

Usage of the Term "Sketchy"

Abstract

Research to determine the definition of "sketchy" was completed using the *Oxford English Dictionary*. In order to understand the how the term "sketchy" is being used in today's society an eight question survey was distributed to twenty participants. The most common discovery of this completed research suggests that the term "sketchy" is mainly used by young adult females to express a strong negative feeling about someone or something. The study also suggests that the term "sketchy" is understood by many as a negative feeling, however, when used by males in relation to a physical action it can contain a different meaning and when used by aging adults it may be used with involvement of the original meaning and in no way related to the slang definition.

Background

Slang terms are being used every single day, all the time, with people not even realizing it. These slang terms have been given one meaning in the past and weren't always considered slang terms. Over time these words have changed to adapt with today's society, therefore, becoming a part of American slang. One term that is becoming more and more common is "sketchy." In today's society, "sketchy" can have many different variations of meanings depending on the situation and/or the person using it.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the adjective form of "sketchy" as "giving only a slight or rough outline of the main features, facts, or circumstances without going into details." This definition relates to the way most people use the term today, but it is not exact. Sketchy sums up the situation one may be in or a person without going into great detail of why it is intimidating, which relates to the *OED*'s definition. This word does not come from one certain origin but instead has a background in many different locations including Germany, Italy, and France. The word was first used in the early 19th century to describe something that has minimal detail and instead provides a rough outline.

Today, "sketchy" is a word used quite often to describe many different things including, but not limited to places, ideas, and people. Even now people use the term in many different situations, however, the term almost always contains a negative feeling one has towards something or someone they would describe as risky, scary, or uninviting. People use the term "sketchy" to show their feelings of concern. Anything that can put one's life in danger or bring

about trouble can be described as "sketchy." How is the term "sketchy" currently being used, if at all, by both male and female teenage students and working female adults? Research was completed and the results are provided to determine how the term "sketchy" is used in today's society.

Methods

The research carried out in order to discover how the term "sketchy" is applied in today's society began with handing out twenty surveys containing eight questions relating to "sketchy" and how one uses the term. Defining the term, providing a similar and an opposite term, giving a sentence, and relating the term to his or her personal experience were all included in the study questions. After the eight questions were answered, the respondents then had to inform their gender, age, and location.

These twenty people who answered these surveys were mainly high school and college students with an addition of two working adults. The research included eleven females and nine males with ages ranging from seventeen to forty-nine. Eighteen of the respondents were between the ages of seventeen and nineteen, while only two were between the ages of forty-five and forty-nine. The individuals completed the survey provided to them either in their dorm room, a relative's house, or their own home beginning on February 5th and ending on the 7th of February in 2012.

All of the following data, received from the following twenty individuals who participated in the research study, has been obtained in order to provide valid information regarding the use of the slang term "sketchy." The data was sorted multiple different ways in order to receive the most possible and accurate information given throughout the surveys and

analyze the information accurately and successfully. Some of the ways the data was sorted include by gender, by age, and by definitions. Once the data was analyzed in each of these groups, the data was then sorted in more specific ways including separating age and genders, separating genders and definitions, and separating age and definitions in order to find the most patterns in the data.

Results

The participants involved in the research of the use of the term "sketchy," were first asked to define the term in no more than one sentence. Sixteen out of the twenty participants (ten females and six males) defined "sketchy" as someone or something that is shady, scary, dangerous, or suspicious. An eighteen year old female defined "sketchy" as "something that is scary or can be dangerous." All defined "sketchy" in an extremely similar way if not exactly the same. The other four respondents defined the term quite differently. Three seventeen year old male respondents defined "sketchy" as something that related to barely finishing or completing something successfully. A seventeen year old stated, "Accomplishing something with a rough landing or finish." The forty-nine year old female provided the definition of "sketchy" as "sketchy relates to being bare bones, minimal, and vague," which is spot on with the *OED* definition.

When asked to provide a synonym of the term "sketchy," the sixteen respondents with the similar definitions also provided similar synonyms that related to their definitions. Some of the sixteen synonyms provided were "suspicious," "uneasy," "unsafe," and "scary." A forty-five year old female provided me with the synonym, "uncertain." The other three male respondents provided the synonyms related to an ending of some sort that included "rough," "close-call," and

"risky." The synonym, "minimal," was provided by the last female and related to the *OED* definition.

Sixteen antonyms were related to "sketchy" being something or someone that is shady and/or frightening. Some of these antonyms included "trustworthy," "funny," "friendly," and "predictable." A seventeen year old male provided the antonym, "exquisite." Two male respondents provided the antonym, "smooth," and one provided "perfect" all in relation to a completion of some sort. The antonym provided in relation to the *OED* definition was, "detailed."

The participants were also asked to use the term "sketchy" in a sentence. Once again sixteen of these sentences related to a person, place, or thing that appears unappealing. An eighteen year old male provided the sentence, "That haunted house looks pretty sketchy, brah." A sentence provided by an eighteen year old female was, "The dark alley was sketchy so I walked around." Three sentences given by seventeen year old males were in relation to the term "sketchy" being used to describe the ending of something. One male stated, "That was a sketchy landing," while another one stated, "That catch in the end zone was so sketchy the ball was bobbling all over the place." The sentence given by the forty-nine year old female in relation to the term meaning minimal was, "Her sketchy description of the event did not help the investigator to understand what actually happened."

When asked if the respondents had ever used this term thirteen said yes and seven said no. Of these thirteen that have used the term "sketchy" ten were girls and only three were guys. Five of these girls used the term to describe a guy they did not find appealing, but instead someone they wanted to avoid because he was "dirty looking and creepy." Three of the girls had used the term to describe a place they found uninviting and dangerous looking. One girl used the

term to describe a friend's plan that she thought was dangerous and could get her in trouble. Out of these nine girls, six are seventeen and four are eighteen. The forty-nine year old female also used this term to describe her son's explanation for why he missed curfew as vague "because he left too many unanswered questions." Two seventeen year old guys who have used the term "sketchy" used it in relation to the landing of some sort. One used it while skateboarding to describe his friend's landing of a trick "but wasn't smooth at all because he was close to falling" while the other used it when watching *Supercross* to describe one of the riders "landing after the triple because he barely made it." An eighteen year old male used the term to describe a rest stop surrounded by woods really late at night that he found to be scary.

When asked if any of the participants had been called "sketchy" in some way eighteen responded with no. Of these eighteen eleven were females and seven were males. Two males had the term directed towards them before. A seventeen year old male said while skateboarding with a friend, his friend had called his landing of a trick "sketchy" because he barely made it back on the board. An eighteen year old male said his female friend had called his idea of sneaking into the movie "sketchy" because she was afraid of getting caught.

The participants were then asked if they had ever used the term "sketchy" to describe themselves in some way. Nineteen of the respondents said no and only one said yes. The one respondent, a seventeen year old male who said yes, used the term when telling his friend a story about his own landing of a dirt bike jump while he was riding. After telling his story about how he barely made it over the triple he summed it up and said, "It was sketchy and I don't know how I landed it."

The final questions the participants were asked to answer was whether or not they found the term "sketchy" as an insult or a compliment. Seventeen, eleven females and six males,

believed it to be an insult to be called sketchy because the person who called the respondent "sketchy" would have a negative feeling about him or her. A seventeen year old male stated, "It would be an insult because people wouldn't feel comfortable around me and would think I was a suspicious dude." A forty-nine year old female whom described the word in relation to someone being very vague stated, "I would interpret it as an insulting because clearly they don't buy my argument." Two seventeen year old males stated it was neither an insult nor a compliment because it was merely describing an action they had barely completed. One male, who is seventeen, said he would take it as a compliment in relation to the landing of his dirt bike because "even though I barely landed the jump successfully, I still managed to land it."

Discussion

This study was completed in order to determine who uses the term "sketchy" and how they go about using it. Before the research began, "sketchy" was thought to be a negative term used mainly by teenage females to describe a person, place, or thing they were concerned about. As the research was completed involving both males and females mainly of the same age, the results were not too surprising with a few exceptions.

The teenage females who participated in this study provided expected results of how they understand the word "sketchy." Not one teenage girl found the term as a positive thing, but instead all found the term to be negative and related to something she would want to avoid. This suggests that when a young adult female uses this term, she is using it in a similar way as the participants use it.

The male participants in this study provided two different meanings for the term "sketchy," one being not at all expected. Most of the teenage males who participated provided expected data involving "sketchy" being a negative term to describe something shady or creepy.

Even though through the data one realizes that most males do not actually use the term, however, the data still suggests males have an understanding of how females are using it.

It was surprising to find out that three out of the nine males who participated in this study described the term in a completely different way than what was expected. The idea that "sketchy" is used to describe the finishing or landing of some type of action was rather interesting. This suggests that males whom are using the term use it more often to describe a physical action that is risky to complete or a physical action that was completed with barely just escaping the action successfully.

Also, these males did not see the term "sketchy" as a negative term, but instead one even saw it as a positive thing. This was not expected at all, but after further explanation of how these three males use the term their use was clearly understood. This also suggests that teenage males whom use the term "sketchy" in relation to physical actions can be considered the active, risk-taking type of males.

When it came to female adults using the term "sketchy," only two participants were involved, therefore, there was not enough data collected to accurately analyze how female adults use this term. However, one can still learn from the results that were provided and still be surprised by both responses.

The data provided by both adult females were surprising in different ways, but both involved a negative feeling towards the term. One of the two adult participants came to understand the term "sketchy" just as all other teenage females understand the term. This is rather shocking because it was not at all expected that older adults would understand the current teenage slang. This suggests that some adults may pay attention to the current slang of today's

society that is being used by teenagers, or maybe this term was being used the same way it is being used today back in her teenage years.

When it came to the other adult participant's data, one can also be shocked at how spot on it is with the definition the term "sketchy" was given back in the 19th century. This was more expected than the other adult's results she provided me with. One can expect a different understanding of the term "sketchy" by an adult than by teenagers, but it was not expected to be so accurate with the *OED* definition. This suggests that this in particular participant may be well-educated and less aware of the current teenage slang.

The expected data that was received came as no surprise, but still is connected with the *OED* definition as also expected. The females whom use the term and the males whom understand how females use the term as something that one would want to keep his or her distance from are still providing just a simple outline of how they feel about someone or something. Although teenagers are using the term in a more negative way than it initially was used, the data still suggests that how the term is used today by teenagers has a small relation to how it was used in previous generations.

It is surprising to see the difference between how teenage females and teenage males use the term. Expected data that was not received involved the male usage of the word. It was not at all surprising that females use the term more than males, however, it was surprising how little men actually use this term in the same way females do. This can suggest that females are more concerned about things than males might be and/or males do not and do not want to show their concern as much as females do.

With the results established throughout the study, one can come to the understanding that teenage females use this term the way they are expected and teenage males understand how

females are using this term, but when these men use it themselves they use it in a whole different way. When it comes to the understanding of how adults are using the term "sketchy" the data collected does not provide enough research to properly provide accurate information of how most female adults use "sketchy."

References

Sketchy. (2011). *Oxford English Dictionary online*. Accessed 2 February 2012.

<<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/180778>>