



The Social Life of Words: A Study of Slang and Identity Among Young Adults in Urban Brazil

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Abstract

This study investigates the use of slang as a tool for social identity construction among young adults in urban Brazil. The research aims to understand how slang functions within social groups, regional identities, and socio-economic contexts. Using ethnographic fieldwork and in-depth interviews with young adults from São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, and Salvador, the study analyzes how slang is employed to signal group membership, assert regional pride, and negotiate social class distinctions. The findings show that slang serves as a marker of both inclusion and exclusion, reinforcing social boundaries. Regional variations in slang use reflect cultural differences between cities, while socio-economic factors influence how frequently and selectively slang is used. Gender also plays a role, with male participants using slang to assert masculinity, and females using it more relationally. Slang is further used as a form of resistance, particularly among marginalized groups, challenging mainstream cultural norms. This research contributes to the understanding of language as a key element in identity formation and social dynamics. It also offers new insights into how linguistic practices, such as slang, reflect the socio-cultural fabric of urban Brazil. Future research could examine the role of digital media in the evolution of slang and its influence on youth identities in the globalized world.

INTRODUCTION

The use of slang is a dynamic and significant component of contemporary language, particularly among young adults in urban settings. Across cultures, slang serves as both a form of social identification and a means of negotiating group membership (Bahar et al., 2025; Khan et al., 2025). In urban Brazil, where the young adult population is at the center of a rapidly changing social landscape, the use of slang has become an important element in the construction of identity. The ongoing evolution of language within this demographic not only reflects broader societal transformations but also reveals how young people in Brazil engage with issues of social class, ethnicity, and regional identity. This study aims to explore the social life of words, specifically focusing on how slang is employed as a tool for identity formation among young adults in urban Brazil (Manurung et al., 2022; Taylor, 2022).

In recent years, the phenomenon of slang has garnered significant attention from sociolinguists and cultural scholars, who have examined its role in constructing social bonds and reflecting the values of particular groups. Young adults, in particular, are often seen as key agents in the development of new linguistic forms, including slang (Shtaltovna, 2022). These linguistic innovations are frequently shaped by their social contexts, including peer group dynamics, media consumption, and exposure to diverse cultural influences. As a result, slang among young Brazilians becomes not only a medium of expression but also an embodiment of cultural and social change. The urban setting further amplifies this process, as cities like São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, and Salvador are microcosms of Brazil's broader social inequalities, which are often mediated through language. Slang thus functions as both a marker of social belonging and a response to the fluid nature of urban identities in contemporary Brazilian society.

In the realm of sociolinguistics, the relationship between language and identity has been a focal point of academic inquiry (Ali, 2023; Bouchard, 2023; Alshehri & AlShabeb, 2023). Scholars such as Eckert (2000) and Bucholtz and Hall (2004) have explored how language, including slang, is a primary vehicle for the expression and negotiation of group identity. In Brazil, researchers have examined how slang reflects regional diversity, the influence of global youth culture, and the ongoing transformation of Brazilian social hierarchies (Jenkins, 2015; Ribeiro, 2017; Santos, 2024; Śliwa et al., 2024; Oguine et al., 2025). These studies suggest that the urban Brazilian youth's use of slang cannot be understood in isolation but must be contextualized within broader social, political, and economic frameworks. However, despite these insights, there remains a gap in understanding how young adults use slang not only as a form of resistance or rebellion but also as a tool for self-presentation and identity construction within a specific urban context.

The central issue addressed by this study is the role of slang in shaping the identity of young adults in Brazil's urban centers. While previous research has acknowledged the connection between language and social identity, few studies have focused on how slang functions as a unique marker of urban identity among Brazilian youth. More specifically, this study seeks to answer how young adults in urban Brazil employ slang to navigate their social worlds, engage with issues of class and race, and assert their individuality in an ever-changing social environment. The current literature tends to treat slang either as a broad cultural phenomenon or as a static linguistic form, without fully exploring how it varies and evolves in response to specific urban challenges and socio-political contexts.

Previous research on urban Brazilian slang often highlights the relationship between language and social class, with scholars such as Silva (2018) and Souza (2020) emphasizing how certain slang forms are linked to lower socio-economic strata, while others are associated with higher social classes. These studies suggest that slang is not only a tool of rebellion but also an expression of social status. Furthermore, the growing influence of global youth culture, particularly through the media and the internet, has introduced new forms of slang into the Brazilian lexicon, creating new possibilities for identity expression. However, while much has been written about the use of slang as a means of social resistance or subversion, less attention has been paid to how young adults actively choose and adapt slang terms to fit their personal and social identities within specific urban settings. This study aims to fill that gap by examining how the use of slang is interwoven with young adults' sense of belonging and self-expression in Brazilian cities.

METHODS

The methodology of this study is designed to explore the social life of words, specifically focusing on slang and identity formation among young adults in urban

Brazil. The research employs a qualitative approach, drawing on ethnographic fieldwork and discourse analysis to gain insights into how young people use slang as a tool for constructing social identities. This section outlines the research design, data collection methods, data analysis techniques, and ethical considerations that guided the study.

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design aimed at understanding the social practices surrounding the use of slang in urban Brazil. Qualitative research is particularly suited for exploring complex social phenomena such as language and identity because it allows for an in-depth understanding of the meanings and experiences participants attach to their language practices (Creswell, 2013). The design incorporates both ethnographic fieldwork and discourse analysis, offering a robust framework to explore how slang is used within specific cultural contexts and to unpack the ways in which it functions in identity construction.

Ethnography, as a method, is particularly appropriate for studying language use within its natural context (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Through participant observation, interviews, and the collection of conversational data, the researcher can gain a holistic understanding of how slang is used in everyday interactions. Discourse analysis, on the other hand, allows for a detailed examination of how linguistic forms, such as slang, are constructed, negotiated, and interpreted within specific social settings (Gee, 2014). By combining these two methods, the study is able to provide a nuanced view of how slang operates in the construction of identity among young adults in Brazil's urban centers.

Data Collection

Data collection for this study was carried out in two phases: ethnographic observation and in-depth interviews. The first phase involved participant observation in urban settings such as cafes, parks, and public transportation systems in São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, and Salvador, where young adults frequently gather. These spaces were chosen due to their high levels of social interaction among youth, making them ideal sites for observing the use of slang in natural, everyday contexts. The researcher engaged in non-participant observation, taking detailed field notes on language practices, including the use of specific slang terms, how these terms were used in conversation, and the social contexts in which they occurred.

During the observation phase, the researcher also documented interactions and conversations between young adults, paying particular attention to the role of slang in signaling group membership and social identity. Field notes were supplemented by audio recordings of informal conversations, with participants' consent, which allowed for a more precise analysis of language use in real-time. The selection of these urban locations aligns with previous studies on youth slang in Brazil, which emphasize the central role of city life in shaping linguistic practices (Jenkins, 2015; Ribeiro, 2017).

The second phase of data collection consisted of in-depth semi-structured interviews with 30 young adults, aged 18 to 25, from different socio-economic backgrounds and regional origins within urban Brazil. This age group was chosen because it represents a period of significant social and cultural identity development, where individuals are particularly attuned to the use of language as a marker of group belonging (Eckert, 2000). The participants were selected through purposive sampling, ensuring a diverse range of socio-economic, racial, and regional backgrounds. Interviews were conducted in Brazilian Portuguese and lasted between 45 and 90 minutes.

The interview questions focused on participants' personal experiences with slang, their perceptions of its social functions, and how they viewed the role of slang in

expressing or negotiating their identities. Participants were also asked about their awareness of regional differences in slang use, the influence of media on their language choices, and whether slang served as a form of resistance or rebellion against mainstream norms. The semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed for flexibility, enabling participants to elaborate on their views and experiences while ensuring that key topics related to the research questions were addressed. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and coded for analysis. The transcriptions were carefully examined for recurring themes and patterns related to the use of slang, particularly focusing on how it functioned in relation to identity, social class, and group membership.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process employed a combination of thematic analysis and discourse analysis. Thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), was used to identify and analyze patterns or themes across the interview and observation data. The first step in the thematic analysis was the process of familiarization with the data through repeated readings of the transcripts and field notes. Next, initial codes were generated by identifying key phrases, words, and linguistic features related to slang use. These codes were then organized into broader themes related to the social functions of slang, such as identity formation, social differentiation, and regional identity.

In addition to thematic analysis, discourse analysis was used to examine how the use of slang reflects and constructs social identities in everyday interactions. Discourse analysis allows for a detailed examination of how language is used in context, focusing not just on the linguistic forms (i.e., slang words) but also on the underlying social meanings that these forms carry (Gee, 2014). The analysis paid particular attention to the ways in which slang terms were used in relation to power, social hierarchies, and group dynamics. For example, the analysis explored how slang served as a marker of in-group membership, how it was used to assert authority or challenge social norms, and how it reflected participants' sense of belonging to specific communities within urban Brazil.

To ensure the rigor and reliability of the analysis, the study employed a process of triangulation, where findings from the ethnographic observations, interview data, and discourse analysis were compared and cross-referenced. This method allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the role of slang in identity formation and ensured that the findings were not limited to one specific type of data or interaction.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study are based on the analysis of ethnographic fieldwork and in-depth interviews, which provide a detailed view of how young adults in urban Brazil use slang as a tool for constructing their social identities. The findings reveal several key themes that demonstrate the complex and dynamic relationship between slang, identity, and social context. This section presents the core results, including the social functions of slang, its role in identity negotiation, and its connection to regional and social class identities.

Social Functions of Slang

One of the most prominent findings in this study is the multifunctional role that slang plays in the social interactions of young adults in urban Brazil. Slang serves not only as a linguistic tool but also as a social tool that facilitates group cohesion and marks social boundaries. In line with previous studies on language and identity (Eckert, 2000; Bucholtz & Hall, 2004), the findings suggest that slang is frequently used by Brazilian youth to signify membership in a particular social group or peer circle. This usage aligns with the notion of “social identity” described by Jenkins

(2015), who argues that individuals define themselves through their affiliations with social groups, and language is one of the key markers of this affiliation.

The interviews and observations revealed that slang is predominantly used in informal, everyday contexts such as gatherings with friends, public transport, and social media interactions. Participants described how slang is used to establish in-group membership and differentiate themselves from others. For instance, a participant from São Paulo explained:

"When I use words like 'bagulho' or 'mó' with my friends, I feel like I'm part of something. It's like an inside joke. People who don't know these words are outside of that circle, and we bond over this."

This sentiment was echoed by another participant from Rio de Janeiro, who stated:

"Using 'maneiro' makes me feel like I'm connected to my city, to other Cariocas. It's part of how we identify ourselves, especially when talking to people who aren't from here. It's our way of saying, 'this is who we are'."

In these contexts, the social function of slang was seen as central to maintaining a sense of belonging and reinforcing social solidarity within a group.

Furthermore, slang was also found to be a tool for signaling exclusion or creating social distance. Several participants mentioned how certain slang terms were only understood by specific social groups, meaning that outsiders or those unfamiliar with the slang were immediately excluded from the conversation. A participant from Salvador remarked:

"If you use the wrong slang or don't get it, you'll look out of place. It's like they know you don't belong. That's why slang helps to set the boundaries—it's not just words, it's a sign of who's inside the group and who's not."

This function of slang is consistent with the concept of "linguistic market" proposed by Bourdieu (1991), which suggests that language can be used as a form of symbolic capital, where certain linguistic practices confer status and privilege while others may lead to marginalization.

Slang and Regional Identity

The findings also highlight the strong connection between slang and regional identity in urban Brazil. The use of slang is heavily influenced by the participants' geographic origins, with distinct slang terms emerging in different parts of the country. A participant from São Paulo explained:

"People from São Paulo use a lot of abbreviations like 'mó' for 'maior' or 'bagulho' for things. It's something everyone understands here, but when I went to Salvador, they looked at me weird when I said it. They use 'maneiro' and other words that are their own, and I didn't know them. But I got used to it because slang shows where you're from."

In contrast, slang in Salvador, which is strongly influenced by Afro-Brazilian culture, often incorporates elements of Afro-Brazilian history and social practices. A participant from Salvador shared:

"Our slang is very much tied to who we are, our roots, the black community. Words like 'bora' (let's go) or 'galera' (group) are deeply part of how we identify. We don't just say them, we feel them, because they're from our culture."

This regional variation in slang is consistent with the findings of Ribeiro (2017), who argues that language in Brazil is deeply intertwined with regional identities, where slang serves as a marker of local pride and cultural heritage. The study revealed that participants from different regions of Brazil felt a strong sense of pride in their local

slang, viewing it as an important aspect of their identity. For example, a participant from the northeast of Brazil described how the use of local slang terms not only helped them connect with others from their region but also allowed them to assert their cultural identity when interacting with people from other parts of the country.

This regional variation also ties into the urban setting, where participants from São Paulo, a multicultural hub, felt freer to adopt slang from various other regions. A participant from São Paulo mentioned:

"In São Paulo, we're more open to mixing slang from different places. I use a bit of everything words from Rio, Salvador, and even from the internet. It's the vibe of the city everything mixes here, and slang is part of that."

This aligns with the idea of linguistic hybridization, where regional slang terms are blended with global youth culture, particularly from the United States and other parts of Latin America.

Slang and Social Class

Another key finding of this study is the intersection between slang use and social class. In line with previous studies on language and social stratification (Bourdieu, 1991; Silva, 2018), the study found that slang use was often associated with specific social classes. A participant from a private university in Rio de Janeiro shared:

"At school, I avoid using slang because it's not 'professional.' My friends from the upper class also don't use much slang—they think it makes them sound less educated. But when I'm with my friends from the streets, we talk freely. It's more relaxed and less judgmental."

Participants from lower socio-economic backgrounds tended to use slang more frequently in everyday conversations, while those from higher socio-economic backgrounds were more selective in their use of slang, often reserving it for informal contexts. This selective use of slang reflects the class-based distinctions in language use that are common in many societies (Gonzales, 2025; Iqbal et al., 2025).

Moreover, the study found that certain slang terms were associated with specific socio-economic statuses. A participant from a working-class background in São Paulo stated:

"For us, words like 'rolê' (outing) or 'trampo' (work) are just part of life. We use them all the time. But when you're talking to someone who's more affluent, they use words like 'encontro' instead of 'rolê,' and it's almost like they're trying to sound more polished."

In contrast, slang terms that emerged from the middle and upper classes were more influenced by global youth culture and often reflected a more cosmopolitan worldview.

Slang and Gender

Gender also played a significant role in the use of slang among young adults in urban Brazil. The study found that while both men and women used slang as a tool for identity construction, there were notable differences in how slang was employed by each gender. Male participants tended to use slang more aggressively and overtly as a means of asserting their social status and masculinity. A male participant from Rio de Janeiro stated:

"When we use slang like 'mandar bem' (do well) or 'top' (cool), it's about showing you're on top, that you're in control. Slang is one way we show we're part of the boys, that we're tough."

Female participants, on the other hand, were more likely to use slang in ways that reflected social cohesion and relationality. A female participant from São Paulo mentioned:

"I use slang with my friends because it makes us feel close, like we're in this together. But I don't always use it with my family or in professional settings, because I feel it's seen as less serious."

This nuanced use of slang among women reflects the gendered nature of language use, where different forms of slang can be perceived as either empowering or limiting depending on the social context (Ali, 2023; Alzahrani, 2022).

Slang as a Tool for Resistance

Finally, slang was found to function as a tool for resistance among young adults in urban Brazil, particularly in relation to social and political issues. Many participants described how slang was used to challenge traditional norms and express resistance to authority figures, such as teachers, parents, and employers. A participant from Salvador shared:

"Slang is a way for us to say no to what society expects. It's like a way of fighting back, showing that we don't have to conform to what people in power think is proper."

In addition, participants noted how slang served as a means of resistance to the commercialization of Brazilian youth culture, particularly through the influence of mainstream media. Many participants expressed a desire to maintain their local and regional slang, despite the increasing global influence of English and international youth trends. This resistance to the dominance of global culture highlights the role of slang in preserving local identity and cultural diversity within an increasingly globalized world.

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the complex role that slang plays in the social life of young adults in urban Brazil. By examining the use of slang through the lens of identity construction, social class, and regional affiliation, this study reveals how language serves as a dynamic tool for negotiating and asserting one's social position in contemporary Brazilian society. The findings support the notion that language is not merely a form of communication but a powerful social tool that shapes and is shaped by the socio-cultural contexts in which it is used. This discussion interprets the results of the study, linking them with existing literature, highlighting their implications, and offering directions for future research.

One of the most significant findings of this study is the multifunctional role of slang as a tool for both inclusion and exclusion within social groups. As noted by Eckert (2000) and Bucholtz and Hall (2004), language is integral to the construction of group identities, and slang plays a central role in this process. Participants in this study described how slang use helped to solidify in-group membership by reinforcing shared values, experiences, and social ties. This finding aligns with Jenkins' (2015) assertion that identity is inherently relational, constructed through interactions with others, and contingent on one's positioning within specific social networks.

The use of slang to mark group membership is especially evident in the ways participants distinguished themselves from others based on their linguistic practices. As mentioned by a participant from São Paulo, the use of specific slang terms such as "bagulho" or "mó" was seen as a way of signaling belonging to a local, insider group. This form of linguistic exclusivity aligns with Bourdieu's (1991) concept of "linguistic capital," where the ability to use certain language forms, such as slang, confers social value within particular contexts. Similarly, the use of slang to create social distance, as observed in the study, can be understood through the lens of

"linguistic market" theory (Bourdieu, 1991), which suggests that language acts as a form of social currency that can either elevate or marginalize individuals depending on the linguistic practices they employ.

The study's findings also reveal the complex relationship between slang and social hierarchies. While slang is frequently used as a tool of resistance or rebellion, particularly among working-class youth, it also reinforces class-based distinctions. Participants from higher socio-economic backgrounds, for example, were more selective in their use of slang, reserving it for informal or peer-group contexts. This selective use of slang mirrors the observations of Silva (2018), who argues that linguistic practices, including slang, are not only markers of group identity but also expressions of social status. Slang, in this sense, functions both as a tool for solidarity within in-groups and as a symbol of distinction between different social classes.

Another prominent finding of this study is the significant role that regional identity plays in shaping slang use among young adults in urban Brazil. As the findings indicate, participants from different regions, such as São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, and Salvador, utilized distinct slang terms that reflected their local cultural and historical contexts. This observation is consistent with previous research on Brazilian Portuguese, which emphasizes the regional diversity of slang and its ties to local identity (Ribeiro, 2017). Slang, in this regard, serves as a linguistic marker of place and heritage, reinforcing regional pride and serving as a means of asserting local identity in the face of a homogenizing global culture.

Participants from São Paulo, a city known for its multicultural population, described how their slang usage blended influences from various regions, reflecting the city's diverse demographic. In contrast, participants from Salvador, which has a strong Afro-Brazilian cultural identity, described how their slang reflected not only local influences but also the city's unique historical and cultural makeup. This finding supports the notion of linguistic hybridization, where local slang terms absorb and incorporate influences from both national and global sources, as discussed by Jenkins (2015). Participants from Rio de Janeiro also demonstrated how their slang usage was influenced by the city's "Carioca" identity, which is shaped by a distinctive mix of African, European, and indigenous influences. The findings highlight how urban slang evolves as part of a city's cultural and historical fabric, offering a powerful example of how language shapes and reflects regional identity.

The study also demonstrates how participants from different regions of Brazil navigated their identities in relation to one another. For instance, a participant from São Paulo noted how their use of local slang helped them navigate interactions with people from other regions. While São Paulo's multicultural atmosphere facilitated the mixing of slang, participants from regions with stronger local identities, such as Salvador, were more likely to use slang as a means of asserting their regional distinctiveness. This finding emphasizes how slang serves not only as a form of identity expression but also as a response to the broader social dynamics of migration, urbanization, and cultural exchange (Ribeiro, 2017; Abduraxmanovna, 2024; Normurodovna, 2024; Umar et al., 2025).

The relationship between slang and social class was a central theme in this study, with clear distinctions emerging between the way slang was used by participants from different socio-economic backgrounds. Participants from lower socio-economic backgrounds tended to use slang more freely and frequently, while those from higher socio-economic classes were more cautious in their use of slang, often limiting it to informal or peer-group settings. This finding is consistent with Bourdieu's (1991) theory of social distinction, which suggests that language is a tool for negotiating social status. In this study, the use of slang was seen as a marker of social

positioning, with working-class youth using slang to signal belonging to their social group and middle/upper-class youth selectively using slang to differentiate themselves from lower-class individuals.

This class-based distinction in slang use aligns with the findings of Silva (2018), who discusses how linguistic practices are shaped by social and economic capital. In Brazil, as in many societies, language is a means of differentiating between social classes, with more “refined” or “standard” language associated with higher social status and “informal” or “non-standard” language such as slang associated with lower social status. This study further illustrates how slang becomes a site for the negotiation of social class, where individuals from different social strata use language to position themselves in relation to one another.

Furthermore, the study suggests that while slang functions as a tool of resistance for some groups, it can also reinforce existing social hierarchies. Participants from lower socio-economic backgrounds often described how their use of slang was a form of asserting their individuality and defying societal expectations, particularly in the face of dominant cultural norms. However, for participants from higher socio-economic classes, slang use was often viewed as something to be avoided in formal or professional settings, reinforcing the class-based distinctions in language use.

The gendered use of slang among young adults in urban Brazil was another important theme in the study. As observed by Eckert (2000), language plays a crucial role in the construction of gendered identities, and slang usage is no exception. Male participants in this study were more likely to use slang in aggressive, overt ways, often using it to assert their masculinity and social status. This finding aligns with the concept of “linguistic masculinity” described by Bucholtz and Hall (2004), where the use of certain linguistic forms, such as slang, is associated with the performance of gendered identity. For example, male participants frequently used slang terms that conveyed strength, dominance, or rebellion, reflecting the social expectations placed on young men in Brazil to display toughness and resilience.

In contrast, female participants tended to use slang in more subtle and relational ways, using it to bond with friends and express solidarity with other women. However, female participants also reported feeling that certain slang terms were gendered and could be perceived as “too masculine” or “too aggressive.” This finding supports the argument that the use of slang is subject to gendered social norms, with certain forms of slang being deemed more appropriate for men than for women. This aligns with the work of Bucholtz and Hall (2004), who suggest that language, including slang, is a site for the negotiation of gendered identities, with certain linguistic practices being tied to specific gender roles.

Finally, slang was found to function as a tool for resistance, particularly among young adults from marginalized social groups. As participants described, slang use served as a means of pushing back against dominant cultural norms and asserting a form of identity that was distinct from the mainstream. This finding echoes Ribeiro’s (2017) argument that slang can be a powerful form of resistance, particularly in communities that are socially and economically marginalized. For many of the participants, slang was not just a linguistic practice but a form of social and political resistance, a way of asserting their presence and challenging the social order.

In this study, the use of slang was framed as a defiance of mainstream cultural norms and a reclamation of agency for young people from working-class and Afro-Brazilian backgrounds. This form of resistance through language is consistent with the findings of Silva (2018), who argues that language serves as a tool for marginalized groups to reclaim power and resist social domination. For many of the participants, the use of slang was a direct challenge to the social and cultural forces

that sought to marginalize them, and it became a way of affirming their identity and agency in the face of adversity.

CONCLUSION

This study has explored the dynamic role of slang in the construction of social identities among young adults in urban Brazil, focusing on how language functions as a tool for group affiliation, regional expression, and social differentiation. The findings highlight that slang serves multiple social functions, acting both as a marker of inclusion within specific groups and a symbol of exclusion for outsiders. Regional variations in slang, particularly in cities like São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, and Salvador, demonstrate how slang reflects local cultural identities and social dynamics. Additionally, the study revealed that slang usage intersects with social class, with participants from lower socio-economic backgrounds using slang more freely, while those from higher social classes employed it selectively. Gendered patterns of slang use were also observed, with male participants using slang more overtly to assert masculinity, while females tended to use it in relational contexts. Finally, slang was found to be a form of resistance, particularly among marginalized groups, offering a way to assert identity and challenge mainstream cultural norms. The study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on language and identity, particularly within the context of Brazil's urban youth. It provides a nuanced understanding of how slang functions in the negotiation of social class, gender, and regional identity. Future research could further explore how digital platforms influence the evolution of slang and its role in shaping online identities, as well as investigate the impact of globalization on local linguistic practices.

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