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INFORMAL ENGLISH LEARNING THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

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Abstract:

The rapid growth of digital technology has been associated with shifts in the way English is learned, with social media becoming an increasingly popular platform for Informal Digital Learning of English (IDLE). Although many higher education learners use social media to support their language learning, existing literature provides mixed evidence regarding its effectiveness and educational value. This systematic literature review (SLR) synthesises 27 peer-reviewed studies published between 2020 and 2026, retrieved from the Scopus, Web of Science, and ERIC databases. Guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework, the review explores how social media is used to support English language learning, its contribution to language development, and the emerging issues identified in the literature. The findings are synthesised based on three research questions. For RQ 1, the review studies show that learners mainly use social media for vocabulary development through short-form content, utilise mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) for personalised learning, and develop motivation through activity participation in online communities. For RQ 2, vocabulary acquisition was the most reported outcome for language development contributions, followed by listening and speaking skills, through

authentic audiovisual content and activities such as vlogging. For RQ 3, the review highlighted several emerging issues, including the tendency for passive consumption of online information as well as the growing need for Critical Digital Literacy (CDL) to help learners evaluate online content and utilise social media more effectively for learning purposes. Generally, social media can complement formal English learning, yet its success depends on purposeful use and appropriate pedagogical support.

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Keyword:

Digital Literacy; English Language Learning; Informal Digital Learning of English (IDLE); Higher Education; Social Media



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Introduction

The rapid growth of digital technology and social media has transformed the way English learners interact with language beyond the formal classroom setting. In recent years, platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube have increasingly become informal learning spaces where learners engage with the English language through videos, captions, online discussions, and multimodal content. This situation, known as Informal Digital Learning of English (IDLE), highlights how learners independently utilise digital platforms to improve their language skills outside institutional environments (Lee, 2019; Dressman & Sadler, 2020). Unlike traditional classroom-based learning, IDLE promotes flexible self-directed learning and authentic language exposure in socially relevant contexts. The IDLE framework explains how students learn English independently outside the classroom. Social media gives them a space to practise English in real-life contexts, while Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) refers to the use of mobile technologies to facilitate language learning anytime and anywhere, allowing students to integrate English practice seamlessly into their daily routines (Alghasab, 2025). This paper examines how these three elements work together to improve English language proficiency.

The growing integration of social media into English learning has attracted considerable attention among university students who are highly immersed in digital environments. Studies have shown that social media platforms support learner engagement leading to speaking confidence, listening comprehension, and willingness to communicate in authentic situations (Lee & Drajiati, 2019; Sundqvist & Sylven, 2016). Similarly, Hashim et al. (2022) state that video-based platforms such as TikTok and YouTube also encourage multimodal learning by integrating visual, textual, and auditory input. This enables learners to interact with language more effectively. As a result, learners progressively participate in online

communities and informal digital practices that contribute to their overall English language development.

The theoretical foundation for this shift can be linked to Sociocultural Theory (SCT) by Vygotsky (1978), which emphasises that language learning occurs through social interaction and collaboration. In digital environments, social media platforms act as tools that allow learners to interact with More Knowledgeable Others (MKOs), such as proficient peers, influencers, and native speakers, through discussions, comments, and content creation (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Supporting this perspective, the Informal Digital English Learning (IDLE) framework introduced by Lee (2019) highlights how learners develop English autonomously through authentic digital activities such as watching TikTok videos, commenting on Instagram posts, and participating in online communities.

Despite these affordances, the implementation of social media-assisted learning remains complex. While many studies emphasise, benefits related to learner engagement and language development, concerns have also emerged regarding passive content consumption, digital distractions, misinformation, and limited critical digital literacy skills (Teng, 2021). Existing studies have largely focused on specific platforms, learners' perceptions, or short-term interventions (Alhamami, 2020; Soyoo et al., 2023), resulting in limited synthesis of how various social media practices collectively contribute to English language development in higher education contexts. To address these gaps, this study is guided by the following research objectives:

1. To identify the ways in which social media is used to support English language learning in higher education.
2. To analyse the contribution of social media-assisted informal learning to English language development.
3. To synthesise emerging issues, affordances, and future research directions regarding social media-assisted informal language learning.

As language learning is increasingly taking place in digital environments, it is important to have a systematic overview of the trends and research directions in this field. Therefore, this study systematically reviews 27 articles published between 2020 and 2026 on social media-assisted Informal Digital English Learning (IDLE) among English learners in higher education. Guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework, this review synthesises findings from studies indexed in Scopus, Web of Science (WoS), and ERIC databases. Specifically, this review aims to answer the following research questions:

1. How is social media used to support English language learning among learners in higher education?
2. How does social media-assisted informal learning contribute to English language development among higher education learners?
3. What emerging issues, affordances, and future directions can be identified in research on social media-assisted informal language learning?

Literature Review

To establish the current state of knowledge on social media-assisted English language learning, this review focuses on three interrelated areas: social media platforms as environments for Informal Digital Learning of English (IDLE), their reported language development outcomes, and the affordances they provide for English language learning in higher education.

Social Media Platforms and Informal Digital Learning of English (IDLE)

Most studies reported that social media platforms support language development by increasing exposure to authentic English language while encouraging learners to interact with the language in meaningful contexts (Hashim et al., 2022). Such opportunities enable learners to engage with English beyond formal instructional settings and deepen familiarity with real-world language use. However, existing studies present contrasting findings regarding the effectiveness of such exposure. While some researchers found that frequent social media use helps learners feel more confident and increases their exposure to English vocabulary, others argued that passive scrolling and entertainment-focused consumption may create only an illusion of learning rather than meaningful language acquisition (Teng, 2021).

Existing literature has also been criticised for focusing primarily on the amount of exposure while paying less attention to the quality of engagement, learners' interaction with content, and actual language outcomes. Consequently, although social media is widely regarded as a valuable informal learning environment, there remains a limited understanding of how different social media practices contribute to English language development across higher education contexts. As such, there is a need for a more comprehensive synthesis of existing research to determine whether the perceived benefits of social media-assisted learning are consistently supported across different platforms and learning environments.

Language Development Outcomes in Social Media-Assisted Learning

Social media provides useful content for language practice, while Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) makes this content easy to access. Through their mobile devices, students can use social media wherever they are, such as while travelling or taking a short break. For example, they can watch a YouTube video, read an Instagram caption or comment on a post whenever they have some free time (Alghasab, 2025). This flexibility allows students to practise English beyond the classroom and include it naturally in their daily routines. They can also learn at their own pace without the pressure of a formal lesson. Therefore, MALL and social media make language learning more accessible and a more natural part of everyday life. Recent studies revealed that certain social media platforms, such as WeChat, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, offer learners the opportunities to improve vocabulary knowledge, communication skills, and language awareness through continuous exposure to English content (Li et al., 2021; Soyooof et al., 2023). Learners are provided with opportunities to use English in authentic contexts through commenting, content creation, and participation in online communities. These activities support language learning by providing authentic input and opportunities to engage with the English language beyond academic settings.

Despite reported positive learner perceptions, several researchers questioned whether such occurrences translate into meaningful language development. In many cases, learners perceived enjoyment and frequent platform use were treated as indicators of learning success,

despite limited evidence of actual improvements in language proficiency or communicative competence (Rahman et al., 2022). Furthermore, much of the existing literature relies on self-reported perceptions, making it challenging to determine whether social media engagement produces positive and sustainable language outcomes. As a result, further research is needed to examine the relationship between learner engagement and actual language development in informal digital learning environments.

Social-Media Affordances for English Language Learning in Higher Education

Social media offers several features that may support English language learning in higher education contexts. Researchers highlighted that social media platforms provide learners with immediate access to authentic materials, diverse language communities, and flexible learning opportunities that are not always available in traditional classrooms (Gaffas, 2024; Aslan & Sirojitdinovna, 2025). This will create a dynamic and personalised learning experience for learners. These affordances have undeniably contributed to the growing popularity of social media as a supplementary learning tool among university students.

Despite these advantages, researchers question whether learners fully utilise the affordances for language learning purposes. While social media platforms provide opportunities for interaction and self-directed learning, learners often use them primarily for entertainment and social networking rather than for pedagogical objectives (Javahery et al., 2026). Existing studies also tend to focus on the potential benefits of social media features without examining how learners actually use them to support language development. Consequently, there remains a limited understanding of which social media affordances contribute most effectively to English language learning and how these features are used to promote meaningful learning outcomes in higher education settings.

Although social media provides learners with many opportunities to engage with authentic use of the English language, there is still a limited understanding of how different social media practices contribute to actual language development in higher education. Most existing studies focus on specific platforms or learners' perceptions. As such, it becomes difficult to identify which digital practices are most effective for meaningful learning. This gap has become more important with the growing use of AI-powered tools that are changing how learners interact with digital content. Therefore, this study systematically synthesises existing evidence to provide a clearer understanding of social media-assisted English language learning and to inform future research on the role of AI and social media in language education.

Methodology

To answer the posed research questions, a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) was conducted, guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) as proposed by Moher et al. (2009) and later updated by Page et al. (2021). The SLR method was chosen for its systematic identification, appraisal, and synthesis of existing evidence on social media-assisted higher-education informal English-language learning reported in the literature. A transparent and replicable review process was employed to identify, screen, and analyse studies on social media-assisted informal English language learning, language development, and future research directions. The process of attaining the articles includes identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and final inclusion of studies for analysis.

Database and Search Strategy

The search for related articles was conducted using three major databases: Scopus, Web of Science (WoS), and Education Resources Information Center (ERIC). These platforms were selected for the extensive coverage of high-quality peer-reviewed research and established reputations. Boolean searches were utilized to ensure comprehensive and systematic retrieval of the journal articles from these databases. The keywords used in the search were tabulated in Table 1. The search was conducted from 18th May 2026 until 22nd May 2026.

Table 1: Boolean Search Syntax Used

Database	Syntax
Scopus	TITLE-ABS-KEY("social media" OR "TikTok" OR "Instagram" OR "YouTube" OR "social networking sites") AND ("informal language learning" OR "IDLE" OR "vocabulary acquisition") AND ("English learners") AND ("higher education" OR "university"))
WoS	TS=(("social media" OR TikTok OR Instagram OR YouTube) AND ("informal" NEAR/3 "learning") AND ("language learn*" OR "English learn*") AND ("higher education" OR university* OR student*))
ERIC	("social media" OR "TikTok" OR "Instagram" OR "YouTube" OR "social networking sites") AND ("informal language learning" OR "IDLE" OR "vocabulary acquisition") AND ("English learners") AND ("higher education" OR "university"))

Eligibility Criteria

The filtered articles were screened against predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure alignment with the research objectives. The eligibility criteria included the study population, research focus, learning context, social media platforms, publication type, and publication time frame. Specifically, the focus was on informal English language learning facilitated through social media among higher education learners.

Table 2 describes the inclusion and exclusion criteria used in the screening and eligibility stages. Studies that met all the inclusion criteria and none of the exclusion criteria were retained for further analysis. The application of clearly defined eligibility criteria enhanced the consistency, transparency, and reliability of the study selection process. No formal risk-of-bias assessment tool was employed because the review aimed to provide a descriptive synthesis of the literature rather than evaluate intervention effectiveness. Study quality was partially controlled through the inclusion of peer-reviewed articles indexed in recognised databases (Scopus, WoS, and ERIC).

Table 2: Inclusion And Exclusion Criteria

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Population	Studies involving ESL/EFL learners in higher education institutions such as universities, colleges, or foundation programmes	Studies involving primary school, secondary school, preschool learners, or non-student populations
Focus of study	Studies focusing on social media use for informal English learning, IDLE, vocabulary acquisition, or language/literacy development	Studies focusing on formal classroom learning only, online learning platforms without social media elements, or non-language-related outcomes
Platform/context	Studies examining social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, or other social networking sites	Studies focusing solely on learning management systems (e.g., Moodle, Blackboard) or general digital tools not categorised as social media
Publication type	Full-access, peer-reviewed journal articles indexed in Scopus, WoS and ERIC	Peer-reviewed journal articles without full access, conference proceedings, book chapters, dissertations, theses, editorials, review papers, and non-indexed publications
Language and time frame	Articles published in the English Language between the years of 2020 and 2026	Articles published before 2020 or works written in languages other than English

Selection Process

The study selection process was conducted systematically in accordance with the PRISMA guideline. managed continuously by the same panel of reviewers throughout all four processes: identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and final inclusion. Using the search string in Table 1, the search yielded a total of 347 records (Scopus = 61, WoS = 35 and ERIC = 251). The publication period of 2020–2026 was selected to capture the evolving landscape of informal digital learning of English (IDLE) and social media-assisted language learning. The year 2020 was chosen as the starting point, reflecting the increased adoption of digital technologies and social media for language learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, while 2026 marks the most recent developments and emerging trends in the field.

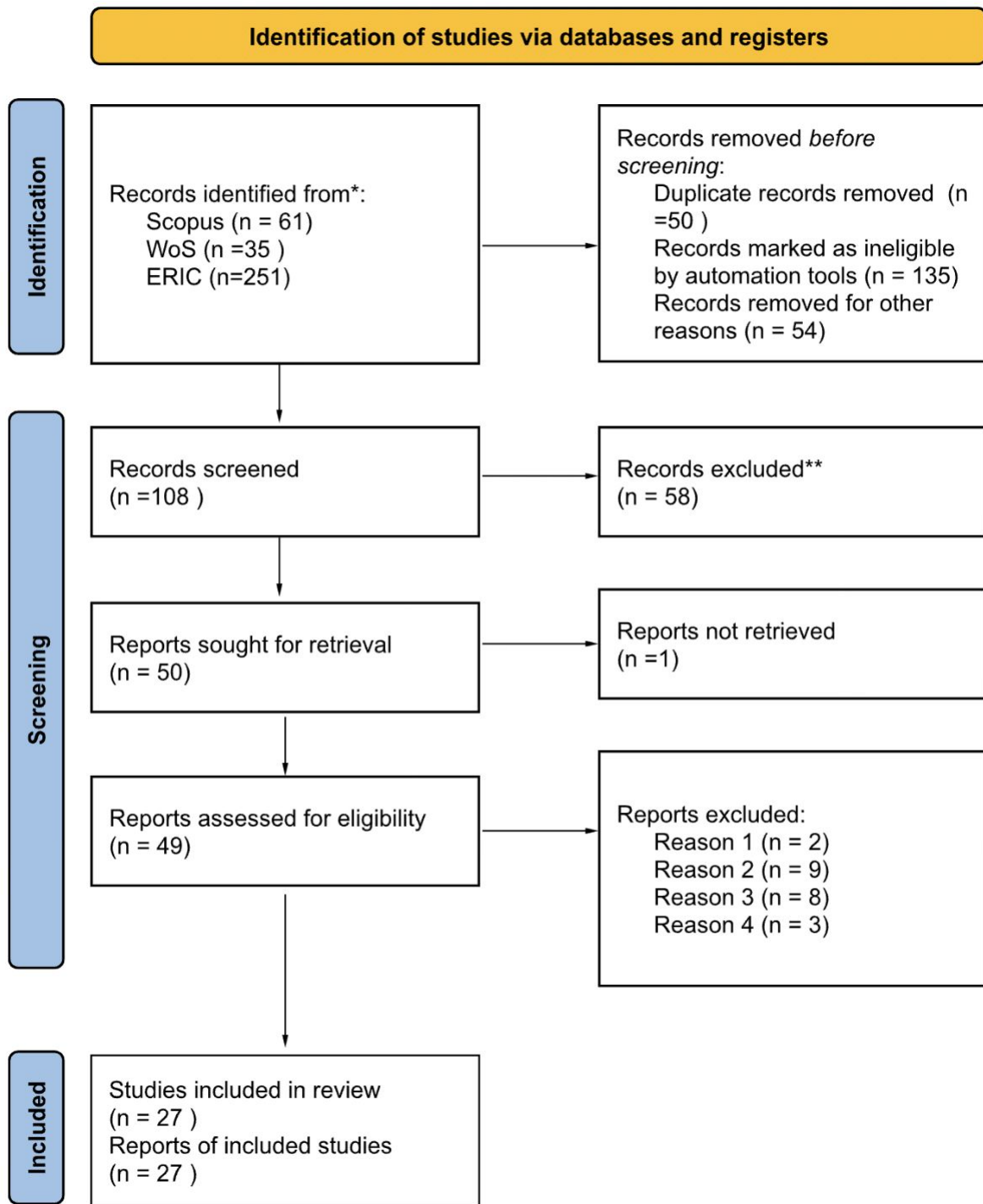


Figure 1: PRISMA Flow Diagram adapted from Page et al. (2021)

Data Analysis Procedure

Data extraction and screening were systematically managed via Google Sheets, with tasks distributed based on database yield. To ensure methodological consistency, all four processes were performed by the reviewers, who were actively involved throughout the entire timeline of the review. Single reviewer's primary-screened the Scopus (n = 61) and Web of Science (n

= 35), while the larger ERIC dataset ($n = 251$) was screened independently by two reviewers. To mitigate bias and ensure coding fidelity, all extracted metadata, which includes authors, year of publication, article database and abstract, were cross-examined by the entire team, with any interpretive discrepancies resolved through peer consensus.

A narrative synthesis approach was employed to analyse and synthesise the findings of the included studies. The studies were grouped according to themes aligned with the research questions, namely (i) the use of social media for English language learning, (ii) contributions of social media-assisted informal learning to language development, and (iii) emerging issues, affordances, and future research directions. Similar findings across studies were identified, compared, and organised into thematic categories to facilitate interpretation.

Findings

RQ 1: How is social media used to support English language learning among learners in higher education?

To address RQ1, a thematic analysis of the 27 reviewed studies identified seven themes illustrating how higher education students use social media for informal English language learning. Since some studies contributed to more than one theme, the total number of thematic occurrences ($n = 36$) exceeded the number of reviewed studies ($N = 27$). Table 3 shows the frequency distribution of these themes.

TABLE 3: Frequency Distribution of Themes Illustrating How Higher Education Students Utilise Social Media for Informal English Language Learning ($N = 36$) Thematic Occurrences

Theme	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Vocabulary Development	7	19.4
Motivation and Engagement	6	16.7
Language and Literacy Development through Informal Learning	6	16.7
Multimodal Learning	6	16.7
Speaking and Communication Practice	4	11.1
Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL)	4	11.1
Content Creation and Self-Expression	3	8.3
Total	36	100.0

The most prominent usage of social media identified in the literature is Vocabulary Development, appearing in 7 studies. Higher education learners frequently utilise the short-form and repetitive features of social media platforms to broaden their vocabulary knowledge and acquire idiomatic expressions and colloquial language that are often absent from formal instructional contexts. This pattern is evident in several studies. For instance, social media also facilitates vocabulary development through both intentional and incidental learning

opportunities, allowing learners to acquire new lexical items through continuous exposure to digital content and online interactions (Bai & Zhou, 2025; Bin-Hady & Al-Tobi, 2024).

Closely following this are Motivation & Engagement (n=6) and Language & Literacy Development Through Informal Learning (n=6). The reviewed studies indicate that the accessible and engaging nature of social media fosters learners' willingness to communicate, allowing them to move beyond passive content consumption towards more active participation in English language learning. Specifically, Ebadi (2024) reported that behavioral, cognitive, and affective engagement on platforms like Instagram has been identified as a primary predictor of second language (L2) motivation among university students. In the same vein, Shafirova and Sa (2024) reported that approximately 22% of learners engaged in activities such as video production and vlogging. These forms of active participation encourage learners to use English for authentic communication, self-expression, and interaction, thereby supporting the development of language proficiency and broader communicative competence. Collectively, these findings highlight the role of social media as a participatory learning environment that supports learner motivation, authentic interaction, and autonomous language development.

Another prominent theme identified in the reviewed studies is Multimodal Learning, as identified in 6 studies. Social media platforms inherently combine text, audio, images, and video, allowing higher education students to engage with English through multiple sensory channels, which caters to diverse learning styles. This is reflected in the findings that learners strategically utilise a range of digital spaces, including online gaming, media-sharing platforms, and social networking sites, to support their language learning needs and personal interests rather than relying on a single platform (Lee & Roger, 2023). Furthermore, Mobile-Assisted Learning (MALL) was highlighted in 4 studies, emphasizing the ubiquitous, "anywhere, anytime" access that smartphones provide to university students, seamlessly integrating English practice into their daily routines. One compelling finding from a study investigating Kuwaiti undergraduate students is that social media applications function as highly effective Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) tools that enable self-paced, personalized language development outside of the traditional classroom (Alghasab, 2025). Hence, these findings reinforce the importance of multimodal and mobile technologies in facilitating authentic, personalised, and flexible English language learning experiences among higher education learners.

Finally, social media serves as a key environment for active language production, enabling learners to engage in authentic communication and self-expression. Speaking & Communication Practice (n=4) demonstrates how learners use voice notes, video replies, and interactive live streams to practice real-time verbal communication with both peers and native speakers. For instance, Kusuma et al. (2024) reported that learners improved their speaking skills through meaning-focused communication activities, such as video calls on WhatsApp and interactions with strangers on OmeTV, which provided opportunities for authentic language use. Meanwhile, Content Creation and Self-Expression (n = 3) reflects a higher level of learner autonomy. By creating their own posts, captions, and videos in English, learners become active language users rather than passive consumers, which contributes to greater confidence and language development. The reviewed studies consistently demonstrate that learners actively utilise social media platforms to create multimodal content such as vlogs, speaking videos, memes, and photo captions. These content creation activities provide opportunities for authentic language use, self-expression, and interaction with wider online

communities, thereby supporting the development of communicative competence and English language proficiency (Ali et al., 2026; Kusuma et al., 2024; Lee & Roger, 2023; Mahmud et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2023). Overall, the reviewed studies highlight the role of social media as an interactive and mobile learning ecosystem that enables learners to engage with English anytime and anywhere according to their individual needs and preferences.

RQ2: How does social media-assisted informal learning contribute to English language development among higher education learners?

Fifteen studies examined social media-assisted informal learning in relation to specific areas of English language learning. Table 4 presents the distribution of the language areas identified across these studies. Importantly, the evidence varied across studies, ranging from learners' self-reported practices and perceived benefits to directly assessed language outcomes. The thematic frequencies should therefore be interpreted as indicating areas of research attention rather than evidence of the magnitude of language improvement.

TABLE 4: Distribution of Language Development Areas in Reviewed Studies

Language Skill Development Theme	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Vocabulary Development	7	33.0
Speaking Development	4	20.0
Listening Development	4	19.0
Reading Development	3	13.0
Writing Development	3	13.0
Total	21	100.0

Vocabulary Development

Vocabulary emerged as the most frequently examined area of English language development, accounting for seven of the identified occurrences. Across the reviewed studies, learners engaged with vocabulary through TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and Telegram by viewing captions, watching short-form videos, following hashtags, and interacting with multimedia content. Rather than indicating that social media use itself necessarily leads to vocabulary improvement, this pattern suggests that these platforms function primarily as sources of repeated and contextualized lexical exposure outside formal instruction.

The evidence further points to both intentional and incidental dimensions of vocabulary learning. Punkhoom et al. (2025), for example, reported significant vocabulary gains associated with TikTok's short-video and multimodal features, while Teng (2024) demonstrated the value of caption viewing for incidental vocabulary learning and exposure to high-frequency words. In contrast, Alghasab (2025) identified vocabulary development as one of learners' primary goals when using smartphone applications informally, reflecting learners' purposes rather than directly measured language gains. Taken together, these findings suggest that the strongest contribution of social media may lie in expanding opportunities for learners to encounter and engage with vocabulary repeatedly and in context. However, evidence of actual vocabulary

improvement should be distinguished from learners' reported practices, goals, and perceptions of learning.

Listening Development

Listening was another recurring area in the reviewed literature, particularly in relation to video-centric platforms such as YouTube and TikTok. Across the studies, learners used these platforms to watch videos, movies, series, reels, and live streams and to listen to songs and podcasts. A common pattern is therefore not simply the use of social media for listening, but learners' voluntary and repeated exposure to spoken English outside scheduled classroom instruction. Kusuma et al. (2024), for example, found that university students engaged in meaning-focused and self-directed activities on YouTube and TikTok, including watching movies and series and listening to songs. Similarly, Alghasab (2025) identified listening as one of the language-learning activities prioritised by higher education learners using social media applications, while Aloraini and Cardoso (2022) reported that learners engaged with spoken English through English Outside the Classroom activities on platforms such as Instagram and YouTube. Collectively, these studies demonstrate that social media broadens learners' access to spoken English and creates opportunities for informal listening practice. Nevertheless, where the studies rely on self-reported practices or perceptions rather than direct assessments of listening performance, these opportunities should not be interpreted as evidence of measurable improvement in listening proficiency.

Speaking Development

The evidence concerning speaking differs somewhat from that relating to receptive language exposure because social media provides opportunities for learners to produce language and interact with other users. Across the reviewed studies, learners used platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, and WhatsApp for vlogging, video creation, video calls, and other forms of online communication. These activities extend opportunities for spoken English use beyond formal classroom settings and place learners in contexts where English serves an immediate communicative purpose. For example, Dashti and Abdulsalam (2025) associated social media use with increased engagement and interaction with English speakers in authentic settings. Donny and Adnan (2022) meanwhile found that learners who expressed concerns about their speaking proficiency in formal learning contexts perceived informal communication through WhatsApp, YouTube, and TikTok as beneficial to their oral communication. These findings indicate that social media can provide accessible spaces for communicative practice, particularly for learners who may have limited opportunities or confidence to use English in formal settings. However, perceived benefits and increased opportunities for speaking should not automatically be equated with measurable gains in speaking proficiency. The evidence therefore more strongly supports social media's role in extending opportunities for authentic language use than a direct causal effect on speaking development.

Reading Development

Reading was less frequently represented in the reviewed literature than vocabulary, listening, and speaking. Nevertheless, the identified studies show that learners encounter substantial amounts of written English through everyday social media practices, including reading posts, captions, comments, blogs, and online discussions on platforms such as Facebook, X, and Instagram. This finding suggests that informal reading on social media is often embedded

within learners' routine digital activities rather than undertaken as an explicitly structured language-learning exercise. Lee and Roger (2023) found that international students strategically combined multiple digital resources, including textual and social media content, to construct personalised language-learning environments. Similarly, Karimah et al. (2024) reported positive student perceptions of Twitter as a medium for English vocabulary and reading. Viewed collectively, these studies suggest that social media expands learners' access to varied forms of written English and creates opportunities for incidental and self-directed reading beyond formal learning environments. However, the available evidence should be interpreted cautiously: exposure to written English and learners' positive perceptions of its usefulness do not, in themselves, demonstrate measurable improvement in reading proficiency.

Writing Development

Finally, the reviewed studies indicate that social media-assisted informal learning also supports writing development, although this was the least frequently reported language skill. Social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and WeChat provide learners with opportunities to engage in written language production through activities including posting updates, writing comments, creating captions, and maintaining informal blogs. Chinese undergraduate students held positive perceptions of WeChat as a virtual learning space that enhanced their confidence and motivation in English writing (Jiao et al., 2023). Such activities encourage learners to move beyond content consumption and participate actively in written communication, thereby supporting the development of writing skills in authentic digital contexts. A similar pattern was observed by Shafirova & Araújo e Sá, (2024), who found out that school video creation often involved written tasks such as translating content and composing captions, which contributed to learners' overall language literacy. Taken together, these studies indicate that social media extends opportunities for informal written production, particularly through short, communicative forms such as captions, comments, translations, and posts. However, the predominance of perception- and activity-based evidence makes it difficult to determine whether frequent digital writing translates into measurable improvements in writing proficiency.

RQ 3: What emerging issues, affordances, and future directions can be identified in research on social media-assisted informal language learning?

In addition to exploring the role of social media in supporting English language learning, the reviewed studies also reveal several emerging issues, affordances, and future research directions. These findings provide a broader understanding of the opportunities and challenges associated with social media-assisted informal language learning.

Emerging Issues on Social Media-Assisted Informal Language Learning

The reviewed studies highlight three major issues related to social media-assisted informal language learning: learning distractions and fragmented learning experiences, concerns about content reliability, and imbalances in language skill development. The entertainment-driven and algorithm-based nature of social media often diverts learners from language learning goals, reducing concentration and encouraging only surface-level engagement (Ali et al., 2026; Kusuma et al., 2024; Javahery et al., 2026). Moreover, social media content is often presented in short and separate segments, which prioritise accessibility and engagement rather than deeper and more structured learning (Aslan & Sirojtdinovna, 2025). The open nature of social

media exposes learners to inaccurate information, grammatical errors, and oversimplified explanations. Learners may also judge content based on popularity rather than credibility, which may lead to misinformation (Aloraini & Cardoso, 2022; Kusuma et al., 2024; Javahery et al., 2026). Although the reviewed studies show that social media supports both receptive and productive language skills, speaking activities are generally informal and self-directed. Learners typically practise through vlogging, video creation, voice messages, and online interactions, with limited opportunities for formal guidance and evaluation. As a result, the effectiveness of speaking development largely depends on learners' initiative and the quality of their interactions (Alghasab, 2025; Kusuma et al., 2024). Collectively, the reviewed studies indicate that these emerging issues may reduce the effectiveness of social media-assisted informal language learning despite its potential to provide accessible learning opportunities.

Affordances of Social Media for Informal Language Learning

Social media platforms provide several technological and pedagogical affordances that support language learning. Platforms such as Instagram and TikTok offer multimodal learning environments by combining text, audio, images, and videos. The reviewed studies indicate that multimodal content supports vocabulary learning and comprehension by combining visual, textual, and auditory input (Aslan & Sirojiddinova, 2025). In addition, features such as disappearing posts on Snapchat create low-anxiety opportunities for learners to practice productive language skills, as the temporary nature of the content reduces concerns about making public mistakes (Aloraini & Cardoso, 2022). Social media also enables learners to develop personalised learning networks by engaging with online games, discussion forums, and media-sharing platforms across different contexts (Lee & Roger, 2023). Interactive tools, such as Bilibili's danmu comments and TikTok's duet feature, further promote peer collaboration by allowing learners to provide feedback and language-related support directly through digital content (Zhang et al., 2023). Moreover, social media expands learning opportunities beyond the classroom by connecting learners with native speakers, experts, and other language users worldwide, thereby integrating formal instruction with authentic language exposure and real-world communication (Manca, 2020). Overall, these affordances demonstrate the potential of social media to create engaging, collaborative, and authentic language learning experiences.

Future Directions in Research

Future research should focus on addressing several gaps identified in the literature on social media-assisted informal language learning. First, more studies are needed to examine how learners use multiple social media platforms simultaneously and how these cross-platform practices contribute to language development. Second, future research should investigate how different types of social media activities support productive language skills. Greater attention should be given to the quality of learner interaction, feedback, and sustained language production to better understand how these factors influence language development. Third, greater attention should be given to Critical Digital Literacy (CDL), including how learners evaluate online information, recognise algorithmic influences, and assess the credibility of digital content (Javahery et al., 2026). Researchers should also explore the relationship between guided and unguided social media activities and their influence on learner motivation, anxiety, and willingness to communicate in digital environments (Kusuma et al., 2025). Finally, as much of the existing literature relies on self-reported data, future studies should adopt longitudinal, experimental, and mixed methods approaches with larger and more diverse

samples to provide stronger evidence of language development outcomes over time (Ebadi et al., 2024). Addressing these areas will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how social media can effectively support informal language learning in higher education contexts.

Discussion

Research Gaps in Social Media-Assisted Informal Language Learning

The specific learning outcomes associated with Informal Digital Learning of English (IDLE) through social media remain insufficiently defined, particularly in terms of how learners integrate multiple platforms to support language development (Kusuma et al., 2024; Lee & Roger, 2023). Existing research also shows a gap in understanding learners' attitudes, motivations, and difficulties in incidental vocabulary learning, suggesting the need for further exploration of learner behaviour in digital environments (Ali et al., 2026; Teng, 2024). Although previous studies have shown that social media supports both receptive and productive language skills, further research is needed to examine how interaction, feedback, and learner engagement influence speaking and writing development. Little is also known about how guided and unguided social media activities influence learners' motivation, confidence, and communication behaviours (Donny & Adnan, 2022; Kusuma et al., 2025). Methodologically, many studies rely on qualitative approaches and self-reported data, indicating a need for more quantitative, experimental, and longitudinal designs with broader and more diverse samples to strengthen the reliability and generalisability of findings (Ebadi et al., 2024; Punkhoom et al., 2025; Shafirova & Araújo e Sá, 2024). Addressing these gaps would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the role of social media in language learning.

Another important gap concerns the limited attention given to Critical Digital Literacy (CDL) in social media-based language learning research. Few studies examine how learners assess credibility, authorship, or ideological influences in online content, as well as how algorithms and influential content creators shape their understanding of language learning (Javahery et al., 2026; Aslan & Sirojiddinova, 2025). This lack of critical engagement may limit learners' ability to use digital resources effectively and responsibly. Therefore, integrating CDL into language learning research and practice is essential to promote more informed, reflective, and autonomous engagement with online learning environments.

Implications of the Review

This comprehensive literature review emphasises how crucial it is for universities to carefully align students' extracurricular digital activities with academic English language training. According to Lee and Roger (2023) and Wiwin et al. (2022), platforms like YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, and Telegram offer distinct educational affordances that can support sustained engagement outside traditional classrooms, increase authentic language exposure, and foster student autonomy. In this regard, rather than being merely an auxiliary recreational activity, Informal Digital Learning of English (IDLE) should be considered as a possible supplemental component of formal curriculum. The increasing gap between academic language needs and modern student digital habits may be closed by incorporating these ubiquitous digital experiences.

Additionally, this analysis indicates that effective informal digital learning requires more than the availability of the technology. Despite the linguistically rich input provided by social media spaces, students often engage in passive consumption or come across instructionally unreliable content. Instructional designers should think about creating task-based, production-oriented activities based on sociocultural learning principles, like vlogging, asynchronous online discussions, and collaborative peer feedback, to overcome these limitations (Shafirova & Araújo e Sá, 2024; Zhang et al., 2023). According to Aslan and Sirojiddinova (2025) and Javahery et al. (2026), students can evaluate the reliability of sources, identify false information, and overcome algorithmic biases by carefully integrating Critical Digital Literacy (CDL) into language classes. Combining these two teaching strategies could help students transition from passive media consumption to more deliberate and critical language output. Universities should consider how social media-based IDLE approaches might improve broader Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) initiatives within official academic institutions. Despite mobile devices providing highly customised and flexible learning paths, algorithmic distractions and cognitive stress might undermine their usefulness in casual contexts (Teng, 2024). This study emphasises that to assess the long-term cognitive and developmental impacts of IDLE, future empirical research must use longitudinal and intervention-based techniques. Optimising digitalised higher education pedagogy ultimately depends on an institution's capacity to strike a harmonic balance between student autonomy and structured pedagogical direction.

Limitations of the Review

Firstly, there are some methodological and conceptual limitations. Initially, the search method was limited to peer-reviewed journal articles that were indexed in the Scopus, Web of Science, and ERIC databases and published between 2020 and 2026. Book chapters, non-English publications, grey literature, and studies published before 2020 were excluded, even though this approach ensured the inclusion of high-quality, current research documenting post-pandemic digital learning methods. As a result, rather than providing a full synthesis of all worldwide scholarship in this field, the findings represent indexed research patterns within significant academic databases.

Secondly, self-reported data, descriptive surveys, and cross-sectional designs are the main sources of methodological variance in the synthesised evidence. Rather than using direct, objective evaluations of language proficiency increases, the included research mostly records learners' self-reported behaviours and perceived advantages. Therefore, rather than providing conclusive evidence of a direct causal relationship between social media use and language progress, these results should be viewed as evidence of the possible affordances and perceived support of social media for informal learning. Additionally, direct cross-study comparison is limited by differences in sample sizes, analytical methods, and research strategies among the 27 investigations.

Finally, with regard to the conceptual ambiguity, the terms "social media-assisted learning," "IDLE," and "MALL" are synonymous. As this study attempted to characterise social media as an environment for IDLE within a broader MALL ecosystem, it is crucial to be cautious when synthesising general conclusions, as different primary research operationalise these concepts differently.

Conclusion

To investigate the impact of social media in expanding English language learning in higher education through Informal Digital Learning of English (IDLE), this systematic literature review synthesised findings from 27 empirical studies published between 2020 and 2026. According to the synthesis, social media sites like YouTube, Instagram, Telegram, and TikTok function as multimodal learning environments that provide language exposure opportunities outside of traditional classroom settings. The reviewed literature indicates that using these platforms is associated with self-reported benefits in vocabulary development, communicative confidence, learner engagement, and self-directed practice. However, the review shows that affordances do not always translate into measurable language development. This is because student engagement levels and the availability of structured pedagogical scaffolding to link informal digital practices with formal instruction impacted the learning outcomes.

The review also highlights significant empirical gaps in the existing body of research. The research still mostly depends on short-term, perception-based data, offering little insight into underlying mechanisms or long-term language acquisition. Furthermore, productive writing, critical digital literacy, and broader cognitive characteristics continue to receive insufficient attention in favour of receptive skills and language exposure. Despite these drawbacks, this review advances the subject of IDLE by presenting social media as a dual-function arena that offers language learners both opportunities and problems. The findings demonstrate that rather than viewing social media as an innate source of expertise, its true value lies in its potential as a useful, real-world learning environment. To fully realise this potential, successful and long-lasting English language acquisition requires a balanced combination of structured pedagogical instruction and unstructured, independent digital engagement.

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