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SWEAR WORDS AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN BANDUNG: A MIXED-METHODS SOCIOLINGUISTIC STUDY OF TYPES, PURPOSES, AND INFLUENCES

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Abstract: This study investigates the use of swear words among university students in Bandung, focusing on the types, purposes, influences, and gender differences in swearing behavior. Through a mixed-method approach comprising surveys, interviews, and observational data, the study reveals that students use a diverse range of swear words, including local vernacular and borrowed terms from English, primarily to express emotions, build social bonds, emphasize communication, and challenge societal norms. According to the findings, peer pressure, media exposure, cultural background, and digital platforms all have a substantial influence on swearing practices. There are notable gender inequalities, with male students swearing more frequently and openly than their female colleagues, who tend to use softer phrases in private. The role of social media platforms in normalizing swearing and fostering linguistic creativity is particularly highlighted. These findings underscore the complex interplay between cultural, social, and technological factors in shaping language use among youth. This study contributes to the broader understanding of sociolinguistic behavior in modern, digitalized societies.
Keywords: *swear words; university students; gender differences; swearing in Indonesian context.*

INTRODUCTION

Swearing has become a prominent subject in sociolinguistic inquiry due to its complex role in expressing emotion, identity, and social relationships. According to Stapleton and Fägersten (2023), profanity should be understood as part of interpersonal pragmatics rather than merely offensive language. Recent discourse-based studies further show that swearing functions as a socially embedded communicative practice shaped by context and interaction (McEnery et al., 2023; Hunt et al., 2023). Among younger speakers, it is often used to signal solidarity, humor, and emotional intensity rather than aggression, reflecting a shift in its social meaning (Adarna et al., 2025). The expansion of digital communication has also normalized profanity across platforms, where users employ it more freely in informal interactions (Allailah et al., 2023). As Werner (2023) and Suwarno (2025) argue, these developments illustrate that swearing reflects broader cultural transformations and evolving linguistic norms.

Holmberg (2026) highlights that swearing serves multiple pragmatic functions beyond emotional expression, including humor and rhetorical emphasis. Supporting this view, Wilson and Wedlock (2023) demonstrate that profanity can even function strategically in professional discourse. Empirical findings from corpus-based studies indicate that the use of swear words varies depending on register, context, and speaker identity (Dara et al., 2023). In conversational settings, McEnery et al. (2023) observe that swearing often operates as a discourse marker rather than purely offensive language. Media studies further show that profanity contributes to character construction and authenticity (Zagoto et al., 2025; Indiola et al., 2024). These findings collectively suggest that swearing is a flexible communicative resource shaped by situational demands (Faizal & Zakaria, 2024).

The categorization of swear words has also been widely examined in sociolinguistic research.

Tanuwijaya and Ibrahim (2025) classify swear words into several types based on their communicative functions, such as insults and expletives. Cross-cultural perspectives reveal that these categories are influenced by cultural beliefs, including references to religion, animals, and sexuality (Al-Qaissi & Salih, 2026). In the Indonesian context, studies have shown that swear words often incorporate local languages and reflect cultural values (Juidah et al., 2024). Perangin-angin et al. (2024) further note that regional variation plays a significant role in shaping taboo expressions. Additionally, Romadlani and Ng (2025) demonstrate that differences in social groups contribute to variation in swearing practices. Such diversity underscores the importance of contextual analysis in understanding profanity (Hidayat et al., 2025).

Research has also explored the communicative purposes underlying the use of swear words. Prayogo and Ibrahim (2025) argue that swearing is frequently used to express strong emotions such as anger and frustration. However, studies also indicate that profanity functions as a tool for humor and rhetorical emphasis in interaction (Holmberg, 2026; Nur'aini et al., 2025). Arvian and Hadi (2024) find that students often use swear words to build solidarity and maintain peer relationships. In leadership discourse, swearing can be used strategically to create relatability and assertiveness (Wilson & Wedlock, 2023). Similarly, Yap and Ibrahim (2026) show that its use varies depending on hierarchical relationships. These findings suggest that swearing serves both emotional and social purposes (Hasanah et al., 2025).

Sociocultural factors play a crucial role in influencing swearing behavior. Suwarno (2025) explains that cultural norms determine what is considered acceptable or offensive in language use. Social interaction and peer influence also shape individuals' use of profanity, particularly among younger speakers (Salih, 2025). Widyasari, & Afifulloh (2025) observe that students often adapt their language to align with group expectations. Meanwhile, media exposure introduces new forms of swear words and contributes to their normalization (Allailah et al., 2023). Rathje (2024) notes that reality television and digital content significantly influence contemporary swearing practices. These findings indicate that swearing is deeply embedded in social and cultural contexts (Cheng & Ho, 2023).

Gender differences in swearing have been consistently documented in sociolinguistic studies. Sagheer et al. (2024) report that men tend to use swear words more frequently and openly than women. However, recent research suggests that women increasingly use profanity in informal contexts, particularly within peer groups (Wulandari & Sari, 2024). Pribadi and Purwanti (2024) highlight that this shift reflects changing gender norms and identities. From a broader perspective, Purba et al. (2023) argue that language use is closely linked to identity construction. Ahmad et al. (2023) further demonstrate that gendered language practices reflect societal expectations and power relations. These patterns show that swearing behavior is shaped by gender dynamics (Agustina & Simatupang, 2024; Stapleton & Fägersten, 2023).

Digital communication has significantly transformed the use of swear words in contemporary society. Allailah et al. (2023) note that social media platforms provide spaces for linguistic experimentation and informal expression. Online discourse also facilitates the spread of new swear words and creative variations (Zhang & Mo, 2025). Hijazo-Gascón et al. (2024) emphasize that anonymity in digital environments often increases the intensity of swearing. Similarly, Aqeel and Sadiq (2024) highlight challenges in interpreting swear words across contexts, particularly in translation. Shofi and Hadiutomo (2025) argue that digital platforms blur the distinction between private and public language use. These developments illustrate the evolving nature of swearing in digital communication (Rathje, 2024; Cheng & Ho, 2023).

In Indonesian contexts, swearing reflects the interaction between local culture and language use. Saniada et al. (2023) show that children acquire swear words through social interaction and environmental exposure. In Javanese culture, Suwarno (2025) explains that swearing is closely tied to norms of politeness and hierarchy. Juidah et al. (2024) demonstrate how local literature reflects culturally specific taboo expressions. Comparative studies reveal differences in swearing practices across ethnic groups in Indonesia (Hidayat et al., 2025). Hasanah and Jazadi (2025) further highlight variation among youth communities. These findings confirm that swearing practices are context-dependent and culturally shaped (Dewi & Budasi, 2025).

Swearing in media and popular culture has also been widely investigated. Utami (2024) shows that films frequently use profanity to construct realistic dialogue. Saleh (2024) argues that swearing in

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television reflects everyday language use and social interaction. In literary contexts, Hasanah et al. (2025) demonstrate that swear words can function as tools of social criticism. Indiola et al. (2024) further emphasize their rhetorical role in storytelling. Translation studies reveal that adapting swear words across languages involves cultural and pragmatic considerations (Aqeel & Sadiq, 2024; Zhang & Mo, 2025). These perspectives highlight the cultural significance of swearing beyond linguistic boundaries (Bączkowska & Gromann, 2023; Werner, 2023).

Although previous studies have examined swearing from various perspectives, most focus on isolated aspects such as types or functions. Faizal and Zakaria (2024) note that systematic analyses often emphasize frequency rather than contextual meaning. Similarly, Tikile and Ngulube (2025) highlight the need for more comprehensive approaches that consider multiple dimensions of swearing. In Indonesian contexts, Arvian and Hadi (2024) provide insights into student language use but do not integrate influencing factors. Shofi and Hadiutomo (2025) also emphasize the growing importance of digital communication in shaping language practices. However, limited research examines how these elements interact within a single framework, particularly among university students in urban settings. Therefore, this study addresses the following questions: what types of swear words are used, what purposes they serve, and what factors influence their use (Hasanah & Jazadi, 2025; Rathje, 2024).

This study offers a novel contribution by adopting a mixed-methods approach to analyze swearing comprehensively. McEnery et al. (2023) emphasize the importance of combining quantitative and qualitative perspectives in sociolinguistic research. Unlike previous studies, this research integrates the analysis of types, purposes, and influencing factors within a single framework. It also considers both offline and digital communication contexts, reflecting contemporary language use (Allailah et al., 2023; Pamungkas et al., 2023). Suwarno (2025) highlights the importance of cultural context in interpreting swearing, which is incorporated into this study. By examining these aspects together, the study provides a more holistic understanding of swearing practices (Hidayat et al., 2025; Stapleton & Fägersten, 2023).

The findings of this study contribute to sociolinguistic theory by providing empirical insights into the multifunctionality of swearing. Werner (2023) suggests that understanding taboo language is essential for language education and pragmatic competence. Faizal and Zakaria (2024) further emphasize its relevance for second language learning. In addition, Holmberg (2026) highlights the role of swearing in contemporary communication practices. This study also contributes to discussions on language, identity, and digital interaction (Wilson & Wedlock, 2023). McEnery et al. (2023) argue that discourse-based approaches are essential for analyzing real-life language use. Ultimately, this research enhances understanding of how university students negotiate cultural norms and modern influences through language (Adarna et al., 2025; Tikile & Ngulube, 2025).

METHOD

This study employs a mixed-methods approach to comprehensively analyze the use of swear words among university students in Bandung. The combination of qualitative and quantitative methods ensures a robust understanding of the linguistic, social, and cultural aspects of swearing behavior. As noted by McEnery et al. (2023), integrating multiple methods allows researchers to capture both patterns and contextual meanings in language use. Such an approach is also recommended in sociolinguistic studies of taboo language, where both frequency and function need to be examined (Stapleton & Fägersten, 2023; Dara et al., 2023).

The research follows an explanatory sequential design. First, quantitative data is collected and analyzed to identify patterns and trends in the use of swear words. This is followed by qualitative data collection to gain deeper insights into the motivations, perceptions, and social dynamics underlying these patterns (Creswell, 2009). This design is particularly useful in sociolinguistic research, as it allows statistical findings to be interpreted through participants' experiences (Dara et al., 2023). In addition, combining these phases helps reveal both the distribution and the pragmatic functions of swearing (McEnery et al., 2023; Stapleton & Fägersten, 2023).

The participants of this study consist of university students aged 18–24 years from various institutions in Bandung. A purposive sampling technique is used to ensure diversity in terms of gender, academic background, and social affiliations. Previous studies indicate that social background and peer groups significantly influence swearing behavior (Arvian & Hadi, 2024). The sample size includes 150 participants for the quantitative phase and 20 participants for

the qualitative phase. This range is considered adequate for capturing both general patterns and in-depth perspectives (Pranata, & Nasrullah, 2023; Hasanah & Jazadi, 2025).

Survey. A structured questionnaire is distributed to the participants to gather quantitative data on the frequency, types, and contexts of swear word usage. The survey includes both closed-ended and Likert-scale questions to measure attitudes and perceptions. Survey-based approaches are widely used to identify patterns of language use and variation (Faizal & Zakaria, 2024). They also allow researchers to examine differences across groups systematically (Dara et al., 2023).

Interviews. Semi-structured interviews are conducted with a subset of participants to explore their reasons for using swear words, the influences on their behavior, and the social significance of swearing within their peer groups. As Stapleton and Fägersten (2023) argue, qualitative methods are essential for understanding the interpersonal and pragmatic aspects of swearing. These interviews allow for in-depth discussions and rich qualitative data, particularly in exploring identity and social relationships (Hasanah et al., 2025; Wilson & Wedlock, 2023).

Observation. Non-participant observation is carried out in informal settings such as university cafeterias, study groups, and online chat forums. This method provides contextual data on how swear words are used in natural interactions. Observational approaches are important for capturing authentic language use in real-life contexts (McEnery et al., 2023). In addition, online environments have been identified as key spaces for examining contemporary swearing practices (Allailah et al., 2023; Shofi & Hadiutomo, 2025).

Quantitative Analysis. The survey data is analyzed using statistical techniques, including descriptive statistics and cross-tabulations, to identify trends and correlations in swear word usage. Tools like SPSS or Excel are utilized for this analysis. Quantitative analysis enables the identification of frequency patterns and group differences in language use (Faizal & Zakaria, 2024). Such statistical approaches are commonly used in sociolinguistic studies to examine variation (Dara et al., 2023).

Qualitative Analysis:. The interview and observation data are analyzed using thematic analysis. Codes are developed to categorize recurring themes related to the types, purposes, and influences of swearing. Thematic analysis is effective in uncovering the social meanings and pragmatic functions of language (Stapleton & Fägersten, 2023). It also allows for deeper interpretation of participants' perspectives and experiences (Nur'aini et al., 2025; Hasanah & Jazadi, 2025).

Ethical approval is obtained from the relevant institutional review board. Participants provide informed consent and are assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Research involving sensitive language such as swearing requires careful ethical consideration, particularly in ensuring participants' comfort and privacy (Hijazo-Gascón et al., 2024). Data is securely stored, and participants are given the right to withdraw from the study at any time. Ethical practices also include transparency in data handling and reporting (Aqeel & Sadiq, 2024).

Triangulation is employed to enhance the validity of the findings by comparing data from surveys, interviews, and observations. This approach strengthens the credibility of sociolinguistic research by integrating multiple data sources (McEnery et al., 2023). Member checking is conducted to ensure the accuracy of interview data. The reliability of the survey instrument is tested through a pilot study with 20 participants prior to the main data collection. Pilot testing helps improve consistency and clarity of research instruments (Dara et al., 2023). These procedures contribute to the overall trustworthiness of the study (Hapsari & Pramana, 2023; Stapleton & Fägersten, 2023).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Types of swear words used by university students

The survey findings show that university students in Bandung employ a wide variety of swear words, including both vernacular and borrowed terminology. The most commonly used swear words are divided into three categories: general insults ("bodoh" or "stupid"), expressions of frustration ("sialan" or "damn"), and vulgar terms borrowed from English ("fuck" or "shit"). Similar categorizations have been identified in previous sociolinguistic studies, where swear words are grouped based on function and semantic domain (Tanuwijaya & Ibrahim, 2025; Dewi et al., 2025). Observation data show that the choice of swear words is frequently context dependent, with local slang dominating informal situations and English terminology more usually employed in internet communication. This pattern reflects findings that language choice in swearing varies across settings and communicative purposes (McEnery et al., 2023; Dara et al., 2023). In addition, the use of

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borrowed vulgar terms supports the argument that globalization and media exposure influence local linguistic practices (Al-Qaissi & Salih, 2026; Werner, 2023). These findings are consistent with prior research emphasizing the contextual and cultural heterogeneity of swearing behavior.

Table 1: *Types of swear words*

Category	Examples	Context of Use
General Insults	"bodoh," "tolol"	Casual conversations, arguments
Expressions of Frustration	"sialan," "anjir"	Venting emotions, sudden reactions
Vulgar Terms (Borrowed)	"f***," "sh**"	Digital platforms, peer interactions

Aims or purposes of using swear words

Qualitative interviews provide further information about the reasons students swear. The most typical causes are expressing emotions like anger or frustration, establishing interactions with peers, and reinforcing points during conversations. These functions align with findings that swearing serves both emotional and interpersonal purposes (Prayogo & Ibrahim, 2025; Holmberg, 2026). Participants frequently stated that swearing adds emotional weight to their expressions, making them more impactful. This supports the idea that profanity enhances emphasis and pragmatic force in communication (Stapleton & Fägersten, 2023). Swearing is also frequently employed as a social strategy to create group cohesiveness and reflect shared identities, a function widely reported in sociolinguistic studies (Arvian & Hadi, 2024; Hasanah et al., 2025). However, some individuals admitted to using swear words to challenge societal standards or as a form of resistance against authority. Similar patterns have been observed in studies where swearing functions as a tool of social criticism and identity assertion (Hasanah et al., 2025; Wilson & Wedlock, 2023).

Table 2: *Purposes of using swear words*

Purpose	Examples	Explanation
Emotional Expression	"sialan," "damn it"	To release frustration or express strong feelings
Social Bonding	"anjay," "bro"	To foster camaraderie within peer groups
Emphasis in Conversations	"seriously, f*** this"	To highlight or emphasize a point
Challenging Norms	"vulgar terms"	To rebel against authority or societal standards

Influences on the use of swear words

Peer pressure appeared as a major motivator, with many individuals saying that they began swearing to fit in with their social groups. This finding is consistent with studies showing that peer interaction strongly influences language behavior among young people (Tikile & Ngulube, 2025; Arvian & Hadi, 2024). Media exposure, notably through films, music, and social media platforms, was highlighted as a significant influence. Previous research has shown that media introduces and normalizes new forms of swear words in everyday communication (Allailah et al., 2023; Rathje, 2024). Digital communication also plays a crucial role by providing a semi-anonymous space for linguistic experimentation, where users feel freer to use taboo language (Shofi & Hadiutomo, 2025). Students from more permissive familial contexts swear more frequently, indicating that cultural background is also important. This aligns with findings that cultural norms and family values shape attitudes toward swearing (Suwarno, 2025; Hidayat et al., 2025). These findings highlight the multidimensional nature of language behavior, influenced by both internal and external factors.

Table 3:*Influences on the use of swear words*

Influences	Examples	Impact
Peer Pressure	Group chats, slang terms	Increases swearing to fit in socially
Media Exposure	Films, social media platforms	Introduces new swear words and normalizes usage
Cultural Background	Local traditions, family values	Shapes acceptability and frequency of swearing
Digital Communication	Chat forums, memes	Provides space for experimentation

Gender differences in swearing practices

The findings show significant gender disparities in swearing habits. Male students reported swearing more frequently and openly than their female peers, especially in public or mixed-gender contexts. Similar patterns have been widely documented, where men tend to use stronger and more frequent swear words (Sagheer et al., 2024; Aisyah et al., 2024). Female participants, on the other hand, tended to employ milder swear words and frequently limited their use to private interactions. This reflects broader sociolinguistic findings that women's language use is often shaped by norms of politeness and social expectations (Wulandari & Sari, 2024; Purba et al., 2023). Despite these distinctions, all genders recognized the pragmatic value of swearing in social interactions, supporting the view that swearing serves important communicative functions regardless of gender (Stapleton & Fägersten, 2023).

Table 4: Gender differences in swearing practice

Gender	Frequency	Common Contexts	Types of Swear Words
Male	Higher	Public settings, group discussions	Stronger, vulgar terms
Female	Lower	Private settings, close friends	Milder expressions

Digital platforms and swearing

The importance of digital platforms in shaping swearing habits cannot be overstated. Students commonly use swear words on social media and messaging platforms like Instagram, Twitter, and WhatsApp. This finding is consistent with studies showing that online environments facilitate informal and expressive language use (Allailah et al., 2023). Observation data revealed that swear words on these platforms are frequently used to enhance humor or irony, as well as to express strong emotions in a way that peers understand. Such functions align with findings that digital discourse encourages creativity and pragmatic flexibility in language use (Zhang & Mo, 2025; Bączkowska & Gromann, 2023). However, participants were also concerned about the possibility of misinterpretation and the negative connotations associated with swearing online. This concern reflects previous research on the ambiguity and perceived offensiveness of swear words in digital communication (Hijazo-Gascón et al., 2024).

Table 5: *Digital platform and swearing*

Platform	Common Usage	Purpose
Instagram	Comments, captions	Humor, self-expression
Twitter	Tweets, replies	Sarcasm, venting frustration
WhatsApp	Group chats	Peer bonding, emotional release
Online Forums	Anonymous discussions	Linguistic experimentation

The findings of this study present an in-depth understanding of swearing among university students in Bandung. The various types and uses of swear words reflect the complex interaction of cultural norms, social influences, and individual agency. Consistent with McEnery et al. (2023), swearing in this study functions as both a linguistic and social resource rather than merely offensive language. However, unlike some earlier studies that emphasize the dominance of negative or aggressive functions of swearing, the present findings show that students more frequently use swear words for neutral or even positive purposes such as humor and bonding. This partially challenges traditional views of profanity as primarily antisocial. At the same time, the coexistence of local and borrowed swear words supports claims about globalization shaping linguistic practices (Al-Qaissi & Salih, 2026), yet contrasts with studies that suggest strong dominance of local cultural forms in Indonesian contexts (Suwarno, 2025). This indicates that Bandung students demonstrate a more hybrid and fluid linguistic identity than previously assumed.

The influence of digital media further emphasizes the evolving nature of language in contemporary society. In line with Allailah et al. (2023) and Rathje (2024), social media appears to normalize the use of swear words and increase their visibility in everyday communication. However, this study reveals a more nuanced pattern: while swearing is frequent online, its usage is often strategic and context-sensitive rather than entirely uninhibited. This finding complicates earlier assumptions that digital environments simply encourage unrestricted use of taboo language. Moreover, although Zhang and Mo (2025) argue that online spaces promote creativity in swearing, participants in this study also expressed concern about misinterpretation and negative judgment. This suggests that, contrary to the idea of complete linguistic freedom in digital discourse, users still negotiate meaning and

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appropriateness carefully (Hijazo-Gascón et al., 2024). Therefore, digital communication not only expands swearing practices but also introduces new constraints and considerations.

Gender differences in swearing behavior further highlight the role of social norms in language use. The finding that male students swear more frequently aligns with previous research (Sagheer et al., 2024), reinforcing the notion that men are generally more linguistically permissive. However, the present study also reveals that female students actively use swear words within close social circles, which contrasts with earlier studies portraying women as consistently more restrained (Purba et al., 2023). This suggests that gender differences are becoming less rigid and more context-dependent. While Wulandari and Sari (2024) argue that women's language reflects evolving social roles, the current findings extend this by showing that such changes are already evident in everyday student interactions. Thus, rather than a simple gender divide, swearing practices appear to reflect a shifting balance between traditional norms and contemporary identity construction (Agustina & Simatupang, 2024).

Overall, these findings indicate that swearing is not merely a linguistic phenomenon but also a reflection of broader social and cultural processes. While previous studies emphasize the role of cultural norms in regulating swearing (Suwarno, 2025; Hidayat et al., 2025), this study suggests that such norms are increasingly negotiated rather than strictly followed. The influence of peer groups and digital media demonstrates that language use among students is shaped by dynamic and overlapping factors. In contrast to perspectives that view increased swearing as a decline in language standards, the findings here support the argument that it represents an adaptive communicative strategy in modern social contexts. Therefore, swearing among Bandung university students should be understood not as deviant behavior, but as part of an evolving sociolinguistic system influenced by globalization, technology, and changing social identities.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the use of swear words among university students in Bandung represents a complex and dynamic sociolinguistic phenomenon shaped by emotional expression, peer interaction, cultural norms, and digital communication. The findings demonstrate that swearing is not merely a form of offensive language, but a strategic communicative resource used to construct identity, express stance, and maintain social relationships. Moreover, the coexistence of local and global forms of swearing reflects the ongoing negotiation between traditional cultural values and contemporary linguistic practices. The influence of digital media further reinforces this shift, as it both expands opportunities for expression and reshapes the norms governing language use.

These insights contribute to a more nuanced understanding of language practices among young speakers in Indonesian contexts, particularly in urban settings such as Bandung. Rather than indicating a decline in linguistic standards, the increasing use of swear words suggests an adaptive response to changing social and communicative environments. Therefore, future research should further explore how these evolving practices intersect with issues such as identity, power, and digital discourse across different sociocultural groups.

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