

HOURLY NEWS  
Connecticut Public Radio  
LIVE NOW  
PLAYLIST  
npr public

DONATE

CULTURE

# As Lizzo was called out for ableism, many Black disabled people felt overlooked

Updated June 16, 2022 · 9:54 PM ET

SHRUTI RAJKUMAR



Lizzo, pictured here on May 17 in New York City, has rerecorded a lyric in her new song after criticism that it had what many consider an ableist slur.

Noam Galai/Getty Images for YouTube

When singer-songwriter Lizzo's new single, "Grrrls," sparked a heated online

discussion over the weekend about ableist language, Black disabled activist Vilissa Thompson noticed that the conversations were dominated by certain people within the disability community.

White disabled people in the U.S. and the U.K. were calling out the singer for using the word "spaz," which many consider an ableist slur. Buried among these critiques, however, was the perspective of Black disabled people, who raised points about the need for cultural nuance and an intersectional lens to the situation.

"The erasure of Black disabled people, when it comes to a Black entertainer, has been very prominent throughout this whole thing," Thompson, a licensed master social worker, told NPR.

## **Language has history, and it holds different weight to different communities**

The term "spaz" originates from the term "spastic," which has historically been used to describe people with spastic paralysis or cerebral palsy. Often used in a derogatory way to describe people with disabilities, "spaz" or "spaz out" has also been used to refer to someone losing physical control or simply acting "weird" or "uncool."

---

### **Sponsor Message**

In online conversations, white disabled people in the U.S. and the U.K were speaking about their experiences with the word. Meanwhile, Black people in the U.S. and the U.K. pointed out how the word, which some say is a part of African American Vernacular English, is used differently by Black people within their countries. Thompson wished there were an amplification of Black disabled people who understand the nuances of those who use the word and those who are reclaiming it.

She pointed out that language evolves and that if the history of the word is offensive or has been used to oppress a particular group, it's on each person to unlearn it.

"The onus is on us to not just unlearn but also update and improve the way that we communicate with each other, so that our words are intentionally used, so that they don't cause unintentional harm," Thompson said.

Thompson believes that the way people go about critiquing others is very important. In reading the discussions online, she said she noticed they perpetuated anti-Blackness and misogynoir, or misogyny directed at Black women.

She noted that rather than fostering an open dialogue about ableist language and engaging in a conversation with Lizzo about it, the critiques piled on and missed the mark.

"I was shocked but not surprised by the way that white disabled people, especially those who claim to be in solidarity with Black disabled people, engaged in the conversation. You are not in solidarity with us if your behavior during this time in addressing Lizzo can be read as problematic [and] offensive," Thompson said.

## **Holding people accountable is important but so is recognizing the racial dynamics at play**

Criticism is much harsher for Black people with high profiles, particularly if they are not disabled and stumble when it comes to disability and language, Thompson added. For example, when white musicians use ableist language in their songs, they may receive some backlash but not the same visceral reaction that Black people do,

Thompson said.

"I'm always particular about how white people and non-Black people of color engage with Black women who look a certain way. [Lizzo is] unintentionally a polarizing figure ... because she has the audacity to be comfortable in her skin as a fat Black woman. If she does something that people don't like, the pile-ons feel exacerbated, and at times unnecessarily, when it comes to her," she said.

Lizzo released a statement on Monday acknowledging the "harmful word" in her song and announcing a rerecorded version of the song without the slur in it. "I never want to promote derogatory language. As a fat black woman in America, I've had many hurtful words used against me so I understand the power words can have (whether intentionally or in my case, unintentionally)," she wrote in her statement.

**lizzobeeating**

12.6M followers

[View profile](#)

It's been brought to my attention that there is a harmful word in my new song "GRRRLS". Let me make one thing clear: I never want to promote derogatory language. As a fat black woman in America, I've had many hurtful words used against me so I understand the power words can have (whether intentionally or in my case, unintentionally). I'm proud to say there's a new version of GRRRLS with a lyric change. This is the result of me listening and taking action. As an influential artist I'm dedicated to being part of the change I've been waiting to see in the world. Xoxo, Lizzo.

[View more on Instagram](#)**1,015,043 likes****lizzobeeating**

view all 16,674 comments

Add a comment...

Shortly after the post and the song's rerelease, disabled people praised Lizzo for being so receptive and for responding well to the community's feedback.

Thompson noted, however, that she was not surprised that Lizzo responded the way that she did. Having done work in Black progressive spaces, Thompson has seen Black

people who are not versed in disability but who actively work to do better. They know the importance of understanding when they've messed up and being inclusive to everybody, she said.

"Grace and room for correction are typically not given [to Black people]. The double standard of inconsistent reactions is profound. They don't trust Black people to do the right thing," she said.

Lizzo

---

## Sign Up For Breaking News Alerts

Stay on top of the latest stories and developments, sent when news breaks.

By subscribing, you agree to NPR's terms of use and privacy policy. NPR may share your name and email address with your NPR station. See Details. This site is protected by reCAPTCHA and the Google Privacy Policy and Terms of Service apply.

## More Stories From NPR

