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The "Friendzone": Renegotiating Gender Performance and Boundaries in Relationship Discourse

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The “Friendzone”:  
Renegotiating Gender Performance and Boundaries in Relationship Discourse

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Abstract

The term *friendzone* has become more and more common in the vernacular of younger generations, particularly over the past few years. This term is predominantly used in a relationship context, and always to negotiate the boundaries between platonic and romantic relationships. Due to the assumed heterosexual default for the romantic marketplace, this term is used not only to negotiate relationships but also to perform gender, redefining and shifting the roles of young men and young women in romantic as well as platonic relationships. Through a series of interviews and surveys, this study focuses on ideologies inherent in the term *friendzone*, as well as the ways in which the word is used in everyday conversation. I argue that the disparity between representation and reality reflects a changing understanding in cross-gender relationships, as well as in how to perform one’s own gender in relationship contexts, both platonic and romantic. The thesis thus analyzes the disparity between ideologies of the term *friendzone* and its actualities—or rather, how the term is actually used in day-to-day situations. The goal is to discover how the term is used to perform gender in these scenarios and what the term means for the generations that use it.
0. **Introduction**

At first look, defining the term *friend zone* or *friendzone* seems relatively straightforward. (As a side note, *friend zone* spelled as two words appears to be the older form of the term, whereas recent spellings of the term are commonly *friendzone*). As an article titled *Escape the Friend Zone: From Friend to Girlfriend or Boyfriend* from *Psychology Today* puts it, “the friend zone’ refers to a situation where one individual in a friendship develops more intense feelings and wants to become ‘more than friends’ with the other person” (“Escape The Friend Zone,” 2011). This is a straightforward, gender-neutral definition. However, it is also a simplification of a term that has grown to be loaded with a number of connotations and alternate definitions. A user on the website “Urban Dictionary”, a site dedicated to collecting and defining slang, defined the term eight years ago as, “What you attain after you fail to impress a woman you're attracted to. Usually initiated by the woman saying, ‘You're such a good friend’. Usually associated with long days of suffering and watching your love interest hop from one bad relationship to another” (“Urban Dictionary”, 2003). This is far from the most vitriolic definition on the website. Clearly, these two definitions, though defining the same word, exhibit different meanings. The question then becomes how a term with such diverse meanings can be used effectively—and why.

Without a doubt, everyday use of the word *friendzone* varies from its more formal definitions. Language does not remain static; it is constantly evolving. However, while it is impossible to expect everyone to have the same definition of any given word, when the definitions are so distinct as to be almost unrecognizable, there must exist problems of understanding. To attribute this merely to gender differences is a simplification. I suggest
in this thesis that differences in meaning do not arise out of inherent differences between men and women; rather, the use of the term *friendzoning* is an example of the performance of gender through language. So long as gender is constructed out of a series of actions and consolidated through repetition through time, so too is gender performed by speech acts (Butler, 1988). In a society still dominated by heterosexual beliefs, there is very little as important in the performance of gender as the performance of relationships between men and women. This fact has led to countless articles and studies regarding whether or not women and men are capable of being friends, many of which reflect an under-appreciation and marginalization of cross-gender friendships (Monsour, 2002). A concept such as *friendzone* is a distinct way for a generation to attempt to navigate their gender identity, especially in relation to the “opposite” gender.

The purpose of this study is to define the term *friendzoning* amongst the particular demographic of college-age youth, as well as the ways in which the word can be used. An attempt will be made to gather accepted grammatical forms of the word, as well as synonyms or associated words. There are currently no proper definitions of the word; though it has an online entry in the Oxford Dictionaries, it is a scant definition that does not address the myriad of ways that it can be used. This study will instead gather definitions from the generation that popularized the term. With this data, it is possible to observe how the word functions for college students who identify as men and women, and how it contributes to their identities. For both men and women who recognize the term, *friendzoning* is distinctly pejorative; this is an essential aspect to understanding why its use is so important. For the defining term of a generation to have such negative connotations makes a statement about how the performance of gender is changing, both
in same-sex and cross-sex interaction. The use of the term *friendzone* is a social practice, but it is a social practice that reveals changing attitudes about relationships, both romantic and platonic, and the negotiation of these relationships.

This study will discuss the results of both anonymous surveys and of interviews of both men and women. These men and women will have their generation in common; all subjects were between the ages of 18 and 22, and college students at the University of Colorado at Boulder. The surveys will be analyzed to gather a basic understanding of the definitions of the term *friendzone*, as well as its grammatical aspects. The interviews will be analyzed to determine how the term *friendzone* is used in different contexts, amongst different genders, and why.

I begin with a review of the literature that is relevant to this topic and that has influenced the current study of language and gender. I will also review the short history of the term *friendzone*: specifically, where it came from and why it is such a popular term amongst particular age groups. I will then discuss the methods and process of this study. This will be followed by the results gathered from the study, their significance, and their implications. I will finish with a discussion of these implications, as well as what further research needs to be undertaken in order to fully understand the impact of the word *friendzone* and its reach.

The use of the term *friendzone* in college student discourse is a performance of gender that separates itself from the connotations it carries both in the media and on the Internet. This performance is a negotiation of cross-gender platonic relationships in a context where default heterosexual romantic relationships places pressure on young men and women to become romantically involved.
1. Understanding the Performance of the Friendzone

1.1 The Performative Approach to Language and Gender

The study of language as it pertains to gender has gone through a number of large changes as the field grew and developed. This is relevant for how the term friendzone will be discussed in this study. Early language and gender research established the existence of a dominance model and a difference model (see Eckert 2003). The dominance model established that women speak differently from the norm—that is, men’s speech—due to societal constraints (Lakoff, 1975). Specifically, differences in men’s speech and women’s speech arise out of male dominance over women through patriarchal systems (Freed, 1992). The difference model, in contrast, posits that women and men belong to different subcultures and thus orient to different norms of speaking. Men and women can be shown to speak differently through empirical analysis of discourse, as well as our intuitive understanding of the situation (Tannen, 1990). But as critics of the difference model have claimed, it is dangerous to stop the analysis here. Caution has to be taken when studying differences split by gender. These differences do not merely reflect gendered subcultures, but also societal pressures and constructs.

Following this, a method of analyzing linguistic performance was formed that involves acknowledging language as something that constructs gender. Our gender does not determine how we speak, but rather is constructed by what we say (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2003). This is because gender can be considered a social performance: through a myriad of acts, what we choose to say and how we say it, we are performing our genders every single day (Butler, 1990).
There are many more variables that need to be considered when analyzing language traits, even with gender as the main focus. A binary gender consideration is almost more harmful than helpful when analyzing language. Thus, the acknowledgement of the existence of varied communities of practice within the gender binary has assisted in diversifying the way language and gender are analyzed. At the same time, there has been a shift towards acknowledging sexuality and how it influences the connection between language and gender (Cameron, 2005). With the shift towards gender as performance, it is possible to account for things that do not fit within the rigid binary established before. For example, Kira Hall’s study of the parodies of sexuality and identity by the kotis of New Delhi documents how the performance of language not only authenticates the identities of these men who act like the third-sex hijras, it also reframes the very relationship between sexuality and identity (Hall, 2005).

By conceptualizing gender as performance, scholars have been able to challenge assumptions regarding the “naturalness” of heterosexuality. For example, many scholars have reconceptualized childhood as a “heterosexual market”—the site where boys and girls first learn how to negotiate relationships in a romantic context (Thorne, 1993). This market presumes heterosexuality, marginalizing those who do not participate and setting into motion how girls and boys will approach relationships in the future (Eckert 2003). Part of what girls and boys learn through this project is the language to perform their role in this market (Eckert 2011). As I will show, friendzoning is a direct consequence of this sort of societal construction of relationships, especially in the “heterosexual market”.

Language and the negotiation of power is an extremely important aspect to consider in analyzing a term like friendzone. Within language is the ability to negotiate
power structures through what words are used and how (Bourdieu, 1991). Even well
known systems of power can be undermined and renegotiated through the use of
language in particular ways. It is possible for women to find other ways to obtain more
power for themselves in each individual scenario, regardless of the status quo and current
existing forms of power (Hall, 1995).

It is also important here to discuss other studies done on contemporary slang that
is directly related to gender. For example, studying the sorts of terms college students
were able to generate for the penis, Cameron shows that there is a significant element of
power in the way sexual relationships are conceptualized (Cameron, 1992). Conversely,
there is an element of risk when it comes to slang terms for women. According to Sutton,
there “is a higher percentage of negative words for women than positive, and the positive
words all focus on the attractiveness of women to men as sexual partners” (Sutton, 1995:
286). Thus, it is important to note that the linguistic reflexes of power often suggest
danger for women but power and prestige for men. This observation will help frame the
discussion of friendzoning and how it is used.

1.2 The Growth of the Friendzone

The concept of the friendzone is not new, even if the term itself is. Speakers can
generally explain the context of a relationship that has been demoted from romantic to
friendly without using this term. Why, then, use the word friendzone? It may help to trace
the development of the word itself to understand its sudden popularity amongst the
particular age group that is the focus of this study.

In 1994, the sitcom Friends aired an episode titled “The One with the Blackout”.
In it, a male character by the name of Ross is in love with a character named Rachel; she,
however, does not know it. In this context, the following conversation takes place between Ross and his male friend Chandler.

1  C:  Never gonna happen.
2  R:  (...) (laughs) What?
3  C:  You and Rachel.
4  R:  (laughs incredulously) What a, me and Rachel, what a, uhh eh? (...) Why not?
5  C:  Because, you waited too long to make your move and now you’re (...) in the friendzone.
6  R:  No no no, I’m not in the zone.
7  C:  No, Ross, you’re mayor of the zone.
8  R:  Look, I’m taking my time, alright, I’m I’m laying the groundwork. Yeah, I mean, every day I get just a little bit closer to uh
9  C:  Priesthood!
10 R:  Look, Ross, I’m telling you, she has no idea what you’re thinking.
11 R:  Oh yeah? She just (...) ran her fingers through my hair. Were you uh, missing that interaction?
12 C:  No no no no no no no. This is running fingers through your hair. Kay? Now this is a tousle. (...) Look, Ross, if you don’t ask her out soon, you’re gonna end up stuck in the zone forever.
13 R:  I will, I will. I’m just (...) see I’m waiting for the uh, the right moment.

This is the first known media usage of the term *friendzone*, and though its usage in this excerpt is somewhat different from how it is used today (for one, the word *zone* is used instead of *friendzone*), the basic context seems to be the same. Ross is in love with Rachel and has had an interaction that he believes is romantic. Chandler, on the other hand, has recognized that Ross’s feelings for Rachel are not reciprocated, thus his urging Ross to act on the situation lest he “end up stuck in the zone forever”. There are a few other similarities between this usage and how the term is used now; for one, it is a casual word used in groups of good friends, almost always of the same gender. Another notable feature in this usage is the idea that “zoning” is permanent. While this is what Chandler
suggests is the case in this portion of dialogue, in the series it is proven false, as Ross and Rachel do end up romantically involved. The message, then, is that the friendzone can be transcended and a romantic relationship can be obtained, no matter how grim the outlook. As I will illustrate, personal accounts of friendzoning express conflicting opinions as to whether or not this transcendence is possible.

After this 1994 usage, the term does not re-emerge in media representations until 2002 and 2003. In 2002, a post titled “Friend Zone, Truth or Fiction? Ladies?” was submitted on a forum. A year later, the definition cited above was entered into the Urban Dictionary in 2003 (“Friend Zone”, 2012). There was resurgence then of the use of the term on the Internet, which is corroborated by the trend of Google searches for the term, which are practically non-existent before the mid-2000’s. However, the term did not truly hit its peak until January 2012—which is not long after the first episode of the MTV show *Friendzone* aired. This does not mean, however, that the term was not used in everyday interaction before this time.

Yet this short history does go a long way towards explaining the generational gap of the word *friendzone*. The term did not originate on the Internet, yet this is where it gained its popularity as well as a sense of vernacularism. It was this freedom of use that finally shoved the word *friendzone* into more commonly used slang, but only amongst the generation most firmly entrenched in the Internet. This generation is the generation that saw and made the memes surrounding the term, used it in every day conversations, and slowly spread it throughout their friendship groups.

The friendzone still has a strong presence on the Internet, in particular on Facebook, dating sites, and similar social media sites that depend on interactions between
people, often romantic. However, it is no longer solely common on the internet, and has instead taken on a life of its own, particularly in middle schools, high schools, and colleges—places where young men and women are negotiating their identities, especially when it comes to dating and romance.

2. Methodology

2.1 The Friendzone Generation

To begin collecting data on this topic, I first had to isolate an age group to investigate. While the term originally appeared in 1994, its common usage did not truly show up until at least ten years later; the generation that created, expanded, and spread the word is the generation most native to technology, or the Digital Natives. Digital Natives are those who grew up with computers, the Internet, and other prevalent pieces of technology, and thus, the current average college student falls into this category (Prensky, 2001). While likely unfamiliar with the exact origin of the word friendzone, a number of the students interviewed were very aware that its source was the Internet; this seemed to influence how they viewed the term. A young woman, Isabelle, who I interviewed, had this to say about where she had learned the term.

[1]
1 I: Ah, I’m going to go with starting Tumblr but maybe I heard of it in middle school, just because it is kind of an internet related term. And then I guess too that whole culture comes up with funny terms for things so I just sort of learned about it through that and it was kind of like “oh my god this is like the perfect thing”. (laughs)

She acknowledges that it is a term derived from the Internet, in particular from a website known as Tumblr. The way the term is used on the internet has shaped the way she thinks
about and uses the term, which is my primary reason for choosing to focus on this age group. Thus, all participants in both the survey and the interviews were between 18 and 24 years of age.

Similarly, this is also the generation that would be most familiar with the term’s rise to popularity. They would be able to help me pinpoint its spread by telling me when they first heard the term and which age groups they believed would use it. This generation, therefore, is not merely the first generation of Digital Natives, they are also the generation that would have watched the term *friendzone* appear and develop into the very forms that they themselves used in their surveys or interviews with me. Thus they are users of the word, but also observers of it, something that was very clear in their descriptions of the term, which were often quite sophisticated and thoughtful when it came to its origins and use.

Furthermore, an even split between men and women was necessary to get as wide a range of opinions as possible. While there are dangers in dividing language use by solely gender, as has been critiqued in a number of earlier works, such as those by Lakoff and Tannen, gender is still an important variable in the understanding of words such as friendzoning, which are so heavily encoded in the heterosexual dating sphere. Data from the men and women involved in the study does show key differences in how the word *friendzone* and derivations are perceived, but this is not due to a difference in biological sex, but rather how gender is performed differently in these contexts, and for a number of reasons.

While other variables, such as students’ cultural groups, interests, and other diverse features, are undeniably important to analyzing the way in which language is
used, the focus here will be on age, gender, and context of the discourse in question. This will hopefully allow for an analysis of how the term is used in this particular age group to perform gender amongst their peers and same-sex groups, specifically by analyzing their definitions, grammatical constructs, and the stories they tell in their interviews.

2.2 Process and Findings

In order to conduct this study, two forms of data collecting were utilized. First, one hundred anonymous surveys were distributed, both by paper and on the internet, to college-aged men and women who were interested in participating in the study. Because it was an anonymous survey, the only personal information gathered was the participant’s gender. These surveys were all distributed to young men and women in fraternities and sororities, as this means that they already self-identified as the gender in question, as well as being a large source of data. The remainder of the questions focused on definitions and grammatical information. First, by gathering as many definitions as possible from the generation that is most commonly using the term, I hoped to find which definitions are most popular, as well as what outlying definitions mean for its usage and the ability to understand what the friendzone is. Second, I focused on grammatical forms in order to find how flexible the usage of the word is, as well as what forms are most commonly used. Again, this is helpful in developing a picture of the word’s basic definition, as well as what the “proper” usage of the word is. What grammatical forms are most common can explain a great deal about the function of the friendzone, something that was noted even by those I interviewed. Any gendered differences in the grammatical usage of the
term is also something to be noted, as it means the word is used differently among different groups of people.

Ten interviews were also collected for this study. These interviews were one-on-one, as, while many of the interviewees talked about the use of the term *friendzone* in their same-sex friend groups, having focus groups of multiple people around the term seemed to cause discomfort. This is likely due to the fact that the word *friendzone* is only ever to be used amongst close friend groups, and very rarely, if ever, among unacquainted peoples. In respect to this, all interviews were conducted one-on-one between the researcher and the participant in a private location. All names have been changed and all information de-identified in order to protect the information of the participants. Interviews were also collected only from parties interested in participating in the study and who felt strongly enough about the term *friendzone* to be willing to talk about it. Unlike in surveys, interviews were collected only from people who were already familiar with the term and its meaning.

These interviews were intended to obtain first person accounts of the term *friendzone* in three particular areas: (1) when the term was first heard or used by the participant; (2) what contexts it is most commonly found in according to the participant, and (3) personal accounts of a situation that the participant would define as friendzoning. The first is to set a baseline for when the term *friendzone* first began to be used in the common vernacular. Secondly, the contexts in which the term is most commonly found are useful in determining the sorts of group make-up that the use of the term *friendzone* can be found in: as it is a performance of gender, the people it is performed to and in what contexts are extremely significant. Finally, personal accounts of situations in which
the term friendzone comes up are an amalgamation of the previous points, while also providing the benefit of real world situations and contexts, as well as a number of examples of how the term would be used in sentences and particular situations.

3. Perceptions of Friendzoning

3.1 Ideologies of the Media

There are a number of different situations and contexts that the term friendzone is used in. The media uses the term differently from how it is used in everyday conversation. This disparity will be called the “ideology” of friendzoning. Here, ideology is used to mean the ideal of the term friendzone as reflected by how the media portrays it. In media such as television shows, the term is either the basis of the show (such as MTV’s Friendzone) or the product of a conversation between two men, where the term does not need explanation but is there to describe the situation. The MTV show Friendzone has the description:

Long-standing friendships will be tested as individuals try to navigate their way from best-friendship to relationship. What happens when you ask your best friend to help you prepare for an upcoming blind date... only to later reveal that the date is actually intended for the two of you! Will the feelings be mutual... or will your friendship be ruined forever? (“MTV”, 2014).

Already, there is a distinct change from the discourse that has surrounded the term friendzone thus far. Here, the show has presented a dichotomy—either the friendzone will be “exited” and the relationship will proceed to dating, or the friendship will “be ruined forever”. Similarly presenting this dichotomy in a visual way is the opening title
screen, which presents the word *Friendzone* with a heart around the “zone” half of the word (Salsano, 2011). This clearly romantic gesture splits the word in two. This is the premise of the show as it is set up, and the speech of those in the show itself are equally revealing.

The episode analyzed is the first in the very first season, which portrays a young woman (Gaby) who wishes to “get out of the friendzone”, as she puts it (Salsano, 2011). In a filmed discussion with her mother, the following conversation occurs:

1  M:  It may not be what you *want* (...) but you guys are
2  G:  best friends, I mean, even if you don’t (...) end up
3  G:  going *quote* unquote "as a date" you’re still friends.
4  M:  I *hope*.
5  M:  *Just as important*.
6  G:  This is like, it's like now or never.

This seems to fit the dramatized tone of the entire show, and allowances should be made for both the fact that this is a filmed conversation and that it is for a dramatic show.

However, due to those two factors, it is especially revealing for how the media *intends* to present “friendzoning” as a concept. Much like the dramatic premise of the TV show, the actors within it seem to believe that it is impossible for the friendzone to exist at the same time that an actual platonic relationship does. It either becomes a romantic relationship, or there is no friendship at all. This intention of pitting the two against each other—where there is the *friendzone* versus a relationship of any sort—is clear even in the earlier conversation transcribed from the *Friends* episode it first appeared in.

Chandler says, “If you don’t ask her out soon, you’re gonna end up stuck in the zone forever” (Crane and Kauffman, 1994). The concept of an actual relationship coexisting with the friendzone is a foreign one as portrayed by the media.
There are also the negative connotations of the friendzone made very clear in this episode. The second part of the episode is devoted to Conner, who wants to “leave the friendzone” to be in a relationship with his friend Brittanie. He states to the camera, “I feel like a little like puppy dog that just like, follows her around” (Salsano, 2011). He certainly is not evoking flattering imagery here when talking about his current relationship with his friend. There is a sense of the friendzone as a derogatory term, or a “place” where nobody wants to be. Earlier, Gaby similarly said with her statement, “I’m so sick of being in the friendzone” (Salsano, 2011). This is the sort of reaction that is promoted just by the very show’s existence, of course. By creating a show with the set-up to allow those who are “in the friendzone” to confess and hopefully change the mind of their friend, the entire show’s premise makes it clear that the friendzone is the less desirable place to be.

This is not the case only in shows such as Friendzone, where this is the entire premise. In a show called Parenthood, an episode titled “In Dreams Begin Responsibilities”, a boy who is having trouble with his relationship with a female classmate goes to ask his uncle for advice. His uncle (in the presence of a second uncle) says:

1 U: Drew, Drew, listen to me. You are at a critical (...) juncture
2 with this young lady. Okay? Right now, she sees you as a friend.
3 U2: Ooooh.
4 U: Okay. You've got a very small window (...) to break through
5 the friendzone and into the funzone.

The second uncle’s entire contribution to this segment of the conversation is to providing the disapproving “Ooooh”, overlapping the first uncle’s explanation that this
young woman sees Drew “as a friend”. This position is clearly seen as negative by both male adult figures. Even the contrast of the term “funzone” (a made up term for this moment in the show) to friendzone makes it clear that the friendzone is an antonym of a fun place to be. Therefore, the media examples of the use of the term friendzone is an example of a word with very negative connotations describing a place nobody wants to be in.

There is one more significant implication offered by media usages of the term friendzone, and that is the sense of entitlement that the usage of the term implies. For example, in the episode from Friendzone, Conner states, “I’m gonna tell her how I really feel and then (...) just hope that (...) I get the reaction I really deserve” (Salsano, 2011). It is clear from the usage of the words “I really deserve” that Conner believes that he deserves to not be in the friendzone—in other words, he deserves to have a romantic relationship with his friend. This entitlement is another subtle connotation in the use of the term friendzone, and while it is rarely stated outright as in this statement, it is most easily seen in rebuttals against its sense of entitlement. However, for it to be rebutted, this connotation has to exist in the first place, and it undoubtedly is one of the many things that makes the friendzone such a complicated term.

The media thus employs three main ideologies about the friendzone: the connotations of a sense of entitlement, the negative connotations associated with the term, and the dichotomy built around the friendzone and relationships. It could be argued that the media has a stake in promoting romantic love; after all, romantic love is what “sells” (Galician, 2006). Whatever the case, the media’s use of this term differs from how it is used in everyday discourse, though its influence cannot be dismissed.
3.2 Ideologies of the Internet

While it would be impossible to reduplicate every single opinion on the term friendzone from the Internet here, it is possible to gather mass general opinion in a number of ways and gauge Internet ideologies in that way. Again, here ideologies are defined as the way in which the term is used to show an “ideal” definition of what it means according to the use in this context. However, ideologies of friendzone are starkly divided online. The very exaggerated and extreme views suggest that the word no longer even means the same thing, depending on the context it is being used in online. As the rapid expansion of the use of friendzone as a word began on the Internet, the term has had a longer time to grow there. Therefore, perhaps it is not surprising that there has been a great deal of semantic shift. In particular, there is a strong atmosphere of reclamation and pushback towards the term, usually but not always divided along gendered terms. This negotiation between meanings does not exist in the media like it does on the Internet, which makes this domain a particularly interesting context for the ideologies that have been developed there for the friendzone.

One of the easiest ways to gauge popular opinion on the Internet is to survey the most popular videos on Youtube under that term. A quick search of friendzone on Youtube will return a number of videos that are particularly interesting for the study of the ideologies of this term. First of all, the majority of these first videos are videos in response to perceived uses of the term. There were very few videos that discussed the term separate from any sort of rebuttal about its usage and connotations. This carries implications about the term’s ideologies on its own. For instance, it is clearly a word
that contains very provocative connotations, enough so that at the time of writing this, the first two most popular videos on the topic are a discussion of its problematic aspects (“The Science of the Friend Zone”) and a song parodying the concept (“Friend Zone – Your Favorite Martian music video”). This doesn’t mean that videos describing the friendzone without censor don’t exist; they certainly do, but they are significantly harder to dig up than the rebuttals, and are therefore less popular to the viewers.

One such video, “The Truth About the Friend Zone” by user SteveGreeneComedy, describes an aspect that I’ve already touched on before with the media representation of the term. He states:

1. That's what you do just stop being friends with those
2. fuckers because you can take something away from
3. them. They’re taking your heart away from you (…)
4. and you can take something away from them revenge is
5. (…) the greatest (…) tool that's ever been invented by
6. anyone by God or man. (…) They don't wanna fuck you
7. (…) and they certainly don't wanna hold your hand and
8. ride on a roller coaster or whatever the hell you think is
9. gonna happen okay?

Again with this speech there is a focus on the dichotomy between the friendzone and relationships. He states that this is the “truth” about the friendzone; to “just stop being friends with those fuckers”. While it is a similar established ideology as in the media, there are a few distinct differences in its presentation. For example, the language used is significantly stronger in this medium than in the media. Part of the reason for this is simply the format. Content on the Internet, especially Youtube videos, is not particularly censored. There is no need to hold back on expletives and references to sex when no trouble will come of it. Furthermore, this isn’t a discussion; by nature of Youtube videos, this is a speech given from the creator to his audience. Therefore, it is
possible to say whatever one wants without fear of interruption. However, the most likely reason for this strong language is that this is a topic that incites strong language in the speakers. It is a consistent feature amongst the Youtube videos on this topic, and even in some of the interviews I collected. In particular, with the very diverse and ranged opinions on this topic on the Internet, it is a term that incites very passionate feelings. Thus, instead of simply ending the relationship, the words used here imply “revenge” in the action, instead of simply a natural course to take following the friendzone. This is an act of agency; the reaction to the friendzone, then, is a choice according to this Internet. The thought that each aspect of this term’s use is a choice will be a consistent theme amongst the ideologies of the Internet on the word friendzone.

Looking at some of the rebuttal videos, this remains true. JennaMarbles’ video “Nice Guys Do Not Finish Last” is a good example of this; she states:

1. By saying that nice guys finish last is a fucking cop out
2. way to not take responsibility for any of the reasons why
3. a girl might not like you.

Again in this video, there are the ideas delivered that the use of the term friendzone indicates responsibility, or the refusal to take responsibility, which is a responsibility in and of itself. “Nice guys finish last” is a reasonably common phrase; it is often connected with the term friendzone in the context of the Internet. Not only does this video echo the one above in terms of how agency and the word friendzone are connected, but its tone is similar as well. Again, there is the use of strong language surrounding this term, even when taking the opposite viewpoint of the first video. These views on this term are dramatically polarized and the language used then to describe
them demonstrates this. In another similar video, *The Friend Zone* by user Justtom, the video creator states:

1. So you can't just blame like (...) the friendzone or like
2. "nice guys never getting girls" (...) you can't you can't
3. blame that because that's not true like honestly I think the term
4. friendzone is just a word (...) people use to cushion the blow
5. on the fact (...) that they just got straight up rejected.

Here, the emphasis is again on the necessity to take responsibility for one’s self. To “blame the friendzone” would be to not take responsibility for actions, but also for the use of language and the term *friendzone*. These videos explicitly state that there is responsibility inherent in the use of a word such as *friendzone*, and to ignore this responsibility is to use it improperly. While there are not any expletives in this particular section, this video makes use of them as well, and the language in this section is still very strong, confrontational language.

There is one more factor that is distinctly more prevalent in online discussions of the term *friendzone* than found either in the media or in face-to-face conversation, and that is the direct link between the friendzone and sex. While this seems like an obvious link when it comes to the language used in romantic discourse, there is a blatant connection that is made without prompting in the Internet discourse on this topic. For example, in the movies cited above, there are statements such as (from *The Friend Zone*):

1. Cause I dunno if you ask me uh someone who pretends to be a nice
guy so they can get in a girl's pants (...) that sounds like an asshole
3. to me so I dunno why you're not like swimming in vagina already.

And from *Nice Guys Don’t Finish Last*:
That doesn't mean that girls date douchebags or jerks; that means that you don't like her choice of (...) male and they happen to share a lot of common interests with each other so good for fucking them. You're really just setting yourself up for failure because what's happening is you wanna put your dick in her and she won't let you (...) so uh, everyone that she likes is a douchebag and you finish last because you're "too nice".

In other words, this is a connection that is not only made, but one that is made instantaneously, as if it is only a matter of course. No link needs to be established, as this has been a matter of discourse on the Internet concerning the term *friendzone* for nearly as long as the term has been circulating. This changes the discourse from contrasting the friendzone to romantic relationships to contrasting the term to sexual intercourse, which is a significantly different context. This changes the meaning of the term as well, making the friendzone more a refusal to have sex with someone than to be in a relationship with someone. This, always presented in contiguity with the idea of the “nice guy” (present in both conversations, such as in lines one of the first and seven in the second), creates a very different image of the term *friendzone*, one where the performance of gender is distinctly divided between men and women, especially in the acts of finding a sexual partner.

Finally, the use of memes is one more indicator of how the term *friendzone* is used and perceived online. An Internet meme is a “fundamental cultural unit”, one that goes viral (or not, as the case may be) and demonstrates some aspect of the cultural beliefs of the people who create and propagate them (Coscia, 2013). Therefore, the memes used to demonstrate the use of the term *friendzone* are a perfect way to discern the ideologies of the term in this Internet context. One meme of particular interest in the
analysis of friendzone is that of “Friendzone Fiona”, which can be seen in Figures 1 and 2.

Fig. 1

THINKS YOU'RE THE PERFECT GUY
FOR ANYONE ELSE

Fig. 2

HAS A MALE FRIEND WHO IS NICE TO HER
IS STILL NOT OBLIGATED TO FUCK HIM

Friendzone Fiona is of particular interest because as Figure 1 when compared to Figure 2 show, the meme is not the same. Generally a meme follows along the same lines as its predecessors, by nature of being a meme. However, here there is an example of an attempt towards linguistic reappropriation, or reclaiming the term from a pejorative usage to something more positive (Croom, 2011). Figure 1 demonstrates the original meme, which describes the usages of the term friendzone that we have already seen thus far; further memes all have this idea of a romantic interest not returned by a woman. Figure 2, on the other hand, was a meme created later. Using the same image is a distinct effort towards making the reappropriation obvious. While presented in a meme format, the term that is undergoing reappropriation is friendzone. The views presented by these two forms of the same meme are very polarized, but both stem from the use of friendzone as a way
to perform gender in a romantic (or, as is more likely in this context, mostly sexual) situation.

Thus, the situation of the term *friendzone* in an Internet context is less a negotiation of gender performance in a romantic context and more an argument surrounding the performance of gender in an explicitly sexual context. The words used in the videos on Youtube are confrontational, explicit and challenging; there is no space for tentative negotiating of gender performance here. Instead, videos are either a presentation of the use of the term *friendzone* or they are a rebuttal, creating a distinct dichotomy of opinion and usage. Similarly, the reappropriation of a meme in order to present the opposite usage of the term is a demonstration of this argumentative nature of the term *friendzone*. On the Internet, where there is little censorship and few consequences for speaking in an inflammatory manner, the use of the term *friendzone* is almost always an argumentative performance of gender, and it almost always indicates a strong split between male and female, even where such a split does not necessarily exist in other usages of the term in other contexts.

### 3.3 Ideologies of the Data

It is not only in the contexts of the media and the Internet that there are ideologies created of language, and that is particularly true in this case as well. As the use of the word *friendzone* is a performance of gender, those I interviewed created and repeated their own ideologies of the term, through both the essentialization of gender in their own understandings, and through influence from other sources, such as the Internet or the media. Picking out these ideological definitions and uses of the word is important to our understanding of it. By tracing where these come from as well as what influence and
effect they have, it should be possible to better understand the way in which the use of the term *friendzone* acts in the performance of gender for men and women between the ages of 18 and 24.

The essentialization of the performance of gender by the term *friendzone* was a common response in the collected interviews. This is unsurprising, considering how the media and Internet both portray a dichotomized ideology of the word. From how it is shown in both TV shows and memes, the term *friendzone* refers to both the conflict between romantic relationships and friendships and the conflict between men and women in their performance of their genders when pursuing either friendships or romantic relationships. Especially as this term assumes a default heterosexual market, the conflict between genders is almost inevitable. For example, a young woman by the name of Lianne responded in this way:

[2]

1. C: Do you remember the first time you heard the word friendzoning?
2. L: Oh, probably sometime in high school. Probably when they were saying like how
3. guys always complain that “oh girls always say they want a good guy
4. but then they friendzone all of their good friends.” That was probably the
5. first time I heard it.

The first time Lianne heard the term, it was already being used in a way to imply this conflict that has been seen above due to Internet ideologies. The implications here—such as that it is always “guys” who “complain” about this occurrence, is proven false by nearly every definition the participants offered for the term, most of which were simply along the lines of this definition, offered by a young woman, “Friendzoning is…a way that an individual clarifies their status, um, friendship status with another person.” The
careful avoidance of gendered terms is a common theme in both the surveys and the interviews when it came to simply defining the term itself.

However, these ideologies are still very common. Bryce, a young man who was willing to be interviewed, stated about the term:

[3]
1 She wants you to and you’re just kinda being almost in a sense
2 like whipped. You know? (laughs) Almost where you’re really just you know
3 the puppy on a leash and she’s just carrying you around and she’s
4 manipulating you however she wants you, wants to.

Again we see here a gendered discourse that suggests that this is always the case with a term such as the friendzone. That this essentializing of gender happens from both sides is unsurprising, though it does make it clear one of the complications in the use of the word friendzone. With separate ideologies such as these, a sense of misunderstanding is inevitable. Nowhere in the interviews of the women did any mention men as “the puppy on a leash”, and nowhere in the interviews of the men was there any statement of how “guys always complain”. These differences seem to be more influenced again by the media and the Internet than by any actual life experience, as more descriptions of actual friendzoning tended to acknowledge that it was usually a simple act of relationship negotiation from both sides.

Therefore, it is important to look at both the media influence and the influence of the Internet on these ideologies within the interviews. This influence is surprisingly clear, and often acknowledged by the participants themselves. For example, one young man by the name of David stated:

[4]
1 Mm…I guess. It just was really popular on the Internet whenever I was
2 in high school so I learned it from the Internet like most of the things
Whereas another, Braden, said:

[5]
1 I guess, I guess it made sense like to see it from the TV.
2 Like they would express it but in reality they don’t, they don’t even talk about it
3 they just joke about it. They don’t talk seriously about being like friendzoned.
4 Because usually when you become in a friendzone you end it.

Here, both acknowledge that they learned the term without a doubt from the Internet and from the media. David even points out that “It was really popular on the Internet”, which is how he learned it from there. The term’s popularity on the Internet is part of what caused it to be used in day-to-day vernacular undoubtedly, though once the term was off the Internet, its development was quite different. However, this influence still exists, especially in the ideologies of those who use the term, though they will often contradict those beliefs when discussing actual instances of friendzoning. On the other hand, Braden pointed out that the use of the word friendzone is different from television to real life. His pointing to the fact that people who are discussing friendzoning in the media “don’t talk seriously about” it is a significant difference. In the media, often romance is the most important plot element, and this is why the relationship almost always ends up romantic regardless. Braden indicates this disparity with his comment, “Because usually when you become in a friendzone, you end it”. In real life, the romantic relationship is not always the end goal, and thus these situations often end up different from how they are portrayed in the media. This difference is striking enough that the ideology has been noticed and critically inspected by those using the word.
This understanding of this term has been influenced by a few very distinctive sources, as outlined above. These sources have an interesting relationship with the word as it stands today. The term friendzone, upon its removal from the Internet and beginning usage in especially the high school and college heterosexual dating scenes, has begun a growth separate to that growth observed in the media and on the Internet. What complicates this is, of course, that the media and Internet still exist to influence this development and the use of this term. This is likely why there are such radical differences in the way that the term is defined and considered, even amongst same-sex groups. The most distinct contrast between these ideologies of the term friendzone and the actualities of it can be found in descriptions of the term in action; in other words, the stories of moments where each participant either was friendzoned or participating in the act of friendzoning reveal different attitudes and beliefs to the ones perpetuated by the media and the Internet.

3.4 Actualities

In order to discuss the actualities of the term friendzone, it is first necessary to contrast the ideologies that have already been discussed. To begin, it is necessary to counter the ideologies presented by the media—namely, that the friendzone is a dichotomy between romantic relationships or no relationship at all, as well as the sense of entitlement and the negative connotations that it brings. Earlier in his interview, Braden stated:

[6]
1 Usually the friendzoning goes to something bad
2 which I can’t understand why. I like the, cause friendzoning is just.
3 I want to be that way. I want to be friends with this kind of a person.
4 But every time I hear it it’s usually because someone is feeling
bad about it like “I don’t want to be this way.” Or joking about it.

In addition, Bryce commented when asked about how the friendzone came about, “You know you either fully go for it or you don’t or you stay in the middle and you just leave it how it is”. While each young man also states that it is possible to break a friendship through the use of the friendzone, there is a significant sense of leeway here. There’s the sense that being in the friendzone doesn’t have to be bad, nor does it have to be a dichotomy; it is possible to “stay in the middle” and just be friends. This liminal space is extremely important in the usage of the term friendzone; it complicates what would otherwise be a simple narrative of cross-gender friendships never working out. However, that isn’t the case here, and those who were interviewed shared this opinion quite often. For example, a young woman who was interviewed, Isabelle, had this to say about the friendzone as a location:

That people think that they’re constantly in but it’s only their own minds. Like convincing them that it’s something that the other person did or that they did. When really it’s just a preference thing, you’re not stuck in a country away from men or women respectively whatever your preference is and you can’t get to them because you’re in another country and there’s this big iron curtain or something going around the whole thing and you’re isolated, I don’t know.

This resistance to the idea that the friendzone is either an inescapable place or a purely heterosexual marketplace deepens the meaning portrayed by the use of the term friendzone further. Thus far, the views of the friendzone as a dichotomy of romantic relationship versus platonic friendship, the negative connotations implied by the term, and the idea of the friendzone as an inescapable place and a purely heterosexual marketplace have been challenged by those who use the term in their every day lives.
This changes the way the term *friendzone* can be read in its role as performative as well. It is not a divisive term between genders, so much as a negotiation of power in both romantic and platonic relationships. This is partially hinted at in Isabelle’s, “When really it’s just a preference thing”; this implies that the friendzone is nothing more than a term used to establish those preferences, whether they be romantic or platonic.

This can be seen in other interviews as well. A young woman named Anna who was interviewed explained:

[8]
1. At times, yeah, I would just say it’s more of a defense thing.
2. But for guys they see it as a bad thing, because it’s more about they’re you know, really are. So I guess it’s more interpretation than anything.

She establishes here that often friendzoning is a way to draw a line and to show boundaries. She adds, “So I guess it’s more interpretation than anything”, pointing out that the way to interpret the term *friendzone* is a choice that can completely change the discourse in question.

Does this then imply the same sort of inherent responsibility as was found in the context of the Internet? The interviews would suggest otherwise. A young man, Skyler, stated:

[9]
1. C: Usually it’s deliberate?
2. S: Yeah. Um
3. C: *Gotcha.*
4. S: Or. No actually it’s not always deliberate like I’ve I’ve seen, I’m talking about one of my roommates so um
5. C: Yeah.
6. S: He’s blatantly like not seeing it. And so I guess that comes into friendzoning someone.
7. C: So they’re still friendzoned it was just by accident.
8. S: Yeah.
Here Skylar makes it clear that it is possible for friendzoning someone to be an accident. Even more interestingly, he first states that it isn’t an accident, only to retract his statement almost immediately, with a situation in mind of when he saw otherwise. His immediate reading of the word *friendzone* is that of the responsibility-implying term used online. However, the moment he considers it, he finds that to be inaccurate; friendzoning can be by accident. This was a similar theme throughout the interviews, though not always stated. A young woman named Marie stated, “So one wants the friendship one wants more than friendship and so (...) The other one feels friendzoned.” Describing the situation, she says the end result is that “one feels friendzoned”. It is a passive result; there is no one doing the act of friendzoning, but rather simply someone feeling friendzoned. This complicates the ideology that there is a sense of responsibility in the use of the *friendzone*, especially on behalf of women (who would be “purposefully” putting others in the friendzone). The idea that the use of the term *friendzone* implies agency in the actions of the person who would like to remain friends is erroneous; it appears to be an even split between accidental and purposeful. Therefore, the use of the term *friendzone* is just as likely to indicate an accidental action, something that is often acknowledged by those who use it.

Similarly, the implications of extremely polarized views on gender being perpetuated by the use of the term *friendzone* seems to dismiss the fact that it is often an act of dual performance of gender. Not only does it require two actors to happen in the first place, the majority of the participants in the study acknowledged as a simple matter of course that friendzoning occurred to both men and women. Marie explained at the end of her own tales of friendzoning:
Marie gives an example not only of a time when she had caused the friendzoning situation, but also a time when she had experienced it, and was quite clear that it could happen to either men or women. However, to call it an equally used term from both sides of the gender divide would also be inaccurate. A young woman who participated in an interview stated, “I would say like, generally I’ve heard guys using it with each other. Like when a girl or a woman friendzones them (laughs).” This perception echoes the ideologies from before—and likely stems from them as well. However, almost every definition given of the term friendzone made it as equal opportunity a term as possible. Non-gendered words such as “person” were always used in place of “girl” or “boy”, and “they” was typically the pronoun of choice. Thus, though this perception exists, the term itself is typically carefully defined in such a way as to negate that perception. This suggests a certain resistance to the ideology as it is presented, not only from men but from women as well. Their real-world experience states that the term can be used by both men and women to define a myriad of situations, and thus does not match up with the ideology that women are the ones who always friendzone “nice guys”. Through this resistance, it is possible to see how the term friendzone could be desired to be that space for the negotiation of how gender should be performed when facing cross-gender relationships, particularly platonic, but also romantic.
Another important point to make about the ideologies that have been seen before is the contrast between said ideologies and the actuality of the ultimate goal in situations where the term *friendzone* is used. It is made very explicit that the end goal of anyone who ends up in the friendzone is sexual in the online discourse; however, this only makes the fact that it is not once mentioned in either interviews or surveys all the more striking. It is made very clear in interviews and surveys both that the end goal for these students is a relationship. Even a word that carries sexual connotations is instead connected to that relationship goal, as Mary explained:

[11]
1 C: Okay. Um, are there any other forms of the word
2 that you can think of that were used?
3 M: Yeah. Um. Cockblock? I think would be the closest thing I can think of (laughs).
4 C: Yeah? (laughs) How would you define the term cockblock?
5 M: I::: would define the term cockblock as someone
6 (...) a girl or a guy is interested in someone else and
7 whether that person or a friend or a family member
8 whatever somehow stops that other person from
9 interacting in a more romantic way.

The term “cockblock” is often defined as an action that prevents someone from having sexual intercourse with someone else (Folb, 1980). Here, however, it is defined as someone who “stops that other person from interacting in a more romantic way”. This shift from a focus on sexual intercourse to simply romantic relationships as a whole is an important one. The use of the term *friendzone* is not simply a term based in sexual frustration, but rather a negotiation of those cross-gender romantic relationships, as well as the lines that are required for platonic ones.

With those ideologies addressed, it is important also to discuss the uses of the term *friendzone* that are not covered by media, Internet or social ideologies. The most
significant of these is that of the cynicism of the participants towards the above-mentioned constructs. Throughout the interviews, the participants challenged the idea of the default heterosexual assumption of the term, the male-female divide the ideologies have implied, and that the friendzone necessitates a negative situation. Ultimately, the participants were well aware that the term friendzone necessitates a social construct that they were not necessarily in agreement with, something that came through in their speech in a number of ways. First of all, as stated before, the default heterosexual assumption was challenged in most all of the definitions offered in both surveys and interviews. These were significantly gender neutral in their portrayal of these relationships. Furthermore, there were occasions in which the participants directly challenged this assumption. For example, Alex upon being asked to define the term friendzone, had this to say:

[12]
1 So like when you think of a relationship, it’s almost like a relationship
2 that’s more complicated than it should be. There’s always a guy
3 and a girl or a guy and a guy or a girl and a girl or whatever you
4 know the point is it’s like a one way street.

There was no hesitation in his challenge to the idea that this term only takes place in the heterosexual dating marketplace, though that is the default for our society. It was simply how he defined the term friendzone, as something that could happen to any pair who is negotiating their relationship status between platonic and romantic. More simply, as Lindsey defined the term:

[13]
1 Friendzoning is…a way that an individual clarifies their status
2 um, friendship status with another person.
It is a term that deals with an “individual” and a “person” even more often than it is a term that deals with a “guy” and a “girl”, according to the obtained definitions. Even more significantly, to her it is a way to define “friendship status”—not romantic relationship status. This removes the male-female dichotomy that was being presented earlier in this paper. The performance of gender through this term is simplified through this complication of the heterosexual norm; there is no sense that same-gender or cross-gender relationships need to be particularly different, and this applies to both romantic and platonic relationships.

Finally, there is the way the participants approached the term itself. There was a certain cynicism offered in the address of this term; often, this was stated outright, though it was also made clear through the use of laughter throughout the interviews. Often after stating something such as a definition of the term friendzone or what sorts of situations it would be found in, the participants would laugh. Part of this is undoubtedly that friendzoning is an uncomfortable subject to discuss with someone who is not a close friend, as one young woman told me:

```
[14]
1 I think it’s definitely social ones. When you’re talking
to a friend, it’s not something that you would
3 really talk about just randomly, I dunno, at least for me
4 not a random thing, because for me that would be
5 kind of uncomfortable, for me it’s not something you just throw out.
```

There was undoubtedly a sense of discomfort in discussing something that is often kept between friend groups with an interviewer. However, much of the laughter was comfortable laughter, often just used to emphasize something that seemed ridiculous or funny. It is important to note that the term friendzone is not a particularly serious one.
Even in situations where it may seem as though the situation is quite serious, the use of
the term friendzone implies a sense of lighter seriousness, hence why it is a term that is
usually only used between close friend groups.

This cynicism was not just hinted at through non-verbal cues, however; there
were a number of times in which the participants made it clear themselves that they did
not find the term to be an accurate representation of their relationship situation. Two
young men, Braden and Alex, stated outright that this representation did not fit their
expectations. Braden stated, as a continuation of dialogue [5]:

[15]
1 Say through like sit-coms and stuff like that. Before coming
2 here most of my knowledge was from TV which was bad.
3 It lied to me a lot.

The presentation of the friendzone that he received through the media was something he
considered to be a lie. Likewise, Alex said:

[16]
1 I can’t think of any other terms besides friends with benefits, friendzoning
2 (...) they’re all lies. For all you viewers out there.

Here, though having a one-on-one interview with me, Alex addressed the audience of this
paper to state that these terms are “all lies”. This cynical address towards these terms
cannot be dismissed easily. For the generation that popularized a term like the friendzone
enough to have it included in the basic vernacular of the generation, it is an interesting
contrast to know that there is a sense of frustration with the use of the term as well.
Perhaps it is due to the very fact that it is a term associated so strongly with the
generation, as Bryce made clear:
The term *friendzone* and all of the connotations that go along with it are a direct responsibility of this generation—or that is at least their perception of it. It was a term that was created in an attempt to negotiate the growing popularity of different cross-gender relationships beyond simply the romantic. However, it is also a term with dozens of different meanings, a number of different ideologies and a term often used to strengthen the gender divide. Perhaps this is the source of the frustration, and why the term *friendzone* is “all lies”.

### 3.5 The Grammatical Construct of the Friendzone

It is important also to inspect the grammatical way in which the term *friendzone* can or cannot be used according to the people who use it most. As a term that is slang, it is flexible enough to be used in particular ways depending on the situation. Despite this, when asked to rate whether or not a usage of the term was grammatical or not on the anonymous surveys, there were a few striking trends. In order to collect these trends, participants were simply asked to circle which uses of the term were grammatical. Four choices were offered, along with sample sentences. These four options were as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Percentage of Participants that Considered the Term Grammatical</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Friendzone (noun)</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friendzoning (noun)</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friendzoned/friendzones (verb)</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friendzoning (adjective)</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
There are two trends of interest in this data. First, there is the fact that the term *friendzone* can rarely be used as an adjective. Something cannot be a *friendzoning object* or a *friendzoning move*. As has been stated by participants in both interviews and surveys, the friendzone is more likely to be considered a place than an abstract idea. It is metaphorical in nature, and thus the lack of adjectival use is not unusual. Similarly, the use of the noun *friendzoning*, such as in “What they did to each other was friendzoning” was also not particularly considered to be grammatical. This falls under a similar sort of reason; the friendzone as a place means that the more abstract use of it as a noun *friendzoning* is both unnecessary and odd. This simply emphasizes the nature of the word as a metaphor for an actual place; as its first usage implies, there is a *zone* that someone is stuck in. However, nobody would every now use only *zone* to describe the *friendzone*, so it has become impossible to separate both parts of the term.

The second interesting aspect of this data worth noting is the curious trend of the verbs, *friendzoned* and *friendzones*. Both were originally included simply to show a past tense and present tense form of the verb. However, in situations where they were able to (the online version of the survey did not allow for one to be selected over the other), participants would often choose *friendzoned* to be grammatically correct and *friendzones* was left as not grammatically correct. Though they were grouped together, this distinction was important enough for many participants to carefully select only *friendzoned*. Amongst surveys where it was possible to choose one over the other, *friendzoned* was considered grammatically correct 55% of the time compared to the 46% that was *friendzones*. Considering the fact that they were grouped together, as I truly did
not expect one to be considered more grammatical than the other, this distinction is significant. This suggests that only the past tense form *friendzoned* is used commonly enough for it to not sound strange to the participants taking the survey. The present tense *friendzones* was considered strange to the majority of the participants. This could suggest two things about the term. First, it is only ever discussed in the past. While this seems obvious, it means that the term is rarely if ever discussed as it is happening, either due to a lack of visibility or a lack of knowledge. It can only be discussed after the fact, as then it is clear what has happened. Thus the term *friendzoned* is use much more often than *friendzones*. The alternative is that this is a process that does not take a long period of time, but is rather resolved rather instantaneously. Therefore, there is no reason to use the present tense verb *friendzones*, as the only opportunity to discuss the friendzone would be in reference to situations where it has already occurred. The fact that the friendzone is often only discussed in the past tense implies certain restrictions on its usage and appearance to those observing the process.

### 3.6 What Does This All Mean?

Clearly, it is dangerous to make too many overgeneralizations about this term and what it means. While these trends are significant, this sample size is still small, and amidst the sample, particularly the surveys, there were many definitions that echoed the ideologies listed above. Furthermore, this is all reported data, and not data collected from actual situations in which the term is being used. There could be significant differences if the term were to be gathered in a more natural setting. However, the complications themselves are significant to the understanding of the term as a performance of gender in cross-gender relationships, platonic and romantic. From the complication of the default
heterosexual understanding to the challenging of the male-female divide, these complications are a clear expression of this negotiation of cross-gender relationships. In particular, for a term that is so complicated even in simply looking at various definitions of it, the fact that it often flaunts the social ideologies that are presented emphasize the nature of its dual performance of gender—both men and women perform roles in the use of the term *friendzone*, but often they are capable of reversing those roles or at the very least renegotiating them.

First off, it is necessary to analyze the claims made about the challenges to the default heterosexual marketplace. As this default assumption was used in order to frame the understanding of the term “friendzoning” and the performance of gender, it is important to inspect exactly what this challenge means for our understanding of said performance. First off, while the majority of the definitions given were carefully genderless, there were still a number of them that assumed that default heterosexual marketplace. It is impossible, therefore, to completely generalize everything into one simple analysis. However, it is still possible to read these challenges as an implication that there is little difference between cross-gender and same-gender relationships, whether romantic or platonic. That same-gender relationships could also use the term *friendzone* seemed to be a matter of course for the majority of the participants. From this, it can be extrapolated that without this difference, the differences implied in cross-gender platonic relationships would also be considered minimal. An assumption of heterosexual romantic relationships also by necessity marginalizes cross-gender platonic relationships; thus, by removing or at least complicating that structure, cross-gender relationships are also complicated. Through this, it establishes greater freedom in negotiating those gender
boundaries through language—such as the friendzone being a term that can be used both ways by men and women.

Similarly, this can be seen in the complication in the ideology of a strict gender divide. The assignment of responsibility is often removed in many of these interviews, whereas in much of the ideologies, there is a “fault” assigned—often to women. However, when the gender divide of these roles is complicated, it is much more difficult to assign a particular fault to any one group. Both men and women are capable of putting the other in the friendzone, and often by accident; that is what the data suggests, as well as the real life experience of the participants. When constrained to a particular role, it is very difficult to escape it; however, this changing usage of the term friendzone is almost a reassignment of the term’s meaning in a way that does not force that gender dichotomy. At the very least, by using the term in both ways, both men and women are renegotiating their roles in these cross-gender relationships.

Through all of this, it is possible to see how the social construct of the friendzone is being challenged simply by its day-to-day usage. When considering the fact that the ideology being challenged is that of a male-female dichotomy, particularly in the context of platonic relationships, this challenge to these ideologies presents a challenge to the concept that men and women cannot be platonic friends. The term friendzone has always been considered a romantic term, or so common perception of it would have us believe; however, many interviews and surveys suggested that it was simply a negotiation between platonic and romantic relationships. While the term still carries negative connotations, it is important to establish where those negative connotations are coming from. Is it the lack of a romantic relationship, or the fear of losing the existing platonic
one that makes the friendzone such a dangerous place? Regardless of the answer, it is undeniable that these emerging uses of the term friendzone are a new way of performing gender, one that allows for a more even exchange in the romantic sphere, despite the push-back that is present from the media and the Internet both.

4. Conclusion

There is an important conclusion that can be drawn from this data, and that is that the performance of gender through the use of the term friendzone is disparate from the media and Internet usage to the actual way the word is used. Though the definitions offered often showed the influence that the media and Internet both had on their understanding of the term, even those were often retracted or undermined when it came time to talk about situations in which they had actually used or heard the term friendzone used. This is unsurprising, considering that many, if not all, of the participants learned the term in an Internet-mediated way, as they either learned of it online or learned of it from friends who had learned of it online. With this as the basis for their beginning understanding of the term, it is no surprise that they still retain a number of the ideologies propagated by the Internet and the media. However, it would seem that as the term has been used separate from the Internet, it has changed and grown to be used in different ways that are less accepting of the ideologies that are offered by the media and the Internet.

As outlined before, both the Internet and the media propagate a very dichotomized understanding of friendzoning—that it is a term that was coined by men describing actions done by women, and that it is a pejorative term intending to divide the genders further. However, this is far from how it is actually used as a term in this
Friendzoning is an action that can occur to anyone at any time for a number of reasons. While it does still have negative connotations, these are distinctively different—the negative connotations come from hurt feelings or a fear of losing friendship, as opposed to the rather pejorative associations that come of the Internet understanding of the term (that it is something done by women to men because “nice guys always finish last”) and even the media understanding of the term (that friendships are impossible between men and women and must either proceed to a romantic relationship or fall through). Undoubtedly, this change in meaning reflects a change in the state of cross-gender relationships, both platonic and romantic. The term friendzone can be used by both men and women to describe both sides of the relationship—being friendzoned or doing the friendzoning—and its existence emphasizes a desire to retain that friendship that existed before. After all, the majority of the participants made it clear that the only reason the friendzone could possibly exist was if someone was “too scared to go for it”—if someone didn’t want to jeopardize their friendship by pursuing a romantic relationship. This is a far departure from the idea of a term that implies that the friendship is the lesser of the two options, and that the friendzone is the worst place one can possibly be.

With this growth in importance of cross-gender platonic relationships comes the resistance towards the term that is visible in the participants’ interviews. Through both blatantly speaking out against it and implying a sense of cynicism, many of the participants made it clear that they thought that the term friendzone was “a lie”. In other words, it was a term that, if used, often didn’t mean what they wanted it to, and that what the term represents itself is also a lie. This pushback to the term is rather complicated, but
makes sense when considering the understanding the participants had of the term. It is a term associated with this generation; coined in 1994 and made popular in the early 2000’s, the term truly does have a special impact on the generation that uses it most. However, because of this, there is an understanding that it is a term that defines the generation as well. It is a pejorative, negative term, and this resistance towards being defined by it is a natural response to seeing the negative connotation that the generation had become associated with through the use of the term. Whether this association exists or not is unimportant; what matters is that there is the perception that it does, and this frames the way these participants respond to the term. This response takes the form of resistance towards the term itself and what it represents, in large part due to the ideologies associated with it.

It is significant to note here that this is not a gendered understanding of the term. Both genders separated and distanced themselves from the term in various ways; many of the young women interviewed suggested that they rarely used it themselves, though they knew how it was defined and the sorts of situations it could be found in. Meanwhile, many of the young men interviewed took a more direct route in denying their attachment to the term, by the aforementioned “lie”, or by suggesting that they did not agree with the term as they saw it. In pulling back from the common understanding of the term, however, it is possible to see how the term is actually used and understood by this generation. Even more significant, this act of distancing themselves from the term is only applicable to the ideological understanding of it. Thus this is a situation in which the media is attempting to perpetuate an understanding of the term in a way that those who
actually use the term in their day-to-day vernacular are resisting. This makes for an awkward tension between the ideology of the term and how it is actually used.

Often terms are used differently in the vernacular compared to how they are popularized in the media; however, in this instance, the significance of this cannot be overlooked. By resisting this understanding of the term, the participants are resisting too the implications inherent in those ideologies—namely the dichotomizing of gender, the insistence that cross-gender platonic relationships cannot occur, and the existence of the default heterosexual relationship market. However, they are also resisting the argument that exists on the Internet for the use of this term, which is a feminist struggle using the term *friendzone* as a talking point. Instead, this term is used as a performance of gender in the romantic and platonic relationships sphere. This is evidenced by how difficult it would be to use such an emotionally charged word in these day-to-day, common situations, unless that distancing was to occur. By making this a term that can be used in the common vernacular, in situations that everyone encounters and understands, the term is made easily accessible to everyone, male and female.

It isn’t only a term that can be used by everyone, however, but is a term that is renegotiating boundaries of gender performance as well. The use of this term allows for an exploration of relationship boundaries, both romantic and platonic, and the ways in which gender is performed relating to these relationships. The term is an effort to understand lines between romantic and platonic, as well as what role gender plays in the interplay between the two categories. It is significant that the majority of participants believed that friendzoning was a thing that could happen to anyone regardless of gender—this is a change from often very gendered interactions in both romantic and
platonic relationships. However, by insisting that in this instance gender has little impact on the use of the term, the use of this term renegotiates the assumed differences between genders in relationships. This implies both that men and women play similar roles in the creation of romantic relationships and that it is possible for men and women to have platonic relationships. However, despite all of this, it is important to note that the term is still highly gendered, and that there is a distinct essence of inequality within it. This paper does not seek to claim that isn’t the case, but rather bring up these interesting differences between these ideologies and the actualities of the term as reported by the participants.

Further studies focused on specific communities within gendered groups and different age groups, both older and younger than the age group this study targets, would be optimal for better understanding this term and its impact. In particular, a number of participants noted that the term has been passed down to younger generations, and thus studying their use of the term could be extremely valuable. While a large portion of focus of this study was on grammatical forms of the term friendzone, now that the study has been finished, I think it would have been more valuable to have focused on the sexuality aspect, or on gendered groups in other situations aside from fraternities and sororities. It is clear that the term is a significant one as the impetus of feminist discourse online, an acknowledgement of the presence of this generation in the media, and a term that is being passed down to younger generations. The friendzone inherently signifies a new way to negotiate romantic relationships—with a performance of gender that acknowledges and accepts that in relationships, the genders need not be so different.
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Appendix A: Transcription Key

(…) – Pause

**Bold** – Overlapping words

*Italics* – Emphasis

(.) – Short pause

:: - Lengthened vowel within a word
Appendix B: Anonymous Survey

This is an anonymous survey. Please do not write your name on this paper. If at any time you do not wish to continue, please let the researcher know. You will not be penalized for this in any way. If at any time you do not wish to answer a question, you can skip it without consequences.

Gender (please check one):
___ Male
___ Female
___ Other

1. Have you heard the term friendzone or similar words before?
   ___ Yes ___ No

2. How would you define the word friendzone?

3. Please circle all forms that you would consider grammatical or that do not sound strange. I have included some example sentences.

Friendzone (noun): “He put me in the friendzone.”
Friendzoning (noun): “That was definitely friendzoning.”
Friendzoned/friendzones (verb): “They both friendzoned him.” “He friendzones her.”
Friendzoning (Adjective): “That was a friendzoning move.”

Thank you for your participation in this survey! All results will be kept strictly confidential and will not be traced back to you in any way. All surveys will be shredded after the necessary data has been collected from them and will be kept in a secure location and only accessed by the researcher until then.

If you have further interest in this survey or wish to participate in interviews, please let the researcher know. Thank you again!
Appendix C: List of Interview Questions

1. Have you ever heard the term “friendzoning”?
2. When was the first time you heard the word?
3. Are they any other forms of the word that you’ve heard? Can you give me an example in a sentence?
4. In what situations have you heard the word “friendzoning” used?