

Rizz: I study the history of charisma—here's why the word of the year is misunderstood

December 13 2023, by Tom F. Wright



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The Oxford English Dictionary has selected rizz as its word of 2023. If you've heard of it at all, you'll probably have heard that it comes from the word charisma. However, the [OED definition](#) pins it down as "style,

charm or attractiveness, and the ability to attract a romantic or sexual partner."

So, wait—which is it? Charm or charisma? The difference seems small—most people switch them up all the time. However, there has always been a subtle rivalry between the two ideas, because each embodies a quite different vision of how power works. Rizz takes this in a fascinating—and troubling—new direction, with implications for how [young people](#) talk about politics and masculinity.

Rizz migrated online from Baltimore street slang during 2021, when [YouTuber Kai Cenat](#) started dropping it into his videos as a shorthand for the ability to seduce women. Hundreds of millions of streams later, it has taken on a life of its own. He has taught a generation to use rizz [as a verb](#), to spot different kinds of rizz when they see it, and to aspire to be "[rizz kings](#)".

It is fascinating for those of us who enjoy head-scratching about language change. I am one of those people, a historian writing about [the history of charisma](#).

In the 1910s, German sociologist Max Weber repurposed "charisma," the ancient Greek word for the Christian "gift of grace," to talk about new styles of democratic leadership.

The word had a slow start. Data shows it [bursting into popularity](#) from the 1960s onwards, when it became a buzzword for talking about celebrity-driven politics. Since then, it has become the first term many of us reach for when explaining the appeal of populist politicians like Donald Trump, or [charismatic CEOs](#) like Apple's Steve Jobs.

Charisma or charm?

Now, with rizz erupting like an alien from its middle syllable, charisma has gone from a theological word to a political word to a dating word.

And here's where the paradox comes in. Today's typical rizz post on [social media](#) sees a young woman apparently won over by a man's slick confidence. But what we're actually watching here is a different word, one we used to call charm. Since that word [comes from the Latin *carmen*, for song](#), being charming can be thought of as "singing pleasing melodies to your audience"—in other words, telling people what they want to hear, or conforming to what you think another person wants.

By contrast, Weber adopted charisma as an anti-establishment idea, the "[specifically creative revolutionary force of history](#)" by which compelling individuals could mobilize people against authority. Throughout history, leaders called charismatic have frequently been abrasive, "singing songs" that crowds didn't realize they wanted to hear.

Hitler had little endearing rizz in the 2023 sense. Neither does the charmless but charismatic hero at the heart of Ridley Scott's Napoleon. By contrast, being a rizz king today is more about beguiling than challenging one's audience.

Charm and charisma also differ in scale. Rizz is native to platforms such as TikTok that, even if they involve reaching vast numbers of people, depict interactions between individuals or small groups of people. In this intimate arena, charm triumphs.

Charisma, by contrast, is seduction scaled up from the individual to a mass. It is larger than life, the macro to charm's micro. Charisma only makes sense as magnetism exerted over a crowd or populace, more attuned the cinema or television than the smartphone screen.

Rizz and gender

Most worryingly, by making charisma all about charm, rizz brings toxic gender politics and misogyny to the surface. It makes sexual prowess the measure of all things. As [critics of rizz culture](#) have begun to observe, rizz is a manosphere term—a way that young heterosexual men measure their own and rival men's place in the world.

It is quite possible that rizz owes nothing to [charisma](#), since Kai Cenat has [claimed](#) the etymology is a red herring.

But in another sense it owes everything, since the newly-acquired rizz obsession of older generations—including the OED—is clearly down to how it links back to reassuringly well-established concepts. It makes us Millennials (and older) feel that we have a grip on the language of the young.

Such interest may even kill the word off. After all, nothing has less rizz with Generations Z and Alpha than the dictionary of a 1,000-year-old university in England.

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Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Rizz: I study the history of charisma—here's why the word of the year is misunderstood (2023, December 13) retrieved 28 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-12-rizz-history-charismahere-word-year.html>

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