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Forging a Nation in the Language Matrix: Bangla and the Politics of Identity in Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

Language is the most enduring site where nations are imagined, contested, and reproduced. In Bangladesh, Bangla has historically been the grammar of solidarity, sacrifice, and pride, yet its position in contemporary identity is increasingly negotiated. This study employs Anderson's (2006) theory of imagined communities to examine how Bangla continues to function as both a cultural anchor and a site of ambivalence in the age of globalization. The data were collected from one hundred educated young adults through a questionnaire based survey including both quantitative and qualitative strategies. The analysis reveals three critical findings. First, Bangla remains most resilient in familial and academic settings, where it nurtures intimacy, continuity, and historical consciousness. Second, digital spaces introduce tension: while Bangla retains symbolic importance, English often dominates in social media and entertainment, indexing global belonging and aspirational modernity. Third, younger generations negotiate this hybridity strategically, affirming national pride in Bangla while simultaneously embracing multilingual practices. These findings highlight a layered linguistic nationalism, resilient yet adaptive, where Bangla persists as the emotional core of identity but is reconfigured in response to cosmopolitan pressures. However, this study is limited to urban university students, which narrows generalizability. Future research should investigate rural contexts, intergenerational perspectives, and longitudinal shifts across media. Notably, strengthening Bangla in higher education, advancing vernacular digital content, and crafting inclusive cultural policies can uphold linguistic pride while embracing global engagement.

Keywords: *Bangla; Digital Culture; Globalization; Imagined Communities; Linguistic Nationalism; National Identity*

1. Introduction

Language is not merely a tool for communication; it is a fundamental marker of identity, culture, and social belonging (Myhill, 2003). Across the world, linguistic practices have been closely intertwined with political struggles, cultural preservation, and the construction of collective identities (Khan, 2026). In postcolonial contexts, the relationship between language and national identity is particularly pronounced (Lamichhane et al., 2026). Bangladesh provides a compelling case study of this phenomenon, given its historical struggles for linguistic recognition, cultural assertion, and political sovereignty. The Bengali language (Bangla) is deeply embedded in the nation's identity and has been instrumental in mobilizing communities, shaping political ideologies, and constructing a sense of collective belonging. This study examines the role of Bangla in shaping national identity in contemporary Bangladesh, focusing specifically on tertiary learners, young adults who are both inheritors of the linguistic heritage and active participants in its ongoing evolution.

The roots of linguistic nationalism in Bangladesh are deeply historical. The Language Movement of 1948-1952, which demanded the recognition of Bangla as one of the state languages of then-East Pakistan, is a landmark example of the intersection between language and national identity. The movement was not merely about linguistic preference; it was a struggle for cultural dignity, political recognition, and social justice. The events of 21 February 1952, which resulted in the death of several student activists, are commemorated

annually as International Mother Language Day, highlighting the enduring symbolic power of Bangla in the national imagination.

This historical struggle established a precedent: language is inseparable from identity and nationhood in Bangladesh. The movement catalyzed a broader discourse on Bangla as a unifying force for social cohesion and cultural resilience. Subsequent political developments, including the 1971 Liberation War, reinforced this connection. The demand for linguistic and cultural recognition was central to the struggle for independence, positioning Bangla not only as a medium of communication but as a cornerstone of national identity.

In contemporary Bangladesh, Bangla continues to play a central role in constructing and sustaining national identity. Beyond its symbolic significance, the language permeates everyday life, media, literature, and institutional discourse. Linguistic nationalism in Bangladesh manifests through public celebrations, political rhetoric, literary production, and educational policies. Scholars such as Fishman (1999) argued that language functions as a key instrument in imagining communities and consolidating national consciousness. Bangla, in this sense, is both a practical medium and an ideological marker, connecting individuals to a shared cultural and historical narrative.

The rise of globalization and the increasing dominance of English in education, business, and digital communication present both challenges and opportunities for linguistic nationalism (May, 2012). English is often positioned as a language of modernity, global mobility, and professional advancement (Dobric, 2026). However, Bangla retains its symbolic weight as a marker of cultural authenticity, local identity, and national pride. For many young adults, this duality creates a complex linguistic landscape where the pursuit of global competencies must be balanced with the preservation of cultural heritage.

Tertiary learners represent a particularly significant group for studying linguistic nationalism. Young adults occupy a transitional phase in which they negotiate multiple identities: academic, professional, and national. University students are exposed to both local linguistic traditions and global languages, primarily English, creating opportunities for bilingual or multilingual competence. Their attitudes toward Bangla and English are shaped not only by personal experiences but also by social, political, and educational contexts.

Focusing on tertiary learners allows this study to capture the intersection of language, identity, and social agency. Students are not passive recipients of linguistic ideologies; they actively interpret, reproduce, and sometimes contest these ideologies in their daily interactions, both within and beyond the classroom (Awayed-Bishara, 2021; Lopez, 2025). Examining this group provides insights into how the younger generation perceives the symbolic and functional roles of Bangla, how they navigate linguistic hierarchies, and how they contribute to the ongoing construction of national identity.

Furthermore, tertiary learners are highly engaged with digital media, popular culture, and transnational discourses, all of which influence their linguistic choices and attitudes. Social media platforms, online communities, and international educational environments expose students to diverse languages and cultural practices, creating a dynamic space where national identity is continuously negotiated (Wulandari et al., 2026). By investigating this demographic, the study addresses a gap in understanding how linguistic nationalism is maintained, challenged, and reinterpreted in the 21st century.

In the context of rapid globalization, technological advancement, and transnational mobility, the role of Bangla in constructing national identity is both urgent and complex. English and other global languages increasingly dominate education, media, and professional domains, creating tensions between linguistic utility and cultural authenticity (Aburous & Kamla, 2021). By focusing on tertiary learners, this study seeks to explore how the younger generation balances these pressures, negotiates their identities, and engages with the ideological dimensions of language. Moreover, understanding the perspectives of young adults can inform language policy, educational planning, and cultural initiatives. Universities and policymakers can design programs that promote bilingual competence while reinforcing linguistic pride, thereby ensuring that Bangla retains its symbolic and functional significance for future generations.

2. Literature Review

Linguistic nationalism, the ideological intertwining of language and national identity, has been a pivotal force in shaping modern nation-states. The study of Mar-Molinero (1994) examines linguistic nationalism in Europe, emphasizing the tension between minority languages and dominant national languages in supranational contexts. The study highlights how language policies often evoke the “territoriality principle” (p. 323), tying linguistic rights to specific regions. Similarly, Bres et al. (2019) explore linguistic nationalism in multilingual Luxembourg, where competing ideologies, monolingualism (prioritizing Luxembourgish) and trilingualism, reflect broader tensions between tradition and globalization. The authors note how political parties instrumentalize language to appeal to national identity. The study’s analysis of “discourses of endangerment” parallels fears of Bangla’s marginalization in Bangladesh’s elite spheres. Accordingly, Aytürk

(2004) investigates Turkey's language reforms, where linguistic purification sought to erase Ottoman heritage and construct a secular, Western-facing identity. The "Sun-Language Theory" (p. 16) exemplifies how states mythologize language to assert civilizational prestige. Bangladesh's post-1971 language policies mirror this, elevating Bangla as a marker of anti-colonial resistance and national pride. However, unlike Turkey's top-down imposition, Bangla nationalism in Bangladesh emerged organically through mass movements.

The study of linguistic nationalism in South Asia reveals how language serves as a potent tool for constructing national identity, as exemplified by the cases of Hindi and Urdu in India and Pakistan (Aneesh, 2010) and the constitutional management of linguistic diversity (Choudhry, 2009). Aneesh (2010) argues that linguistic boundaries are not preexisting but are sociocognitive constructs shaped by nationalist aspirations, as seen in the deliberate Sanskritization of Hindi and Persianization of Urdu to reinforce communal identities. This framework is pivotal for understanding Bangladesh's linguistic nationalism, where Bangla emerged as a unifying force against Urdu-dominated Pakistan, culminating in the 1971 Liberation War. Likewise, Choudhry (2009) highlights how constitutional design can mitigate or exacerbate linguistic conflicts, as seen in India's accommodation of regional languages versus Sri Lanka's Sinhala-only policies, which fueled Tamil separatism. Bangladesh's post-independence language policies, which enshrined Bangla as the sole official language, reflect a similar nation-building project. However, unlike India's multilingual federalism, Bangladesh's centralized approach risks marginalizing minority languages like Chakma and Santali, echoing Choudhry's warning about the costs of exclusionary language policies.

Linguistic nationalism has been a pivotal force in shaping national identities, as evidenced by historical and contemporary case studies across the globe. The paradox of linguistic nationalism, as explored by García (2014) in the context of Luxembourg, highlights how language serves as both a cultural marker and a political tool in nation-building. The study demonstrates how Luxembourgish, once perceived as a dialect, was institutionalized as a national language in the 1980s through deliberate mobilization, reflecting the tension between traditional nation-state models and modern socio-political realities. Busekist (2005) further elucidates the ideological underpinnings of linguistic nationalism, arguing that language is inextricably linked to political legitimacy and national unity. By examining cases like Belgium and South Africa, the study reveals how linguistic policies often emerge from struggles for recognition and power, where language becomes a proxy for broader socio-political demands.

Besides, Hackert (2009) adds another dimension by tracing the historical construction of the "native speaker" concept, showing how linguistic identity is often racialized and tied to nationalist ideologies. In Bangladesh, the privileging of Bangla as the "mother tongue" has marginalized indigenous languages, reinforcing a monolithic national identity. Therefore, Hackert's analysis of Anglo-Saxonism parallels how Bangla nationalism excludes linguistic minorities, raising questions about inclusivity in Bangladesh's language policies.

Studies on minority languages and global language policies illustrate that linguistic nationalism is central in shaping national identity. For instance, Knudsen (2010) explores the Faroe Islands' struggle to preserve Faroese against Danish influence, highlighting how purist language policies clash with multilingual realities. The study reveals tensions between linguistic nationalism and practical language use, emphasizing the symbolic power of language in asserting cultural distinctiveness. Similarly, Valle (2008) examines Spain's promotion of Spanish as a global language through institutions like the Cervantes Institute, illustrating how language is weaponized to reinforce geopolitical influence and Pan-Hispanic unity. Despite rejecting overt nationalism, Spain's policies retain nationalist undertones by framing Spanish as a "common fatherland". These studies underscore language as both a cultural marker and a political tool, resonating with Bangladesh's context, where Bangla is central to national identity.

The role of language in shaping national identity is a well-documented phenomenon, particularly in post-colonial contexts where linguistic choices often reflect deeper socio-political struggles. In this context, Shaikh's (2024) study on linguistic choices among Bangladeshi international students in China underscores the centrality of Bangla as a marker of cultural identity, despite the pragmatic use of English and Mandarin in academic settings. The findings reveal that while multilingualism is prevalent, Bangla remains the preferred medium for expressing cultural identity, with 86.1% of respondents affirming its significance (p. 231). This aligns with the broader discourse on linguistic nationalism, where the mother tongue serves as a vessel for heritage and resistance against cultural dilution. However, the study also notes ambivalence among participants, suggesting that globalization and educational demands may dilute linguistic nationalism over time.

Furthermore, Hossain's (2015) historical examination of Bangladesh's political crises further contextualizes these tensions, revealing how linguistic nationalism (Bengali) and religious identity (Muslim) have been weaponized in partisan struggles. The Awami League's promotion of secular, language-based

nationalism contrasts sharply with the Bangladesh Nationalist Party's emphasis on Muslim identity, creating a polarized sociopolitical landscape. This dichotomy underscores the precarious balance between linguistic pride and religious allegiance in national identity formation.

The interplay between language and nationalism in Bangladesh is a complex and evolving phenomenon, deeply rooted in historical, political, and cultural dynamics. To contextualize, Absar (2014) underscores the post-1971 shift from secular Bengali nationalism to a resurgence of Muslim identity, revealing how political elites manipulated these identities to consolidate power. Correspondingly, Hajjaj (2020) traces this identity conflict to colonial policies, arguing that the British *divide and rule* strategy exacerbated Hindu-Muslim divisions, which later influenced the linguistic nationalism of East Pakistan. The 1952 Language Movement, which asserted Bangla as a symbol of resistance against Urdu-dominated West Pakistan, exemplifies how language became a unifying force for Bengali identity. However, this study also notes that post-independence, Bangladeshi nationalism was redefined to emphasize religious identity, creating a false dichotomy between "Bengali" and "Bangladeshi". This aligns with the application of Benedict Anderson's "creole nationalism", as illustrated by Das et al. (2022), which frames Bangla as a cultural marker that initially unified East Pakistanis but was later contested by political forces promoting Islam as a national identity.

3. Theoretical Framework

In exploring the formation of national identity in contemporary Bangladesh, the concept of imagined communities, coined by Anderson (2006), provides a foundational lens. Anderson's theory revolutionized the understanding of nationalism by emphasizing the constructed and imagined nature of nations. His perspective aligns powerfully with the role of language, especially Bangla, in unifying disparate populations. This theoretical framework applies Anderson's central ideas to elaborate on the dynamics of linguistic nationalism in Bangladesh.

Anderson (2006) defines a nation as an imagined political community, and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. The imagination lies in the shared belief that members of a nation feel a connection despite not knowing each other personally. For Anderson, this imagined solidarity is made possible by the emergence of print capitalism, standardization of vernacular languages, and the decline of religious and monarchical legitimacy. Language, particularly the shift from sacred to vernacular languages, plays a central role in forming the deep horizontal comradeship that underpins nationalism (Gellner, 1983). In Anderson's analysis, language not only fosters shared identity but serves as the medium through which individuals come to imagine themselves as part of a broader collective through newspapers, novels, and education systems.

The Bengali Language Movement directly reflects Anderson's imagined community concept. Although many protesters were unacquainted with each other, their collective memory, grievances, and dreams were shared and reinforced through language-based publications, political speeches, and education. As Absar (2014) argues, the language movement catalyzed the development of Bengali nationalism by uniting different socioeconomic and religious groups under a linguistic identity. This collective act of imagination transformed language into a tool of resistance and nation-making. This can even be seen in 2024 July Uprisings (see Shaikh, 2026). In this sense, Bangladesh's nationalist trajectory mirrors Anderson's thesis, where language facilitates political solidarity.

Print capitalism, as outlined by Anderson (2006), enabled the mass production of vernacular literature, newspapers, and textbooks, helping people to perceive themselves as part of a coherent whole. In the contemporary moment, the growth of Bangla literatures which is very rich and print media that is well-established was instrumental in cultivating an "imagined" Bangladeshi identity distinct from the Western cultural hybridity, or Indian cultural imperialism promoted through the social media and/ or satellite TV stations.

The above discussions illustrated that Benedict Anderson's theory of imagined communities provides a powerful framework for analyzing how the Bangla language contributed to national identity construction in contemporary Bangladesh despite globalization pressures. Therefore, this is the appropriate conceptual framework for analyzing cultural identity in contemporary Bangladesh.

4. Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods design to investigate the role of Bangla in constructing national identity among tertiary learners in contemporary Bangladesh. The survey instrument consisted of 11 close-ended items on a 5-point Likert scale, designed to measure students' attitudes towards Bangla as a marker of national identity, and 3 open-ended questions to elicit richer, qualitative insights. Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS to identify patterns and percentages. For qualitative responses, NVivo software was utilized to conduct reflexive thematic analysis outlined by Braun & Clarke (2006), enabling the identification

of recurring themes, ideological stances, and variations in learners' perspectives.

The study employed a stratified random simple sampling technique to ensure representation across different academic years, disciplines, and demographic categories. A total of 100 tertiary learners were selected from four universities in Khulna, Bangladesh: Khulna University, Khulna University of Engineering and Technology, Northern University of Business and Technology Khulna, and North Western University. The sample reflects the diversity of the student population, with 77% male and 23% female participants, distributed across 4th year (57%), 3rd year (30%), 2nd year (11%), and 1st year (2%). Academic disciplines represented include English (40%), Business Administration (13%), Law (8%), Civil Engineering (7%), BECM (11%), Economics (2%), Computer Science and Engineering (1%), and smaller proportions from Architecture, Sociology, Journalism and Communication, Fine Arts, and other fields. Participants' schooling backgrounds varied, with the majority having studied in Bangla medium (69%), followed by English medium (30%), and English version (1%).

5. Findings

5.1 Quantitative Findings

The survey data reveals a complex but telling picture of how Bangla functions as a cultural anchor and marker of identity across different social and digital domains.

5.1.1 Language Use in Daily Life

Language is never just a tool for communication rather it is also a marker of belonging, identity, and cultural pride. In the context of Bangladesh, the everyday use of Bangla reflects how deeply language is tied to national identity, even as English and other languages enter different spheres of life. The following analysis looks at how participants reported using Bangla in their daily interactions, both in private and public spaces.

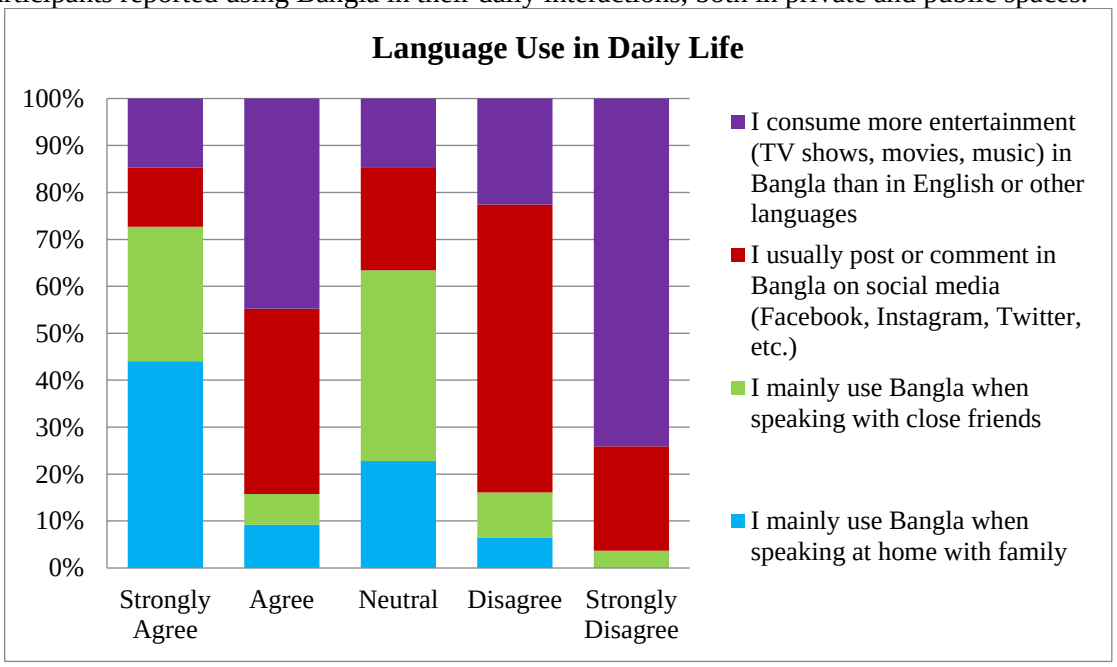


Figure 1. Language Use in Daily Life

The survey results highlight how Bangla continues to play a central role in shaping everyday communication and identity among participants. When it comes to the most intimate spaces, home and family, Bangla dominates strongly. A large majority (63% respondents) strongly agreed and 7% agreed that they mainly use Bangla with family, while only a handful disagreed (2%). This suggests that the family domain remains the strongest site of linguistic nationalism, where Bangla is not only preferred but also emotionally tied to belonging and comfort.

In friendships, however, the pattern shifts. While 41% respondents strongly agreed that they mainly use Bangla with close friends, the 50% neutral responses point to a more flexible linguistic landscape. Friendship circles may accommodate English or other languages, reflecting cosmopolitan influences or pragmatic code-switching. Here, Bangla retains symbolic importance but shares space with alternative linguistic practices.

Social media interactions present a different dynamic. Only 18% strongly agreed and 30% agreed that they post or comment in Bangla, whereas 27% were neutral and 19% disagreed. This indicates that digital spaces dilute the dominance of Bangla, where bilingual or English-dominant expressions often emerge to signal

modernity, global belonging, or professional identity. Online self-presentation thus introduces tension between nationalist attachment to Bangla and aspirational ties to global communication.

The most striking divergence appears in cultural consumption. 34% agreed and 21% strongly agreed that they consume more entertainment in Bangla, but 20% strongly disagreed, the highest "strongly disagree" count across all categories. This polarization suggests that while Bangla entertainment sustains national cultural pride for many, a significant group seeks alternative linguistic-cultural content. Such consumption patterns may signal a generation, where younger respondents gravitating toward English or hybrid global media cultures.

Overall, the data underscores the layered role of Bangla: it is most entrenched in the private and familial realm, somewhat negotiated in friendships, more contested in online identity-making, and sharply divided in entertainment consumption. This trajectory illustrates how linguistic nationalism in Bangladesh remains vibrant but also encounters pressures from globalization, digital cosmopolitanism, and shifting generational tastes. Bangla, therefore, continues to anchor national identity, but its role is neither static nor uncontested rather it evolves alongside the sociocultural and technological transformations shaping contemporary Bangladesh.

5.1.2 Bangla in Academic Settings

Language choice within the classroom is never neutral; it reflects deeper questions of identity, belonging, and cultural affirmation. In Bangladesh, where Bangla has historically been central to struggles for recognition, its presence in academic discourse continues to shape how students experience their education and their sense of national identity. The survey data from this study sheds light on how students perceive and use Bangla in university contexts, particularly in classroom discussions, personal academic interactions, and in relation to cultural belonging.

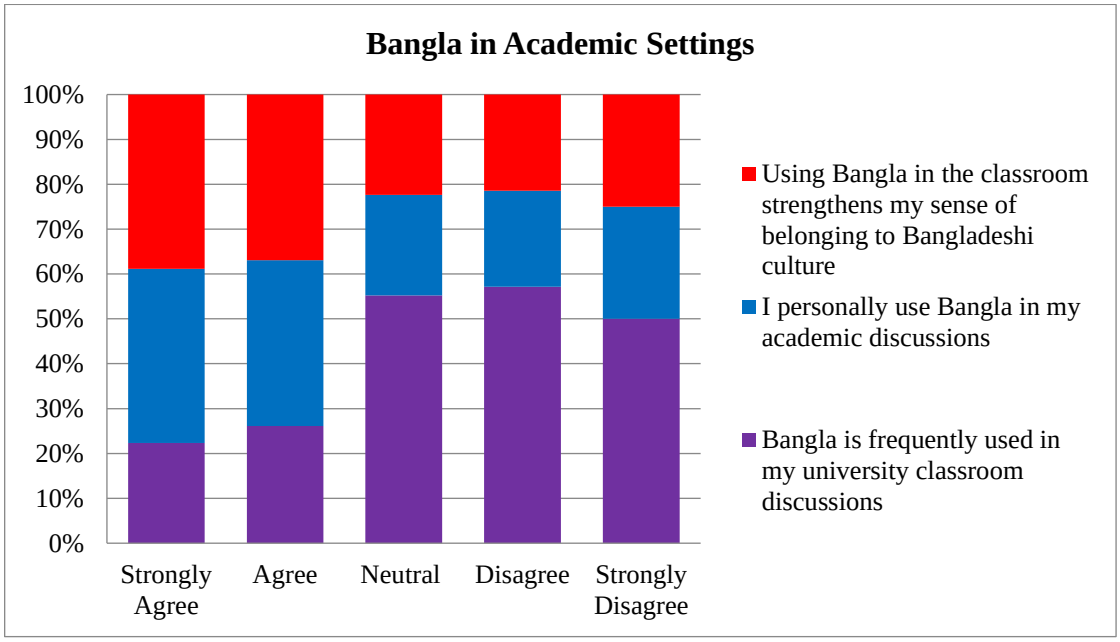


Figure 2. Bangla in Academic Settings

When asked whether Bangla is frequently used in classroom discussions, a combined 53% of respondents (Strongly Agree: 19%, Agree: 34%) affirmed this practice, suggesting that Bangla is not marginal but a vibrant medium of intellectual exchange. This contrasts with 10% who disagreed or strongly disagreed, while 37% remained neutral, hinting at either variability across disciplines or a fluid switch between Bangla and other languages, particularly English.

Personal use of Bangla in academic discussions produced an even stronger consensus. Nearly four-fifths of participants (Strongly Agree: 33%, Agree: 48%) reported actively employing Bangla in their own conversations, reflecting not just a passive reception but a deliberate choice to situate knowledge within a familiar linguistic frame. Compared to the previous item, neutrality dropped to 15%, and only a small minority (4%) resisted this view, highlighting the language's deep integration in everyday academic interaction.

The cultural significance of Bangla is most vividly captured in responses to whether classroom use strengthens a sense of belonging to Bangladeshi culture. A remarkable 81% of respondents affirmed this link (Strongly Agree: 33%, Agree: 48%), underscoring that Bangla is not merely a communicative tool but an

emotional anchor that affirms identity. The very low level of disagreement (4%) demonstrates the near-universal recognition of this connection.

In sum, the findings suggest that Bangla's presence in academic settings goes beyond practical communication. It serves as a symbol of cultural continuity, a reminder of historical struggles, and a living expression of national pride. The university classroom emerges as a vital space where the intellectual and the cultural intersect, reaffirming Bangla's role in shaping both knowledge and belonging.

5.1.3 Language and National Identity

The data paints a compelling picture of the intimate bond between language and national belonging in Bangladesh. When participants were asked about the emotional and cultural significance of Bangla, the majority responded with overwhelming affirmation.

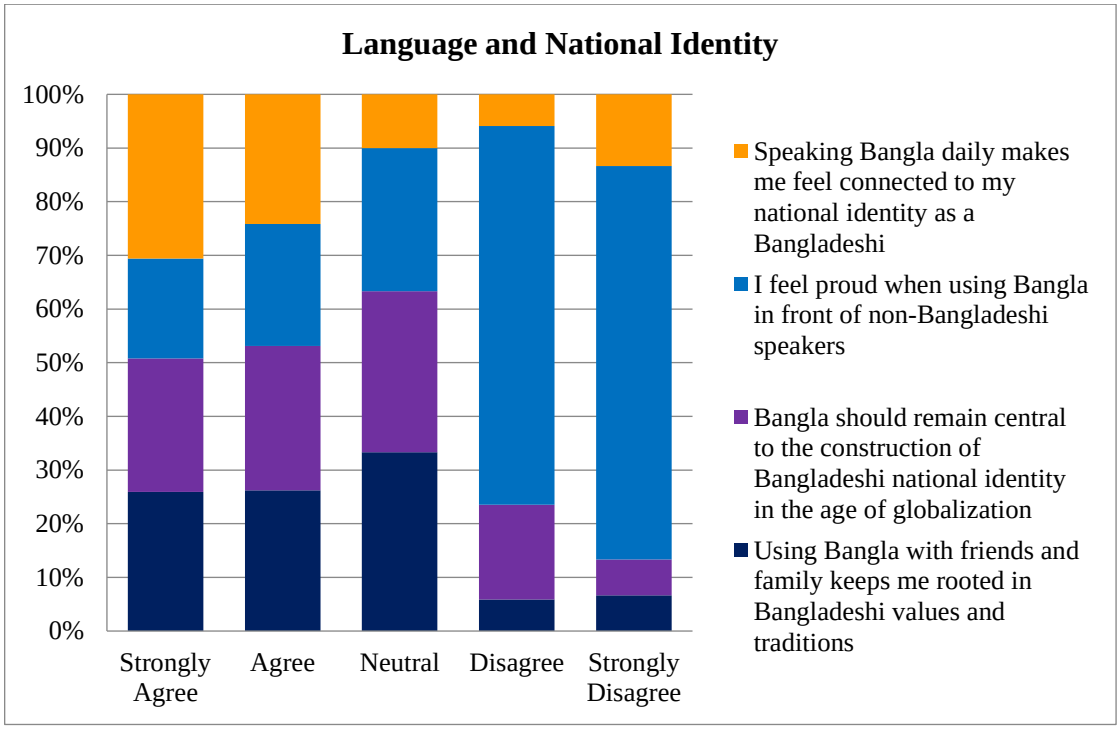


Figure 3. Language and National Identity

For the statement "Using Bangla with friends and family keeps me rooted in Bangladeshi values and traditions", an impressive 88% (50% strongly agree, 38% agree) resonated with this sentiment. This demonstrates that everyday interactions in Bangla are not just casual exchanges but vessels of cultural continuity, anchoring individuals to their inherited values.

Similarly, the belief that "Bangla should remain central to the construction of Bangladeshi national identity in the age of globalization" drew strong support, with 87% agreeing or strongly agreeing. Despite globalization's growing pressures and the dominance of English in education and technology, the data underscores a widespread conviction that Bangla is not merely a communicative tool but a cultural safeguard against erasure.

Expressions of pride also featured prominently. In response to "I feel proud when using Bangla in front of non-Bangladeshi speakers", the distribution revealed a more nuanced picture. While 69% affirmed this pride, a notable 23% (12 disagree, 11 strongly disagree) expressed resistance. This suggests a complex dynamic in which language pride coexists with some degree of ambivalence, perhaps linked to social mobility, cosmopolitan aspirations, or internalized linguistic hierarchies.

The strongest consensus appeared in the statement "Speaking Bangla daily makes me feel connected to my national identity as a Bangladeshi". Here, 94% of respondents agreed, with only a small minority remaining neutral or dissenting. This finding highlights the powerful role of daily linguistic practice in reinforcing collective identity: the act of speaking Bangla is not just habitual, but symbolic, a daily reaffirmation of belonging.

Taken together, the data reveals that Bangla functions as both an emotional anchor and a political statement. It is simultaneously a medium of intimacy, a marker of pride, and a site of contestation in the global arena. The responses suggest that while globalization creates room for ambivalence, the centrality of Bangla in

national identity remains overwhelmingly affirmed, testifying to the enduring spirit of linguistic nationalism in contemporary Bangladesh.

5.2 Qualitative Findings

The open-ended responses provide a textured landscape of how Bangla operates as both a communicative resource and a symbolic anchor in shaping national identity in contemporary Bangladesh. A thematic approach was adopted to explore patterns, tensions, and underlying narratives across three guiding questions. What emerges is a story not merely of language use, but of how Bangla functions as a site of belonging, generational negotiation, and institutional responsibility.

5.2.1 Bangla in Daily Life as a Marker of Identity

The first question probed how the use of Bangla in daily life shapes participants' sense of identity as Bangladeshis. The data reveals a deeply entrenched view of Bangla as both a practical medium of communication and a symbolic container of collective memory. Responses are layered: some participants foreground pride and comfort, while others articulate Bangla as inseparable from their national identity, cultural heritage, and even their existential sense of being.

A recurring theme is Bangla as mother tongue as identity. Numerous participants (e.g., P3, P6, P13, P23, P34, P47) assert that Bangla is not only their first language but their *whole identity*, often phrased in absolute terms: "Bangla is my one and only identity" (P34). Such categorical statements underscore a symbolic fusion between language and nationhood, suggesting that to speak Bangla is to enact one's Bangladeshi-ness in its most authentic form. In NVivo coding, these responses cluster around the node "Bangla as essential identity", demonstrating how participants collapse the distinction between personal expression and collective belonging.

Another strong theme is Bangla as comfort and home. Several participants emphasize that speaking Bangla makes them feel "comfortable", "safe", or "like home" (e.g., P8, P15, P28, P39, P83). These sentiments reflect the affective dimensions of linguistic nationalism, where language is not merely an external marker but an embodied experience of familiarity. Such statements also suggest that identity is lived at the level of daily affective practices, not only in public rituals of nationalism.

Equally significant is the historical and political dimension of Bangla. Participants often link their use of Bangla to the sacrifices of the 1952 Language Movement and the struggles of independence (P16, P29, P54, P63, P64, P95). These responses point to a collective memory embedded in the language, where Bangla is not only a communicative tool but also a vessel of political legitimacy and national pride. In this framing, daily use of Bangla reactivates a sense of continuity with past struggles, embedding personal identity in the nation's historical narrative.

However, the data also reveal competing voices. A minority of participants (P11, P89) emphasize pride in English, either as an alternative identity marker or as a necessary skill for modern life. P11's declaration: "I feel very proud to speak in English", stands out as a counter-narrative within the broader consensus, signaling a possible fracture between nationalistic idealism and pragmatic global orientation. Such dissenting responses, though few, destabilize the narrative of linguistic homogeneity and gesture towards the hybrid identity formations that globalization fosters.

5.2.2 The Younger Generation and Shifts in Linguistic Identity

The second question asked whether the younger generation in Bangladesh is maintaining or moving away from Bangla as a marker of national identity. Here, the data present a more ambivalent and contested picture, marked by tension between globalization and cultural rootedness.

A dominant theme is youth moving away from Bangla. Many participants (P7, P8, P11, P13, P15, P16, P27, P37, P42, P47, P49) argue that younger generations are increasingly drawn towards English or Western cultural practices. Responses frequently reference "Western culture", "English dominance", and "social media influence" as factors pushing youth away from Bangla. P7's remark, "the younger generation is moving away from Bangla, influenced by Western culture", is echoed in dozens of similar formulations, indicating a widespread perception of cultural drift. This aligns with the node "Globalization/Western Influence". At the same time, participants also articulate resistance and maintenance of Bangla among youth. Some (P12, P19, P25, P33, P38, P55, P62, P74, P84) point to the continued use of Bangla in cultural festivals, music, or at home. P25's observation that "on International Mother Language Day, many youths show respect to Bangla" highlights how symbolic performances sustain identity even when everyday practices may lean toward English. These responses cluster under the node "Cultural Continuity/Resistance".

Another striking theme is the hybridity and negotiation of identities. Several participants (P4, P20, P33, P43, P63, P69, P78) suggest that youth neither fully abandon Bangla nor embrace it exclusively, but rather

negotiate between Bangla and English depending on context. P4 articulates this as a "re-negotiation and hybridity influenced by globalization", while P20 notes youth use both "depending on context". The analysis groups these under "Hybrid Identity Practices", indicating that identity formation among youth is not a binary of loyalty versus abandonment, but a strategic adaptation to global and local demands.

Socioeconomic and spatial factors also surface. Urban youth are often portrayed as more vulnerable to English dominance (P27, P40, P70, P87), while rural youth are credited with maintaining stronger ties to Bangla (P73, P87). This rural-urban contrast highlights how linguistic nationalism is unevenly distributed across class and geography, with English often functioning as cultural capital in urban centers.

5.2.3 The Role of Universities in Promoting Bangla

The third question addressed what role universities should play in promoting Bangla as part of national culture and identity. The responses overwhelmingly affirm that higher education institutions have both the responsibility and capacity to safeguard Bangla.

The strongest theme is universities as cultural custodians. Many participants (P4, P5, P8, P17, P42, P62, P68, P77, P93) argue that universities should organize cultural programs, festivals, and seminars to reinforce Bangla's role in national identity. P5 frames universities as "centers for preservation and advancement" through curriculum development and research. This positions universities not merely as sites of learning but as guardians of cultural continuity.

Another recurrent theme is integration of Bangla in academia. Participants (P2, P3, P10, P14, P20, P28, P31, P45, P63, P90) suggest Bangla should be used more in research, teaching, and academic publications. The recommendation for publishing Bangla journals (P2, P59) and writing research papers in Bangla (P28, P90) signals a push to elevate the language from everyday usage to scholarly legitimacy. This falls under "Academic Integration". Furthermore, There is also an emphasis on symbolic visibility and institutional recognition. Suggestions range from Bangla signage and notices (P39, P56) to celebrating festivals like Pohela Boishakh (P92) and creating cultural centers (P81). These responses imply that language promotion is not only a matter of curriculum but also of spatial and symbolic presence on campuses.

Some notable tension appears in the balance between Bangla and English. While many advocate prioritizing Bangla, some participants (P37, P82) recognize the necessity of English for global communication. P37 insists that universities must "balance English for global use but prioritize Bangla as national pride". This ambivalence reflects broader societal negotiations between linguistic nationalism and global competitiveness.

Finally, several participants emphasize student engagement. Debates, creative writing, theatre, and cultural clubs (P15, P44, P50, P69, P86) are seen as platforms through which students can internalize Bangla as not only a language of communication but also of creativity and intellectual exploration. These responses highlight the performative dimension of language in shaping identity.

6. Discussion

Language has long been regarded as a potent instrument in the construction and maintenance of collective identity (Khan, 2026; Tufi, 2023). In the Bangladeshi context, the role of Bangla transcends its communicative function to embody memory, belonging, and the struggle for recognition. The findings of this study, which show Bangla's persistent salience in familial, educational, and national domains, resonate with Benedict Anderson's (2006) conceptualization of nations as *imagined communities*. To imagine oneself as part of a nation requires both a symbolic medium and a shared narrative, and in Bangladesh, Bangla has been the principal vehicle through which such imagination is sustained. Yet, this role is increasingly negotiated in the face of globalization, digital media, and shifting generational tastes.

Anderson's (2006) insight that nations are "imagined" because members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their compatriots finds sharp expression in the Bangladeshi experience. The widespread use of Bangla in private and public life, demonstrated in this study by strong majorities affirming its role in family communication, education, and cultural belonging, exemplifies the process by which language renders distant strangers proximate. A respondent speaking Bangla with family in Dhaka, for example, is symbolically linked to another conversing in Bangla in Rajshahi or Khulna; the language binds them into a community they can imagine but not empirically perceive.

The history of the Bengali Language Movement of 1952 provides the clearest instantiation of Anderson's thesis. Protesters were united not by kinship or acquaintance but by the symbolic claim that their mother tongue was inseparable from their dignity and political sovereignty. In this light, everyday Bangla speech is not trivial; it is the daily reproduction of an imagined national bond. The survey's finding that 94% of participants feel their national identity strengthened through daily use of Bangla underscores this mechanism of imagined solidarity.

Yet Anderson's framework also suggests that such imagination is historically contingent. Just as print capitalism enabled the rise of nationalism in Europe (Leerssen, 2020), the spread of Bangla print culture, in newspapers, literature, and textbooks, shaped a specifically Bengali consciousness. Today, however, the communicative infrastructure has shifted to digital platforms, where English often dominates (Yang et al., 2026; Schneider, 2025). The ambivalence recorded in participants' social media use of Bangla reflects this tension: while Bangla grounds belonging in intimate and academic settings, online self-presentation increasingly demands bilingual or English-dominant practices. The imagination of community thus risks dilution in spaces where Bangla loses symbolic dominance.

If Anderson provides the scaffolding for understanding how Bangla forged a community, contemporary scholarship points to the ways globalization unsettles that community. The dual pressures of English as a global lingua franca and the cultural flows of media consumption complicate the nationalist script. Scholars such as Heller (2011) argue that language has become a form of "symbolic capital" in the global marketplace, and English, in particular, is frequently associated with modernity, mobility, and cosmopolitanism. This framework helps interpret why some participants in this study openly expressed pride in speaking English, or why younger respondents gravitate toward English-dominated entertainment. Their practices suggest not a rejection of Bangla per se, but an attempt to reconcile local identity with global belonging.

This ambivalence mirrors findings from other multilingual contexts that globalization often produces linguistic hierarchies where local languages sustain cultural belonging while global ones secure socioeconomic advancement (Sharma & Phyak, 2017; Giannakou et al., 2026; Huang & Park, 2026). The survey's evidence of hybrid practices among youth, switching between Bangla and English depending on context, fits within this global pattern. Rather than a binary choice between loyalty and abandonment, younger Bangladeshis appear to practice what García (2009) terms "translanguaging", blending linguistic repertoires to navigate both local and global identities.

However, the Bangladeshi case is distinguished by the historically sacralized status of Bangla. As Chatterjee (1993) reminds us, anticolonial nationalisms often foreground culture as the inner domain of sovereignty. In Bangladesh, Bangla remains the emblem of this inner domain. The data show that despite global pressures, overwhelming majorities still affirm Bangla's centrality to national identity. This resilience suggests that while digital modernity introduces new linguistic practices, it has not fundamentally displaced Bangla's symbolic role. Rather, the negotiation between Bangla and English reveals a layered nationalism, one that incorporates global aspirations while maintaining linguistic pride.

Universities, like newspapers in Anderson's model, function as sites where a shared imagination of the nation is continuously produced. The strong consensus among students that using Bangla in classrooms deepens cultural belonging demonstrates the enduring pedagogical role of language in nation-making. This resonates with Gellner's (1983) argument that nationalism is inseparable from education systems, which standardize language and disseminate shared knowledge. In Bangladesh, where education was historically a battleground for recognition of Bangla, the classroom remains a symbolic and practical site of linguistic nationalism.

At the same time, the data reveal ambivalence: some participants urge a balance between Bangla and English. This reflects a linguistic paradox of Bangladeshi higher education where English dominates in global scholarly networks (Smit et al., 2026), yet Bangla anchors local identity. The challenge, then, is not whether universities should promote Bangla, but how they negotiate its symbolic centrality alongside pragmatic demands of English. Moreover, student activism in universities continues to mobilize Bangla as a political tool, particularly during movements such as the 2024 July Uprising, underscoring that academic spaces are not neutral but deeply implicated in the ongoing imagination of the nation.

If print capitalism once consolidated Bangla identity, digital media present a more ambiguous terrain. Social media, as the survey revealed, dilutes the dominance of Bangla: participants are more divided on whether they post or comment in Bangla online. From Anderson's perspective, the digital sphere poses both a threat and an opportunity. On one hand, the dominance of English in global digital spaces risks undermining the linguistic foundation of the imagined Bangladeshi community. On the other, digital technologies allow for new forms of Bangla solidarity, from online literature forums to nationalist hashtags. The ambivalence captured in this study's data, between pride in Bangla and attraction to English, suggests that the imagination of community is increasingly negotiated online, where linguistic nationalism contends with cosmopolitan performances. This may imply an imagined scenario that Bangladeshi youths use social media to articulate hybrid identities that balance local pride with global visibility (Addan & Ahmed, 2026). The data here substantiate this claim: Bangla retains symbolic value, but its online presence is less stable, reflecting broader tensions between nationalism and globalization.

Ultimately, the persistence of Bangla as a cultural anchor, despite global pressures, demonstrates the

resilience of linguistic nationalism in Bangladesh. Yet the survey findings also underscore its contested and evolving nature. While Anderson's (2006) framework explains the historical formation of Bangladeshi national identity through Bangla, contemporary conditions require an extension of his theory. The imagination of community today contends not only with vernacular print but with digital cosmopolitanism, global English, and transnational cultural flows. Here, recent scholarship offers critical insights. As Shaikh and Akter (2025) argue that while Bangla remains a cornerstone of national identity in Bangladesh, its symbolic and functional roles are increasingly shaped by global cultural and economic pressures. They assert that English, as a language of aspiration and global access, complicates the nationalist narrative once anchored in Bangla's revolutionary legacy. This aligns with the study's evidence that while Bangla remains cherished, its use is uneven across domains: entrenched in the home and classroom, negotiated in friendships, and contested online. Such unevenness suggests that the imagined community is not static but adaptive, responding to shifting cultural ecologies.

7. Conclusion

The study of Bangla as a cornerstone of national identity in contemporary Bangladesh opens a window onto the larger interplay between language, nationalism, and globalization. This inquiry was framed through Benedict Anderson's (2006) theory of imagined communities, which foregrounds language as the medium through which collective belonging is sustained. What emerged from both the data and its interpretation is the layered role of Bangla: a deeply intimate marker of belonging, a symbol of historical resistance, and a contested resource in digital and global contexts. These dimensions confirm the endurance of linguistic nationalism while simultaneously revealing its tensions and vulnerabilities in the twenty-first century.

To ensure Bangla thrives as the heart of Bangladeshi identity, a multi-faceted approach is essential. This includes integrating Bangla as a legitimate language of scholarship within universities, championing its digital presence through new technologies, and refreshing school curricula to connect its heroic past with a dynamic future. Concurrently, promoting Bangla on the world stage through cultural diplomacy and enforcing its practical use in government and law will transform policy from symbolic recognition into tangible reality.

This study, while valuable, has inherent constraints. Its reliance on self-reported data from a hundred educated youths offers a snapshot, not a national portrait, potentially overlooking rural, working-class, and diasporic voices. The analysis, though thematic, would have been deepened by qualitative interviews to probe contradictions, such as the complex relationship with English online. Furthermore, the project captures a moment in time, missing the longitudinal evolution of language attitudes as individuals age. Finally, while the Andersonian framework was instrumental, its focus on print-capitalism cannot fully account for the algorithmically driven, digital landscapes where linguistic nationalism now unfolds. Therefore, future studies should address these issues.

To conclude, in an age of globalization, the task is not to defend Bangla through insularity but to integrate it into global modernity without eroding its symbolic centrality. The challenge lies in balancing cosmopolitan aspirations with cultural rootedness. If this balance is struck, Bangla can thrive not only as a national language but as a global emblem of linguistic pride and resilience. Thus, identity in the twenty-first century is refracted through global networks, yet it remains anchored in the languages that shape our imagination of who we are. In this sense, every utterance of Bangla, whether in a classroom, a poem, or a social media post, is not merely speech but an act of imagining the nation anew.

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