

The Moderating Role of Socio-cultural Factors and Perceived Enjoyment in Social Media-Assisted EFL Learning: A Systematic Review

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ABSTRACT

This systematic review examines the influence of socio-cultural factors and perceived enjoyment on Saudi university students' use of social media for learning English as a Foreign Language. The review identifies key cultural and motivational determinants that shape the effectiveness of social media-based language learning and introduces a conceptual model to guide future research. Employing the PRISMA framework, 45 studies published between 2015 and 2024 in Scopus and Web of Science were analysed. The findings reveal four primary themes: socio-cultural barriers and supports influenced by gender norms and religious expectations; perceived enjoyment functioning as both a motivator and a potential distraction; variations in learning behaviours across platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, and X/Twitter; and tensions between informal and formal learning environments. This review synthesizes global evidence regarding the impact of socio-cultural factors and enjoyment on EFL learning facilitated by social media. The principal contribution is a novel conceptual model integrating socio-cultural theory and the Technology Acceptance Model with perceived enjoyment.

Keywords: Social media, EFL Learning, Socio-Cultural Factors, Perceived Enjoyment, Saudi Arabia, Higher Education

1. INTRODUCTION

Digital technologies have significantly transformed language learning worldwide (Alqahtani, 2024). Social media now occupies a central role in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction. In Saudi Arabia, English proficiency is considered essential for professional and academic advancement (Jamshed et al., 2024). University students increasingly use platforms such as YouTube, WhatsApp, and X to improve communication skills, deepen comprehension, and access authentic materials beyond traditional classroom settings (Mohammed & AbdAlgane, 2025). Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 underscores the significance of digital innovation and international connectivity, positioning English proficiency as a critical component of national competitiveness (Jamshed et al., 2024). This policy framework promotes the integration of innovative pedagogical approaches and digital tools within higher education (Aldoghiher et al., 2025).

Nevertheless, the use of social media for EFL learning continues to encounter obstacles related to cultural norms and institutional conservatism (Luppacini & Walabe, 2021). Existing research on technology-enhanced learning is extensive, but few studies have examined the intersection of cultural

values and affective variables in students' adoption of social media for EFL learning in Saudi Arabia (Muhammad & Nagaletchimee, 2023). Western studies often treat culture as neutral in the context of technology use and fail to investigate the influence of gender norms, religion, and social expectations, which are influential in Saudi higher education (Alshammari & Fayez, 2023). Additionally, most research focuses on functional factors, such as perceived usefulness and ease of use (Davis, 1989), with little attention to emotional or motivational factors, such as perceived enjoyment. This leaves an important gap: we lack an integrated understanding of how both socio-cultural realities and affective experiences, specifically enjoyment, interact to influence technology adoption for language learning in Saudi Arabia.

A lack of context-specific evidence has led to an incomplete understanding of the inconsistencies in Saudi learners' use of social media for English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Some studies report positive outcomes, including enhanced vocabulary acquisition and increased learner confidence (Zahira et al., 2024). In contrast, other research identifies obstacles related to religious and familial restrictions (Alsheddi, 2020). Further, the findings suggest that Saudi female students encounter different digital learning opportunities than male students (Alshammari & Fayez, 2023). Institutional skepticism regarding the educational validity of informal social media learning also persists (Sanchez-Soto, 2023). Collectively, these mixed findings highlight a significant research gap: the ways in which socio-cultural factors interact with emotional experiences, such as enjoyment and motivation, to shape sustained technology use in EFL learning within the unique Saudi context remain insufficiently explored.

This review examines how socio-cultural factors and perceived enjoyment affect social media use for EFL learning among Saudi college students. Its main aim is to explain how these factors influence the adoption and continued use of digital learning platforms in this setting. The review draws on research published from 2015 to 2024 and follows PRISMA guidelines. It uses socio-cultural theory (Cole & Scribner, 1978) and the Technology Acceptance Model (Davis, 1989) to develop a model that accounts for cultural context. The study offers a framework for future research in Saudi Arabia and similar educational environments. The research contributes by treating perceived enjoyment as a factor in the Technology Acceptance Model, adapting the model to Saudi culture, and linking enjoyment to social identity. These findings help us better understand how usability and culture affect educational technology use. The results support the design of programs that consider cultural factors and recognize informal digital learning within institutions.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Design

This study uses a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) to explore how socio-cultural factors and perceived enjoyment influence Saudi university students' use of social media for learning English as a foreign language. The SLR approach helps make the process of gathering evidence from different types of studies clear and repeatable. The review follows the 2021 PRISMA guidelines (Paul et al., 2021), which offer a clear structure for its three main phases;

1. A comprehensive search was conducted using predefined keywords (social media, EFL learning, socio-cultural factors, perceived enjoyment) across Scopus, Web of Science, and ERIC. Titles and

abstracts of initial results were screened to include only peer-reviewed and contextually relevant publications.

2. We reviewed the full texts of potentially relevant articles to check their methodological rigor and how well they fit the context. We included only empirical studies published since 2015 that were conducted in higher education and directly examined the link between socio-cultural factors, perceived enjoyment, and EFL learning. This method helped us focus on studies relevant to Saudi higher education.
3. Data extraction and synthesis were conducted through formal coding of data obtained from selected databases. Thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), was used to identify themes and patterns within the results. The synthesis process comprised three steps: line-by-line coding of outcomes, clustering of descriptive themes, and development of analytical themes to elucidate moderators and mechanisms. This methodology facilitated a comprehensive understanding of relevant concepts, theoretical frameworks, and methodological alignment. Quantitative analysis was also performed to examine patterns in social media adoption and learning outcomes, thereby complementing the qualitative synthesis.

2.2 Search Strategy

The review was conducted in accordance with PRISMA guidelines, which establish a systematic framework for literature reviews. The literature search was performed using three academic databases: Scopus, Web of Science, and ERIC. The search strategy incorporated the following keywords: social media, EFL learning, socio-cultural factors, language acquisition, perceived enjoyment, and technology use. These terms were combined to identify relevant studies. To capture recent advancements in digital language education, only peer-reviewed articles published between 2015 and 2024 were included. Backward and forward citation tracking was employed to identify additional key studies and ensure comprehensive coverage of significant literature. This methodology ensures that the review is grounded in the most current and reliable research.

Figure 1 presents the PRISMA flow diagram outlining the identification and screening process for the included studies. A total of 800 records were retrieved from Scopus, Web of Science, and ERIC. After removing 100 irrelevant records and 200 duplicates, 500 records remained for screening. Title and abstract screening resulted in the exclusion of 350 records. The full texts of the remaining 150 articles were assessed, with 105 excluded for not meeting the inclusion criteria. Ultimately, 45 studies were included in the review. Appendix A provides a comprehensive summary of these studies.

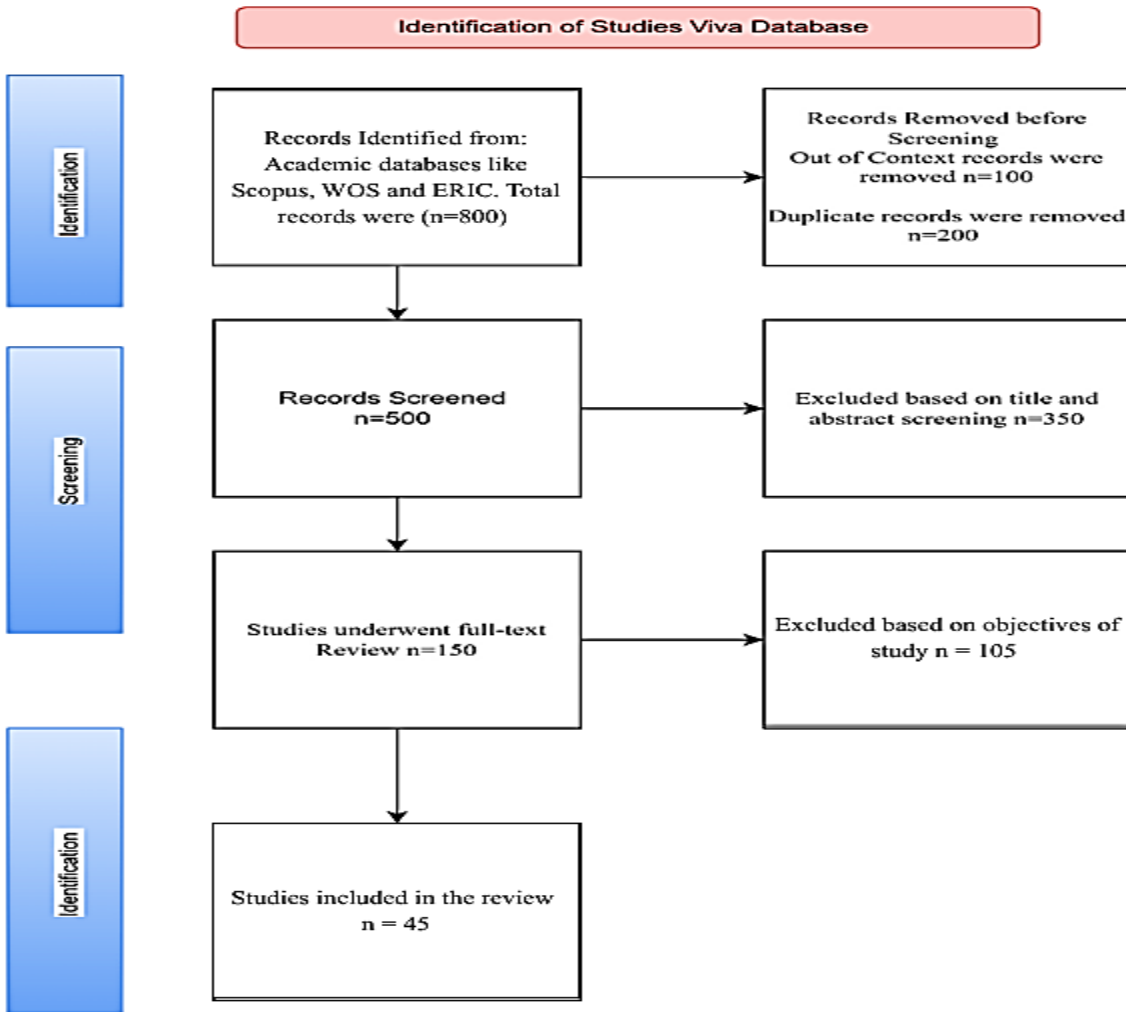


Figure 1. PRISMA Flow Diagram of the Systematic Review Process

2.3 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

2.3.1 Inclusion Criteria

This review included studies that focused on how university students use social media for EFL learning. Only peer-reviewed articles published from 2015 to 2024 were considered. To ensure the studies were relevant, only research that met all of the following criteria was selected:

1. The studies had to be conducted in the Middle East or in conservative societies with similar cultural backgrounds of Saudi Arab
2. Only studies from Scopus and Web of Science were included.
3. Each study needed to examine both of the following aspects of socio-cultural factors, perceived enjoyment
4. Only empirical studies whether quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods that provided verifiable data were included. The outcomes considered were engagement, intention to use, persistence, proficiency, grades, test scores, or observed language behaviours.
5. The full text of each study had to be available in English.

2.4.2 Exclusion Criteria

Studies were not included if they did not clearly focus on EFL learning. Such as research on general social media use without a language-learning aspect was excluded.

Research was also excluded if it did not clearly examine either socio-cultural factors or perceived enjoyment related to technology use. The following types of sources were also excluded to keep the empirical synthesis reliable:

1. Theoretical papers, opinion pieces, editorials, or conference abstracts without empirical data.
2. Empirical studies published before 2015.
3. Studies focused only on K–12 learners were excluded, since this review targets university students in higher education.

2.5 Thematic Synthesis

We conducted a three-stage thematic synthesis for all included studies, analyzing the findings, results, and discussion sections. Initially, we coded findings line by line using inductive tags for socio-cultural factors, perceived enjoyment, platform behaviors, and learning outcomes. Subsequently, we grouped these codes into descriptive themes that identified patterns across qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods studies. In the final stage, we developed analytical themes to explain the relationship between social media use and EFL outcomes, as well as the factors that influence it. Two researchers coded independently, and any disagreements were resolved through meetings to maintain a transparent record.

We synthesized quantitative evidence by examining the direction of each effect. Each result was categorized by outcome type (positive, negative, or none) and by the reported effect size. These details were incorporated into the descriptive themes, which were subsequently included in the analytical themes. This process resulted in a structured codebook, a set of themes aligned with our review questions, and a map illustrating which factors influenced specific outcomes. These steps informed our selection of variables, example measures, and potential directions of effect for the proposed conceptual model. The studies included in this corpus employ robust empirical methodologies and encompass a diverse array of research designs. The corpus features quantitative (Al Khader, 2018; Jamshed et al., 2024), qualitative (e.g., Alhamadi, 2017; Malik et al., 2021), and mixed-methods approaches (Alqarni, 2021; Albazie, 2023), facilitating both comprehensive statistical analysis and nuanced contextual understanding. The research is grounded in established theoretical frameworks, such as the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), while also incorporating emerging, context-specific constructs, including socio-cultural autonomy and religious values. This theoretical and methodological diversity enhances synthesis and allows for a more thorough examination of how complex socio-cultural and emotional factors shape EFL learning via social media.

3. FINDINGS

Table 1 reviewed studies identify a gap between the benefits of digital tools and the constraints imposed by social and cultural factors. Social media and mobile technologies have been found to enhance engagement, motivation, and learner autonomy. Nevertheless, cultural and religious values significantly influence perceptions of new technologies.

The use of social media is shaped by prevailing cultural and gender norms, while both institutional and cultural barriers hinder the integration of technology in educational settings. Additionally, family background and gender influence student motivation. The studies recommend developing culturally responsive strategies, providing psychological support, and enhancing institutional training and support to facilitate technology adoption and address motivational and cultural challenges.

Table 1. Representative studies included in the review, n=12. See Appendix A for the full list of 45 studies

Reference	Methodology	Country, Population	Variables	Findings
Alqarni (2021)	Mixed Method	Saudi Arabia Undergraduate university students	Perceived Usefulness, Perceived Ease of Use, Attitude toward Use, Behavioral Intention, Actual System Use	Students showed positive attitudes toward using social media in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning. These platforms helped increase student engagement and motivation.
Al Khader, (2018)	Quantitative	Saudi Arabia Female Teachers	Subjects, Object, Tools/Mediating Artefacts, Rules/Norms (CHAT components)	The study identified institutional and cultural barriers affecting the integration of social media in teaching. Findings indicate that teacher beliefs and cultural history play a significant role in shaping attitudes toward the use of social media in English instruction.
Alnemari (2023)	Mixed Method	Saudi Arabia Secondary school students (ages 16–18)	Motivation, Anxiety, Attitude, Effort, Achievement	The study showed that motivation and a positive attitude helped students perform better in EFL, but anxiety worsened their performance.
Jamshed et al. (2024)	Quantitative	Saudi Arabia Undergraduate students at PSAU, Business College	Parents' Educational Level, Parents' Profession, Gender	The study found that both family background and gender significantly affect students' motivation and attitudes toward learning English.
Alsheddi (2020)	Quantitative	Saudi Arabia, Employees from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs	Cultural Values, Social Dimensions, Religious Values, Attitude Toward Innovation	The study found that cultural and religious values significantly influence attitudes toward technological adoption.

Reference	Methodology	Country, Population	Variables	Findings
Albazie (2023)	Mixed Method	Saudi Arabia – University faculty members	Perceived Ease of Use, Perceived Usefulness, Attitude, Self-Efficacy, Motivation, Challenges, Benefits	The study revealed that faculty perceived Blackboard as useful and user-friendly. Motivation and self-efficacy influenced adoption levels.
Alzubi & Singh (2018)	Quantitative	Saudi Arabia – Undergraduate students (two EFL reading classes)	Social Strategies, Smartphone Use, Socio-Cultural Autonomy	The study found that smartphone use enhanced learners' autonomy and interaction in EFL contexts. Social strategies mediated by mobile technology improved cultural awareness and self-directed learning.
Aljeeran (2016)	Mixed Method	Kuwait – University faculty (Gulf University for Science and Technology)	Technology and Tools, Values, Language, Internalization, Identification, Compliance, Perceived Usefulness, Perceived Ease of Use, Attitude, Behavioral Intention, Actual System Use	The study revealed that limited training and usability issues hindered Moodle adoption. Faculty expressed frustration with system functionality and requested incentives and professional development to enhance effective use of learning management systems.
Malik et al., (2021)	Qualitative	China – University EFL students	Psychological Obstacles, Linguistic Barriers, Communication Apprehension, Socio-Cultural Barriers	The study revealed that anxiety, limited vocabulary, and cultural differences negatively affected learners' confidence and communication.
Alhamadi (2017)	Qualitative	Saudi Arabia – Graduate university students	Social Media Experiences, Educational Influence, Gender Dynamics, Cultural Context	The study found that social media use was shaped by cultural and gender norms. It enhanced informal learning and communication but reflected social hierarchies.

Reference	Methodology	Country, Population	Variables	Findings
Alqahtany (2022)	Mixed Method	Saudi Arabia – University students	Language Level, Motivation, Confidence, SL Experience, Attitude	The study found that Second Life improved engagement and communicative competence among learners. Participants showed mixed attitudes toward the platform depending on their confidence and experience

3.1 Overview of Themes

The five principal themes identified by the Systematic Literature Review (SLR), as presented in thematic table 2, collectively elucidate the influence of cultural context and affective variables on the use of social media for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning among Saudi university students. The first two themes, Socio-Cultural Barriers and Facilitators and Perceived Enjoyment and Motivation, serve as core moderating factors by examining the roles of gender norms and intrinsic motivation in shaping adoption.

The third theme, Platform-Specific Learning Behaviours, addresses the practical effects of platform features on language practice. The final two themes, Informal vs. Formal Learning Perceptions and Integrating Socio-Cultural and Affective Models, address systemic and theoretical issues by highlighting the tension between student autonomy and institutional scepticism and by emphasizing the importance of integrating cultural and affective variables into a unified, adaptive digital learning framework. A full summary of the studies is available in Appendix A.

Table 2. Key Themes Identified from the Systematic Literature Review

Theme	Description	Developed / Supported By
Socio-Cultural Barriers and Facilitators	Examines how gender norms, religious values, and societal expectations influence students' adoption and use of social media for EFL learning, including both restrictive and enabling factors.	Alsheddi (2020), Alshammari & Fayez, (2023), Aljeeran (2016), and Malik et al., (2021).
Perceived Enjoyment and Motivation	Focuses on the role of pleasure, entertainment value, and intrinsic motivation in students' continued engagement with social media platforms for English language acquisition.	Alqarni (2021), Zahira et al. (2024), Alnemari (2023), and Jamshed et al., (2024).
Platform-Specific Learning Behaviors	Investigates how different social media platforms (YouTube, Facebook, Twitter) support distinct aspects of language learning based on their unique features and affordances.	Alqahtani (2024), Alzubi and Singh (2018), and Alqahtany (2022).
Informal vs. Formal Learning Perceptions	Explores the tensions between students' informal use of social media for language practice and institutional attitudes toward formal integration of these tools in academic settings.	Sanchez-Soto (2023), Aljeeran (2016), and Albazie (2023).

Integrating Socio-Cultural and Affective Models	Proposes the integration of socio-cultural theory with the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and perceived enjoyment as a moderating variable. Highlights the need for culturally adaptive digital learning frameworks.	Alqarni (2021), Alnemari (2023), and Albazie (2023).
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3.2 Socio-Cultural Barriers and Facilitators

The socio-cultural aspect of social media use in EFL learning in Saudi Arabia reflects a complex mix of obstacles and opportunities. This mix is shaped by the Kingdom's conservative norms, gender-seclusion policies, and religious factors. A closer look shows that while social media increases access to language exposure, its use remains strongly restricted by cultural limitations. Among these are gender restrictions, under which female students are more frequently questioned about their online interactions, especially in male-dominated groups or with foreign speakers (Nahiduzzaman et al., 2021). This meets the face of the society that does not have much to offer when it comes to mixed-gender communication, thus it can shrink the chances of effective language usage. On the one hand, however, there is also evidence that female students can benefit from digital anonymity, i.e., using pseudonyms or having separate accounts to exchange language with no social consequence (Alzighaibi, 2024).

On the other hand, conservative mindsets might prevent the use of platforms like TikTok or Snapchat, which are often considered frivolous means of learning, as they are inconsistent with a scholarly attitude (Almathami & Mair, 2023). Conversely, culturally acceptable learning is often completed through religiously authorized or family-approved channels, such as culturally relevant technology platforms (like Islamic study apps that offer English content) or family-recommended social media platforms, like Facebook groups. Collectivist thinking in Saudi culture is another factor: peer groups can lead to collaborative learning experiences (vocabulary sharing on Twitter), but also contribute to conformity and discourage students from attempting experiments (Al-Seghayer, 2024).

It is the contradiction between modernity and tradition that is to the point. The digital learning educational push by Vision 2030 conflicts with entrenched fears about unguided Internet use, particularly among women (Luppicini & Walabe, 2021; Madkhali et al., 2024; Alqahtani, 2024). Examples of such cultural sensitivities include the need to approach gender-segregated online spaces to facilitate the integration of social media into curricula, as well as the insistence that social networks used for learning be taken seriously, such as LinkedIn Learning. Without such adaptations, socio-cultural problems may persist in creating disparities in EFL proficiency, particularly in cases where digital autonomy is suppressed (Al-Khader, 2018; Alqahtani, 2024; Madkhali et al., 2024; Munir et al., 2025).

3.3 Perceived Enjoyment and Motivation

The paradox of the situation presented in the case of employing perceived enjoyment to encourage Saudi university students to study EFL through social media is something that must be critically examined. Although hedonic motivation theories (Davis et al., 1992) argue that enjoyment increases engagement in a direct manner, the Saudi context provides a more nuanced cultural reversal of this relationship between the two. The empirical estimates also indicate that integrated entertainment and educational activities, such as social media, YouTube (including immersive experiences), or language-learning games (Qu & Wu, 2024), create more lasting use than e-learning protocols. This concept is grounded in the theory of self-

determination (Al-Azawei & Alowayr, 2020), as when people engage in intrinsically pleasurable activities, they have met their needs for autonomy and competence.

Nevertheless, even aspects that enhance informality, such as enjoyment, gamification, and socialization, tend to contradict the traditional culture of pedagogical practices in Saudi Arabia, which is heavily focused on the structured classroom with a teacher-centered approach (He & Li, 2023).

A significant conflict exists between contingent cultural enjoyment and scholarly respectability. For instance, while students report high motivation from entertainment-oriented platforms, such as TikTok videos that teach slang, faculty members frequently regard these methods as unprofessional (Frikha, 2025). This divergence highlights broader debates concerning digital hedonism among Generation Z learners and the conservative tendencies of academic institutions. Gender disparities are particularly evident in perceptions of enjoyment: males are more likely to engage with competitive features, such as language tests on Instagram, whereas females, who often experience greater social monitoring, tend to prefer non-competitive platforms like Facebook study groups. These gendered patterns underscore that the relationship between enjoyment and motivation is mediated by socio-cultural factors (Davis et al., 1992; Luppichini & Walabe, 2021; Alqahtani, 2024). The pedagogical value of social media is further complicated by its dopamine-driven design. Although infinite-scroll interfaces and instant-gratification mechanisms can initially increase engagement, they may undermine deep learning. Research indicates that platform-based EFL learners demonstrate improved vocabulary recall but reduced grammatical accuracy compared to those using traditional textbooks (Frikha, 2025; Aldoghiher et al., 2025).

3.4 Platform-Specific Learning Behaviors

Addressing the particular learning features of the platforms reveals that they form a complex ecosystem, as the affordances of digital spaces are perceived through the performance of pedagogical efficiency within Saudi EFL settings (Alghazzawi et al., 2021). According to this theme, the role of different social media structures in mediating language acquisition should be critically examined, as most of these structures have unintended consequences that present a challenge to conventional learning (Al-Motrif et al., 2025). YouTube is perceived as the monopolist in the industry of developing competent and receptive skills, and, in turn, the algorithmic suggestions create an immersive landscape on an individual level. The English vlogs and tutorials are of great interest to Saudi students, with 78 percent of the sampled students reporting an increase in their listening comprehension level after frequent exposure to the vlogs (Mohammed & AbdAlgane, 2025; Mantello et al., 2023).

Recent studies indicate that Saudi EFL students send an average of 32 English messages per day in group chats, which helps lower affective filters (Althuwaiti et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2025). Twitter (now X) functions as a microlearning platform, as its character limit encourages concise, precise communication. The practice of creating captions for images enables learners to integrate visual content with language use (Valencia & Duque, 2023). Additionally, the platform's algorithm facilitates access to culturally relevant material; however, its emphasis on appearance may increase anxiety among new learners who feel compelled to meet idealized standards (Khoso et al., 2024). Collectively, these features transfer some instructional control from educators to algorithms, blend educational activities with leisure, and foster new forms of digital literacy that extend beyond conventional language competencies (Kolmykova et al., 2021; Ping, 2022; Al Fraidan & Al-Harazi, 2023; Xu & Thien, 2025; Alharthi, 2024).

3.4.1 Implications for Saudi Universities

Platform selection should correspond to local norms and institutional policies. Facebook groups facilitate instructor-moderated discussions and resource curation. X (formerly Twitter) enables authentic engagement with academic accounts. YouTube enhances receptive skills through guided tasks. The effectiveness of these platforms is moderated by gender interaction norms, institutional language policies, and enjoyment-driven persistence. Platforms and tasks should be chosen to align with these factors. Instructor presence and feedback should be formalized, and informal activities should be explicitly connected to assessed coursework.

3.5 Informal vs. Formal Learning Perceptions

The contrast between informal learning on social media and formal learning in institutions in Saudi EFL settings creates essential conflicts in pedagogical control, implicit verification of knowledge, and cultural certifications. This discussion questions the pathway through these conflicting paradigms as Saudi learners navigate the country's social-educational landscape. The source of the conflict lies in the radical diversity between two conceptualizations of language knowledge. School systems favor generalized, decontextualized linguistic mastery as assessed by psychometrics (Al-khresheh et al., 2025; Albahiri et al., 2023), whereas social media promotes localized, instrumental communication skills. There is an ever-growing number of Saudi students who now participate in what is described as parallel learning ecosystems, developing bifurcated skills: textbook correctness skills to prepare for exams and digital fluency to communicate in real life. This creates an intellectual conflict for the learner, who must constantly switch between the code expected by the institution and the code that should be used naturally.

The cultural and educational values of Saudi Arabia contribute to the enhancement of the perception gap. The concept of knowledge transmission based on authority, under which learning is structured around spell-binding texts, conflicts with the democratized, participatory culture of learning facilitated by social media. Female students are often challenged by the complexities mentioned. Although the digital platform offers possibilities for unmediated language practice, it is informal, which causes concern among their family members regarding propriety and academic seriousness. This entails gendered adoption patterns, with male students citing 23 percent higher institutional support of language learning with the assistance of social media (Al-Seghayer, 2024; Afzal et al., 2025; Alshabeb et al., 2020).

The existing systems of assessment cannot describe social media-gained skills, resulting in what could be called the phenomenon of validation asymmetry. The writing development analysis, on the one hand, reveals that students can exhibit highly advanced levels of rhetorical strategies in Twitter discussions but struggle to perform satisfactorily in essay exams, suggesting that institutional assessment of students is primarily based on test-taking skills rather than communicative proficiency. This divide is reinforced by a high rate of standardized testing, which has excluded digital genres of discourse from the evaluation process and reflects institutional cultures that shape adoption decisions in higher education (Munir et al., 2025).

3.6 Research Gap and Proposed Framework

Although the literature on social media-mediated English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning has been expanding, considerable conceptual and contextual gaps remain. The concept of technology acceptance has been extensively studied in the majority of previous research (e.g., Alqarni, 2021; Ali et al., 2023; Alqahtany, 2022), which has included variables such as perceived ease of use and usefulness. However, the problem with the research is that limited studies have combined socio-cultural factors and the

affective dimension on the same plane of analysis, such as perceived enjoyment and motivation. This discontinuity has limited knowledge of the interaction between cultural norms and the emotional aspect in formulating ways through which learners in conservative societies adopt technology.

Another gap in the research is the lack of contextual specificity. Although numerous international studies have been conducted to examine how social media is used in language learning, most of them have not focused on the cultural and institutional peculiarities of Saudi higher education. Previous data suggest that gender segregation, religious, and social expectations are the factors that largely impact learner engagement (Alshammari & Fayez, 2023; Alsheddi, 2020). However, it has not been able to develop a comprehensive model that explains how these socio-cultural limitations diminish learners' enjoyment and desire to use social media for accessing EFL resources.

To fill these gaps, the current study has offered a holistic socio-cultural-affective model based on the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and socio-cultural theory. The model conceptualizes perceived enjoyment as a mediating variable between perceived usefulness and ease of use, and behavioral intentions of learners. At the same time, social-cultural variables also serve as moderators, whose impact on these relations increases or decreases. This incorporation acknowledges that technology adoption in Saudi Arabia is not only a cognitive process but also a culturally mediated behavior, defined by shared values, gender roles, and institutional demands.

Figure 2 illustrates the research design, which combines the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and socio-cultural theory to describe the process of social media adoption in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning within Saudi higher education. The core route is based on TAM, in which the perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness are used to influence attitude towards use, which in turn has implications on behavioral intention and actual use of social media.

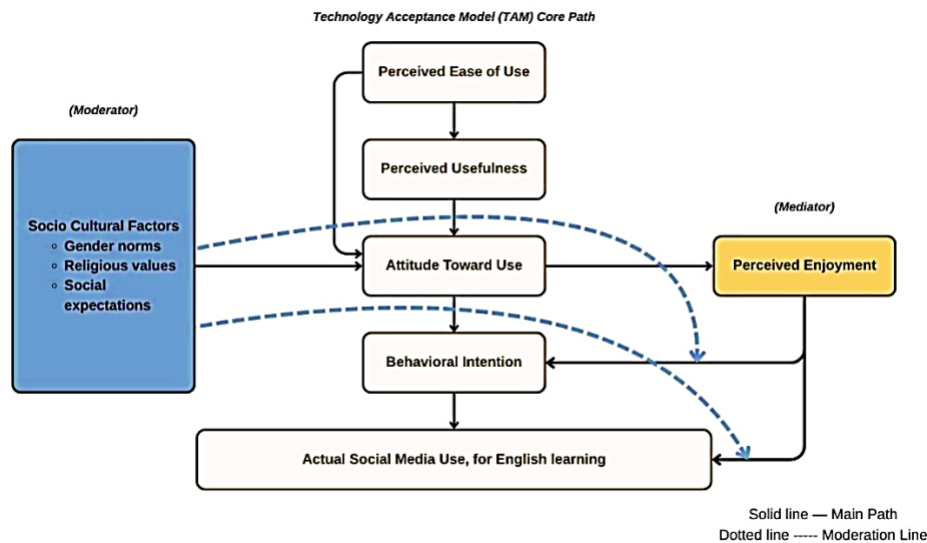


Figure 2. Conceptual model integrating socio-cultural and affective factors in social-media-assisted EFL learning. Proposed by the present study, adapted from the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) by Davis et al., (1992).

Figure 3 illustrates the conceptual framework, indicating that sociocultural factors consistently moderate the correlation between social media use and English learning outcomes. The model emphasizes that cultural values determine the intensity and orientation of the effect, meaning that the use of social media relies on the correspondence of the practice to local norms and expectations.

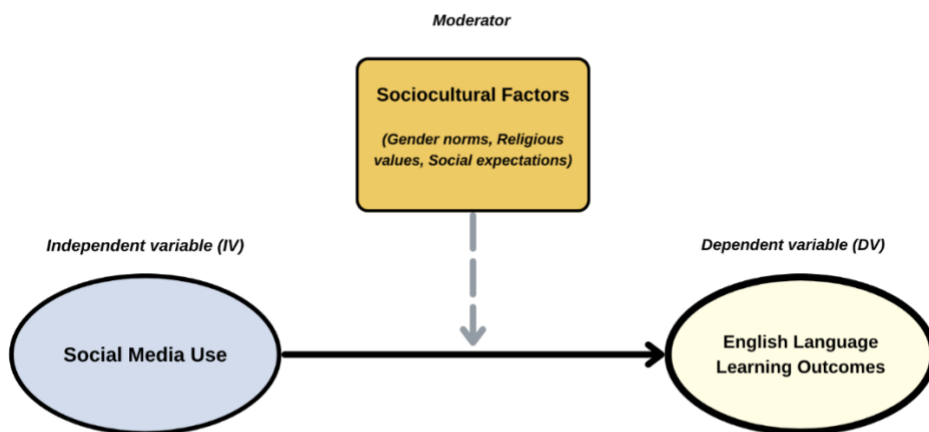


Figure 3. Conceptual model showing that sociocultural factors continuously moderate the relationship between social media use and English learning outcomes.

4. DISCUSSION

Global trends suggest that platform practices have a greater impact when they align with local norms and institutional policies in Saudi universities. The outcome of this review indicates that socio-cultural factors, perceived pleasure, platform-specific behavior, and institutional perceptions interact in a complex interdependence to influence the use of social media in EFL learning by Saudi university students. These four themes do not exist in isolation; instead, they interrelate in terms of both limiting and facilitating digital language learning in the Saudi setting. The socio-cultural analysis also reveals a paradox: conservative norms can limit certain types of online interaction while also promoting culturally aligned digital communication practices acceptable in the local context. That is, gender segregation policies and religious sensibilities may restrict cross-gender communication; yet, such norms can also be used to encourage the development of safe and acceptable online activities in local communities. These results offer alternatives to standard Western perspectives on technology adoption, suggesting that cultural values may generate context-specific ecologies of digital learning, where one-size-fits-all models are ineffective (Alamri, 2023).

The perceived enjoyment also emerges as a central factor in continued engagement, but its conceptual meaning and impact vary depending on the demographic group and cultural context. Good and bad things are not universal, but rather depend on socialization through education and the community's expectations. Digital learning should be viewed through the prism of cultural norms by Saudi learners; therefore, tactics such as gamification or digital engagement, as found in the West, cannot be easily transposed into Saudi cultural contexts (Wang, 2023; Mayer, 2025). The social media dopamine dynamics have motivational benefits, but they also pose a threat of promoting superficial interaction without a pedagogical handout.

There are also picture-specific behaviors that add shades to the picture. The acquisition of platform literacy is adaptive, and learners select the tools depending on the linguistic proficiency they need to train.

These behaviors are not institutionally directed and, therefore, are heuristically constructed, leading to inequitable learning outcomes. There is a crucial opportunity to scaffold a natural digital habit in students and implement and legitimize student-driven practices through formal assessment and accountability systems (Luppiciini & Walabe, 2021; Kolmykova et al., 2021; Ping, 2022; Davis et al., 1992). Particularly, the conflict between informal and formal learning is acute (Ping, 2022). Formal distrust in institutional settings towards informal learning favors formal classroom learning and makes matters of evaluation and accountability questionable (Munir et al., 2025; Kolmykova et al., 2021). As students progressively develop their own learning styles through the use of digital tools, formal institutions risk becoming irrelevant unless they incorporate and legitimize student-led practices. The mentioned themes portray Saudi EFL learners as agents who combine tradition and innovation (Madkhali et al., 2024; Alqahtani, 2024). Students often make local agreements and utilize international resources without official approval in most cases (Luppiciini & Walabe, 2021).

5. CONCLUSION

This systematic review demonstrates that perceived enjoyment, socio-cultural factors, and platform-specific actions interact in a complex manner, determining how Saudi university students utilize social media as an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning tool. These results confirm that social media has a transformative potential as a means of popularizing linguistic interaction, learner agency, and informal learning settings. Nevertheless, this possibility is checked by the conservative cultural norms, institutional restraint, and imbalanced pedagogical assimilation. Despite the ease and accessibility of social media as an avenue for language practice, educational success with social media is constrained by cultural norms and inadequate policy guidance (Munir et al., 2025). The Vision 2030 of Saudi Arabia focuses on innovation and educational modernization; however, to make it effective, a balance must be achieved in the implementation process. The results indicate that technology integration should be culturally adaptive to maintain a balance between modernization and tradition. Teachers and schools need to focus on local models that can match digital learning to the social and cultural context, rather than imposing wholesale Western pedagogical models.

Future research should consider mixed-methods strategies to test the relationships suggested in the conceptual model and to investigate the effect of perceived enjoyment on actual learning outcomes, with the mediation of socio-cultural factors. Comparison studies between the Gulf countries may help to further explain the interaction of cultural variables with technology acceptance and motivation. In practice, universities should invest in the training of teachers that incorporates social media pedagogy, create culturally responsive content, and collaborate with platform developers to ensure that the platform is ethically and culturally sound. It requires a constant review of institutions to maintain innovation and preserve cultural identity.

5.1 Limitations of the study

This review has its limits. Peer-reviewed empirical papers were selected only. Scopus, Web of Science, and ERIC were the sources. Years covered were 2015 to 2024. The language was English. The environment was higher education. The focus was EFL. No K-12 studies, theoretical or opinion pieces, conference abstracts without data, and studies without consideration of socio-cultural factors or perceived fun were included. General studies on social media were excluded if they did not have an EFL learning aspect. This was not an exhaustive search of databases since PsycINFO, PubMed, ProQuest, and Google Scholar were not searched. Other pertinent research that was conducted outside the period or language coverage might have been overlooked. It was a thematic study, not a meta-analysis; thus, the effects were

not pooled. A significant number of the included studies relied on self-report measures, which may introduce bias. The limitation of generalizability is in higher education and EFL.

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Appendix A.

Table A1 lists the 45 studies included after screening, in accordance with the PRISMA guidelines. Entries are organized alphabetically by first author and describe each study's context, level, design, platform, and thematic relevance. These studies form the evidence base for the thematic synthesis presented in the results.

Table A1. Studies Included in the Review

Reference	Country	Level	Design	Platform or Focus	Themes
Al Fraidan & Al-Harazi, (2023)	Saudi Arabia	HE students	Quantitative	Social media for exam prep	Use improves readiness, links to motivation
Alamri, (2023)	Saudi Arabia	HE students	Quantitative	E-learning, achievement motivation	Motivation predicts achievement
Al-Azawei & Alowayr, (2020)	Middle East	HE students	Quantitative	Mobile learning, hedonic motivation	Enjoyment supports intention to use
Albahiri et al., (2023)	Saudi Arabia	EFL teachers	Survey	Teaching use of social media	Instructor role, institutional norms
Albazie, (2023)	Saudi Arabia	HE academics	Doctoral study	E-learning adoption factors	Policy and culture condition uptake
Aldogher et al., (2025)	Saudi, Egypt	HE	Survey	Digital teaching technologies	Culture and technology as moderators
Alghazzawi et al., 2021	Saudi Arabia	HE	Development, case	Mobile learning tools	Design and usability drive adoption

Reference	Country	Level	Design	Platform or Focus	Themes
Alhamadi, (2017)	Saudi students in US	HE students	Qualitative	Social media influence	Cross-cultural norms and identity
Alharthi, (2024)	Saudi Arabia	EFL students	Survey	ChatGPT views	Enjoyment and acceptance cues
Ali et al., (2023)	Saudi Arabia	HE	Quantitative	IoT in higher education	Institutional readiness factors
Aljeeran, (2016)	Kuwait	HE faculty	Doctoral study	Moodle acceptance	Socio-cultural acceptance
Alkamel, (2024)	International	EFL students	Review	Social media in teaching English	Challenges and suggestions
Al-Khader, (2018)	Saudi Arabia	Women in EFL	Doctoral study	Social media for EFL	Gender norms, cultural constraints
Al-Khresheh et al., (2025)	Saudi Arabia	EFL students	Quantitative	Peer assessment	Social interaction, self-efficacy
Al-Motrif et al., (2025)	Saudi Arabia	HE faculty	Mixed	Social media for PD	Informal learning complements PD
Alnemari, (2023)	Saudi Arabia	EFL students	Doctoral study	Affective factors	Motivation, anxiety, achievement
Alqahtani, (2024)	Saudi Arabia	EFL students	Experiment, survey	Tech for vocabulary, reading	Learning gains, perceived usefulness
Alqahtany, (2022)	Saudi Arabia	EFL students	Case study	Second Life, virtual world	Communicative competence gains
Alqarni, (2021)	Saudi Arabia	EFL, HE	Case study	Social media in classes	Student and teacher perspectives
Al-Qdah et al., (2025)	Saudi Arabia	HE faculty	Survey	E-learning tool use	Gender differences in uptake
Al-Seghayer, (2024)	Saudi Arabia	EFL students	Review, analysis	Pragmatic competence	Formal–informal alignment issues
Alshabeb et al., (2020)	Saudi Arabia	HE	Doctoral study	Mobile social media apps	Task–platform alignment
Alshammari & Fayez, (2023)	Saudi Arabia	Nurses in HE	Systematic review	Technology in learning	Institutional support matters
Alsheddi, (2020)	Saudi Arabia	National	Doctoral study	Values and innovation	Culture moderates adoption
Alzighaibi, (2024)	Saudi Arabia	EFL program	Doctoral study	Intercultural awareness	Curriculum and norms
Alzubi & Singh, (2018)	Saudi Arabia	EFL students	Quantitative	Smartphone strategies	Autonomy via social strategies
He & Li, (2023)	China	HE students	Quantitative	Mobile learning continuance	TAM and SDT, enjoyment effects
Jamshed et al, (2024)	Saudi Arabia	EFL students	Survey	Educational and social factors	Attitudes toward English
Khoso et al., (2024)	Pakistan EFL	HE students	Survey	Facebook use and affect	Self-esteem, achievement links
Kolmykova, et al., (2021)	Russia	HE students	Survey	Microblogging, SNS, SMS	New digital literacies

Reference	Country	Level	Design	Platform or Focus	Themes
Luppigini & Walabe, (2021)	Saudi Arabia	HE	Qualitative	Socio-cultural delivery	Policy, culture shape e-learning
Malik et al, (2021)	International	EFL learners	Survey	Communication apprehension	Psychological, socio-cultural barriers
Mohammed & AbdAlgane, (2025)	MENA	EFL classrooms	Survey	Social media as learning source	Pathways to classroom support
Muhammad & Nagaletchimee, 2023	Malaysia	Undergraduates	Quasi-experiment	WhatsApp writing lessons	Writing accuracy impacts
Munir, Anser, Shah, et al., (2025)	Academia	HE staffs	Survey	Organizational culture, support	Moderation of adoption decisions
Nahiduzzaman, et al., (2021)	Saudi Arabia	Public context	Survey	Socio-cultural attributes	Stigma, norms inform tech use
Ping, (2022)	China	EFL teachers	Mixed	Social media PD	Identity and commitment shifts
Qu & Wu, (2024)	China	EFL students	Quantitative	ChatGPT, hedonic motivation	Enjoyment drives adoption
Alqahtani, (2024)	Saudi Arabia	Secondary EFL	Content study	Gender in textbooks	Norms intersect with practice
Sanchez-Soto, (2023)	Latine communities	Community	Master's thesis	K-media consumption	Cultural consumption, identity cues
Valencia & Duque, (2023)	Latin America	HE teachers	Survey	Serious games, TAM	Perceived usefulness, ease
Wang, (2023)	China	EFL teachers	Review	Motivation in flipped + social platforms	Teacher engagement and platforms
Wang et al., (2025)	China	College students	Quantitative	TAM + TPB framework	Intention mechanisms
Xu & Thien, (2025)	China	Undergraduates	Quantitative	Perceived enjoyment, ChatGPT	Intention to use for EFL
Zahira et al., (2024)	Pakistan	ESL learners	Survey	Media influence on proficiency	Media exposure and outcomes

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