

Students' Perception of The Use of Social Media as A Medium of Learning English: A Study of Digital Ethnography

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Abstract

Using of social media as an English language learning medium among university students continues to grow alongside the acceleration of digital transformation in higher education, yet in-depth studies grounded in students' perspectives through an ethnographic approach remain scarce. This study aims to explore university students' perceptions of social media use as an English language learning medium through a digital ethnography approach. A qualitative method with a digital ethnography design was employed, with data collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews involving 12 purposively selected students and analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña. The findings reveal that students predominantly perceive social media as an effective, flexible, and motivating learning medium, particularly for developing listening, vocabulary, and speaking skills. YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram emerged as the most frequently utilized platforms for informal English learning. Key challenges identified include non-educational content distraction, insufficient pedagogical guidance from instructors, and the risk of acquiring unstructured informal language registers. These findings reinforce the argument that social media holds genuine pedagogical potential that students have been tapping into spontaneously without adequate instructional frameworks. Practically, this study contributes to EFL instructors and curriculum designers in integrating social media systematically into English language learning that is more adaptive, contextual, and sustainably impactful.

Keywords: Digital Ethnography, English As A Foreign Language, Learning Media, Social Media, Student Perception.

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INTRODUCTION

University students' perceptions of social media as a medium for English language learning have become an increasingly relevant issue amid the rapid digital transformation in higher education. In the era of global connectivity, digital platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and WhatsApp have evolved beyond their primary social networking functions to become dynamic, accessible, and sustainable informal learning environments. This transformation has prompted both educators and learners to reconsider how they perceive, access, and engage in the process of acquiring English as a Foreign Language (EFL) beyond the boundaries of conventional classroom settings (Muftah, 2026).

Several academic studies conducted in recent years have provided compelling evidence of the potential of social media to support language learning. A systematic review encompassing more than 396 documents indexed in the Scopus database found that social media has a significant positive impact as a language learning environment, with platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter receiving the greatest attention from researchers in the field of *computer-assisted language learning* (Barrot, 2023). Regarding speaking skills, a systematic review focusing on the integration of social media reported that various digital platforms consistently enhance the motivation and speaking proficiency of EFL learners. Furthermore, a study conducted at the senior high school level in Indonesia revealed that students generally hold positive perceptions of the use of social media for learning English, particularly because it provides easy access to English-language content and enables self-directed learning in a *stress-free environment* (Forberg & Schilt, 2021). In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of social media in language education, as learners increasingly relied on various digital platforms as alternatives to face-to-face instruction.

This study aims to explore university students' perceptions of the use of social media as a medium for English language learning through a *digital ethnography* approach. Digital ethnography was selected because of its ability to capture participants' authentic experiences, practices, and meaning-making processes within digital environments, making it a particularly appropriate approach for understanding the dynamics of language learning in online ecosystems (Fauziah & Sutrisno, 2024). Data were collected through participant observation in online communities, in-depth interviews, and documentation of students' digital activities across various social media platforms. The findings indicate that students generally perceive social media as a flexible, motivating, and relevant learning resource that supports their everyday communicative needs. Nevertheless, several challenges were also identified, including content-related distractions, limited internet infrastructure, and insufficient pedagogical guidance (John, 2021). The study concludes that the effective integration of social media into the EFL learning ecosystem in higher education requires a structured, evidence-based approach to maximize its educational potential.

Substantively, this study is in direct contact with the issues of digital literacy and informal language learning which are the main concerns in contemporary language education discourse. Social media, as one of the core components of Web 2.0 technology, offers interactive features such as commenting, content sharing, and online collaboration that inherently support the principles of communication-based learning and social constructivism (Serino, 2021). The impact of this practice is not only felt on improving vocabulary and listening skills, but also on the formation of self-confidence in communicating using English authentically. Thus, understanding students' perceptions in depth through the lens of digital ethnography is a crucial step in designing English teaching policies that are responsive, contextual, and adaptive to the development of the ever-evolving digital ecosystem.

METHODS

This research uses a qualitative approach with digital ethnography design which aims to deeply understand the perceptions, experiences, and meanings constructed by students in the context of the use of social media as a medium of learning English. The selection of this approach is based on its ability to record cultural practices that take place authentically in the digital space, as it is emphasized that ethnography is one of the five main qualitative approaches that are most appropriately used when researchers want to describe and interpret the cultural patterns of a group in their specific environment (Creswell, 2018). The subject of this study is an active student of the English Education study program at one of the universities in Indonesia who routinely use social media such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok as a source of learning English outside of formal lecture hours. Respondent characteristics included: (1) second- to sixth-semester students, (2) active users of at least one English-language content-based social media platform, and (3) willing to participate voluntarily and openly. The participant selection technique used purposive sampling with a number of 10 to 15 informants, a number that was considered adequate to achieve data saturation in qualitative research.

Data collection is carried out through two main techniques. First, semistructured in-depth interviews are carried out face-to-face or online using interview guides that have been developed based on research questions. Each interview session lasts between 45 to 60 minutes and is recorded with the informant's consent. Second, participatory observations were carried out on the digital activities of informants on the social media platforms they used, including the type of content consumed and the patterns of English-language interactions that occurred in them. Data analysis refers to an interactive model consisting of three continuous stages, namely data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing (Miles, 2023). In the reduction stage, the interview transcription is inductively coded (open coding) to identify the initial themes that emerge from the data. Next, the codes are grouped into more abstract categories through the axial coding process, before finally being synthesized into the main themes (selective coding) that answer the research questions. The validity of the data is guaranteed through the source triangulation technique, namely by comparing interview results, observation field notes, and documentation of informants' digital activities. The entire analysis process is carried out manually but systematically, so that the findings produced are transparent, traceable, and easy to understand by readers from various scientific backgrounds.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Students' General Perception of Social Media as a Media for Learning English

Temuan utama penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa mahasiswa secara dominan memiliki persepsi positif terhadap pemanfaatan media sosial dalam proses pembelajaran Bahasa Inggris. Dari 12 informan yang berpartisipasi, seluruhnya menyatakan bahwa media sosial telah menjadi bagian tak terpisahkan dari rutinitas belajar mereka sehari-hari, baik secara sadar maupun tidak disadari. Platform yang paling sering digunakan adalah YouTube, Instagram, dan TikTok, diikuti oleh Twitter dan WhatsApp. Para informan mengungkapkan bahwa konten berbahasa Inggris yang tersaji secara organik di *feed* mereka secara konsisten mendorong proses pemerolehan bahasa secara informal.

One of the informants said: "I learned new vocabulary precisely from TikTok, not from dictionaries. Every day I find a new term that I can immediately use," (Informant A). Another informant also expressed a similar statement: "YouTube helps me understand pronunciation more than textbooks, because I can hear native speakers directly," (Informant C). These findings are in line with the results of Suharto's research Suharto (2022) who found that

YouTube as an online learning medium has a significant positive impact on students' English mastery, especially in the context of communication-based courses..

Table 1. Social Media Platforms Most Used by Informants in Language Learning

Platform	Jumlah Informan	Aspek Keterampilan yang Dikembangkan
YouTube	11	Listening, pronunciation, vocabulary
TikTok	10	Vocabulary, speaking, ekspresi informal
Instagram	8	Reading, writing, kosakata visual
Twitter	6	Reading, literasi kultural
WhatsApp	5	Writing, komunikasi autentik

Source: Data based on the results of in-depth interviews with 12 informants. A single informant can use more than one platform.

ANALYSIS

Students' Perception of the Effectiveness of Social Media in Language Skills Development

Students consistently perceive social media as an effective means to develop four language skills, with listening and vocabulary as the skills that are most beneficial. These findings are consistent with research (Anggraeni, 2022) which found that the ease of access and navigation of social media was the factor with the highest correlation to the perception of the effectiveness of learning English vocabulary ($r_s = 0.343$) among non-language students.

One informant revealed: "I feel more confident in speaking English after watching a lot of English YouTube content, because I am getting used to the rhythm and intonation," (Informant F). Furthermore, research (Rahmalina&Putri, 2025) also proves that students have a very good perception of Twitter as a means of learning vocabulary, which strengthens the finding that text-based social media platforms also contribute to expanding students' lexicon mastery. However, a number of informants also identified limitations. "The problem is, I am often distracted. The intention is to learn English, but instead watch entertainment content," (Informant H). This indicates that the effectiveness of social media in learning depends on the level of self-regulation of each student (Akbarani, 2021).

Students' Perceptions of the Relevance of Social Media to Academic and Professional Needs

Most informants perceive that the English language skills they acquire through social media have direct relevance to their academic needs and future career prospects. These findings are in line with research (Syahira et al., 2023) which revealed that 95% of 100 non-English speaking students consider English important in the world of work, especially for cross-cultural communication and professional added value. One informant stated: "I am aware that my English skills will be in high demand in the world of work later, and social media helps me practice without having to pay for expensive courses," (Informant D). This perception shows that students do not only view social media as entertainment, but also as an instrument for developing competencies that are functional and economical. Research (Khasanah, 2021) at IAIN Ponorogo also found that students have a positive perception of the importance of English in the academic context, where English language skills are seen as crucial to access scientific references and support study development. The combination

of these findings emphasizes that students' perception of social media cannot be separated from their awareness of the urgency of English itself as intellectual capital (Risadi, 2022).

Students' Perception of Aspects of Digital Interactivity and Engagement

In terms of interactivity, students appreciated the collaborative features available on various social media platforms, such as comment columns, live sessions, and reply features that allow them to practice writing and responding in English authentically. Their research on students' perceptions of Japanese memes and Twitter found something similar, namely that the use of digital cultural content increases students' emotional engagement and encourages critical reflection on cultural differences in language learning. The informant in this study revealed: "I often comment in English on foreign people's posts, and it made me learn to write more naturally and authentically," (Informant J). This kind of active participation is a tangible manifestation of interaction-based learning that is naturally facilitated by the social media ecosystem. (Wahyuningsih, 2021) In the research on Quizizz also underlined that interactive and motivational elements in digital platforms contribute greatly to student acceptance of technology as a learning medium. This confirms that the aspect of interactive design is a key variable that determines the extent to which students are willing and able to utilize digital platforms optimally in their learning process (Nurrahma et al., 2025).

Challenges and Barriers in Using Social Media for Learning

Although the general perception is positive, the study also identified a number of challenges that consistently arise from informants' narratives. The main barriers identified include: (1) distraction from non-educational content, (2) lack of pedagogical guidance from teachers in the use of social media, (3) limited internet connections, and (4) concerns about digital privacy and security. "Sometimes I don't know if the content I consume is linguistically accurate or if it's teaching the wrong English. There is no teacher to guide," (Informant B). Online learning via Zoom also found that the limitations of digital infrastructure and lack of guidance from teachers are significant obstacles in optimizing digital platforms as learning media. On the other hand, (Wilson et al., 2025) Reminded that massive exposure to social media also carries the risk of a decrease in formal language skills due to the dominance of informal registers and the phenomenon of code-switching. This finding is an important note that the use of social media in English learning needs to be balanced with structured digital literacy assistance so that it is not counterproductive to the development of standard and academic language competencies.

Pedagogical Implications: Towards Structured Social Media Integration

Overall, the findings of this study confirm that social media has great pedagogical potential but has not been systematically optimized in the English learning ecosystem in universities. Students have essentially independently integrated social media into their study routines, but without a clear pedagogical framework, this process is sporadic and immeasurable. (Suharto, 2022) In a study on students' perceptions of AI in English teaching, it was found that digital technology, including social media, has been proven to help students improve their language skills when integrated with structured and systematic feedback. Thus, this study recommends that English lecturers need to design a social media-based curriculum that utilizes platforms that are familiar to students, accompanied by clear guidelines, measurable evaluation criteria, and critical reflection mechanisms so that the process of language acquisition through digital media can take place optimally, directed, and responsibly.

CONCLUSION

This study succeeded in revealing that students dominantly have a positive perception of the use of social media as a medium for learning English. Platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, and Twitter are perceived to be effective in developing listening, vocabulary, reading, and speaking skills in an informal but meaningful manner. Social media is considered to provide a flexible, accessible, and pressure-free learning environment so as to encourage students' intrinsic motivation. However, the findings also identified a number of crucial obstacles, namely content distractions, lack of pedagogical assistance, limited digital infrastructure, and the risk of acquiring non-standard language registers. The overall conclusions of this study confirm that the integration of social media in English learning in higher education has great potential, but requires a structured, measurable, and digital literacy-based pedagogical framework so that its impact can be optimized academically and sustainably.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, several practical recommendations are proposed. First, English lecturers are advised to design a social media-based curriculum that integrates digital platforms into structured learning activities, accompanied by clear content consumption guidelines and measurable evaluation criteria. Second, higher education institutions need to develop digital literacy programs that equip students with the ability to critically sort out quality content. Third, follow-up research with a wider scope of participants and mixed methods is strongly recommended to strengthen the generalization of the findings. Fourth, EFL (English as a Foreign Language) curriculum developers need to consider the digital ecosystem of students as legitimate and relevant learning resources. Finally, collaboration between educators, parents, and content provider platforms is needed in creating a digital environment conducive to responsible language learning.

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