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Swearing as Social Bonding: A Case Study of Peer Friendships in Early Adulthood

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ABSTRACT

The use of swear words among university students is often seen as negative behavior, but in certain contexts, it can serve to strengthen social relationships and show closeness between individuals. This study aims to analyze the role of swear words as markers of solidarity, closeness, and group identity in peer interactions. The study involved four early adults aged 20–22 years who are members of close friendship groups and employed a qualitative descriptive approach with thematic analysis. Data were collected through an open-ended questionnaire and analyzed to identify patterns of swear word use and the social meanings behind the swear words that appeared in daily conversations. The results show that all respondents feel comfortable and free to use swear words in their friendship groups, mainly as a way to create humor, show closeness, and express spontaneous feelings without causing conflict. The study also observed gender-based differences, where female students tend to face more social limits than male students in using swear words. Overall, the findings indicate that swearing functions as social glue that strengthens solidarity and group identity, rather than merely as verbal aggression. These insights enhance understanding of the social functions of taboo language in early adulthood and offer practical guidance for educational and communicative contexts, illustrating how awareness of social and cultural context can inform approaches to peer interaction and language use.

Keywords: Swearing, Social Identity, Politeness Strategies, Language Style, Emotional Expression

INTRODUCTION

The use of swear words in daily communication is commonly understood as language behavior that violates norms of politeness because it is frequently associated with negative emotional expressions such as anger, frustration, aggression, and disrespect, which explains why it is often stigmatized in formal and public contexts (Jay & Janschewitz, 2008). However, research on swearing consistently shows that linguistic meaning is not inherent in words themselves but is shaped by context, speaker intention, and the nature of interpersonal relationships, meaning that the same taboo expression may carry different social meanings depending on how and where it is used (Jay & Janschewitz, 2008). In more intimate social settings, particularly within peer relationships, swear words often undergo a subtle shift in function, in which their potential to offend is softened and replaced by relational meanings that signal familiarity, emotional closeness, and shared understanding. Among young people, swearing therefore tends to operate less as an act of verbal aggression and more as an expressive communicative style that conveys equality, informality, and a sense of togetherness, highlighting its role in the construction and maintenance of group identity (Beers Fägersten, 2012 in Stapleton et al., 2022). Viewed through a sociolinguistic lens, this context-sensitive use of swearing further illustrates how linguistic practices are shaped by patterns of social connection, as language choices often reflect the strength and nature of relationships within social networks (Milroy & Milroy, 1985 in Laitinen et al., 2025). In this way, swearing can be understood not merely as inappropriate language but as a flexible communicative resource whose meaning is continuously negotiated through social interaction and shared relational norms.

Situated within the Indonesian sociocultural setting, where norms of politeness, respect, and sensitivity to social hierarchy are reflected in both traditional communal practices and contemporary formal communication, changes in the meaning and use of swear words emerge as a particularly compelling phenomenon to explore, especially as younger generations increasingly negotiate these long-standing values in evolving interactional contexts (Jumriani et al., 2024; Purnomo, 2025). Within this cultural framework, speakers are traditionally encouraged to carefully select linguistic forms based on age, status, and social distance, particularly when interacting with elders or individuals in positions of authority, as the use of polite language is commonly associated with moral character and social awareness. However, the influence of popular culture alongside the rapid expansion of digital media has contributed to noticeable shifts in youth communication practices (Fatimah & Rahma, 2025). Social media platforms expose youth to more casual, expressive, and humorous language styles, where informal expressions and swear words are frequently normalized. In this context, swearing may be interpreted as a form of authenticity, openness, and emotional honesty rather than rudeness. This cultural shift illustrates the ongoing negotiation between traditional norms of politeness and the emergence of more relaxed modern communication practices. As a result, swearing among young people is no longer viewed solely as negative behavior but also as a resource for building social connection and strengthening group solidarity. This tendency is evident in the widespread imitation and acceptance of swear words found in TikTok content, which are then incorporated into everyday peer interactions (Jadmiko & Damariswara, 2022).

Language use in peer interaction plays a crucial role in shaping identity and reinforcing social bonds, particularly among young adults. Peer groups often develop their own linguistic styles, including slang, humor, and informal expressions, which function as markers of group membership and shared identity. Such language practices serve not only as tools for communication but also as mechanisms for social negotiation and cultural adaptation within campus and youth communities. In informal settings, these linguistic choices help create a more relaxed, friendly, and inclusive atmosphere, allowing individuals to express themselves more freely (Lazuardi & Dewi, 2025). Through shared vocabulary, speaking styles, and playful

language use, peer group members actively construct and maintain close social relationships. In a similar manner, swearing can operate as a form of social glue that connects individuals through shared emotions and symbolic togetherness. When used within a trusted and friendly environment, swear words function as expressive tools that emphasize equality, mutual understanding, and emotional alignment among group members. Consequently, the use of swearing in peer friendships is not merely a linguistic deviation but a meaningful social practice that reflects how young people adapt their language to evolving values and contemporary communication norms.

Despite its potential to function as a form of social bonding, swearing is not always interpreted positively and remains highly dependent on context, interpersonal relationships, and shared norms within a group. Swearing does not merely occur within social relationships but also actively participates in shaping and negotiating those relationships, allowing different interpersonal meanings to emerge across interactional settings (Stapleton & Beers Fägersten, 2023). As a result, expressions that are perceived as friendly and acceptable among close peers may be interpreted as offensive or inappropriate in other social contexts. This dual nature underscores the pragmatic complexity of swearing, as evaluations of its use are closely tied to contextual expectations, representations of the speaker, and the social meanings attached to specific situations (Stapleton, 2020). Among peers who share similar backgrounds and experiences, swear words often lose their literal semantic force and instead acquire relational meanings, such as signaling trust, intimacy, or emotional closeness. In mediated and online interactions, these interpretations are further influenced by prevailing moral orders and the social composition of the communicative environment (Jay, 2018). This pragmatic flexibility positions swearing as a significant object of sociolinguistic inquiry, particularly in understanding how young adults negotiate meaning, identity, and social boundaries in everyday interaction.

Furthermore, early adulthood represents a crucial life stage characterized by increased personal agency within relatively flexible social structures, in which individuals rely more heavily on peer relationships to construct social identities and navigate everyday interactions (Halfon et al., 2018). Often described as the volitional years, this period offers extensive opportunities for identity exploration in areas such as relationships, values, and self-expression, with friendships becoming more egalitarian, informal, and emotionally expressive (Arnett, 2000). Within these peer contexts, language practices such as swearing may emerge not as deviant behavior but as symbolic resources for signaling solidarity, intimacy, and shared understanding. Examining swearing within peer friendships therefore provides insight into how young adults strategically use language to maintain closeness, manage group dynamics, and negotiate social boundaries in a transitional phase marked by prolonged movement toward full social adulthood (Skirbekk et al., 2025). At the same time, the ways in which emerging adults experience and express these practices remain shaped by broader cultural beliefs and norms, highlighting the importance of situating swearing as social bonding within the Indonesian sociocultural context, where values of politeness continue to interact with evolving forms of modern and expressive communication (Arnett, 2010).

This phenomenon can be understood through sociolinguistic and pragmatic perspectives. Pragmatics examines hidden aspects of language, focusing on meanings and intentions not explicitly stated (Yule, 2020 in Saefudin et al., 2023). While every speech act involves managing one's social image or face, as explained in Politeness Strategies theory, which distinguishes between positive politeness, aimed at building closeness and solidarity, and negative politeness, which shows respect by maintaining distance (Brown & Levinson, 2016). In group communication, the Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) highlights that speakers often adjust their communication style, including the use of taboo words, to align with others, strengthen solidarity, and foster group identity (Giles et al., 2023).

Accordingly, swearing serves multiple social and pragmatic functions: it can reinforce relationships, convey emotional solidarity, or express emotions such as anger, fear, or surprise, while also reflecting gender differences in society (Baruch & Jenkins, 2007 in Debray, 2023; Jay & Janschewitz, 2008; Thelwall, 2008 in Stone et al., 2015). In friendship groups, therefore, the use of taboo language functions as a deliberate communication strategy to demonstrate solidarity, enhance social bonds, and express positive politeness, directly linking theory to research objectives. Moreover, swearing varies across gender and cultural contexts: although men and women use taboo words with similar frequency, men tend to do so to assert power or express anger, whereas women often employ them for humor or exaggeration in conversation (Muhanovic et al., 2018). whereas women often employ them for humor or exaggeration in conversation (Muhanovic et al., 2018). Linguistically, taboo words are defined as terms restricted in use due to their perceived impoliteness, including religious curses, obscene expressions, rude slang, sexual terms, insults, words referring to body waste, and racial or gender slurs (Jay, 2020).

Some experts mention four main categories of taboo words: religion, sexuality, excretion, and insults (Bergen, 2018). Other studies highlight that many taboo words are related to women's bodies, showing gender bias in language (Fromkin et al., 2011). Taboo words are also often called four-letter words because they are short but emotionally strong (Bergen, 2018). Research shows that emotions and meaning affect how taboo a word feels, while sound and form also play a role in how society sees the taboo level of a word (Reilly et al., 2020).

Many previous studies have explored how people use swear words in different social and media settings. For example, in religious preaching, swearing has been used to create humor and express a sense of closeness (Aldiansyah et al., 2024). In gaming communities, researchers have examined the forms, meanings, and functions of swear words (Afriansyah et al., 2022), while in literature, they have been studied to uncover the psychological motives behind swearing (Istifadah et al., 2024). Other studies have looked at how swearing appears in driver communities (Yolanda et al., 2025), in film (Nisa & Damayanti, 2022), on social media platforms such as Twitter (Putri & Utomo, 2021), and TikTok (Husnah & Herniti, 2022), where it often reflects emotions like anger, humor, and frustration. However, most of these studies still emphasize moral and politeness perspectives rather than the social roles that swearing plays among peers. In everyday friendships, especially among young people, language becomes a powerful way to build identity and solidarity. In casual and egalitarian conversations, swear words can even serve as signs of emotional closeness and shared belonging. Cross-linguistic research also shows that emotional factors and word meanings shape how taboo language is perceived, while sound patterns can intensify its emotional force (Reilly et al., 2020). Therefore, this study aims to understand how Indonesian youths use swear words as a way to create and strengthen social bonds in their peer interactions.

This study aims to analyze the social functions of swear words in student interactions, focusing on how language works as a marker of solidarity, closeness, and informal communication style. It also seeks to explore how swear words help form group identity and strengthen social bonds among university students. From a theoretical point of view, the findings are expected to broaden the understanding of the relationship between language, emotion, and social structure within the collective-oriented Indonesian culture. From a practical perspective, the study hopes to give insights to educators, parents, and society to see the use of swear words in a more contextual and less negative way. Following the quantitative sociolinguistic approach, this study assumes that swear words function as markers of solidarity and informality that help strengthen social bonds among peer group members.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach with a case study design to explore how swear words function as social glue, signs of solidarity, and informal communication among Indonesian youth peer groups, as this approach allows an in-depth understanding of how people give meaning to social experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The study involved four young adults aged 20–22 from an active friendship circle, selected through purposive sampling based on initial observations, as these individuals were considered most relevant and capable of providing information aligned with the research objectives, with their socio-cultural profiles, including age, gender, and level of engagement in peer interactions, recorded to contextualize the findings.

Data were collected using an open-ended questionnaire, with questions exploring the types of swear words used, their perceived social functions, and common situations for their use, and analyzed using Braun & Clarke (2013) thematic analysis, which included coding responses, identifying patterns, grouping related codes into themes, and interpreting their significance in relation to the research objectives. To ensure credibility, method triangulation was conducted by combining questionnaire responses with structured observations of online group interactions, focusing on verbal exchanges and the contexts of taboo word usage, and ethical principles were upheld throughout, including obtaining informed consent, maintaining anonymity, and ensuring confidentiality of participant data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The analysis of this study aims to describe how the use of swear words functions as a marker of solidarity, a form of informal communication, and a means of shaping group identity in the interactions of Indonesian university students. Using an open-ended questionnaire, the study explored the forms, contexts, and social meanings of swear words used in daily conversations among friends. The analysis focused on four main dimensions, intensity and context of use, the social function of swear words as social glue, and their contribution to group identity and cohesion.

Four university students participated in this study, all of whom were female aged between 20 and 22. Most lived with their parents and described their family atmosphere as “good but not emotionally open.” Emotional interactions within the family were rated low to moderate (scores 2–3 out of 5), while interactions with close friends were much more intense, warm, and expressive. Table 1 presents an overview of the respondents’ profiles based on the questionnaire results.

Table 1. Respondent Description

Respondent	Gender	Age	Comfort Level	Freedom of Expression
S1	Female	22	Relaxed	Uninhibited
S2	Female	21	Relaxed	Uninhibited
S3	Female	20	Relaxed	Uninhibited
S3	Female	20	Relaxed	Uninhibited

The data show that all respondents felt very comfortable and free when using swear words among their peers, with an average comfort score of 5 out of 5. The frequency of use ranged from 3 to 5 times a week, mostly during gaming, joking, or casual storytelling. Commonly used swear words included “*anjing*”, “*anjir*”, “*bego*”, “*bangke*”, and “*goblok*”. These words were not used to insult but rather to express closeness and situational humor. In nearly all cases, swearing was followed by shared laughter instead of conflict or misunderstanding. The

respondents also stated that swearing was considered “safe” when used jokingly among close friends.

The thematic analysis revealed several interesting patterns. First, swearing served as a symbol of solidarity and a social bond. All respondents mentioned that using swear words marked emotional closeness and mutual trust within the group. Second, the informal style of communication characterized their relationships; the respondents felt more like themselves and freer to express emotions with friends than with family. Third, gender differences appeared in their narratives. Although they felt comfortable swearing among friends, the respondents were aware that women who swear are often seen as impolite in public, while men are considered more “bold” or “fun.” This reflects a double standard in social perceptions of swearing.

Furthermore, the social role of each member influenced the frequency of swearing. Respondents who were seen as funny, expressive, or dominant tended to swear more often to lighten the mood. In contrast, quieter members usually responded rather than initiated. No cases showed that swearing caused serious conflict; instead, it became part of a social ritual that strengthened togetherness and reinforced group identity.

Overall, the findings indicate that the use of swear words among university students functions as a linguistic strategy that expresses closeness, strengthens solidarity, and builds an egalitarian and open group identity. Although respondents were aware of politeness norms, the friendship context allowed a reinterpretation of swear words as expressions of warmth and emotional honesty. Thus, this study supports the idea that swear words are not purely negative but also serve as “social glue” that strengthens social bonds among peers.

Discussion

The findings of this study show that university students use swear words not only to express emotions but also to maintain closeness and strengthen solidarity with their friends. The data suggest that swear words in everyday conversations shift from negative meanings to symbols of trust, comfort, and equality. In these settings, students did not feel offended by swearing. Instead, they saw it as a way to show familiarity and acceptance within the group.

The interpretation of these findings fits with the Politeness Strategy (Brown & Levinson, 2016) where negative politeness is replaced by positive politeness to show closeness and group membership. Therefore, the use of swear words can actually strengthen the feeling of togetherness through language that is “informal” but warm. In addition, the findings also support the idea that the use of taboo language in groups, such as swearing, vulgar words, or sarcasm, serves as a marker of in-group membership and a difference from out-groups, strengthening internal cohesion and solidarity. This also supports the social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), which explains that behavior in groups is aimed at improving self-esteem and creating group distinction through shared norms and communication styles (Liao et al., 2020).

When compared with previous studies, these findings are consistent with research showing that swearing can strengthen social bonds and help release emotions without causing offense (Jay & Janschewitz, 2008). They also support the view that swearing can function as a symbol of solidarity in certain communities (Brandes, 2018). In addition, the results align with studies that highlight the role of informal language in building group closeness (Snell, 2018). What this study adds is a clearer picture of how Indonesian students adjust their use of swear words to fit local social and cultural norms. Unlike many Western contexts that relate swearing to individual expression, Indonesian students use it more to maintain harmony, show equality, and support group unity. Because of this, the study not only supports existing theories but also expands the understanding of how the social functions of language can adapt and develop in non-Western settings.

The implications of this study show that swearing can play a more positive role than many people expect. Theoretically, the findings help us understand that taboo language is not only about anger. It can also support connection, lighten the mood, and make people feel closer to each other. This gives sociolinguistic studies a clearer picture of how people use language to manage relationships in everyday life. On the practical side, the results can help teachers, counselors, and language researchers see that swearing among students is not always a problem. Sometimes it shows trust, comfort, and healthy interaction within a group. These insights can be useful for developing learning activities that teach students to understand context and to be aware of how their words affect others. Overall, the findings remind us that language, even taboo language, can support positive social relationships when used with awareness and respect.

In addition, the findings can be understood within the broader tension between established norms of linguistic politeness and the increasingly fluid communication styles shaped by peer culture and digital exposure. While respondents were clearly aware that swearing may be judged negatively outside their friendship circles, particularly in more formal or hierarchical settings, they demonstrated a strong ability to shift linguistic behavior according to context. This situational awareness reflects pragmatic competence, where speakers adjust language choices based on relationship, setting, and shared expectations. In this sense, swearing among peers does not signal a rejection of politeness norms but rather illustrates how such norms are selectively reinterpreted within intimate social spaces. The ability of students to compartmentalize language use suggests that taboo expressions can coexist with broader cultural values of respect, provided they are employed within mutually understood boundaries. This reinforces the view that contemporary youth language practices are not inherently disruptive but are adaptive responses to changing social environments, allowing young adults to balance tradition, identity, and relational closeness through everyday interaction.

However, this study has several limitations. The small number of participants makes it difficult to generalize the findings. In addition, using a questionnaire as the main instrument cannot fully capture the emotional and contextual nuances of swearing in real situations. Future research is suggested to use a mixed-method approach, such as observation or in-depth interviews, to explore the pragmatic meanings and emotions behind swearing more deeply. Future studies could also expand the respondent group to include people from different regional and cultural backgrounds to see how social and cultural factors influence the interpretation of taboo language in daily interactions.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the use of swear words among university students functions not merely as an emotional outlet but as a meaningful linguistic resource that strengthens solidarity, fosters emotional closeness, and supports an informal yet egalitarian mode of communication within peer friendships. Within these relational contexts, swearing is reinterpreted from its conventional association with rudeness into a marker of trust, comfort, and shared understanding, highlighting how language operates as a social tool through which group belonging and interpersonal connections are constructed and maintained, while also revealing gendered perceptions that continue to shape how swearing is evaluated beyond friendship circles. The findings underscore the context-dependent nature of taboo language, showing that its meaning and impact are not inherent in the words themselves but emerge through social relationships, shared norms, and situational boundaries, where swearing among close peers can function as “social glue” without threatening harmony.

From a broader perspective, this study contributes to sociolinguistic discussions by illustrating how Indonesian young adults actively negotiate traditional values of politeness with more relaxed and expressive communication styles shaped by peer culture and contemporary media exposure, reflecting linguistic adaptability rather than a decline in cultural values. In

practical terms, the findings suggest that educators, language practitioners, and counselors should approach swearing among students with greater contextual sensitivity, recognizing that such language use may signal relational closeness rather than deviant behavior. However, this study is limited by the small number of participants and its reliance on questionnaire data, which may not fully capture the dynamic and emotional nuances of swearing in real-time interaction; therefore, future research is encouraged to involve larger and more diverse samples and to employ mixed methods such as observation, interviews, or discourse analysis to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of swearing as a socially embedded communicative practice.

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