



The Existence of Casual Slang and the Decline of Indonesian Language National Identity Among University Students

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the phenomenon of slang usage on social media within an academic campus environment. Employing a phenomenological approach, this research focuses on active undergraduate students at Universitas HKBP Nommensen Pematangsiantar. Data were gathered through field observations, in-depth interviews, and documentation. The findings indicate that slang is widely adopted because it is perceived as more intimate, accessible, and effective in facilitating peer comprehension, particularly during digital interactions. However, this phenomenon also indicates a linguistic shift that potentially marginalizes language politeness and ethics when used in inappropriate contexts. Therefore, the preservation of standard Indonesian and indigenous languages must be maintained within academic settings, whereas slang should be restricted to informal or non-academic domains. The implications of this study underscore the necessity of fostering register awareness among students. Ultimately, students are expected to develop code-switching competence based on the interlocutor and communicative setting, thereby preserving the identity and prestige of the national language on campus without impeding their communicative creativity in public spheres or social media.

Keywords: *Academic community; National integration; Slang.*

Abstrak: Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji fenomena penggunaan bahasa gaul di media sosial dalam lingkungan akademis kampus. Pendekatan yang digunakan adalah studi fenomenologi terhadap mahasiswa aktif Universitas HKBP Nommensen Pematangsiantar. Pengumpulan data dilakukan melalui observasi lapangan, wawancara mendalam, dan studi dokumentasi. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa penggunaan bahasa gaul lazim diterapkan karena dinilai lebih akrab, mudah diterima, dan mempermudah pemahaman antar-mahasiswa, khususnya dalam interaksi digital. Meskipun demikian, fenomena ini juga memperlihatkan adanya pergeseran atau distansi linguistik yang berpotensi mengesampingkan nilai kesantunan dan etika berbahasa apabila tidak digunakan pada konteks yang tepat. Oleh karena itu, kelestarian bahasa Indonesia dan bahasa ibu harus tetap dijaga di ruang-ruang akademik, sementara penggunaan bahasa gaul dibatasi pada ranah informal atau di luar konteks ilmiah. Implikasi dari temuan ini menegaskan pentingnya membangun kesadaran register (*register awareness*) di kalangan mahasiswa. Mahasiswa diharapkan mampu melakukan alih kode (*code-switching*) secara tepat sesuai dengan lawan bicara dan situasi tutur, sehingga identitas dan wibawa bahasa nasional tetap terjaga tanpa menghalangi kreativitas komunikasi sosial di ranah publik maupun media sosial.

Kata Kunci: *Bahasa gaul; Integrasi nasional; Sivitas akademika*

INTRODUCTION

The proliferation of digital media has significantly accelerated the transformation of linguistic practices within society, particularly among younger generations who utilize digital platforms as their primary arena for interaction. This shift in communicative patterns has fostered the emergence of slang varieties that are increasingly normalized in daily discourse. The growing dominance of slang raises profound concerns regarding the declining intensity of formal Standard Indonesian usage, particularly within academic environments that are normatively expected to serve as spaces for language cultivation and the preservation of national identity (Ahmad et al., 2025).

This shift in linguistic orientation reflects a fundamental transformation in language attitudes among the youth. Standard Indonesian, which normatively functions as the national language and a primary symbol of national identity, is gradually experiencing a decline in prestige within daily digital interactions. Across numerous online communities, proficiency in slang serves as an in-group marker of belonging, whereas the use of formal Standard Indonesian often creates an impression of rigidity and social distance. This dynamic generates indirect peer pressure, compelling individuals to adapt their linguistic choices to secure social acceptance. Consequently, language use is no longer strictly driven by communicative necessity, but is increasingly dictated by the demand to construct a self-image aligned with digital culture (Safar et al., 2025).

This attitudinal shift is further amplified by the expansion of social media as the core domain for the formation of youth popular culture. Digital platforms do not merely facilitate communication; they actively establish mechanisms that drive linguistic reproduction through algorithms, user engagement, and viral culture. In this context, slang undergoes a functional transformation from a mere communicative tool into a source of economic and symbolic value through linguistic commodification. Content creators strategically leverage specific linguistic variations—such as Indonesian–English code-mixing, regional trendy dialects (e.g., "South Jakarta" style), and viral lexicon—to enhance audience engagement, expand reach, and gain digital recognition. As these practices are continuously reproduced and validated through empirical metrics such as view counts, follower growth, and interactive engagement, slang acquires social legitimacy as the most relevant mode of communication in the digital ecosystem (Aghapouri, 2020).

This phenomenon presents a critical linguistic paradox. On one hand, the proliferation of slang illustrates linguistic creativity and dynamism, which represent natural trajectories of societal evolution. On the other hand, the hegemony of slang in digital spheres threatens to relegate Standard Indonesian from a core symbol of national identity to a mere utilitarian code reserved strictly for formal and administrative contexts. This paradox demonstrates that social media not only accelerates linguistic innovation but

also actively restructures the prestige hierarchy among language varieties through continuous social validation mechanisms.

Although extensive research has examined slang as a manifestation of linguistic creativity, youth identity construction, and social media variation, a comprehensive literature gap remains regarding how the dominance of slang simultaneously reshapes language attitudes, generates peer pressure against standard language use, and reconstructs linguistic prestige in digital spaces. In other words, studies that integrate the dynamics of digital identity, the mechanisms of linguistic commodification, and their broader implications for the existence of Standard Indonesian within a unified analytical framework remain scarce.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research method to conduct an in-depth exploration of the sociocultural phenomena occurring among undergraduate students at Universitas HKBP Nommensen Pematangsiantar. Rather than aiming to generalize that the entire student body massively utilizes slang, this study specifically focused on evidence-based perceptions and orientations regarding slang usage within an academic environment. Data collection was conducted through non-participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation involving key informants, specifically undergraduate students of Universitas HKBP Nommensen Pematangsiantar who were selected using a purposive sampling technique. Subsequently, the collected data were analyzed through systematic stages of data reduction and descriptive-analytical data display. These analytical steps aimed to draw conclusions regarding the prevailing tendencies of slang usage while simultaneously evaluating its implications as a contributing factor to the erosion of national identity and the declining use of both Standard Indonesian and indigenous languages.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Intensity, Patterns, and Subjective Reasons for Slang Usage Among Students

The utilization of slang among university students demonstrates a exceptionally high intensity, having evolved into an entrenched habit within their daily communication. This condition is established through a continuous process of habituation within peer circles, resulting in slang being increasingly selected for non-academic interactions. These findings are corroborated by informant admissions indicating that slang is employed almost daily when communicating with peers. Such high frequency of use suggests that slang is no longer practiced as a momentary linguistic variation, but has crystallized into a stable communication pattern maintained through repetitive social

interactions. Consequently, the intensity of slang usage reflects the formation of robust linguistic habits within the students' social spheres.

The habitual nature of slang indicates that this language variety holds an increasingly dominant position in students' daily communication. This condition implies that slang is not merely utilized as a superficial response to fleeting trends, but has become an integral component of recurring communication patterns within their social ecosystem. The recurrence of these practices reveals that language choice is shaped by continuous interactional experiences until it transforms into a collective habit within peer groups. As a result, slang acquires a broader function—not merely as an instrumental tool for communication, but also as a socio-linguistic marker of intimacy and group identity. Therefore, these findings confirm that the persistence of slang among university students is sustained by a continuous social habituation process in daily life (Orchard & Sangaraganesan, 2023).

The primary determinant underlying students' subjective choice to adopt slang is the creation of psychological comfort and a more relaxed, intimate atmosphere of communication. The preference for this language variety emerges as a response to students' psychosocial need to circumvent formality, which is perceived as excessively rigid; the use of Standard Indonesian is often perceived to create social distance and impede the fluidity of emotional expression among peers.

Students evaluate slang as "more pleasant" (*lebih enak*) and "more comfortable" (*lebih nyaman*) for daily conversations. The adoption of slang is capable of rendering communicative relationships "more intimate" (*lebih akrab*) compared to formal language usage. These findings demonstrate that language functions not only as a medium for information transfer, but also as an affective instrument capable of building emotional proximity, group solidarity, and a sense of belonging within student social communities.

The affective function of language serves as a crucial factor explaining why non-standard varieties are preferred in informal interactions over standard language, which tends to be oriented toward prescriptive norms and formality. Therefore, psychological comfort, intimacy, and emotional closeness serve as social legitimations that reinforce the continuity of slang usage among university students.

The distributional patterns and usage of slang within the academic environment also indicate clear social domain boundaries; it is dominantly utilized in horizontal interactions among peers outside of formal instructional settings. This pattern emerges because students retain normative awareness regarding linguistic appropriateness based on communicative contexts. They understand that communication with fellow students is more flexible and accommodates slang, whereas interaction with lecturers or engagement in scientific forums demands the use of formal Standard Indonesian.

Slang is more frequently employed during instant messaging ("chatting"), social gatherings with peers, or casual interpersonal conversations. Its usage is generally restricted to "outside the classroom" (*di luar kelas*) or "outside instructional activities" (*di luar kegiatan perkuliahan*). This finding reveals that students remain capable of exercising code-switching based on situational demands, although the exceptionally high intensity of slang usage risks blurring the boundaries between formal and informal domains if not accompanied by adequate linguistic awareness (Zulkhaeriyah et al., 2023).

Social Media Determination and Peer Environment as Driving Factors of Slang Usage

The massive proliferation of slang among university students is a direct implication of powerful external factors, notably the penetration of social media and the dynamics of peer interactions. In the digital era, social media has emerged as the primary arena for the production, reproduction, and dissemination of new linguistic forms that rapidly diffuse across communities and geographical boundaries. The presence of digital platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, X, YouTube, and various instant messaging applications facilitates the emergence of vocabulary, abbreviations, expressions, and trendy terms that are subsequently adopted widely by the younger generation.

Informants consistently identified social media—particularly TikTok and Instagram—as the primary sources of linguistic trends utilized in their daily lives. They acknowledged that various contemporary slang terms are generally first encountered through digital content before ultimately being implemented in direct, face-to-face communication with peers (Prayudha & Pradana, 2023).

The dominance of social media in shaping students' linguistic behavior is further amplified by the inherent characteristics of digital platforms, which emphasize speed, creativity, and communicative appeal. The majority of contemporary internet content utilizes language that is relaxed, concise, and trend-oriented, feeling more relatable to youth realities than formal language. Consequently, students do not act merely as passive consumers of slang, but actively function as dissemination agents who reproduce and transmit these linguistic forms through posts, comments, and online discourse.

Social media has transformed into an arena for the formation of new linguistic norms capable of influencing the linguistic preferences of the younger generation. Slang, which initially originates within digital spaces, undergoes a process of social legitimation as it is repeatedly utilized by a critical mass of users, eventually becoming accepted as an integral component of daily communicative practices.

Social media possesses the capacity to generate viral culture that accelerates linguistic diffusion. A term originated by a content creator or

stemming from a specific phenomenon can reach millions of users within a remarkably brief timeframe. This condition compresses the cycle of linguistic evolution significantly compared to historical periods. Students who remain continuously connected to digital media are indirectly and intensely exposed to evolving linguistic innovations.

Such intensive exposure fosters a process of linguistic habituation, wherein the use of slang terms is perceived as normalized and intrinsically relevant to youth identity. Thus, social media functions not only as a communicative medium, but also as an agent of cultural socialization that molds the mindset, lifestyle, and linguistic choices of university students in their daily lives.

In addition to digital technological factors, the peer group environment plays a highly significant role in driving slang usage among students. Intensive interactions within peer circles create a psychological need for communicative uniformity as an expression of social solidarity. In this context, slang functions as an in-group marker that distinguishes individuals who are considered "part of the group" from those outside the social boundary. Informants stated that the peer environment represents the most substantial factor influencing their daily speech patterns. This assertion indicates that students' linguistic choices are not solely determined by individual preference, but are governed by the evolving norms and expectations within their immediate social networks.

The influence of the peer environment dictates that slang is more readily comprehended by peers, lacks interpersonal rigidity, and aligns seamlessly with youth communication characteristics. Slang facilitates faster and more efficient communication because every group member shares a mutual understanding of the semantics of the terms employed. Furthermore, uniform language use fosters a sense of togetherness and reinforces emotional bonds among group members. This phenomenon illustrates the function of language as a social identity marker utilized to establish and maintain group solidarity (Cheung et al., 2025).

The propensity of students to adopt slang within peer environments can be explained through the concept of social conformity. Individuals tend to adjust their behavior—including linguistic behavior—to align with prevailing group norms to secure social acceptance and mitigate the risk of marginalization. When the majority of group members utilize slang, an individual feels compelled to follow identical patterns to be perceived as adaptable and integrated into the community. In specific situations, utilizing formal language can paradoxically create an impression of social distance or alienation from the group; hence, students preferentially select language varieties perceived as common and accepted by their peers.

Beyond functioning as an instrument of social adaptation, slang also serves as a medium for expressing youth identity. Through the deployment of specific terminology, students demonstrate their affinity with popular culture,

digital technological advancements, and contemporary social trends. Therefore, slang represents not merely a mode of speech, but also reflects the social positioning and cultural identity of its speakers. The more frequently a term is utilized within a peer circle, the stronger the identity symbolism attached to that term becomes.

Evidence demonstrates that the persistence of slang among university students is constructed by the interplay of two mutually reinforcing forces: social media serves as the source of production and dissemination for viral linguistic innovations, while the peer environment acts as a space of social validation ensuring that this language continues to be practiced in daily communication. This synergy between digital culture and the fundamental need for social acceptance is precisely what allows slang to persist, evolve, and become deeply rooted in student life. Therefore, slang usage cannot be understood merely as an individual linguistic choice, but must be analyzed as the outcome of simultaneous social, cultural, and technological processes within contemporary youth reality.

The entrenched habit of utilizing slang intensively triggers linguistic interference that potentially distorts competence in good and correct Standard Indonesian during formal situations. This linguistic barrier emerges when informal communication patterns habitually employed in personal spaces subconsciously infiltrate academic activities. This symptom was openly acknowledged by informants who stated that slang terms frequently slip out spontaneously when they deliver scientific presentations in class or compose academic assignments. This phenomenon indicates that the dominance of slang has weakened students' sensitivity in differentiating language registers, causing the boundaries of scientific formality to blur under the pressure of daily linguistic habits.

The negative impact of this interference extends to a degradation in the quality of students' standard vocabulary mastery and grammatical precision. Informants revealed concrete impacts including the loss of recall for standard lexicon and a strong tendency to utilize non-standard abbreviations in written communication. A situation was depicted where this habit directly impairs vocabulary selection when composing formal assignments because students are unaccustomed to positioning themselves within formal registers. Referring to sociolinguistic theory regarding diglossic instability, the inability of students to differentiate between formal and informal situations indicates that the function of the High Variety (Standard Language) is currently undergoing functional degradation due to the uncontrolled expansion of the Low Variety (Slang) within the university environment (Jasmine Azizah Nur Inayah et al., 2024).

Students' Perceptions of Standard Indonesian as a National Identity

Although slang dominates students' communicative practices in daily life, they do not view Standard Indonesian solely through a pragmatic lens as an instrumental communication tool. Rather, they perceive it as a symbol of unity, collective identity, and a representation of national sovereignty. This awareness is forged because students understand that Standard Indonesian plays a strategic role in unifying an Indonesian society characterized by highly diverse ethnic, cultural, and regional language backgrounds.

Based on the empirical findings, informants explicitly stated that Standard Indonesian is a language of unity (*bahasa persatuan*) that serves a critical role in integrating diverse ethnic groups and regions. Statements viewed Standard Indonesian as an inseparable element of national character and a national symbol irreplaceable by any other language variety. This perspective positions the national language as the primary medium for constructing an *imagined community*—an instrument that enables individuals from disparate backgrounds to cultivate consciousness as a single, unified nation.

This perspective aligns with the theoretical functions of a national language, asserting that Standard Indonesian serves not merely as a communicative medium, but as a symbol of national identity, national pride, and societal unification. Therefore, the high intensity of slang usage does not inherently diminish students' ideational awareness regarding the strategic position of Standard Indonesian as a national identity.

This ideological awareness subsequently generates a collective understanding that students bear a moral responsibility to preserve, utilize, and maintain Standard Indonesian correctly and appropriately, particularly within academic environments. This perspective arises because students recognize that higher education institutions serve as intellectual arenas with a strategic mandate to preserve the existence of Standard Indonesian as the language of science and state administration.

Students are expected to act as role models in the proper usage of Standard Indonesian as a manifestation of both academic and social responsibility. This view posits that preserving the characteristics of Standard Indonesian represents an integral component of nationalism that must be consistently enacted. These results demonstrate that the informants possess positive language loyalty—specifically, a willingness to maintain the existence of Standard Indonesian as a national symbol despite navigating the currents of globalization and digital culture.

These findings confirm that language loyalty represents one of the primary indicators of a positive language attitude, alongside language pride and awareness of the norm. Therefore, university students continue to exhibit a strong normative commitment to the preservation of Standard Indonesian as an essential pillar of national identity.

Conversely, the data reveal a behavioral paradox between positive language attitudes and actual linguistic conduct in daily communicative practices. On one hand, all informants acknowledged the significance of Standard Indonesian as a national symbol and unifying language; on the other hand, they consistently default to slang across various social interactions. This condition indicates that appreciation for Standard Indonesian resides predominantly at the cognitive and affective levels, whereas its behavioral implementation remains inconsistent.

The findings demonstrate that ideological acknowledgment regarding the importance of Standard Indonesian is not automatically accompanied by a habit of utilizing standard language in daily communication or academic activities. This phenomenon can be explained through the concept of language attitude, which posits that a positive attitude toward a language is not always directly proportional to actual usage behavior, as language choice is heavily governed by social factors, cultural dynamics, group identity, and environmental pressures. This explanation also aligns with the domain of language use theory, which posits that individuals may maintain a positive attitude toward a language while opting for alternative language varieties within specific domains due to solidarity, social intimacy, or communicative efficiency (Salman & Akhiroh, 2025).

Therefore, the dominance of slang in student life does not reflect a weakening of nationalist sentiment; rather, it highlights a dichotomy between ideological convictions regarding the linguistic importance of Standard Indonesian and daily communicative practices shaped by contemporary social dynamics.

Regarding linguistic identity, it can be understood that while students maintain a highly positive perception of Standard Indonesian as a national identity, they face challenges in consistently actualizing this perception within their linguistic behavior. This phenomenon demonstrates that the primary issue does not lie in a decline in linguistic nationalism, but rather in the escalating influence of digital culture and social interactions that incentivize slang as the primary mode of communication. Consequently, efforts to reinforce Standard Indonesian within higher education institutions must be directed not merely toward enhancing theoretical knowledge of linguistic rules, but toward cultivating linguistic habits capable of bridging the gap between positive language attitudes and behavioral enactment in both academic and social domains.

Thus, Standard Indonesian can continue to execute its functions as the state language, the language of scientific inquiry, and the symbol of national identity without necessitating the eradication of slang as a legitimate linguistic variation within informal interpersonal discourse.

Contextualization and Habituation Strategies in Higher Education

The findings indicate that efforts to maintain an equilibrium between slang usage and the preservation of Standard Indonesian in higher education require a linguistic reconciliation strategy oriented toward contextual language use. Students do not view slang as an existential threat that must be eradicated, but rather as a functional language variety that serves to construct peer intimacy. Therefore, the proposed solutions do not advocate for the absolute prohibition of slang, but rather emphasize the delineation of clear usage boundaries to ensure it does not encroach upon the functions of Standard Indonesian as an academic and official language.

Students must cultivate register awareness to deploy language appropriate to its context. According to the informants, slang remains legitimate for informal peer communication, whereas good and correct Standard Indonesian must serve as the primary code during lectures, scientific writing, academic presentations, and formal scholarly forums. These findings align with the *domain of language use* concept, which dictates that language variety selection must be calibrated to the communicative domain, interlocutor relationships, and interactional objectives.

Communicative competence is not determined solely by grammatical proficiency, but by a speaker's sociolinguistic ability to select the language variety appropriate to the social context. Thus, a strategy of linguistic contextualization represents a form of sociolinguistic competence that enables students to utilize slang and formal Standard Indonesian proportionally, without placing the two codes in an adversarial relationship.

Beyond situational language placement, the research findings demonstrate that the successful preservation of Standard Indonesian within higher education depends heavily on sustained habituation processes. Students evaluated that proficiency in formal Standard Indonesian cannot be built merely through theoretical memorization of grammatical rules, but must be actively trained through consistent practice across diverse academic activities.

Informants emphasized the critical importance of fostering a campus culture that prioritizes formal Standard Indonesian, particularly during instructional processes, classroom discussions, academic seminars, and scientific forums. This assertion highlights that the academic environment holds a strategic role as a habit-formation space that reinforces students' competence in proper language usage. Social learning principles demonstrate that linguistic behavior is acquired through continuous processes of observation, imitation, and reinforcement within a social environment. Therefore, if the campus ecosystem consistently models and enforces good and correct Standard Indonesian, students will more readily internalize these practices as part of their communicative repertoire.

The research findings also reveal that effective habituation necessitates the active involvement of the entire *civitas academica* as cultural agents within

the university. The burden of cultivating Standard Indonesian usage cannot be placed solely on students; it requires systemic support from lecturers, administrative staff, and institutional policies that collectively build a conducive linguistic ecosystem.

Informants emphasized the importance of synergy between lecturers and students through mutual corrective practices—such as gentle reminders when inappropriate language varieties surface during academic presentations or discussions. Furthermore, informants proposed that institutions proactively organize activities oriented toward reinforcing Standard Indonesian, such as linguistic seminars, scientific writing competitions, academic workshops, and campus literacy programs. This finding aligns with language planning theories, which posit that the successful maintenance of a language is heavily influenced by institutional policy, structural planning, and structural support capable of shaping linguistic habits within a community. Thus, reinforcing Standard Indonesian in higher education cannot rely on individualistic approaches alone, but demands systemic support involving all institutional stakeholders.

In addition to academic environmental support, the results indicate that reinforcing Standard Indonesian competence must be accompanied by enhanced individual literacy as the foundational pillar for robust linguistic capability. Students must habituate themselves to reading academic books, scientific journals, and quality Indonesian-language literature that adhere to grammatical standards, while simultaneously increasing writing practice as a mechanism to enrich lexicon and improve structural precision.

Linguistic competence evolves through intensive engagement with high-quality textual inputs. Literacy is not merely the mechanical ability to read and write; it represents a holistic process of linguistic competence development, critical thinking cultivation, and heightened awareness of language deployment across diverse social contexts. Therefore, fostering a culture of reading and writing serves as an imperative strategy to reinforce Standard Indonesian mastery while simultaneously mitigating the intrusion of slang elements into academic discourse.

The reconciliation between slang and Standard Indonesian is not an attempt to pit two language varieties against one another, but rather to establish a functional equilibrium through the enhancement of students' contextual competence. Slang retains its legitimate space as a variation for informal discourse, whereas Standard Indonesian must be uncompromisingly defended as the language of science, official administration, and national identity within academic environments. Therefore, the most relevant strategy for higher education institutions is to cultivate a linguistic culture that emphasizes situational awareness, structured habituation of Standard Indonesian in academic activities, individual literacy enhancement, and sustained institutional support. Through this holistic approach, higher

education institutions can fulfill their mandate as centers of scientific advancement and strategic arenas for safeguarding the national identity of Standard Indonesian, without stifling students' linguistic creativity and social expression in their daily lives.

CONCLUSIONS

This study concludes that slang has become the dominant mode of communication in daily interactions among undergraduate students. The widespread adoption of this language variety is driven by its ability to foster intimacy, social acceptance, and mutual comprehension among peers, particularly within social media environments. However, this phenomenon also indicates a shift in language attitudes and linguistic distance that potentially undermines language politeness and communicative ethics when deployed in inappropriate contexts. Consequently, the preservation of standard Indonesian and indigenous languages must be rigorously maintained within academic domains, while slang usage should be proportionally restricted to informal settings or non-academic contexts.

The primary implication of these findings underscores the critical necessity of cultivating register awareness within higher education institutions. Students are expected to develop sociolinguistic competence in code-switching, enabling them to adapt their language choices appropriately based on the interlocutor and the communicative setting. Through sustained habituation strategies and institutional support, the identity and prestige of Standard Indonesian as the language of scientific inquiry can be preserved on campus, without impeding students' linguistic creativity and social expression in public spheres or digital spaces.

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