

## **Social Media as a Digital Language Learning Ecosystem: An Interpretive Study of Thai Teenagers' English Development**

**\*\*\*On the Internet\*\*\***

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### **Abstract**

Despite growing interest in the role of digital media in language learning, limited research examined how teenagers in EFL contexts engage with social media as informal spaces for English development, particularly through the lens of cognitive, social, and critical literacies. This study explored how Thai teenagers majoring in English and Chinese use social media platforms to support their English language learning, the affordances they perceive, and the drawbacks they encounter. Anchored in the Digital Literacies Framework (DLF), the study employed an interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach, drawing on in-depth semi-structured interviews with ten Thai teenagers who have studied English for over twelve years and possessed A2–B1 CEFR proficiency. Thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's six-phase procedure revealed that platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, TikTok, and Twitter were frequently used to enhance vocabulary, grammar, intercultural communication, and critical thinking, reflecting the development of technical, cognitive, and social literacies. However, participants also reported drawbacks, including distraction, overexposure to informal language, miscommunication due to faulty translations, and difficulties assessing content credibility—highlighting gaps in critical digital literacy. The findings suggest that integrating digital literacy instruction into EFL curricula can help teenagers navigate online learning spaces more effectively and foster more purposeful and reflective language development.

**Keywords:** Digital Literacy, Drawbacks, Language Development, Social Media, Thai Teenagers

Social media has a significant effect on the language learning ecosystem, providing learners with exposure to real use of the language, spontaneous interaction chances, and exposure to language and cultural variance (Barrot, 2022). Sites such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok are becoming more integral parts of the daily routines of students, both as sites of socialization and as unstructured sites for language acquisition (Bouvier & Machin, 2020; Cheung, 2010; Wang et al., 2024). Their affordances, from user-generated videos to real-time

commenting, have been associated with increased student participation, communicative competency, and learning motivation in English (Abdalgane, 2022; Han, 2022; John & Yunus, 2021). Empirical evidence considering inclusiveness highlights the pedagogic value of the platforms in facilitating learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) more easily. Previous research demonstrated the potential of social media for vocabulary development, oral and written fluency, and collaborative and autonomous learning (Mohamad et al., 2023; Muftah, 2024; Rezaul Karim et al., 2022). Specifically, TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube have been identified as promoting creative language use and providing natural, culture-specific materials (Dincer, 2020; Lee, 2023; Liu et al., 2025). Students who consume English content on social media tend to show higher consciousness of the language, increased confidence, and the desire to speak (Hongsa et al., 2023; Rasyid et al., 2023).

English is taught in Thailand as a compulsory foreign language. However, it is disconnected from students' daily lives, for which social media offers a viable gateway to bridging the gap. Teacher-led instruction in Thai classrooms continues to emphasize grammar-based approaches and exam performance (Khemkullanat & Khongput, 2023), limiting students' exposure to English in authentic situations. Nevertheless, English and Chinese language learners in Thailand are very active in social media use and consumption of English-language media daily. Current studies in Thailand showed digital technology's positive influence on speaking ability, intrinsic motivation, and total language performance (Kanoksilapatham, 2022; Poonounin et al., 2024; Ven Ye Teh & Thien, 2024; Waluyo, 2024). The results indicated the pedagogical potential of social media and its potential as a classroom learning supplement in the future. However, some aspects of this phenomenon remain underexplored. First, there are a few understandings of how learners themselves perceive their engagement with social media during language learning. Earlier studies often focused on language acquisition without taking into account the cognitive, affective, and social aspects of online interaction. Second, although earlier research has been justifying the uses of social media, issues encountered by students such as overexposure to informal language, misunderstanding by translation mistakes, online distractions, and the pervasive presence of dubious content have attracted less attention (Asafo-Adjei et al., 2023; Slim & Hafedh, 2019). These are not ancillary drawbacks. They are the necessity for students to acquire a wide range of digital literacies required to constructively and effectively move within online spaces.

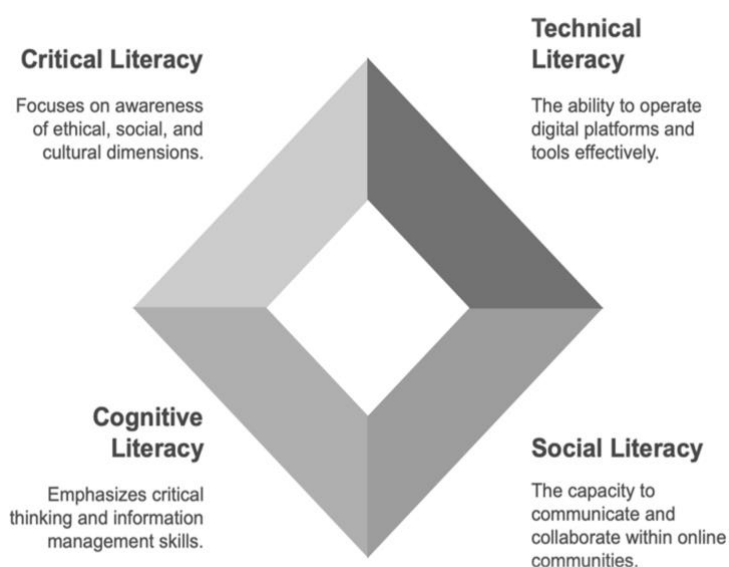
This study addressed the gaps by exploring social media as a digital language learning ecosystem, focusing on how Thai teenagers develop their English skills through social media use. This focus is important because, while social media has become an integral part of young people's lives globally, there is limited empirical understanding of how Thai teenagers in particular engage with these platforms as informal spaces for authentic language use and skill development. Given that traditional classroom instruction in Thailand often remains grammar-oriented and detached from everyday English use, examining social media's role as a self-directed, interactive, and culturally rich language environment offers critical insight into new patterns of English learning, learner autonomy, and the challenges specific to this context. By situating Thai teenagers' experiences at the center, this study highlights a group for whom social media use is not only frequent but also deeply integrated into their daily routines. Teenagers are typically early adopters of new digital platforms, using them extensively for both socialization and learning (Michikyan & Suárez-Orozco, 2016; Reinhardt, 2019). It is essential to concentrate on this demographic, as adolescence represents a critical period for identity formation, peer engagement, and language acquisition in informal settings (Davydova, 2025; Jitsaeng et al., 2024). While social media engagement is also widespread among young adults and older learners, teenagers in Thailand represent a particularly underexplored cohort whose experiences can shed light on how emerging digital practices shape English learning in EFL

contexts. In addition, this study adopted the Digital Literacies Framework (DLF) by Dudeney et al. (2013). This framework was chosen because it offers a comprehensive, multi-dimensional lens for analyzing not just the technical use of digital tools, but also the social interactions, cognitive strategies, and critical thinking skills essential for meaningful language learning in digital environments. By applying this framework, the study can holistically examine the complexities of language learning on social media and address both its affordances and drawbacks. The research investigates three main questions:

- (1) Which platforms are most commonly used by learners?
- (2) How do these platforms contribute to their English language learning?
- (3) What drawbacks do they encounter?

## Theoretical Underpinning

Dudeney et al.'s (2013) Digital Literacies Framework (DLF) was used as the conceptual frame of reference to guide this study, offering an integrative perspective to analyze how students engage with digital technologies in language learning contexts. The framework, as illustrated in Figure 1, identifies four principal areas—technical, social, cognitive, and critical literacy, upon which the analysis of how students use social media platforms to facilitate English language development is based. Technical literacy is the capacity to use online environments, that is, navigate programs, create content, and interact using tools such as comments or chats. Social literacy has been identified as covering digital communication and collaboration skills, while cognitive literacy deals with the capacity for information handling, critically evaluating content, and harnessing linguistic capability. Critical literacy, on the other hand, entails understanding the ethical, cultural, and ideological aspects of web use, where learners are encouraged to challenge sources, motives, and consequences. In addition to Dudeney et al. (2013), broader definitions of digital literacy characterize it as a comprehensive skill that encompasses IT, media, visual, and information literacies (Martin, 2006). Increasingly, institutions have leveraged such frameworks to assist staff and students to acquire the digital literacies they need to teach, research, communicate, and govern academic work (Newland & Handley, 2016; Reyna et al., 2018). These indicate a growing appreciation that digital literacy entails more than functional abilities and involves contextual, pedagogical, and critical knowledge, especially in teaching environments characterized by relentless technology change.



**Figure 1. Digital Literacies Framework (Dudeney et al., 2013)**

The framework is particularly pertinent to this research, as it offers a theoretically robust and multi-faceted conceptual framework for elucidating how Thai adolescents utilize social media for English language acquisition beyond mere functional literacy. Through technical, social, cognitive, and critical literacies, the model enables a subtle analysis of digital engagement. Technical literacy involves more than just digital tool use; it involves the tactical use of platform affordances—algorithmic suggestion, multimodal presentation, and interactivity—to customize and broaden learning. Social literacy emphasizes the worth of online communities and intercultural communication, which all too readily dissolve classroom borders and coalesce global networks of communication. Cognitive literacy concerns the processes by which learners aggregate, process, and negotiate information across multiple digital genres to deepen understanding and linguistic flexibility. In addition, critical literacy is more important in an age of misinformation, altering language norms, and cultural complexity, calling students to assess content credibility, examine digital motives, and make informed engagement decisions. Empirical research has shown that digital literacy tasks have a strong positive effect on reading comprehension, learner autonomy, and effective communication (Dzekoe, 2020; Ngo & Pham, 2024), whereas social media and online forums provide specific affordances to personalized learning and enhanced cultural understanding (Talib, 2018). Nonetheless, issues such as restrictive policies in learning and the need for critical, reflective practice continue to hinder the successful embedding of digital literacies (Alvermann et al., 2012; Waemusa & Jongwattanapaiboon, 2023). Hence, using the DLF is not only crucial in interrogating what students are doing on the internet but also how and why such activities affect their English development—thus, guiding research and pedagogy. It draws attention to the importance of a pedagogical shift that recognizes learners' existing digital literacy competences and explicitly integrates digital literacies into EFL syllabuses to better fit the conditions of contemporary language learning.

In second and foreign language learning, studies continue to confirm that social media incorporation adds value to second language learning in the forms of authentic, context-specific, and socially embedded experiences (Wong et al., 2017). Through interacting with authentic audiences, learners acquire a variety of linguistic input and cultural activities that traditional classrooms cannot offer. Solmaz and Reinhardt (2024) discovered that Turkish language learners who received social media-enhanced instruction acquired more cultural knowledge and language skills by participating in interactive digital practices like tweeting and journaling. These practices illustrate how online contexts facilitate language learning through cooperation, imagination, and self-reflection. As Yeh and Swinehart (2022) similarly focused on social media literacy in managing user-generated content, Talib (2018) concentrated on critical digital literacy to assess the credibility, intention, and effect of online texts. The use of social media in language learning also includes its capacity to integrate digital and academic communication norms. Lantz-Andersson's (2016) research involving secondary students from varied international backgrounds provided evidence of how students employed in closed Facebook groups could blend official education language and unofficial online language. These blended interactions not only illustrated communicative flexibility but also the way social media facilitates social affiliation and a sense of audience consciousness (Pratiwi & Waluyo, 2023), a fundamental component of social and critical literacy. Although prior research pointed to the pedagogical potential of social media, more robust pedagogical models and evidence-based research are necessary, particularly in adolescent settings. The informal, often unstructured way people use social media makes it essential for us to better understand how students perceive, interact with, and are constructed by social media in their own language acquisition.

## **Studies on social media and English language learning**

There are significant studies that investigated the pedagogical potential of social media in English language learning and found its ability to support vocabulary acquisition, learner motivation, and communicative competence. For example, Abbas et al. (2019) investigated the impact of Facebook and YouTube on ESL learners' vocabulary acquisition in Pakistan and concluded that both learners and instructors perceived these websites as suitable resources because they could maintain the learners' attention. Desta et al. (2021) also found that social media usage was beneficial for Ethiopian medical students in English learning, especially in informal settings. These results complement wider trends focusing on digital engagement as a linguistic force for development. In addition, Abdullah et al. (2022) discovered that university students in Jordan benefited from reading abilities, vocabulary, and pronunciation using platforms, e.g., WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter, and testified to platform-based linguistic differences in learning. Rezaul Karim et al. (2022) also validated the role of social media among Indian undergraduates with advantages in all four language skills. Lai and Tai (2021) emphasized that various modes of involvement—stretching from participatory consumption to participatory interaction—influence learners' motivation and performance, pointing to the position of learner agency in online environments. Recently, Liu et al. (2025) demonstrated that the digital migration of "TikTok refugees" can convert a domestic social media landscape into a dynamic setting for genuine language acquisition and intercultural interaction.

Nevertheless, pedagogical threats of excessive usage of social media are still a concern. Asafo-Adjei et al. (2023) warned that excessive use of informal content negatively impacts academic writing, which introduces non-standard patterns into formal writing among students. Similarly, in comparing Facebook-based instruction and conventional instruction among Saudi ESP learners, Slim and Hafedh (2019) confirmed that there was no significant difference in the acquisition of vocabulary despite learners reporting positive attitudes—i.e., social media alone is not enough without aligned motivation in pedagogic principles. Regionally, most research has been built from the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa, and comparatively less research has been identified in Southeast Asia, i.e., Thailand. Nonetheless, current research elucidates that Thai English language teaching (ELT) is going through a revolutionary change. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated computer-mediated communication, whose velocity accelerated the shift towards self-learning and transformed digital learning processes (Songmuang et al., 2025). As English remains the lingua franca of ASEAN (Associated States of Southeast Asia) (Kirkpatrick, 2003, 2020), scholars have noted the necessity to transform traditional ELT methodologies to conform to local environments. This approach incorporates digital technology and pedagogy that resonates with local cultures (Baker, 2008, 2016).

Thai language learners' use of English is influenced by pedagogical, technological, and social contexts. Research underlined that they prefer facilitative, socially embedded approaches (Phothongsunan, 2006) and increasingly expect ELT courses to prepare them for intercultural communication instead of native-like production (Ambele & Boonsuk, 2021; Apridayani et al., 2024). Furthermore, the digital language usage among Asian students, particularly Thai learners, demonstrates a growing capacity for creative communication and critical management of sociolinguistic contexts (Sultana & Dovchin, 2021). Despite these developments, there has been relatively little empirical research on how Thai students specifically utilize social media to acquire English. Closing this research gap is central to comprehending the role that online interaction serves in regionally contextualized language development and pedagogically effective language learning.

## **Methodology**

### **Research design**

This research used an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) design to investigate how Thai teenagers utilize social media to craft their English language learning. IPA is a qualitative approach grounded in phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography and is well suited to investigating how people make sense and interpret their everyday experience within distinctive cultural and social contexts (Smith et al., 2009). As opposed to generalizing between populations, IPA values depth, context, and participants' individual subjective meaning-making processes, thus being best placed to examine learners' digital language use, motivations, and challenges. For those moments of language acquisition and technology use—when being active means being influenced by emotional, cognitive, and sociocultural processes—IPA makes it possible to engage in a nuanced analysis beyond what can be observed to include internal thought and perception (Smith & Eatough, 2008).

The selection of IPA as the methodological foundation for this study is particularly significant, as it foregrounds the lived, subjective experiences of Thai teenagers and provides an in-depth lens for examining how they interpret and navigate their engagement with social media as English language learners. Unlike approaches that limit analysis to observable behaviors or broad patterns, IPA is designed to illuminate the nuanced meaning-making processes that underpin learners' choices, emotional responses, and evolving identities within digital environments (Emery & Anderman, 2020; Larkin et al., 2006; Smith, 2011). This focus is especially relevant in the context of informal language learning on social media, where individual trajectories are shaped by personal histories, shifting social dynamics, and diverse cultural backgrounds. Existing research has demonstrated IPA's utility in revealing the complex interplay between personal agency, social influence, and cultural practice in second language acquisition and digital learning spaces (Kimura, 2019; Luo & Watts, 2024). Through this approach, the current study captures not only the diversity of students' perspectives but also the tensions, agentic practices, and emotional dimensions that define their digital literacy journeys, including issues of identity formation and motivation. By extending IPA into the domain of digital language learning, this research offers thorough insights into how teenagers actively construct and negotiate their linguistic development online, thereby providing a richer foundation for future pedagogical strategies and policy interventions attuned to the realities of contemporary EFL education.

The research design was also supplemented by the theoretical underpinning of the research in the DLF (Dudeny et al., 2013), wherein social, cognitive, technical, and critical literacies are determined as indicating dynamic learner-tech relations. In its casual yet powerful learning context, social media presents tensions that require interpretation rather than superficial explanation. IPA's idiographic concern justifies a dense, case-based exploration of learners' lives with resources like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, which have the potential to diminish the boundary between enjoyment and learning. IPA has also been used by prior studies on applied linguistics and digital teaching to examine learners' practice and identity in digitally mediated spaces (Kim, 2018). Therefore, IPA allowed this study to critically analyze how Thai learners reflect on, internalize, and act on the linguistic and cultural inputs they receive on the internet.

### **Context and participants**

This research was carried out in the context of Thai tertiary education, in which English is taught as a topic at all levels of the national curriculum and increasingly prioritized because it is the working language of the ASEAN Economic Community (Jindapitak, 2019; Kirkpatrick,

2020). The research participants were Thai adolescents who were pursuing language-oriented undergraduate degree courses—eight English majors and two Chinese majors—at a Thai university. All of them engaged in learning English for no less than twelve years in the national school system, beginning with elementary (Prathom 1) and extending to secondary education (Mathayom 6), where English is generally taught for a minimum of three hours a week based on the policy of the Thai Office of the Basic Education Commission in 2017. At the time they arrive at the university, students are considered to have reached levels of A2 to B1 in accordance with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Waluyo, 2019), equivalent to the ability to understand colloquial expressions, participate in simple conversations, and receive information from simple texts. These students were thus well-placed to reflect on how informal digital practices, such as the use of social media, complemented or supplemented their official English learning.

All of them claimed to use social media tools like Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and YouTube for frequent personal interactions and English content exposure on a regular basis, as presented in Table 1. All had studied English for more than 12 years. They had previously interacted with both native and non-native English speakers in schools and private language institutions, which provided them with diverse linguistic inputs and cultural insights. Participants were purposefully sampled, with initial selection on the basis of regular use of English-language social media material and availability for in-depth interviews. This procedure conforms to qualitative research guidelines based on information-rich cases, which provide a window into the phenomenon in question (Patton, 2014). The population consisted of six females and four males aged between 18 and 20. All the participants were briefed on the purpose of the study and ethics, and they were asked for consent before the data collection. Pseudonyms were employed for anonymity protection. This small group of students is a reasonably representative sample of Thai freshmen who have been subjected to a grammar-oriented English learning system focused on test preparation but are increasingly seeking new media for more naturalistic, interactive, and autonomous language learning experiences.

**Table 1. Participant Demographics and Educational Background**

Participant	Gender	Major	CEFR Level	Main Social Media Platforms Used
Student 1	Female	English	B1	Instagram, YouTube
Student 2	Male	English	B1	Facebook, TikTok
Student 3	Female	English	A2/B1	Instagram, Facebook
Student 4	Female	Chinese	B1	TikTok, YouTube
Student 5	Male	English	A2/B1	YouTube, TikTok
Student 6	Female	English	B1	Instagram, Facebook, YouTube
Student 7	Male	English	B1	YouTube, Instagram
Student 8	Female	Chinese	A2	TikTok, Instagram
Student 9	Male	English	A2/B1	Instagram, Twitter
Student 10	Female	English	B1	Instagram, TikTok

### Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, a method well-received in qualitative research as flexible and rich in capturing participants' lived realities, beliefs, and perceptions (Vaivio, 2012). Semi-structured interviews allowed the researchers to ask about key themes, e.g., learners' behaviors online, language development, and social media attitudes, while there was space for participants to elaborate on incidents that mattered to them. The interview

questions were developed based on the study’s objectives and the DLF’s constructs (Dudenev et al., 2013), with specific items to elicit technical, social, cognitive, and critical approaches to digital materials. These methods ensured that data collection directly captured the distinct literacies described in the framework, enabling subsequent thematic analysis to trace not only general experiences but also the multidimensional literacy practices at play. To ensure content appropriateness and cultural relevance, the protocol was expertly validated by two applied linguists with backgrounds in digital pedagogy. Additionally, pilot testing was done with two students who were outside the original participant pool, and slight wording changes were made for readability and clarity.

Thai language interviews were used to introduce linguistic ease and enable participants to convey intricate thoughts free from linguistic restriction, considering their English A2–B1 levels, as detailed in Table 2. Participant interviews were conducted face-to-face or using secure video-conferencing software based on participant availability. Sessions were 30–40 minutes long and audio-recorded after receiving informed consent. Field notes were recorded to capture nonverbal communication and situational observation. For the sake of utmost reliability, standard procedures were adhered to during every interview, such as conducting a structured protocol and a standard introduction script. Trustworthiness was likewise guaranteed through member checking, whereby three participants had their transcripts checked and received confirmation or clarification (Birt et al., 2016). Precise transcription and bilingual translations (Thai and English) were done in the hope of maintaining the authenticity of the response. The data were all kept safe and were followed up by adopting ethical practices to the word.

**Table 2. Summary of Interview Procedures**

<b>Component</b>	<b>Details</b>
Interview Type	Semi-structured interviews
Language	Thai (for linguistic comfort and clarity)
Duration	30–40 minutes per session
Mode	Face-to-face and virtual (Zoom/Google Meet)
Instrument Development	Based on Digital Literacies Framework (Dudenev et al., 2013)
Expert Validation	Two specialists in digital language learning
Pilot Testing	Conducted with two non-participant students
Recording and Note-taking	Audio-recorded with consent; researcher notes taken
Transcription and Translation	Verbatim transcription and bilingual translation (Thai – English)
Reliability Measures	Standardized protocol, consistent procedures, member checking
Ethical Considerations	Informed consent, data anonymization, secure storage

### **Data analysis**

The research utilized thematic analysis (TA) by Braun and Clarke (2006), a common and versatile approach for the advancement, analysis, and interpretation of substantial patterns within qualitative information. Utilization of thematic analysis was approached with its similarity to IPA, especially its focus on participants' lived experiences and meaning-making in particular contexts (Braun & Clarke, 2024; Smith et al., 2009). Whereas IPA typically focuses on idiographic case-by-case analysis, TA provided a systematic process of exploring common and unique experiences among participants in a way that remains grounded in the individuals' own words. This approach was appropriate for investigating how Thai university students use social media to acquire English, as it enabled the researcher to identify both common themes and unique features.

As depicted in Table 3, analysis proceeded on Braun and Clarke's six-step framework: (1) familiarization with data, (2) initial code generation, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) naming and definition of themes, and (6) report creation. Transcripts of initial

interviews were read several times to become familiar with the data, and early remarks were jotted down in margins to record first impressions. Second, inductive coding was manually done line by line to identify major bits. Codes were then subsumed under umbrella categories based on the four strands of the DLF (Dudeney et al., 2013) of technical, social, cognitive, and critical literacy. Themes were then built further through iterative analysis to bring about internal consistency and conceptual distinctiveness. To enhance credibility, the investigator kept an audit trail of the decision-making process and used peer debriefing with a qualitative researcher external to the research team. Final themes were checked against raw data to ensure that they represented participants' perceptions and contextual realities.

**Table 3. Thematic Analysis Procedures**

Stage	Description
1. Familiarization	Transcripts read and re-read; initial notes taken for early impressions
2. Initial Coding	Inductive, line-by-line coding of meaningful units
3. Theme Development	Codes grouped into conceptual categories (aligned with Digital Literacies)
4. Theme Review	Themes refined for internal coherence and thematic distinctiveness
5. Theme Definition	Themes clearly defined and named, reflecting both theoretical and emergent ideas
6. Reporting	Final narrative developed using themes, supported by participant quotations

To maintain analytical rigor and reduce interpretive bias, the principle of phenomenological reduction (bracketing) was carefully applied throughout data analysis (Tufford & Newman, 2012). Researchers actively engaged in reflective journaling before and during the analytic process, recording preconceptions, expectations, and personal experiences with social media to foreground participants' voices rather than impose external meanings (Vicary et al., 2017). During coding and theme development, analytic memos were used to distinguish participants' perspectives from researcher interpretations, and regular peer debriefing with an external qualitative expert provided an additional layer of accountability.

Researcher reflexivity was also integral to the analytic process (Kleinsasser, 2000). As digital language users and educators, researchers acknowledged that their engagement with social media could influence interpretation. To address this, the researchers critically examined how their beliefs and experiences might shape the reading of the data, especially in recognizing both the affordances and pitfalls of social media in language learning. This reflexive stance was explicitly documented in analytic memos and discussed in peer debriefing sessions, ensuring transparency and helping to balance empathy for participants with analytic distance. Through these measures, the study sought to produce findings that were both credible and authentically grounded in participants' lived realities.

## Findings

The findings from the IPA revealed three overarching themes: (1) social media platforms used by Thai university students, (2) perceived benefits of social media for English language learning, and (3) the challenges associated with digital engagement. As summarized in Table 4, the themes were closely aligned with the four domains of the DLF—technical, cognitive, social, and critical literacy (Dudeney et al., 2013).

**Table 4. Summary of Thematic Findings**

Main Theme	Sub-theme	Relevant Digital Literacy	Key Participant Insights
1. Social Media Platforms Used	Preferred Platforms: Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, TikTok, Twitter	Technical, Cognitive	Used for entertainment and English exposure; platform adaptability
2. Positive Impacts on English Learning	Vocabulary and Grammar Acquisition	Cognitive	Learn new words, idioms, and grammar via content exposure
	Communication and Social Interaction Skills	Social	Interact with native speakers; practice real-life conversation
	Critical Thinking and Analytical Skills	Critical	Understand cultural nuance; question content and intent
	Technical Engagement and Digital Fluency	Technical	Engage with tools and multimedia to support language use
3. Drawbacks	Overuse and Distraction	Critical	Distraction from learning; loss of focus
	Negative Language Influence	Cognitive	Unintended use of slang in formal contexts
	Miscommunication and Translation Issues	Technical	Reliance on inaccurate translations; misunderstanding content
	Content Quality and Credibility	Critical	Difficulty identifying reliable and educational content

### Social media platforms used

Across all participants, five platforms emerged as the most frequently used for English language exposure: Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, TikTok, and, to a lesser extent, Twitter. Students described these platforms as integral to their daily routines, often serving as both sources of entertainment and informal learning environments. Their usage patterns reflected technical literacy, as students demonstrated fluency in navigating interfaces, customizing feeds, and interacting with multimedia content. Student 3 noted, *“Mostly I use Instagram and Facebook,”* while Student 4 explained, *“I use TikTok and YouTube because they help me develop my English skills.”* These reflections highlight not only habitual use but also intentional engagement with English-language materials embedded within their preferred platforms. The ability to shift between platforms according to purpose—whether for visual learning, communication, or entertainment—also exemplifies cognitive literacy, whereby students assess which platforms best align with their personal learning goals. Student 6 captured this adaptive behavior: *“I always use Instagram, but I also use YouTube and Facebook in my daily life.”* The flexibility shown by participants suggests a degree of metacognitive awareness and self-regulation in their informal language learning practices. The findings align with Dudeney et al.’s (2013) claim that technical fluency and cognitive decision-making are intertwined dimensions of digital literacy that support learner autonomy.

### Positive impacts on English language learning

Participants identified four key ways social media supported their English language development: (1) vocabulary and grammar acquisition, (2) communication and social interaction skills, (3) critical thinking and cultural awareness, and (4) technology-mediated learning engagement.

**Vocabulary and grammar acquisition (cognitive literacy).** All students reported acquiring new vocabulary, idiomatic expressions, and grammatical structures through regular

engagement with English-language content. Social media's algorithmic curation allowed for repeated exposure to language in varied contexts, reinforcing both passive and active learning. Student 9 shared, *"Using social media, I learned new words from them. There are a lot of categories of words on social media platforms, so it helps me to improve skills."* Similarly, Student 10 added, *"On Instagram, I follow accounts related to the language I study, and I learn a lot from them."* Participants emphasized that this informal exposure often complemented formal instruction, with some reporting greater learning outcomes through self-curated content than in traditional classroom settings. This theme exemplifies cognitive literacy, where students are not only exposed to new lexical and grammatical forms but also develop strategies for storing, retrieving, and applying them. According to Dudeney et al. (2013), cognitive literacy emphasizes the ability to process and manage information across digital genres—a pattern observable in participants' accounts.

**Communication and social interaction skills (social literacy).** Many students indicated that social media provided valuable opportunities to engage with English-speaking communities, practice conversational skills, and observe authentic language use in intercultural settings. Student 7 remarked, *"Social media platforms help by providing exposure to native speakers and real-life usage of the language."* Student 3 echoed this sentiment, stating, *"English is the lingua franca and serves as a common language for communication between people from different linguistic backgrounds."* Beyond exposure, platforms like YouTube and TikTok were described as fostering peer-based learning. Student 4 observed, *"YouTube is good for learning because it helps us improve our skills by seeing how other people use the language in real life."* These insights reflect social literacy, defined by Dudeney et al. (2013) as the ability to communicate, collaborate, and participate effectively in digital communities. The students' use of English as a lingua franca and their intercultural exchanges extend this dimension by showing how social media situates language practice in authentic, transnational contexts.

**Critical thinking and analytical skills (critical literacy).** Students demonstrated varying degrees of critical literacy in describing how they questioned, interpreted, and contextualized online content. Some reported heightened awareness of cultural nuance and media bias when comparing English-language posts to their Thai equivalents. Student 9 reflected, *"Some international news on social media, when translated into Thai, might change somewhat from the original. Therefore, reading the content in English helps me understand more facts."* Meanwhile, Student 7 added, *"Social media introduces new slang and informal language, which I learn to distinguish from formal English for specific contexts."* These examples suggest that students were not only decoding content but actively interrogating it for accuracy, tone, and audience. The orientation towards questioning and contextualizing information resonates strongly with Dudeney et al.'s (2013) conception of critical literacy, where learners evaluate not just linguistic form but also cultural framing and credibility.

**Technology-mediated learning engagement (technical literacy).** Several participants emphasized the value of social media's interface design and interactivity in supporting sustained language practice. Participants viewed the accessibility, brevity, and multimodality of content, especially short videos, as highly effective for language retention and engagement. Student 8 stated, *"TikTok is very effective because we use it every day, and it helps us practice speaking and understanding English."* Likewise, Student 10 explained, *"I use Instagram and TikTok not just for entertainment but to follow accounts that help me develop my language skills."* Their experiences highlight the role of technical literacy (Dudeney et al., 2013)—not only in operating tools, but also in leveraging them for educational purposes.

## **Drawbacks of using social media for English language learning**

While students overwhelmingly recognized the value of social media in supporting language development, they also expressed concerns about its limitations. Four key drawbacks emerged: overuse and distraction, the negative influence of informal language, miscommunication due to translation and cultural gaps, and difficulty evaluating content quality. These themes highlight the importance of critical engagement and informed digital practices, particularly for learners who rely heavily on online platforms.

**Overuse and distraction (critical literacy).** One of the most frequently mentioned drawbacks was the ease with which students became distracted by non-educational content. Participants articulated that the immersive and addictive characteristics of social media frequently compromised their initial objective of engaging in purposeful learning. Student 7 admitted, *“I think I waste time on social media instead of learning,”* while Student 6 echoed, *“Sometimes, I intend to learn, but I get distracted by other content like videos or memes.”* These responses reflect the tension between digital affordances and attention regulation. The algorithmic design of platforms like TikTok and Instagram, which reward scrolling and constant novelty, was cited as a key reason for diminished focus. As Student 4 noted, *“Social media is helpful, but it’s hard to avoid distractions unless you are very disciplined.”* These findings underline the need for developing critical digital literacy, which involves not only evaluating content but also managing one's own engagement and time within these platforms (Dudeny et al., 2013).

**Negative language influence (cognitive literacy).** Another significant concern raised by students was the overuse of informal or slang language, which they felt compromised their academic writing and formal communication skills. While many appreciated learning idiomatic expressions, they found it difficult to switch between informal digital discourse and more structured academic English. Student 9 observed, *“As a teenager, sometimes I accidentally write slang words in my essays,”* while Student 8 shared, *“Most of the slang I use comes from TikTok. It’s easy to use, but sometimes I forget where it’s appropriate.”* These statements reveal a blurred boundary between informal and formal registers, indicating that while cognitive literacy may be present, it is not always well regulated. Student 3 added, *“Using social media introduces informal language, which sometimes makes it harder to switch back to proper English.”* This issue demonstrates a partial but uneven development of cognitive literacy, which in the DLF involves not just processing new linguistic input but also managing registers and applying language appropriately across contexts (Dudeny et al., 2013).

**Miscommunication and translation challenges (technical literacy).** Students frequently reported challenges in understanding English content due to inaccurate translations or nuanced language use that automated tools failed to capture. Despite using Google Translate or platform-integrated translation features, many felt that the outputs were unreliable or even misleading. Student 6 remarked, *“Google Translate doesn’t always work well, and it can make things confusing,”* and Student 9 added, *“Some international news on social media, when translated into Thai, might change somewhat from the original.”* These limitations became particularly problematic when cultural meanings or idiomatic language were involved. Student 4 explained, *“Even if the translation is correct, I don’t always comprehend the cultural meaning behind some phrases.”* These examples highlight deficiencies in technical literacy, particularly in evaluating the accuracy and contextual appropriateness of translation tools (Dudeny et al., 2013). They also reflect a broader need for cultural competence, as misinterpretation can extend beyond language structure to worldview and intent.

**Content quality and credibility (critical literacy).** Finally, students voiced concerns over the quality and trustworthiness of information encountered on social media. The open nature of these platforms—while democratizing access to information—also leads to the spread of

misinformation, oversimplified language lessons, and irrelevant or sensationalized content. Student 6 stated, “*Not all content is useful; some posts are misleading,*” while Student 4 expressed frustration: “*There’s a lot of fake information on social media, and it’s hard to know what’s true.*” Even verified accounts were not immune to scrutiny. Student 10 explained, “*I prefer following trusted accounts, but sometimes I still question the accuracy of what they post.*” These reflections point to a gap in critical literacy, which, according to the DLF, requires the ability to assess reliability, bias, and intent behind digital texts (Dudeny et al., 2013). While students demonstrated some awareness of misinformation, their struggles show that critical literacy is not yet fully developed, making it a crucial area for pedagogical support in digital EFL learning environments. As Student 8 concluded, “*Sometimes I spend a lot of time scrolling through posts that are entertaining but not helpful for learning English.*”

## Discussion and Implications

The results of this study validated and built existing knowledge regarding the role that social media has as an informal learning environment for English language learning among Thai university students. The findings were fully interpreted by applying the DLF (Dudeny et al., 2013) as an analytic lens. Specifically, students’ experiences with social media for English learning are best understood as a dynamic interplay among technical, cognitive, social, and critical literacies. Table 5 provides a concise mapping of the main findings onto these four literacies, illustrating how each theme, such as vocabulary development, distraction, and code-switching, relates to different dimensions of digital engagement.

**Table 5. Mapping Key Findings to the Digital Literacies Framework**

Key Finding	Technical Literacy	Cognitive Literacy	Social Literacy	Critical Literacy
Vocabulary & Grammar Acquisition	Navigating platforms to access resources	Processing, storing, and retrieving new words	Participating in online discussions, exposure to global English	Evaluating which vocabulary is appropriate for context
Distraction & Overuse	Engaging with algorithms and app design	Self-regulation of attention	Peer influence in digital environments	Awareness of persuasive design, managing digital wellbeing
Slang vs. Formal English	Using digital communication tools	Managing multiple language registers	Adapting language for different audiences	Code-switching, evaluating appropriateness for context
Miscommunication/ Translation	Use of translation tools, subtitles	Interpreting nuanced language, idioms	Navigating intercultural digital contexts	Evaluating translation accuracy and cultural implications
Content Credibility	Accessing multiple sources	Synthesizing information from feeds	Relying on social recommendations, influencers	Assessing reliability and bias, fact-checking

In this study, the Thai teenagers illustrated strategic use of sites such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok, which revealed vast technical and intellectual expertise. The results are in line with early research that pointed to the pedagogical value of digital media in facilitating vocabulary learning, grammatical consciousness, and communicative competence (Muftah, 2024; Mohamad et al., 2023; Rezaul Karim et al., 2022). The research affirms Lee’s (2023) and Dincer’s (2020) arguments that social network sites not only offer genuine language contact but also facilitate creative and user-driven language use. Students’ capacity to shift between platforms and content types of evidence metacognitive awareness and portends growing competence to self-regulate language learning in valuable personal ways, a central dimension of learner autonomy explored by Rasyid et al. (2023) and Hongsa et al. (2023). These trends further suggest that online participation is bridging gaps in the deficiencies of grammar-focused instruction in Thai classrooms that have long been faulted as being too remote from communicative competency (Kanoksilapatham, 2022; Poonounin et al., 2024).

Among the contributions of this research is providing a subtle account of how social media promotes critical and social literacy. Apart from vocabulary and grammar acquisition, learners utilized social media to interact with speakers from different linguistic and cultural

backgrounds and thereby acquired intercultural competence, as highlighted by Liu et al. (2025). The results also complement Baker's (2008, 2016) calls for the integration of cultural sensitivity into teaching ELT and support Solmaz and Reinhardt's (2024) contention that online interaction allows learners to access world discourses in natural and socially situated terms. Of note, learners reported evaluating and critiquing content, navigating informal and formal uses of language, and considering translation accuracy, each highlighting nascent attention to Dudeney et al.'s (2013) conception of critical literacy. The results are in line with Yeh and Swinehart's (2022) call for user-generated content as a literacy practice site, where students need to exert credibility and cultural framing judgments. The research therefore contributes to a wider understanding of how digital literacies are embodied and practiced in non-classroom, informal settings, a subject that until relatively recently has been under-researched throughout Southeast Asia (Ambele & Boonsuk, 2020; Sultana & Dovchin, 2021).

Nonetheless, the research found that social media learning is not risk-free. Participants repeatedly highlighted distractions and excesses, the blurring of scholastic vocabulary, and the inability to quantify quality as hindrances to effective learning. These are in line with previous studies conducted by Asafo-Adjei et al. (2023) and Slim and Hafedh (2019), which cautioned against pedagogical issues offered by open digital spaces. A deeper thematic exploration of the “challenges” theme revealed that distraction is not simply a matter of student discipline but is deeply rooted in the algorithmic design of social media platforms. Features such as infinite scroll, algorithmically curated feeds, and push notifications are explicitly engineered to maximize user engagement, often by leveraging psychological mechanisms like intermittent rewards and instant gratification (Alter, 2018). This “dopamine-driven” design means students are frequently diverted from learning goals by emotionally charged or entertaining content, making digital self-regulation a critical component of literacy (Han, 2022). Thus, developing critical digital literacy entails not only evaluating information but also cultivating awareness of persuasive technology and strategies for digital well-being.

In addition, the blending of slang and formal English, sometimes referred to as digital code-switching, emerged as a persistent challenge. Consistent with recent research (Sultana & Dovchin, 2021; Lantz-Andersson, 2016), students in this study described how online communication encouraged flexible and creative language practices but also led to unintentional transfer of informal expressions, internet slang, and emojis into academic writing. Such “leakage” indicates the need for explicit instruction in genre awareness, metapragmatic skills, and critical reflection on register use. As students navigate multiple language varieties across contexts, cognitive literacy alone is insufficient without the complementary ability to judge appropriateness and adapt language use strategically. Students in this study often found it difficult to balance entertainment with learning, and many unintentionally adopted slang in formal writing, confirming Lai and Tai's (2021) assertion that the nature of digital interaction shapes learning outcomes in unpredictable ways. The data also revealed deficits in critical and technical literacies, particularly in the use of automated translation tools and the evaluation of source credibility. While students liked having access to English content, their misinformation and miscommunication issues illustrate the folly of depending on unmediated content and point to the necessity of mediated intervention as well as explicit literacy instruction (Apoko & Waluyo, 2025; Lantz-Andersson, 2016; Talib, 2018).

The DLF helps to clarify the findings: technical and cognitive literacies are necessary but insufficient unless paired with strong critical and social literacies that enable students to critically assess content, manage distractions, and adapt their language appropriately. The tensions and challenges students face online illustrate the complex, interconnected nature of digital literacies in real-world learning environments. Pedagogically, the results reinforced the need for EFL curricula to go beyond functional digital skills and vocabulary acquisition,

addressing the broader literacies students require to thrive online. By systematically fostering technical, cognitive, social, and critical literacies, educators can help students leverage the benefits of social media while mitigating its risks, transforming passive consumption into reflective, purposeful, and contextually sensitive language development. Lastly, this research provides an important implication for Thailand and other EFL settings: bridging the time lag between informal online practice and traditional pedagogy. According to Kirkpatrick (2003, 2020), English is increasingly used as a regional lingua franca in ASEAN, yet pedagogy in the classroom does not keep pace with what students are doing with language out of class. The findings suggested that integrating the DLF into ELT courses could offer an effective pedagogical approach that acknowledges the roles of learner agency, media literacy, and contextual responsiveness. Institutional support for digital literacy, as suggested by Martin (2006), Reyna et al. (2018), and Newland and Handley (2016), is also required. Students require guided opportunities to critically evaluate digital content, track their use of media, and identify informal and formal registers of English. Integrating digital literacy instruction into language instruction will enable teachers to assist students in converting passive scrolling into reflective, goal-oriented, and contextually relevant language learning activities. Table 6 summarizes the key discussion insights and literature alignment.

**Table 6. Summary of Key Discussion Insights and Literature Alignment**

Key Focus	Finding/Thematic	Key Discussion Insight	Aligned Literature
Platform Use and Language Exposure		Students use platforms strategically, enhancing vocabulary and metacognitive awareness through repeated, personalized engagement.	Rasyid et al. (2023); Rezaul Karim et al. (2022); Muftah (2024)
Communicative and Cultural Competence		Learners interact with native speakers and global content, fostering intercultural competence and social literacy.	Baker (2008, 2016); Liu et al. (2025); Solmaz and Reinhardt (2024); Yeh and Swinehart (2022)
Challenges in Informal Digital Learning		Informal language habits, distraction, and mistrust in translations/content quality present barriers to academic English use.	Lai and Tai (2021); Asafo-Adjei et al. (2023); Slim and Hafedh (2019)
Pedagogical Implications for ELT		Integration of the Digital Literacies Framework into ELT can bridge formal instruction with informal digital practices.	Dudenev et al. (2013); Kirkpatrick (2012); Martin (2006); Reyna et al. (2018)

## Conclusion, Limitations, and Recommendations

The research presents a critical analysis of social media website use among Thai university students in aid of their English language acquisition, both affordances and tensions of the informal digital learning environment. Following the DLF, the research points out that the students utilize websites such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok for purposes beyond entertainment but as strategic means to acquire vocabulary, practice communication, and learn culture. Nonetheless, challenges such as over-exposure to colloquialism, distraction, mistranslation, and questionable content stress the need to cultivate critical and cognitive literacies in learners. Although the research indicates a nuanced picture of online engagement, the small population size and singular focus on a particular group limit the scope of the results' generalizability. Moreover, the reliance on interviews as the sole data source limits the study's capacity to capture the full range of students' digital behaviors and contextual dynamics. The use of self-report data is inherently subject to bias, as participants may unintentionally overstate the positive impacts of social media on their language learning or downplay challenges and negative experiences. Future research should incorporate more data sources, such as screen

recordings, engagement diaries, and classroom observations, to mitigate self-report bias and provide a more holistic perspective.

Another limitation is the volatility and rapidly evolving nature of social media platforms. Trends and user preferences among teenagers shift quickly (e.g., TikTok's rise in popularity, Facebook's relative decline), meaning that findings based on current platform use may soon become outdated. Researchers should remain attentive to the dynamic digital landscape and regularly revisit platform relevance and user practices. To address both self-report and platform volatility, longitudinal and mixed-methods study designs are strongly recommended for future research. These methods would enable researchers to monitor genuine improvements in language proficiency, examine the evolution of digital literacy practices over time, and evaluate the enduring effects of changing platform ecosystems on English language acquisition. Thai ELT curricula and other similar EFL contexts are encouraged to explicitly teach digital literacies, prioritizing not only the instrumental use of social media but also critical evaluation, genre awareness, and cross-cultural communication, to better address the disconnect between classroom instruction and students' actual language use.

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