

## Yes We Are: A Sociolinguistic Study of Egyptian Slang

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### Abstract

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This article draws on a sociolinguistic study of slang as a marked speech style of Egyptian youth. This social group speaks a linguistic variety which is evaluated by other subgroups to be incomprehensible and inappropriate. This article presents examples from the Egyptian slang highlighting their semantic features (obscenities, address forms, addressee-oriented tags), their formation processes as well their social implications. The study sheds light on the degree of societal acceptance to the used slang, arguing that such linguistic deployment offers a variety of opportunities to a marginalized social group to express their novelty and uniqueness. The results extracted from the circulated survey uncover the features of such linguistic repertoire.

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**Keywords:** slang; word formation; identity marker; social group; ideology; Arabic language

### Introduction

Although slang is regarded as a viable sociolinguistic phenomenon, some neologistic formations draw the attention to their idiosyncratic existence. Due to the drastic socio-economic changes that took place after what is called Arab Spring Revolutions, new and innovative use of language has prominently affected the Arabic linguistic sphere. The Egyptian society in particular has encountered mass transformations in its structure. Egypt has witnessed two revolutions that led to the ruling of five presidential regimes. Many sociolinguistic studies focus on how males and females speak differently and that gender matters when it comes to linguistic choices. This article, however, does not focus on gender differences. Rather, the study concentrates on language use and its ideological implications in the Egyptian society. The study presents instances drawn from the actual use of slang by the Egyptian youth. The ideological stances of such linguistic choices are, then, interpreted within the context of the Egyptian culture and the wide range of factors that lead to the domination of such phenomenon.

### Review of Literature

Language reflects social reality. It is a means of communication that undergoes mass transformation enabling its users to adapt with the continuous changes surrounding it (Sapir, 1966; Halliday 1976; Hudson, 1985; Connie, 1996). Research keeps on reevaluating its stance to highlight such linguistic revolutionary transforms. Language, as Cameron (2003), states is used as a means of self-representation or a means of dominating the other. Either case, according to Cameron (2003) it, still, is the only way to express reality.

It cannot be denied that the multiplicity of the social groups in a given community reflects and is reflected through the linguistic choices of the members of such groups. It is the context of the situation in a certain society that regulates the way language is used.

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Similarly, in a wider scale of the context of culture, language is dominated by a variety of socio-economic constraints that depict wider representations of the social groups and their intricate communicative behavior. These two variables, i.e. context of situation and context of culture, cannot be ignored when dealing with such communicative style.

### **Contexts of Situation and Culture**

To achieve the intended societal goals, members of social groups intentionally and unintentionally consider the surroundings of the society in which they are playing their roles. These settings are termed as context of situation (register) and context of culture (genre). Register is a semantic concept proposed by Halliday (1982) as a development of Malinowski's context of situation. It is defined by Halliday and Hasan (1989) as "configuration of meanings that are typically associated with a particular situational configuration of field, mode, and tenor" (p.38). Halliday and Hasan claim that a register is a variety of language that includes the expression, the lexico-grammatical and phonological features. Such linguistic use is governed by a wider scope of norms, beliefs and background knowledge. Thus, as register is concerned with the dimensions of context of situation. The concept of 'genre', on the other hand, is used to describe "the impact of the context of culture on language, by exploring the staged, step-by-step structure cultures institutionalize as way of achieving goals" (Eggins, 2004, p.9). There are two other related concepts that have to be defined for the purpose of this study, i.e. jargon and slang. Jargon is defined as a set of vocabulary associated with a given occupation, profession reflecting an in-group variety (Spolsky, 2004; Halliday and Hasan 1989, Eggins, 2004). "...[C]losed peer groups often develop their own forms of jargon to serve as markers of groups membership and also make their speech less intelligible to outsiders" (Spolsky, 2004, p.34).

### **Slang and the Expression of Reality**

The concept of 'slang' refers to that linguistic variety known to be common among peers of equal social standards and statuses. It is colloquial, used every day and includes both nice in addition to negative connotations (Cameron, 2003; Spolsky, 2004; Tagliamonte, 2012). According to Spolsky (2004), "Slang is a kind of jargon marked by its rejection of formal rules, its comparative freshness and its common ephemerality, and its marked use to claim solidarity" (p.35). The literature of sociolinguistic includes a number of features of slang. Anderson and Trudge (1990:42) enumerate a number of features that are ascribed to slang:

1. slang is language use below the neutral stylistic level, where the stylistic continuum ranges from colloquial to vulgar and obscene; and therefore
2. slang is typical of informal situations, like swearing;
3. slang is typical of spoken language;
4. slang is found in words, but not in grammar: it implies variation in the choice of words but not grammar or pronunciation – English is a language but slang is not; slang is not a dialect: stylistic variation, including the use of slang, can take within dialects and what is slang may vary from place to place, and dialect to dialect
5. slang is not swearing
6. slang is not register, though it may contain slang, in so far as the specialized vocabulary is informal;
7. slang is not cant, argot or jargon;
8. slang is creative, makes speech vivid, colorful and linguistically interesting

Slang is, thus, a variety used as a marker of social identity. Those who use it are in-groups, while others who reject such style are considered outsiders (Anderson and Trudge, 1990; Leech and Static, 1981; Connie, 1996; Hudson, 1985). In other words, using language, members of the social groups tend to perform two actions, either to attract similar members or resist those who are different. According to Van Hark (2012) "...people try to sound more like their interlocutors, to converge towards the people they are talking to (and occasionally, if their interlocutors are jerks or if they want to establish social distance from them, to diverge, or sound less like them" (p.105). In fact, when social members coin new linguistic forms, they are actually trying to formulate their identities within the socio-economic changes in that global sphere. According to Shin (2012) new linguistic forms "highlights ways in which symbolic values of linguistic resources in individuals' hybrid linguistic repertoires shift as an index of globality" (p.2).

Such virtual division between the in-groups and out-groups is marked by the ideological representation of what surrounds a community. Common linguistic styles, as Gal and Woolard (2014) claim, are the products of experts who share linguistics ideologies. Inherent beliefs and viewpoints enable language user and even larger social groupings to impose their societal roles in the community. According to Gal and

Woolard (2014) argues that such socio linguistically created usages enforce an authoritarian voice among other social groups. Slang is an essential part of languages. Arabic Language is not an exception. Slang is deployed by members of different social classes, ages and professional groups. Each period of time is characterized by the emergence of a special language among social groups that share common interests. Slang can be studied from different approaches. In the current study, the Egyptian slang is described from both a linguistic and ideological point of views highlighting the unconventional expressions and their social meanings among the Egyptian youth.

## **Methodology**

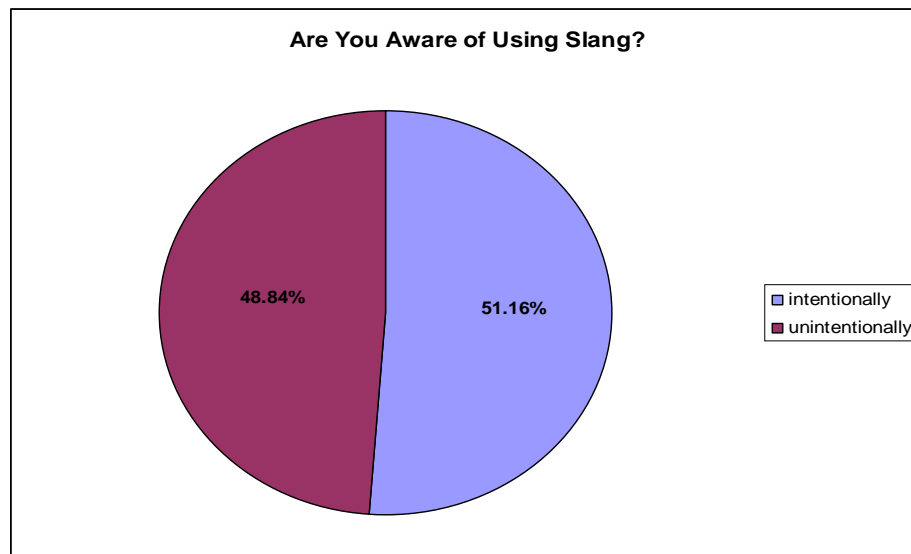
The data for this study are collected after a survey conducted on a total sum of 100 informants whose age range between 16 and 25 years old. Results are primary obtained from subjects selected using the purposive sampling method. The survey has included questions about gender, age and other societal components. Such questions are helpful in the formation of large picture about the context of situation and the context of culture in which the participants live. The study intended to choose subjects of similar social standard according to their education level (all participants have attended prestigious universities in Egypt) and their living standard. The questions circulated to the participants investigate the common linguistic choices used among their peers, the community acceptance/rejection of such choices, in addition to the reasons why they lean to such linguistic repertoire.

The study classifies the extracted slang expressions into semantic domains according to their meanings either denoting personality descriptions, addressee-oriented tags, degree of intensesness, verbs of actions and obscenity and insults. After that, the results are analyzed in the light of the youth communicative intentions, the meaning of such expressions and their role in the social contexts. Such explanations are manifested by the effect of such usage on the social relationships between the members of the society (either in-groups or out-groups) and the ideological impacts resulting from such linguistic phenomenon.

This investigation proceeds with qualitative analyses where the collected vocabulary is analysed linguistically and ideologically. The statistical record presented seeks to highlight the contextual surrounding in which the study is conducted. This whole qualitative-quantitative analysis is sought to portrait a vivid picture about how such language use is ideologically motivated in the Egyptian society.

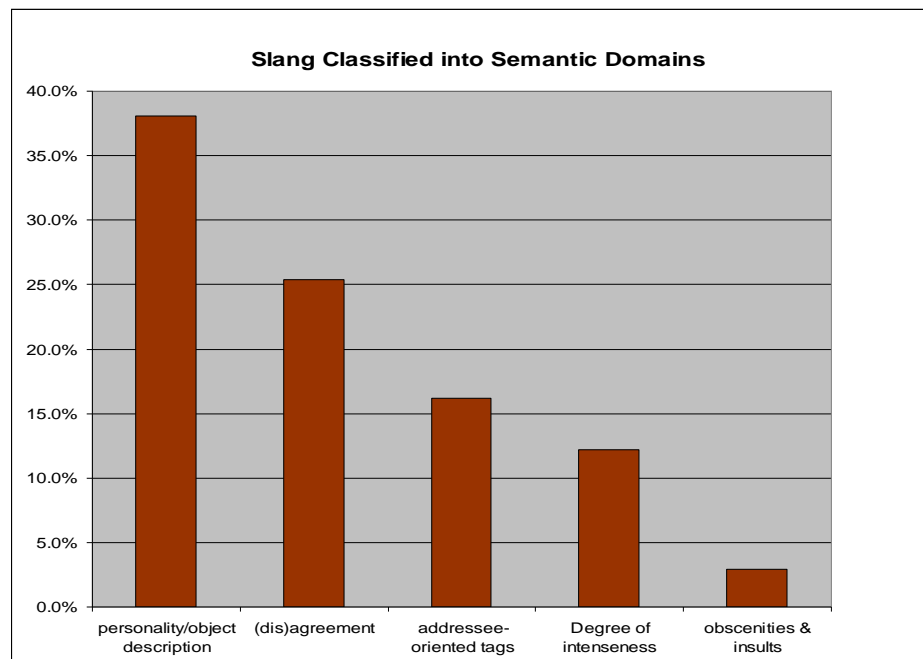
## **Results**

After examining the responses of the subjects, a number of findings are uncovered. Slang is described as an investable social process that is practiced in face-to-face encounters and is supported by other factors, most of which are broadcast media and the proliferation of social media. The process becomes part of the linguistic repertoire in the Egyptian society. The responses to the survey reveal closeness in the use of slang either intentionally or unintentionally. When asked whether they are aware that they are using slang or not, 51.16 % of the subject answered that they use it intentionally. Chart (1) shows this percentage indicating that those participants are conscious that they are using slang in different settings controlling themselves from using it in inappropriate contexts.



**Figure 1-Are You Aware of Using Slang?**

The other type of participants has described their use of slang as an autonomic process. For 48.84 % of the subjects, slang expressions slip out of their mouth involuntarily. The closeness of the percentage implies that the process of expression is spontaneous and inherited in the personal ideological components of the speaker. Participants confirm that, when friends gather, they tend to impulsively call each other names, greet each other with swear words with no intention to abuse or oppress one another. Such unintentional process reinforces the fact that such slang expressions become part of their ideological beliefs. Intimate friends feel that such communicative style represents them in a way that can exclude any interference from other 'unwanted' subgroups. The following chart illustrates the frequency of the mostly used slang terms classified according to their semantic domain. The chart shows that the inspiring and productive semantic domains, as far as slang is concerned is personality/object description.



**Figure 2 - Slang Classified into Semantic Domains**

Although the material for this investigation consists of slang words without context, the most frequently mentioned expressions provided by participants belong to the domain of describing personalities and objects. The following table provides sample of the collected expressions and their pragmatic function as used by the youth:

Arabic expression	Literal Translation	Pragmatic Function
مزة	'chick'	description of good looking females
كورك	idiot	description of naivety
منينها	From Benha 'Egyptian Governorate'	criticizing unawareness of the surroundings
علوضعك	stand still	description of needy helpless state
ملزق	sticky	accusation of a follower person with bad personality
خروف	sheep	description of a holder of an MB political belief

**Table 1- Personality Descriptive Slang**

The chart shows that more than 38% of the collected slang expressions are utilized to describe the 'other'. The results show that 'personal traits' are best described through such expressions which are exchanged commonly among such group. As seen in Table (1) a word such as مزة 'chick' is used to refer to the good physical appearance of a female. The word كورك 'idiot' is, conversely, used to refer to a male character who is naive and has no experience in dealing with the surrounding issues. Similarly, the words منينها 'from Benha' and علوضعك 'stand still' carry similar significations. Both slang expressions collocate with a person who pretends that he is unaware of the running issues. Describing a person who holds opposing political tendencies, a word such as خروف 'sheep' is used to describe those believing in Muslim Brothers ideologies. Second in frequency are the markers of agreement and disagreement. With a percentage reaching more than 19 % of the collected expressions, agreement/disagreement markers are found to be of preference among peers of equal social status.

Arabic expression	Literal Translation	Pragmatic Function
قشطه	cream	agreement
فل	flowery	liking and preferring
امين	Amen	strongly approving
فكك	unlock yourself	stopping a certain action
نفض	remove dust by shaking	ignore the subject matter
احلق	shave	ignore the subject matter
فاكس	faakis(untranslatable)	unimportant

**Table 2- (Dis)agreement Slang**

The lexis seen in the Table 2 reflect the diversity of the semantic formation processes. Some words are semantically extended from names of food, plants or even a religious jargon. Words such as قشطه 'cream' and فل 'flowery' can be interpreted to have an 'approval' signification due to their positive denotations, i.e. sweet taste of cream or sweet smell of flower. The word امين 'Amen', also, signifies approval which is derived from the religious meaning of Amen. An interesting use of the three verbs فكك 'unlock', نفض 'remove dust' and احلق 'shave' may derive their meanings from a metaphorical implication of ignoring the 'other' either by resembling him/them to dust, or unlocking the self from the prison of the other or getting rid of unnecessary bad looking hair, respectively. The last word in the list is فاكس, 'a meaningless word' whose origin cannot be traced in the Arabic language. The word is mentioned in a movie by one of the Egyptian actors, and then repeated among clusters of youth. In fact all of these words have implications which are completely different from the literal meaning of the expression.

As a part of marking and attributing self-identities among equal peers, it is found out that youth are commonly addressing each other with positive address-tags which connote aggrandizement and glorification. Interestingly, the domain of address-oriented tags includes all positive connotations. Table (3) shows some instances.

Arabic expression	Literal Translation	Pragmatic Function
ياكبير	big	marking importance
يابرنجي	primary	marking top importance
شقيق	brother	indicating intimacy
بيبي	baby	showing lovable feelings
يادبابه	military tank	marking huge body
ياوحش	wild	describing courage

**Table 3- Address-oriented Tags**

Investigated subjects claim that they do not usually address each other by their first or family names. Rather, they prefer to call each other with these expressions to pertain the feeling of importance, intimacy and self confidence. Vocatives such as *ياكبير* 'O' big' or *يابرنجي* 'O' primary' identify the addressee as an important person to the addresser. Words such as *ياشقيق* 'O' brother' and *بيبي* 'O' baby' touch the emotional essence of the hearer indicating closeness and relatedness. Related to the physical appearance of the addressee words like *ياوحش* 'O' wild' and *يادبابه* 'O' military tank' are frequently used to compare the addressee with the strength of the military tank and the courage of beasts, respectively.

Another set of expressions deployed is related to intensity. Out of the extracted slang words a number of examples are found signifying exaggeration and amplification through the metaphoric adjacency of nouns and modifiers.

Arabic expression	Literal Translation	Pragmatic Function
تئين	dragon	numerous
سنين	years	extreme
فشخ	sexually relate meaning	incredible attribute
جاعد	merciless	acute intensity
زوربيح	meaningless	excessive amount
طحن	grind or crush	strength and excessive

**Table 4- Intensity-connoting slang**

These examples, when combined with adjectives, express the intensity of the attributes of the modified carrier. Interestingly, the literal meaning of the words are not by any means related to the meaning of intensity. A common feature concluded from the study is the exchange of obscenity and swear words among youth. Table (5) exemplifies obscenity and insults. Though found with low frequency in the collected data, i.e. less than 5%, their existence is, still a fact. This category of slang terms, as claimed by the respondent, is highly noticed among males, though presented by a considerable some of girls. The blatant use of these words among the clusters of youth is ascribed to many reasons, one of which the bald repetition of these expressions in movies and street songs. Instances found are related to sexual references and drugs.

Arabic expression	Literal Translation	Pragmatic Function
اضر بدماغ	head hitting	encourage smoking and drinking
خرمان	drunk	in a state of unconsciousness
يعط	mischievous	insincere love affair

**Table 5- sexual-connoting slang**

The expression of *head hitting* 'اضرب دماغ' signifies 'being on drugs', i.e. in a state of relation and unconsciousness. Related to this meaning is *خرمان* 'drunk', a meaningless words connoting an absent state of mind. Sexually-related, the verb *يعطط* 'mischievous' is used with a subject connoting 'womanizer' who does not belong to a sincere relationship. Although these expressions are socially disapproved, such deeds and their naming are, still, an established reality in the Egyptian society.

### Formation process of Arabic slang expressions

Slang exists within the Arabic language and uses its standard linguistic rules to coin new expressions and phrases either semantically, morphologically or syntactically. This section illustrates the word formation process of the collected data.

After analyzing the extracted expressions, some slang items are found to follow the morphological rules of the Arabic language. A morphological process found in the formation of the slang words is derivation. Some words have undergone an affixation process either to form a feminine noun out of a masculine one as *مزامة* where the feminine suffix 'ة' is added to signify *a female chick* and *a handsome male*. Another morphological derivative is found to form a verb out of noun as *حفلة* 'party' where the original noun is back-formed to create a verb *يحفل* which signifies 'making a fuss out of something'. Similarly the words *زيطة* 'loudness' is also back-formed to derive the verb *يزيط* which signifies 'to get used to doing something'. Similar formations are derived from nominal derivations such as *دايس* 'going on' and *اشتغاله* 'making fool of someone'.

Loan forms represent another word formation process whose original word is rooted in another language, yet goes into a process of adaptation in Arabic. The following slang words, for instance, are found in the collected material. The word *هارتي* is a loan form of 'heart' affixed with the Arabic first person possessive pronominal suffix denoting 'my heart'. Similar examples can be represented in the words *حنكروز* and *حنسبوت* which have undergone a prefixation of the colloquial prefix 'حـ' 'will' to the English word 'cruise' and 'spot' to signify the English meaning in an Arabic form. Both words denote 'we will spot' and 'we will have a cruise' respectively. Another two words *جيمرز* and *افور* are borrowed to signify 'over-reacting' and 'gamers', respectively. In fact, a large number of words have gone through the adaptation of English forms to be used as slang words to Arabic. One of the common word formation processes is semantic change where the original word loses its denotative meaning and comes to be used with a completely different semantic signification. The word *بشع* 'ugly', for instance, is currently used with the opposite meaning, i.e. 'extremely beautiful' the original meaning is not intended at all when used in the Egyptian slang. Also, the semantic domain of food includes words such as *بلح* 'dates' and *كنافه* 'Konafa pastry' to connote 'chaotic state'.

Metaphoric formations have found their way through slang expressions. Metaphors relate the experience of one thing to another (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). The following instances of slang employ comparisons of original signifiers to refer to other objects of similar attributes. So, a word such as *ديكاليرابر* 'rooster among his peers' is used to describe a person with beauty and eloquence. This image resembles the rooster in its beauty and cheerful cooing. The slang is used to refer to a person who wants to appear unique and bright. Another instance is of the denotative meaning of the word *مرهملي* 'put the ointment on me'. The word is a verbal derivation of the noun 'ointment'. The implication of the verb form resembles the medical effect of the ointment that pacifies any wound. The word connotatively signifies to calm any person if he is in rage. The same metaphorical use is found in the Arabic word *كيسني*. The word is a verb derivation of the noun *كيس* 'plastic bag' which is used to keep things. The metaphorical use of the verb form is used to signify fooling someone to reverse his point of view. Politically, the word *خروف* 'sheep' is metaphorically used to refer to a person who belongs to a political group that holds the fanatic religious Muslim Brother (MB) ideological beliefs. The metaphorical implication, hence, results from the assimilation of the image of those cattle that obey their shepherd blindly just like the MB members who blindly follow the instruction of their leader.

Thus, we can see that many slang items are derived from semantically old forms but obtained new metaphorical meanings through the interpretation of their ironic use. It is noticed that the source of the semantic formation of slang lexical items is not limited to a specific field or register; rather slang stretches its root to a diversity of fields in the surrounding world.

Syntactic structures are noticed in a set of slang formations. Some words are formed by compounding different parts of speech such as جوز العنب *'nut grapes'* and جوز العنب *'nut Almonds'*. In the previous examples, the slang is a **noun + noun** compound to signify 'perfection'. Similar examples are found in compounding the words سنين *'years'* and تتين *'dragon'* to a noun to function as quantifiers expressing exaggeration and intensity. Such compounding process includes two new words presented adjacently to imply a totally new meaning. Also, some words are used as modifiers especially when they are used in combination with adjectives, adverbs and evaluative substantives. The formation of the slang expressions فيالسريع connoting *'quickly'* and فيالضياع connoting *'absent minded'* or منبنها connoting *'playing fool'* are **preposition + noun** adverbials.

### Societal Perception of Youth Slang

Egypt is an Arabic-speaking diglossic country which is characterized by having two varieties of the same language i.e., high and low. Linguists classify the levels of Arabic in Egypt into a number of other categories. These varieties are classified according to their use in the society. Al-Badawiyy (1973) mentions them as: (1) Classical Arabic (language of Quran, mosques and preaches); (2) Modern Standard Arabic (language of news and education); (3) Colloquial of educated people; (4) Colloquial of uneducated people. Each one of these varieties reflects the social and educational standard of its user. The study has examined the degree of acceptance and rejection of the everyday use of slang of the Egyptian youth. Almost 73% of informants claim that they avoid speaking in slang with the elder people. According to the societal norms, youth speaking in such way are considered impolite, carless and disrespectful.

Using slang, youth are accused of using 'street language' and are, thus, blamed of presenting themselves as low standard social members. Parents view such style as a sign of disrespect. Witnessing such style, parents lament over the way they raised their children. Responses reflect the mutual relations between those of different age groups. Elder people are claimed not to understand the feelings or the mentality of the youth. Slang expressions have to be semantically interpreted and when doing so, elder people mock such usages and disapprove them completely. An interesting finding is that more than 25% of the responses state that some parents attempt to use some of these words to maintain relations with their sons and daughter. Nevertheless, girls are intensely observed to have used vocabulary of masculine tone and meanings. Such deviant linguistic behaviour violates the stereotypical norm of which females are portrayed. Female respondents intend to show equality with males by using vulgar words to mark of masculinity. For them feminine language is considered the language of the powerless.

Some respondents consider such use as a natural development of an upcoming generation who just used its right to have a different language. Although they adopt this view, elder people claim that it is unstable and will fade when time passes. By examining the answers of the posed questions, the infiltration of this use of slang is ascribed to a number of reasons. The following table illustrates the point of view of the participants.

Reasons	Percentage
Social trend (media, internet, etc.)	52.28%
Expresses me more	20.45%
Secret code between me and my peers	25%
I want to be different	2.27%

**Table 6**

It can be seen that more than 52% of the participants regard slang as a social trend whose existence is inevitable, especially with the influence of broadcast media. According to the responses extracted from the study, media is blamed to have presented actors and actresses playing the roles of 'villain' yet lovable characters. Those depraved characters are presented as descendent of low standard social classes.



This 'street language' is considered to be unaccepted among conservative subgroups. Still, those media-presented characters are rewarded by the end of such dramatics representations. Needless to say, the 'street songs' have been a major source of slang words. Those types of songs represent a phenomenon in the Egyptian society. Media failed to gather the Egyptian people around the acceptable traditions and manners. Modern media forms are criticized of ignoring the role of rooting national and societal identities in the community. Also, the proliferation of internet and social media has made it easier to the spread of the slang on tremendous wide scale. New words do not need more than an excessive transaction on the social networks to be part of everyday talk. Such slang represents a shortcut to lots of things they want to say in few words.

Around 25% of the participants consider slang responsible for creating bonds and blending with members of the same mentalities. They need to set barriers with older generations, and create a secret code among their peers. Egyptian youth after the two revolutions, as they claimed, did not manage to express their needs nor did they succeed to achieve what they have revolted against. From their point of view, they do not feel loyal any more to their language nor do they feel committed to their society. According to them, successive rough political events have caused imbalance in the societal as well as the linguistic behaviors. Some of the answers reveal the socio-linguistic urge of the youth to express themselves in a community, whom they think, ignores their need. According to 20.45% of the survey participants, freedom of expression is a right they are fighting for. For them they have the right to speak in such rebellious way.

Some of the informants have revealed their need to express uniqueness. They want to be different. Although the percentage is low, 2.27%, Youth seek to pursuit self identity. The responses indicate their desire to exclude non-members and depict themselves as inimitable models. Breaking the societal norms, those type of youth attempt to create social boundaries between themselves and other rejected social groups.

## Conclusion

In many aspects, the slang expressions analyzed so far have become a part of everyday practice in the Egyptian society. Young people fabricate words and expressions depending on their social and cultural needs. The excessive use of slang reflects their need to construct intimate groups isolated from other oppressing social groups. They seek setting boundaries with other subgroups to mark their difference. When they use these extravagant formations, they are intentionally breaching the normal societal use of language to express their ideological beliefs; they want to mark their identity in a society, whom they claim, ignores their existence. Egyptian society mostly meets the youth desire with rejection. The unacceptability of the slang by the other social groups makes the young people more decisive to use such abnormal language usages even more.

Egyptian youth seek to pursue self-identity to separate themselves and set boundaries with other subgroups. Although previous studies suggest difference in language use between different genders this study reveals the exchange of vulgar words among females as well as males. Females do not speak differently any more. The reason to such unusual verbal behavior is ascribed to the female's need to show equality in a society whom they regard as a masculine society. According to the community of youth, such unusual use of vocabulary is a way to strengthen bonds with other masculine subgroups and mark their co-existence with them. It can be said that females refuse to mark their feminine identity, on the contrary, they tend to deviate from the stereotypical frame they have long been imprisoned in. thus it can be said that Egyptian slang is a product of the Egyptian culture. Young people are directly affected by the socio-economic factors which are in turn reflected in their language use.

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