



UNIVERSITY EFL STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF SOCIAL MEDIA USE AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO THEIR ENGLISH READING PROFICIENCY: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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ABSTRAK

Media sosial telah menjadi bagian yang tidak terpisahkan dari rutinitas harian mahasiswa, memaparkan mereka pada teks berbahasa Inggris dalam jumlah yang signifikan melalui takarir (*caption*), utas komentar, dan video berdurasi pendek. Penelitian-penelitian terdahulu umumnya menguji korelasi ini melalui pendekatan kuantitatif skor tes atau survei penggunaan, sementara penelitian yang mengeksplorasi pemaknaan subjektif mahasiswa secara mendalam masih sangat terbatas. Penelitian kualitatif ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi bagaimana mahasiswa Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris mempersepsikan hubungan antara kebiasaan bermedia sosial dengan kecakapan membaca bahasa Inggris mereka berdasarkan perspektif teori *New Literacies*. Data dihimpun dari sepuluh mahasiswa program studi Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris di Institut Pendidikan Indonesia (IPI) Garut menggunakan kuesioner terbuka tertulis secara daring, kemudian dianalisis menggunakan analisis tematik model enam tahap. Hasil penelitian mengidentifikasi empat tema sentral: perolehan kosakata dan ungkapan secara insidental melalui paparan kasual, transfer parsial ke ranah membaca akademik yang terbentur perbedaan laras bahasa (*register*), dampak yang terpolarisasi terhadap rentang konsentrasi membaca, serta peran media sosial sebagai jembatan motivasional bagi pembaca yang enggan. Studi ini menyimpulkan bahwa mahasiswa memposisikan media sosial bukan sebagai pengganti teks akademik formal, melainkan sebagai wadah pengayaan literasi digital mandiri yang memperluas keterpaparan bahasa Inggris mereka secara kontekstual. Temuan ini mengimplikasikan pentingnya bagi dosen untuk mengintegrasikan praktik literasi digital informal mahasiswa ke dalam perancangan strategi instruksional membaca di kelas formal.

Kata Kunci: *Kemampuan membaca bahasa Inggris, mahasiswa EFL, media sosial, studi kualitatif, teori New Literacies.*

ABSTRACT

Social media has become deeply embedded in university students' daily lives, exposing them to substantial amounts of English-language text through captions, comments, and short-form digital content. While prior research has examined this relationship primarily through standardized test scores or quantitative usage surveys, few studies have explored how students themselves interpret this connection in their own authentic voices. This qualitative study explored how English Education major students perceive the relationship between their informal social media use and their English reading proficiency, adopting a phenomenological design grounded in New Literacies theory. Data were gathered from ten fourth-year English Education students at Institut Pendidikan Indonesia (IPI) Garut through open-ended written questionnaires distributed via Google Forms, which were subsequently analyzed using reflexive



thematic analysis. Findings revealed four interrelated themes: incidental vocabulary and expression acquisition through casual exposure, perceived but limited transfer to academic reading constrained by register differences, mixed effects on sustained reading focus and cognitive attention span, and social media functioning as a motivational bridge for reluctant readers. The study concludes that students experience social media not as an outright substitute for academic texts, but as an autonomous, low-pressure supplementary literacy practice that shapes their textual engagement in nuanced and divergent ways. These empirical insights suggest that higher education EFL practitioners should intentionally acknowledge and scaffold students' everyday digital reading habits rather than isolating informal communicative practices from formal academic instruction.

Keywords: *EFL students, English reading proficiency, New Literacies theory, qualitative study, social media use.*

INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary digital landscape, social media platforms have transformed into ubiquitous communicative environments for university undergraduates across Indonesia. For university students learning English as a Foreign Language (*EFL*), digital engagement routinely involves processing substantial volumes of English text across various interfaces. Platform affordances such as photo captions on Instagram, interactive discussion threads on TikTok and X, as well as multimodal video scripts constantly demand reading comprehension skills (Al Fraidan & Al-Harazi, 2023; Sudiran et al., 2025). This informal textual exposure occurs frequently during leisure time, irrespective of whether students deliberately identify these activities as structured literacy events. Consequently, understanding how pre-service English teachers make sense of this pervasive digital input in relation to their formal academic reading competencies represents an essential area of inquiry.

Extensive scholarly investigations demonstrate that digital communicative networks play a constructive role in facilitating foreign language acquisition. Quantitative experimental findings highlight that incorporating Instagram-mediated pedagogical materials over consecutive instructional cycles yields statistically significant gains in students' reading comprehension performance (Sudiran et al., 2025). In parallel, tertiary learners frequently mobilize social network applications as personalized cognitive resources to support independent course preparation and collaborative exam revision (Al Fraidan & Al-Harazi, 2023). A large-scale survey by Smith and Storrs (2023) confirmed that undergraduate students place high utilitarian value on web-based media for information retrieval, academic debates, and resource sharing. Nevertheless, their findings surfaced a critical institutional paradox: while students widely recognize digital literacy as a core competency, they report receiving negligible explicit guidance from formal academic curricula regarding how to critically navigate these virtual environments (Smith & Storrs, 2023).

Conversely, empirical assessments focusing specifically on English reading habits portray a much more nuanced and fragmented picture. A qualitative investigation conducted among English department undergraduates revealed that less than half of the participants believed web-based reading authentically nurtured their reading habits, with the majority categorizing digital interaction as a purely instrumental mechanism for assignment completion (Benaicha & Benghalem, 2024). Related research within the Indonesian higher education context corroborated that digital reading preferences diverge widely across gender identities, medium accessibility, and individual learner motivations (Milal et al., 2021; Nurfaizah et al.,



2024). Furthermore, problematic or unmonitored digital media consumption has been linked to elevated academic anxiety and fragmented learning outcomes, indicating that digital exposure is not inherently beneficial across all contexts (Shu, 2023). These divergent findings suggest that the relationship between social media engagement and reading proficiency cannot be captured through reductive, linear generalizations.

This empirical divergence necessitates adopting theoretical frameworks that conceptualize modern literacy beyond traditional printed typography. According to Knobel and Lankshear (2014), *New Literacies* theory conceptualizes literacy as dynamic, socially situated, and multimodal practices of meaning-making that unfold across interconnected online networks. This paradigm asserts that comprehensive evaluations of foreign language literacy must examine the authentic digital ecosystems where learners routinely consume texts, rather than restricting evaluations to isolated classroom measures. Qualitative inquiry provides the methodological depth required to capture these contextual nuances, as evidenced by recent investigations into pre-university learners' perceptions of intensive and extensive reading approaches (Ali et al., 2024). Capturing the interpretive voices of learners provides rich phenomenological granularity regarding how informal communicative practices intersect with institutional literacy demands.

Despite the growing body of literature examining computer-assisted language learning, the existing literature remains overwhelmingly skewed toward psychometric test measures and correlational surveys (Benaicha & Benghalem, 2024; Smith & Storrs, 2023; Sudiran et al., 2025). Very few studies center the interpretive voice of Indonesian undergraduate learners to unpack how they personally understand the transferability of casual digital reading to academic text processing. This oversight obscures the rich phenomenological insights emphasized by *New Literacies* theory, which views language development as an experiential, socially embedded practice rather than an isolated quantitative score (Knobel & Lankshear, 2014). To address this gap, this qualitative study investigated how English Education students in Indonesia perceive the relationship between their social media usage and their English reading proficiency, gathering qualitative evidence through open-ended written questionnaires analyzed through the theoretical lens of *New Literacies*.

Guided by these contextual and theoretical considerations, this study addressed the overarching research question: How do university EFL students perceive the relationship between their social media use and their English reading proficiency? Accordingly, this study aimed to explore and describe university EFL students' perceptions of how their social media use relates to their English reading proficiency, as understood through their own reflections and experiences. Theoretically, the study extends the analytical utility of *New Literacies* theory by contextualizing informal digital reading within the Indonesian tertiary EFL environment. Practically, the findings generate empirical insights to guide university lecturers and curriculum developers in bridging informal online reading practices with formal academic literacy instruction.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design utilizing a phenomenological approach to explore how tertiary students construct meaning from their everyday digital experiences. A phenomenological inquiry was deemed appropriate because the primary analytical objective was to capture the essence of participants' lived experiences and subjective reflections regarding social media and reading literacy (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Rather than



testing predetermined hypotheses or quantifying linguistic variables, the research prioritized capturing the authentic perspectives of learners in their natural communicative settings. The research was formally conducted in April 2026 at Institut Pendidikan Indonesia (IPI) Garut, West Java, Indonesia.

Participants were recruited using purposive sampling to ensure they possessed rich experiential insights relevant to the research questions. Ten undergraduate students enrolled in the English Education Department were selected based on three criteria: (1) active enrollment in their final undergraduate academic year, (2) verified daily engagement with social media platforms during leisure time, and (3) willingness to provide comprehensive written reflective accounts. Final-year students were purposefully selected because their extensive experience with academic coursework, journal articles, and undergraduate thesis preparation positioned them to critically compare casual online reading with formal academic discourse. All participants voluntarily provided informed consent prior to data collection, and anonymity was preserved by assigning alphanumeric codes (P1 to P10).

Qualitative data were generated using open-ended written questionnaires administered electronically via Google Forms. The instrument was developed by operationalizing *New Literacies* theory and the study's research questions into three distinct reflective sections: (1) general digital platform habits and types of English texts encountered, (2) personal academic and extensive reading routines, and (3) critical evaluations regarding how casual social media reading intersects with academic reading proficiency. Open-ended written prompts were chosen over real-time spoken interviews to provide participants with uninterrupted reflective time to articulate detailed, introspective accounts without conversational pressure (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The questionnaire was distributed in the Indonesian language to prevent foreign language anxiety from constraining the depth of participants' expressive narratives, with responses subsequently translated into English for academic reporting.

The research data collection procedure was executed over a dedicated four-day window in April 2026 to provide participants with sufficient flexibility to complete their self-paced written entries. The questionnaire hyperlink was distributed via institutional communication groups, and completed protocols were stored securely within an encrypted digital repository. Data analysis followed the six-phase thematic analysis framework formulated by Braun and Clarke (2006): (1) familiarization with the narrative dataset through repeated readings, (2) generation of initial descriptive codes, (3) clustering related codes into candidate thematic patterns, (4) reviewing candidate themes against the full dataset, (5) defining and naming final conceptual themes, and (6) producing the interpretive scholarly report. Data trustworthiness was established through analyst triangulation and cross-participant consistency auditing, systematically verifying that derived themes faithfully reflected converging and diverging participant narratives (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Overview of Participants

The ten participants in this study were all fourth-year undergraduate students majoring in English Education at Institut Pendidikan Indonesia (IPI) Garut. Instagram, TikTok, and WhatsApp emerged as the most heavily utilized social media platforms, with several students additionally accessing YouTube, X, and Facebook. Daily screen time allocated to social media ranged from 1–3 hours to well over 5 hours per day, illustrating an intensive immersion in digital environments. The dominant forms of English texts encountered by participants included



short captions, comment threads, subtitled video clips, shared micro-blogs, and digital memes. A qualitative synthesis of the participants' written reflections generated four primary themes detailing the perceived interactions between informal online reading and academic reading proficiency. To provide a structured and transparent overview of the empirical findings, the emergent thematic framework, defining codes, conceptual descriptions, and representative participant quotes are synthesized in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of Emergent Themes, Coding Keywords, and Representative Excerpts

Emergent Theme	Coding Keywords	Conceptual Description	Representative Excerpt
Theme 1: Incidental Vocabulary and Expression Acquisition	Informal lexicon, idioms, slang, passive learning	Social media functions as an effortless, recurring input source for contemporary lexical items and colloquial expressions.	<i>"Watching native speakers on TikTok exposed me to idioms meaning 'denial' or 'confused,' making me realize my English vocabulary still needed expansion."</i> (P8)
Theme 2: Perceived but Limited Transfer to Academic Reading	Register disparity, lexical formality, warm-up tool	Exposure facilitates basic conceptual familiarity but exhibits constrained utility when decoding dense, highly formalized academic texts.	<i>"Academic English is fundamentally more formal than social media English; online reading serves mainly as a mental warming-up exercise."</i> (P4)
Theme 3: Mixed Effects on Reading Focus and Attention Span	Fragmented attention, cognitive fatigue, visual comfort	Fast-paced digital formats condition minds toward brevity, creating divided perceptions regarding sustained academic reading stamina.	<i>"Social media conditioned my brain to expect fast, bite-sized information, making me lose focus and get bored easily when reading academic journals."</i> (P9)
Theme 4: Social Media as a Motivational Bridge	Affective filter, psychological safety, reading engagement	Low-pressure, multimodal online texts lower psychological barriers to reading for individuals who avoid traditional print books.	<i>"I generally dislike reading conventional books, but social media is very helpful because short English sentences feel approachable and not intimidating."</i> (P1)

As displayed in Table 1, the analytical matrix illustrates that university EFL learners experience digital reading through multidimensional, interconnected pathways. The four themes capture a functional continuum ranging from linguistic acquisition (Theme 1) and structural-academic transferability (Theme 2) to cognitive-behavioral adaptations (Theme 3) and affective-motivational transformations (Theme 4). The data demonstrate that students do not conceptualize digital reading as an absolute binary between productive learning and cognitive distraction. Rather, participants evaluate their online textual practices through a



critical, highly reflective awareness of register, genre constraints, and individual learning dispositions.

Theme 1: Incidental Vocabulary and Expression Acquisition through Casual Exposure

The most prominent finding across the narratives was that social media serves as a potent, spontaneous source for expanding colloquial vocabulary, contemporary slang, and idiomatic expressions. Participants consistently emphasized that this lexical growth occurred passively during leisure browsing without the deliberate intention of studying English. For instance, P8 described discovering authentic idioms from native English creators on TikTok, noting how this casual exposure revealed noticeable gaps in his communicative competence:

"It made me realize that my English skills are still lacking and need to be expanded further, especially regarding everyday expressions." (P8)

Similarly, P5 recounted acquiring the viral digital acronym *"POV"* (*point of view*) purely through repeated encounters across social media captions, having had no prior exposure to the term in formal modular lessons. In another illustrative account, P2 detailed watching comparative TikTok videos explaining nuanced distinctions between near-synonymous English verbs, which she subsequently integrated into her formal academic sentence constructions. Furthermore, P10 noted that being an English major made her subconsciously vigilant toward short English sentences encountered online, transforming everyday scrolling into an ongoing, low-stakes vocabulary repository. These narrative accounts illustrate that informal digital spaces supply meaningful linguistic exposure that complements classroom curricula.

Theme 2: Perceived but Limited Transfer to Academic Reading due to Register Differences

While participants acknowledged that online browsing enriched their general linguistic awareness, they expressed critical reservations regarding its direct transferability to academic reading tasks. The primary impediment identified was the profound register divergence separating colloquial online communication from rigorous scholarly discourse. P4 clearly articulated this structural demarcation:

"Academic language is of course much more formal compared to the English used on social media platforms; reading online functions only as a warming-up activity before reading textbooks, not an equivalent alternative." (P4)

In line with this view, P5 highlighted that social media language predominantly mirrors informal spoken vernacular rather than the synthesized syntactic conventions of academic writing. Notably, P3 emerged as the most critical voice, explicitly rejecting any functional connection between the two settings:

"Reading on social media stays within its own social context; it does not serve as functional practice that transfers to reading academic research papers." (P3)

Conversely, P2 and P9 described a more permeable transfer boundary, noting that encountering core conceptual terms in Instagram captions or video commentaries reduced cognitive apprehension when those same concepts reappeared within scholarly journal articles. These contrasting reflections demonstrate that pre-service English teachers possess an astute sociolinguistic awareness regarding genre variations, evaluating informal digital reading as a preliminary conceptual threshold rather than an academic equivalent.

Theme 3: Mixed Effects on Reading Focus and Attention Span

The empirical dataset revealed significant polarization regarding whether habitual consumption of digital content altered cognitive stamina during sustained reading tasks. Several participants reported that constant exposure to micro-content severely eroded their ability to



engage with lengthy, conceptually dense academic literature. P9 described experiencing cognitive fatigue and attention lapses when reviewing peer-reviewed papers:

"My brain has become unconsciously accustomed to fast, bite-sized information, making me more prone to boredom and needing to re-read academic passages multiple times." (P9)

Participant P2 echoed this concern, explaining that navigating algorithmic digital platforms conditioned her mind toward rapid visual switching, which necessitated deliberate environmental isolation when attempting to study formal texts. In contrast, P5 and P8 rejected the notion of cognitive impairment, arguing that frequent reading across any medium inherently cultivates overall reading fluency, visual comfort, and decoding speed. Furthermore, P6 maintained that reading fatigue was attributable to the dry, technical nature of academic texts themselves rather than digital media habits. These divergent narratives indicate that the cognitive impact of digital media on reading stamina is highly individualized, mediated by personal self-regulation and individual study habits.

Theme 4: Social Media as a Motivational Bridge for Reluctant Readers

An insightful finding was that social media functioned as an affective catalyst for undergraduates who characterized themselves as reluctant readers of conventional print materials. For learners intimidated by lengthy print chapters, the visual, bite-sized architecture of social media offered an unthreatening entry point into English texts. P1 openly acknowledged this transformative psychological function:

"I really dislike reading conventional printed books, but social media is very helpful because it makes engaging with English text feel much easier and more appealing." (P1)

Participant P10 expressed a congruent perspective, observing that the succinct sentence structures characteristic of social media captions allowed her to practice English reading without encountering cognitive overload. In these cases, the instructional value of social media lies primarily in its affective affordances: it lowers learners' affective filters and minimizes psychological resistance toward the target language. By decoupling foreign language reading from evaluative academic scrutiny, online networks provide a non-threatening space where reluctant readers construct positive reading identities.

Discussion

The empirical findings generated from this qualitative study confirm that Indonesian university EFL learners experience social media reading not as a substitute for academic literacy, but as an autonomous, low-pressure supplementary resource. The incidental vocabulary gains documented in Theme 1 align closely with prior experimental evidence demonstrating that Instagram-mediated reading tasks meaningfully enhance students' lexical comprehension (Almohesh & Al-Tamimi, 2024; Baruti & Subekti, 2023; Ibrahim & Basim, 2024); Sudiran et al., 2025). However, this study extends earlier research by revealing that learners actively acquire, categorize, and utilize lexical items autonomously during leisure browsing, independent of explicit classroom instruction. This autonomous uptake highlights the self-directed learning capabilities of digital natives when engaging with authentic foreign language materials (Al Fraidan & Al-Harazi, 2023). Furthermore, students frequently reported that the visual nature of the platform facilitated a subconscious acquisition of isolated vocabulary, even though its efficacy in fostering deeper contextual understanding remains comparatively limited (Baruti & Subekti, 2023; Dzikrullah, 2026; Fannoni et al., 2023; Maevskaya et al., 2024; Naqrash et al., 2025; Shadiev et al., 2020).

The register tensions identified in Theme 2 corroborate the institutional imbalances documented by Smith and Storrs (2023), who observed that undergraduate learners value online



platforms for information sharing but lack formalized strategies for bridging everyday digital media with academic literacy. Furthermore, the skeptical views articulated by participants regarding the academic utility of informal digital text resonate with earlier qualitative investigations in which tertiary students approached web reading as a purely functional, task-driven activity (Benaicha & Benghalem, 2024; Elegbeleye, 2025; Kim et al., 2024; Walsh-Moorman & Pytash, 2021). Interpreted through *New Literacies* theory, these findings illustrate that literacy is a socially situated practice constructed across interconnected communicative spaces (Knobel & Lankshear, 2014). The participants in this study were not passive media consumers; rather, they critically evaluated the structural boundaries between informal vernacular and academic discourse, demonstrating an acute awareness of sociolinguistic registers.

The cognitive contradictions identified regarding reading stamina in Theme 3 provide qualitative nuance to the emerging literature examining digital reading behaviors in developing contexts. While Marpaung et al. (2025) categorized university learners' digital literacy habits as relatively weak due to their preference for viral social media content over academic texts, the current findings reveal a more varied picture. Rather than succumbing unconditionally to digital distraction, several participants consciously deployed compensatory self-regulation strategies to manage cognitive fatigue when transitioning between short social media posts and formal journal articles. Moreover, the emergence of social media as a motivational bridge (Theme 4) underscores the affective dimensions of digital reading practices, demonstrating that visual, bite-sized digital formats can lower affective filters for reluctant readers (Ali et al., 2024). Ultimately, these insights affirm that informal digital environments provide valuable linguistic and motivational affordances that can be constructively leveraged to support formal foreign language education.

CONCLUSION

This qualitative investigation explored how Indonesian university EFL students perceive the relationship between their social media use and their English reading proficiency. The empirical findings reveal that pre-service English teachers view social media as an autonomous, low-pressure literacy environment that facilitates incidental vocabulary acquisition and lowers affective barriers for reluctant readers. However, participants also demonstrated a clear awareness of register boundaries, acknowledging that informal digital reading does not directly substitute for the complex comprehension strategies required by formal academic texts. Furthermore, divergent perceptions regarding reading focus and attention span indicate that the cognitive impacts of digital media depend heavily on individual self-regulation. Ultimately, grounded in the lens of *New Literacies* theory, the study concludes that tertiary learners actively negotiate meaning across both informal and formal digital spaces, functioning as discerning interpreters of their own literacy development rather than passive consumers of online content.

These findings carry meaningful pedagogical implications for higher education EFL lecturers and instructional designers. Rather than viewing students' informal digital habits as an instructional distraction, educators should actively incorporate these informal practices into formal coursework, such as designing tasks that explicitly compare casual online language with academic discourse. Institutions should also offer targeted digital literacy workshops to help students develop sustained reading stamina and self-regulation when navigating dense digital texts. Future research should consider employing mixed-methods designs that combine



phenomenological reflections with standardized reading measures across diverse academic disciplines to determine whether perceived linguistic benefits correspond to measurable reading comprehension gains.

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