

ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

THE ROLE OF (SOCIAL) MEDIA IN INFORMAL ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING AMONG HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the role of social media in informal English language learning among high school students in urban and rural areas of Maglaj and Tešanj, Bosnia and Herzegovina. It investigated students' social media use, motivations, perceived language-learning benefits, and experiences of passive and interactive engagement. A mixed-methods design was used, combining quantitative data from 152 students with qualitative responses from 31 students. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics in SPSS, while qualitative responses were analyzed thematically. The study was informed by Social Learning Theory, Constructivism, and Krashen's Input Hypothesis. Students perceived social media as particularly useful for vocabulary and listening development, while accessibility, entertainment, personal interests, communication, travel, and future educational or professional goals were important motivations. Qualitative findings further showed that students valued the flexibility, accessibility, authenticity, and enjoyment of social media-based learning and frequently described incidental learning of vocabulary, expressions, pronunciation, and everyday English. However, distraction, slang, abbreviations, incorrect language use, rapid speech, different accents, and limited opportunities for systematic grammar learning were identified as important challenges. Overall, social media appears to be a valuable complement to formal English instruction, particularly for receptive skills, but structured instruction remains necessary for grammatical accuracy, writing, and sustained productive language use.

Keywords: social media, informal learning, English language learning, high school students, mixed methods, Bosnia and Herzegovina



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1. INTRODUCTION

Social media has become an important part of adolescents' everyday lives and an increasingly significant source of English exposure outside formal education. Platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube provide access to English-language videos, music, posts, conversations, and other digital content. Unlike classroom learning, this exposure is often embedded in entertainment, communication, and personal interests, allowing students to encounter English incidentally through everyday digital activities.

This development is closely related to the concept of informal or extramural language learning, which involves voluntary engagement with the target language beyond formal instruction (Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2016). Social media can increase opportunities for language exposure and interaction while allowing learners to choose content according to their interests and needs (Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2016). However, its informal nature may also create challenges, including distraction, exposure to non-standard language, and limited opportunities for the systematic development of grammar and productive skills.

The role of social media is particularly relevant in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), where English is encountered through education, popular culture, media, and digital communication. Although English is widely present in adolescents' environments, research specifically examining how high school students use social media as an informal English-learning environment remains limited. More attention is needed not only to the frequency of exposure but also to students' motivations, perceived learning benefits, and differences between receptive and interactive engagement.

The present study addresses this gap by examining social media use for informal English language learning among high school students from urban and rural areas of Maglaj and Tešanj. Using a mixed-methods design, it investigates students' patterns of social media use, motivations for engaging with English-language content, perceived language-learning benefits, and experiences of passive and interactive engagement.

It should be noted from the outset that this study investigates students' self-reported use of, and perceptions about, social media as a resource

for informal English learning. It does not measure students' actual English proficiency or objectively verified language gains; rather, it examines how students perceive and describe their own informal learning experiences. This distinction is maintained throughout the manuscript. The following section presents the theoretical framework underlying the study, after which the literature review situates the research within existing scholarship.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded primarily in Krashen's (1985) Input Hypothesis, which holds that language acquisition occurs when learners are exposed to input that is comprehensible and slightly beyond their current level of competence (the "i+1" principle). Krashen further distinguishes between acquisition, an implicit, largely unconscious process driven by meaningful exposure, and learning, the explicit, conscious study of linguistic rules. The Input Hypothesis also proposes that a low "affective filter" – that is, low anxiety and high motivation – facilitates the processing of input into acquired competence. Social media is directly relevant to this framework because it exposes learners to large volumes of authentic, contextually rich English input that they themselves select on the basis of personal interest, which may lower the affective filter and increase the likelihood that exposure is processed as comprehensible input. This framework is used in the present study to interpret why students report benefits concentrated in receptive skills such as vocabulary and listening (RQ1 and RQ3), which are the skills most directly associated with input-driven acquisition, and why passive, receptive engagement is not treated as inherently less valuable than interactive engagement.

Two complementary perspectives are used to interpret the remaining research questions. Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory proposes that learning occurs through observation, imitation, and interaction with models in one's environment; on social media, this perspective helps explain how students' interactive engagement (commenting, messaging, and content creation) may extend informal learning beyond input alone into modeled language production, and is used to interpret RQ4. Constructivist perspectives, which view learners as active agents who build knowledge through participation and personally meaningful experience, are used to interpret RQ2, since they highlight why students' own choice of platforms, content, and topics of interest shapes their motivation and

engagement. Together, these three perspectives provide a coherent, if necessarily interpretive, lens: because the data are self-reported, the framework is used to make sense of students' perceptions rather than to establish causal claims about language development.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Digital technologies have expanded the ways in which foreign languages are encountered and learned. For adolescents, English increasingly extends beyond formal classroom instruction into entertainment, music, gaming, communication, and social media. This engagement can be understood as informal or extramural language learning, in which learners encounter and use the target language outside formal education, often without an explicit intention to study it (Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2016). Social media is particularly relevant because it combines frequent exposure with learner choice, personal interests, and opportunities for interaction (Thorne, 2003).

3.1. Social Media as an Informal Learning Environment: Access, Benefits, and Challenges

The concept of extramural English emphasizes voluntary engagement with English beyond the classroom. Activities such as watching videos, listening to music, reading online content, and communicating with others may lead to incidental learning when they are motivated by entertainment or personal interests (Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2016).

Social media expands these opportunities by providing English-language content across a range of contexts. Thorne (2003) argues that Internet-based environments are not simply technological tools but also social and cultural spaces in which communication and learning occur. Similarly, Social Learning Theory suggests that learning can take place through observation, imitation, and interaction (Bandura, 1977). On social media, students can encounter vocabulary, pronunciation, conversational expressions, and pragmatic forms and may reproduce or adapt them in their own communication.

Research on mobile-assisted language learning also emphasizes accessibility and flexibility. Kukulska-Hulme and Shield (2008) and Viberg and Grönlund (2013) note that mobile technologies

allow language learning across different times and contexts. Social media builds on these characteristics by integrating English exposure into students' existing digital routines.

Within this environment, social media carries both benefits and challenges for informal language learning.

A major benefit of social media is the quantity and variety of language input available to learners. Platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram provide spoken and written English together with visual and contextual information. Learners may encounter different accents, pronunciation patterns, vocabulary, idioms, slang, and cultural references, making social media particularly relevant to listening and vocabulary development (Godwin-Jones, 2018).

Repeated exposure can support incidental vocabulary learning. Students may encounter words and expressions across videos, captions, music, comments, and conversations. Sidig (2021) suggests that repeated encounters can facilitate vocabulary learning, while Krashen's (1985) Input Hypothesis emphasizes the importance of meaningful and comprehensible input. Although social media content is not usually designed for specific proficiency levels, its connection to learners' interests may increase attention and engagement.

Another potential benefit is learner autonomy. Students can choose the content, accounts, and topics they engage with, allowing English to become connected to personally meaningful activities. Such choice may support motivation and sustained engagement (Dörnyei, 2005; Deci et al., 1991). Social media may also expose learners to cultural and pragmatic aspects of English, including humor, informal expressions, conversational conventions, and culturally specific references, thereby supporting communicative competence (Hymes, 1972).

However, social media lacks the systematic structure of formal language instruction. There is generally no progression from simpler to more complex linguistic forms, and frequent exposure to listening and reading may not result in equivalent development of writing or grammatical accuracy. Online input may also contain grammatical errors, unconventional spelling, slang, abbreviations, and other non-standard forms (Androutsopoulos, 2011). Distraction is another limitation, as entertainment,

notifications, and continuously changing content may compete with purposeful learning. Nasution (2022) therefore notes that the educational value of social media is influenced by distraction and content quality.

This informal learning environment also differs in how students engage with it, ranging from passive to interactive forms of participation.

Digital language learning can involve passive or interactive engagement. Passive engagement includes watching videos, listening to content, scrolling through posts, and reading captions or comments. These activities provide language input and may support vocabulary recognition, pronunciation awareness, and listening comprehension, but they offer fewer opportunities for language production.

Interactive engagement includes commenting, messaging, participating in discussions, responding to users, and creating English-language content. These activities require learners to retrieve and produce language and may therefore provide opportunities for productive practice. Kukulska-Hulme and Shield (2008) emphasize interaction and collaboration in mobile-assisted language learning, while constructivist approaches view learning as an active process of constructing knowledge through participation and experience.

Nevertheless, passive engagement should not be considered ineffective, as repeated exposure may contribute to familiarity with vocabulary, pronunciation, expressions, and different varieties of English. Thus, passive and interactive engagement can be viewed as complementary: passive activities primarily provide input, whereas interactive activities offer additional opportunities for production and communication.

3.2. Social Media and English Learning in Bosnia and Herzegovina

The role of social media in English learning is particularly relevant in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where English has a strong presence in education, popular culture, media, and digital communication. Brdarević-Čeljo (2024) found generally favorable attitudes toward English among younger and more highly educated respondents, indicating its strong position in the linguistic and cultural environment of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

English is also increasingly visible in youth culture and public communication. Research on English in Bosnian advertisements indicates its integration into commercial and popular-cultural communication (Kešetović, 2024). Adolescents therefore encounter English through multiple channels beyond school, including music, entertainment, advertising, online communities, and social media.

The concept of extramural English is particularly relevant in this context because voluntary engagement with English can provide substantial exposure outside formal instruction (Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2016). Social media also gives students access to international English-language content and different varieties and accents, which may contribute to awareness of pronunciation and intelligibility (Levis, 2018). At the same time, informal online communication frequently includes slang, abbreviations, and conversational expressions. Students may therefore develop familiarity with informal English while still requiring formal instruction in grammar, academic writing, and register. Research on problematic smartphone use among young people in Bosnia and Herzegovina further highlights the importance of considering adolescents' broader digital behavior (Tomczyk et al., 2024).

Further studies specifically situated in Bosnia and Herzegovina reinforce this gap. Kovačević et al. (2018) identify both opportunities and persistent challenges facing Bosnian high-school EFL learners, while Bećirović et al. (2021) similarly report on high school students' use of digital technology for foreign language learning in Bosnia and Herzegovina, finding largely positive experiences alongside grade-level, but not gender, differences. At the level of online language use more broadly, Bavčić (2022) documents the widespread use of English abbreviations among Bosnian social network users, illustrating how informal digital English has already become embedded in Bosnian users' everyday online communication. Together, these studies confirm that while digital and technology-supported English use has been studied among Bosnian students, the specific role of social media as an informal learning environment, examined through students' own motivations, perceptions, and forms of engagement, remains underexplored.

3.3. Research Gap

Existing literature suggests that social media can support informal English learning by increasing exposure to multimodal input, facilitating vocabulary and listening development, encouraging learner autonomy, and providing opportunities for communication. However, its informal nature also creates challenges related to distraction, non-standard language, passive consumption, and limited opportunities for the systematic development of grammar and productive skills.

Although research on digital language learning has expanded, empirical evidence concerning high school students in Bosnia and Herzegovina remains limited. Previous research in the Bosnia and Herzegovina context has examined attitudes toward English and its presence in public communication, but less attention has been given to students' everyday use of social media as an informal English-learning environment.

Further research is therefore needed to examine students' digital practices, motivations, perceived language-learning benefits, and differences between passive and interactive engagement. The present study addresses this gap by examining high school students from urban and rural areas of Maglaj and Tešanj. It combines quantitative and qualitative evidence to investigate social media use, motivations, perceived effectiveness, and forms of engagement, providing insight into how students experience and evaluate social media as part of their informal English-learning environment.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1. Aim of the Research and Research Questions

The aim of this study was to examine how high school students in Bosnia and Herzegovina use social media for informal English language learning, focusing on their platform preferences, motivations, patterns of engagement, and perceptions of learning effectiveness. The study focused on students from urban and rural areas of Maglaj and Tešanj and examined how everyday digital practices may contribute to English language development outside formal classroom instruction.

As outlined in the Theoretical Framework section above, the study is grounded primarily in

Krashen's (1985) Input Hypothesis, complemented by Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory and constructivist perspectives; these perspectives directly inform the four research questions and hypotheses below.

The study addressed four research questions:

RQ1: How do high school students in Bosnia and Herzegovina use social media for informal English language learning?

RQ2: What motivates their choice of platforms and content?

RQ3: How do students perceive the effectiveness of social media in improving their English skills?

RQ4: How do interactive and passive forms of engagement differ in their learning experiences?

Based on these questions, four hypotheses were formulated:

H1: High school students primarily use platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube for informal English language learning, particularly for vocabulary and listening development.

H2: Students' choice of platforms and content is influenced by accessibility, personal interests, communication opportunities, and practical goals.

H3: Students perceive social media as an effective tool for improving English, particularly vocabulary and listening skills.

H4: High school students perceive interactive engagement with English-language social media content as more beneficial for language development than passive engagement.

4.2. Research Design

A mixed-methods research design was used to investigate students' use of social media for informal English language learning. The quantitative component examined platform preferences, frequency of English-language exposure, motivations, perceived effectiveness, and forms of

engagement. The qualitative component consisted of open-ended questions that allowed students to describe their experiences and perceptions in their own words.

The two datasets were treated as complementary, with quantitative findings identifying general patterns and qualitative responses providing additional context.

4.3. Participants and Sampling Procedures

The total sample consisted of 183 high school students from urban and rural areas of Maglaj and Tešanj, Bosnia and Herzegovina. Of these, 152 students participated in the quantitative component and 31 students completed the qualitative questionnaire.

The quantitative participants were aged 15–19 and included 83 female students (54.6%) and 69 male students (45.4%). In terms of residence, 77 participants (50.7%) lived in rural areas and 75 (49.3%) in urban areas. The largest age group was 16-year-olds ($n = 57$, 37.5%), followed by 17-year-olds ($n = 48$, 31.6%), 18-year-olds ($n = 28$, 18.4%), 15-year-olds ($n = 15$, 9.9%), and 19-year-olds ($n = 4$, 2.6%). Regarding grade level, 48 participants (31.6%) were in the first grade, 41 (27.0%) in the second, 42 (27.6%) in the third, and 21 (13.8%) in the fourth grade.

A convenience and snowball sampling strategy was used. Questionnaires were distributed electronically through school-related Viber groups and institutional or personal email networks, enabling access to students from different grades, genders, and residential backgrounds.

Table 1.
Demographic Characteristics of the Quantitative Sample ($N = 152$)

Gender		
	Frequency	Percent
Male	69	45.4
Female	83	54.6

Age		
	Frequency	Percent
15	15	9.9
16	57	37.5
17	48	31.6
18	28	18.4
19	4	2.6

Grade Level		
	Frequency	Percent
1	48	31.6
2	41	27.0
3	42	27.6
4	21	13.8

Location		
	Frequency	Percent
Rural area	77	50.7
Urban area	75	49.3
TOTAL	152	100

4.4. Research Instruments and Data Collection

Two instruments were used: a structured quantitative questionnaire and an open-ended qualitative questionnaire. Both were administered electronically.

The quantitative questionnaire was completed by 152 students through Google Forms. It included closed-ended questions and Likert-scale items addressing social media use, platforms and content, motivations, perceived effectiveness, and passive and active engagement. Passive engagement included activities such as watching videos and reading posts, whereas active engagement included commenting, participating in discussions, communicating with others, and producing English-language content.

The qualitative questionnaire was completed by 31 students and focused on their experiences, motivations, and perceptions of learning English through social media. The open-ended format allowed participants to provide explanations beyond predetermined response categories.

4.5. Instrument Development and Operationalization

The quantitative questionnaire was developed with reference to previous research on social media use, digital language learning, and learner motivation. It was adapted to the context of high school students in Maglaj and Tešanj and to contemporary patterns of social media use.

The questionnaire was organized around the four research questions. RQ1 addressed frequency

of use, preferred platforms, and English-language exposure. RQ2 focused on motivations such as accessibility, entertainment, personal interests, communication, travel, and future goals. RQ3 examined perceived effectiveness in vocabulary, listening, speaking, and writing. RQ4 distinguished between passive and interactive engagement.

4.6. Data Analysis

Quantitative data from the 152 completed questionnaires were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics, Version 26.0. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were used to summarize responses. Independent-samples *t*-tests and one-way ANOVA were conducted where appropriate to examine differences according to demographic characteristics, including gender and grade level.

The 31 qualitative questionnaires were analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach. Responses were reviewed repeatedly, recurring ideas were coded, related codes were grouped, and broader themes were developed. The qualitative findings were then considered alongside the quantitative results to provide a more comprehensive interpretation of students' experiences.

4.7. Alignment of Variables with the Theoretical Framework and Literature

Gender and grade level were retained as inferential variables because prior research on attitudes toward English in Bosnia and Herzegovina has reported differences associated with age and educational level (Brdarević-Čeljo, 2024), and research on problematic smartphone use among Bosnian adolescents similarly points to demographic differences in digital behavior (Tomczyk et al., 2024); independent-samples *t*-tests and one-way ANOVA were therefore conducted for these variables only, in direct correspondence with RQ3 and RQ4. Urban and rural residence was recorded as a descriptive sample characteristic, reflecting the study's coverage of both settings in Maglaj and Tešanj, but was not tested inferentially because no research question specifically targeted location-based differences; this is acknowledged as a limitation and a direction for future research rather than treated as an analyzed variable.

5. RESULTS

5.1. Preliminary Results: Sample Characteristics

Before addressing the research questions, the demographic composition of the quantitative sample ($N = 152$) is summarized in Table 1. The sample was close to evenly split between female (54.6%) and male (45.4%) students, and between rural (50.7%) and urban (49.3%) residence, with the largest proportions of participants in the first and third grades. This demographic profile is reported here as a preliminary, descriptive step and is kept separate from the research-question-driven analyses that follow; only gender and grade level, not location, were subsequently tested inferentially, as explained in the Methodology.

5.2. Quantitative Findings

The quantitative findings are presented according to the four research questions, focusing on students' social media use, motivations, perceived language-learning benefits, and passive and interactive engagement.

5.2.1. Patterns of Social Media Use for Informal English Learning

Regarding RQ1, students reported a moderate frequency of using social media to practice or improve their English ($M = 3.46$, $SD = 1.23$). Female ($M = 3.47$) and male students ($M = 3.45$) reported nearly identical levels of use. Mean scores across grade levels ranged from 3.29 to 3.57. Among the age groups, 18-year-olds reported the highest mean ($M = 3.71$, $SD = 1.15$), whereas 19-year-olds reported the lowest ($M = 3.25$, $SD = 1.71$); however, this group included only four participants.

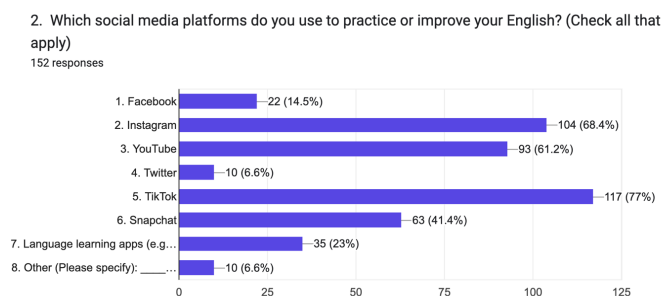
Table 2.
Mean Frequency of Social Media Use for Practicing or Improving English by Demographic Characteristics

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
Age			
15	3.67	15	1.345
16	3.40	57	1.223
17	3.33	48	1.243
18	3.71	28	1.150
19	3.25	4	1.708

Gender			
Male	3.45	69	1.334
Female	3.47	83	1.151
Grade level			
1	3.40	48	1.216
2	3.51	41	1.267
3	3.57	42	1.129
4	3.29	21	1.454

TikTok was the most frequently reported platform for practicing or improving English ($n = 117$, 77.0%), followed by Instagram ($n = 104$, 68.4%) and YouTube ($n = 93$, 61.2%). Snapchat was reported by 63 students (41.4%), language-learning applications such as Duolingo by 35 students (23.0%), Facebook by 22 students (14.5%), and Twitter and other platforms by 10 students each (6.6%).

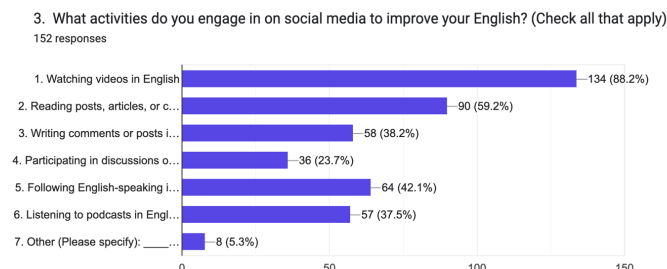
Figure 1.
Social Media Platforms Used by Students for Informal English Language Learning



Students' activities were predominantly receptive. Watching videos in English was the most common activity ($n = 134$, 88.2%), followed by reading posts, articles, or captions ($n = 90$, 59.2%). Following English-speaking influencers or content creators was reported by 64 students (42.1%). Writing comments or posts in English was reported by 58 students (38.2%), listening to English podcasts by 57 students (37.5%), and participating in discussions or conversations by 36 students (23.7%).

Overall, students primarily encountered English through mainstream social media platforms and receptive activities, particularly video viewing and reading.

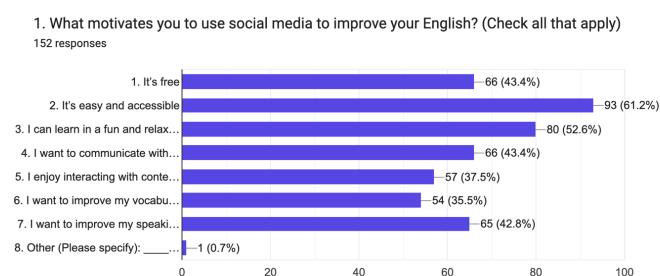
Figure 2.
Activities Students Engage in on Social Media to Improve Their English



5.2.2. Students' Motivations for Using Social Media

RQ2 examined students' motivations for using social media for informal English learning. Ease and accessibility were the most frequently reported reasons ($n = 93$, 61.2%), followed by learning in a fun and relaxing way ($n = 80$, 52.6%). Free access and communication with others were each selected by 66 students (43.4%). Improving speaking skills was reported by 65 students (42.8%), enjoyment of or interaction with English-language content by 57 students (37.5%), and vocabulary improvement by 54 students (35.5%).

Figure 3.
Motivations for Using Social Media to Improve English



Regarding primary motivations, personal interests, including entertainment and sports, were most frequently selected ($n = 93$, 61.2%), followed by communication with friends or people globally ($n = 88$, 57.9%) and travel or study abroad ($n = 80$, 52.6%). Professional prospects were reported by 41 students (27.0%), while passing exams or tests was reported by 34 students (22.4%).

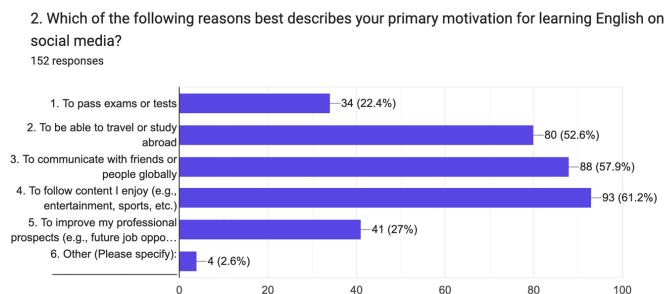
Table 4.

Comparison of Perceived Effectiveness of Social Media by Gender

	Gender	N	Mean	df	t	Sig.
Effectiveness of social media	1	69	4.02			
	2	83	3.78	150	1.76	.079

Figure 4.

Primary Motivations for Learning English Through Social Media



These findings indicate that accessibility, enjoyment, personal interests, communication, and practical future goals were important factors in students' engagement. The findings therefore provide substantial support for H₂. Content variety was not directly measured and was therefore not evaluated as an independent motivational factor.

5.2.3. Perceived Effectiveness of Social Media for English Language Development

RQ3 examined students' perceptions of the effectiveness of social media in developing English language skills. All four skills received mean ratings above the midpoint. Vocabulary and listening received the highest ratings ($M = 4.07$, $SD = 0.95$), followed by speaking ($M = 3.89$, $SD = 0.96$) and writing ($M = 3.52$, $SD = 1.09$).

An independent-samples t-test was conducted to examine gender differences in perceived effectiveness. Levene's test was non-significant, $F(1, 150) = 0.54$, $p = .464$. Male students reported somewhat higher perceived effectiveness ($M = 4.02$) than female students ($M = 3.78$), but the difference was not statistically significant, $t(150) = 1.76$, $p = .079$, 95% CI $[-0.03, 0.51]$.

Overall, students perceived social media as beneficial for English language development, particularly for vocabulary and listening. These findings support H₃ at the level of perceived effectiveness.

Table 3.

Students' Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Social Media for Developing English Language Skills

Statements	N	Mean	SD
How effective do you think social media is in improving your English vocabulary?	152	4.07	.95
How effective do you think social media is in improving your English speaking skills?	152	3.89	.96
How effective do you think social media is in improving your English writing skills?	152	3.52	1.09
How effective do you think social media is in improving your English listening skills?	152	4.07	.95

5.2.4. Passive and Interactive Engagement

RQ4 examined students' patterns and perceptions of passive and interactive engagement. The mean for type of engagement was $M = 1.97$ ($SD = 0.82$), indicating a relatively balanced pattern. Perceived usefulness had a mean of $M = 2.36$ ($SD = 0.81$), indicating a tendency to view active engagement as more useful, while enjoyment had a mean of $M = 1.92$ ($SD = 0.89$).

Gender comparisons showed no statistically significant differences in engagement pattern ($p = .971$), perceived usefulness ($p = .365$), or enjoyment ($p = .777$).

A one-way ANOVA showed no significant grade-level differences in engagement pattern, $F(3, 148) = 1.83$, $p = .144$, or perceived usefulness, $F(3, 148) = 2.01$, $p = .115$. A significant difference was found for enjoyment, $F(3, 148) = 3.03$, $p = .031$.

Tukey's HSD identified one significant difference between first- and third-grade students (mean difference = -0.51 , $p = .032$, 95% CI $[-0.99, -0.03]$). Third-grade students reported a higher mean ($M = 2.24$) than first-grade students ($M = 1.73$), indicating a greater tendency toward active or balanced engagement.

Table 5.
Students' Responses to Passive and Active Engagement Items

Statement	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Do you usually passively consume content in English (e.g., watching videos, reading posts, listening to music)	152	1.97	.821
How do you think passive engagement (watching videos, reading posts, listening to music) helps improve your English language skills	152	2.36	.809
Which type of engagement do you find more enjoyable when learning English	152	1.92	.888
Valid N (listwise)	152		

Table 6.
Comparison of Passive and Active Engagement by Gender

Statement	Gender	N	Mean	t	df	p
Do you usually passively consume content in English (e.g., watching videos, reading posts, listening to music)	Male	69	1.97	1, 150	.004	.971
	Female	83	1.98			
How do you think passive engagement (watching videos, reading posts, listening to music) helps improve your English language skills	Male	69	2.29		.028	.365
	Female	83	2.41			
Which type of engagement do you find more enjoyable when learning English	Male	69	1.90		.091	.777
	Female	83	1.94			

Table 7.
ANOVA of Passive and Active Engagement by Grade Level

	Grade level	N	Mean	SD	df	F	Sig.
Do you usually passively consume content in English (e.g., watching videos, reading posts, listening to music)	1	48	1.94	.885	3, 148	1.83	.14
	2	41	1.85	.853			
	3	42	2.21	.682			
	4	21	1.81	.814			
How do you think passive engagement (watching videos, reading posts, listening to music) helps improve your English language skills	1	48	2.48	.922	3, 148	2.01	.11
	2	41	2.10	.800			
	3	42	2.40	.665			
	4	21	2.48	.750			
Which type of engagement do you find more enjoyable when learning English	1	48	1.73	.939	3, 148	3.03	.03
	2	41	1.93	.877			
	3	42	2.24	.790			
	4	21	1.71	.845			

Overall, students primarily engaged with English through receptive activities, although active or balanced engagement was perceived as relatively useful and enjoyable. Gender was not significantly associated with engagement measures, while grade-level differences were limited to enjoyment. These findings provide partial support for H₄, as the data show positive perceptions of active engagement but do not demonstrate

greater language development resulting from such engagement.

5.3. Qualitative Findings

The qualitative component included open-ended responses from 31 students. Thematic analysis identified four main themes: (1) enjoyment, accessibility, and incidental learning; (2) authentic language exposure and communication; (3)

distraction, informal language, and comprehension difficulties; and (4) lack of structure and the need for formal language support.

5.3.1. Enjoyment, Accessibility, and Incidental Learning

Students frequently described learning English through social media as enjoyable, flexible, and less stressful than traditional learning. Terms such as “fun,” “interesting,” “easy,” and “entertaining” appeared repeatedly. Participants also emphasized accessibility, describing social media as available “anywhere and anytime” and “24/7.”

Several students reported learning vocabulary, expressions, and phrases without deliberately studying. One participant described this as “unconscious learning,” while another stated, “I am not conscious that I learn new things everyday.”

Overall, students perceived social media as an environment in which English learning often occurs incidentally through entertainment and everyday media use.

5.3.2. Authentic Language Exposure and Communication

Students valued exposure to everyday English, including expressions, idioms, pronunciation, and vocabulary. They reported learning expressions commonly used in everyday conversations and encountering English through memes, videos, and songs.

Communication with users from other countries was also described as beneficial. Students additionally identified vocabulary, pronunciation, and listening as areas in which social media was particularly useful.

These responses suggest that social media provides exposure to forms of English associated with everyday communication and naturally occurring language use.

5.3.3. Distraction, Informal Language, and Comprehension Difficulties

Students also identified several challenges. Distraction was a prominent concern, as entertainment and continuous content feeds could interfere with purposeful learning. Participants noted that they sometimes spent “more time scrolling than actually learning.”

Students also reported difficulties with slang, abbreviations, informal language, rapid speech, and different accents. Thus, although authentic language was considered valuable, its informal and varied nature could also make comprehension more difficult.

5.3.4. Lack of Structure and the Need for Formal Language Support

Students identified the lack of structure as another limitation. They reported encountering grammatical mistakes online and expressed uncertainty about whether particular expressions were correct. Participants also noted the absence of systematic grammatical explanations.

Some students described developing an intuitive understanding of English forms through exposure while finding it difficult to explain the underlying grammatical rules. Students therefore generally viewed social media as complementary to formal instruction, particularly for grammar, writing, accuracy, and reliable language guidance.

5.3.5. Overall Qualitative Pattern

Overall, students viewed social media as an accessible, enjoyable, and authentic environment for informal English exposure, particularly when content was connected to their interests. They reported incidental learning of vocabulary and expressions, exposure to everyday English, and opportunities for communication. However, distraction, slang, rapid speech, different accents, grammatical inaccuracies, and limited systematic instruction were identified as important challenges.

5.4. Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

The integration of the two datasets revealed several areas of convergence. Both quantitative and qualitative findings indicated that social media was particularly useful for vocabulary and listening. Quantitatively, these skills received the highest effectiveness ratings, while watching English-language videos was the most common activity. Qualitative responses linked these benefits to repeated exposure to spoken English, songs, pronunciation, everyday expressions, and personally relevant content.

The findings also converged regarding motivation. Accessibility and enjoyment were prominent quantitative factors, while qualitative

responses emphasized flexibility, personal interests, and the perception that social media learning does not feel like traditional studying.

A further area of convergence concerned the limitations of informal digital learning. Students engaged more frequently in receptive than productive activities, and writing received the lowest effectiveness rating. Qualitative responses similarly highlighted limited opportunities for systematic grammar and writing practice, as well as distraction, slang, grammatical inaccuracies, and comprehension difficulties.

Findings concerning passive and interactive engagement were more complex. Students primarily engaged through watching and reading, although active or balanced engagement was perceived as useful and enjoyable. Qualitative responses also identified communication as valuable, but neither dataset demonstrated that interactive engagement resulted in greater language development.

Overall, the findings suggest that social media functions most effectively as a complementary informal learning environment. It extends students' exposure to English and supports vocabulary, listening, authentic language exposure, and incidental learning, while formal instruction remains important for grammar, writing, accuracy, and purposeful language production.

6. DISCUSSION

This study examined how high school students in Bosnia and Herzegovina use social media for informal English language learning, focusing on their patterns of use, motivations, perceived learning benefits, and forms of engagement. Overall, the findings indicate that social media provides a meaningful source of informal English exposure, particularly through video-based and interest-driven content. However, its educational value appears to depend on how students engage with digital content and on the extent to which informal exposure is complemented by formal language instruction.

6.1. Social Media as an Informal English Learning Environment

The findings related to RQ1 and RQ2 show that students' use of social media for English learning is closely integrated into their everyday digital practices. TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube were the most frequently reported platforms, while

watching English-language videos was the most common learning-related activity. Students were motivated mainly by accessibility, enjoyment, personal interests, communication, travel, and future educational or professional goals.

These findings are consistent with the concept of extramural English, which describes learner-initiated engagement with English beyond formal classroom settings (Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2016). The qualitative responses further showed that students often encountered English incidentally while watching videos, listening to music, or following content related to their interests. This suggests that social media allows English learning to become part of everyday entertainment and communication rather than a separate academic activity.

The findings largely support H_1 , as students primarily used mainstream social media platforms and receptive activities, particularly for vocabulary and listening. H_2 is also broadly supported, as accessibility, personal interests, communication, and practical goals were important motivational factors. However, the findings should be interpreted as evidence of students' reported practices and perceptions rather than as proof that social media directly causes language development.

6.2. Perceived Language-Learning Benefits

The findings related to RQ3 indicate generally positive perceptions of social media as a resource for English language development. Vocabulary and listening received the highest effectiveness ratings, followed by speaking, while writing received the lowest rating. This pattern corresponds with students' reported activities, which were predominantly receptive.

The frequent use of video-based content may provide learners with multimodal input combining spoken language, visual information, and contextual cues. Such exposure may support vocabulary acquisition, listening comprehension, pronunciation, and familiarity with everyday expressions (Godwin-Jones, 2018; Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2016).

At the same time, students reported considerably more receptive than productive activities. Watching and reading were more common than writing comments, participating in discussions, or communicating in English.

The qualitative findings also highlighted limited opportunities for systematic grammar learning and concerns about grammatical accuracy. This may help explain why writing received the lowest effectiveness rating.

H₃ is therefore supported at the level of students' perceptions, particularly regarding vocabulary and listening. However, because the study did not include objective proficiency measures or longitudinal assessment, the findings cannot demonstrate actual language gains. Rather, they indicate that students perceive social media as particularly beneficial for certain aspects of English development.

6.3. Passive and Interactive Engagement

RQ4 revealed a distinction between students' actual engagement and their perceptions of engagement. Students most frequently engaged with English through watching and reading, while their responses suggested that active or balanced engagement was perceived as relatively useful and enjoyable.

This finding is relevant to Social Learning Theory and constructivist perspectives, which emphasize observation, interaction, and active participation in learning (Bandura, 1977). Social media can support both receptive exposure and productive participation through commenting, messaging, discussions, and content creation.

From the standpoint of the Input Hypothesis, however, the predominance of passive, receptive engagement is not necessarily a shortcoming: comprehensible input alone, without production, is sufficient for the acquisition process Krashen (1985) describes, which may help explain why students rated passive-skill areas such as vocabulary and listening most favorably even though interactive engagement was less common.

However, the study did not establish that students who engage more actively achieve greater language proficiency. H₄ therefore receives only partial support: students showed positive perceptions of active engagement, but the findings do not demonstrate a direct relationship between interactive engagement and language development.

No significant gender differences were found in engagement patterns, perceived usefulness, or enjoyment. The only significant grade-level difference concerned enjoyment, and this finding

should be interpreted cautiously because the other engagement measures did not show significant grade-level differences.

6.4. Implications for Formal English Instruction

The quantitative and qualitative findings support the view that social media is most useful as a complement to formal English instruction. Students valued its accessibility, enjoyment, personal relevance, and authentic exposure, while also identifying distraction, slang, grammatical errors, rapid speech, different accents, and limited opportunities for systematic grammar and writing practice.

These findings have practical implications for English language teaching. Teachers could incorporate familiar forms of digital content into classroom activities by asking students to discuss short videos, identify and evaluate vocabulary, compare informal and formal expressions, or produce short responses to online content. Such activities could transform predominantly receptive exposure into more purposeful language practice.

Students should also be guided in evaluating the linguistic quality and appropriateness of online content. Formal instruction can help them distinguish between informal digital English and language appropriate for academic or professional contexts. In this way, social media can extend meaningful exposure to English, while classroom instruction provides structure, feedback, grammatical explanation, and opportunities for sustained productive use.

6.5. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Several limitations should be considered. First, convenience and snowball sampling limit the generalizability of the findings beyond the participating students from Maglaj and Tešanj. Second, the study relied primarily on self-reported practices and perceptions rather than objective measures of language proficiency.

The qualitative component also used an open-ended questionnaire rather than interviews or focus groups. Although this provided useful insights into students' experiences, more interactive qualitative methods could provide deeper information about motivation, learning strategies, and digital engagement.

Future research should therefore include larger and more diverse samples, objective proficiency measures, and longitudinal designs. It would also be useful to compare predominantly receptive users with students who regularly communicate, write, or create content in English in order to examine whether different forms of social media engagement are associated with measurable differences in language development.

Overall, the findings suggest that social media should be understood neither as a substitute for formal English instruction nor simply as entertainment. For the students in this study, it represents an accessible and personally relevant environment for informal English exposure, particularly for vocabulary and listening, while structured instruction remains important for grammar, writing, accuracy, and purposeful language production.

7. CONCLUSION

This study examined the role of social media in informal English language learning among high school students from urban and rural areas of Maglaj and Tešanj, Bosnia and Herzegovina. Using a mixed-methods approach, it investigated students' patterns of social media use, motivations, perceived language-learning benefits, and forms of engagement with English-language content.

The findings show that social media functions as a meaningful informal English-learning environment, particularly through TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube. Students most frequently encountered English through videos and content related to entertainment and personal interests. Accessibility, enjoyment, communication, travel, and future educational or professional goals were important factors influencing their engagement.

Students perceived social media as particularly useful for vocabulary and listening, which corresponds with their predominantly receptive patterns of engagement. At the same time, students identified important limitations, including distraction, slang and abbreviations, linguistic inaccuracies, difficulties with rapid speech and different accents, and limited opportunities for systematic grammar and writing practice.

The study contributes to research on informal digital language learning by providing insight into the experiences of high school students

in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The findings also have pedagogical implications, suggesting that teachers can build on students' existing digital practices while providing guidance on language accuracy, register, source evaluation, and productive language use.

Given the limitations of the sample and the reliance on self-reported data, future research should include larger and more diverse samples, objective measures of language proficiency, and longitudinal designs. Overall, social media is best understood as a complement to, rather than a substitute for, formal English instruction. Its greatest potential lies in extending students' exposure to meaningful English beyond the classroom, while structured instruction continues to support grammar, accuracy, writing, and purposeful language production.

Returning to the theoretical framework outlined earlier, these findings are broadly consistent with Krashen's (1985) Input Hypothesis: students reported the greatest perceived benefit in the receptive skills most closely associated with comprehensible input (vocabulary and listening), and their self-selection of personally interesting content is consistent with the framework's emphasis on a lowered affective filter facilitating acquisition. At the same time, the predominance of passive over interactive engagement, and the limited evidence that interactive engagement produced greater perceived gains, suggests that Social Learning Theory's emphasis on modeled interaction and constructivist emphases on active participation may play a more limited role in this specific informal digital context than in more structured or socially mediated learning environments. In this respect, the study nuances these frameworks by suggesting that, for informal social media use among adolescents in this setting, input-driven, learner-selected exposure may be the primary mechanism through which perceived language benefits arise, with interaction and active construction of knowledge functioning as a secondary, complementary pathway rather than the dominant one.

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