants who chose not to answer.

This is all interesting of course, and it is even more interesting to compare the demographics. Let's first take a look at the differences in how men and women understood the slang terms (see figure 5).

Figure 4

How Well Non-BYU Students Understood BYU Slang

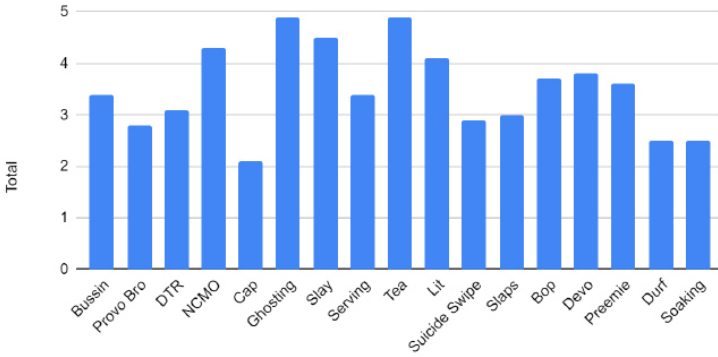
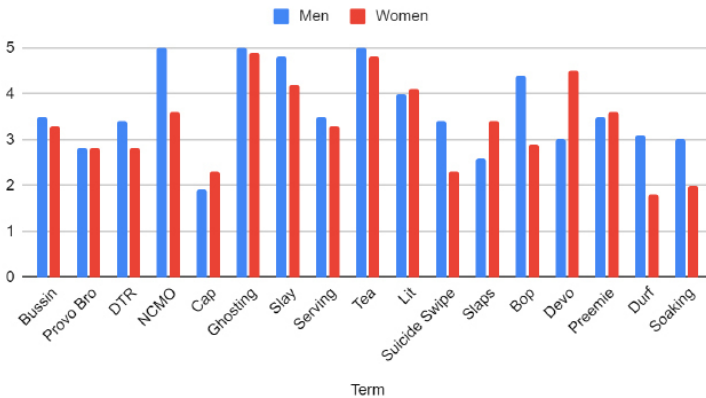


Figure 5

How Men vs. Women Understood Slang



I was surprised to see that the majority of slang terms were better understood by men rather than women, although many of them were close, if not equal. The men far exceeded the women in the more sexual-based terms such as *NCMO*, *durf*, and *soaking*. The only two terms that women understood significantly more than men were *slaps* and *devo*. Again, we see that ghosting, tea, and slay were the most understood terms, which is a trend we will continue to see with each demographic.

Next, we will take a look at the different age groups and how well they were able to interpret each slang term (see figure 6).

Not surprisingly, the youngest age group understood slang the best overall, and the oldest age group understood the terms the least. However, there were a couple of surprises in this data that don't follow that pattern. For example, the 70+ age group understood the term *slay* significantly more than the 60–69 age range, and the 50–59 age range guessed the meaning the most accurately. For the most part, the 70+ age group understood the slang the least, and in instances where they beat out the 60–69 age group, it often wasn't by much. Only once did they beat the 50–59 age group as well, which was with the term *cap*. It was interesting to see that the oldest age group understood the term *cap* the second best, seeing that it was consistently the least understood term across all demographics.

I was not surprised to see that the oldest age group had a hard time understanding the term *suicide swipe* because it is based in social media, specifically online dating. In fact, not a single person in the 70+ category correctly guessed *suicide swipe*, *durf*, *soaking*, or *DTR*.

Lastly, let's take a look at how the rest of the demographics understood slang. In figure 7, we can see how well Utah natives, Utah residents, non-Utah residents, and BYU alumni understood BYU slang.

I wanted to present all of the data first to show what it looked like, but I decided to analyze the data without the "Utah resident less than 5 years" category because only one person was in that category. They represent all of the data in one category and there is no average, which I feel skews the data.

Figure 6

How Various Age Groups Understood Slang at BYU

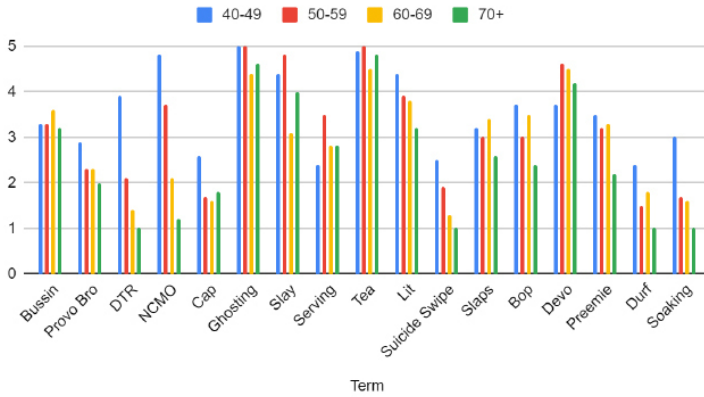
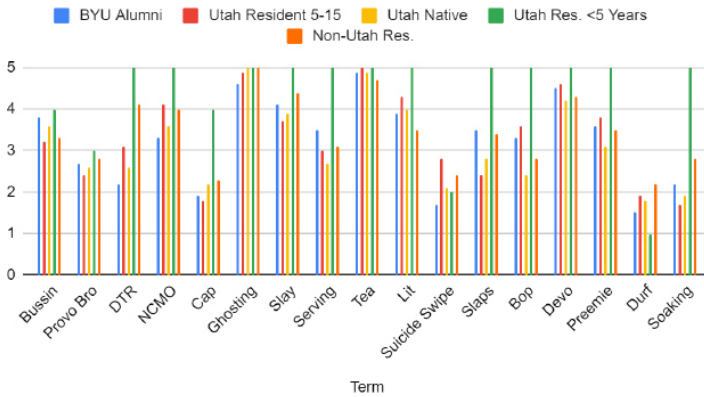


Figure 7

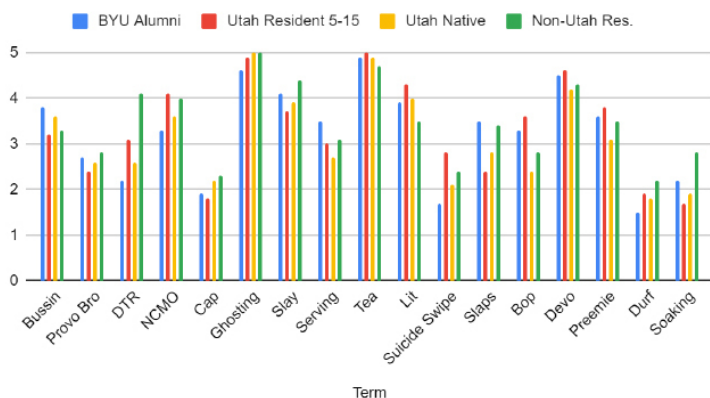
How Non-BYU Students Understood BYU Slang



The data found in figure 8 surprised me. At first, I expected BYU alumni to understand the slang best, but after thinking about it, I realized that for most of the terms, being an alumnus doesn't give any advantage since slang changes so quickly and so often. I then expected the Utah natives to understand the slang the best, but the data is rather inconclusive. No one demographic really stands out above the rest.

Figure 8

How Non-BYU Students Understood BYU Slang (Revised)



I was interested to see that non-Utah residents understood *DTR* far better than everyone else. Although that is a term used outside of Utah, I thought that it was probably used way more in Utah than outside of Utah and thus expected Utah residents to be more aware of the term. There were also a couple of other instances where non-Utah residents actually knew the terms best, like *slay*, and *soaking*. *Slay* does not surprise me since that is used widely outside of BYU, but I was very surprised to see that the non-Utah resident group understood the term *soaking* best since that is very specific to BYU. It is probable that very few people outside of BYU use that term, and even those who do use it only joke about it. I wonder if it's because the idea became highly stigmatized and stems from the myth that BYU students believe that soaking doesn't count as sex. I wonder if this rumor leaked out to people who don't live in Utah, aren't familiar with BYU, or aren't members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, causing the non-Utah residents to understand it better than anyone else.

Conclusion

Overall, there was a lot to be gleaned from the data. There is also much more research that could be done to make the data more complete and accurate. There were a couple of limitations to my research that I would like to change for future research.

First of all, although fifty responses to my survey were more than sufficient for this amount of research, I would like to collect more data in the future. It would be great if I could also collect more data from people outside of Utah and from people who are not members of the Church. I would also like to have a better age group breakdown that includes all ages, as long as they are not current BYU students. I was focusing particularly on 40+, but in the future, I would like to include a wider age range.

I also would have liked to have someone besides myself code the data and include a comparison of our coding. For the project at hand, this was unrealistic because there was expansive data to code. In the future, I would want to do that for accuracy's sake so that it's not just based on my opinion and interpretation of the data. Along with that, I would like to improve the scale used to code the data even though a scale of 1–5 worked pretty well for my purposes.

One other limitation is the fact that a lot of the interpretation of this research includes assumptions and theories that couldn't be proved. The numbers speak for themselves, but when looking at why some demographics performed better than others, some guesses and formulations were necessary. I think including these thoughts is important and many of the theories could be true, but until tested, they shouldn't be taken as facts.

Despite the limitations, we can still clearly see how different demographics understood BYU slang terms. We were able to conclude that, in general, men understood BYU slang better than women. Along with that, for the most part, the younger a person was, the more likely they were to understand the slang. Surprisingly though, there wasn't conclusive evidence that any single in- or out-group (BYU alumni, Utah natives, non-Utah residents, etc.) understood BYU slang significantly more than another. Thus, it appears that age and gender play a much bigger role in understanding slang than location or affiliation. This research helps us understand a lot about slang and how well different groups can understand such an ever-changing and ever-growing language feature.

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Appendix

Examples of Responses Collected from Survey about BYU Slang

- Wilk, JFSB, JKB (basically any building ever on campus), DTR, non-committal make out, the Creamery, the Y, that slaps, a bop, yo, dang, heck, fetch, frick, freak, etc., a chad
- Provo bros, VASA bro
- y'all, girlies, rn/ofc (texting, not spoken), ncmo, suicide swipe (Mutual)
- fetch, bruh, Molly Mormon

Examples of Questions Given in the Second Survey

- Bussin': That burger was bussin' bussin'! Given the sentence, what does *bussin'* mean?
- Provo Bro: Yeah, he's cute, but he's a total Provo bro. Given the sentence, what is a Provo bro?
- Cap: No cap, dude. I really like Sarah. Given the sentence, what does *cap* mean?

Sample of Answers Collected Guessing the Definition of Provo Bro

- A guy who needs to expand his horizons.
- Not sophisticated.
- Typical guy from Provo, though I'm not really sure what that's supposed to mean.
- someone who lives in Provo all of the time not just a student. Someone who is looked down on because he is not cool since he lives here
- BYU student
- Probably someone that just wants to do summer sells and NCMO.
- Mormon boy
- Utah native dorky Provo guy.
- Dude that won't commit unless forced.
- Guy that's sheltered.

Example of Data Collection for Utah Residents 5–15.

										Average
bop	1	5	5	1	5	1	5	5	4	3.9
bussin'	4	1	1	5	1	4	5	4	4	3.2
cap	3	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	5	1.8
devo	5	1	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	4.6
DTR	5	5	1	1	5	4	1	5	1	3.1
durf	2	1	1	2	5	1	1	2	2	1.9
ghosting	5	5	5	4	5	5	5	5	5	4.9
lit	5	5	3	4	5	4	4	5	4	4.3
NCMO	5	5	5	1	5	5	1	5	5	4.1
preemie	4	3	4	3	5	5	3	2	5	3.8
Provo bro	5	2	2	3	1	3	1	2	3	2.4
serving	5	4	1	2	1	3	2	4	5	3
slaps	5	1	1	1	1	1	3	5	4	2.4
slay	5	4	5	2	3	4	1	4	5	3.7
suicide swipe	5	1	1	1	1	5	1	5	5	2.8
tea	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5