

Can Social Media Support Self-Directed English Learning? A Study of First-Year Undergraduates at the Faculty of Arts and Culture, South Eastern University of Sri Lanka

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Abstract: This study investigates whether social media can effectively support self-directed English learning among first-year undergraduates at the Faculty of Arts and Culture, South Eastern University of Sri Lanka. Drawing on a quantitative survey design, data were collected from 100 students aged 20–22 years using a structured questionnaire. The instrument explored patterns of social media usage, preferred platforms, and students' perceptions of how these platforms contribute to developing listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills in English. The findings indicate that YouTube and WhatsApp were the most frequently used platforms for independent learning, with the majority of students spending one to three hours daily engaging with English-language content. Students reported notable improvements in listening and speaking, moderate gains in reading, and comparatively limited progress in writing. Results also revealed that social media enhanced motivation, exposure to authentic materials, and confidence to use English beyond the classroom. These findings suggest that social media can be an important complementary tool for self-directed language learning when aligned with learners' goals and formal coursework. The study contributes empirical evidence on the role of digital platforms in promoting autonomous English learning in higher education in Sri Lanka.

Keywords: *Social Media, Independent English Learning, First-Year Undergraduates, Self-Directed Learning, Sri Lanka, Language Skills Development.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of social media during the past decade has introduced new possibilities for learners to access authentic English input, practice skills in low-stakes environments, and participate in interactive communities beyond formal classrooms. For first-year students in the Faculty of Arts and Culture at South Eastern University, English proficiency is essential for academic reading, writing, classroom participation, and future employment. During the transition to university study, many students adopt self-directed learning strategies to supplement institutional instruction; social media has emerged as a prominent venue for such autonomous study because it offers flexible, multimodal, and readily available resources. Exploring which platforms students use and how those platforms influence skill development is therefore timely and pedagogically important.

A growing body of research highlights both the affordances and the limitations of social media for English learning. Surgawie et al. (2024) reported that platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok provide short, focused lessons, pronunciation exemplars, and listening-rich materials that can accelerate vocabulary acquisition and oral comprehension when learners engage deliberately with content. At the same time, Surgawie et al. warned that entertaining content, algorithmic distraction, and lack of structured progression may undermine learning unless students exercise critical selection and purposeful engagement. Complementing these empirical findings, Khurram and Palpandan (2023) synthesized literature on undergraduate EFL learners and concluded that social media exerts generally positive effects on motivation, exposure, and incidental learning; yet their review also emphasized the need for disaggregated analyses that compare platforms and map platform use to particular language skills.

Research undertaken in institutional contexts further suggests that pedagogical framing matters considerably. Chandrasiri and Samarasinghe (2019) found that when social media activities were intentionally integrated with curricular objectives, through instructor-curated tasks, guided online discussions, or recommended channels students demonstrated greater engagement and more consistent academic outcomes than when use was unguided. Similarly, Akpan and Chayanuvat (2022) reported that social media platforms can increase learners' confidence and willingness to communicate in English, particularly when platforms provide authentic input and opportunities for peer interaction. These studies collectively indicate that social media's potential is mediated by how learners and educators use it rather than by the technology itself.

Despite these encouraging findings, important gaps remain that motivate the current study. First, there is limited research that isolates first-year cohorts in humanities and arts faculties within multilingual university environments. Students in Arts and Culture programmes often enter university with heterogeneous prior exposure to English, shaped by Sinhala, Tamil, or bilingual schooling and they face specific academic literacy demands that differ from those in science or professional faculties. Second, the literature frequently reports general benefits of social media but less often disaggregates outcomes by platform and by discrete language skills like listening, speaking, reading, writing. Aggregated measures of "overall improvement" obscure how, for example, video platforms might better support listening and pronunciation while text-based communities might lend themselves to writing practice. Third, few studies concentrate explicitly on self-learning behaviours, choices learners make independently of formal instruction and how such behaviours relate to perceived skill gains.

This study addresses these gaps by focusing on first-year students at the Faculty of Arts and Culture, South Eastern University. Its two primary aims are to identify which social media platforms these students use to self-learn English and to examine how engagement with those platforms influences perceived improvement across specific language skills and confidence in academic application. By targeting a clearly defined cohort at a critical stage of academic transition, the research can generate actionable insights for instructors, curriculum designers, and academic support services seeking to improve students' autonomous learning practices.

The practical rationale is straightforward: knowing which platforms students habitually use and why allows educators to recommend high-quality channels, design scaffolded activities that convert passive consumption into active practice, and develop digital-literacy training that helps students evaluate content credibility. At the institutional level, findings can inform support measures, such as workshops or curated resource lists that enhance the effectiveness of self-study and reduce the risks associated with unmoderated online

content. In sum, while prior literature indicates substantial potential for social media to enhance exposure, motivation, and informal practice (Surgawie et al., 2024; Khurram & Palpandan, 2023; Chandrasiri & Samarasinghe, 2019; Akpan & Chayanuvat, 2022; Mera-Garrido, 2024), this study narrows the focus to first-year Arts and Culture undergraduates at South Eastern University.

➤ *Research Problem and Purpose*

Despite the widespread integration of social media into students' daily lives, its specific role in supporting self-learning of English among first-year undergraduates in Sri Lanka remains underexplored. Prior studies have shown that social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, WhatsApp, and TikTok can enhance language skills, motivation, and confidence (Akpan & Chayanuvat, 2022; Surgawie et al., 2024). However, much of this evidence is derived from broad undergraduate samples or international contexts, without considering the unique cultural and linguistic environment of Sri Lanka's Faculty of Arts and Culture students. Khurram and Palpandan (2023) emphasize the need for disaggregated analyses of platform use and specific language skill outcomes, while Chandrasiri and Samarasinghe (2019) note that unguided or unstructured use may not translate into meaningful academic gains.

First-year undergraduates in Arts and Culture faculties may face particular challenges: heterogeneous prior exposure to English, competing linguistic identities, and new academic literacy demands. Understanding which platforms these students use and how those platforms influence listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills is critical for designing effective language support.

The purpose of this study is therefore to identify the types of social media platforms used by first-year undergraduates at the Faculty of Arts and Culture, South Eastern University of Sri Lanka, for self-learning English and to examine the perceived impact of these platforms on improving their English language skills. By addressing this gap, the study aims to inform educators, curriculum designers, and institutional policymakers about leveraging social media as a supplementary resource for enhancing English proficiency in Sri Lanka's higher education context.

➤ *Research Objectives*

- To identify the types of social media platforms used by first-year undergraduates for self-learning English.
- To examine the impact of social media on the improvement of students' English language skills.

➤ *Research Questions*

- Which social media platforms are most commonly used by first-year undergraduates for self-learning English?
- How does social media influence the improvement of English language skills among first-year undergraduates?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

➤ *Social Media Platform Usage and Learner Preferences*

The proliferation of social media has reshaped how learners engage with English beyond traditional classroom boundaries. Al Arif (2019) conducted an exploratory study with Indonesian EFL undergraduates and revealed that Instagram and Facebook were among the most frequently used platforms for informal English practice. Although most students reported initially using social media for entertainment or communication, they expressed positive attitudes toward its potential as a learning aid. Similarly, Al Jahromi (2020) surveyed 330 Bahraini users and found that Instagram, Twitter, and WhatsApp were preferred platforms, with many learners perceiving tangible benefits to their vocabulary acquisition and reading skills. Li and Wang (2020) observed comparable trends among Chinese undergraduates, where exposure to authentic English content on social networks increased opportunities for incidental learning. These findings collectively indicate that platform choice often depends on the skill learners wish to develop, multimedia platforms such as YouTube are suited to listening and speaking, while text-based networks like Facebook and Twitter provide rich contexts for reading and writing practice.

➤ *Effects on Reading and Vocabulary Development*

A consistent finding across studies is that social media can support reading comprehension and vocabulary growth. In Al Jahromi's (2020) quantitative study, respondents overwhelmingly agreed that their reading skills improved through regular exposure to English on social media feeds. Amin, Rafiq, and Mehmood (2020) further reported that learners encountered new vocabulary while browsing posts and captions, leading to incidental acquisition of lexical items. Wang and Low (2023) expanded on this by showing that Chinese EFL students' English reading self-efficacy mediated the relationship between motivation, particularly extrinsic motivation and reading performance when engaging with social media content. These findings suggest that the immersive, informal reading environment of social networks can complement formal instruction by offering authentic and context-rich input that textbooks often lack. For Tamil-speaking undergraduates in Sri Lanka, who may have had limited exposure to English print outside academic contexts, such authentic content could be especially valuable.

➤ *Writing Skill Development and Limitations*

The literature on writing presents more nuanced outcomes. Al Jahromi (2020) found that Bahraini learners believed their writing style improved through frequent online interaction, particularly when composing captions, comments, and messages in English. Al Arif (2019) also noted positive perceptions of improved sentence construction and grammar through written exchanges on social media. However, other studies highlight potential drawbacks. Informal language, abbreviations, and non-standard grammar prevalent on platforms like Twitter or WhatsApp can inadvertently influence learners' academic writing negatively (Khurram & Palpandan, 2023). Amin et al. (2020) warned that students must be taught to distinguish between casual digital communication and formal writing norms. Without guidance,

learners may transfer colloquial expressions or incorrect grammar to academic contexts. This duality underscores the need for educators to provide scaffolding, perhaps through guided writing tasks on social platforms that balance authenticity with formal accuracy.

➤ *Listening and Speaking Skills through Multimedia Exposure*

Research also suggests that multimedia-rich platforms enhance oral and aural skills. Al Arif (2019) reported that students considered watching English videos or tutorials on YouTube and Instagram Stories beneficial for improving listening comprehension and pronunciation. Al Jahromi (2020) similarly observed perceived gains in communication skills, implying improvements in both speaking and listening. Li and Wang (2020) documented that exposure to native and non-native speakers on social media provided learners with diverse accents and conversational patterns, thus broadening their listening horizons. Furthermore, studies on flipped classrooms supported by social media, such as Zhao and Yang (2023), found that integrating video-based social content into pre-class tasks significantly improved EFL learners' oral proficiency and reduced their speaking anxiety. For Tamil-speaking undergraduates, who may have fewer opportunities for real-life English interaction, social media provides an accessible space for auditory and spoken practice.

➤ *Motivation, Attitudes, and Self-Efficacy*

Motivational factors are central to the success of social media-mediated language learning. Al Arif (2019) discovered that although entertainment remained a primary driver for social media use, students valued the chance to improve English informally, suggesting a positive attitude toward integrating learning with leisure. Al Jahromi (2020) confirmed this trend, reporting that Bahraini learners felt more motivated to engage with English when encountering it in authentic and personally relevant contexts online. Wang and Low (2023) demonstrated that self-efficacy plays a critical role: learners confident in their ability to comprehend English texts on social media showed greater reading improvement. This interaction between motivation, self-efficacy, and platform engagement indicates that encouraging learners to set achievable goals and recognize small successes on social media could amplify their language gains. Tamil undergraduates' motivation might similarly be strengthened if instructors connect social media activities to their personal interests and academic needs.

➤ *Challenges, Anxiety, and Problematic Use*

While many studies emphasize benefits, they also caution against unstructured or excessive use. Khurram and Palpandan (2023) note that unguided engagement may not translate into measurable academic improvement. Shu et al. (2023) linked problematic social media use among Chinese EFL learners to heightened foreign language anxiety, perfectionism, and academic burnout, suggesting that the psychological dimensions of online learning warrant careful attention. Al Jahromi (2020) also reported concerns that informal online writing styles could erode formal grammar and spelling accuracy. Francis (2017) argued more broadly that technology's motivational benefits can wane if not integrated meaningfully into structured learning

environments. For Tamil-speaking undergraduates transitioning to English-medium academic work, these challenges imply that social media must be used strategically, with teacher support or peer collaboration, to ensure it supplements rather than distracts from formal learning.

➤ *Mediating Factors Influencing Effectiveness*

Several mediating factors shape the effectiveness of social media for language learning. Platform type is significant: YouTube and TikTok provide rich audiovisual input for listening and speaking, whereas Facebook and Twitter offer contexts for reading and writing (Al Arif, 2019; Al Jahromi, 2020). Learner motivation, both intrinsic and extrinsic also moderates outcomes. Wang and Low (2023) showed that extrinsic motivation, such as grades or recognition, positively influenced reading performance when combined with social media exposure. Self-efficacy further conditions results: confident learners derive more benefit from online English content than those with low self-belief (Wang & Low, 2023). Frequency and quality of use matter as well. Amin et al. (2020) argue that focused, purposeful engagement is more beneficial than sporadic browsing. Cultural and linguistic background is another factor; for Tamil-speaking undergraduates, limited exposure to English in earlier education may influence how effectively they use social media for self-learning.

➤ *Research Gaps and Relevance to the Present Study*

Despite the growing body of research, several gaps persist. Much of the literature relies on self-reported perceptions rather than objective assessments of skill gains (Khurram & Palpandan, 2023). Writing outcomes, especially in formal contexts, remain inconsistent, with little guidance on balancing informal online discourse and academic writing. Moreover, there is a paucity of research focusing on specific linguistic groups such as Tamil-speaking undergraduates in Sri Lanka, who face unique challenges: transitioning from Tamil to English-medium instruction, limited opportunities for authentic English interaction, and socio-cultural factors that shape their learning strategies. By investigating which platforms these learners use and how these tools influence their English proficiency, the present study aims to address these gaps and provide evidence-based recommendations for educators and policymakers seeking to integrate social media into language support strategies.

III. METHODOLOGY

➤ *Research Design*

This study employed a quantitative descriptive survey design to examine the impact of social media on the self-learning of English among first-year undergraduates in the Faculty of Arts and Culture at South Eastern University of Sri Lanka (SEUSL). A descriptive survey design was considered appropriate because it enables researchers to gather data systematically from a defined population, summarize trends, and identify relationships between variables without manipulating the study environment (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The research aimed to identify the types of social media platforms most frequently used by students for self-learning English and to assess their perceived influence on specific

language skills, listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Since the study's objectives were exploratory and explanatory rather than experimental, the survey method provided a reliable and practical approach for collecting data from a relatively large student cohort in a short period. Furthermore, a survey-based quantitative approach allowed for the generation of numerical data that could be statistically analysed to reveal patterns in students' behaviours, preferences, and perceptions (Cohen et al., 2018).

➤ *Study Setting*

The research took place at the Faculty of Arts and Culture of South Eastern University of Sri Lanka (SEUSL), situated in Oluvil in the Ampara District of the Eastern Province. As a national university, SEUSL accommodates a linguistically and culturally diverse student community, where Tamil and Sinhala are the predominant first languages. Among its several faculties, the Faculty of Arts and Culture is one of the largest, offering a broad spectrum of undergraduate programmes in the humanities and social sciences. For first-year undergraduates, English becomes especially important since much of their academic exposure involves textbooks, scholarly articles, and lectures delivered in English, which require adequate language competence. Yet, students often enter the university with mixed levels of English proficiency, influenced largely by prior schooling in Tamil or Sinhala medium. This context was particularly significant for the study, as first-year Arts and Culture undergraduates are at a transitional stage in which self-directed learning strategies, such as the use of social media can play a crucial role in their adjustment to university studies.

➤ *Sampling Procedure*

The study employed a purposive sampling procedure. Purposive sampling is commonly used in educational research when the researcher intends to focus on a particular group that can provide rich, relevant, and diverse data about the phenomenon under investigation (Etikan et al., 2016). In this case, first-year undergraduates at the Faculty of Arts and Culture were chosen because they represent a cohort navigating the critical transition from secondary education to university-level academic work, where self-learning practices are highly significant.

The selection criteria for inclusion in the study were: (a) students enrolled as first-year undergraduates in the Faculty of Arts and Culture, (b) students who had access to social media platforms, and (c) students who reported using social media for English language self-learning purposes. The purposive approach was justified because the study aimed to focus specifically on learners who actively engaged in social media-based self-learning, making them the most suitable participants to address the research questions.

➤ *Participants*

A total of 100 first-year undergraduates from the Faculty of Arts and Culture participated in the study. This sample size was deemed adequate to ensure a reasonable representation of the population while remaining feasible for data collection and analysis. The participants were drawn from a diverse set of academic departments within the faculty, including

Languages, Social Sciences, and Fine Arts. They represented both male and female students, with a range of socio-economic and linguistic backgrounds.

The participants were between 20 and 22 years old, which corresponds to the usual age group of first-year undergraduates in Sri Lanka. All of them reported Tamil as their first language. Consistent with ethical research guidelines, their involvement in the study was entirely voluntary. Each student received an informed consent form that explained the aims of the research, guaranteed anonymity, and emphasized their right to withdraw at any stage. To maintain confidentiality, no personal identifiers were collected.

➤ Research Instruments

The primary research instrument used in this study was a structured questionnaire. Questionnaires are widely recognized as effective tools for collecting data from a large number of respondents, particularly when the objective is to measure attitudes, behaviours, and self-reported experiences (Cohen et al., 2018). The questionnaire for this study was designed to capture data under three key domains:

- **Demographic Information:** Questions on age, gender, and linguistic background.
- **Social Media Use:** Items identifying the specific platforms used (e.g., YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp) and frequency of use.
- **Perceived Impact on Language Skills:** Likert-scale questions (ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”) assessing students’ perceptions of how social media use influenced their listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills.

A pilot study was conducted with 10 students from the same faculty to check the questionnaire’s clarity, reliability, and overall validity. Based on the feedback obtained, slight modifications were made to improve the cultural and linguistic suitability of the items. To further confirm reliability, Cronbach’s alpha was calculated, with values exceeding 0.70 regarded as satisfactory (Field, 2018).

➤ Data Analysis

The questionnaire responses were coded and analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 26. Descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were applied to present participants’ demographic details and to outline patterns in social media use. These measures highlighted the most frequently accessed platforms and gave an overview of the intensity of use for self-learning purposes.

To address the second research question, inferential statistical tests were performed to explore the connection between social media engagement and perceived gains in English language skills. Chi-square tests were utilized to examine associations between categorical variables (for instance, the platform type and the language skill influenced). Correlation analysis was also conducted to assess the strength of the relationship between frequency of use and perceived improvement.

In addition, students’ qualitative responses from the open-ended items were examined through thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-step framework guided this process: becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, identifying potential themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming them, and writing up the findings. This thematic analysis offered deeper insight into students’ perspectives and experiences, enriching the quantitative results.

By integrating statistical findings with qualitative themes, the study enhanced the credibility and depth of its analysis. This mixed-methods approach provided a more holistic understanding of how social media contributes to English self-learning among first-year undergraduates in this setting.

IV. FINDINGS

The findings of this study are presented in line with the research objectives and questions outlined earlier. Section A explores the types of social media platforms used by first-year undergraduates for self-learning English, while Section B examines how these platforms have influenced the improvement of their language skills. Data were collected from 100 participants, ensuring clear representation through percentages and descriptive statistics. Tables are included for key aspects of the analysis, followed by interpretive discussions that relate the findings to existing scholarship.

➤ Social Media Usage Patterns

The survey asked participants which social media platforms they used most frequently for learning English.

Table 1: Most Frequently Used Social Media Platforms for Self-Learning English (N = 100)

Platform	Frequency	Percentage (%)
YouTube	85	85%
WhatsApp	70	70%
Instagram	60	60%
TikTok	45	45%
Facebook	40	40%
Telegram	20	20%
Others	10	10%

The results clearly indicate that YouTube dominates as the most frequently used platform (85%), followed by WhatsApp (70%) and Instagram (60%). TikTok (45%) and Facebook (40%) are moderately used, while Telegram (20%) and other platforms (10%) remain less common.

These findings align with international trends where YouTube is widely acknowledged as a preferred platform for English learning due to its audiovisual affordances (Al Arif, 2019; Surgawie et al., 2024). In contrast, Facebook’s lower ranking is consistent with research noting a decline in its popularity among younger learners for academic purposes (Li & Wang, 2020).

Participants reported the average daily time they allocated to social media for English self-learning. The most common duration was 1–2 hours per day (35%), followed by 2–3 hours (30%). About 15% spent less than one hour, while 12% reported 3–4 hours, and only 8% exceeded 4 hours daily.

This suggests that most undergraduates treat social media as a supplementary activity rather than a full-time learning tool. Previous studies (Amin et al., 2020) confirm that moderate and consistent engagement tends to yield better learning outcomes than either sporadic browsing or excessive use, which may lead to distraction.

YouTube emerged as the most dominant platform. Half of the students (50%) reported using YouTube always, while another 30% said they used it often. Only a small proportion (15% sometimes, 5% rarely) used it less consistently.

This pattern reinforces the role of YouTube as a go-to platform for listening, pronunciation, and speaking practice, which corresponds with Zhao and Yang's (2023) findings that video-based learning significantly reduces speaking anxiety and boosts oral proficiency.

When asked which single platform they considered most effective for learning English, 60% of respondents selected YouTube, while 20% chose WhatsApp and 10% identified Instagram. TikTok (5%), Facebook (3%), and Telegram (2%) were rarely cited.

The preference for YouTube reflects its diverse range of tutorials, lectures, and interactive content. WhatsApp's effectiveness is likely tied to peer study groups and teacher-student communication, making it valuable for collaborative practice (Chandrasiri & Samarasinghe, 2019).

The most frequently consumed content was vocabulary-focused materials (30%), followed by grammar lessons (25%) and speaking practice videos (20%). Listening exercises (15%) and reading articles (8%) were less common, while "other" content (2%) included memes or short interactive quizzes.

This suggests that learners prioritize vocabulary building and grammar consolidation, which they perceive as directly relevant to academic success. Similar trends were observed in Bahraini undergraduates, where vocabulary was reported as the most tangible benefit of social media exposure (Al Jahromi, 2020).

A notable proportion of students engaged in online study communities, though not consistently: 25% often, 30% sometimes, 20% rarely, 15% never, and 10% always. This indicates that while peer interaction occurs, it is not a dominant practice.

Research suggests that structured online peer collaboration improves accountability and outcomes (Akpan & Chayanuvat, 2022). The present findings imply an opportunity for educators to encourage greater use of

WhatsApp or Telegram groups as spaces for academic English exchange.

The majority of students reported moderate to strong engagement with English-learning pages: 40% moderately, 30% very much, and 5% extremely. Meanwhile, 20% engaged only slightly and 5% not at all.

This trend highlights that passive consumption of curated pages is common, but fewer learners actively immerse themselves at an "extreme" level. As Francis (2017) argues, such engagement must be complemented with active learning tasks to sustain long-term benefits.

Table 2: Distribution of Using Different Platforms for Different Language Skills (N = 100)

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Always	25	25%
Often	40	40%
Sometimes	20	20%
Rarely	10	10%
Never	5	5%

The majority of respondents reported using different platforms for different skills often (40%) or always (25%). This indicates a strategic approach to learning, where students recognize the strengths of each platform, for instance, using YouTube for listening, WhatsApp for group discussions, and Instagram for vocabulary. This aligns with Khurram and Palpandan's (2023) call for disaggregated analyses, showing how platform-specific features align with particular skills.

When asked how often they produced their own English content (posts, comments, or videos), 30% sometimes, 25% rarely, 20% never, 15% often, and 10% always reported doing so. This shows that active output remains limited compared to passive input. Since language production is critical for fluency, these findings suggest that more structured encouragement is necessary.

Finally, 35% often, 30% sometimes, 20% rarely, 10% always, and 5% never reported checking notifications from English-learning pages or groups. This indicates a moderate level of responsiveness, but also suggests that learning is often opportunistic, triggered by reminders rather than deliberate schedules.

➤ *Impact of Social Media on English Skills*

Students were asked whether using social media contributed to their English language improvement. The majority, 80%, agreed (55% "yes, to some extent" and 25% "yes, very much"), while 15% were unsure and only 5% disagreed.

This indicates that most undergraduates perceive social media as a positive supplement for language learning, supporting studies by Hashim et al. (2022), which found that undergraduates see social media as an informal but effective tool for acquiring communicative competence.

A key analysis focused on the extent to which students felt their listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills improved due to social media use.

Table 3: Perceived Improvement in Language Skills Through Social Media (N = 100)

Skill	Significant Improvement	Moderate Improvement	Minimal Improvement	No Improvement
Listening	45%	40%	10%	5%
Speaking	35%	40%	20%	5%
Reading	20%	45%	25%	10%
Writing	15%	30%	40%	15%

The table shows Listening is the most improved skill (85% report significant or moderate improvement), reflecting YouTube's dominance as a platform for auditory and audiovisual learning. Speaking follows closely (75%), as learners mimic pronunciation, repeat dialogues, or participate in voice chats. Reading benefits moderately (65%), mainly from Instagram captions, Facebook posts, and articles. Writing remains the least improved skill (45%), reflecting limited opportunities for structured writing tasks on social media. This aligns with global findings that social media enhances oral and receptive skills more than productive writing (Khurram & Palpandan, 2023).

When asked specifically about vocabulary, 60% reported significant gains, 30% moderate gains, and only 10% minimal or no improvement. This confirms that social media provides rich input in informal, contextualized ways, which helps learners expand their lexicon. According to Godwin-Jones (2018), frequent exposure to authentic content fosters incidental vocabulary learning, a finding reinforced here.

Grammar improvement was perceived as moderate: 25% significant, 40% moderate, 25% minimal, and 10% none. Students explained that while they often encountered short grammar-focused lessons on YouTube or Instagram, these resources lacked depth compared to formal classroom instruction. This finding suggests that grammar acquisition requires more structured, systematic practice than social media alone typically provides.

Students were also asked whether social media use motivated them to practice English more regularly. 50% agreed strongly, 30% agreed somewhat, 15% were neutral, and only 5% disagreed.

Thus, 80% felt motivated, demonstrating that social media increases exposure, engagement, and willingness to experiment with language. Previous research (Derakhshan & Hasanabbasi, 2015) found similar results, where motivation rose because students enjoyed interactive and relatable online content.

When asked about confidence in speaking or writing English after using social media, 20% felt much more confident, 45% somewhat more confident, 25% no change, 0% less confident (mainly due to fear of making mistakes publicly).

These findings highlight both the potential and risks of social media: while many gain confidence through exposure, some feel pressure due to the public nature of posts and comments (Sánchez-Cruzado et al., 2021).

About 65% reported interacting with peers in English on WhatsApp groups, YouTube comments, or Instagram captions, while 35% preferred consuming content passively. Interaction was strongest in peer discussion groups (WhatsApp/Telegram), where students practiced everyday English, but weakest in content creation (few made videos or long posts).

This suggests that while interaction exists, it is still limited and informal, leaving scope for teachers to structure more purposeful online collaborations.

Table 4: Overall Effectiveness of Social Media in English Self-Learning (N = 100)

Effectiveness Level	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Very effective	30	30%
Moderately effective	50	50%
Slightly effective	15	15%
Not effective	5	5%

The majority (80%) rated social media as moderately or very effective. Only a small fraction (5%) considered it ineffective.

This finding resonates with the study by Al Rahmi et al. (2021), which concluded that social media, while not replacing formal learning, provides a valuable supplementary role in enhancing accessibility, motivation, and skill development.

Listening and speaking benefited the most from social media, confirming the importance of audiovisual and interactive platforms like YouTube. Vocabulary growth was widely reported, while grammar and writing saw limited gains. Motivation and confidence were positively influenced for the majority of learners. Social media was seen as effective overall, though more in terms of supplementary practice than structured learning.

➤ Summary of Key Findings

The analysis of social media usage and its impact on first-year undergraduates' English self-learning at the Faculty of Arts and Culture, South Eastern University of Sri Lanka,

reveals several key insights aligned with the research objectives and questions.

The study shows that YouTube is the most dominant platform, used by 85% of students, followed by WhatsApp (70%) and Instagram (60%). TikTok and Facebook were moderately used (45% and 40%, respectively), while Telegram and other platforms were least preferred. These findings indicate that students favour platforms with rich audio-visual content and opportunities for interactive learning, supporting previous research that identifies YouTube as particularly effective for improving listening and speaking skills (Al Arif, 2019; Zhao & Yang, 2023).

Time spent on social media for learning English predominantly ranged from 1–3 hours per day, suggesting that most students view social media as a supplementary learning resource rather than a primary tool. This aligns with Amin et al. (2020), who highlight that moderate engagement is often more productive than excessive usage that can lead to distraction.

Students reported strategic use of platforms: YouTube for listening, WhatsApp for peer interaction, and Instagram for vocabulary and short grammar lessons. About 65% of participants acknowledged using different platforms for distinct skills, reflecting a conscious, skill-oriented approach to self-directed learning. However, active participation in content creation was less frequent, with only 25% producing posts, videos, or comments often or always.

Additionally, engagement with English-learning pages or channels was largely moderate, with 70% of students following them to some extent. Interaction in online groups was inconsistent: while some participated often or always (35%), others engaged sporadically or passively (45%). These findings suggest that although social media provides ample learning opportunities, actual utilization varies based on student motivation, habits, and comfort with digital communication.

The perceived improvement across language skills demonstrates that listening and speaking benefited most from social media, with 85% and 75% of students reporting significant or moderate improvement, respectively. These skills naturally benefit from video tutorials, listening exercises, and voice-based interaction on YouTube and Instagram, consistent with Li and Wang's (2020) findings that audiovisual content enhances oral proficiency.

Reading skills showed moderate improvement (65%), primarily through exposure to captions, articles, and posts on social platforms. Writing was the least improved skill (45%), reflecting limited opportunities for structured, formal composition online and the prevalence of informal language, abbreviations, and colloquial grammar on social media (Khurram & Palpandan, 2023).

Vocabulary acquisition was widely reported as a major benefit, with 60% of students experiencing significant gains. Grammar development was more moderate, indicating that

informal social media content alone may not be sufficient for complex grammatical proficiency, which requires structured guidance (Amin et al., 2020).

Motivation and confidence were also positively influenced. Around 80% of participants reported increased motivation to practice English due to social media exposure, and 65% felt more confident in using the language. These results are in line with studies highlighting social media as a motivational tool that integrates learning with leisure and encourages experimentation (Al Arif, 2019; Al Jahromi, 2020).

The overall effectiveness of social media for self-learning was rated moderately or very effective by 80% of respondents, reinforcing its role as a complementary tool rather than a substitute for formal instruction. Only a small fraction (5%) considered it ineffective. These perceptions resonate with Chandrasiri and Samarasinghe (2019), who emphasize that pedagogically framed social media use can improve engagement and learning outcomes, whereas unguided consumption may not.

While social media clearly supports informal learning, vocabulary building, listening, and speaking, it is less effective for writing, grammar mastery, and structured academic skills. Students' selective and strategic use of platforms demonstrates an awareness of these strengths and limitations, although opportunities exist to enhance engagement with peer interaction and active content creation.

V. DISCUSSION

The present study examined the impact of social media on the self-learning of English among first-year undergraduates at the Faculty of Arts and Culture, South Eastern University of Sri Lanka. The findings indicate that social media platforms, particularly YouTube, WhatsApp, and Instagram, play a prominent role in enhancing students' listening, speaking, and vocabulary skills. This aligns with prior studies emphasizing the effectiveness of audiovisual and interactive content for language acquisition (Al Arif, 2019; Zhao & Yang, 2023). Listening and speaking skills showed the highest perceived improvement, suggesting that students benefit from exposure to authentic, multimodal input and opportunities for imitation and repetition.

The study also revealed moderate gains in reading skills and comparatively limited improvement in writing and grammar. While platforms like Instagram and Facebook provide abundant textual content, the informal and often abbreviated nature of communication online may hinder formal writing proficiency (Khurram & Palpandan, 2023). These findings highlight the need for structured scaffolding to translate informal online exposure into formal academic competence, consistent with Amin et al. (2020), who argue that incidental learning requires guidance to achieve measurable gains in grammar and writing.

Motivation and confidence emerged as significant outcomes of social media engagement. A large proportion of

participants reported increased motivation to practice English and greater confidence in using the language, corroborating earlier research that links interactive and entertaining digital content to learner engagement (Al Jahromi, 2020; Akpan & Chayanuvat, 2022). However, the study also noted that excessive or unguided social media use may lead to passive consumption and limited skill improvement for some learners, echoing concerns raised by Shu et al. (2023) regarding foreign language anxiety and distraction.

The findings underscore the importance of skill-oriented platform selection. Students deliberately used YouTube for listening and speaking practice, WhatsApp for collaborative interactions, and Instagram for vocabulary enhancement. This strategic use demonstrates a high degree of self-regulated learning, consistent with Wang and Low (2023), who emphasize the moderating role of learner motivation and self-efficacy in determining the benefits of social media for language learning. The relatively low engagement in active content creation indicates a potential area for pedagogical intervention, as producing language output online can reinforce writing skills and grammar application (Godwin-Jones, 2018).

Culturally, the study contributes novel insights by focusing on Tamil-speaking undergraduates in Sri Lanka, a group that faces heterogeneous prior exposure to English and limited opportunities for authentic interaction. The positive perceptions reported suggest that social media can serve as a bridge between informal learning environments and formal academic requirements, complementing institutional instruction (Chandrasiri & Samarasinghe, 2019). Nevertheless, findings emphasize that social media should not be viewed as a standalone solution; rather, its effectiveness is mediated by purposeful engagement, guidance, and integration with formal curricula.

In summary, the study confirms that social media is a valuable tool for self-directed English learning, particularly in enhancing listening, speaking, vocabulary, motivation, and confidence. Challenges remain in writing and grammar development, highlighting the need for pedagogical strategies that combine informal social media engagement with structured learning support. These findings provide evidence-based insights for educators, curriculum designers, and policy makers aiming to harness social media to strengthen autonomous language learning among first-year undergraduates.

VI. CONCLUSION

This research examined how social media influences self-directed English learning among first-year undergraduates in the Faculty of Arts and Culture at South Eastern University of Sri Lanka. The results indicate that platforms such as YouTube, WhatsApp, and Instagram play a notable role in enhancing language learning, motivation, and learner confidence. Students reported the greatest progress in listening and speaking, moderate development in reading, and relatively limited advancement in writing and grammar. These outcomes are consistent with earlier studies that highlight the

effectiveness of audiovisual and interactive tools for improving oral communication, while also suggesting that informal online writing does not always support the development of formal academic skills (Al Arif, 2019; Khurram & Palpandan, 2023; Zhao & Yang, 2023). By offering authentic and multimodal input, social media enables repetition, imitation, and contextualized learning opportunities that extend beyond traditional classroom settings.

➤ *Limitations of the Study*

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that must be acknowledged. First, the reliance on self-reported questionnaire data introduces potential response bias, as students may overestimate their skill improvement due to social desirability or recall limitations (Amin, Rafiq, & Mehmood, 2020). Second, the study did not employ standardized proficiency assessments, which limits the ability to objectively measure actual skill development. Third, the sample consisted of 100 students from a single faculty, restricting the generalizability of the findings to other faculties, linguistic groups, or universities in Sri Lanka. Fourth, the study captured learners' social media use at one point in time, without examining long-term effects or sustained skill development. Finally, while participants reported platform use and preferences, the study did not analyze the quality or pedagogical design of the social media content, which could significantly affect learning outcomes.

➤ *Significance of the Study*

This study contributes meaningfully to the understanding of social media as a tool for language learning in a Sri Lankan context. By focusing on Tamil-speaking first-year undergraduates, the research addresses a population that has been underrepresented in prior studies. The disaggregated analysis by language skill and platform type provides nuanced insights into how specific platforms influence listening, speaking, reading, and writing differently (Khurram & Palpandan, 2023). These insights are practically significant, as they allow educators to design skill-targeted interventions and provide recommendations for platform-specific learning strategies. Additionally, the study underscores the importance of digital literacy, equipping learners to evaluate content credibility and engage purposefully with social media for learning rather than entertainment alone (Francis, 2017).

➤ *Implications*

The findings carry several implications for teaching, curriculum development, and institutional policy. For educators, social media can be integrated into classroom instruction through curated and guided activities, targeting specific language skills. YouTube videos, for instance, can be used to enhance listening comprehension, while WhatsApp or Instagram exercises can foster collaborative learning and vocabulary acquisition. At an institutional level, universities can develop training workshops, digital resource repositories, or orientation programs to help students leverage social media effectively for self-directed learning. Encouraging students to actively produce content, participate in online discussions, and set personal learning goals may further enhance writing skills and reinforce oral proficiency. Overall, the study suggests that

purposeful and structured use of social media can complement traditional teaching and strengthen learner autonomy.

➤ *Recommendations for Future Research*

Future research should address the limitations identified in this study. Incorporating objective assessment tools, such as standardized English proficiency tests or performance-based evaluations, would allow for more accurate measurement of skill gains. Expanding the sample to include students from multiple faculties, universities, and linguistic backgrounds would improve generalizability and provide a more comprehensive picture of social media use in language learning. Longitudinal studies could track learners over time to assess the sustainability of improvements in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Investigating the quality and pedagogical design of social media content could clarify how content characteristics influence effectiveness. Future studies may also explore active learner engagement, including content creation, peer interaction, and feedback utilization, to identify factors that maximize language learning outcomes (Godwin-Jones, 2018). Finally, examining blended approaches that integrate social media with formal writing instruction may address observed limitations in academic writing development.

In summary, the study demonstrates that social media is a valuable tool for self-directed English learning among first-year undergraduates, particularly in enhancing listening, speaking, vocabulary, motivation, and confidence. While limitations in writing and grammar remain, structured guidance and skill-specific strategies can optimize learning outcomes. The study provides actionable insights for educators, curriculum designers, and policymakers aiming to harness social media as a supplementary language learning tool, particularly for Tamil-speaking undergraduates navigating the transition to English-medium academic work.

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