



ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN FRAMING DRUG ADDICTS IDENTITY IN KHYBER PAKHTUNKHWA, PAKISTAN

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Abstract

This study explores how language shapes the identities of drug using individuals in Peshawar, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, with particular attention to its role in negotiating stigma, belonging, and social positioning. Drawing on Critical Discourse Analysis, Social Identity Theory, and Politeness Theory, the study examines how code switching and language mixing in a multilingual context influence participants' self-presentation and identity construction. Data were collected through semi structured interviews with twelve participants representing four substance user groups. The interviews were conducted in Pashto, Urdu, Hindko, and English, reflecting the participants' multilingual linguistic practices. Using Dey's (1993) six-stage framework for qualitative data analysis, the findings reveal that language functions both as a shield and a bridge. Euphemisms, humour, and digital codes enable participants to manage stigma and protect their self-image, while shared slang, nicknames, and multilingual switching contribute to group solidarity and a sense of belonging. The study highlights the central role of linguistic choices in constructing and negotiating fluid identities across overlapping cultural, clinical, and digital contexts. The findings contribute to sociolinguistic research on language, identity, and stigma and offer practical implications for clinicians, counsellors, and policymakers seeking to develop stigma sensitive and linguistically informed interventions

Keywords: *Discourse Analysis, Drug Use, Identity Construction, Multilingualism, Pashto, Peshawar, Stigma Negotiation.*

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background of the study

With the dawn of the 21st century, the global and national landscape of drug abuse has become increasingly concerning. In Pakistan's complex and diverse social fabric, the growing problem of drug addiction poses a serious threat to individuals, families, and communities. Pakistan's geographical location, particularly its proximity to major drug-producing regions, contributes to the availability and trafficking of illicit substances. At the same time, socioeconomic challenges, including unemployment, limited educational opportunities, and the lack of adequate support systems, can create conditions in which substance use may become more prevalent. According to reports by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), drug use remains a significant public health and social concern in Pakistan. Cannabis continues to be one of the most commonly used substances, while the increasing use of injectable drugs raises serious concerns about associated health risks, including HIV transmission. Although drug use is a nationwide concern, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, given its geographical proximity to Afghanistan and its complex sociopolitical context, has experienced particularly significant challenges related to substance use. Commonly used substances include cannabis (charas/hashish), heroin, opium, crystal methamphetamine (ice), cocaine, ecstasy (MDMA), and the misuse of prescription medications such as tramadol and diazepam. The continued presence of these substances has contributed to the emergence of drug-related social practices and subcultures that can influence how users perceive themselves, interact with others, and negotiate their social identities.

In this context, language becomes particularly important because drug use is not merely a medical or social phenomenon but is also experienced, represented, and negotiated through communication. Language and culture are deeply interconnected, continuously shaping and influencing one another in different social contexts (Shah & Bashir, 2025; Shah & Furqan, Zaman, 2019). They play a central role in how individuals understand themselves, interpret their experiences, and position themselves within society (Shah, Pillai & Sinayah, 2020; Shah, Pillai & Sinayah, 2019; Shah, Riaz & Malik, 2019). For individuals who use drugs, linguistic practices may reflect shared experiences, group membership, social relationships, stigma, resistance, and belonging. Terms, labels, slang, euphemisms, code switching, and other forms of linguistic expression can therefore become important resources through which drug using individuals construct and negotiate their identities. Examining the relationship between language, culture, and substance use can consequently provide deeper insight into how individuals manage social stigma, establish group solidarity, and present themselves within their cultural and social environment.

1.2. Problem Statement

Although drug use in Pakistan, particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, has received considerable attention as a social and public health concern, less attention has been given to how drug using individuals use language to construct, negotiate, and manage their identities within contexts of stigma and social pressure. Language is not merely a means of communication; it also reflects individual experiences, social relationships, cultural values, and identity. This dimension becomes particularly significant in the social context of Peshawar, where substance use may be associated with shame, dishonor, social exclusion, and family stigma. Therefore, the drug using individuals may adopt particular linguistic strategies to conceal their experiences, protect their self image, negotiate social relationships, and establish a sense of belonging with others who share similar experiences. Euphemisms, slang, humor, nicknames, code switching, and other forms of linguistic expression may serve as important resources for managing the social consequences of addiction. However, the ways in which these linguistic practices contribute to identity construction and the negotiation of stigma among drug using individuals in Peshawar remain relatively underexplored. Therefore, this study investigates how drug using individuals employ multilingual and other linguistic practices to construct and negotiate their identities, manage stigma, and establish belonging within their cultural, social, and interpersonal context.

1.3. Research Objectives

- To identify linguistic markers in the speech of drug addicts in Peshawar that reflects their identity.
- Examine the strategic use of language that minimizes the perceived impact of their addiction.
- To explore the contributions of local languages in reinforcing or challenging stigmas related to drug addiction.

1.4. Research Questions

- What do linguistic markers in the speech of drug addicts reveal about their identities?
- How do cultural values and societal expectations influence language of the drug addicts?
- How do drug addicts in Peshawar express social rejection or acceptance of their addiction through their language?

1.5. Significance of study

The study contributes to sociolinguistic literature, particularly research on identity construction, identity negotiation, stigma, and multilingual discourse. It shows how

language can function both as a defense mechanism and a source of empowerment through an examination of the linguistic practices of drug using individuals in Peshawar. The findings highlight the importance of language in managing belonging, protecting face, and resisting social exclusion. Participants' use of coded language, euphemisms, humor, and shifts between languages illustrates how linguistic resources enable them to navigate stigma and maintain their social identities. The study also extends existing literature by demonstrating how digital discourse contributes to identity performance and negotiation. Through the use of WhatsApp conversations, Instagram captions, hashtags, and emojis, participants developed forms of coded communication that facilitated interaction with peers, strengthened group solidarity, and helped them manage the risk of social judgment and exclusion.

Furthermore, the integration of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Social Identity Theory (SIT), and Politeness Theory provides a comprehensive analytical framework for examining the intersection of language, culture, identity, and stigma. Focusing on drug using individuals in the multilingual and culturally complex context of Peshawar, the study offers insights that may be valuable to sociolinguists, researchers, clinicians, counselors, and other practitioners working on marginalized groups. The study shows that language is not merely a means of communication but a socially available resource through which marginalized individuals negotiate identity, dignity, belonging, and resistance within challenging sociocultural environments.

2. Literature Review

In sociolinguistics, the role of language in constructing identities among drug using individuals is an important area of inquiry, particularly because linguistic practices can reinforce or challenge processes of stigmatization and marginalization. However, the specific role of language in constructing and negotiating the identities of drug using individuals remains comparatively underexplored. Much of the existing scholarship on drug addiction adopts biomedical, psychological, criminological, or rehabilitation focused perspectives. These approaches typically examine the causes, symptoms, treatment, and criminal consequences of addiction, often conceptualizing it primarily as a pathology or behavioral disorder. Consequently, a significant gap remains in understanding how language itself functions as a resource for constructing, negotiating, and representing the identities of drug using individuals. Therefore, the review examines existing literature on the role of language in shaping drug related identities, with emphasis on Peshawar, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), a region characterized by considerable sociocultural complexity and linguistic diversity. Pashto, Urdu, and Hindko are among the commonly spoken languages in the region, with Pashto used as the dominant language in Peshawar and playing an important role in social interaction, cultural expression, and identity formation (Shah & Bashir, 2025; Shah & Furqan, Zaman, 2019). Language shapes perceptions, values, and

power structures and reflects them by constructing the different identities. The basis of identity is the recognition of commonalities with other individuals, groups, or ideals, including ethnic, linguistic, religious, historical, territorial, cultural, and political characteristics. According to Bucholtz and Hall (2005), identity is a continuous and dynamic process that is constructed and negotiated through social interaction and shaped by historical, social, and cultural developments. It may transform in response to broader processes such as globalization, modernity, and technological innovation. In the context of addiction, linguistic choices can either promote understanding and support recovery or reinforce stigma and social marginalization. Against this background, this chapter examines major theories and recent studies at the intersection of language, identity, and addiction. The analysis is grounded in four principal theoretical frameworks: Critical Discourse Analysis, Politeness and Face Theory, Linguistic Relativity, and Register Theory.

A number of scholars have examined the intimate, mutually productive relationship between language and identities (Shah & Bashir, 2025; Shah, Pillai & Sinayah, 2020; Shah, Pillai & Sinayah, 2019; Shah & Furqan, Zaman, 2019). Language is not only used in creation of identities but it is also used to know about the identities of others. It is a socially constructed phenomenon which spawns in a culture as a result of interaction and discourse. The linguistic labels associated with drug addiction such as “nashai” (addict) in Pashto is laden with moral and cultural meanings that reinforce stereotypes. Drug Addiction that is presented in moralistic and criminal terms becomes a crucial area where identity is contested. Therefore, the language used in everyday communication, the media, and healthcare can have a significant impact on an addict's social standing and recovery path (Snowden, 2020). In study on stigmatization in South Asia, Shah et al. (2021) explores the labels that deprive people of other facets of their identities in addition to defining them by their addiction.

The use of substances, especially hashish, a drug derived from cannabis, is crucial to the creation and negotiation of both individual and collective identities. This review critically analyzes the existing literature on hashish use and its implications for identity construction, with an emphasis on the ways that language, discourse, and socio cultural context contribute to shaping the identities of users. The stigmatization influences how users perceive themselves and how they are treated by society. Users can either internalize these labels or reject them by creating alternative identities often based on spiritualism, rebellion or artistic expression. (Khan & Raza, 2021).

Drinking habits, the environments in which they take place, and the language used to characterize them contribute to the formation of personal and group identities. In the conservative setting of Peshawar, the language used to characterize alcohol users can be derogatory and laced with moral or religious condemnation. Uscola (2023) discusses

stigma, belonging and shame as identity resources and the study further demonstrates that alcohol-related identities are socially constructed through interactions in which individuals express feelings of shame and pride while seeking group belonging.

Crystal methamphetamine, locally known as "Ice," has become a common and synthetic drug in Pakistani cities, especially Peshawar, where its use by young people and college/university students has raised serious political, public, and media concerns. According to report of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa police and media outlets indicate increasing use of meth among university students, female users, and even school-aged individuals (Dawn, 2019; Tribune, 2020).

In the particular setting of heroin addicts, whose constant intake of heroin construct a different social identity from the mainstream social expectations. Highly addictive heroin users take heroin for abandoning the harsh realities and different societal pressures that is otherwise stressful to withstand or find solace and resultantly leads to delusion. It provides heroin users with bizarre experiential space where they cherish their emotional relief and detachment emerge from all kind of distressing realities, reshaping self-impression and social belonging.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study draws on four complementary theoretical frameworks: Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Politeness and Face Theory, Linguistic Relativity, and Register Theory. Together, these perspectives provide a multidimensional understanding of how language is used by drug-using individuals to construct, negotiate, and manage their identities within particular social and cultural contexts.

First, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) provides a framework for examining how social norms, power relations, cultural values, and taboos shape the language used to represent drug use and drug-using individuals. From this perspective, language is closely connected to broader structures of power and social control and can contribute either to the reproduction or resistance of stigma and marginalization. Drug-using individuals may internalize dominant cultural beliefs about addiction, while others may resist these representations through alternative forms of self-expression and identity construction. CDA is also useful for examining the use of metaphors, labels, euphemisms, and other discursive strategies through which drug use and drug-related experiences are represented and negotiated.

Second, Politeness and Face Theory focuses on how individuals use language to maintain their desired self-image, social relationships, and social identities. This framework is particularly relevant in the context of drug use, where individuals may face social judgment, stigma, shame, and exclusion. It helps explain how drug-using individuals manage potentially sensitive interactions, protect their social and personal identities, and minimize or avoid face-threatening acts. The use of indirect expressions,

euphemisms, humor, and other politeness strategies may therefore enable individuals to discuss stigmatized experiences while protecting their dignity and maintaining interpersonal relationships.

Third, Linguistic Relativity, particularly the Sapir-Whorf tradition, provides a perspective for examining the relationship between language, thought, and perception. The theory suggests that linguistic categories and patterns can influence how individuals perceive and interpret their social and cultural worlds. In this study, Linguistic Relativity provides a basis for examining how drug-related vocabulary, expressions, metaphors, and culturally specific terms may shape participants' understandings of addiction, identity, stigma, and social relationships. Rather than assuming that drug-using individuals possess an inherently different language system, the framework helps investigate how their particular linguistic experiences and repertoires may reflect and influence their perceptions of addiction and their social environment.

Fourth, Register Theory examines how speakers adapt their language according to particular social situations, activities, relationships, and communicative purposes. In the context of drug use, individuals may develop and employ specialized vocabulary, slang, jargon, coded expressions, and other linguistic features associated with drug-related activities and peer groups. Such language can facilitate communication among group members, conceal sensitive meanings from outsiders, and establish a sense of in-group solidarity and belonging. Register Theory therefore helps explain how particular ways of speaking become associated with drug-related social practices and contribute to the construction and negotiation of group identity.

On the whole, these four frameworks provide a complementary analytical lens for understanding language, identity, and drug use. CDA addresses power, stigma, and dominant social discourses; Politeness and Face Theory explains identity management and the protection of social face; Linguistic Relativity examines the relationship between language, perception, and experience; and Register Theory focuses on context-specific language, jargon, and group belonging. Their integration enables the study to examine drug-related language not simply as a collection of specialized words, but as a social and identity-building resource through which individuals negotiate stigma, dignity, belonging, and social positioning

3.1. Conceptual Model

The proposed framework includes these four perspectives merging into a unique explanatory model of identity construction:

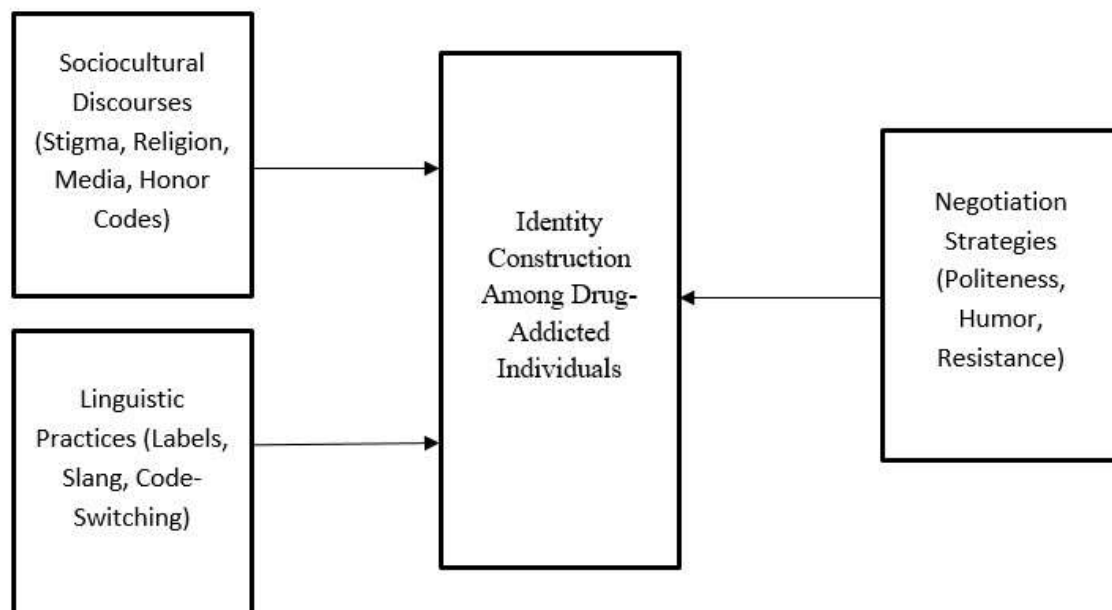


Figure 2.1 Proposed Framework for a Holistic Explanatory Model of Identity Construction

- ✓ CDA → Uncover the strategies of the dominant discourses that stigmatize addicts and sustain power relations.
- ✓ Linguistic Relativity → Explains the involvement of language choices that shape perception and worldview.
- ✓ Politeness & Face Theory → Reveals how addicts protect or manage identity threats through strategic discourse.
- ✓ Social Identity Theory → Highlights how belonging, judgement and exclusion shape identity boundaries.

4. Methodology

4.1. Research Design

The methodological choices of this study were guided by its primary aim of examining how drug using individuals construct, negotiate, conceal, and communicate their identities through language within the multilayered sociocultural context of Peshawar. The study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in an interpretivist paradigm and informed by ethnographic principles. This approach is appropriate because the study focuses on participants' subjective experiences, linguistic practices, and interpretations of identity, stigma, and belonging within their social and cultural contexts.

Although ethnographic research commonly involves prolonged engagement in natural settings and the use of multiple data sources (Shah & Bashir, 2025; Shah, Pillai & Sinayah, 2020; Shah, Pillai & Sinayah, 2019), the present study relies exclusively on in depth, semi-structured interviews. This methodological decision was informed by both

practical and ethical considerations. Direct observation or interviewing participants in public settings was neither feasible nor appropriate, particularly when participants might be intoxicated or psychologically unstable. Instead, interviews were conducted in psychiatric clinics and rehabilitation centers, where privacy and participant safety could be maintained and interviews could be scheduled only when participants were considered clinically stable. This setting enabled the researcher to obtain detailed personal narratives while maintaining appropriate ethical safeguards.

4.2. Research Setting

The study was conducted in Peshawar, the capital of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, which provides a particularly relevant sociolinguistic context for investigating the relationship between language, identity, and stigma. The city is characterized by considerable linguistic and cultural diversity, with Pashto, Urdu, Hindko, and other languages used in different social contexts. The sociocultural environment of Peshawar, including social norms, cultural expectations, and notions of family and social honour, provides an important context for understanding how drug use may be discussed, concealed, stigmatized, or negotiated through language.

Participants were recruited from psychiatric clinics and rehabilitation centers in Peshawar that provide services to individuals experiencing substance-use-related problems. These settings were selected following preliminary consideration of the practical and ethical challenges associated with interviewing drug using individuals in public environments or during periods of intoxication. The clinical and rehabilitation settings provided relatively safe and private environments in which participants could discuss their experiences and linguistic practices without unnecessary exposure or social judgment.

4.3. Research Paradigm

The study is situated within the interpretivist paradigm, with a constructivist orientation. Interpretivism assumes that social reality is understood through individuals' interpretations of their experiences and interactions. This perspective is particularly appropriate for the present study because identity is understood not as a fixed attribute but as something that is continuously constructed and negotiated through social interaction and language.

The constructivist orientation further recognizes that participants actively construct meanings around their experiences of drug use, stigma, belonging, and social identity. Accordingly, their narratives are treated as valuable sources of knowledge through which the researcher can examine how linguistic choices contribute to the construction and negotiation of identity.

4.4. Sampling Strategy and Participants

The study employed purposive sampling to recruit participants who could provide relevant information about the relationship between language, identity, and stigma. Participants were recruited through psychiatric clinics and rehabilitation centres in Peshawar with the assistance of relevant clinical and rehabilitation staff.

The inclusion criteria were:

- a) Participants were adults aged 20–50 years.
- b) Participants were identified users of one of four substances: hashish, alcohol, crystal methamphetamine (ice), or heroin.
- c) Participants were able to provide informed consent at the time of the interview.
- d) Participants were considered clinically stable by the relevant clinical or rehabilitation staff.

A total of 12 participants were selected, with three participants representing each substance-use category: hashish (n = 3), alcohol (n = 3), crystal methamphetamine/ice (n = 3), and heroin (n = 3). Participants represented diverse linguistic backgrounds, including Pashto, Urdu, and Hindko speakers. The sample was predominantly male because of the practical and sociocultural difficulty of recruiting female participants from the selected clinical and rehabilitation settings.

Importantly, participants were interviewed only when they were considered clinically stable and capable of providing informed consent. Individuals who were acutely intoxicated or experiencing significant psychological disturbance were not interviewed at that time; interviews were postponed until the relevant clinical staff considered them sufficiently stable to participate. This procedure was adopted both to protect participants and to enhance the quality and credibility of the data.

4.5. Data Collection

Data were collected through semi structured interviews. This method was selected because the study seeks to understand participants' personal experiences, linguistic choices, identity negotiations, and perceptions of stigma. Semi structured interviews provided sufficient consistency across participants while allowing them to elaborate on experiences that were personally and culturally significant (Shah & Bashir, 2025; Shah, Pillai & Sinayah, 2020; Shah, Pillai & Sinayah, 2019).

The interviews were conducted individually in private consultation rooms within psychiatric clinics and rehabilitation centres. Each interview lasted approximately 30–60 minutes and was conducted in the participant's preferred language, including Pashto, Urdu, or Hindko. Before each interview, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, their rights as participants, and the procedures for maintaining confidentiality. Written informed consent was obtained before data collection.

Interviews were conducted only when participants were clinically stable. If a participant was intoxicated or emotionally or psychologically distressed at the scheduled time, the interview was postponed and rescheduled. With participants' permission, interviews were audio-recorded to facilitate accurate transcription and analysis. Where participants declined audio recording, detailed field notes were taken. These procedures created a relatively safe and confidential environment in which participants could discuss sensitive experiences and linguistic practices.

4.6. Transcription and Translation

Transcription and translation were conducted carefully to preserve the linguistic nuances of participants' speech. Interviews conducted in regional languages were translated into English while retaining important idiomatic expressions to minimize the loss of linguistic richness and cultural context. The data were coded manually and supported by qualitative data analysis software to facilitate systematic comparison and validation.

5. Data Analysis

The interview data were analyzed using Dey's (1993) qualitative data analysis framework. Dey's approach was selected because its iterative and flexible structure allows researchers to move systematically between data, categories, concepts, and interpretation. This was particularly appropriate for the present study because the analysis sought to identify recurring linguistic patterns and connect them with broader issues of identity, stigma, culture, and belonging.

The analysis proceeded through the following stages:

5.1. Stage 1: Managing and Preparing the Data

All recorded interviews were transcribed systematically, with attention to participants' original linguistic expressions. The transcripts and related research materials were organized according to participant characteristics, substance-use category, and relevant contextual information. Reflective notes were maintained during transcription to record initial observations and emerging analytical ideas.

5.2. Stage 2: Reading and Annotating

The transcripts were read repeatedly to develop familiarity with participants' narratives and linguistic practices. Particular attention was given to words, expressions, metaphors, euphemisms, and culturally significant phrases associated with stigma, shame, identity, belonging, and drug use. Examples included expressions such as *nashaī* (نشئی), *mastak* (مستک), and *da qawm da badnami sabab* ("reason for tribal dishonor"). These annotations helped identify recurring linguistic and identity-related patterns.

5.3. Stage 3: Developing Categories

Following repeated engagement with the data, open coding was used to group similar expressions and meanings into broader analytical categories. Initial categories included:

- a) Stigmatizing labels: addict, dishonor, failure
- b) Identity negotiation: strategies for resisting, concealing, or managing stigma
- c) In-group language: slang, metaphors, humor, and shared expressions
- d) Religious and cultural frames: expressions associated with cultural expectations, honour, morality, and social norms

These categories remained flexible and were refined as the analysis progressed.

5.4. Stage 4: Coding and Assigning Categories

Relevant segments of the transcripts were systematically assigned to the developing categories. For example, *da qawm da badnami sabab* was coded in relation to stigma and shame, while expressions such as *mastak* were examined in relation to in-group identity construction. Humour and expressions of resistance were coded in relation to reframing drug-use narratives and negotiating stigma. This process enabled the researcher to organize participants' linguistic practices systematically while retaining their cultural and linguistic meanings.

5.5. Stage 5: Linking Categories and Contexts

The analysis then examined relationships among the categories and their broader sociocultural contexts. Particular attention was given to the relationship between stigmatizing language and self-perception, the influence of cultural norms and expectations surrounding honour and shame, and the relationship between broader social discourses and participants' identity narratives. This stage helped establish how language functions not only as a reflection of social experience but also as a resource for constructing and negotiating identity.

5.6. Stage 6: Interpretation and Analytical Account

The final stage involved developing an integrated analytical account based on the patterns identified across the interviews. Participants' quotations were used to support interpretations, while contextual descriptions were provided to situate linguistic expressions within the sociocultural environment of Peshawar. The analysis focused particularly on how participants constructed, negotiated, concealed, and resisted stigmatized identities through language.

5.7. Reliability and trustworthiness

To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the study, the analysis followed the four criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985): credibility, dependability, conformability, and transferability. Credibility was supported through member checking with selected participants. Dependability was enhanced through maintaining an audit trail

documenting analytical and coding decisions. Confirmability was supported through the use of reflexive notes to identify and minimize the influence of researcher assumptions. Transferability was addressed through detailed contextual descriptions of participants' linguistic practices and the sociocultural setting, enabling readers to assess the relevance of the findings to comparable contexts.

Table 3.1 Ian Dey's (1993) Qualitative Analysis Framework.

Research Objective	Major Codes	Main Categories / Themes
RO1: To identify linguistic markers of identity among drug users.	Slang, peer labels, euphemisms, code switching, metaphors, emojis	In-group identity, identity duality, concealment, digital identity
RO2: To examine strategic language use for minimizing stigma and managing identity.	Euphemisms, humour, politeness, silence, secrecy, religious/medical framing	Stigma management, face protection, identity negotiation, resistance
RO3: To explore multilingualism in stigma, identity construction, and social negotiation.	Pashto, Urdu, Hindko, English, code-switching, hashtags, emojis	Multilingual identity, contextual switching, stigma avoidance, peer solidarity

6. Data Analysis and Discussion

This section presents the analysis and findings of the study based on in-depth interviews with twelve participants representing four groups of drug users: hashish, alcohol, crystal methamphetamine (ice), and heroin. The analysis examines how linguistic choices shape and negotiate identity, stigma, belonging, and social relationships among drug-using individuals in Peshawar. Particular attention is given to the participants' multilingual practices and the ways in which they use different linguistic resources across social contexts.

The analysis follows Dey's (1993) qualitative data analysis framework, which provides a systematic and flexible approach to identifying patterns in participants' narratives. The framework facilitates the movement from raw data through description and classification to the identification of thematic relationships and broader interpretations. This approach enables the study to retain participants' voices while interpreting their linguistic practices within their wider sociocultural context.

The findings are organized according to the three research objectives. Within each objective, the analysis considers the four groups of drug users comparatively to identify both shared and distinctive linguistic practices. Selected participant quotations are incorporated to illustrate the major patterns and provide direct evidence of the linguistic practices identified in the data.

7. Application of Dey's Qualitative Analysis Framework

The analysis followed Dey's (1993) six-stage qualitative analysis framework, which was selected for its systematic yet flexible approach to interpreting qualitative data. The process involved moving from the organization and description of the interview data to coding, categorization, identification of relationships among categories, and interpretation of broader themes. This process helped identify recurring linguistic patterns related to identity construction, stigma management, multilingualism, peer solidarity, and social positioning.

8. Key Findings from Research Objective 1: Linguistic Markers of Identity

The first objective examined the linguistic markers through which participants constructed and performed their identities. The analysis revealed that coded expressions, slang, euphemisms, peer labels, and multilingual practices played an important role in shaping both individual and group identities.

Participants frequently used coded expressions such as *sabza*, *juice party*, and *rocket fuel* to refer indirectly to substances or drug-related activities. These expressions served a dual function: they enabled participants to discuss sensitive activities discreetly while also strengthening in-group solidarity by creating meanings that were more readily understood by peers.

Peer-generated labels such as *sabza master*, *energy master*, and *shiney boy* similarly contributed to positive in-group identities and could provide participants with a sense of recognition and belonging. In contrast, socially stigmatizing labels such as *chars wala*, *sharabi*, and *mastak* reflected negative societal perceptions and contributed to feelings of shame, exclusion, and social marginalization. The contrast between peer-generated and socially imposed labels demonstrates the dual nature of identity construction, in which participants negotiated between positive identities within their peer groups and stigmatized identities imposed by wider society.

The participants' frequent movement between Pashto, Urdu, Hindko, and English further demonstrated the strategic nature of their linguistic choices. Language switching varied according to audience, setting, and communicative purpose, allowing participants to present different aspects of themselves in different social contexts. Thus, multilingualism functioned not merely as a communicative resource but also as a means of identity negotiation, stigma management, and social positioning.

8.1. Key Findings from Research Objective 2: Strategic Language Use and Stigma Management

The second objective examined how participants strategically used language to manage stigma and protect their social identities. Expressions such as *malgari dawa*, *white wali*, and *cold tea* were used as euphemisms to soften sensitive or potentially stigmatizing discussions, particularly in the presence of family members and other community

members. These expressions enabled participants to discuss drug-related activities indirectly without explicitly naming the substances involved.

Participants also used humour and playful reframing within peer groups to reduce the seriousness of drug-related discussions and create a more accepting interactional environment. Such strategies helped transform potentially stigmatizing experiences into shared and socially manageable forms of communication.

Digital communication on platforms such as WhatsApp and Instagram provided additional opportunities for concealment. Slang, emojis, hashtags, and coded expressions allowed participants to communicate with selected peers while reducing the possibility of being understood by outsiders. These digital practices therefore functioned as forms of linguistic camouflage and social boundary-making.

Code-switching was another important strategy. Urdu was often associated with formality and clinical contexts, Hindko with peer interaction and humour, while Pashto was closely associated with cultural notions of honour, shame, and family identity. Participants therefore adjusted their language according to audience, context, and the perceived risk of disclosure. These choices enabled them to protect their dignity while maintaining relationships across different social settings.

8.2. Key Findings from Research Objective 3: Multilingualism, Stigma, and Identity Negotiation

The third objective explored how multilingual practices shaped stigma management, identity construction, and social negotiation. The findings indicate a close relationship between Pashto and culturally embedded notions of honour and shame, which influenced participants' willingness to discuss drug use openly within family contexts. Urdu was frequently used as a relatively neutral and formal linguistic resource, particularly in clinical or public settings, where it could soften potentially stigmatizing meanings.

Hindko was associated more strongly with humour, informality, and peer bonding, contributing to a sense of familiarity and solidarity within peer groups. In digital communication, English expressions, hashtags, and emojis introduced additional resources for secrecy, modernity, and group exclusivity. These multilingual and multimodal practices enabled participants to negotiate different aspects of their identities according to the audience, context, and perceived risk of disclosure.

9. Cross-Case Comparative Analysis

The cross-case analysis compares the four groups of participants hashish, alcohol, crystal methamphetamine (ice), and heroin users with regard to their linguistic identity markers, stigma-management strategies, and multilingual practices. The comparison reveals substantial similarities alongside some group-specific differences.

Across the four groups, participants commonly employed coded expressions, humor, euphemisms, and multilingual code-switching to construct identities and manage

stigma. However, differences emerged in the specific linguistic markers used, the forms of concealment adopted, and the extent to which digital communication was incorporated. These variations appear to reflect differences in perceived social acceptability, cultural expectations, peer-group practices, and access to digital communication. Overall, the findings demonstrate that language functions as an important resource through which participants construct identity, protect social dignity, maintain peer solidarity, and negotiate their position within a stigmatizing social environment

Cross-Case Comparison of Linguistic Identity Markers

Dimension	Hashish Users (HS1–HS3)	Alcohol Users (A1–A3)	Ice Users (C1–C3)	Heroin Users (H1–H3)
Coded Expressions & Slang	“sabza”, “malgari dawa”, “safa session”	“juice party”, “cold tea”, “white wali”	“rocket fuel”, “shiney wali”, “session”, emojis	“daro”, “malgari dawa”, “safa boys”
Peer Labels	Positive: “sabza master”	Positive: “energy master”	Positive: “shiney boy”, “rocket master”	Positive: “daro khwagi”
Societal Labels	“chars wala”, “nashaī”	“sharabi”, “paapi”	“beghairat”, “tabahi wala”	“mastak”, “nashaī”
Stigma Management	Coded talk within peers; limited exposure outside	Euphemisms to disguise drinking; polite framing in family contexts	Emojis, hashtags, secret slang, English insertions for concealment	Silence, metaphors, religious framing, hiding terms entirely
Multilingual Patterns	Pashto + Urdu; Hindko humor occasionally	Urdu for clinics; Hindko jokes with peers; English hashtags for online captions	High hybridization: Pashto, Urdu, English, emojis; Hindko captions	Pashto avoided in explicit contexts; Urdu for clinical discourse; Hindko in safe peer zones
Digital Practices	Limited WhatsApp group use; minimal emoji coding	Instagram captions in Urdu + English hashtags	High reliance on digital codes; WhatsApp slang + emojis	Minimal digital presence due to social fear

9.1. Insights from the Cross-Case Comparison

The cross-case comparison reveals three key insights:

1. Shared Strategies

All four groups used coded expressions, humour, and multilingual practices to negotiate identity, maintain peer solidarity, and manage social stigma.

2. Group-Specific Variations

- ✓ **Ice users** demonstrated the strongest use of digital codes, including emojis, hashtags, and English expressions.

- ✓ **Alcohol users** relied more on euphemistic and politeness strategies to manage stigma and religious sensitivities.
- ✓ **Heroin users** showed greater avoidance of explicit references and relied more on metaphors, silence, and indirect expressions.
- ✓ **Hashish users** appeared relatively more open in using coded drug-related language within peer groups, contributing to greater normalization of drug-related talk.

3. Multilingual Negotiation

Participants strategically shifted between **Pashto, Urdu, Hindko, and English**, as well as emojis and other digital resources, according to the context, audience, and perceived risk of stigma or disclosure.

10. Conclusion and Recommendations

10.1. Conclusion

This study examined the role of language in identity construction, stigma management, and multilingual communication among drug users in Peshawar. Drawing on interviews with twelve participants representing four groups—hashish, alcohol, ice, and heroin users and analysing the data through Dey's (1993) qualitative framework, the study found that language functions as more than a means of communication. It serves as a resource for constructing identity, maintaining peer solidarity, protecting dignity, and negotiating social stigma.

The findings show that participants used coded expressions, euphemisms, humour, metaphors, digital codes, and multilingual practices to manage sensitive aspects of their identities. Although these strategies were common across the four groups, their use varied according to the substance involved, social context, cultural expectations, and perceived risk of disclosure. Multilingual switching between Pashto, Urdu, Hindko, and English further enabled participants to adapt their communication to different audiences and settings. The study therefore highlights the importance of understanding language as a socially situated resource in the negotiation of identity and stigma among marginalized groups.

10.2. Recommendations

1. **Linguistically sensitive counselling:** Counsellors and rehabilitation practitioners should recognize participants' use of euphemisms, coded expressions, and multilingual communication and adopt respectful, non-judgmental communication strategies.
2. **Multilingual rehabilitation services:** Rehabilitation programmes should, where possible, provide communication support in **Pashto, Urdu, and Hindko**, allowing clients to communicate in the language with which they feel most comfortable.

3. **Digital outreach:** WhatsApp, Instagram, and other digital platforms can be used to develop **stigma-sensitive awareness and support initiatives**, particularly for younger users who regularly engage in digital communication.
4. **Community awareness:** Families and communities should be encouraged to replace stigmatizing labels and negative stereotypes with more supportive approaches that promote treatment, recovery, and social reintegration.
5. **Future research:** Future studies should include **larger and more diverse samples**, particularly greater representation of women, and compare rural and urban communities. Ethnographic observation and naturally occurring online discourse could also provide further insight into multilingual and digital identity practices.

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