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"A Different Light"

A Different Light – 13 August 2022 – “The slow demise of ableist slurs in pop culture”

Forward, one two, back, two three. It's the usual sound that punctuates a dance crew in rehearsal, but Lizzo's Dance Crew is anything but usual. Lizzo is a popstar, more specifically she is a rap star and an accomplished musician. She has three Grammys under her belt and a number chart topping songs. Lizzo is literally larger than life -she has a plus sized body to go with her plus sized personality. She has currently got a very successful television series running on Amazon - “Lizzo's Big girls”, where 10 plus size dancers practise and compete for a spot on tour with Lizzo as her backup dancers. The episodes are steeped in Lizzo's values such as ‘big is beautiful’ and ‘being big is nothing to be ashamed of, in fact it's sexy’. Lizzo constantly works on the participants' self-confidence and self-esteem through affirmations and encouragement delivered in her own bombastic style.

Lizzo is emphatic about rebranding what is attractive and cool, in fact you could say Lizzo is a champion for diversity. That's why I was somewhat surprised to hear that Lizzo had been called out for using the word “spaz” in one of her latest songs. Disability activist and writer Hannah Diviney who has cerebral palsy, tweeted *“Hey Lizzo my disability Cerebral Palsy is literally classified as Spastic Diplegia (where spasticity refers to unending painful tightness in my legs) your new song makes me pretty angry + sad. ‘Spaz’ doesn't mean freaked out or crazy. It's an ableist slur. It's 2022. Do better.”*

To Lizzo's credit she apologised and rewrote the song. In a statement on her Social Media platforms she said *“It's been brought to my attention that there is a harmful word in my new song “GRRRLS”. Let me make one thing clear: I never want to promote derogatory language. As a fat black woman in America, I've had many hurtful words used against me so I overstand the power words can*

have (whether intentionally or in my case, unintentionally). I'm proud to say there's a new version of GRRRLS with a lyric change. This is the result of me listening and taking action. As an influential artist I'm dedicated to being part of the change I've been waiting to see in the world. Xoxo, Lizzo."

Lizzo's gaffe follows another blunder made by the popstar Beyonce who's recent song "Heated" includes a line about people "spazzin' on that ass"! Charming! Beyonce also publicly apologised and her team released a statement "*The word was not used intentionally in a harmful way, it will be replaced.*" I did notice that in her original official lyrics she has the N word censored in such a way that shows she knew that this word was unacceptable to be printed in public.

Personally, I find the word "spastic" repulsive in a toe-curling way. Even when it's articulated by a medical professional I flinch, let alone any musician or neanderthal who is trying to be edgy and on the fringe hip. I have never tolerated the use of the word and was glad to see Hannah Diviney call Lizzo out, with her tweet that went viral. It all brings back memories of the Black Eye Peas when they released a song with the chorus "Let's get retarded" meaning "let's get high and wasted". After much condemnation of the song, they eventually rewrote the song to "let's get it started". In NZ at the time the Edge radio station refused to stop broadcasting it.

I actually thought the word spaz had been extinct for a number of years, but (sigh) apparently not. I suppose we are getting there slowly, although like the big girls' rehearsal it's three steps forward, two back.

Jonny Wilkinson is the CEO of Tiaho Trust - Disability A Matter of Perception, a Whangarei based disability advocacy organisation.