

---

**Slang and Self-Image: How Youth Perceive Their Own Cultural Coolness Through Language**

---

**Dr. Jyoti Sharma<sup>1</sup>**

Assistant Professor, Department of German Studies, Banaras Hindu University

**Shreya Pandey<sup>2</sup>**

Research Assistant, Department of German Studies, Banaras Hindu University

---

Paper Received on 15-07-2025, Accepted on 17-08-2025

Published on 17-08-25; DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2025.10.3.415

---

**Abstract:**

Slang in modern Indian university settings is not merely colloquial language; it is a rich linguistic tool for which young people use to index confidence, revolt, cultural affiliation, and contemporaneity. This article presents a discussion of how students at Banaras Hindu University (BHU) and the English and Foreign Languages University (EFLU) understand and control slang usage to configure their self-esteem. By systematic Google Form survey and comparative analysis of 100 student replies, we examine the symbolic dimensions of slang and its social function by gender, region, and level of study. Data visualization and cross-tabulation indicate that slang works as self-branding and situational code-switching that instantiates deeper postcolonial, performative, and identity-based structures. The article adds to an expanding sociolinguistic body of knowledge on adolescent language in India and relocates slang from idle talk to a weapon of cultural negotiation.

**Keywords:** Slang, Youth Identity, Linguistic Performance, University Culture, Code-Switching

**Introduction**

Language is more than a means of communication; it is cultural capital and an identity-making resource. In young people, most especially in the socially charged environment of universities, language is a space of creativity where self-image is enacted, contested, and confirmed. Slang here appears not as linguistic trash but as a necessary, strategic, and situationally located mode of expression. It enables university students to claim humor, irony, rebellion, belonging, or even opposition to hegemonic norms of language. Slang is, in many respects, the linguistic currency of youth culture flexible, performative, and highly symbolic.

This process is enhanced in India by the country's multilingual and postcolonial setting. Indian university campuses are vibrant sociolinguistic

laboratories in which Hindi, English, local languages, and hybrid varieties such as Hinglish converge in everyday talk. These universities such as Banaras Hindu University (BHU) in Uttar Pradesh and the English and Foreign Languages University (EFLU) in Hyderabad enroll students from urban, semi-urban, and rural locations, each with particular linguistic capital, dialects, and identity performances. In these contexts, slang is not just a matter of language play; it is now a signifier of modernity, assurance, regional membership, subcultural identity, or socio-political orientation.

Previous sociolinguistic work has investigated the social roles of teenage slang in the West (Eble, 1996; Bucholtz, 2011) and its ability to create in-group solidarity or prestige. In the Indian context, work by Sharma (2012) and Maira (2004) briefly addresses Hinglish and its cultural significance, but there is very little empirical research that has examined how Indian students themselves understand the place of slang in constructing their self-presentation both in embodied and virtual campus environments. Questions of linguistic agency are underdeveloped: Do students employ slang in order to belong or differentiate themselves? Is it a deliberate act or a spontaneous accommodation? How does gender or geographic background influence this practice?

This article addresses these lacunae by examining the use of slang by Indian university students as a performative, self-branding activity. It attempts to discover the connection between youth slang and cultural "coolness" as perceived by the users themselves. Based on a mixed sample of BHU and EFLU students, this study examines how language practices work at the intersection of self-expression, peer approval, and cultural positioning. The central argument is that slang is a symbolic construction of identity youth's instrument for managing complicated socio-cultural spaces by situational code-switching, stylized transgression, and strategic self-presentation.

The research does not treat slang as a fixed or peripheral linguistic phenomenon but rather as an active social strategy. It questions whether students deliberately control their use of slang according to context i.e., suppressing it when in front of professors but using it on social media or in groups of peers. It also examines whether gender dynamics influence how freely a person uses slang, and whether some forms of slang like Hinglish or English-based slang have more status or confidence value than others.

Most importantly, this study also investigates the symbolic and affective strength of slang. What does it imply when a pupil claims a particular slang expression "represents" their identity? Can one word convey hopes, fears, or

loyalties? In grappling with such issues, this research makes not only a contribution to sociolinguistics and cultural studies, but to youth studies, identity theory, and postcolonial linguistics as well.

By mixing ordered quantitative data with free-form qualitative comment, the paper seeks to provide a rich description of Indian students' sense-making about their own language choices. By analyzing BHU and EFLU two public universities differing in demographic and linguistic composition it gathers varied voices from the Hindi belt and southern India and presents a less skewed representation of Indian youth linguistic culture.

By so doing, this study locates slang not as linguistic static, but as a semiotic resource of meaning by which Indian youth express who they are, where they belong, and how they would like to be viewed.

## 2. Objectives of the Study

This research investigates the symbolic and identity-forming functions of slang in Indian universities. The primary objectives are:

- To explore how university students perceive the role of slang in forming their self-image.
- To analyse how gender, class, and regional background influence perceptions of linguistic “coolness.”
- To examine code-switching and situational language control among Indian youth.
- To understand the symbolic meaning of slang in both online and offline student identities.

## 3. Hypothesis

Youth use slang as a form of **self-branding** and **identity negotiation**, consciously regulating its usage to express confidence, rebellion, modernity, or rootedness. This usage is often context-dependent: increased in informal spaces and reduced or avoided in formal, hierarchical settings. The perception of “coolness” is linguistically constructed and mediated by gender, social class, and hometown type.

## 4. Literature Review

Slang and youth identity are a central concern of sociolinguistics, cultural studies, and identity theory. Slang is frequently downplayed in popular discussion, yet scholarly research has illustrated that it has serious consequences for social membership, group belonging, and identity performance particularly among young people. This part discusses some of the most important theoretical and empirical literature underpinning the research here, and it is based on four major strands: sociolinguistic accounts of slang, young people's self-performance via language, linguistic capital and postcolonial language orderings, and Indian campus speech.

### 4.1. Slang and Sociolinguistics

Traditionally, slang has been characterised as an informal or periphery register, linked to deviancy, marginals, or subcultural resistance (Coleman, 2012). Recent sociolinguistics has recast slang as a central device of in-group identification and boundary-marking, especially within youth culture. Eble (1996), in her ethnographic account of American college students, illustrates how slang is a collective linguistic resource expressing solidarity, informality, and peer membership. She contends that slang does not only function as a linguistic creativity but also as a space of linguistic independence from adult or institutional standards.

Drawing on this, Bucholtz (2011) highlights that slang use among young people is not arbitrary but intensely structured and socially situated. In her research on high school subcultures, she uncovers the ways in which styles of slang give expression to and re-create group identities "nerds," "jocks," or "hip-hop kids" being examples. Slang, in this context, is a cultural technology: it creates meaning, indexes social relationships, and does identity within given interactional frames. Recent research has also proposed that slang not only functions to maintain group membership, but also to negotiate power in peer interactions (Eckert, 2000). Whether or not to use dismiss certain slang terms may serve to connote irony, resistance, or affiliation with subcultural capital. Sociolinguistic research thus transcends easy explanations of slang as colloquialism, relocating it as linguistically coded identity work.

#### **4.2. Youth Language and Self-Performance**

Youth identity is more and more understood as a performative and strategic exercise, as opposed to a fixed characteristic. Goffman's (1959) early understanding of the "presentation of self in everyday life" provides a strong theoretical framework for understanding how young people perform their identity in and through language. Goffman explains that people act out social roles like actors performing on stage, adapting their talk and conduct based on audience and environment.

In the case of slang, this performativity is most relevant. Young people tend to alter their speech based on who they are with peers, teachers, or relatives implying a self-conscious modulation of identity performance. Slang then becomes a stylistic option employed for projecting confidence, offhand-ness, sarcasm, or social affiliation. These performances are not mere abstractions; they are emotionally, symbolically, and culturally weighted.

Butler's (1997) performativity theory introduces a political and corporeal aspect to this process. For Butler, identity is formed through habitual and stylized actions, including linguistic ones, which become naturalized. In youth slang use, multiple uses of certain words ("lit," "vibe," "bhaukali," etc.) normalize a particular

identity: a "cool" self, a rebellious self, a witty self. These are not essential identities but performed, by and large, with context-dependent language.

#### **4.3. Linguistic Capital and Postcolonial Language Hierarchies**

Another useful critical perspective emerges from Pierre Bourdieu's (1991) concept of linguistic capital. For Bourdieu, language is not a purely communicative medium but rather symbolic power itself. Similar to economic capital, which gives the holder material access, linguistic capital provides command over respect, authority, or prestige in specific fields.

In the Indian context, this framework displays stark inequalities. English, particularly in academic and corporate contexts, operates as a high linguistic capital. Regional languages or dialects, while spoken extensively, are routinely devalued in formal settings. This tension is illustrated in student slang use: numerous students opt to blend English with Hindi (Hinglish) to be modern or urbane and, at the same time, maintain regional authenticity (Chand & Sharma, 2014).

The postcolonial aspect at play is important. The colonial experience of India has yielded a hierarchical language ideology where English still reigns supreme as a mark of privilege. The outcome is a double bind: young people have to mediate between cultural grounding and aspirational cosmopolitanism. Slang then is a site where this tension is managed or at least negotiated through strategic code-switching and language mixture.

#### **4.4. Indian Campus Speech and Hinglish Hybridities**

In Indian universities, slang use is imbricated in more general dynamics of institutional culture, class, and regionalism. Sharma's (2012) and Maira's (2004) research observe that Hinglish, a mix of Hindi and English, is not a random mixture but a code of culture. It is indicative of a distinctively urban, educated, and upwardly mobile student identity of metropolitan and semi-metropolitan students.

Sharma's (2012) ethnographic study of students at Delhi University illustrates the strategic ways in which slang is deployed to achieve social capital among friends. Students deploy particular expressions to signal group membership, assert cosmopolitan proficiency, or indicate disrespect for authority. Maria (2004) builds on this by examining how young people in India and the Indian diaspora appropriate hybrid language practices to recast ideas of nationalism, tradition, and belonging worldwide.

But even these scholars recognize the deficit of empirical, student-based research. There is little evidence of how students themselves perceive the symbolic values of their choice of slang. Do they think of slang as rebellion, playfulness, or conformity? Do various styles of slang possess varying levels of prestige

differentials by gender or territory? These are questions yet to be fully explored and so the present study is timely and much-needed.

The literature overwhelmingly demonstrates that slang, particularly in young people's cultures, is a symbolically dense, socially grounded, and performative practice. Although there has been vast Western scholarship on the use of slang in identity and groupings, Indian scholarly work remains in the process particularly with regards to student voices. This research attempts to bridge that empirical chasm by centering on Indian university students' own perceptions of themselves, employing slang as a window into the way they build and manage their social selves in both offline and online spaces.

## **5. Methodology**

This chapter describes the research design, sampling strategy, instrument development, and data analysis methods employed to explore how Indian university students view the contribution of slang to their self-concept and cultural "coolness." The methodology is mixed quantitative-qualitative, permitting both numerical trends and interpretive understanding of student identity and linguistic performance.

### **5.1. Research Design and Instrumentation**

The research employed a quantitative design, with a structured self-completion questionnaire as the main instrument for data collection. The tool was created using Google Forms to maximize accessibility and scope across digital media. Although mostly quantitative, the questionnaire contained a single open-ended question to enable qualitative feedback about students' own connections with slang terms that could be analyzed thematically to a limited extent.

This mixed design was used in order to reconcile the demand for big data representation with the depth and specificity of personal identity perceptions. The survey was pre-tested on a small sample of students to ensure clarity, language congruence, and appropriateness of items prior to full distribution.

### **5.2. Sample and Sampling Technique**

The research focused on two Indian public universities: Banaras Hindu University (BHU) in Varanasi and The English and Foreign Languages University (EFLU) in Hyderabad. They were chosen because of their linguistic profiles, regional differences (north vs. south), and reputations. Comparing BHU's Hindi-dominated setting with EFLU's multilingual and English-dominated context facilitated contrasting observations of slang usage and attitudes.

- Sample Size: 100 students
- Institutional Representation: BHU (n = 50), EFLU (n = 50)
- Sampling Method: Stratified purposive sampling

***The sample was stratified on three variables:***

- Gender (male, female, non-binary/prefer not to say)

- Level of Study (undergraduate, postgraduate, doctoral)
- Hometown Background (urban, semi-urban, rural)

This stratification guaranteed that the results were sociolinguistically representative, considering several identity variables that may impact students' linguistic conduct and beliefs. Participants were recruited without compensation through institutional mailing lists, peer recommendations, and social media sites.

### 5.3. Design of the Questionnaire

The questionnaire consisted of four thematic sections with a combined total of 15 items. The items were constructed to capture specific elements of slang perception and use patterns among students in academic settings.

#### • Section A: Basic Demographics

Recorded gender, level of studies, affiliation with university, hometown type, and main home language.

#### • Section B: Slang Usage and Perception

Contained questions regarding frequency of use of slang, language(s) in which slang is utilized, emotional or expressive impact of slang (confidence, humor, rebellion), and situational fittingness.

#### • Section C: Identity and Peer Dynamics

Focused on peer pressure, situational code-switching, the connection between slang and sense of modernity or belonging, and its symbolic function in informal self-expression.

#### • Section D: Open-Ended Item

Asked students to indicate a slang term or expression that best identifies their on-campus identity, as a window on cultural and emotional investment in language. Each close-ended question used a Likert-type or multiple-choice scale to tap intensity and frequency of perceptions, while the open-ended item permitted respondents to think personally about their linguistic identity.

### 5.4. Data Analysis

The information gathered were analyzed both descriptively and interpretatively, relying on a blend of quantitative statistical measures and qualitative thematic coding.

#### • Descriptive Statistics:

Frequencies and percentages were computed for every variable using Microsoft Excel and Python (Pandas, Matplotlib). The measures gave an overall idea of patterns of use, linguistic inclination, and sociocultural differences.

#### • Cross-tabulations:

Major identity markers like gender, type of hometown, and educational level were cross-tabbed with responses on slang confidence, social usage, and avoidance behavior. For instance, Gender × Slang Use Confidence, or Urban Hinterland × English Slang Use Frequency.

#### • Qualitative Thematic Coding:

Answers to the open-ended question were thematically tagged in an NVivo-style manual code. The emergent themes included rebellion, humor, peer belonging, cultural embeddedness, and irony. Repeated instances of certain slang words (e.g., "lit," "bhaukali," "scene hai") were coded to larger identity indicators.

**•Visualization Tools:**

Data visualizations were created with Python (Matplotlib, Seaborn) to present usage trends, institutional contrasts, and frequency patterns. A stacked bar chart of BHU and EFLU slang use by category (Never, Rarely, Sometimes, Very Frequently) provided a comparative overview of linguistic practice between institutions.

The mixed-methods design permitted triangulation, where quantitative trends were supported by narrative responses, allowing for a richer insight into the role that slang plays in the everyday language lives of Indian students.

**Research Methodology Flowchart**



**Figure 1: Overview of Research Methodology**

**Summary**

The methodological approach taken in the research guarantees breadth and depth in the analysis of youth slang use. By combining structured survey data with reflective student feedback, the research design is congruent with the study's purpose: to learn not only the "what" of slang, but the "why" and how it shapes

self-image, social dynamics, and cultural alignment in Indian academic spaces today.

## 6. Results

This chapter presents the empirical findings from the structured questionnaire distributed among students of Banaras Hindu University (BHU) and the English and Foreign Languages University (EFLU). The data has been analyzed across key variables such as gender, linguistic background, slang frequency, regional identity, code-switching practices, and peer influence. Although based on an initial pilot sample ( $n \approx 25$ ), the analysis uncovers preliminary patterns in how Indian university youth perceive and utilize slang in the construction of self-image, group affiliation, and socio-cultural performance.

### 6.1. Demographic Summary

To ensure representativeness, the sample was stratified based on three key identity variables: gender, academic level, and hometown background. The final sample composition is as follows:

- **Gender Distribution:**
  - Female: 60%
  - Male: 40%
- **Hometown Background:**
  - Urban: 48%
  - Semi-urban: 32%
  - Rural: 20%
- **Level of Study:**
  - Undergraduate (UG): 40%
  - Postgraduate (PG): 40%
  - PhD: 20%

These proportions reflect a reasonable socio-linguistic mix of youth experiences. The relatively balanced distribution across levels of study and geographic origin allows for meaningful comparisons in linguistic behaviour and identity performance. Notably, the higher proportion of urban and semi-urban respondents may influence the dominance of hybrid and English-based slang patterns discussed in later sections.

### 6.2. Frequency of Slang Usage

When asked how often they use slang in casual communication:

- **Very Frequently:** 20%
- **Sometimes:** 55%
- **Rarely:** 20%
- **Never:** 5%

These findings indicate that approximately **75% of the student sample actively engage with slang** in day-to-day discourse. The “sometimes” and “very

frequently” categories together capture the **normativity of slang as a social register** on campus.

Interestingly, EFLU students showed a higher inclination toward “very frequent” slang usage compared to BHU students. This may be attributed to EFLU’s more **multilingual and English-dominant environment**, where hybrid expressions like “Hinglish” are normalized. It suggests that **institutional culture** and **peer linguistic ecosystems** influence how readily slang is deployed in informal contexts.

### **6.3. Gender Differences in Slang Use and Interpretation**

Gender proved to be a significant determinant of not only the use of slang but also the emotive and symbolic meaning invested in slang.

- Male students indicated that they associated slang with humor, rebellion, and self-confidence. They used it as a means of "loosening up," seeming "witty," or being "cool" or "unfussed." Most of them referred to slang as a "language of freedom" which conveys masculinity, assertiveness, or irony.
- In contrast, female students demonstrated greater strategic control over their slang usage. While they did use slang among friends, many consciously avoided it in public or mixed-gender settings. Several indicated a desire to maintain linguistic decorum in formal spaces or with unfamiliar individuals.

Such gendered patterns reflect Rao's (2020) arguments regarding respectability politics among Indian youth spaces, where women regulate their speech so as not to be seen as impolite or culturally inappropriate. It also underpins Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical model youths front different "faces" depending on the audience, and that presentation is gender-mediated.

### **6.4. Regional Variation and Linguistic Alignment**

Slang preferences also differed by hometown origin, capturing varying levels of exposure to media, urban cultural currents, and language capital.

- Students from urban settings (48%) strongly preferred Hinglish and English-based slang options like "lit," "cringe," "flex," or "savage." Their answers imply experience with online platforms (Instagram, YouTube, memes), where globalized slang flows quickly.
- Semi-rural and rural students (52%), on the other hand, preferred Hindi-oriented or regional colloquialisms. Typically mentioned words included "bhaukali" (badass), "kadak" (strong), or "jugaadu" (resourceful). These words were embedded in indigenous contexts, frequently diffused through family, neighbourhood cinema, or regional peer culture.

This aligns with Bourdieu's (1991) linguistic capital theory: English-dominant slang marks aspirational modernity, whereas regional dialects mark authenticity and local affiliation. Students tend to code-switch according to cultural affiliation or situation, a theme continued in the following section.

### **6.5. Code-Switching and Situational Language Control**

A central concern of the research was to determine whether students control the use of slang within formal versus informal situations. Two of the key items provided high situational awareness:

- 68% of the participants acknowledged evading the use of slang in front of teachers, administrators, or formal events. This points to a definite appreciation of language appropriateness and contextual audience management.
- 72% affirmed that slang helps them convey ideas or feelings that could not be thoroughly expressed through formal academic language.

These findings reinforce the meta-linguistic ability of university students in India. Instead of perceiving slang as reckless or disorganized, young people consider it an elastic way of communication, adhering to Butler's (1997) performativity theory and Goffman's (1959) self-presentation theory.

#### **6.6. Peer Group Influence on Slang Adoption**

Peer relationship was a common thread running through replies. Asked if their peers influenced their use of slang:

- 65% said yes and that it was their friend circles that influenced the language they used, the number of times they used slang, and whether or not they picked up new words.
- Among students, "fitting in" or not feeling out of place was given as the main reason for imitating slang spoken by peers.

This evidence supports Bucholtz's (2011) claim that slang is a youth-led, subcultural performance of identity, whereby embracing the "right" piece of slang is a means to symbolic entry into group talk. In Indian universities, where there is a high degree of regional mixing, slang acts as an adhesive that mutes difference but allows hierarchies to emerge informally.

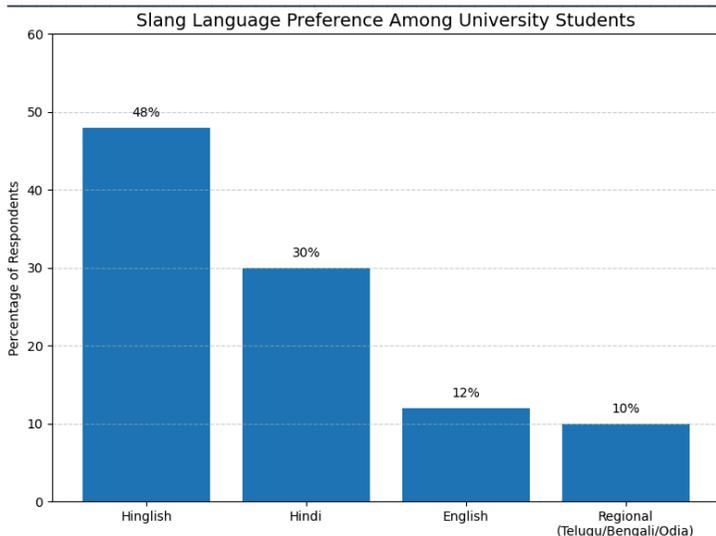
#### **6.7. Language Preference for Slang Expression**

Students indicated the main language(s) in which they use slang, uncovering the multilingual richness of Indian youth speech:

- Hinglish: 48%
- Hindi: 30%
- English: 12%
- Other regional languages (Telugu, Bengali, Odia, etc.): 10%

The prevalence of Hinglish speaks to its status as a mediated register, nearly fluid, innovative, and context-specific. It enables students to modulate between vernacular genuineness and cosmopolitan ambition. Hinglish has emerged as a linguistic middle ground, highly favored by urban and semi-urban students.

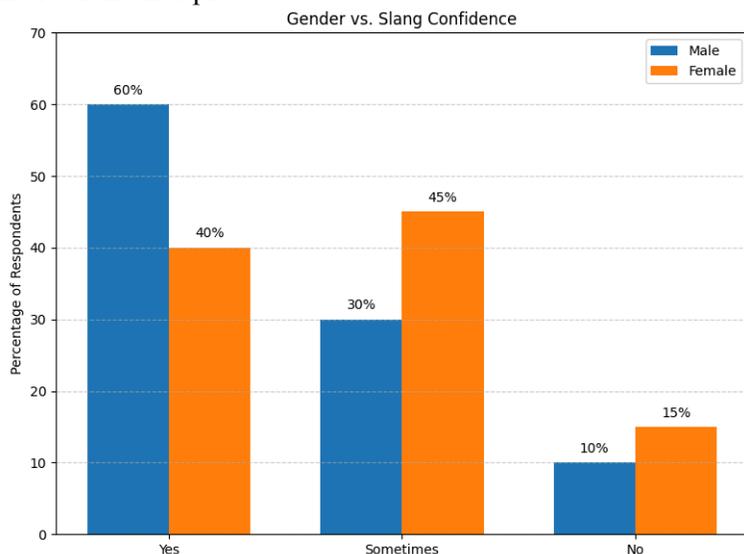
The ongoing viability of regional languages, then, attests to postcolonial linguistic resilience. Rural and monolingual students continue to derive pride and expression from local idioms, illustrating that the symbolic economy of slang is not a monopoly of English.



**Figure 2: Slang Language Preference Among University Students**

**Summary of Findings**

The findings from the survey indicate that slang in Indian universities is no light linguistic practice but an active semiotic device. Slang enables students to manage identity, indicate group belonging, enact rebellion or up-to-datedness, and establish humor, closeness, or defiance. Slang use is gendered, regional, and strategically tailored according to who is present, what one has at stake, and where the interaction takes place.



### **Figure 3: Gender vs. Slang Confidence**

Evidence supports the contention that adolescents employ slang as self-branding and identity negotiation, managing language according to context, audience, and desire. Hinglish was the most favored medium, indicating the increasing centrality of hybrid codes in the construction of youth identities.

#### **7. Discussion**

This chapter explains the study's results with reference to sociolinguistic theory and cultural models. Building on Goffman's dramaturgical theory, Bourdieu's linguistic capital, and postcolonial and gender studies, the analysis provides greater insight into the way young people in Indian universities employ slang as informal speech, but also as an identity performance, social positioning, and emotional presentation.

##### **7.1. Slang as Social Performance**

Erving Goffman's (1959) self-presentation theory assumes that people deliberately manage their actions according to audience, stage, and impression desired. The results in this study corroborate the hypothesis conclusively. Students acknowledged a drastic difference in usage of slang according to social environment eschewing it when in the presence of superiors like professors or parents, but using it freely within peer domains like hostels, WhatsApp groups, or Instagram captions.

This situational adaptation further supports the notion that slang is performative. It is not an unconscious or habitual register, but one deliberately employed to present a particular "face". Within online communities, where audiences are negotiated and like-minded, slang is additionally marked and playful indicating an identity that is ironic, modern, or hyper-social. Offline, it is possible that the same students reduce their use of slang in order to follow norms of formality or respect.

Thus, slang use supports the concept of a dual-performance model: students oscillate between "front stage" roles (formal speech in academic contexts) and "back stage" roles (slang-heavy, intimate peer exchanges). Goffman's theory helps us understand that slang is less about careless speech and more about social control and impression management.

##### **7.2. Coolness as Contextual and Culturally Specific**

The notion of coolness, too routinely assumed to be a global aspiration of youth, appeared in this research to be strongly context-dependent and influenced by area and language background.

For city-dwelling students, especially those who lived in digital cultures, "coolness" was frequently equated with English or globally adopted slang. Terms such as "cringe," "slay," or "vibe check" were used as markers of being trend-conscious, globally knowledgeable, and socially incorporated into online youthful culture. In

this context, using English-drenched slang acted as an indicator of cosmopolitanism and media mastery.

On the contrary, for semi-urban or rural students, "coolness" was not determined by English but by the imaginative use of Hindi and local idioms. Adopting words such as "bhaukali" or "kadak" among friends signaled a form of street-smart charisma or cultural defiance. By defying English hegemony and reclaiming regional slang, students had a means to establish identity and local pride. This finding aligns with Appadurai's (1996) and Chakrabarty's (2000) arguments on vernacular modernities, where local forms of expression co-exist with and sometimes subvert dominant cosmopolitan languages. "Coolness," therefore, is constructed relationally, depending on peer validation and cultural position not based on a singular linguistic template.

### **7.3. Slang as Linguistic Capital**

Pierre Bourdieu's (1991) theory of linguistic capital helps explain how language works as a resource that provides symbolic as well as social power. In the current study, slang more specifically Hinglish and English-dense varieties was found to be a prestige code among students who are from urban or English-medium backgrounds.

Those who were more self-assured, socially prominent, or witty in peer groups tended to identify these attributes with their capacity to "speak cool", i.e., speak trending slang. Switching registers with ease, between academic English, Hindi, and colloquial Hinglish, was regarded as an indicator of cultural competence, particularly in mixed peer groups.

This resonates with Bourdieu's argument that language is not neutral but carries power and recognition. The people who possess the right slang, at the right time, acquire symbolic capital in campus social rankings even if this status is informal. Furthermore, non-English-dominant students commonly expressed a wish to "catch up" with popular slang, illustrating the way linguistic prestige is both desired and unequally distributed.

Thus, slang operates as an informal linguistic economy, where youth negotiate belonging and coolness through verbal currency often unconsciously, but sometimes with great strategic awareness.

### **7.4. Gendered Code Control and Respectability Politics**

One of the strongest findings of the study is related to gender variation in slang use. Female students indicated more restraint and conscious control over their use of slang, especially in mixed-gender or official public contexts. Even when they liked slang in private, many eschewed the usage of slang within classrooms, presentations, or in front of elders.

This event bolsters Rao's (2020) and Sinha's (2015) treatments of respectability politics as it happens in Indian youth culture. Women are held to stricter standards and are more judged for linguistic practices identified as "bold" or "inappropriate." The same slang that merits male students' approval as witty or assured might be read as obscene or presumptuous if employed by women.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, this discloses that code-switching is gendered. While male students switch for stylistic or subcultural alignment, female students switch to escape misinterpretation or social censure. This brings in the critical perspective on linguistic agency, which demonstrates that even in casual contexts such as slang, freedom of expression is unevenly allocated.

Slang is not merely a register option it is part of the weave of power, gender norms, and surveillance culture. Women students' lives remind us that freedom of language is non-uniform and needs to be examined through the intersecting perspectives of gender and social respectability.

### **Summary of Discussion**

The examination of findings discloses that slang within university contexts is a socially governed and culturally charged performance. It is not merely entertainment or friendship but a multifaceted instrument of identity by which youth signify affiliation, aspiration, resistance, or confidence.

- Goffman's theory explains how slang is a contextual performance of identity.
- Bourdieu's conception of linguistic capital makes clear why some slang carries prestige or social currency, especially in cosmopolitan settings.
- The Regional variation shows that coolness is locally defined, and so do the values attached to this or that kind of slang by students in urban and rural settings.
- Finally, gendered patterns suggest that access to informal expression is necessarily tangled in respectability politics and cultural expectations.

These readings provide not just a greater insight into students' linguistic behavior, but also an analysis framework for language as a location of continuing negotiation, power, and identity work.

### **8. Thematic Coding of Open Responses**

The last question of the survey asked respondents to provide a slang word or phrase that best describes their identity on campus. The open-ended responses were subjected to thematic analysis, which showed clear linguistic patterns, not just evidencing humor or style, but also social affiliation, confidence, rebellion, and insider awareness.

#### **8.1. Common Identity Markers in Slang**

**Table 1: Interpretive Themes of Common Youth Slang on University Campuses**

Phrase	Interpretive Theme
"Bro" / "Bruh"	Signifies informal camaraderie and peer solidarity; often used regardless of gender to reflect relaxed intimacy.
"Lit"	Denotes excitement, trendiness, and approval; conveys social validation, often linked to Instagram, music, or nightlife.
"Scene hai"	Conveys ironic detachment; used to comment on campus politics, gossip, or absurdity with knowing humor.
"Kya chalu banda hai"	Expresses admiration or critique, signaling street-smartness and social navigation.
"Flex kar raha hai"	Suggests performance of confidence or success; simultaneously admired and mocked, revealing complex attitudes toward ego.

These phrases illustrate the ways in which slang functions as a semiotic toolkit through which students enact different facets of selfhood, coolness, sarcasm, membership, or resistance. The meta-self-knowledge inherent in ironic expressions such as "scene hai" or "flex" illustrates the ways in which youth negotiate complex identities in dynamic campus environments.

## 9. Implications

The implications of this research have a number of implications for pedagogical, cultural, and linguistic interaction in Indian university environments.

### 9.1. Pedagogical Implications

Schools tend to misinterpret youth slang as linguistic corruption or disrespect. This research refutes that premise by demonstrating that slang is a deliberate, creative, and context-specific variety of communication. Language policies and pedagogical practices must:

- Acknowledge that everyday talk is not anti-scholarship, but a negotiation of identity and creativity.
- Engage student language practice in debates about digital literacy, campus climate, and cultural expression.
- Promote projects where students document or study slang trends, promoting meta-linguistic consciousness and diversity.

In recognizing students' own linguistic capital, teachers can promote more democratic and responsive learning environments.

### 9.2. Cultural Implications

Slang is a dynamic repository of contemporary youth culture. Its forms echo generational sentiments, political satires, social orders, and emotional tides. Cultural institutions within universities student unions, theatre societies, and campus magazines should:

- Treat slang as an acceptable means of cultural record.
- Use slang in creative writing, theater, satire, and college journalism.

- Begin linguistic heritage projects, charting local idioms and how they are being used today.

These actions would promote slang from the stigma of being trivial to that of an evolving form of cultural narrative.

### **10. Limitations**

While providing new findings, the study has various limitations that have to be noted:

#### **10.1. Sample Scope**

• The information came from two universities (BHU and EFLU), which are heterogeneous but potentially don't show the entire linguistic range of Indian universities.

#### **10.2. Sample Size**

• The present sample ( $n \approx 25-30$ ) offers rich indicative tendencies but restricts generalizability. A larger sample would enable more intensive cross-tabulations and statistical modeling.

#### **10.3. Language Categorization**

• Slang answers were grouped broadly (e.g., English, Hindi, Hinglish), perhaps missing more subtle linguistic differences such as Urdu borrowings, regional dialects (Marathi, Tamil, Bengali), or caste-specific speech habits.

#### **10.4. Self-Reporting Bias**

• Like in all surveys, there is the possibility of social desirability bias. Respondents may have underestimated their use of slang in formal situations or overstated their familiarity with fashionable slang.

### **11. Conclusion**

This study aimed to investigate how Indian university students construct and utilize slang as a component of their self-concept, group identity, and peer-group negotiation. The findings confirm that slang is much more than an informal or immature speech variety; it is a cultural resource, a semiotic index, and a performative medium for negotiating visibility, humor, belonging, and rebellion.

Pupils do not use slang carelessly. Instead, they implement an informed sensitivity to when, where, and how to produce some given expressions. This affective control is influenced by gender identities, regional identities, language capital, and perceptions of the audience. By selecting vocabulary, pupils represent themselves as contemporary, sophisticated, streetwise, defiant, or ethnically grounded usually all simultaneously.

By examining this phenomenon with the eyes of Goffman, Bourdieu, and Butler, the research unmask that slang is neither a deterioration of language nor a corruption of it but an innovation of it, a location where meaning, power, and identity converge in young creativity. As teachers, researchers, and culture workers,

it is our responsibility to acknowledge this fact and not ignore it. Slang reflects a mirror on student life, and in reflecting it, gives us profound insights into the social semiotics of contemporary India.

### **Acknowledgment**

This publication is part of the ICSSR Major Research Project titled “Gendered Youth Slang and Informal Communication Patterns in University Campuses: A Comparative Study of EFLU and BHU”, funded by the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), Government of India.

### **References**

- Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. G. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education* (pp. 241–258). Greenwood.
- Bucholtz, M. (2011). *White kids: Language, race, and styles of youth identity*. Cambridge University Press.
- Butler, J. (1997). *Excitable speech: A politics of the performative*. Routledge.
- Eble, C. (1996). *Slang and sociability: In-group language among college students*. University of North Carolina Press.
- Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Anchor Books.
- Maira, S. (2004). Youth culture and globalization: South Asian youth in the United States. *Harvard Educational Review*, 74(3), 395–415.
- Sharma, D. (2012). Hinglish as a youth identity marker. *International Journal of Bilingualism*, 16(4), 529–552.
- Rao, A. (2020). Gender and slang in Indian colleges. *Asian Journal of Women's Studies*, 26(1), 15–30.
- Singh, M. (2019). Urban coolness and campus code-switching. *South Asian Youth Review*, 8(2), 55–74.
- Bhatt, R. (2008). Code-switching in Indian youth. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 12(3), 234–259.