SOCIAL MEDIA
AND ONLINE INFORMAL LEARNING OF ENGLISH
University language students'
preferences, attitudes and perceptions

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Abstract – The emergence of Web 2.0 technologies has significantly influenced informal language learning, offering learners greater control and autonomy over their educational journey. Within this context, social media and networking platforms have become integral to the informal learning landscape, fostering collaborative learning environments and facilitating knowledge sharing among users. Despite their initial design not being education-centric, these platforms have become prominent elements in modern e-learning environments, operating outside the control of traditional educational institutions. Building upon these trends, this research paper investigates the preferences, perceptions and attitudes of Italian university language students, particularly those at the University of Salento, towards the role of social media in learning English. Using a questionnaire inspired by the IECoL tool (Pavesi *et al.* 2023), administered to 213 language students, the current study seeks to explore the extent to which students use social media to enhance their English language proficiency. The findings aim to contribute insights into the evolving dynamics of informal language learning in the digital age and into the implications for language education practices.

Keywords: social media platforms; language learning; informal learning; perceptions; language education practices.

1. Introduction

Informal language is a field of research that has received significant attention in recent years. It has been defined using a variety of labels, such as, to name but a few, Extramural English (Sundqvist, Sylvén 2016), Informal Digital Learning of English (Lee 2022), Online Informal Learning of English (Sockett 2014; Toffoli, Socket 2015), Language Learning Beyond the Classroom (Reinders, Benson 2017). All these terms refer to how individuals learn and acquire by exposing themselves and interacting with leisure or meaning-based activities (Kusyk 2023, p. 37). In this paper, the label Online Informal Learning of English (OILE) by Toffoli and Socket (2015, p. 1) is adopted, as it specifically refers to language development through online activities such as social networking, streaming and/or downloading television series or films,

listening to music on demand and web browsing. Our interest here is on social media, that is to say on those digital platforms and websites that allow users to create, share, and engage with various forms of content, including text, images, videos, and links, while participating in social networking. These platforms support communication, collaboration, and the development of communities, enabling individuals, groups, and organisations to connect and exchange information in both real-time and asynchronous formats. Prominent examples include Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, and TikTok, where users can post updates, follow others, interact through comments, and engage in discussions.

OILE differs from learning through OERs (Open Educational Resources) because the learning that occurs is mostly unintentional, as the primary goal of the activities is not to learn a language. Instead, individuals perceive themselves as engaging in recreational activities, with language learning happening as a side effect. In this context, it is the learner, rather than the instructor or course developer, who selects the materials to use, and these materials were not originally created for language learning purposes (Toffoli, Socket 2015, p.1). In OILE, incidental learning plays a primary role, as there is no deliberate intention to learn; rather, learning occurs as a by-product. Learners are often unaware of the learning process and its outcomes. While OILE includes both explicit and implicit elements—meaning that the intention to learn is not entirely absent—there is consistently a lack of conscious awareness of the learning taking place (Kusyk 2023, p. 44).

Over the last decades, the capabilities of Web 2.0 have massively contributed to the enhancing of the learning experience, and contact with foreign languages outside the classroom has become commonplace (Toffoli *et al.* 2023). This is also shown by several recent studies investigating the correlation between self-directed, informal second-language learning and advancements in technology (Toffoli, Socket 2015; Richards 2015; Dressman, Sadler 2020; Toffoli *et al.* 2023). Indeed, websites and applications that make use of user-generated content for end users contribute to language learning by empowering students and fostering greater control over their educational journey (Bielawska 2015). Toffoli and Sockett (2015) conducted a survey on the teacher's perceptions of and beliefs about online informal language learning and practices, and among the positive sides of OILE, teachers reported heightened curiosity about English and greater motivation to learn the language, often driven by the students' sense of understanding. They observed increased confidence and a general comfort with spoken English. For some students, English had become a regular part of their daily routines.

In the realm of social media, online informal learners are free to choose their own contents, are not subject to evaluation and the leisure activities they engage in are low in anxiety and high in motivation (Sockett 2014).

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Furthermore, in online collaboration and communication, the sharing of knowledge becomes inevitable. Unbeknownst to users, this interactive dynamic fosters an environment conducive to informal learning, occurring subtly and indirectly through these digital interactions (Sockett 2014; Yaşar, Karadeniz 2011).

While not originally designed with education in mind, these digital affordances have become prominent elements within the modern e-learning environment. Unlike official educational applications, these tools are recognised as a significant component of the digital landscape for many learners, distinctly operating beyond the control of educational institutions (Selwyn 2007, p. 3). More specifically, social media foster collaborative and participatory roles and allow users to be engaged learners, rather than passive receivers, and active co-producers of contents.

Based on the ever more prominent role of social media platforms in language learning, this paper aims to investigate Italian university language students' preferences, perceptions and attitudes regarding the role of social media usage in learning English. The study particularly examines students' perceptions of the benefits of using social media platforms in English and their attitudes, that is to say, adapting Smith 1971, the enduring structuring of beliefs regarding social media usage and language learning, influencing their specific responses. To achieve this, a questionnaire consisting of 19 items, primarily multiple-choice, was administered to a sample of 213 language students from the University of Salento (Lecce, Italy). This analysis was inspired by the findings of the IECoL questionnaire, a tool used in an ongoing large-scale national (PRIN) project on the informalisation of English language learning among university students in Italy (Pavesi *et al.* 2023). A section of this questionnaire focused on the Internet in English as a form of input, revealing that language students from the four universities involved (Catania, Salento, Pavia, and Pisa) exhibited higher exposure to English language content on the Internet compared to students involved in the project but from other degree courses. For this reason, this paper sets out to explore whether and how a sample of University of Salento language students use social media to improve their level of competence of the English language.

The remainder of this paper is organised as follows: Section 2 provides an overview of previous studies analysing social media usage in autonomous language learning; Section 3 describes the participants in the current study, the administered questionnaire, and its findings; Section 4 offers concluding remarks and outlines the attitudes and perceptions of University of Salento language students regarding social media usage in learning English.

2. Previous studies

To the best of the author's knowledge, there is limited scholarly attention devoted to exploring the specific connection between social media and autonomous learning. The majority of existing studies predominantly centre on the integration of technology within formal educational settings, concentrate on the intersection of the Internet and informal learning, or investigate informal learning through digital media other than social media. What these studies have in common is their focus on learners' autonomy, which, in turn, leads to the development of successful strategies in the process of language learning. An illustrative example is presented by Dabbagh and Kitsantas (2011, p. 5) who focus on Personal Learning Environments (PLEs). PLEs are multidimensional spaces encompassing social media tools and enabling students to acquire competence or knowledge. Whether the tool facilitates interaction with peers on a class project or involves seeking online examples and suggestions for approaching a project, students use social media to cultivate informal learning communities centred on course topics. Personal Learning Environments are, therefore, transformed from an individual learning space into a communal learning environment. These collaborative endeavours actively involve students in self-regulation processes, encouraging self-monitoring, and prompt students to recognise and employ essential strategies for tackling more formal learning tasks (Dabbagh, Kitsantas 2011, p. 6). Although PLEs involve the input of instructors, the potential for cultivating learner autonomy is a positive aspect. When learners encounter challenges in initiating their informal language learning, the instructor can play a role in fostering their self-reliance and their ability to deal with problems and unusual or new situations autonomously. This study shows that autonomy and collaboration play pivotal roles in language learning, potentially fostering a sense of responsibility among learners for their own educational journey. This is where social media come into play, being characterised primarily by autonomous, collaborative and interactive use.

     The advantages of employing social networking sites for foreign language learning among students was studied by Bicen *et al.* (2015) at Near East University, in Northern Cyprus. The research engaged a total of 85 undergraduate students, comprising 58 male students and 27 female students, who participated through the completion of a questionnaire. Among the available options, which required rating on the Likert scale, students conveyed their agreement with the following:

1. Social networks play a useful impact in improving foreign language;
2. I follow foreign language teachers through social networks to improve the target language;

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3. I follow online pages on social networking sites to learn foreign language;

4. I use chat tools via social networking sites to improve foreign language;

5. I try to understand news in the foreign language while reading them on social networks;

6. I try to enhance the language ability by communicating with foreign people via social networks.

What is interesting about this study is that students expressed disagreement on the options "I try to answer tests in the foreign language to evaluate my level in the target language", "I force myself to learn the language by writing sentences on social networking groups", "Audiovisuals are used via social networks to practice foreign language", and "I feel confident about making posts in foreign language on social networks". This may indicate that students feel more confident using social media to enhance their receptive skills rather than their productive ones.

AbuSa'aleek (2015) explored university students' perceptions towards learning English in a Facebook context at Qassim University in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The survey employed a questionnaire comprising two sections. Section A gathered demographic information about the students, including their level in the college and language proficiency. Section B included items aimed at gathering insights into the impact of Facebook as an online English language learning environment and exploring students' perceptions of learning English within the Facebook context. Results showed that students primarily interacted on Facebook using a combination of Arabic and English, or exclusively in English, but never in Arabic alone. Furthermore, EFL students hold the belief that Facebook, serving as an online learning environment, facilitates, supports, and motivates their English language learning. Consequently, it plays a role in assisting EFL students throughout the process of enhancing their English language skills and helps them overcome their language mistakes and learn new words. According to AbuSa'aleek (2015, p. 69), the favourable attitudes of students towards using Facebook as an online English language-learning environment could be attributed to the fact that Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) allows EFL learners to access the Facebook platform at their convenience and from any location, thus confirming the importance of autonomy as a learning motivation. Additionally, Facebook encourages self-reliance through a student-centred approach, typically fostering improvements in language proficiency and overall growth. Consequently, students can acquire knowledge and skills from English speakers and participate in authentic asynchronous and synchronous interactions. EFL students also indicated that reading English materials on Facebook enhanced their confidence in communicating using the English language and their motivation to learn this foreign language. As Kabilan *et al.* (2010) state, the technologies underpinning

Facebook and the distinctive features of the platform have the capability to involve students in meaningful language-related activities, despite their initial purpose for joining Facebook being socialisation.

Ismail and Shafie (2018) conducted a research study involving students from three public universities in Selangor and one in Negeri Sembilan (Malaysia), with a sample size of 120 subjects. The study involved surveying the participants through a questionnaire, and 30 responses from each of the four universities were selected for analysis.

A specific section of the questionnaire focused on informal English language learning through Social Network Sites (SNS). The options with the highest scores related to ways of learning English informally through SNS were the following:

1. Save interesting quotes/images posted on SNS in English;
2. Pay attention to the sentence patterns and accent while watching videos on SNS;
3. Try to understand news in English language while reading them on SNS;
4. Watch English language videos posted on SNS to improve my English language.

Another section of the questionnaire focused on Perceived English Language Skills Learned Informally from the SNS. There were six categories listed (four basic English language skills, plus vocabulary and grammar), and the skill that had the highest mean score was the listening skill followed by vocabulary. The third section focused on Perceived Receptive and Productive Skills Learned through SNS, and the receptive skills (listening and reading skills) achieved the highest score. The authors concluded that informal learning through Social Network Sites (SNS) has the potential to complement formal learning and that SNS serve as the ideal platform for students to use and enhance their English language skills, even in the absence of direct monitoring from their instructors.

This view is emphasised by Godwin-Jones (2018, p. 18), who states that the co-adaptive nature of informal online language learning is notably pronounced in participatory Web 2.0 activities. Engaging in reading and writing within online communities significantly contributes to the development of a second language (L2). This ongoing process leads to the evolution of resources over time, transforming websites, social network services, discussion forums, and other affinity sites from static entities into dynamic and evolving platforms.

Murphy Odo (2020, p. 428) suggests that online fan communities serve as non-language oriented spaces which offer L2 learners an opportunity to engage with individuals globally, establishing connections based on shared interests like their preferred pop singers or fan fiction. This interaction can contribute to the cultivation of their identity as proficient users of the second

language and to learning autonomy. Illustratively, Stan Twitter serves as a prime example of these online fan communities. This community consists of Twitter users who express their opinions and enthusiasm about celebrities and related topics, displaying the dynamics of global interactions centred on shared interests in the realm of pop culture. Malik and Haidar (2021) analysed Twitter communities of K-Pop fandom and specifically focused on how memetic discourse is learnt and reused by non-native speakers of English and how interaction takes place. Some community members interviewed by the two scholars maintained that the platform enhances their proficiency in the English language. They engage in online learning using search engines, encountering memetic discourse on Twitter fandom communities, interacting with others, and internally assimilating memetic language patterns and sequences. These learning processes are incidental to the community's explicit objectives because members collaboratively support, promote, and express their shared love for the pop stars they follow (Malik, Haidar, p. 375).

Harmaini and Nanda (2023) focused on incidental learning on Instagram by considering a sample of 52 secondary school students from a vocational school in Padang (Indonesia). Students were administered a questionnaire which aimed to ascertain students' perception on the influence of Instagram use on their writing skills, vocabulary, grammar, and schematic learning. Results confirmed that students perceive Instagram as a supplementary tool for formal English learning. Most of them, when writing on Instagram, try to use appropriate vocabulary, grammar and patterns, thus showing that this social is not only an entertainment tool but also a learning platform.

2.1. The IECoL questionnaire

Prior to delving into the analysis of the data gathered for the current study, it is necessary to provide a concise overview of the IECoL questionnaire (Pavesi *et al.* 2023). This is essential because the analysis presented in this paper is derived from a survey conducted across four Italian universities, where the IECoL questionnaire was administered, namely the universities of Catania, Pavia, Pisa, and Salento.

The IECoL questionnaire (Pavesi *et al.* 2023, pp. 78-79), written in Italian, is structured into three main sections. Initially, it collects information regarding participants' language background, encompassing details such as the number of languages known, the age at which English instruction commenced in school, and involvement in extramural English language courses. The subsequent section of the questionnaire delves into behavioural inquiries, concentrating on exposure to diverse input types. This part is further segmented into subsections that cover a range of media: films, TV series, and programmes; YouTube videos; video games; songs and lyrics; Internet activities, which are subdivided into activities such as reading and posting on

social networks, blogs, and forums, as well as using various online platforms and websites. Additionally, it explores participants' engagement levels, frequency, duration of exposure per session, modalities of access, and motivating factors across each type of input.

The third section expands upon behavioural and attitudinal inquiries, as it collects demographic information from participants, as well as additional insights into their language background and activities beyond the conventional language learning setting.

The questionnaire developed for the current study narrows the scope of the IECoL questionnaire by focusing solely on social media use and exposure and aims to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the attitudes of a sample of University of Salento language students towards using social media in English. To achieve this, it combines some items from the IECoL with those described in the surveys outlined in section 3.1. Additionally, it introduces new questions to ascertain students' perceptions regarding the advantages of using social media in English within their L2 learning process.

3. Case study: participants and questionnaire

Data were collected at the University of Salento, a middle-sized university located in southern Italy. All the students involved in the project attend the BA course in Language Mediation Theories and Strategies (*Scienza e Tecnica della Mediazione Linguistica*). The decision to exclusively select language students stems from two primary reasons: (1) their increased motivation to use social media in English as a means to enhance their language proficiency, and (2) findings from a survey conducted across four Italian universities (Pavesi *et al.* 2023), which indicated that a significant proportion of respondents who acknowledged using the Internet in English were language students. Consequently, they emerged as the ideal target for this new survey.

The students who completed the questionnaire were 213 and were distributed across the three years of the BA course as follows: 93 from the 1st year, 64 from the 2nd year, and 56 from the 3rd year.

The questionnaire was in Italian, it was anonymous, and included 19 items focusing on:
-   languages in which social media platforms are used;
-   reasons for using or not using social media in English;
-   frequently accessed topics and pages;
-   types of activities carried out on social media;
-   length of exposure;
-   perceptions of the benefits of using social media in English;

-   use of social media platforms to improve the English language.

All the questions except the last one were multiple-choice, typically featuring the option '*Altro*' (Other), allowing respondents to specify additional choices not listed.

Prior to the administration of the questionnaire, students were informed about the objectives of the study, for which the questionnaire served as a tool, as well as the guaranteed anonymity of their responses.

3.1. Results from the questionnaire

At the beginning of the questionnaire, students were asked to indicate which social media platform they use, regardless of the language in which they use it. More than one option could be indicated. The question listed a series of social media platforms but students could also add other platforms by typing their names in the option '*Altro*' (Other). The most used revealed Instagram (94.9%), followed by TikTok (76.7%), Pinterest (51.2%), Twitter (30.8%), and Facebook (11.6%). A portion of the respondents (9.9%) added YouTube, which, similarly to socials, has recently introduced a real-time counter for video likes and views, facilitating active tracking of a video's popularity while watching. Additionally, YouTube features a comment section for each video, allowing users to engage in interactions.

This general question regarding social media usage placed at the outset of the questionnaire aimed to verify whether students actually use these platforms and to enhance the interpretation of the questionnaire's findings concerning usage and activities. This initial question was followed by a specific question on the language in which social media are used. Italian and English were listed as options, but respondents could also add other languages by using the empty option '*Altro*' (Other). Italian was selected by 78% of respondents while the English language seemed to be preferred as this option was chosen by 87.4% of students. Other languages were indicated, such as Spanish (8%), French (3.9%), German (2.9%), and Japanese (1.9%). These percentages seem to validate the decision to exclusively target foreign language students for this survey, leading to a more comprehensive insight into university language students' behaviours concerning social media usage and English language acquisition.

The questionnaire also included a question aimed at understanding the reasons why students do not use social media platforms in English. The question *Se NON usi i social in lingua inglese, puoi indicarci il perché?* [If you do NOT use social media in English, can you tell us why?] included the following options:

-   *Ci ho provato, ma non riesco a capire il contenuto dei post o dei reel* [I tried but I'm not able to understand the content of posts or of reels]

- *Per me i social sono intrattenimento e quindi li uso solo in italiano* [I consider socials as entertainment and, for this reason, I use them only in Italian]
- *Le pagine che mi interessano sono solo in italiano* [The pages I'm interested in are only in Italian]
- *Altro* [Other]

This question received responses from 27 students, comprising approximately 13% of total respondents. The second and third response options [I consider social media as entertainment and, for this reason, I use it only in Italian - The pages I'm interested in are only in Italian] were the most selected, with a selection rate of 32.4% and 20.6%, respectively. These two percentages, when considered together, may suggest that, for some students, the choice of language on social media platforms is driven more by established habits than by their level of English proficiency. Notably, only 11.8% opted for the first choice [I tried but I'm not able to understand the content of posts or of reels]. As for the '*Altro*' [Other] option, three students stated that they do not use social media platforms in English because they prefer other foreign languages, while another one admitted that s/he had never thought of setting English as the primary language of socials.

The next question focused on students' reasons for using socials in English, and the options listed were those proposed by the IECoL for a similar type of question to which three more options were added (the last three in the following list): *Se usi i social in lingua inglese, per quale motivo lo fai?* [If you use socials in English, for what reason do you do so?]

- *Per svago e intrattenimento* [For leisure and entertainment]
- *Per socializzare con persone straniere* [To socialise with foreign people]
- *Per acquisire familiarità con altre culture* [To get acquainted with other cultures]
- *Per studio universitario* [For university study]
- *Per imparare un vocabolario di uso specialistico* [To learn a specialised vocabulary]
- *Per imparare la lingua inglese* [To learn the English language]
- *Per usare la lingua inglese* [To use the English language]
- *Per accedere a informazioni in generale* [To access information]
- *Per accedere a informazioni in lingua inglese* [To access information in English]
- *Perché i social in lingua inglese offrono più intrattenimento e informazioni rispetto a quelli in lingua italiana* [Because socials in English offer more entertainment and information than those in Italian]

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The last three options [To access information; To access information in English; Because socials in English offer more entertainment and information than those in Italian] were added to ascertain whether the choice of using social media in English could depend more on the amount and type of information available on socials in English rather than on the language in which contents are available. Figure 1 summarises the results for this question.

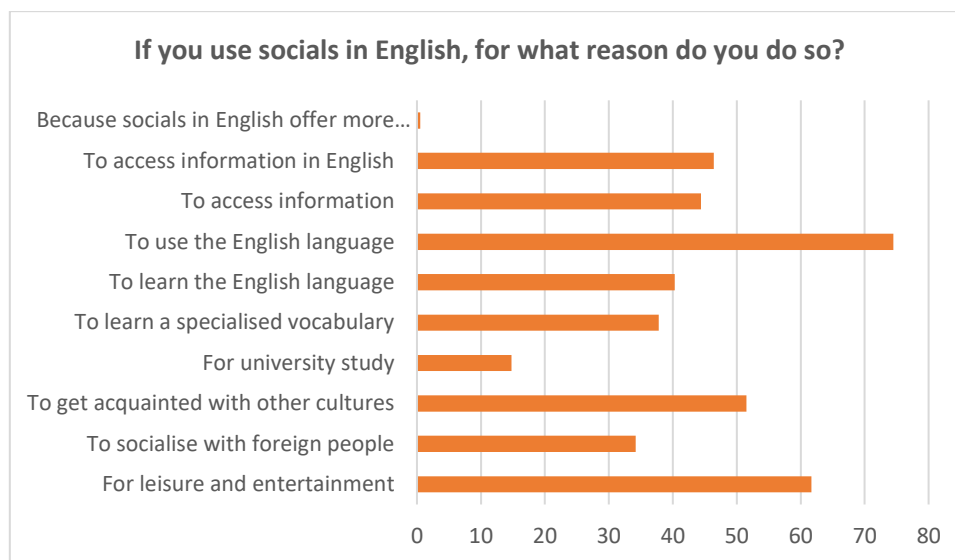**If you use socials in English, for what reason do you do so?**

Figure 1
Reasons for using social media in English, with percentages.

As shown in Figure 1, the most selected option was 'To use the English language' (74.6%), indicating that university language students view social media as a viable virtual platform for practicing the language/s they are learning. The selection ranking as second in the list was 'For leisure and entertainment' (61.4%), followed by 'To get acquainted with other cultures' (51.8%), 'To access information in English' (46.2%), 'To access information' (44.2%). These percentages suggest that social media platforms are perceived as rich and multi-functional environments, enabling users to engage with foreign languages and cultures, as well as to be entertained and informed. The percentage associated to the selection 'To access information in English' reveals interesting insights into language students' attitudes on socials. They appear to be interested in exploring certain topics in English, possibly because they trust information in English more or aim to improve their language skills and expand their vocabulary.

To check which topics are accessed most frequently by students on social media, they were asked *Quali tematiche approfondisci più spesso tramite i social in lingua inglese?* [Which topics do you most often explore through social media in English?]. The options for this question were taken from the IECoL questionnaire, which included the same list of topics for a

question regarding the reasons for visiting blogs and forums. Figure 2 summarises the percentages for each selected option.
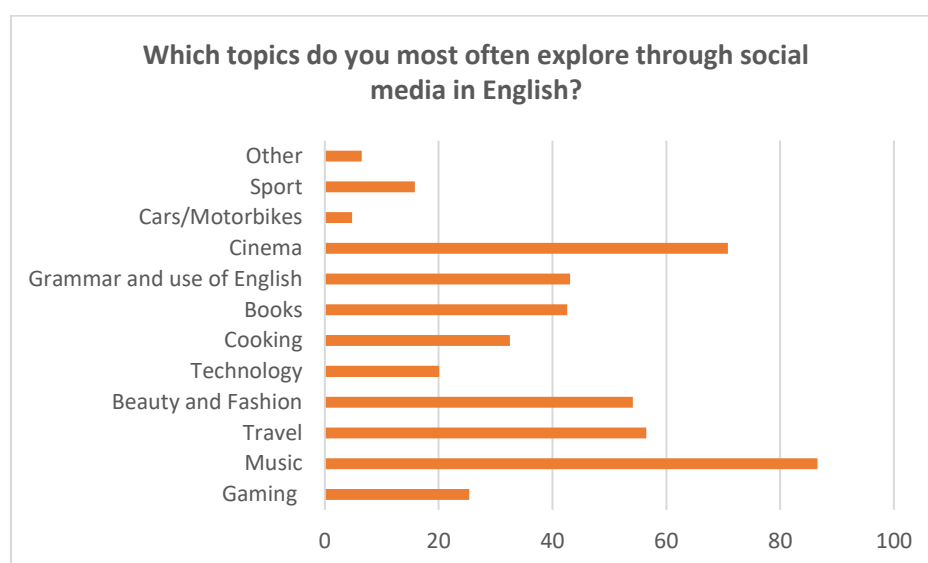

Figure 2
Topics more often explored on social media in English, with percentages.

Music and cinema rank at the top of the list with 86.6% and 70.8%, respectively. Travel is the third most selected option with a percentage of 56.5%, followed by Beauty and Fashion (54.1%), Grammar and use of English (43.1%), Books (42.6%), Cooking (32.5%), and Gaming (25.4%). The remaining topics (Technology, Sports, Cars/Motorbikes) have percentages ranging from 20% downwards. The relatively low percentage of the topic 'Grammar and use of English' may suggest that students primarily use social media to practice English in areas that they like or find interesting. Additionally, they use social media more traditionally as an easily accessible language-learning platform.

The question *Quali attività svolgi prevalentemente sui social in lingua inglese?* [Which activities do you primarily carry out on social media in English?] aims to explore attitudes and behaviours of language students in a more detailed manner. The options available were *Leggo contenuti* [I read posts], chosen by the majority of respondents and having a percentage of 95.7%, *Leggo e commento post* [I read and comment posts], with a percentage of preference of 21.2%, *Studio* [I study], selected by 24% of students. In the option *Altro* [Other], 12.7% of students indicated the action *Guardo video* [I watch videos]. The type of involvement on social media seems to be more receptive than productive or interactional, contrarily to the options selected for the question regarding the reasons for using social media in English. Indeed, the most frequently chosen was 'To use the English language' (74.5%) while the option 'To learn the English language' had a lower percentage (40.3%).

The next two questions are behavioural questions addressing both frequency and length of exposure to English through social media in order to quantify the hours of contact with English (Socket 2014; Pavesi *et al.* 2023, p. 76). The options listed in these questions are taken from similar questions of the IECoL referring to the length of exposure to different types of media, including social platforms. The first of these two questions focused on the time spent on social media reading posts in English (*Con che frequenza giornaliera leggi post in lingua inglese sui social?* How often do you read posts in English on social media each day?). Options were 'Never' (0%), 'Less than 30 minutes' (16.3%), 'Between 30 minutes and 1 hour' (19.1%), 'About 1 hour' (12.9%), 'From 1 to 2 hours' (22.5%), 'More than 2 hours' (29.2%). These figures suggest that students spend a high amount of time reading posts on socials. These percentages dramatically change in the second of the behavioural questions, focusing on the amount of time spent writing and commenting on posts. In fact, in response to the question 'How often do you write posts and comments in English on social media each day?' almost half of respondents (44.5%) answered selecting the option Never, 36.4% selected 'Less than half an hour', 8.1% chose 'Between 30 minutes and 1 hour', 5.3% selected 'About 1 hour'. The percentage of the options 'Between 1 and 2 hours' and 'More than 2 hours' was 2.9%. Most of the language students involved in the survey appear not to fully exploit the interactivity of this type of communication. Social media seem to be viewed more as a huge and varied repository of content rather than an interactive social environment where users can engage in synchronous and asynchronous conversations. This tendency to avoid interacting with other people on social media may be partly explained by the answers to another question, which focuses more specifically on the activity of writing posts, which reads: *Quando chatti o commenti un post in inglese, cerchi di evitare di fare errori?* [When you chat or comment on a post in English, do you try to avoid making mistakes?]. Interestingly, 49.5% of respondents answered 'Yes, I write and rewrite the post until it is correct', 42.2% selected the option 'I try to avoid making mistakes but interacting is what interests me most', and 6.1% of them chose the option 'I'm afraid of making mistakes and I usually write only a couple of words in the post'. Only 2% of respondents answered by selecting the alternative 'No, I primarily think about the content I'm communicating'. Based on these figures, we may hypothesise that students refrain from writing and commenting on posts because they lack confidence in their productive skills. Although they like to interact, the fear of making mistakes seems to act as an inhibiting factor.

The last group of questions focuses on students' perceptions of the benefits of using social media for language learning. The first of these perception questions is *Pensi che usare i social in lingua inglese possa aiutare a migliorare le tue competenze nella lingua?* [Do you think that using social media in English can help you improve your language skills?]. More than half

of respondents (56.5%) answered *Molto* [A lot], 40.5% selected the option *Abbastanza* [Enough], 2.8% answered *Poco* [Little], and only 1% chose the alternative *Per niente* [In no way]. Nobody selected the option *Non so* [I don't know] and this may indicate that all the respondents had a clear idea of the influence of social media on language learning. To better understand what kinds of activities, aside from reading content and comments, are viewed by students as important to improve their language skills, the following question was included: *Se usi i social per migliorare il tuo inglese, cosa fai esattamente?* [If you use social media to improve your English, what do you do exactly?]. Options and percentages are summarised in the graph in Figure 3.
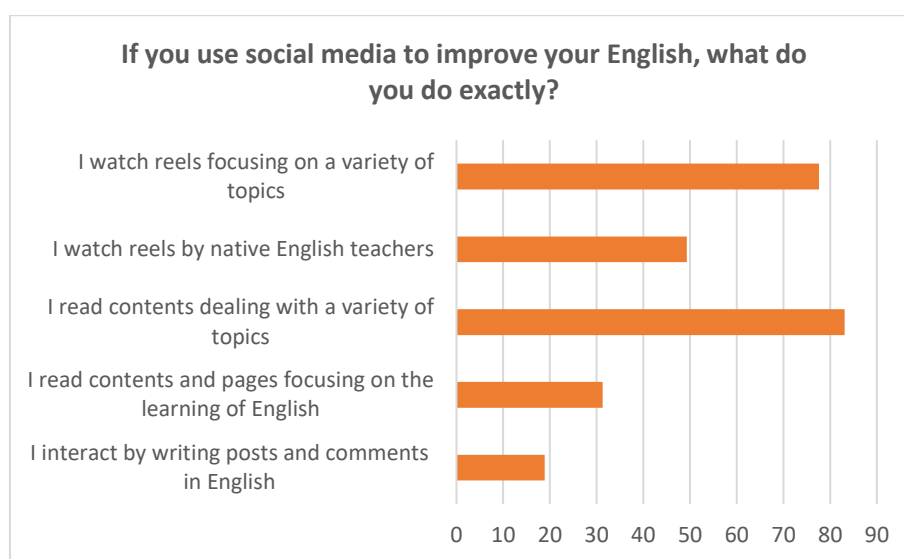

Figure 3
Activities carried out on social media to improve English, with percentages.

Percentages confirm what had already emerged in the previous questions, namely that language students primarily read posts (83.1%) and/or watch reels (77.6%) dealing with a variety of topics. This may indicate that students perceive they improve their English primarily by entertaining themselves with topics they like or are interested in, through reading and watching. The option 'I watch reels by native English teachers' was selected by 49.3% of respondents while the alternative 'I read contents and pages focusing on the learning of English' was chosen by 31.3%. We hypothesise that students may prefer watching videos to reading posts, probably because, in this way, they may also improve their listening and pronunciation skills. As expected, only 18.9% of respondents selected the option 'I interact by writing posts and comments in English' thus confirming their reluctance to use productive skills.

To delve deeper into what students do on social media, they were asked four questions focusing on activities they consciously engage in to improve their English. The first of these is *Che cosa fai quando leggi o ascolti delle*

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espressioni o parole che non conosci? [What do you do when you read or listen to expressions or words you don't know?]. Options and percentages of choice are summarised in Figure 4.

What do you do when you read or listen to expressions or words you don't know?

- Other
- I react with a like to the post
- I write them down, look for their meaning, and check their context of usage
- I try to understand their meaning and to learn them
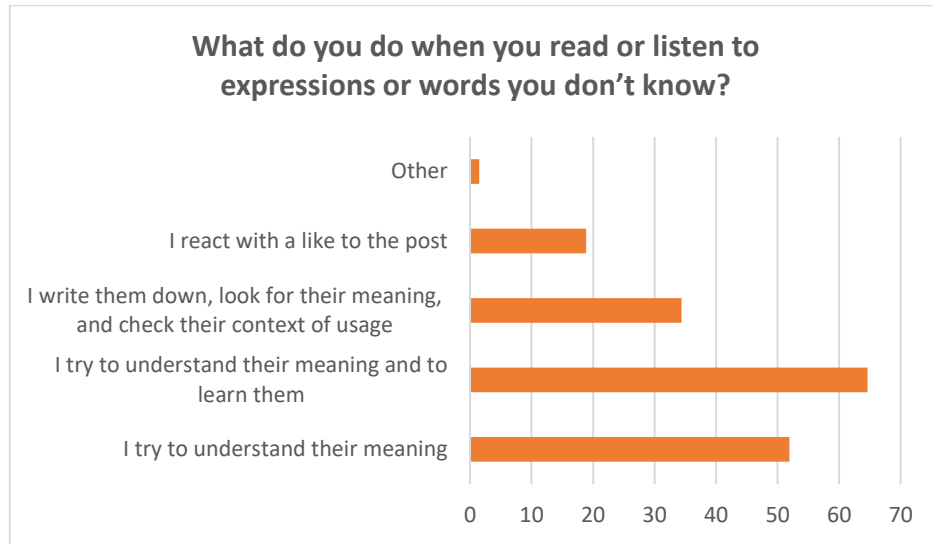- I try to understand their meaning

Figure 4
Activities related to words and expressions unfamiliar to students, with percentages.

When students encounter words and expressions they do not know they primarily try to understand their meaning and learn them (64.6%). Many students (51.9%) try to understand their meaning only, and 34.4% of them write down unfamiliar words and expressions, look for their meaning and check their context of usage. Some of them (18.9%) like the post, and, as some other language students explained to the author on a separate occasion, they usually get back to it later with the aim of checking the meaning of the words they do not know. The preferred choices illustrate the students' willingness to acquire new vocabulary while reading posts and watching videos on social platforms.

Another question was related to quotes and memes and reads *Ti capita di salvare o di fare lo screenshot a post contenenti citazioni o meme in inglese?* [Do you ever save or take screenshots of posts containing English quotes or memes?]. This question was included because, according to Ismail and Shafie (2018, p. 220), when quotes are deemed interesting enough to be saved, informal learning may occur. Almost all of the students (95.3%) replied 'Yes' to this question, thereby revealing an interesting behaviour on social media that should be taken into account in projects aiming to integrate language learning and new technologies.

The questionnaire also focuses on students' activities related to the usage of words. It does so by asking the question *Ti capita di riflettere su parole ed espressioni che incontri nei post perché ti interessa capire come vengono utilizzate?* [Do you reflect on words and expressions you come across in posts

because you're interested in understanding how they're used?]. Students could choose between two options, *Sì* [Yes] or *No* [No], and 96.7% of them selected the 'Yes' option, thus revealing a conscious usage of social media for learning purposes.

A similar question focused on the pronunciation of words: *Ti capita di riflettere sulla pronuncia delle parole inglesi quando guardi i reel e i video?* [Do you reflect on the pronunciation of English words when you watch reels and videos?]. Once again, the majority of respondents selected the 'Yes' option, confirming that content available on social media is considered a viable tool for improving their English fluency.

The last three questions focused on students' perception of the benefits of social media on their English. The first of these aimed to ascertain the degree of influence of social media on students' language skills: *Secondo te, quanto ha influito l'uso dei social in inglese sul tuo livello di competenza della lingua?* [In your opinion, how much has the use of social media in English influenced your language proficiency level?]. Students had six options available: *Moltissimo* (Very much) *Molto* (Much), *Abbastanza* (Enough), *Poco* (Little), *Non so* (I don't know). Most of them answered very positively, and almost all agreed on the importance of using social media in the process of learning the English language. Figure 5 provides a summary of the percentages related to this question.
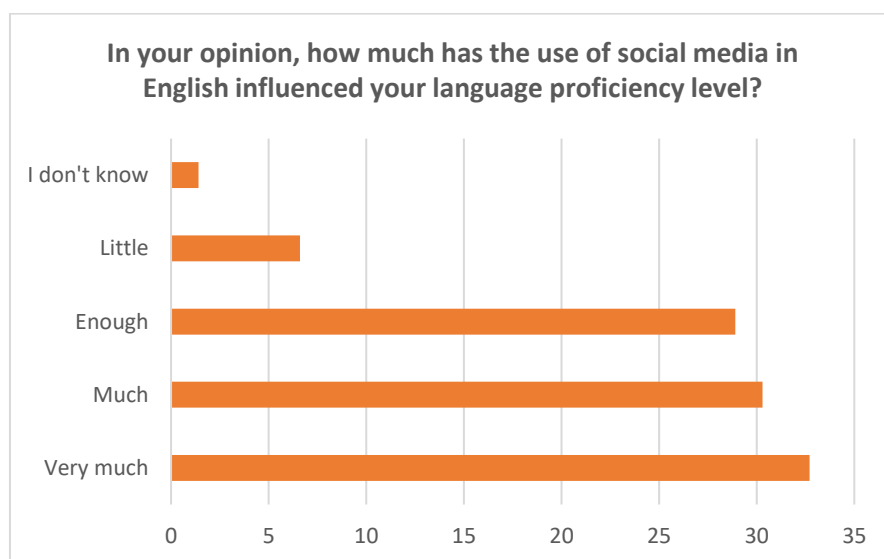

Figure 5
Students' perceptions on the level of influence of social media usage on their English, with percentages.

Next, students were asked their opinion on using social media in formal school and university teaching. To the question *Secondo te, sarebbe utile usare i social come uno strumento per la didattica scolastica e universitaria?* [In your opinion, would it be useful to use social media as a tool for school and

university teaching?], 91.6% answered 'Yes' and 8.4% disagreed answering 'No'. These percentages suggest that students consider social media as a valuable tool for language teaching. Reasons could be many: they may perceive the benefits of exposure to authentic examples of language use, or they could be encouraged to interact more and to engage in conversation with their peers, particularly if topics are selected based on students' interests. Additionally, this integration could make learning more dynamic and in line with young people's needs and likes.

The last item of the questionnaire asked students to indicate which media (not only social media) available on the Internet have mostly contributed to improving their language skills and fluency. YouTube was the most mentioned (26.5%), followed by TikTok (25.5%), Films and TV Series (21.3%), and Instagram (19%). Twitter was selected in 8% of cases while songs and music were mentioned with a percentage of 9.7%. Video games were mentioned only by 5% of respondents.

4. Some concluding remarks

The vast majority of the University of Salento language students involved in this survey actively engage with social media platforms, using both Italian and English languages.

Predominantly, they favour platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Pinterest, alongside more traditional platforms like Twitter and Facebook. Their motivations for social media use include practicing English language skills, seeking entertainment, fostering cross-cultural interactions, and accessing information in English.

Within this sample, common themes explored through social media encompass cinema, music, travel, beauty, and fashion. When navigating social media pages, students predominantly read posts and comments, and a significant portion invests one to more than two hours in these activities. However, engagement in productive activities such as posting and commenting is less frequent. When they do contribute, students meticulously write their text, often revising to ensure accuracy or avoiding errors altogether.

Participants in the survey express a strong belief in the language-enhancing potential of English-language social media usage. They find value in reading diverse content and watching reels spanning various subjects. When encountering unfamiliar expressions, the majority endeavour to understand their meaning and incorporate them into their vocabulary. Furthermore, they actively collect English quotes and memes for future use, reflecting on words and expressions encountered in posts. Pronunciation is also a point of interest, as students strive to comprehend and emulate correct usage.

Almost unanimously, respondents perceive social media's profound impact on their language proficiency. Many advocate for its integration into informal educational settings at schools and universities, recognising its role in language learning and cultural exchange.

However, these findings should also be interpreted considering that the data collected from the survey may have been influenced by the context in which it was conducted—specifically, during a university lecture—and by the individual administering the survey, namely the lecturer. Respondents may have selected certain answers to align with the expectations of the survey organiser, despite assurances of anonymity. Nonetheless, the implications derived from this study remain significant across various domains.

Primarily, in the realms of language learning strategies and language awareness, social media emerge as a tool capable of enhancing students' sensitivity to linguistic nuances and overall language proficiency. This underscores the potential for educators to integrate social media platforms into language learning curricula, thereby bolstering students' capabilities in mastering a second language. Moreover, there is a pressing need to emphasise productive activities on social media platforms, alongside devising novel strategies to encourage active participation among students.

Furthermore, the study sheds light on the role of social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Pinterest in fostering cross-cultural interactions among students. These platforms serve as conduits for promoting cultural exchange and understanding, particularly pertinent in the context of our increasingly globalised world. The steadfast belief exhibited by participants in the language-enhancing capabilities of social media underscores the imperative of recognising these platforms as invaluable educational resources. Consequently, educational institutions should explore avenues for integrating social media into both formal and informal language learning settings, thereby enriching students' overall learning experiences.

In conclusion, the findings of this study underscore the multifaceted role that social media play in shaping the language learning and cultural experiences of University of Salento language students. Recognising and comprehending these dynamics can provide invaluable insights, guiding the formulation of effective educational practices and strategies aimed at harnessing the full potential of social media for language learning and cultural exchange.

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