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ANALYZING THE USE OF ENGLISH SLANG BY ESL LEARNERS ON SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS IN PAKISTAN

Mahrukh Muneer
Institute of Humanities & Arts, Khwaja Fareed University of Engineering and Information Technology, Rahim Yar Khan, Pakistan
Email: mahrukhmuneer.909@gmail.com
Dr. Muhammad Anwar Farooq
Institute of Humanities & Arts, Khwaja Fareed University of Engineering and Information Technology, Rahim Yar Khan, Pakistan
Waheed Shahzad
Institute of Humanities & Arts, Khwaja Fareed University of Engineering and Information Technology, Rahim Yar Khan, Pakistan

Abstract
This study investigates the use of English slang by English as Second Language (ESL) learners in Pakistan on social media platforms. It examines the frequency and forms of slang use, the factors motivating learners to adopt slang, their attitudes towards it, and its perceived contribution to English language learning. A mixed-methods design was employed. Data were collected from 50 ESL learners through a structured questionnaire containing closed-ended and open-ended questions. Quantitative responses were analyzed descriptively through frequencies and percentages, while open-ended responses were examined thematically. In addition, 25 selected responses were subjected to linguistic content analysis. The findings show that 58% of participants encountered slang very often on social media, while 44% reported using it frequently. The leading motivations were to sound cool or trendy (72%), save time and typing effort (64%), and sound more natural (58%). WhatsApp was the most frequently selected platform (78%), followed by Instagram (62%) and TikTok (52%). A majority (66%) agreed or strongly agreed that slang is important in contemporary English learning, and 60% supported its inclusion in ESL learning materials. At the same time, 22% perceived a negative effect on formal English, and 46% reported criticism from teachers or elders. The qualitative analysis identified three themes: positive emotional connection, confusion and cultural barriers, and strategies for learning and adapting slang. Four linguistic categories were identified: phonetic replacements, phrase abbreviations, word abbreviations, and playful nonstandard forms. The study concludes that slang is a socially meaningful feature of digital communication that may support informal communicative awareness, but learners also need guidance in distinguishing informal and formal registers. The findings support a balanced pedagogical approach that recognizes digital language practices without replacing instruction in Standard English.

Keywords: *English slang; ESL learners; social media; digital communication; Pakistan; language learning; code-switching*

1. Introduction

Language changes in response to the social settings and communicative needs of its users. The expansion of digital communication has created new spaces in which language is produced, shared, adapted, and evaluated. Social networking and messaging platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and X allow users to communicate rapidly and informally. In these environments, abbreviations, acronyms, creative spellings, emojis, and slang expressions are common features of everyday interaction. Digital communication therefore provides an important context for examining how English is used beyond formal classrooms.

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In Pakistan, English has an important role in education, employment, and public life, although it is generally learned as a second or additional language. Many learners encounter English not only through textbooks and classroom instruction but also through films, online videos, memes, influencers, and interaction with peers. Social media exposes learners to informal varieties of English that may not be represented in conventional teaching materials. English slang is one such variety. It includes informal expressions, newly created words, acronyms, shortened forms, and familiar words used with altered meanings. Its use may help learners participate in contemporary online communication, express emotions, and signal membership in peer groups. However, the same forms may create difficulties when learners have to distinguish informal digital language from the language expected in academic and professional settings.

Slang is not simply a collection of incorrect or careless expressions. It can perform social and communicative functions. Eble (1996) associates slang with social relationships and group identity, while Crystal (2008) discusses the influence of digital communication on language practices. Thurlow and Mroczek (2011) similarly locate digital discourse within wider social and cultural practices. Online slang can make communication concise and expressive, but its meanings are often dependent on context, shared knowledge, and cultural familiarity. Expressions such as "LOL," "TBH," and "IDK" may communicate laughter, frankness, or uncertainty efficiently, while phonetic forms such as "u" and "gr8" reflect the preference for brevity and playful spelling.

For ESL learners, these practices present both opportunities and challenges. Exposure to slang may increase familiarity with contemporary informal English and support pragmatic awareness: learners can observe how expressions function in particular contexts and how language communicates attitude, humor, and social closeness. At the same time, learners may misunderstand unfamiliar expressions or use informal forms in situations where Standard English is expected. The distinction between knowing a slang expression and knowing when it is appropriate is therefore important. In multilingual Pakistan, this issue is further complicated by the frequent interaction of English and Urdu, including code-switching and Roman Urdu in online communication.

Although social media and English learning have received research attention, the particular ways Pakistani ESL learners encounter, use, and evaluate English slang require continued investigation. The present study addresses this area by examining learners' reported practices and perceptions, together with examples of slang forms found in their responses.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

English language teaching in Pakistan commonly emphasizes formal vocabulary, grammar, and academic communication. However, learners' everyday digital interactions increasingly involve informal expressions that are not always addressed in classroom instruction. This creates a gap between the English taught in formal settings and the English encountered in online communication. It is not clear whether learners view slang primarily as a useful resource for participation and expression, as a threat to formal language development, or as a feature that must be managed according to context. The present study investigates this issue through learners' reported use, motivations, attitudes, and examples of English slang on social media.

1.2 Research Objectives

i. To analyze the use of English slang on social media platforms by ESL learners in Pakistan.
ii. To examine the factors that influence ESL learners' adoption and use of slang.
iii. To explore learners' perceptions of the contribution of slang to the English language acquisition process.

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1.3 Research Questions

i. How do ESL learners in Pakistan use English slang on social media platforms?
ii. What factors influence the adoption and use of slang by ESL learners?
iii. How does the use of slang contribute to the English language learning process for ESL learners in Pakistan?

2. Literature Review

Slang is generally understood as informal, nonstandard language associated with particular social groups, communities, or communicative situations. It may involve newly coined expressions, familiar words with new meanings, abbreviations, metaphorical extensions, and playful alterations of spelling. Eble (1996) emphasizes the relationship between slang and sociability: speakers use slang to establish connections, express group identity, and distinguish insiders from outsiders. Allan and Burridge (2007) also discuss the social and expressive dimensions of nonstandard vocabulary. These perspectives suggest that slang should be examined not only in terms of its linguistic form but also in terms of the social purposes it serves.

Digital platforms accelerate the circulation of informal language. Crystal (2008) describes the relationship between language and the internet, while Tagliamonte and Denis (2008) examine the linguistic practices associated with instant messaging. Social media encourages short, rapid exchanges and gives users opportunities to reproduce, modify, and circulate expressions across networks. Acronyms and initialisms such as “LOL,” “BRB,” and “IDK” reduce longer expressions to compact forms. Phonetic spellings such as “u” for “you” and “gr8” for “great” use sound-symbol relationships to shorten written messages. These forms are not identical in function: some primarily save time, while others also convey humor, informality, or group affiliation.

The distinction between slang and Standard English is especially relevant in education. Standard language is generally expected in formal academic writing, examinations, and professional communication. Slang is more likely to occur in informal conversations and online exchanges. Learners therefore need register awareness: the ability to recognize how language choices vary according to audience, purpose, and setting. Slang may be useful when interpreting authentic digital communication, but it should not be treated as a substitute for formal vocabulary, grammar, or academic writing conventions.

Social media also provides opportunities for language exposure and informal learning. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) describe social media as web-based applications that enable the creation and exchange of user-generated content. Through repeated exposure, learners may notice expressions, infer meanings from context, and test their understanding in interaction. Thorne and Black (2007) discuss the potential of online networking for language learning, while Thurlow and Mroczek (2011) emphasize that digital discourse is shaped by social relationships and communicative practices. These insights support the view that online language use can be a meaningful site of language socialization.

Nevertheless, slang may also create comprehension barriers. Meanings can change quickly and may depend on cultural references, humor, irony, or knowledge of a particular online community. Learners who are unfamiliar with a term may misunderstand a message or feel excluded from an interaction. Overgeneralizing informal spellings may also lead to inappropriate use in formal contexts. The pedagogical issue is therefore not whether slang should replace Standard English, but how learners can develop the awareness to interpret and use different registers appropriately.

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3. Research Methodology

The study employed a mixed-methods design combining quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative component was used to identify patterns in participants' reported exposure to slang, frequency of use, preferred social media platforms, motivations, and attitudes. The qualitative component consisted of open-ended questionnaire responses that provided information about learners' experiences, feelings, and strategies for understanding unfamiliar slang. The two forms of evidence were considered together to provide a broader account of the phenomenon.

The target population comprised ESL learners in Pakistan who actively used social media. Participants were selected through non-probability purposive sampling because the study required respondents with experience of online communication and exposure to English slang. The sample consisted of 50 learners from different educational and geographic backgrounds. The demographic profile included participants aged under 18 to 35 years, learners at intermediate, bachelor's, MS/MPhil, and PhD levels, and respondents who self-rated their English proficiency from beginner to fluent.

Data were collected through a structured questionnaire distributed in printed form and electronically through Google Forms. The questionnaire contained closed-ended items, including multiple-choice and rating-scale questions, as well as open-ended questions. It covered demographic information, social media use, exposure to and use of slang, confidence in understanding slang, reasons for using it, reactions to unfamiliar expressions, and perceptions of its influence on English learning. Data collection took approximately four weeks. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and the confidentiality of their responses.

Quantitative responses were coded and analyzed in SPSS version 26 using descriptive statistics, particularly frequencies and percentages. The study did not report inferential statistical tests; therefore, the results are interpreted as descriptive patterns within the sample rather than evidence of causal effects or statistically established relationships. Open-ended responses were examined through thematic analysis. Three recurring themes were identified: positive emotional connection with slang; confusion, discomfort, and cultural barriers; and strategies for learning and adapting slang. In addition, 25 selected responses were examined through content analysis to classify examples into phonetic replacements, phrase abbreviations, word abbreviations, and playful nonstandard forms.

Ethical procedures included informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and anonymity. The thesis reports that ethical clearance and guidance were obtained from the Board of Advanced Studies and Research at Khwaja Fareed University of Engineering and Information Technology. No personally identifying information was collected, and responses were used for academic purposes.

4. Results

The sample was predominantly young: 42 participants (84%) were aged 18–25, while 6 (12%) were aged 26–35 and 2 (4%) were under 18. Female participants represented 70% of the sample and male participants 30%. In terms of education, 40% were at bachelor's level and 36% at MS/MPhil level; 20% were intermediate students and 4% held PhD-level qualifications. Most participants were from urban areas (68%). More than half rated their English proficiency as intermediate (54%), followed by advanced (24%), fluent (12%), and beginner (10%). These characteristics are important when interpreting the results: the sample largely reflects young adult, relatively educated social media users rather than all ESL learners in Pakistan.

Slang exposure was frequent. Fifty-eight per cent of respondents reported encountering slang "very often" on social media, 32% encountered it "sometimes," 8% "rarely," and 2% "never." In terms of

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personal use, 44% reported using slang frequently, 38% sometimes, 12% rarely, and 6% never. The results indicate that exposure was more widespread than frequent self-reported production, although most respondents reported at least occasional use.

Participants generally expressed moderate to high confidence in understanding slang. On the five-point self-rating scale, 30% selected level 4, 28% level 3, and 20% level 5. Lower ratings were selected by 6% at level 2 and 8% at level 1. When encountering unfamiliar slang, 46% searched online, 24% asked another person, 20% guessed the meaning, and 10% ignored the expression. This pattern suggests that many learners actively used digital and interpersonal resources to interpret unfamiliar vocabulary.

Table 1. Demographic profile of participants (N = 50)

Variable	Category	n	%
Age	Under 18	2	4
	18–25	42	84
	26–35	6	12
Gender	Male	15	30
	Female	35	70
Education	Intermediate	10	20
	Bachelor	20	40
	MS/MPhil	18	36
	PhD	2	4
Location	Urban	34	68
	Rural	16	32
Self-rated English proficiency	Beginner	5	10
	Intermediate	27	54
	Advanced	12	24
	Fluent	6	12

The leading motivations for using slang were to sound cool or trendy (72%), save time or typing effort (64%), and sound more natural (58%). In addition, 46% selected fitting in with others and 40% selected using slang for fun. Since participants could select more than one reason, these percentages are not mutually exclusive. The results point to both practical and social motivations: slang can make messages shorter while also helping users express identity, humor, and affiliation.

The most frequently reported platforms were WhatsApp (78%), Instagram (62%), and TikTok (52%), followed by Twitter/X (46%), Snapchat (38%), and Facebook (36%). Participants could select more than one platform. Sixty-four per cent reported spending at least three hours per day on social media: 34% spent 3–4 hours and 30% spent five or more hours. Another 28% spent 1–2 hours, while 8% spent less than one hour. Regarding language choice, 36% reported using a mixture of English and Urdu, 30% English, 22% Urdu, and 12% Roman Urdu. These figures indicate that English slang is encountered within multilingual online practices rather than in an exclusively English environment.

Table 2. Social media use and language practices (N = 50)

Measure	Category	n	%
Preferred platform*	WhatsApp	39	78
	Instagram	31	62

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	TikTok	26	52
	Twitter (X)	23	46
	Snapchat	19	38
	Facebook	18	36
Daily time online	Less than 1 hour	4	8
	1–2 hours	14	28
	3–4 hours	17	34
	5 or more hours	15	30
Language used online	Mixed English + Urdu	18	36
	English	15	30
	Urdu	11	22
	Roman Urdu	6	12

Ninety per cent of respondents reported acquiring new English slang through social media. Asked about its perceived influence on formal English communication, 42% reported a positive influence, 22% a negative influence, 26% no influence, and 10% were uncertain. These are perceptions rather than direct measures of language achievement. They nevertheless show that participants did not hold a uniform view: some associated slang with improved confidence and communication, while others worried about its possible effect on formal language.

On the broader attitudinal items, 66% either agreed or strongly agreed that slang was important in learning English (34% combined). Sixteen per cent selected "maybe," while 18% disagreed or strongly disagreed. Sixty per cent supported including slang in ESL learning materials, 16% opposed inclusion, and 24% were unsure. Positive emotional reactions to other people's slang were reported by 62%, while 26% were neutral or confused and 12% reacted negatively. At the same time, 46% reported being criticized by teachers or elders for using slang, and a further 26% said this happened sometimes. The findings reveal a tension between learners' positive perceptions and the more restrictive expectations they may encounter in educational or family settings.

Table 3. Attitudes and perceptions toward slang (N = 50)

Measure	Response	n	%
Importance in learning English	Strongly agree	16	32
	Agree	17	34
	Maybe	8	16
	Disagree	5	10
	Strongly disagree	4	8
Criticism from teachers/elders	Yes	23	46
	Sometimes	13	26
	No	14	28
Include slang in ESL materials	Yes	30	60
	No	8	16
	Not sure	12	24
Reaction to others' slang	Positive	31	62

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	Neutral/confused	13	26
	Negative	6	12

4.1 Thematic Analysis of Open-Ended Responses

The first theme, positive emotional connection with slang, captured participants' descriptions of slang as friendly, enjoyable, expressive, and confidence-building. Some respondents explained that slang helped them feel relatable and fit in with online groups. Others associated it with being up to date with social media culture. These responses suggest that slang has an affective and identity-related function: it allows learners to present themselves as active participants in contemporary digital communication. For some learners, informal expressions may also reduce the pressure associated with formal language use when communicating with friends.

The second theme, confusion, discomfort, and cultural barriers, reflected the difficulties experienced by learners who did not understand particular expressions or considered some slang too informal. Participants described scrolling past unfamiliar expressions, feeling annoyed when they could not understand a term, or worrying that slang might be inappropriate in academic or serious conversations. These comments indicate that slang can create barriers as well as solidarity. Its meanings may rely on cultural knowledge and context, and learners who lack this knowledge may feel excluded from online exchanges.

The third theme, strategies for learning and adapting slang, showed that learners used several ways to understand unfamiliar expressions. These included searching Google, consulting online slang dictionaries, watching films and online videos, following native speakers, repeating expressions in everyday communication, and asking friends or classmates. Some participants proposed classroom activities such as discussing memes and reels, conducting slang quizzes, and analyzing contemporary expressions in writing workshops. Such suggestions indicate that learners value contextual explanation and guided opportunities to compare informal and formal language.

4.2 Content Analysis of Slang Forms

The content analysis of 25 selected responses identified four broad categories. First, phonetic replacements use letters or numbers to represent sounds or familiar words. Examples included "ur" for "your/you are," "u" for "you," "b4" for "before," "gr8" for "great," "2" for "to/too," "4eva" for "forever," and "m8" for "mate." These forms reduce typing effort and create a recognizable informal style. Second, phrase abbreviations compress whole expressions into initialisms or acronyms. The examples included "LOL" (laughing out loud), "IDK" (I don't know), "TBH" (to be honest), "LMAO" (laughing my ass off), "POV" (point of view), "ASAP" (as soon as possible), "BRB" (be right back), and "ROFL" (rolling on the floor laughing). Their functions include expressing emotion, signaling honesty, and managing conversational turns. Third, word abbreviations shorten individual words, including "thx" (thanks), "pls" (please), "msg" (message), "pic" (picture), "sry" (sorry), "ppl" (people), "ofc" (of course), and "act" (actually). Fourth, the thesis labels a group of playful or nonstandard forms as "inanity." Examples included "lolz" and "dats." These forms may be used for humor, emphasis, or a distinctive online voice, but they can also be confused with spelling errors by readers who are unfamiliar with the conventions. Taken together, the categories demonstrate that digital slang involves more than shortening: it also conveys stance, emotion, social identity, and familiarity with online conventions.

5. Discussion

The findings indicate that English slang is a routine feature of the digital communication reported by this sample of Pakistani ESL learners. The high level of exposure (58% very often) and the

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proportion reporting frequent personal use (44%) suggest that learners regularly encounter informal English and incorporate some of it into their own messages. The result is consistent with the view that digital communication provides a setting in which language forms circulate rapidly and are learned through repeated exposure and interaction (Crystal, 2008; Tagliamonte & Denis, 2008).

The motivations reported by participants demonstrate that slang serves several purposes at once. The most common reason, sounding cool or trendy, indicates the importance of social identity and alignment with online culture. The reasons of saving time and sounding more natural point to the practical and pragmatic functions of slang. This interpretation is compatible with Eble's (1996) account of slang as a resource for sociability and group identity. The positive emotional theme further suggests that learners may associate slang with confidence, friendliness, and social inclusion.

The results also show that slang use occurs in a multilingual environment. More than one-third of respondents reported using English and Urdu together, while others used English, Urdu, or Roman Urdu. This is important because learners' online communication cannot be understood as a simple movement from one language to another. Rather, participants draw on available linguistic resources according to audience and context. The findings therefore point to the relevance of code-switching and language hybridity when examining digital English practices in Pakistan.

At the same time, the findings do not support an unqualified claim that slang improves formal English proficiency. Although 42% perceived a positive influence, 22% perceived a negative influence and 26% reported no influence. The questionnaire measured perceptions and self-reported experiences, not objective gains or losses in grammar, vocabulary, writing, or speaking. It is therefore more accurate to conclude that participants associated slang with informal communication and confidence, while expressing mixed views about its relationship with formal English. This distinction is essential for avoiding causal claims that the research design cannot establish.

The reported criticism from teachers or elders (46% yes and 26% sometimes) reveals a perceived difference between learners' digital practices and the expectations of more formal language settings. This tension should not be resolved by either rejecting all slang or treating all informal forms as appropriate everywhere. Instead, ESL instruction can develop register awareness by comparing slang expressions with their standard equivalents, discussing audience and purpose, and helping learners identify contexts in which informal language is suitable. Such an approach preserves the central role of Standard English in academic work while acknowledging the language learners actually encounter online.

The four categories identified through content analysis provide concrete material for such instruction. Acronyms, phonetic replacements, shortened words, and playful spellings each operate differently. Learners need to understand not only what a form means but also how it functions pragmatically and whether it is appropriate for a particular audience. The qualitative responses show that learners already use autonomous strategies, including online searches, media exposure, peer consultation, and repeated practice. Teachers can build on these strategies by providing reliable contextual explanations and structured opportunities for reflection.

6. Conclusion

This study examined how 50 ESL learners in Pakistan reported encountering and using English slang on social media, what motivated their use, and how they perceived its contribution to English learning. The findings show that slang is a common feature of participants' digital environments. WhatsApp, Instagram, and TikTok were the most frequently selected platforms, and many participants spent three or more hours per day on social media. Learners reported using slang to sound trendy, save time, sound natural, fit in with others, and have fun. Most participants viewed

slang positively or supported its inclusion in ESL materials, yet a substantial proportion also reported criticism from teachers or elders and some perceived a negative effect on formal English. The qualitative analysis highlighted positive emotional connection, confusion and cultural barriers, and strategies for learning and adapting slang. Content analysis identified phonetic replacements, phrase abbreviations, word abbreviations, and playful nonstandard forms. Overall, slang appears to function as a resource for informal communication, social identity, and digital participation, while also requiring learners to make context-sensitive language choices.

6.1 Recommendations

1. ESL teachers should explicitly teach register awareness by comparing common online slang with standard English equivalents and discussing audience, purpose, and context.
2. Classroom activities may use carefully selected examples from memes, short videos, and online messages to develop learners' ability to interpret informal expressions without presenting slang as a replacement for Standard English.
3. Learners should be encouraged to verify unfamiliar expressions through reliable sources, contextual examples, and discussion with peers or teachers.
4. Curriculum developers may include brief digital-literacy components that address online language variation, code-switching, abbreviations, and the distinction between informal and academic communication.
5. Future studies should recruit larger and more geographically representative samples and include learners from a wider range of age groups and educational backgrounds.
6. Further research should supplement self-reported questionnaires with interviews, digital ethnography, or ethically collected samples of actual online communication. Longitudinal studies could examine whether exposure to slang changes learners' register awareness or formal language performance over time.

6.2 Limitations and Future Research

The study has several limitations. The sample consisted of 50 purposively selected participants and was not designed to represent all ESL learners in Pakistan. The sample was also concentrated in the 18–25 age group and included more female than male respondents. Data were based primarily on self-reports, which may be affected by recall, interpretation, or social desirability. The study did not directly measure participants' formal English proficiency before and after exposure to slang; consequently, perceived effects should not be interpreted as demonstrated effects on language achievement. Finally, the linguistic content analysis was based on 25 selected responses rather than a large, systematically collected corpus of naturally occurring social media posts. These limitations restrict generalization and indicate directions for further research.

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