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Exploring Digital English Exposure: Motivational Dynamics and Mental Health in Junior Secondary EFL Contexts

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Abstract

In an era when adolescents' linguistic practices and emotional lives are increasingly mediated by digital platforms, understanding how social media shapes both language learning and psychological wellbeing has become an urgent educational priority. Although prior research has examined social media in EFL contexts and, separately, adolescent mental health, few studies have integrated these dimensions within a single analytical framework, particularly at the junior high school level in Indonesia. Addressing this gap, the present study investigates how digital English exposure through social media mediates the dynamic relationship between motivation to learn English and students' mental wellbeing. Adopting a descriptive qualitative design, the research involved 220 Indonesian junior high school students, three English teachers, and two psychologists. Data were collected through questionnaires and semi structured interviews and analyzed inductively using thematic analysis. The findings reveal that platforms such as TikTok and Instagram function as dominant motivational spaces by providing authentic input, multimodal engagement, and low-pressure opportunities for incidental learning. At the same time, social media exerts differentiated psychological effects, ranging from emotional relief and confidence building to fatigue and stress depending on patterns of use. Importantly, the study demonstrates a cyclical interrelationship in which positive emotional states reinforce motivation, while motivated engagement enhances wellbeing. By offering empirical evidence from an integrated qualitative framework, this study contributes to interdisciplinary scholarship at the intersection of applied linguistics and educational psychology and provides pedagogical insights for designing digitally responsive and psychologically informed EFL practices in broader global contexts.

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1. Introduction

The glow of a smartphone screen has become one of the most powerful educational influences in adolescents' lives. For many junior high school students, daily encounters with English now occur less through textbooks and more through short videos, captions, comments, and online interactions. Social media is no longer a peripheral leisure activity but a pervasive digital ecology that mediates identity formation, emotional regulation, and informal learning practices (Paljug, 2025; Kristianingsih, 2023). In Indonesia, where English is taught as a foreign language within examination oriented systems, this shift raises urgent questions about how digitally mediated exposure shapes both students' motivation to learn English and their psychological wellbeing during early adolescence, a developmental stage marked by emotional sensitivity and cognitive transition (Zhu & Zhou, 2012; Robinson & Smith, 2023).

Within contemporary EFL education, social media has evolved into a dynamic informal learning space that extends beyond classroom boundaries. Platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and WhatsApp

provide multimodal input and opportunities for interaction that can lower anxiety and stimulate engagement (Dhanya, 2016; Zhou, 2021; Hasan et al., 2020; Pujiati & Tamela, 2019; Zhao et al., 2022). For Indonesian junior high school students, whose exposure to English beyond the classroom was historically limited, digital platforms and technology-integrated learning environments now provide continuous access to authentic language (Sukandi, 2022; Azad, 2023). The rapid expansion of online learning tools has transformed English language acquisition by offering unprecedented access to real-world linguistic input previously unavailable outside school (Sukandi, 2022; Ullah et al., 2024), while AI-based platforms and digital applications have been shown to enhance student engagement and extend language contact hours (Ullah et al., 2024; Azad, 2023).

However, this increased exposure occurs within a complex psychosocial context in which adolescents navigate peer comparison, academic pressure, and emotional fluctuation (Sukandi, 2022; Azad, 2023). Digitally mediated learning environments present “double challenges,” requiring students to manage academic demands alongside external psychosocial stressors (Sukandi, 2022), and both students and teachers report that technology integration brings not only expanded learning opportunities but also notable affective burdens (Azad, 2023). Because affective variables and psychosocial conditions strongly influence learners’ willingness to communicate and overall language outcomes, acknowledging this dual academic and psychological dimension is essential in contemporary ELT research. Studies consistently show that factors such as motivation, anxiety, emotional intelligence, and self-efficacy play central roles in shaping learners’ willingness to communicate (WTC) (Amirian et al., 2021; Anwar et al., 2021; Tabatabaei & Jamshidifar, 2013). Among these variables, motivation has been identified as the strongest direct predictor of WTC, whereas anxiety demonstrates a significant negative relationship with learners’ readiness to engage in communication (Amirian et al., 2021; Anwar et al., 2021). In addition, emotional intelligence has been found to correlate positively with L2 WTC, as learners with higher emotional intelligence tend to show greater willingness to participate in target language interaction (Tabatabaei & Jamshidifar, 2013). Teacher-related psychosocial factors, such as emotional support, mindset, and teaching efficacy, further shape these outcomes by influencing learners’ motivation and affective dispositions (Amirian et al., 2021; Wei & Xu, 2021). Together, these findings highlight the fundamentally socio-psychological nature of communicative engagement in language learning contexts.

A growing body of empirical research has documented the positive influence of social media on English learning motivation and skill development. Studies report improvements in vocabulary, listening comprehension, reading engagement, and writing practice through authentic and interest driven content (Al Arif, 2019; Nasution, 2022; Akpan & Chayanuvat, 2022). Learners frequently describe increased enjoyment, autonomy, and confidence when engaging with English through digital platforms (Hasan et al., 2020; Galoyan & Madyarov, 2016). Recent investigations into short video platforms further suggest that algorithm driven repetition facilitates incidental language acquisition (Rakhmasari & Pratiwi, 2024; Fransisca, 2024). These findings collectively position social media as a powerful motivational catalyst in secondary EFL contexts.

Parallel research in psychology and education, however, presents a more ambivalent picture. While some studies emphasize the benefits of online social connectedness and emotional support (Purnomo, 2023; Robinson & Smith, 2023), others highlight risks such as anxiety, cyberbullying, addiction, and social comparison (Kristianingsih, 2023). Importantly, these strands of research often develop independently. Motivation focused EFL studies tend to overlook mental health variables, whereas psychological investigations rarely situate adolescent wellbeing within specific academic domains such as language learning (Kusumaningsih et al., 2024; Purnomo, 2023). This disciplinary separation has produced fragmented conclusions and limited theoretical integration, particularly in junior high school settings where emotional development and academic motivation are deeply intertwined (Zhu & Zhou, 2012). In the Indonesian context, empirical studies that simultaneously examine social media, EFL motivation, and adolescent mental wellbeing remain scarce.

Responding to this gap, the present study occupies a distinct niche by theoretically integrating applied linguistics and educational psychology within a single qualitative framework. Its novelty lies not merely in examining social media use, but in conceptualizing digital English exposure as a mediating space where motivation and mental wellbeing dynamically interact. The study further advances contextual specificity by focusing on Indonesian junior high school students and employs methodological triangulation through the inclusion of student, teacher, and psychologist perspectives. This combination of theoretical integration, contextual focus, and multi stakeholder triangulation constitutes the primary contribution of the research.

The significance of this study is both theoretical and practical. Theoretically, it advances understanding of how motivation and mental health operate as interdependent constructs within digitally mediated EFL learning. Practically, it informs English teachers, school leaders, and curriculum designers about how social media can function as both a motivational resource and a psychological variable that requires careful pedagogical mediation. The study therefore seeks to answer three interrelated questions: how social media motivates junior high school students to learn English, how it influences their mental wellbeing, and how these two dimensions intersect within their lived experiences.

In conclusion, this study argues that digital English exposure cannot be understood solely in terms of linguistic gain or psychological risk. Rather, social media constitutes a complex pedagogical space where motivation and mental wellbeing continuously shape one another. For ELT practitioners, this perspective underscores the importance of integrating digital literacy, emotional awareness, and autonomy supportive pedagogy into classroom practice. By bridging informal digital experiences with structured instruction, educators can harness students' existing motivational ecosystems while safeguarding their psychological wellbeing in an increasingly networked world.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Social Media and EFL Learning in Secondary Education Contexts

Social media has been widely examined as a transformative digital environment that reshapes how learners access information, construct meaning, and participate in language practices across contexts (Sajithra & Patil, 2013; Zhu & Chen, 2015). In EFL education, it extends learning beyond classroom walls by providing authentic linguistic input, multimodal texts, and opportunities for interaction (Dhanya, 2016; Zhou, 2021). Empirical research consistently demonstrates that platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and WhatsApp expose learners to spoken and written English through captions, comments, short videos, and peer exchanges, thereby supporting listening, reading, speaking, and writing development (Al Arif, 2019; Akpan & Chyanuvut, 2022; Nasution, 2022).

Comparative studies further suggest that social media differs fundamentally from traditional instruction in its personalization and learner autonomy. Algorithm driven content aligns with students' interests, which can enhance engagement and reduce affective barriers (Kim et al., 2011; Zhu & Chen, 2015). Research across Asian and Middle Eastern contexts indicates that learners perceive social media as more enjoyable and motivating than textbook based instruction (Xuan et al., 2020; Akpan & Chyanuvut, 2022; Haque, 2023). However, scholars also caution that without pedagogical mediation, learning may remain incidental and uneven in depth (Bachore, 2015; Galoyan & Madyarov, 2016). These mixed findings suggest that social media's effectiveness is not inherent but contingent upon motivational and psychological factors that shape engagement.

2.2 Motivation Theories in Social Media Mediated Language Learning

Motivation remains a central construct in second language acquisition, particularly during adolescence when affective and social influences intensify (Zhu & Zhou, 2012). Within digitally mediated contexts, motivation is often linked to enjoyment, autonomy, relevance, and perceived usefulness (Hasan et al., 2020; Pujiati & Tamela, 2019). Learners frequently report that indirect feedback mechanisms, peer interaction, and low pressure communicative spaces foster confidence and willingness to use English (Galoyan & Madyarov, 2016; Zhao et al., 2022).

Platform specific research shows that different digital environments stimulate motivation through distinct mechanisms. For instance, short video platforms encourage incidental vocabulary acquisition through repetition (Rakhmasari & Pratiwi, 2024; Fransisca, 2024), while messaging platforms such as WhatsApp and Telegram promote interaction and reduce language anxiety (Ayuningtyas, 2018; Zhao et al., 2022). These findings align with autonomy driven models of intrinsic motivation, emphasizing learner agency in sustaining engagement.

Despite these advances, existing studies frequently treat motivation as an outcome variable detached from broader emotional conditions. Research tends to foreground positive motivational effects while underreporting distraction, procrastination, or digital fatigue (Nasution, 2022; Kristianingsih, 2023). As a result, motivation is conceptualized as relatively stable, rather than fluctuating in relation to stress, self esteem, or emotional regulation. This limitation reveals a conceptual gap in the literature.

2.3 Adolescent Mental Health in Digital Environments

Parallel scholarship in psychology highlights adolescence as a critical period of emotional vulnerability and identity formation (Zhu & Zhou, 2012). Social media has been described as both a source of social support and a potential risk factor for mental health challenges. Studies document positive outcomes such as reduced loneliness, emotional expression, and peer connectedness when engagement is purposeful and supportive (Robinson & Smith, 2023). Conversely, excessive or unregulated use has been associated with anxiety, depression, social comparison, and diminished self esteem (Kristianingsih, 2023).

Importantly, research findings remain inconsistent. Some investigations report moderate or context dependent effects, suggesting that psychological outcomes depend on content exposure, duration, and user interpretation (Kusumaningsih et al., 2024). However, most mental health studies do not situate these outcomes within academic domains. The relationship between emotional wellbeing and language learning motivation is rarely examined simultaneously, leaving a theoretical divide between educational and psychological research traditions.

2.4 Fragmentation, Gaps, and the Need for Integration

Synthesizing these strands of literature reveals three interrelated gaps. First, EFL studies emphasize linguistic gains and motivational enhancement but seldom incorporate mental health as an analytic variable. Second, psychological research documents emotional consequences of social media yet rarely address academic motivation or language specific contexts. Third, few studies focus on junior high school learners in Indonesia, where English functions as a foreign language and digital exposure may play a compensatory role for limited authentic input.

This fragmentation has resulted in polarized narratives that frame social media as either pedagogically beneficial or psychologically harmful. What remains underexplored is how motivation and mental wellbeing dynamically interact within the same digital ecosystem. The absence of interdisciplinary integration limits theoretical development and practical guidance for educators navigating increasingly digitized classrooms.

2.5 Novelty and Contribution of the Present Study

The present study addresses these gaps by integrating applied linguistics and educational psychology within a single qualitative framework. Its novelty lies in conceptualizing social media not merely as a tool or risk factor, but as a mediating space where English learning motivation and adolescent mental wellbeing intersect and mutually influence one another. Rather than isolating constructs, this study foregrounds their cyclical interrelationship.

Additionally, the research contributes contextual specificity by focusing on Indonesian junior high school students, a group underrepresented in interdisciplinary digital learning research. Methodologically, it advances the field through triangulation of student, teacher, and psychologist perspectives, thereby enriching interpretive depth.

Theoretically, this integration expands motivation research beyond performance-oriented outcomes to include emotional regulation and wellbeing. Practically, it offers implications for ELT practitioners by highlighting the necessity of balancing digital engagement with psychological awareness. By bridging disciplinary boundaries, the study provides a more holistic lens for understanding digital English exposure in contemporary secondary education.

3. Method

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to explore how social media mediates junior high school students' motivation to learn English and their mental wellbeing. A qualitative approach was selected because the study aimed to capture participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and interpretations rather than to test causal relationships or generate formal theory (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Tenny et al., 2022). The design allowed for in depth exploration of how linguistic engagement and emotional responses intersect within digitally mediated environments.

3.2 Research Context and Participants

The research was conducted at a private junior high school in Central Java, Indonesia, during the 2023–2024 academic year. The school represents a typical Indonesian EFL context in which English is taught as a compulsory subject with limited exposure outside formal instruction.

Participants consisted of 220 students from Grades 7, 8, and 9, representing early adolescence, a developmental stage characterized by heightened emotional sensitivity and motivational fluctuation (Zhu & Zhou, 2012). To ensure multi perspective triangulation, three English teachers with 16–22 years of teaching experience and two psychologists affiliated with a private university in Central Java were also included as key informants. Their inclusion enabled the study to contextualize student experiences within pedagogical and psychological expertise.

3.3 Sampling Procedures

Total population sampling was applied for the questionnaire phase to obtain comprehensive data from all enrolled students ($n = 220$). This strategy ensured representativeness within the school context. From this population, ten students were selected for follow up interviews using simple random sampling to reduce selection bias and avoid overrepresentation of particular achievement levels or personality types.

Purposive sampling was employed to select the three English teachers and two psychologists based on professional experience relevant to adolescent language learning and mental health (Ugalde, 2018). This combination of total population, random, and purposive sampling strengthened methodological rigor by balancing breadth and depth of data sources.

3.4 Data Collection Procedures

Data collection occurred in two sequential phases to ensure chronological coherence and analytic clarity.

Phase 1-Questionnaire Administration: Printed questionnaires containing closed and open ended items were distributed to all 220 students in December 2023. The instrument elicited information about students' interest in learning English, motivational factors, and explanatory responses regarding social media engagement (Bhandari, 2023). The questionnaire results provided an initial mapping of dominant motivational sources and informed the development of interview protocols.

Phase 2-Semi Structured Interviews: Building on questionnaire findings, semi structured interviews were conducted between January and May 2024. Although preliminary coordination began earlier in the academic year, all formal interview sessions took place after questionnaire analysis to ensure methodological sequencing. Interviews were conducted with ten randomly selected students, three English teachers, and two psychologists. Interview questions were aligned with the research objectives and explored patterns of social media use, perceived language skill development, emotional experiences, and perceived interrelationships among these variables. All interviews were audio recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim to preserve linguistic accuracy and nuance. Field notes were taken to document non verbal cues and contextual observations. This transparent documentation enhances credibility and dependability of qualitative inquiry (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

3.5 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis. The analytic process followed several systematic stages (Rijali, 2018; Muhadjir, 1998). First, questionnaire responses and interview transcripts were read repeatedly to achieve data familiarization. Second, meaningful units were coded line by line to identify patterns related to motivation, language development, and mental wellbeing. Third, codes were grouped into broader categories and refined into overarching themes that directly addressed the research questions.

To enhance analytic rigor, data from students, teachers, and psychologists were compared to identify convergent and divergent perspectives. This triangulation process strengthened interpretive validity by reducing reliance on a single participant group (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Thematic saturation was reached when no new conceptual categories emerged from successive transcript analysis. After coding the eighth student interview and all teacher and psychologist interviews, additional data confirmed existing patterns without generating new themes. Two further interviews were nonetheless analyzed to ensure saturation stability.

3.6 Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

Trustworthiness was ensured through methodological triangulation, combining questionnaire and interview data across multiple participant groups. Member clarification was conducted during interviews to confirm intended meanings, and informal peer debriefing discussions were held to challenge emerging interpretations and reduce researcher bias.

Ethical principles were strictly upheld. Informed consent was obtained from all participants and, in the case of students, from their guardians. Participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity, with pseudonyms or coded initials used in transcripts and reporting (Tankala, 2022). Audio recordings and transcripts were securely stored and accessible only to the research team. By providing clear sequencing of data collection, transparent analytic procedures, explicit saturation criteria, and ethical safeguards, this method section ensures coherence and rigor in addressing the study's interdisciplinary research objectives.

4. Results

This section reports the findings derived from questionnaire responses and semi structured interviews. The results are organized thematically and are explicitly supported by **Table 2 and Table 3**, which function as the main empirical illustrations. Each table is described in detail to clarify patterns, variations, and meanings emerging from the data.

4.1. Sources of Motivation for Learning English

Table 4.1 summarizes the factors that influenced junior high school students' interest in learning English across Grades 7, 8, and 9. The table clearly demonstrates that social media is the most dominant motivational source among students.

Table 4.1 Factors That Influenced Junior High School Students to Like English

No	Motivating Factors	Total Students
1	Social media (TikTok, Facebook, Instagram)	202
2	Television	30
3	Games (Online and Offline)	30
4	English films	12
5	English songs	7
6	English fiction or novels	5
7	English comics	4
8	English magazines	3
9	Digital English lessons (CD)	1
10	English reading texts	1
11	Family	1
12	Friends	1
13	Programming language	1
14	English school lessons	1
15	English teachers	1
	Total Students	220

Note. One student may mention more than one factor.

As shown in Table 4.1, social media was selected by more than ninety percent of the student population, indicating that its motivational influence is both extensive and pervasive. This pattern was consistently observed across all grade levels, suggesting that the appeal of social media as a learning motivator is not limited by age or academic stage within junior high school. Rather than reflecting a temporary trend, the data indicate that social media has become a normalized and shared space through which students encounter and engage with English.

In contrast, traditional educational sources appear almost marginal in their motivational impact. English teachers, school lessons, and reading texts were each mentioned by only one student. This stark disparity suggests a significant disconnect between students' motivational experiences inside and outside the classroom. While formal instruction remains present in students' academic lives, it is not perceived as a primary source of inspiration or interest in learning English. Instead, motivation appears to be shaped predominantly by environments where learners exercise greater autonomy and choice.

Entertainment based media such as television and games occupy a secondary motivational tier, with each cited by 30 students. Although these sources still expose learners to English, their influence is considerably weaker than that of social media. English films and songs were mentioned by a relatively small number of students, indicating that passive consumption of English content alone may be insufficient to sustain strong motivation. Compared to these media, social media offers interactive, personalized, and continuously updated content, which appears to enhance its motivational appeal.

Students' written responses provide further insight into why social media holds such a dominant position. Many students described encountering English on social media as enjoyable and effortless. English was frequently characterized as something that appears "naturally" while scrolling, watching videos, or reading comments. Rather than being framed as a subject that requires deliberate study, English was experienced as a practical and immediately useful tool embedded within content students already find entertaining.

Another important pattern revealed by Table 4.1 is the multiplicity of motivational sources. Although students were allowed to mention more than one factor, social media consistently emerged as the most salient response. This suggests that social media functions not merely as one motivational source among many, but as a central hub through which other interests such as films, games, and music are accessed. In this sense, social media appears to amplify exposure to English by integrating multiple forms of content into a single digital environment.

Overall, Table 4.1 illustrates a broader transformation in how junior high school students relate to English learning. Motivation is no longer primarily anchored in institutional or instructional settings, but in informal, self-directed, and digitally mediated spaces. English is perceived less as an academic requirement and more as a living language encountered through everyday digital experiences. This shift has important implications for understanding contemporary learner motivation and the evolving role of informal digital environments in shaping students' engagement with English.

4.2. Perceived Improvement in English Language Skills

Table 4.2 presents a detailed summary of interview data obtained from ten randomly selected students. The table illustrates the social media platforms students engage with, the English language skills they perceived as improving, and their perceived mental health impacts.

Table 4.2 Summary of Interview Results with Student Respondents

Student	Social Media Used	English Skills Improved	Perceived Mental Health Impact
R143	TikTok	Reading, Listening	Positive
R162	TikTok, Instagram, Twitter, WhatsApp	Reading, Listening, Grammar, Vocabulary, Speaking, Writing	Positive
R141	TikTok, Instagram	Writing, Listening, Vocabulary, Grammar, Reading	Mixed

Student	Social Media Used	English Skills Improved	Perceived Mental Health Impact
R159	TikTok, Instagram, WhatsApp	Listening, Vocabulary, Writing	Mixed
R160	TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, WhatsApp	Reading, Listening, Writing	Negative
R192	TikTok, Instagram, Twitter	Grammar, Speaking, Reading, Vocabulary, Pronunciation	Positive
R193	TikTok, Instagram, Twitter	Reading, Listening	Mixed
R205	Instagram	Listening, Vocabulary	Mixed
R210	Instagram	Reading	Positive
R214	TikTok, Instagram	Speaking, Writing	Mixed

As shown in Table 4.2, all interviewed students reported improvement in at least one English language skill through social media engagement. Listening and reading are the most frequently mentioned areas of improvement, reflecting students' repeated exposure to spoken and written English through videos, captions, comments, and short texts. One student explained, *"I hear English almost every day from videos, so now my ears are used to it and I understand more than before"* (R143). Another student similarly noted, *"At first I only watched, but after some time I could read the captions and comments without translating everything"* (R210).

The table also shows that vocabulary and grammar improvement often accompanied gains in receptive skills. These improvements were commonly described as incidental rather than planned. A student stated, *"I learn new words from comments and videos, sometimes without realizing it. I just remember them because I see them often"* (R205). Another student added, *"Grammar comes naturally. I start to notice patterns because I see similar sentences many times"* (R192). These excerpts indicate that linguistic development occurs gradually through repeated exposure rather than explicit instruction.

A further pattern evident in Table 4.2 is the relationship between platform diversity and skill range. Students who engaged with multiple platforms reported improvements across both receptive and productive skills. One student who used several platforms explained, *"When I use WhatsApp or Twitter, I try to write in English. It makes me brave even if my English is not perfect"* (R162). In contrast, students who relied mainly on one platform tended to report improvement primarily in listening or reading. This suggests that varied digital environments provide different opportunities for language use.

Across interviews, students emphasized confidence and familiarity rather than accuracy as the most noticeable change. One student remarked, *"I am not afraid of English anymore. Even if I make mistakes, I feel okay because English is everywhere"* (R214). Taken together, Table 4.2 and the interview excerpts indicate that social media supports language development by normalizing English exposure and fostering confidence, creating conditions that encourage gradual improvement across multiple skills.

4.3. Social Media and Mental Health Experiences

Table 4.2 also illustrates how students perceive the impact of social media engagement on their mental health, revealing a spectrum of emotional experiences rather than a single dominant pattern. The table categorizes these experiences into positive, mixed, and negative perceptions. Of the ten interviewed students, four reported predominantly positive emotional effects, five described mixed experiences, and one reported a predominantly negative impact. This distribution suggests that social media affects students' mental wellbeing in differentiated and context dependent ways.

Students who reported positive mental health experiences described social media as a space for emotional release and stress reduction, particularly after academic demands. These students associated social media use with feelings of relaxation, enjoyment, and emotional comfort. One student stated, *“After a long day at school, watching short videos makes me feel lighter and less tense”* (R143). Another explained, *“Sometimes I feel overwhelmed, but when I see funny or inspiring content, my mood improves quickly”* (R192). These excerpts indicate that social media can function as an emotional refuge when students actively engage with content they perceive as uplifting. Several students also emphasized the role of control and selectivity in shaping positive experiences. One student noted, *“If I choose what I watch, it helps me feel better. I follow accounts that make me laugh or motivate me”* (R210). Another added, *“I feel happy when I watch things I like, especially when there is no pressure to respond or think too much”* (R162). These responses suggest that positive mental health effects are closely linked to intentional and mindful engagement rather than passive scrolling.

Mixed perceptions, which represent the largest group in Table 3, reveal a more complex emotional pattern. Students in this group acknowledged that social media could both relieve and generate stress. One student explained, *“At first it helps me relax, but after a while I feel tired and my eyes and mind hurt”* (R141). Another student similarly stated, *“Sometimes I feel better after using social media, but sometimes I compare myself with others and feel insecure”* (R193). These excerpts illustrate how emotional outcomes fluctuate depending on duration of use, content type, and students’ emotional states at the time of engagement.

Students with mixed experiences also highlighted internal conflict between enjoyment and guilt. One participant remarked, *“I enjoy it, but then I feel guilty because I spend too much time there instead of resting or studying”* (R205). Another student shared, *“It makes me calm for a short time, but if I stay too long, I feel lazy and stressed afterward”* (R214). These responses indicate that emotional fatigue may emerge not from content alone but from awareness of overuse and loss of control.

Only one student reported a predominantly negative mental health experience, emphasizing difficulty concentrating and increased stress. This student explained, *“When I use social media too much, my thoughts become messy and I cannot focus on anything”* (R160). Although this perspective appears less frequently in Table 4.1, it provides important contrast by showing that social media can intensify emotional strain when usage becomes excessive or unmanaged.

Overall, Table 4.2 demonstrates that social media functions as an emotionally ambivalent space for junior high school students. While it can offer relaxation, enjoyment, and temporary emotional relief, it can also contribute to fatigue, insecurity, and stress. The variation in students’ responses highlights that mental health outcomes are shaped not by social media itself, but by how students engage with it, how long they use it, and how they interpret the content they encounter.

4.4 Relationship Between Motivation, Language Learning, and Mental Wellbeing

When the patterns presented in Table 4.1 and Table 4.2 are examined together, a clear relational dynamic emerges among social media use, motivation to learn English, and students’ mental wellbeing. Students did not describe these elements as separate experiences but as interconnected aspects of their daily digital lives. Motivation to learn English often arose from social media engagement, while emotional states influenced how actively students engaged with English content.

Many students described feeling motivated when they were able to understand English content encountered on social media. This sense of comprehension often generated positive emotions such as pride, satisfaction, and confidence. One student explained, *“When I understand English videos without subtitles, I feel proud of myself and want to learn more”* (R162). Another student shared, *“Knowing the meaning of English comments makes me feel smart and confident”* (R210). These responses suggest that successful comprehension acts as an emotional reward that reinforces motivation.

At the same time, students indicated that positive emotional states supported greater willingness to engage with English. Feeling relaxed or happy encouraged exploration of English content, whereas stress or fatigue reduced motivation. One student noted, *“If I feel calm, I enjoy watching English videos, but if I am stressed, I just scroll without paying attention”* (R141). Another added, *“When my mood is good, I want to understand the words. When I am tired, I avoid English”* (R205). These excerpts indicate that mental wellbeing shapes not only engagement intensity but also learning intentionality.

Students also described moments when excessive social media use disrupted this balance. While initial engagement motivated learning and improved mood, prolonged use sometimes led to emotional fatigue, which in turn reduced motivation. One student reflected, “*At first I feel excited to learn English, but if I stay too long, I get tired and lose interest*” (R214). Another stated, “*Too much scrolling makes my head full, and then I do not want to learn anything*” (R160). These responses illustrate that motivation and wellbeing fluctuate rather than progress linearly.

Teachers’ and psychologists’ perspectives further supported this interconnected pattern. Teachers observed that students who appeared confident and emotionally stable were more willing to experiment with English, while students experiencing stress tended to withdraw or participate minimally. Psychologists similarly noted that feelings of achievement and competence supported emotional balance, whereas comparison and overload undermined both motivation and wellbeing. Together, these observations reinforce the view that social media operates as a dynamic space where motivation and mental health continuously influence one another.

Overall, this subsection shows that social media, motivation to learn English, and mental wellbeing form a cyclical and context dependent relationship. Motivation enhances emotional satisfaction through feelings of progress, while positive emotional states encourage deeper engagement with English content. However, when emotional fatigue or stress emerges, motivation declines. This dynamic interplay highlights the importance of balance and self-regulation in students’ digital learning experiences.

5. Discussion

This study set out to examine how social media functions as a motivational space for English learning among Indonesian junior high school students and how this engagement intersects with students’ mental wellbeing. Three key findings emerged. First, social media overwhelmingly surpassed traditional instructional agents as the dominant source of motivation to learn English. Second, students reported perceived improvement in multiple language skills, particularly listening, reading, vocabulary development, and confidence. Third, and most significantly, motivation and mental wellbeing were found to be dynamically interconnected in a cyclical and bidirectional manner. These findings extend existing research by integrating linguistic and psychological dimensions within a single interpretive framework.

5.1 Social Media as a Primary Motivational Ecosystem

The dominance of social media as a motivational driver aligns with prior studies highlighting its role in enhancing learner engagement through authentic input and autonomy (Al-Arif, 2019; Akpan & Chayanuvat, 2022; Hasan et al., 2020; Nasution, 2022). Similar to Pujiati and Tamela (2019) and Fransisca (2024), students in this study described English exposure through familiar platforms as enjoyable and effortless. However, the present findings reveal a stronger displacement effect than previously documented. Rather than functioning as a supplementary tool, social media appeared to eclipse classroom based motivational sources.

This shift suggests a transformation in motivational orientation. While earlier work by Galoyan and Madyarov (2016) and Dhanya (2016) emphasized informal digital engagement as supportive, the current study indicates that for junior high school learners, digital environments may now constitute the primary motivational reference point. This contextual nuance sharpens our understanding of how motivational ecosystems evolve within digitally saturated adolescent cultures.

5.2 Informal Exposure and Affective Readiness for Language Development

Consistent with international findings (Akpan & Chayanuvat, 2022; Xuan et al., 2020; Zhou, 2021), students reported improvement in receptive skills through repeated exposure to multimedia content. Vocabulary and grammar gains, similar to those described by Nasution (2022) and Al-Arif (2019), were largely incidental rather than explicitly taught. These results reinforce the role of authentic digital input in supporting implicit acquisition processes.

Yet, this study adds an important affective dimension. Students emphasized increased confidence and reduced fear of making mistakes more than measurable linguistic accuracy. This aligns with Zhao et al. (2022), who identified reduced foreign language anxiety in digitally mediated contexts. The findings suggest that social media may first function as an affective scaffold, normalizing English exposure and preparing learners emotionally for participation. Thus, digital environments contribute not only to skill development but also to affective readiness, a dimension often underexplored in EFL research.

5.3 Mental Health as a Mediating Variable

While motivation studies frequently highlight positive engagement outcomes, fewer integrate adolescent mental health explicitly. Psychological scholarship underscores both the supportive and risk laden nature of social media engagement (Robinson & Smith, 2023; Kristianingsih, 2023). The present findings resonate with Kusumaningsih et al. (2024), who argue that emotional wellbeing significantly shapes academic motivation.

This study goes beyond correlational claims by demonstrating that emotional states mediate learning engagement in real time. Emotional, behavioral, and cognitive dimensions of engagement are closely interconnected, with emotions playing a decisive role in learners' willingness to participate in language activities (Xu, 2023). Positive emotions such as enjoyment and relaxation enhance motivation and deepen engagement, as shown in studies of emotionally resonant materials and TikTok-based learning, where pleasurable and meaningful content supported vocabulary acquisition and sustained participation (Moskalets, 2025; Hanansi, 2025; Duraipandi & Murugan, 2024). In contrast, fatigue, insecurity, cognitive overload, and excessive information reduce intentional learning and structured engagement (Qi et al., 2025), while distractions, difficulty identifying credible sources (Wati et al., 2024), and upward social comparison can mediate diminished learning involvement (Qi et al., 2024). Notably, even learners experiencing mixed or negative emotions still reported language improvement, indicating that incidental exposure retains acquisitional value (Noviantoro, 2017; Wati et al., 2024). Overall, the impact of social media on English learning is neither wholly positive nor negative but is shaped by a dynamic interplay of emotional states and contextual factors (Qi et al., 2024; Xu, 2023; Emon, 2025).

5.4 Extending Existing Research: The Cyclical Interrelationship Model

The most significant theoretical contribution of this study lies in articulating a cyclical interrelationship model between motivation and mental wellbeing. Previous research has established that motivation influences learning outcomes (Hasan et al., 2020; Zhao et al., 2022) and that mental health shapes academic engagement (Kusumaningsih et al., 2024). However, these constructs are typically examined in linear or unidirectional terms.

The present findings extend existing literature by demonstrating a bidirectional relationship between motivation and emotional wellbeing. Motivation enhanced emotional wellbeing through feelings of competence and achievement, while positive emotional states increased openness to learning and sustained engagement (Hossain et al., 2025). Such reciprocal associations function as “virtuous” feedback loops in which positive affect and adaptive regulation reinforce one another over time (Hossain et al., 2025). Conversely, emotional fatigue diminished motivation and limited deeper linguistic processing, reflecting the “vicious” cycles identified in affective research, where negative emotions and maladaptive responses perpetuate each other (Hossain et al., 2025). This pattern reflects a dynamic system rather than a linear cause-effect relationship (Cruz et al., 2024), consistent with systems dynamics frameworks showing that feedback loops can either strengthen or undermine motivation through interconnected factors (Cruz et al., 2024). As illustrated by Cruz et al. (2024), shifts in motivation reciprocally influence other elements within complex academic environments, underscoring that motivational and emotional processes are mutually constitutive components of a dynamic, self-reinforcing system (Cruz et al., 2024; Hossain et al., 2025).

By situating this cyclical model within digital EFL contexts, the study integrates applied linguistics and educational psychology more explicitly than prior research. It responds directly to the fragmentation identified in earlier scholarship, where motivation and mental health were treated as parallel but disconnected constructs (Kusumaningsih et al., 2024; Purnomo, 2023). The model thus advances theoretical understanding by positioning digital English exposure as a mediating space in which these variables continuously shape one another.

5.5 Cultural and Contextual Implications

The Indonesian junior high school context provides important cultural insights. In collectivist educational cultures where classroom hierarchies and examination pressure are strong, social media may offer a rare space for low-pressure engagement. Students' preference for informal digital environments may reflect a desire to escape rigid instructional norms. Similar patterns have been observed in other Asian EFL contexts (Akpan & Chayanuvat, 2022; Xuan et al., 2020), suggesting broader regional relevance.

The growing dominance of social media raises concerns about the declining motivational influence of teachers and schools in students' learning lives. Although this does not suggest that formal instruction is

ineffective, it reveals a disconnect between institutional practices and students' lived learning experiences (Carey, 2013), a gap intensified by systemic constraints that limit educators' ability to implement responsive, student-centered pedagogies (Gui, 2025). Bridging this divide requires adaptation rather than resistance. Culturally sustaining approaches that center students' identities and lived experiences have proven effective in reconnecting school learning with learners' realities (Phathona, 2026), while differentiated instruction provides a framework for equitable, learner-centered environments responsive to diverse needs (Febrianti, 2025). Ultimately, meaningful reform demands not only curricular innovation but also systemic alignment among educational values, institutional structures, and cultural contexts (Tapung, 2025), enabling schools to evolve alongside the digital and social landscapes shaping students' engagement with knowledge.

5.6 Pedagogical Implications

The findings have important implications for English language teaching. First, teachers should recognize social media as a legitimate motivational space rather than merely a distraction, as integrating social media-inspired tasks can bridge informal and formal learning contexts (Haas & Tussey, 2023). Second, pedagogy should prioritize emotional safety, confidence, and learner autonomy, acknowledging that affective readiness precedes linguistic accuracy and that connecting instruction to students' interests fosters agency and meaningful engagement (Ajayi, 2015). Third, educators need to address mental health explicitly by promoting self-regulation, selective content consumption, and mindful engagement to prevent fatigue and overload; wellbeing literacy, incorporating multimodal communication pathways, can link wellbeing support with educational outcomes (Oades et al., 2021).

Finally, curriculum design should integrate multimodal and interest-driven content that reflects students' digital experiences while maintaining pedagogical structure (Nabhan & Hidayat, 2018; Xu, 2024). Evidence shows that multimodal literacy, combining visual, auditory, and digital modes, strengthens engagement, comprehension, and communication skills (Sutrisno et al., 2024; Insani et al., 2024), and aligning curricula with students' existing multimodal practices enhances responsiveness to diverse learning preferences (Liu & Lim, 2024; Bolivar, 2025).

5.8 Gaps, Novelty, Implication and Directions for Future Research

Despite extensive research on social media and EFL learning, few studies examine motivation and mental health together within a single framework. This study addresses that gap by demonstrating their dynamic interdependence. Its novelty lies in triangulating student experiences with teacher and psychologist perspectives, offering a holistic view rarely found in language education research.

While this study offers rich insights, it is limited by its single school context and qualitative design. Future research should involve multi-site studies across diverse cultural settings to enhance generalizability. Longitudinal research is also needed to examine how motivation and mental health evolve over time with sustained social media use.

Future studies could explore intervention-based designs that integrate guided social media use into EFL instruction, as well as comparative studies examining different platform types. Investigating parental mediation and digital literacy education would further enrich understanding of adolescent digital learning ecosystems.

lastly, this study demonstrates that social media, motivation to learn English, and mental wellbeing are dynamically intertwined in junior high school learners' experiences. Social media motivates learning, supports emotional engagement, and shapes learners' confidence, yet it also carries risks that require pedagogical attention. By foregrounding the emotional dimension of digital language learning, this study contributes to more humane, realistic, and context sensitive approaches to EFL education in the digital age.

6. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that social media has become a central motivational ecosystem for Indonesian junior high school students learning English, simultaneously shaping their linguistic engagement and mental wellbeing. The findings reveal that digital English exposure not only supports perceived development in listening, reading, vocabulary, and confidence, but also generates differentiated emotional experiences ranging from relaxation and pride to fatigue and stress. Most importantly, the study identifies a cyclical and bidirectional interrelationship in which motivation enhances emotional wellbeing through feelings of competence, while positive emotional states strengthen willingness to engage with English content.

The primary theoretical contribution lies in integrating applied linguistics and educational psychology within a single qualitative framework, positioning digital environments as mediating spaces where motivation and mental health dynamically interact. Practically, the findings underscore the need for ELT practitioners to acknowledge social media as a legitimate learning space, to design autonomy supportive and emotionally safe pedagogies, and to promote mindful digital engagement that balances linguistic growth with psychological sustainability. Future research should extend this integrative model across diverse school types, cultural contexts, and longitudinal designs, as well as examine intervention-based approaches that intentionally connect structured classroom instruction with students' informal digital practices. Ultimately, understanding digital English exposure through an integrated motivational and psychological lens offers a more precise foundation for developing responsive and humane English language teaching in the digital age.

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Appendix

Appendix 1. Questionnaire Questions Distributed to Student Respondents.

1. Do you like learning English?
2. What factors mostly influenced you to like English?
 - Social media
 - TV
 - Newspapers/ Magazines
 - Other answers:

Please explain your answer

Appendix 2. Interview Questions for the English Teachers

Do you think there are relationships between social media and students' learning motivations?

Appendix 3. Interview Questions for Psychologists

3. Menurut Bapak/ Ibu, bagaimana hubungan media sosial dengan motivasi remaja dalam belajar bahasa Inggris?
 4. Bagaimana hubungan media sosial dengan kesehatan mental remaja?
 5. Apakah Bapak/ Ibu memandang fenomena ini (termotivasi belajar bahasa Inggris karena media sosial) sebagai sesuatu yang positif atau negatif?
 6. Tolong jelaskan, apakah media sosial, motivasi belajar bahasa Inggris, dan kesehatan mental saling berhubungan? Tolong jelaskan.
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