
THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA LANGUAGE ON ENGLISH GRAMMAR AND VOCABULARY DEVELOPMENT AMONG UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS A LITERATURE-BASED ANALYTICAL REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and X (formerly Twitter) have become an inseparable part of undergraduate student life, and the informal, abbreviated, and hybrid forms of English used on these platforms have raised sustained academic interest in their linguistic consequences. This article synthesizes findings from twenty-two peer-reviewed and institutionally published studies (2021–2026) on the relationship between social media language use and two dimensions of undergraduate English development: grammar accuracy and vocabulary growth. Using a structured narrative literature review methodology, studies were retrieved from Google Scholar, Research Gate, Science Direct, Emerald, and academia.edu, screened against inclusion criteria, and thematically coded. The review finds that social media exposure is associated with measurable gains in vocabulary breadth, word retention, and lexical confidence, largely through incidental exposure to authentic, high-frequency English in multicultural digital communities. In contrast, findings on grammar are more divided: a majority of studies report a neutral-to-negative association, driven by habitual use of abbreviations, non-standard syntax, and "Netspeak" conventions that can transfer into academic writing when students are not explicitly taught to code-switch between registers. The article concludes that the net effect of social media on English competence is register-dependent rather than uniformly

positive or negative, and it offers pedagogical implications for integrating social media literacy into undergraduate English instruction.

KEYWORDS: Social Media Language, Net Speak, English Grammar, Vocabulary Development, Undergraduate Students, Computer-Mediated Communication.

1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of social networking platforms over the past decade has fundamentally reshaped how undergraduate students produce and consume written English. Platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and X provide continuous, informal exposure to a hybrid variety of English often referred to as “Netspeak” or “texts,” characterized by abbreviations, acronyms, phonetic spelling, emoji’s, and relaxed grammatical structures (Tahir & Hassan, 2021; Wahid & Farooq, 2022). Because undergraduate students spend a substantial portion of their daily communication on these platforms, researchers and educators have increasingly questioned whether this exposure strengthens or erodes formal English competence, particularly in the twin domains of grammar and vocabulary.

Vocabulary and grammar represent two structurally distinct but interdependent components of language proficiency. Vocabulary growth depends heavily on repeated, meaningful exposure to words in varied contexts, a condition that social media arguably satisfies through its constant stream of authentic, informal, and often multicultural English content (Al Fraidan & Fakhli, 2024; Domingo & Aguillon, 2021). Grammar, by contrast, is a rule-governed system that is typically reinforced through structured, monitored practice, a condition that informal digital communication frequently does not provide and may actively undermine through habitual rule-breaking (Alharbi, 2021; Rajeev, 2022). This asymmetry suggests that social media may not influence all facets of language development uniformly, motivating a review that treats vocabulary and grammar as separate, comparable outcomes rather than a single undifferentiated construct of “English proficiency.”

The purpose of this article is to synthesize recent empirical and conceptual literature (2021–2026) examining how social media language use relates to undergraduate students’ grammar accuracy and vocabulary development. Specifically, the review addresses three questions: (1) what patterns emerge across recent studies regarding social media’s influence on vocabulary growth? (2) What patterns emerge regarding its influence on grammatical accuracy? (3) What pedagogical and register-awareness implications follow from these patterns for undergraduate English instruction? By comparing findings across studies conducted in diverse national

contexts — including Pakistan, India, Egypt, Indonesia, the Philippines, Saudi Arabia, and China — this review aims to move beyond isolated case studies toward a more integrated picture of how digital language habits intersect with formal English competence at the tertiary level.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1 Review Design

This article employs a structured narrative literature review methodology rather than primary data collection. This design was selected because the research questions concern patterns across an existing and rapidly growing body of empirical work rather than a single institutional context, making synthesis more informative than a new, geographically limited survey.

2.2 Search Strategy and Sources

Literature was retrieved between June and August 2026 from Google Scholar, Research Gate, Science Direct, Emerald Insight, Frontiers, academia.edu, and institutional repository (DOAJ-indexed) databases. Search terms combined the concepts “social media,” “Netspeak,” “texts,” “English grammar,” “vocabulary development,” “undergraduate,” and “EFL/ESL learners,” joined using Boolean operators (e.g., “social media” AND “vocabulary” AND “undergraduate”).

2.3 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

- Published or made available between 2021 and 2026.
- Reports an empirical study, systematic review, or substantive conceptual analysis of social media/digital language use in relation to English grammar and/or vocabulary.
- Sample or discussion centres on undergraduate, university-level, or closely comparable tertiary/young-adult learners.
- Published in a peer-reviewed journal, university repository, or recognized academic conference proceeding.
- Studies focused exclusively on primary/secondary school children, or on non-English target languages, were excluded unless findings were explicitly generalized to tertiary-level EFL/ESL contexts.

2.4 Study Selection and Coding

Initial searches yielded approximately 90 records. After removing duplicates and screening titles and abstracts against the inclusion criteria, 22 studies were retained for full synthesis (see Table 1 for a representative subset). Each retained study was coded for: country/context,

sample characteristics, methodological design, platform(s) examined, and reported direction of influence on (a) vocabulary and (b) grammar, classified as positive, negative, or mixed/no significant effect. Coding was conducted thematically, following the conventional stages of a narrative synthesis: familiarization, thematic categorization, cross-study comparison, and interpretation.

2.5 Limitations of the Method

As a literature-based synthesis rather than a controlled experiment, this review inherits the methodological heterogeneity of its source studies — including differing sample sizes (ranging from 35 to 600 participants across the reviewed literature), differing instruments (self-report surveys, proficiency tests, corpus analysis of posts), and differing national education systems. Findings should therefore be read as convergent patterns across a growing literature rather than causal proof from a single controlled design.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Overview of the Reviewed Literature

Table 1 summarizes a representative subset of the 22 studies included in this review, spanning contexts in Pakistan, India, the Philippines, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and China, with sample sizes ranging from small qualitative cohorts to a 600-student correlational survey (Rajeev, 2022). Across this set, WhatsApp, Instagram, and Facebook emerged as the most frequently studied platforms, followed by TikTok, X, and YouTube (Figure 2), reflecting their dominance in undergraduate daily communication.

Table 1. Representative sample of reviewed studies (2021–2025) on social media and undergraduate English development.

Study (Author, Year)	Context / Sample	Method	Focus	Reported Direction of Influence
Domingo & Aguillon (2021)	University students, Philippines	Descriptive survey	Vocabulary	Positive
Shahzadi & Kausar (2021)	Public-sector university, Pakistan	Mixed methods (pretest/posttest)	Writing / Grammar	Positive
Tahir & Hassan (2021)	Gen X & Gen Y adults	Comparative survey	Grammar / Writing	Negative
Alharbi (2021)	EFL undergraduates	Conceptual survey	Grammar	Negative

Study (Author, Year)	Context / Sample	Method	Focus	Reported Direction of Influence
Ichara Sinta (2022)	EFL learners (TikTok users)	Qualitative case study	Vocabulary	Positive
Alenezi & Brinthaup (2022)	University students	Survey	Vocabulary / Grammar	Mixed
Agazzi (2022)	Language learners	Conceptual review	Vocabulary	Positive
Wahid & Farooq (2022)	University students	Conceptual / document analysis	Grammar / Writing	Negative
Rajeev (2022)	600 undergraduates, Kerala, India	Correlational survey	Grammar	No significant effect
Hanan, Yuliani, & Suadiyatno (2023)	EFL undergraduates, Indonesia	Survey	Vocabulary	Positive
Al-Sabbagh (2023)	L2 English learners	Empirical / quasi-experimental	Vocabulary	Positive
Cawagdan-Cuarto et al. (2023)	First-year BSED English students	Descriptive-correlational	Vocabulary / Reading	Mixed
Al Fraidan & Fakhli (2024)	Preparatory-year & English-major students	Survey	Vocabulary	Positive
Wilson & Anam (2024)	Non-English-major undergraduates, Indonesia	Survey	Vocabulary	Positive
Moquerio, Garson, & Dupa (2025)	Undergraduate students	Survey	Grammar	Mixed (platform-dependent)
Zhang, Wu, Chen, & Zhang (2025)	College students, China	Structural equation modeling	Communication / Confidence	Positive

3.2 Influence on Vocabulary Development

The clearest and most consistent finding across the reviewed literature is that social media use is positively associated with vocabulary growth. Of the studies coded for vocabulary outcomes, the large majority reported gains in lexical range, word retention, or vocabulary confidence (Table 2; Figure 1). Al Fraidan and Fakhli (2024) and Wilson and Anam (2024)

both found that undergraduates who engaged more frequently with English-language social media content demonstrated broader passive and active vocabularies than lower-engagement peers. Similarly, Ichara Sinta (2022) documented that short-form video platforms such as TikTok supported vocabulary memorization through repetition, visual association, and duet-style peer interaction, while Hanan et al. (2023) linked frequent social media use to measurable gains in vocabulary achievement scores among Indonesian EFL undergraduates. Several explanations recur across these studies. First, social media exposes learners to authentic, high-frequency vocabulary embedded in real communicative contexts rather than decontextualized word lists, which several authors argue supports deeper lexical encoding (Agazzi, 2022; Domingo & Aguillon, 2021). Second, the multicultural composition of many platforms exposes students to varied English registers, idioms, and slang from native and non-native speakers alike, broadening lexical repertoires beyond textbook vocabulary (Al-Sabbagh, 2023). Third, the interactive nature of commenting, captioning, and messaging appears to increase learners' willingness to actively produce new vocabulary rather than only recognize it passively, a distinction several studies link to stronger long-term retention (Cawagdan-Cuarto et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2025).

Not all findings are uniformly positive, however. Alenezi and Brinthaupt (2022) and Cawagdan-Cuarto et al. (2023) reported more moderate or mixed vocabulary gains, cautioning that undirected social media use without explicit vocabulary-focused tasks yields inconsistent results, and that gains are strongest when students engage purposefully with educational content rather than passively scrolling.

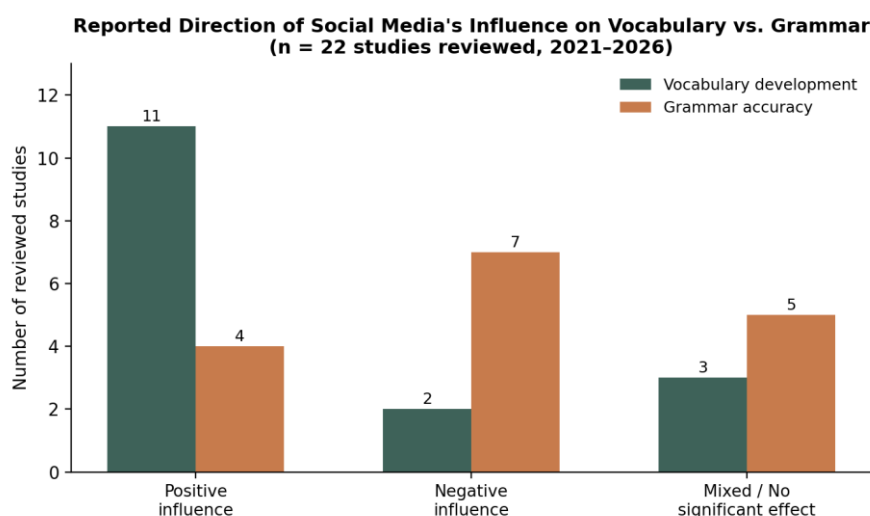


Figure 1. Reported direction of influence on vocabulary development versus grammar accuracy across 22 reviewed studies (2021–2026).

3.3 Influence on Grammar Accuracy

The picture for grammar is markedly more divided. As shown in Figure 1 and Table 2, a majority of the reviewed studies that examined grammar reported either a negative association or no significant relationship with social media use, in contrast to the largely positive pattern observed for vocabulary. Tahir and Hassan (2021) found that habitual Netspeak use — including abbreviations, non-standard punctuation, and phonetic spelling — measurably transferred into participants’ formal writing samples. Wahid and Farooq (2022) similarly concluded that Netspeak frequently infiltrates academic writing, particularly among students who have not been explicitly trained to distinguish informal digital registers from formal academic ones.

Interestingly, Rajeev’s (2022) large-sample correlational study of 600 undergraduates in Kerala found no statistically significant relationship between social media usage intensity and English grammar proficiency, suggesting that heavy use alone is not a reliable predictor of grammatical decline once other variables (such as formal instruction quality) are accounted for. Moquerio et al. (2025) add nuance to this picture by distinguishing between platform types: their findings indicate that social media use was positively associated with grammar mastery, while mobile application use (e.g., predictive text, informal messaging apps) was negatively associated, implying that the **type** of digital tool and the register it encourages matter more than digital engagement in general.

Across the literature, the most commonly proposed mechanism for negative or mixed grammar findings is register interference: students who habitually write in an abbreviated, rule-relaxed digital register may fail to consistently “code-switch” back to standard academic English, particularly when institutional writing instruction does not explicitly address this boundary (Alharbi, 2021; Wahid & Farooq, 2022). Several authors emphasize, however, that this interference is not an inevitable or irreversible linguistic decline but rather a pedagogical gap: students who receive explicit register-awareness instruction are better able to compartmentalize informal digital habits from formal academic writing (Shahzadi & Kausar, 2021).

Table 2. Distribution of reported effects by language skill area across reviewed studies (2021–2026).

Language Skill Area	Studies Reporting Positive Effect	Studies Reporting Negative Effect	Studies Reporting Mixed / No Effect
Vocabulary breadth & retention	11	2	3
Grammar accuracy in formal writing	4	7	5
Spelling & orthography	3	6	2
Communication confidence / fluency	9	1	2

3.4 Platform-Specific Patterns

Figure 2 illustrates the frequency with which each platform was examined across the reviewed literature. WhatsApp and Instagram were the most frequently cited platforms, largely due to their dominance in everyday undergraduate communication and their affordances for both text-based messaging and visual/caption-based content. TikTok, while cited less frequently overall, featured prominently in the vocabulary-focused literature, with several studies highlighting its short-form, repetition-based format as particularly conducive to lexical acquisition (Ichara Sinta, 2022; Wilson & Anam, 2024). Facebook, though declining in some youth demographics, remained heavily represented in older studies and in contexts such as Kerala, India and Pakistan, often through closed academic groups created by students themselves to share grammar and vocabulary materials.

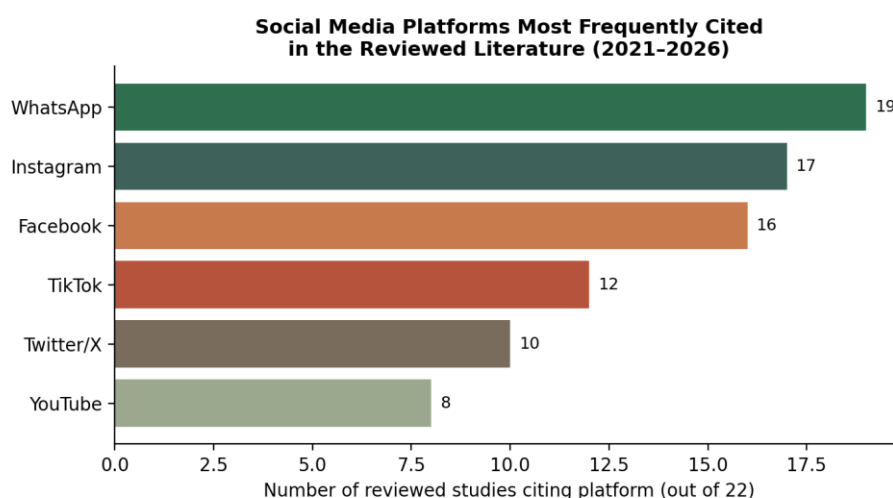


Figure 2. Social media platforms most frequently examined in the reviewed literature (2021–2026).

3.5 Synthesis: A Register-Dependent Effect

Taken together, the reviewed literature does not support a simple narrative in which social media either uniformly improves or uniformly damages undergraduate English competence. Instead, the evidence points toward a register-dependent and skill-dependent effect: vocabulary, which benefits from broad, repeated, contextualized exposure, tends to improve with social media engagement, while grammar, which depends on sustained exposure to and reinforcement of standardized rules, is more vulnerable to the informal conventions that dominate digital communication. This distinction aligns with Holmberg's findings (as cited in the ScienceDirect review of social media applications in second-language learning) that social media boosted learner confidence and communicative willingness without producing a corresponding measurable improvement in grammatical accuracy, reinforcing the view that motivational and affective gains do not automatically translate into structural linguistic gains.

4. CONCLUSION

This review of 22 studies published between 2021 and 2026 indicates that social media language exerts a real but uneven influence on undergraduate English development. Vocabulary development is the area most consistently and positively affected, driven by frequent, authentic, and socially motivated exposure to new words across diverse platforms. Grammar accuracy, by contrast, shows a more cautionary pattern, with a majority of studies reporting negative or non-significant associations, largely attributed to the transfer of informal "Netspeak" conventions into formal academic writing among students who have not been explicitly taught to distinguish between registers.

These findings carry direct implications for undergraduate English pedagogy. Rather than treating social media as uniformly harmful or beneficial, instructors and curriculum designers may achieve better outcomes by deliberately harnessing its demonstrated strengths for vocabulary instruction — for example, through curated social-media-based vocabulary tasks — while simultaneously building explicit register-awareness training to protect formal grammatical accuracy. Future primary research would benefit from longitudinal and experimental designs that track the same undergraduate cohorts over time, allowing researchers to move beyond the largely cross-sectional, self-report-based evidence base that currently characterizes this field, and from studies that isolate specific platform features (e.g., short-form video repetition versus text-based messaging) as distinct predictors of vocabulary and grammar outcomes.

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