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*Research Article*

# Social Acceptance and Gender Differences in the Use of Dysphemism among the Urban Undergraduates in Bangladesh

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## Abstract
Dysphemism refers to the deliberate use of offensive language in communication. Prior research highlighted the factors around dysphemism, especially among young people in diverse cultural settings. However, there is a limited exploration of dysphemism usage in Bangladesh, particularly among university students. This study addresses this gap by analyzing the types and frequency of dysphemism usage among urban university students in Bangladesh, along with its social and gendered dimensions. A stratified sampling approach was utilized, and the data were collected via a Likert-scale survey from 100 male and female students from both public and private universities. The result indicates that dysphemistic epithets are the most common type of dysphemism among the population, and significant gender differences in the usage of dysphemistic language, as male students were using and getting exposed to this more than their female counterparts. Recommendations for future research are to use a more statistically robust sample size and to explore factors influencing the usage of dysphemism and its impact on communication

## Keywords
dysphemism, offensive language, gender dynamic in language, language and social acceptance, peer perception, sociolinguistics

## Introduction
A dysphemism is a term or expression that carries negative or offensive connotations, either toward the subject being described or the audience receiving it. Unlike neutral or euphemistic alternatives, dysphemisms are often used to express emotions such as fear, disgust, hatred, contempt, or even humor (Allan & Burridge, 2001; Literary Devices, 2014; Allan, 1992; Allan, 1991; Oxford English Dictionary, 1972). The word “dysphemism” is etymologically rooted in the Greek words “dys” (non) and “pheme”

(speech). It is usually deliberate and blatant choice of offensive language during verbal or non-verbal interaction.

Existing literature explores the linguistic, cognitive, and sociolinguistic dimensions of dysphemism, emphasizing its expressive creativity, psychological underpinnings, and role in discourse. Casas Gómez (2012) and Rabiyeva (2022) highlight the conceptual overlap between euphemism and dysphemism, demonstrating how they arise from similar cognitive mechanisms but serve opposing communicative functions. Pfaff, Gibbs, and Johnson (1997) investigate metaphorical cognition, showing how conceptual alignment aids in processing dysphemistic and euphemistic expressions, a framework further applied by Kafi and Degaf (2021) in analyzing rhetorical strategies in political discourse.

Recent studies extend these findings by examining dysphemism's social and educational implications. Darmawan and Muhaimi (2020) focus on dysphemistic lexical items in hate speech, stressing the need for political correctness education to mitigate harmful language use among students. Mulya et al. (2021) investigate dysphemism in Indonesian high school students, revealing its prevalence in informal peer communication focusing on the types of dysphemism; such as, Synecdoche ( used to describe something as a whole such as referring to someone a mouth), dysphemistic epithets (name calling, majorly related to animals), euphemistic dysphemism (using soft expression to minimize the offensiveness such as using the word "freaking" instead of "fucking"), dysphemistic euphemism (friendly mockery), "-ist" dysphemism (degrading a particular ethnicity such as racial slurs), homosexual dysphemism (using offensive connotation related to homosexuality), name dysphemism (intentionally calling someone's name without proper title to show disrespect), non-verbal dysphemism (offending someone with gestures, showing middle finger for instance) and cross-cultural dysphemism (using different terms of slang based on particular culture to other cultures (Mulya et al., 2021). Prokhorova et al. (2019) analyze factors shaping dysphemistic effects, demonstrating how cultural and psychological influences shape its interpretation.

Broader sociolinguistic research underscores dysphemism's role in shaping identity and discourse. Coates (2015) explores gender-based differences in euphemistic and dysphemistic choices, while Gray (1992) traces historical shifts in their usage to reflect evolving cultural sensitivities. Auzar and Faizah (2018) examine dysphemism in academic contexts, revealing its strategic use by educators. Winter-Froemel (2017) further links dysphemism to lexical innovation, illustrating how borrowing influences its evolution. Together, these studies highlight the complex interplay of cognition, culture, and social norms in the use and perception of dysphemism across various communicative settings.

However, there is a limited exploration of the usage of dysphemistic language among undergraduate students. This study seeks to fill this gap by focusing specifically on university students in Dhaka and analyzing their use of dysphemism. By examining the gap, this study aims to depict the frequency of types of dysphemism used by the students and provide a comprehensive analysis of the social and gendered aspects of dysphemism usage among students in Dhaka.

Specifically, the research will investigate:

1. What is the nature of dysphemism commonly used by university students in urban Bangladesh?
2. How does the use of dysphemism differ between male and female students in urban Bangladesh?
3. How acceptable is the usage of dysphemism among the Bangladeshi student community?

This study draws upon two primary theoretical frameworks to analyze the use of dysphemisms in conversations among university students in Dhaka City: Tannen's (1990) Genderlect Theory and Allan and Burridge's (2006) Typology of Dysphemism. Together, these frameworks offer a sociolinguistic perspective on how gender influences dysphemistic language use and provide a structured approach to categorizing different types of dysphemistic expressions.

Deborah Tannen's Theory (1990) emphasizes that men and women often exhibit distinct conversational styles, influenced by social and cultural expectations surrounding gender roles. According to Tannen, male speech patterns typically emphasize independence, status, and competition, while female speech patterns prioritize connection, cooperation, and relationship building. These differences in communicative styles can significantly influence the ways in which men and women use dysphemisms. This theory is particularly relevant in the context of university students in Dhaka, as gendered norms often shape how young men and women communicate in social settings. Analyzing dysphemism through this lens allows for a deeper understanding of whether male and female students differ in their use of offensive language, and how these differences align with broader gender-based patterns in communication.

In addition to Tannen's gendered perspective, this study employs Allan and Burridge's (2006) typology of dysphemism to categorize the forms of offensive language used by university students. Allan and Burridge define dysphemism as the substitution of a derogatory or taboo expression in place of a neutral or polite term, often intended to offend, insult, or shock. They identify nine types of dysphemisms, which serve as a framework for analyzing the specific nature of offensive language. The typology of dysphemism can be analyzed by examining the negative implications and intentions behind the selected words, which typically include categories such as insulting epithets, taboo expressions, comparisons to animals, euphemistic dysphemisms, and negative metaphors. In essence, it involves using a harsh, derogatory, or offensive term instead of a neutral one to express a negative view of the subject.

Combining Tannen's (1990) Gendered Communication Theory with Allan and Burridge's (2006) typology allows this study to move beyond merely identifying types of dysphemism and explore how gendered communicative norms shape students' choices of offensive language. This dual-theoretical approach provides both a descriptive and interpretative lens, enabling the study to uncover not only what kinds of dysphemism are most commonly used, but also how gender dynamics influence their employment within student conversations in Dhaka City.

## Method

### Research Design

A quantitative method was utilized in this study. A Likert-scale survey (Appendix) was used for the data collection process, which was aided by Google Form. Bangladeshi students who were enrolled in a bachelor's degree program in universities situated in Dhaka were the target population for this study. Additionally, individual students were the units of analysis. According to Lynn (2019), stratified sampling can accurately represent sub-groups within a population, which can lead to improved estimates of means or proportions to provide reliable and valid results in quantitative studies. Consequently, to ensure accurate representation of male and female students as well as students from both public and private universities, a stratified approach was utilized during the data collection process.

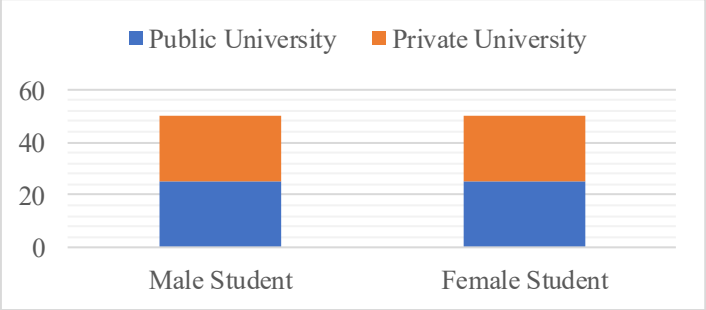


*Figure 1. University type and gender of the respondents (stratified)*

To reduce the chances of bias, the sampling frame comprised 100 undergraduate students, equally divided between 50 students from public universities and 50 students from private universities, where both groups had 25 males and 25 females (Figure 1). The students from public universities were from the University of Dhaka, Bangladesh University of Professionals, Mugda Medical College, Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology, whereas the students from private universities were from American International University-Bangladesh, East West University, BRAC University, Daffodil International University, and Notre Dame University. Moreover, the sample was mostly dominated by Arts and Social Science students (53%), followed by 32% in Business Studies and 15% in Science & Technology (Figure 2). However, 36% of them were freshmen, 35% were in their second year, 10% and 19% were in their third year and final year of pursuing a bachelor's degree program, respectively (Figure 3). Overall, the sample represents a diverse range of students to ensure a balanced perspective.

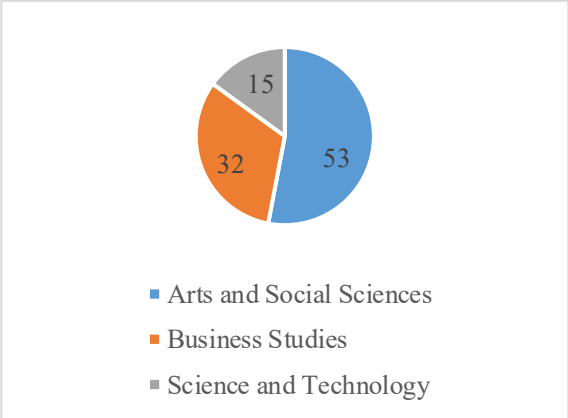


*Figure 2. Field of study of the respondents*

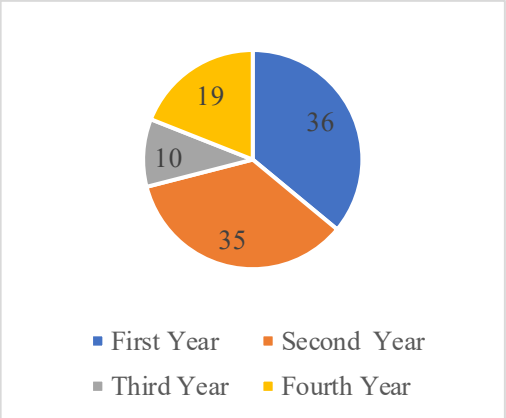


*Figure 3. Current study level of the respondents*

## Data Collection

The questionnaire was initially tested with a convenience sample of three female and two male students from a private university in Dhaka, and no modifications were deemed necessary based on their responses. The main data was collected between 1 June and 5 October 2024. Participants were informed about the voluntary nature of their involvement, and their consent was obtained before taking their input. Additionally, no personal identifiers were collected to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. Questions were asked to measure the frequency of the 9 dysphemism types as per Allan and Burridge (2001). Additionally, two questions were asked to determine their perception of the acceptability of dysphemistic language in the student community. The scale points in all the questions were labeled as "very often", "often", "sometimes", "rarely", and "never". However, to determine demographic variables, questions about the respondent's gender, university type, current study level, and study field were asked.

## Data Analysis

The participant data collected through Google Forms was first transferred to Microsoft Excel, where the responses to the Likert Scale were assigned numerical codes: "Strongly Disagree" as 1, "Disagree" as 2, "Neutral" as 3, "Agree" as 4, and "Strongly Agree" as 5. The data were then imported into SPSS version 27.0 for statistical analysis. Descriptive statistics were used, with a focus on calculating the frequency of the responses. This approach provided a clear understanding of the most frequently occurring unethical behaviors among the students.

# Results

## Types of Dysphemism Usage

Table 1. shows the percentage of different types of dysphemism usage. To find the frequency of synecdoche, students were asked how often they hear or use expressions where a part of the body or an

object represents a person as a whole, like calling someone "a mouth" for talking too much. Males reported that they come across dysphemism sometimes (22%) and never (28%), most frequently. Females displayed a similar pattern, with the highest frequency in sometimes (22%) and never (34%).

To examine the usage of dysphemistic epithets, students were asked how often they hear or use names that compare people to animals, such as "pig" or "donkey," intended as insults. The usage of dysphemistic epithets was markedly higher among males, with 44% stating they use them very often, while 34% of females indicated this frequency. Additionally, males reported 42% using them often, compared to 58% of females, which indicates a preference for these expressions among female respondents.

For measuring the use of euphemistic dysphemism, students were asked how frequently they hear or use alternatives like “freaking” or “darn” instead of more explicitly harsh words. The majority of the males reported they utilize it rarely (22%) and never (28%), while female respondents showed a stronger inclination towards this form, with 36% indicating they use it rarely and 24% stating they never use it.

For the purpose of understanding how often dysphemistic euphemism occurs, students were asked how often they hear or use playful teasing terms, such as calling a friend "you idiot" in a friendly way. The results showed that both genders displayed similar patterns, with rare usage (22% males, 24% females) and never using it (22% males, 8% females) being the most common responses.

Males frequently indicated using or hearing "-ist” dysphemism very often (30%) and often (30%), while the majority of females indicated they use it rarely (32%) or never (42%). This was determined by questioning them on how often they encounter offensive words targeting specific ethnicities or races, including racial slurs.

Males reported higher usage of homosexual dysphemism, with 34% indicating they use it often, while a significant number of females (54%) stated they never use this type of dysphemism when they were asked how often they hear or use offensive language related to someone’s sexual orientation.

To determine the frequency of name dysphemism, students were asked how often they hear or use a person’s name without respectful titles (such as Mr. or Ms.) to express disrespect. Responses were relatively balanced in this case, with 30% of males using it often compared to 18% of females indicating the same. However, a notable 24% of females reported that they never use the term dysphemism.

When asked about non-verbal dysphemism, males reported higher usage frequencies, with 28% indicating that they use or hear it sometimes. In contrast, 56% of females reported that they never face non-verbal dysphemism. Figure 4 represents the frequency of types of dysphemism in visual cues, while Figure 5 shows the comparison between genders for the ‘very often’ usage of each type of dysphemism.

They were also asked how often they hear or use offensive slang from one culture to insult individuals from another culture, to identify the frequency of cross-cultural dysphemism. Males reported 30% using it very often, whereas only 14% of females indicated the same.

The survey also explored how often respondents felt negatively perceived by their peers for using dysphemistic language. Among males, 32% reported they are never perceived negatively, while 12% stated they feel this way very often. Conversely, female respondents indicated a higher frequency of negative perception, with only 8% stating they never experienced negative perceptions and 22% feeling negatively perceived very often (Figure 6).

Additionally, when asked about their perceptions of peers using dysphemistic language, a significant 52% of males indicated they never negatively perceive their peers, compared to 18% of females.

Meanwhile, 32% of female respondents reported they sometimes negatively perceive their peers, while only 14% of males felt the same (Figure 7).

*Table 1. Frequency (percent) of the usage of different types of dysphemism among male and female students*

| Gender | Frequency | Different Types of Dysphemism Usage (Percent) | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Synecdoche | Dysphemistic Epithets | Euphemistic Dysphemism | Dysphemistic Euphemism | " -ist" Dysphemism | Homosexual Dysphemism | Name Dysphemism | Non-verbal | Cross-cultural |
| Male | Very often | 14.0 | 44.0 | 10.0 | 12.0 | 30.0 | 16.0 | 16.0 | 10.0 | 30.0 |
| | Often | 14.0 | 42.0 | 20.0 | 26.0 | 30.0 | 34.0 | 30.0 | 12.0 | 24.0 |
| | Sometimes | 22.0 | 14.0 | 20.0 | 18.0 | 28.0 | 18.0 | 20.0 | 28.0 | 20.0 |
| | Rarely | 22.0 | 00.0 | 22.0 | 22.0 | 12.0 | 14.0 | 8.0 | 26.0 | 8.0 |
| | Never | 28.0 | 00.0 | 28.0 | 22.0 | 00.0 | 18.0 | 26.0 | 24.0 | 18.0 |
| Female | Very often | 10.0 | 34.0 | 00.0 | 12.0 | 00.0 | 00.0 | 14.0 | 00.0 | 14.0 |
| | Often | 8.0 | 58.0 | 20.0 | 20.0 | 12.0 | 8.0 | 18.0 | 00.0 | 12.0 |
| | Sometimes | 22.0 | 8.0 | 20.0 | 36.0 | 14.0 | 18.0 | 20.0 | 10.0 | 24.0 |
| | Rarely | 26.0 | 00.0 | 36.0 | 24.0 | 32.0 | 20.0 | 24.0 | 34.0 | 28.0 |
| | Never | 34.0 | 00.0 | 24.0 | 8.0 | 42.0 | 54.0 | 24.0 | 56.0 | 22.0 |

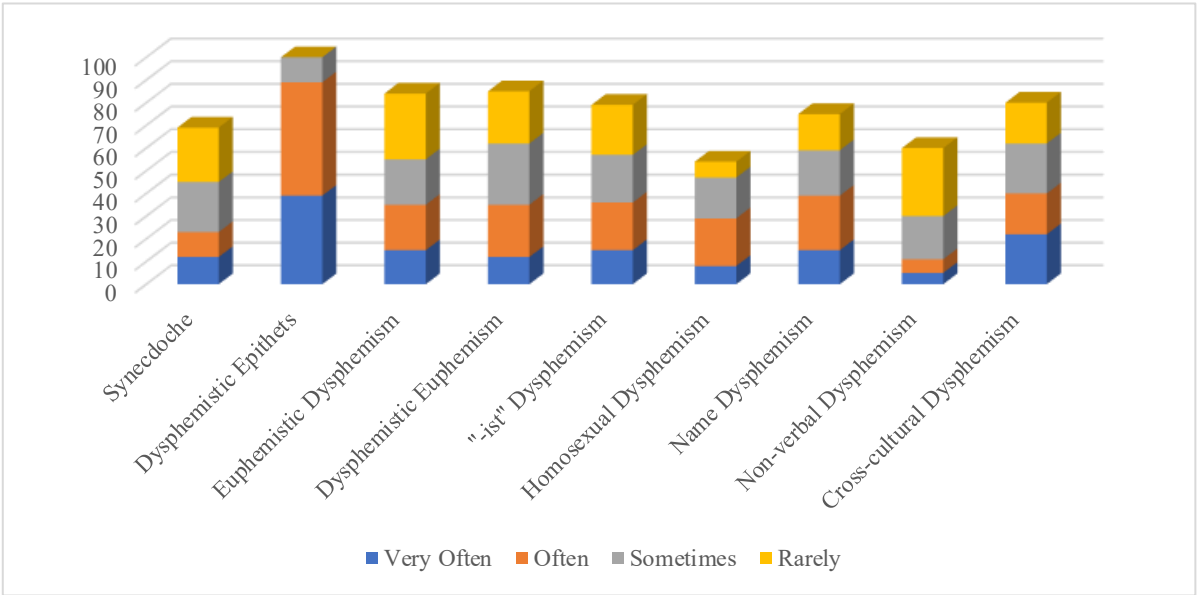


*Figure 4. Most common type of dysphemism among Bangladeshi undergraduates based on their occurrences*

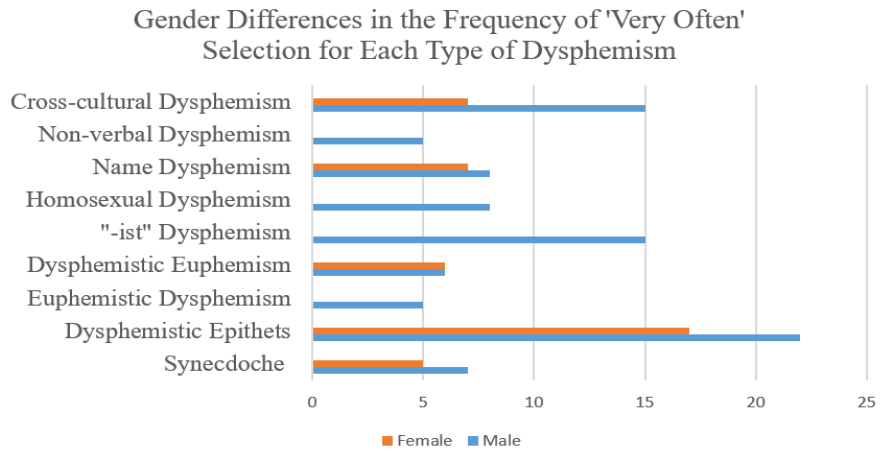


*Figure 5. Gender differences in the frequency of 'very often' selection for each type of dysphemism*

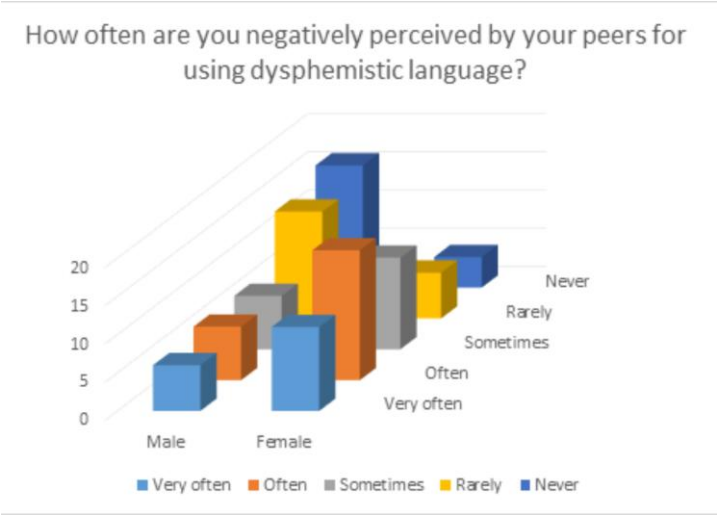


*Figure 6. Negative perception by others when using dysphemism*

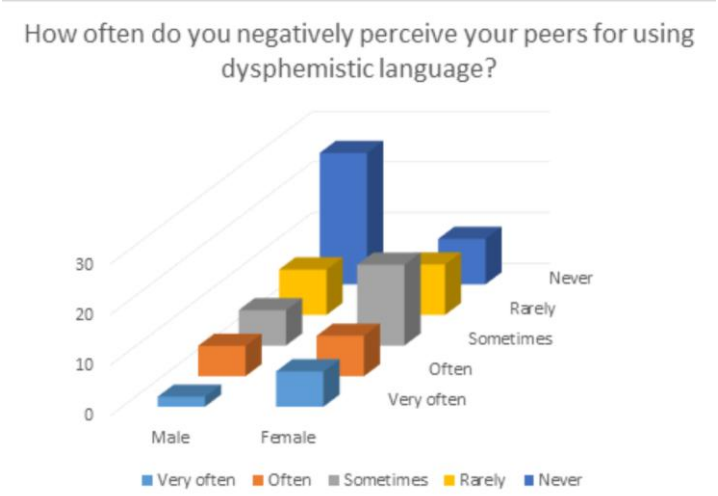


*Figure 7. Negative perception when others use dysphemism*

## Discussion

The findings of this study reveal significant gender differences in the use of dysphemistic language among university students in Dhaka City, with male students exhibiting a higher frequency of dysphemism usage than their female counterparts. These results align with Deborah Tannen's (1990) Genderlect Theory, which posits that men and women exhibit distinct conversational styles due to socially constructed gender roles. Tannen's framework suggests that male speech patterns are often oriented towards asserting independence, status, and competition, which can be seen in their more frequent use of dysphemistic language. Male students in this study were particularly inclined to use dysphemistic epithets and "-ist" dysphemisms, forms of offensive language often linked to expressions of masculinity, aggression, and a desire for social bonding or dominance. This is consistent with the findings of Salman and Isa (2022), who argued that the use of such language serves to reinforce social identity and masculinity among men, with dysphemistic terms playing a role in peer bonding or asserting power within social groups.

In contrast, female students in this study demonstrated a notably lower use of dysphemisms, a pattern that can be understood through the lens of Tannen's (1990) theory, as well as Allan and Burridge's (2006) Typology of Dysphemism. Tannen suggests that women's communication style prioritizes connection, cooperation, and relationship-building, which likely influences their aversion to using offensive language, as such expressions are often viewed as disruptive to social harmony. The societal and cultural

context of Bangladesh further reinforces these gendered communication patterns. In this context, women are generally expected to adhere to more conservative, "standard" language norms, avoiding language that could be considered offensive or inappropriate in social settings. This aligns with the findings of Zaiyadi and Anwar (2019), who noted that women are more likely to avoid using offensive language due to its perceived social inappropriateness. Additionally, cultural and religious norms in Bangladesh, where offensive language is often deemed undesirable, particularly for women, further contribute to this pattern. It is plausible that female students internalize these societal expectations more rigorously, which influences both their language choices and their perceptions of what constitutes acceptable speech.

Notwithstanding the clear gender differences, certain patterns emerge that suggest commonalities in dysphemism use between male and female students. The most frequent form of dysphemism identified in both genders was the use of dysphemistic epithets. This suggests the existence of a shared linguistic culture among university students, where such forms of language are normalized to some extent across gender lines. This observation supports Salman and Isa's (2022) assertion that dysphemisms can function to build peer relationships and solidify group identity, regardless of gender. Despite their differences in frequency of usage, both male and female students appear to employ dysphemistic epithets as a means of navigating social interactions and negotiating their positions within the student community.

Furthermore, Allan and Burridge's (2006) typology of dysphemism proves useful in understanding the specific types of offensive language used by students in this study. Dysphemisms, as defined by Allan and Burridge, involve the substitution of a derogatory or taboo term in place of a neutral or polite expression, often with the intention to insult, offend, or shock. The study's findings corroborate this typology, as dysphemistic epithets, taboo expressions, and comparisons to animals were identified as the most frequently used forms of dysphemism, particularly among male students. These types of language serve as powerful tools for expressing negative attitudes and reinforcing social hierarchies, as indicated in the typology. The use of these dysphemisms can thus be seen as a reflection of the social dynamics within university student groups, where language is not merely a tool for communication but also a mechanism for signaling social affiliation, identity, and power.

In conclusion, this study highlights the complex ways in which gender influences the use of dysphemisms in student conversations in Dhaka City. The results suggest that while dysphemism use is somewhat normalized within the student community, its acceptability and frequency of use are significantly influenced by gender. Male students are more likely to use dysphemistic language, which aligns with gendered communication patterns outlined by Tannen (1990) and is indicative of a desire to assert social dominance or bond with peers. On the other hand, female students appear to avoid such language, likely due to cultural and societal pressures to conform to more "standard" language norms. The findings also support the view that dysphemisms are not universally perceived as negative, as both male and female students use them as a means of navigating their social environments and solidifying group identity. The combination of Tannen's (1990) Genderlect Theory and Allan and Burridge's (2006) typology offer a comprehensive framework for understanding how gendered communication styles and specific types of offensive language interact to shape the use of dysphemisms among university students. This dual-theoretical approach provides valuable insights into the role of language in constructing social identities and navigating power dynamics within the context of higher education in Dhaka City.

**Limitations**

This study's sample size was not determined through statistical methods, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. A properly calculated sample size, based on statistical techniques, would have ensured a more representative sample of the broader population (Mohapatra & Chamola, 2020). Additionally, one of the key limitations of the research approach is the potential for unequal design weights and reduced precision, which may arise when strata sizes do not align with the sampling interval. Moreover, deep stratification across multiple variables can increase weight variation, making it more difficult to achieve accurate results (Lynn, 2019). Another significant limitation is the reliance on self-

reported data, which can introduce biases such as social desirability bias or inaccurate reporting, potentially affecting the validity of the responses. These factors must be considered when interpreting the findings and their implications for the broader population.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this study sheds light on the nature and social dimensions of dysphemism usage among urban university students in Bangladesh, with a particular focus on gender differences. The findings reveal that dysphemistic epithets are the most commonly used form of offensive language among the students, with male students exhibiting a significantly higher frequency of usage compared to their female counterparts. Additionally, the study highlights that gender dynamics play a crucial role in shaping the choice and frequency of dysphemisms, with males generally using more offensive language than females. The research also underscores the need for further exploration into the factors influencing dysphemism use and its impact on communication within student communities. By expanding the sample size and incorporating more in-depth qualitative analysis, future studies can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the sociolinguistic implications of dysphemism.

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## Appendix

Dear Participant,

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this survey, which aims to explore the use of dysphemism among university students in Bangladesh. Dysphemism refers to a word or expression that is deliberately used to convey a negative connotation or to insult. Understanding how and why dysphemism is used can provide valuable insights into language use, social dynamics, and cultural contexts.

Your participation in this survey is crucial to achieving the objectives of this research. The survey will take approximately 10 minutes to complete and consists of questions regarding your experiences and perceptions related to dysphemism.

Your responses will remain confidential and will be used solely for academic purposes. Participation in this study is voluntary, and you can withdraw at any time without any consequences.

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**Participant Information**

**Which year of university are you currently studying in?**

- First year
- Second year
- Third year
- Fourth year

**Gender**

- Male
- Female
- Other
- Prefer not to say

**University type**

- Public
- Private

**Field of study**

- Science & Technology
- Business Studies
- Arts and Social Science

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**Survey Questions**

**Synecdoche**
Sometimes people use a part of the body or an object to refer to someone as a whole, like calling someone "a mouth" to mean they talk too much. How often do you hear or use this kind of expression?

- Very often
- Often
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never

**Dysphemistic Epithets**
Have you ever heard people call others names like “pig” or “donkey” to insult them by comparing them to animals? How often do you use or hear this type of name-calling?

- Very often
- Often
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never

**Euphemistic Dysphemism**
People sometimes use words like “freaking” or “darn” instead of harsher words to make their insults sound less offensive. How often do you use or hear these softer versions of harsh words?

- Very often
- Often
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never

**Dysphemistic Euphemism**
Some people insult others in a way that’s meant to be teasing or joking, like calling a friend “you idiot” in a playful way. How often do you hear or use friendly mockery like this?

- Very often
- Often
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never

**“-ist” Dysphemism**
Have you ever heard people use offensive words that target a specific ethnicity or race (like racial slurs)? How often do you hear or use these words?

- Very often
- Often
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never

**Homosexual Dysphemism**
Some people use offensive words or slurs to refer to someone’s sexual orientation, like using negative words related to homosexuality. How often do you hear or use this type of language?

- Very often
- Often
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never

**Name Dysphemism**
Have you ever heard someone call another person by their name without adding a respectful title (like Mr., Ms., etc.) to show disrespect? How often do you use or hear this type of name-calling?

- Very often
- Often
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never

**Non-Verbal Dysphemism**
Some people use hand gestures or body language to insult others, like showing the middle finger. How often do you use or see gestures that are meant to offend?

- Very often

- Often
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never

**Cross-Cultural Dysphemism**
Have you ever heard someone use slang or offensive words from one culture to insult people from another culture? How often do you hear or use this kind of slang?

- Very often
- Often
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never

**How often do you get negatively perceived by your peers for using dysphemistic language?**

- Very often
- Often
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never

**How often do you negatively perceive your peers for using dysphemistic language?**

- Very often
- Often
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never

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**Consent**

By signing below, you acknowledge that you have read and understood the purpose of this study and voluntarily agree to participate. You understand that your participation is confidential and that you may withdraw at any time without penalty.

**Participant Name:** _____
**Signature:** _____
**Date:** _____