The Interplay between Social Media Experience and EFL University Students' Attitudes and Agency in Language Learning

Tuan Dinh Nguyen ᵃ, Cuong Huy Pham ᵃ, *, Duyen Nguyen Thien Ngo ᵃ

ᵃ Ho Chi Minh City University of Economics and Finance, Vietnam

A B S T R A C T

Contemporary research has shown the prominence of social media as versatile platforms for language learning and practice. However, relatively few studies address the interplay between learners' prior experiences, attitudes, and agency in utilizing these tools for learning purposes. Drawing on a case study design, the present research aims to explore this nexus by focusing on EFL learners' affective, behavioral, and cognitive attitudes and their enactment of agency. The participants in this study were five non-English major students learning general English at a private university in Vietnam. In-depth interviews with each student were conducted and augmented with word clouds as a means of member validation following thematic analysis of qualitative data. Findings show that learners' prior experiences with social media induced shifts in their perspectives on using these digital tools and platforms for language learning, contributing to fostering positive attitudes and proactive engagement. Each participant exhibited their personal agency in the learning process through goal-setting, self-regulation, and strategic navigation of resources. This study highlights the significance of the transformative value of social media in language education, offering valuable insights for integrating social media-based tasks into language curricula.

Keywords: social media; prior experience; attitudes; agency; language learning

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* Corresponding author: Faculty of English, Ho Chi Minh City University of Economics and Finance, Vietnam
Email address: cuongph@uef.edu.vn

1. Introduction

With the increasing penetration of technology in learners' social and academic lives, social media have been extensively utilized for language practice as they provide ample opportunities for interaction, collaboration, and content sharing (Barrot, 2022). Contemporary research has confirmed the role of social media as a major contributor to language development by exposing learners to authentic language and real-life communication within and beyond classroom settings, making the learning experience more dynamic and engaging (Baföz, 2016; Li, 2022). However, the blending of social media in language learning is contingent on several factors, particularly learners' digital literacy and their ability to refrain from distractions (Al-Qaysi et al., 2020).

Learners' prior experiences with social media may affect their perceptions of the affordances and constraints of these tools and their readiness to use them for learning purposes. Their familiarity with the interface, features, and communication styles of different platforms has strong associations with their comfort levels and willingness to engage in language practice (Bosch, 2009; Lyu & Lai, 2022). This highlights the importance of understanding the diverse ways in which learners interact with social media in the past and how these experiences shape their attitudes toward these tools.

Attitudinal dimensions are strong predictors of behaviors contributing to enhancing or impeding their engagement and participation in language learning activities on social media platforms (Lee, Chen, et al., 2024; Yuan et al., 2021). Positive attitudes have been linked to increased motivation, enjoyment, and self-directed learning, all of which are crucial for successful language acquisition, whereas negative ones may make the students reluctant or unwilling to engage in language practice on social media (Getie, 2020).

Learners' prior experiences with social media also have profound impacts on the ways in which students regulate, navigate, and utilize these platforms for language learning (Aloraini & Cardoso, 2022; Lee, Yeung, et al., 2024). Central to these processes is the construct of agency which is generally defined as in the following:

> *The property of those entities (i) that have some degree of control over their own behavior, (ii) whose actions in the world affect other entities' (and sometimes their own), and (iii) whose actions are the object of evaluation (e.g. in terms of their responsibility for a given outcome).* (Duranti, 2004, p. 453)

When exercising their agency, learners take meaningful and self-regulated control over their language learning processes, and adapt them according to their personal preferences and needs (White & Pham, 2017). Given the intricate interplay among learners' previous experiences with social media, their attitudes and agentive practices, such a nexus has been relatively underexplored in the context of tertiary language education. This study aims at gaining in-depth insights into the ways in which university students' prior experiences with these tools and platforms mediate their attitudes and ongoing exercise of agency. The two research questions guiding the present research include:

1. How do EFL students' prior experiences with social media influence their attitudes toward using them as tools for language practice?

2. How do EFL students utilize their agency in using social media platforms for language learning?

2. Literature Review

2.1. The use of social media in language learning

Social media refers to any tools or applications that allow users to create, share, and interact with content and other users through a digital network (Reinhardt, 2019). Language learning through social media involves the acquisition of a language through social networks and other online tools. The contribution of social media to language learning, especially in EFL contexts, has been well-documented in recent research (Li, 2022; Muftah, 2024). Tools and platforms such as Facebook, Telegram, YouTube, TikTok, or WhatsApp are rich and effective environments for language development, boost learners' motivation, and make learning experiences more engaging (Abdullah et al., 2023; Smith et al., 2003).

From a social constructivist view which considers learning as both an individual and shared process, Mondahl and Razmerita (2014) point out that social media can facilitate the basic mental processes in language learning. They provide language learners with more opportunities to interact and acquire knowledge with social others, such as teachers and peers, within and beyond classroom settings. Social media have the potential to expand learners' knowledge of target language users' culture, making them more linguistically and culturally competent (Reinhardt, 2019; Wang & Vasquez, 2012). They support independent learning by encouraging learners to become more self-directed ones. The use of social media also allows learners to be engaged in rich interaction with social others, produce language output, receive feedback, and refine their language use (Reinhardt, 2024; Yuen & Schlote, 2024).

However, the use of social media in language learning poses several challenges concerning learners' prior experiences, digital literacy, levels of acceptance, and potential distractions (Benson, 2016; Ellison & Vitak, 2015; Inayati, 2015). Those with a history of social media use may be more amenable to experimenting with these tools. Their prior exposure to social media may influence their conceptualization of the learning values derived from these platforms and the ways in which they maneuver their learning depending on their digital capability and the ability to cope with distractors (Bui et al., 2023; Li, 2022). This highlights the need to beware of how students have previously engaged with social media, as their perceptions are bound to inform their attitudes and agency in using such tools for language learning.

2.2. Learners' attitudes toward using social media for language practice

According to Seel (2012), attitude refers to an individual's inherent tendency or inclination to evaluate an object or its symbolic representation in a particular way. It comprises three major constituents: cognitive, affective and behavioral (Wenden, 1991). The cognitive dimension concerns learners' knowledge and beliefs about an object under examination. The affective component deals with their feelings and emotional reactions to the object, including any preferences or aversions they may have. The behavioral constituent entails learners' observable actions or behavioral intentions (Haddock & Maio, 2017). This model is commonly referred to as the ABC model or the three-component model of attitudes (Wang & Vasquez, 2012; Zhao et al., 2022). Positive attitudes encourage learners to use a variety of strategies conducive to language acquisition and foster their persistence, whereas negative attitudes can hinder the learning process (Getie, 2020; Thompson, 2021).

Regarding the use of social media for language learning, the influence of learners' attitudes is noteworthy. Positive attitudes are the predictors of the desirable behaviors that lead to their engagement and participation in using these tools for language learning (Zhi & Wang, 2024). They also contribute to higher levels of motivation, enjoyment, and self-directed learning which are

fundamental to successful language development (Teng et al., 2022; Zhao et al., 2022). van Rensburg and La (2017) found that university students benefited significantly from utilizing Facebook in language learning. In contrast, it is noted that negative perceptions or fears of social media can provoke resistance to these tools (Yuan et al., 2021). Learners' attitudes should thus be taken into serious consideration to foster successful adoption of social media in language learning.

2.3. Learners' agency in utilizing social media for language practice

Ahearn (2001, p. 112) defines agency as "the socioculturally-mediated capacity to act," highlighting a person's central role in making decisions to resolve issues arising in their life. Learner agency can be defined as their ability and willingness to take action (Gao, 2010) or their "dynamic strategic behavior" in response to contextual realities (Gao, 2013, p. 29). Agency is viewed as a product of a sociocultural activity occurring in the process of interacting with others (Lantolf et al., 2015). This view accentuates the sociality of agency, stressing learners' active construction and negotiation of meaning with the surrounding environment. Agency has been found to be interrelated with learners' autonomy, self-regulation, motivation, and emotions (van Lier, 2008; Wu & Chao, 2015). It promotes learners' ability to observe their learning and navigate contextual changes. This capability entails choosing the right learning approach and managing feelings in learning (Duff, 2007). Learners enact their agency through their ability to regulate their cognitive, affective, and behavioral processes as they interact with social others in the surrounding environment (Zimmerman, 2000). Agency can be divided into two interrelated aspects: self-regulated learning and intentionality and goal management. While the former refers to students' capacity to manage their own learning processes, the latter points to the establishment and pursuits of pre-determined goals (Gao, 2013).

With the swift development of social media and their implications for language learning, recent research has reiterated the value of examining learner agency in seeking learning opportunities on these platforms (Alazemi et al., 2023; Teng et al., 2022). In a study conducted in Taiwan, Wu and Chao (2015) conclude that Facebook-mediated community can promote interactive learning activities. Thanks to the social, interactive, and responsive features of Facebook, learners develop an "affinity space" that fosters self-regulation and independence in their studies. In the same vein, Teng et al. (2022) explore how Instagram feed-based tasks can enhance grammar learning among EFL learners. This study highlighted the role of social media in promoting learners' independent and collaborative learning across different spaces, suggesting that they utilized a high degree of agency.

It is evident that social media contributes significantly to language learning by offering spaces for communication, collaboration, and exposure to real-world language use. These social platforms not only help boost learners' motivation and promote independent learning, but also encourage interaction beyond the classroom. Learners' attitudes and agency have recently emerged as important factors influencing the ways in which they engage with these tools. However, while there is growing interest in how learners make use of social media for language learning, there remains a lack of research into how their past experiences with these platforms shape their present attitudes and agency in language learning, particularly in tertiary contexts. Only a few existing studies have examined these constructs in isolation without adequately fathoming the dynamic nexus among them. To address that gap, the current study aims to investigate how university students' prior experiences with social media affect their attitudes and enactment of agency in employing these platforms for language learning. It seeks to shed light on the factors which could either facilitate or hinder the effective incorporation of social media into language education.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Setting

This study was conducted at a multidisciplinary university in Vietnam that offered a wide selection of undergraduate as well as postgraduate programs. It seeks to prepare graduates for career mobility in the global context by creating vibrant language learning and practice spaces on campus. All non-English major students participate in the mandatory General English Program (GEP) that comprises six courses with a total of 300 contact hours spanning one and a half years, aiming to support students' language development. The English language benchmark for graduation is an overall band score of 5.5 in the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) or equivalents in other international language proficiency tests endorsed by the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training. This institutional requirement may be a challenge for many students without a solid language background and frequent practice. In addition to contact hours, the university implemented diverse activities for using English outside classrooms through language-related seminars and workshops.

3.2. Research Instruments

This study drew on a multiple case study design with five student participants who were taking GEP courses (see the Findings section for the participants' profiles). This approach has been found to be robust for exploring the accounts from various individuals and obtaining more compelling evidence and holistic understandings of their own personal construction of learning spaces, their attitudes, and agency in language learning (Yin, 2018). The primary tool for data gathering was in-depth interviews with each student. An interview guide was developed revolving around the three components of attitudes (affective, behavioral, and cognitive dimensions) and two aspects of agency (self-regulation and intentionality and goal management) as informed by the literature reviewed earlier. Findings from the interviews were then confirmed with a discussion with each student mediated by a word cloud, a form of visual illustration of the elements encompassing the students' social media use for language learning. This member validation, defined as "returning an interview or analyzed data to a participant" (Birt et al., 2016, p. 1802), allowed the researchers and students to revisit the findings on their attitudes and agentive practices with social media. Following the discussions, the word clouds were revised based on the participants' feedback to provide a more rounded depiction of their attitudes and enactment of agency, drawing on their prior experiences on social media platforms and tools.

3.3. Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

The researchers sent email invitations to their current and former students in the GEP to partake in this project. Initially, fourteen respondents expressed their interest and willingness but only ten managed to participate in in-depth interviews. Participation in this study was voluntary, based on informed consent and pseudonyms were used to ensure participants' anonymity. The students were interviewed and recorded individually in their mother tongue, with each interview lasting about thirty minutes. Upon screening the data, the researchers decided to present findings from five participants due to the quality of the discussion and the uniqueness of their accounts. Qualitative data were analyzed according to the five pre-determined theoretical aspects stated in the instrument section, partially guided by Mayring's (2000) deductive category applications. This model of content analysis involved examining qualitative data based on a previously formulated conceptual framework. The analytical procedures entailed producing explicit definitions, examples, and coding rules for each deductive category as presented in Table 1. Interview excerpts illustrating these categories were retrieved and reported in the findings.

Table 1
Deductive Category Applications for Content Analysis

Category	Definition	Sample excerpts	Coding rules
affective attitude	learners' feelings and emotional reactions to the object, including any preferences or aversions	I feel very excited and encouraged when learning English through social media.	accounting for both positive and negative emotions
behavioral attitude	learners' observable actions or behavioral intentions	I join some international communities on Facebook. We share interesting content with each other and discuss or comment in English.	activities or plans for language learning and practice drawing on resources on social media, excluding those that are not related to language learning
cognitive attitude	learners' knowledge and beliefs about an object under examination	Learning to communicate in English and the cultures of business partners are requirements for my learning and working later.	including learners' awareness of the role of social media in language learning and their beliefs about how these tools can benefit their language learning
self-regulation	learners' capacity to manage their own learning processes	The online environment can be very toxic. People can criticize you even though they do not know you clearly. I prefer discussing in private learning groups because I feel safer there.	demonstrating learners' ability to monitor their learning progress, and adopt and/or adapt strategies for using social media to enhance their learning experiences and efficiency
intentionality and goal management	Learners' ability to set and pursue pre-determined goals	I try to learn five new words from social media every week and incorporate them into my conversations or posts.	only accounting for goals related to language learning and practice

4. Findings

This section analyzes the accounts of five students, namely Lan, Minh, Hoa, Hong, and Tung, to portray the ways in which their prior experiences with social media contributed to shaping their attitudes and ongoing exercise of agency. Each of the cases begins with a brief note of their background and use of social media for language learning. A critical examination of the case is then provided, which explores their personal attitudes and unique enactment of agency in using social media for language learning, drawing on their prior experiences with these tools and platforms. A word cloud is included at the end of each case to vividly illustrate the various elements embedded in their accounts and the significance of each element.

4.1. The case of Lan: Emotional Barriers to Agentive Engagement

Student's Profile

Lan, a second-year international business student, has always been enthusiastic about improving her English skills. However, her greatest challenge was a lack of confidence in speaking, especially in public or group discussions. She enjoyed watching English films with subtitles on social media and passively consuming content but rarely engaged in interactive learning activities due to her fear of making mistakes. Over time, social media became a transformative tool in her learning journey, helping her transition from a passive learner to an active participant through carefully structured and emotionally safe learning spaces.

Analysis of the Case

Lan's emotional journey with social media as a language-learning tool was shaped by a combination of excitement and anxiety. At first, she found joy in engaging with English-language media, especially movies and short clips on social networks such as TikTok and YouTube, which provided her with exposure to real-life conversations and native pronunciation. However, she struggled with self-doubt, fearing that she would be judged if she spoke or wrote in English in public online spaces. This hesitation kept her from posting comments, joining discussions, or sharing her thoughts in English.

A turning point came when she joined a Facebook language exchange group where she met an English-speaking partner learning Vietnamese. Their initial interactions were text-based, but as their conversations progressed, Lan gradually gained the courage to engage in voice and video calls. These interactions significantly boosted her confidence, as she realized that language learning is about communication rather than perfection, as in the following:

> *At first, I only sent text messages because I was nervous about making mistakes. But my partner was very supportive, and we started having short voice calls. Now, I feel more comfortable speaking in English without worrying about making mistakes and the relevance of her word choice.* (Lan)

Despite her growing confidence, Lan remained wary of public interactions on social media. She consciously avoided posting in open forums, as she had observed harsh criticism from other users. Instead, she chose to participate in private group discussions and one-on-one conversations, which created a supportive and non-judgmental environment for her learning. In her words, *"The online environment can be very toxic. People can criticize you even though they do not know you clearly. I prefer discussing in private learning groups because I feel safer there."* (Lan)

Over time, Lan expanded her participation, moving from private conversations to posting comments on educational videos and even recording short audio clips of herself reading aloud. This gradual escalation in engagement demonstrated her ability to regulate her learning process and refrain from her fears in a more controlled manner. She stated that *"I started by just listening, then writing comments, and finally, I posted my own recordings. The first time I did it, I was so nervous, but people gave me encouraging feedback, which helped me try again."* (Lan)

By carefully selecting her learning strategies, Lan exercised her agency in language learning. She deliberately chose interactive learning activities, ensuring that her practice was meaningful and engaging. Instead of consuming content passively, she took the initiative to apply what she learned in real conversations. She also demonstrated her appraisals of learning environments, opting for safer and more encouraging spaces to build confidence before engaging in broader discussions. Through incremental challenges, she pushed her comfort zone at her own pace, allowing her to

overcome her fear of being judged by others for her linguistic deficiency and develop greater autonomy in her learning.

Figure 1. Visual Depiction of Lan's Prior Experiences with Social Media and Her Agentive Utilization of Them for Language Studies

Figure 1 illustrated Lan's drastic transformations in her attitudes toward language learning through the mediation of social media. Her initially nuanced emotions arising out of her low self-efficacy incurred constraints on her language studies as she confined herself to private learning spaces. Further exposure to social media boosted her confidence and engagement in more open discussions, helping her overcome her fear of public scrutiny and become more responsive to interactive learning activities. This was the result of her ongoing utilization of agency in appraising elements in surrounding environments to formulate her most relevant learning options and spaces, thus being more accountable for her language studies.

4.2. The case of Minh: Goal-Oriented Agency

Student's Profile

Minh, a third-year IT student, had a highly structured and goal-driven approach to language learning. His primary motivation for learning English was to attain a high score in the TOEIC test (Test of English for International Communication). Unlike many students who used social media for casual learning, Minh approached it as a resource for exam preparation, seeking out expert-led study sessions, practice tests, and interactive learning groups. His learning journey on social media was highly self-regulated, but he also faced challenges with online criticism, which shaped how he engaged with social media platforms.

Analysis of the Case

Minh's emotional connection to social media as a learning tool was more practical. He was driven by necessity rather than personal enjoyment, but he found motivation through structured content. His primary engagement with social media included live-streamed TOEIC classes, Facebook discussion groups, and practice test communities. These resources provided him with real-time feedback, strategies, and a study routine that kept him on track, as he noted, "*I need to take the TOEIC test for my graduation. Learning through social networks is a good way for me because I can access updated materials.*" However, Minh faced a significant emotional setback when he tried posting his speaking practice

video on TikTok. Some comments were encouraging, but others were harsh and critical, making him feel discouraged about sharing his progress online. He stated, "*I once tried the duo challenge to make an English conversation on TikTok. Some comments were very helpful, but others were quite critical. It made me more cautious about using English on social media.*"

After this experience, Minh became reluctant to share his speaking practice publicly, fearing further criticism. Instead, he adjusted his strategy by opting for less confrontational learning environments. He joined a private TOEIC study group on Facebook, where feedback was constructive, and engaged in one-on-one voice message exchanges with a study partner. This choice allowed him to continue practicing speaking without public scrutiny, as he pointed out, "*Now, I only share my speaking practice in private groups where feedback is more supportive. It helps me stay motivated and improve at my own pace.*" At the same time, Minh actively engaged with TOEIC learning communities on Facebook, where students shared their experiences, strategies, and tips about preparing for the test. Through these discussions, he learned from peers who had already taken the exam, gaining insights into study schedules and preparation techniques as in the following:

> *In the TOEIC study groups, people are very helpful. They share their schedules, like what to review two weeks before the test and how to focus on the most important parts. This helps me plan my own study routine better.* (Minh)

In addition to participating in group discussions, Minh also followed channels where teachers live-streamed TOEIC test corrections. These sessions helped him understand test-taking strategies in a more interactive and cost-effective way. He made it a habit to join these livestreams every weekend, treating them as structured lessons, arguing that "*it is very convenient and cost-saving for students like me. I just need to be on schedule and autonomous.*" From these livestreams, Minh learned how to tackle simulated TOEIC tests more effectively by understanding common pitfalls, time-management techniques, and exam tricks shared by experienced instructors in that "*The teachers explain why some answer choices are wrong and how to choose the best option. I take notes during these sessions and apply the techniques in my practice tests.*" Beyond these study resources, Minh found inspiration from studygram bloggers who shared motivational content and learning. Seeing their well-organized learning routines and commitment to improvement motivated Minh to refine his own approach as he propounded that

> *Watching these bloggers motivates me a lot. They share how they plan their study time, how they stay focused, and even small tips like how to memorize vocabulary effectively. I try to apply some of their methods to my own study routine.* (Minh)

Figure 2. Visual Depiction of Minh's Prior Experiences with Social Media and His Agentive Utilization of Them for Language Studies

Figure 2 illustrates Minh's goal-oriented but cautious engagement with social media for language learning. Minh approached social media as a structured learning tool, engaging in interactive study groups and live-streamed lessons. However, experiences with harsh criticism in public spaces triggered anxiety and shaped his preference for private group discussions and learning with studygram bloggers. Through selective participation and self-regulated learning, Minh exercised his agency to navigate supportive spaces, sustaining his motivation and engagement while managing his fear of public judgment.

4.3. The case of Hoa: Agentive Alignment with Career Aspirations

Student's Profile

Hoa, a third-year student in finance, was highly strategic in her social media-based learning approaches. She did not engage in casual learning but curated her online learning spaces to align with her career aspirations. Her focus was not just on language skills but also on business communication and cultural competence, ensuring that her learning had real-world applications.

Analysis of the Case

Hoa's journey with social media and language learning began when she worked part-time as a sales assistant, managing customer interactions through a Facebook fan page. She regularly communicated with clients through messages and posts and over time, realized the importance of using English to reach a broader customer base. She saw how businesses leveraged social media to attract international customers and build strong personal brands, which motivated her to develop her own communication skills and professional online presence. Hoa stated, "*At first, I only used Facebook for sales, but then I saw how powerful it could be for reaching customers worldwide. Writing posts in English and building a professional online profile became essential.*" Her experience with this platform inspired her to learn English more seriously, as she saw it as a way to expand her learning and job opportunities in that "*I follow specific hashtags or influencers who share content about language tips or business communication.*"

Unlike many learners who browsed social media merely for language input, she set clear goals and used these platforms strategically. She actively participated in LinkedIn discussions, Facebook business forums, and online networking events, where she practiced writing professional emails, discussing case studies, and engaging in industry-related conversations. From Hoa's view, "*Learning through social media is not just about English - it is about understanding how people communicate professionally in different cultures.*"

One of the biggest challenges that Hoa encountered was building her speaking confidence in the business settings. While her reading and writing skills improved significantly through social media interactions, she discovered that she struggled with real-time verbal communication. A defining moment in her learning journey took place when she decided to post a short video on the TikTok platform, using English to summarize a financial news article as well as explain its implications. This was her first attempt at public speaking online, and she was surprised by the positive feedback from her network as she revealed, *"I thought others would criticize my grammar, but many people appreciated my effort and even corrected me politely. It was an eye-opening experience that encouraged me to speak more."* She understood that mastering English and communication skills would provide an advantage in today's job market, allowing her to enhance her career opportunities in the finance sector. Gradually, Hoa became increasingly confident in both her written and spoken English, and she recognized that social media could serve as a bridge between language learning and career preparation. She affirmed

that, *"I now see social media as more than just a language tool. It is, indeed, a valuable resource for career development."*

Figure 3. Visual Depiction of Hoa's Prior Experiences with Social Media and Her Agentive Utilization of Them for Language Studies

Figure 3 depicts Hoa's strategic use of social media for professional and language development. Initially motivated by her part-time work, Hoa recognized the role of English in expanding business opportunities. Her learning journey involved curating professional content and engaging in private and public discussions relevant to business communication. Although she faced initial fear of public interaction, supportive feedback on social media boosted her confidence. By intentionally selecting meaningful content and gradually expanding her involvement, Hoa exercised agency in aligning language learning with her career goals and developing her professional identity.

4.4. The case of Hong: Enactment of Strategic Agency

Student Profile

As a sophomore in business administration, Hong exemplifies the incorporation of social media in language learning by actively utilizing various social platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram. Her engagement with digital education began seriously during the Covid-19 pandemic, which necessitated a shift to online learning. Such a transition not only fostered her academic development but also enabled her to connect with influential figures and current dialogues on social topics.

Analysis of the Case

Hong exhibited a high level of agency as well as a strategic and goal-oriented mindset in her utilization of online platforms. Her effective strategy for learning involves having clear and attainable objectives, prompting her to systematically seek out lesson materials which contributed to a well-structured and productive study session. Hong also actively participated in groups and online platforms for TOEIC test preparation, where she gained from livestream lessons conducted by experienced teachers. She observed that *"while conventional classes can sometimes be daunting, social media offers me an ample supply of resources and the flexibility to review content at my own pace."* The cost-

effectiveness of studying via these platforms allowed her to engage in tests and self-assessments, as she explained, *"In my case, a high score in practice tests may allow entry into advanced study groups with the TOEIC instructors."*

Hong also found YouTube as a valuable learning resource, providing focused lessons in English writing, listening, pronunciation and vocabulary acquisition. She was particularly interested in the site features as well as user-friendly tools such as bookmarks, playback speed control, subtitles, and playlist creation, enabling her to study, download, arrange, and review instructional videos for in-depth understanding, as she pointed out, *"These functions help me monitor my progress and maintain a disciplined strategy for my own studies."*

On TikTok, Hong experienced diverse English accents from various regions, including India, the United States, the United Kingdom, and France. This exposure particularly benefited her pronunciation development, as in the following:

> *Listening to English spoken in various dialects has conspicuously improved my communicative skills. I love to discover the distinct varieties of English across different regions and cultures, each with its own unique nuances and expressions. This exposure has helped me understand different accents as well as allowed me to adapt my pronunciation and vocabulary so that I can communicate more successfully in different situations in the future. (Hong)*

Hong's fascination with celebrity culture, especially in relation to women's rights, further enriched her learning experience. The interaction with materials from TED speakers, famous actresses and musicians broadened her understanding of relevant social issues while enhancing her English language proficiency. She noted that *"I truly value exploring topics that resonate with me, as they help to improve my English skills while keeping me engaged."* Besides, her vocabulary learning process was boosted by her admiration for prominent female celebrities in that *"following these role models gives me a chance to study vocabulary that can be put to good use in my English classes and assessments."* Through her intentional and strategic use of social media, Hong illustrated how these platforms could serve as powerful tools for language learning, reflecting her agency and positive attitude.

Figure 4. Visual Depiction of Hong's Prior Experiences with Social Media and Her Agentive Utilization of Them for Language Studies

Figure 4 shows Hong's maneuvering of social media as learning tools and platforms for goal-oriented and strategic language learning. She set specific goals, attended online classes, and enjoyed interactive lessons. Her exposure to social networking content, especially celebrity culture, boosted her understanding of varieties of English and cultural nuances. Engagement with materials related

to social issues also enhanced her learning experiences, illustrating how her agency and positive attitudes could benefit her language studies.

4.5. The case of Tung: Flexible Approaches to Exercising Agency

Student Profile

Tung, a third-year student in marketing, actively engaged with multiple social media platforms, including Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, and Twitter, in order to upgrade his English language skills. As for Tung, social media was more than just a language learning tool, as it exposed him to authentic English, cultural nuances as well as different communication styles. Tung's approach to learning English via social media was both strategic and flexible as he blended learning with leisure.

Analysis of the Case

Tung's experience with social media offered him a variety of advantages in terms of accessibility and exposure to real-life communication. Social media, unlike traditional learning environments, allowed him to interact authentically without the need for extensive traveling, as in the following:

> *There's no need to travel far; I can connect with people from home. Just by watching videos and reading posts, I can gain insights into how native speakers actually talk in different situations. This accessibility not only improves my speaking and writing skills but also strengthens my grasp of cultural norms and taboos.* (Tung)

To expand his lexical knowledge, Tung often read news articles on social media, took notes and highlighted the idiomatic phrases. For this student, such practice was instrumental in enhancing his English writing ability, as he acknowledged that *"it helps me pick up professional and academic vocabulary I can apply in my assignments. Believe it or not, my writing is now much more natural and expressive than it used to be."* In addition, regular exposure to dissimilar English dialects through online content improved his pronunciation and listening skills. He highly appreciated this diversity as he propounded that *"watching video clips from different countries aids my understanding of different accents and expressions, making me more confident when communicating with foreigners."*

Tung was also passionate about humorous content, such as memes and short videos, which he found useful for improving conversational English skills. In his opinion, *"Funny videos and memes are not only entertaining; they also help me to see how language is used naturally, particularly in informal situations. I even share them with my classmates occasionally and attempt to elaborate on the jokes in English."* Tung's approach to learning on social media might seem casual and relaxing, viewing these platforms as spaces for both entertainment and informal language acquisition. However, he exhibited self-regulation in his language development with clear goals for improving his speaking and writing skills. He stated that *"Since I study marketing, I need to learn to write clearly and persuasively. Social media helps me see how professionals use language to intrigue audiences."* To keep himself focused, Tung agentively set regulations for himself that *"I try to learn five new words from social media every week and incorporate them into my conversations or posts. I'm glad to see the increments in my vocabulary."*

Owing to the abundance of resources available on social media, Tung encountered the difficulty of navigating online inaccuracies. He reported coming across false information, largely due to the large volume of content and the unrestricted freedom to post on social platforms. To tackle such challenges, Tung developed strategies for identifying and verifying reliable information in which critical thinking was crucial in the digital landscape, as in the following:

With the overwhelming amount of content out there, misinformation can be a real issue. Consequently, I've gotten into the practice of verifying any online information to determine its reliability. Obviously, the materials need to be checked to filter out any inaccuracies before they can be utilized. By doing so, I can enhance my knowledge while protecting myself from misinformation. (Tung)

Tung leveraged social media as an effective tool for acquiring English, skillfully balancing structured learning with entertainment. His proactive and autonomous engagement with diverse materials on social networks not only strengthened his language competence but also diversified his cultural insights. By setting personal goals, self-managing his learning, and critically evaluating the available information, Tung exhibited a strong degree of agency in his language-learning journey.

Figure 5. Visual Depiction of Tung's Prior Experiences with Social Media and His Agentive Utilization of Them for Language Studies

Tung adopted a laid-back approach to improving his English skills through social media. He actively engaged with various platforms, underscoring their engaging and concise educational content. To him, social media was a valuable resource for good exposure to authentic English and diverse communication styles. Remarkably, he showed awareness of the need to verify the learning resources he accessed on digital platforms. His relaxed attitude allowed him to blend learning with leisure, making the process enjoyable while effectively improving his vocabulary and language skills.

5. Discussion

This study investigates EFL students' attitudes toward using social media as a language learning tool and the ways in which they enacted their agency, drawing on their prior social media experiences. For the first research question, the findings reveal that prior experiences with social media significantly shaped the five students' attitudes toward using these platforms for language learning. Driven by different learning goals and career orientations, they opted for the platforms and digital tools that best suited their preferences, learning needs and styles, and personal circumstances. Such versatility of social media contributed to fostering their confidence, motivation, and proactive engagement in language learning and practice. This result aligns with the studies by Bosch (2009) and Lyu and Lai (2022), in which familiarity with social media features supported students' positive affects about using these tools and hindered negative ones. Social media motivated students, reinforced their passions for learning, and reduced their anxiety out of their incremental exposure to real-world language use (Reinhardt, 2019; Wang & Vasquez, 2012). Particularly, the findings

provide corroborating evidence for students' lower levels of confrontation and higher enjoyment as they could seek alternative platforms that were more private and secure, thereby enhancing their learning experiences and overall comfort (Dewaele et al., 2023; Muftah, 2024; Zhao et al., 2022). Regarding behavioral attitudes, each student actively engaged with social media platforms, adopting various language learning behaviors and strategies based on the resources available to them in their learning settings. In addition to the conventional apps and platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram, they participated in different learning modes through bloggers or livestreams. This resonates with the finding from Reinhardt (2024) that collaborative learning on social media enhances students' engagement through frequent interactions and peer support. As for the cognitive domain, students with a history of using social media displayed cognitive strategies such as selecting relevant content, setting learning goals, and adapting learning approaches. Prior experiences with specific platform features helped students to access, synthesize, and evaluate learning content more effectively, reflecting the operation of cognitive appraisals (Bui et al., 2023; Gabryś-Barker, 2011; Gao et al., 2017). This also consolidates the value of students' utilization of cognitive processing in enhancing learning efficiency (Al-Qaysi et al., 2020; Yuen & Schlote, 2024).

For the second research question, accounts from the five students shed light on the distinct ways in which they exercised their agency for language learning based on their prior experiences with social media through their self-regulation, goal setting, and adaptation. Drawing on their personally formulated learning objectives and career-oriented aspirations, each student appraised the resources and utility in their settings that best responded to their needs, traits, and circumstances. This finding echoes the research by Tseng et al. (2017) and Wang and Chen (2020), who reported that task-oriented social media use encouraged active goal management and academic performance. In this study, the students' demonstration of agency was quite unique as they could effectively navigate large and unstructured resources to create personally meaningful learning environments. They employed a high extent of agency in deciding the learning content, organizing resources, and pursuing specific targets. This corresponds with Sun and Rueda's (2011) argument that learners in digital environments must continuously adapt to dynamic learning contexts, requiring strong decision-making and critical evaluation skills. This finding also concurs with Lee et al. (2013) in that effective digital learning depends not only on platform features but also on learners' ability to self-regulate and maintain concentration in highly interactive online settings. By exercising intentional control and self-regulation, the students depicted their adaptive agency in leveraging social media for learning purposes. Their capacity to navigate digital environments, manage tasks, and overcome challenges highlighted the dynamic nature of learning with digital and social resources.

6. Conclusion

This study underscores the unique potential of social media in offering dynamic and interactive spaces that promote students' positive attitudes and their enactment of agency. The accounts from the five participants depicted the various approaches to incorporating social media into language learning and instruction. As the students showed their preferences for collaborative activities, group discussions, and language challenges in less confrontational situations, teachers should consider embedding social media-based tasks into the curriculum in a way that encourages constructive feedback, respect, and mutual support. This helps to create a safe environment that elevates their confidence and redresses their fear of public scrutiny. Another issue emerging from the findings is that students might be inundated with the vast amount of information on social media, some of which may even be inaccurate, leading to the fact that students may fail to discover or determine reliable sources for their language learning and practice. To address this, teachers should raise their awareness of the potential risks of utilizing unverified sources for learning purposes and show them strategies for identifying trustworthy platforms. Further, as this study suggests, social media was not always treated as tools and platforms for serious and intensive English learning, given possible

distractions and students' limited concentration. These attitudinal representations are closely linked with their enactment of agency through the mechanism of self-regulation, goal management, and intentionality. It would be useful if teachers allowed students to reflect on their learning goals and plans as the basis for them to expend further learning effort, drawing on available resources on social media.

Though the study offers valuable insights, it also presents a few limitations. First of all, since this research focused specifically on Vietnamese EFL students, the generalizability of the findings to learners from other cultural and educational contexts might be limited. In addition, the study relied on self-reported interviews which could introduce bias in the participants' perceptions and reflections. Besides, it did not distinguish between various social media platforms with unique features and affordances that may influence language learning experiences differently. Lastly, the study primarily examined students' prior experiences, thus it may fail to track long-term impacts of social media use on language learning outcomes.

To address these limitations, future studies could explore how students from different cultural backgrounds perceive and utilize social media for their language learning. That would provide a broader understanding of its global potential. Moreover, it is necessary to analyze the specific features and affordances of different social media platforms (e.g., TikTok, Instagram, Facebook) in order to determine their distinct contributions to language learning. Further, carrying out longitudinal research to assess the long-term effects of social media-based language learning on students' proficiency and intercultural competence can offer more profound understandings and useful insights. Lastly, future studies might investigate teachers' views on the integration of social media in language teaching as well as identify potential affordances and barriers in adopting these tools effectively.

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Mr. Tuan Dinh Nguyen is deputy Dean of the Faculty of English at Ho Chi Minh City University of Economics and Finance, Vietnam. He was the top graduate in the Master of Arts in Applied Linguistics at Curtin University, Australia. His research interests include TESOL, learner autonomy, language acquisition, linguistics, and intercultural communication.

Dr. Cuong Huy Pham is Dean of the Faculty of English at Ho Chi Minh City University of Economics and Finance, Vietnam. He obtained his PhD in Applied Linguistics from Massey University, New Zealand. His research interests include language learning motivation and emotion, teacher and learner agency, and issues related to English language education in EFL contexts.

Ms. Duyen Ngo Nguyen Thien is a lecturer at the Faculty of English at Ho Chi Minh City University of Economics and Finance, Vietnam and a current PhD student at the Open University, Vietnam. She has published research in both local and international journals. Her scholarly interests center on learner autonomy, teacher professional development, and assessment practice.