

The Integration of Social Media Reels in EFL Higher Education: Enhancing Students' Oral Communication Skills and Cultural Awareness

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ABSTRACT:

This study aimed to investigate Omani EFL students' perceptions of using Instagram Reels to enhance their oral English communication skills and cultural awareness. A mixed-methods approach was employed with 96 EFL students providing quantitative data and 25 students providing qualitative data at a public Omani university. SPSS version 29 was used to analyze the descriptive statistics from the questionnaire, while content analysis was conducted to analyze the interview data. The findings showed that students perceived Instagram Reels as a beneficial supplementary resource for improving communication skills, increasing language awareness, and supporting informal learning. However, challenges related to rapid speech, unfamiliar vocabulary, accents, distractions, and vocabulary retention were identified. The study suggests that effective integration of Reels into education requires structured guidance to maximize learning benefits.

Keywords: Instagram Reels; EFL; oral communication skills; cultural awareness; social media; higher education

Introduction

In today's world, oral communication skills and awareness have become a fundamental goal that adults are expected to achieve for purposes of employability and professional success, interpersonal and social relationships, and effective self-expression. However, developing communicative competence and awareness in English involves more than mastering linguistic knowledge. It requires gathering input and information on a wide range of topics to achieve all these goals. In the digital era, social media Reels constitute an effective method of providing

learners with rich and varied language input, fostering both communicative competence and awareness.

Most educational institutions endeavour to prepare graduates with the knowledge and hard and soft skills that align with the requirements of the AI era. Yet, classroom and formal learning

still often reflect students' lack of awareness and communication skills. From a critical perspective, boosting EFL learners' communication and awareness and building their personalities may not be achieved solely through formal learning, as is the case in academic institutions.

In language learning, features such as contextuality, authenticity, and dynamism are highly required to develop not merely students' cognitive and personal skills but also to equip them with the ability to communicate effectively across dynamic, visually oriented, and algorithm-driven media landscapes (Arani, 2024; Hutson et al., 2024; Magoge et al., 2025). Because learners lack exposure to these possibilities, EFL students often struggle with English proficiency and lack comprehensive awareness of important life-related topics. This limited exposure to different types of knowledge results from restrictions imposed on formal education, including curriculum, institutional policies, and other socio-cultural factors. One such restriction is the failure to incorporate digital media, including reels and posts, into the classroom, where EFL students could be exposed to authentic language, real-life situations, and audio-visual media (Firth et al., 2019; Al-Khalidi, 2021a, Turner et al., 21; Al-Khalidi, 2022). In addition to institutional policy, educators, teachers, and stakeholders often pay little attention to guiding or orienting students toward the educational use of social media, which could improve students' communication skills, expand their awareness, and encourage informal learning beyond the classroom.

Considering the limitations of formal education and the challenges facing EFL learners, as previously mentioned, requires that educators, instructional designers, and teachers turn to alternative approaches, such as the inclusion of social media reels in teaching and learning processes (Al-Rahmi & Zeki, 2017; Balakrishnan & Gan, 2016). Globally, social media, including platforms such as YouTube and Instagram, have proven highly effective and significant in education. Potentially, they offer new opportunities for interactive, engaged learning, especially for Gen Z. They can be used to practice speaking and communication in a more engaging and fun way than traditional methods (Mulyana, 2024).

Generally, research on social media, particularly the integration of Instagram Reels in EFL higher education contexts, is rare. Also, the popularity of Instagram and other digital platforms' reels and

their role in enhancing students' communication skills and awareness have prompted the researchers in this study to conduct a mixed-methods study to investigate, through students' lenses, the impacts of reels on students' communication skills and awareness. The literature includes a plethora of empirical studies on educationalizing social media, particularly in the language education industry. However, in the EFL Omani context, little attention has been given to investigating the role and impact of social media Reels in fostering students' communication skills and awareness in both formal and informal learning contexts. Thus, this paper intends to address this gap by reviewing the literature and analyzing the mixed-method data.

The importance of this study stems from the growing use of social media Reels as an emerging educational tool in TESOL contexts. By examining EFL students' perceptions of Reels as a learning resource, the study seeks to provide insights into their role in supporting communication skills development and raising awareness of diverse educational and real-world issues. The findings may encourage EFL teachers to integrate Reels into their instructional practices and design more engaging learning experiences that align with the expectations of digital-native learners. In addition, the study is expected to offer educators, curriculum planners, and policymakers, particularly in Omani higher education institutions, a better understanding of the educational value of Reels and their potential to enhance language learning and student engagement.

Therefore, this study aims to offer insights for integrating social media Reels into EFL higher education. More specifically, the study aims:

1. To examine the impact of social media reels on EFL students' communication skills;
2. To examine the impact of social media Reels on EFL students' awareness of various socio-cultural, economic, and global issues.
3. To explore students' perceptions of social media Reels as an informal learning resource that complements formal classroom learning.

Based on the above objectives, the study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are EFL students' perceptions of the impact of social media Reels on their communication skills?
2. What are EFL students' perceptions of the impact of social media Reels on their awareness of social, educational, and global issues?
3. How do students perceive social media Reels as an informal learning resource that complements formal classroom learning?

Literature review

Reviewing the literature on the integration of social media in higher education, the researchers have found that a plethora of studies have examined a wide range of topics. However, they differ in their focus, objectives, and findings. Some studies examined the effects of social media on linguistic skills and aspects, while others focused on pedagogical purposes such as engagement, motivation, and the like. This study, however, is more comprehensive, as it goes beyond linguistics and pedagogical aspects to encompass the concept of awareness alongside communicative skills. The study is also distinguished by its focus on the effects of social media Reels on the two concepts: awareness and communication skills. Accordingly, this section is organized into three sub-sections: Effects of Reels on Communication Skills, Effects of Reels on Awareness, and Theoretical Background.

The Effects of Social Media Reels on Students' Communication Skills

It has been found that (85%–95%) of students actively utilize Instagram, showing that it is an important part of their daily digital interaction. Such an interaction is obvious in Instagram features such as videos, posts and captions (Agustin & Ayu, 2021). Incorporating Instagram reels into language learning context results in numerous positive outcomes as highlighted by several studies. Benghalem and Kamińska (2025) indicate that Instagram Reels accelerate to the development of learners' speaking skills due to the structural attributes of the platform, namely

its Audio/music selection, AR effects, timer and countdown features, recording multiple clips, and speed adjustment features.

Pronunciation development is the most pervasive oral proficiency improvement that has been identified by previous research. Benghalem and Kamińska (2025) identified that the access to authentic native-speaker models, various accents and simultaneous visual cues—such as lip positioning and facial kinetics—scaffolded their articulation. In addition, Ristianti et al. (2025) findings revealed that the process of replaying and re-recording Instagram reels repeatedly enables learners to focus on focus on unfamiliar words and refine their pronunciation. Chaerunnissa et al. (2025) examined EFL learners' perception of listening to British accent content on Instagram. The findings revealed that the mix of the elegant and prestige appeal of the British accent and pictures motivates students to actively mimic the speakers.

Fluency emerged as another dominant area of improvement. Benghalem and Kamińska (2025) reported that repeated exposure and listening to short-form videos, coupled with targeted language imitation, cultivate a more natural, accelerated and rhythmic speech delivery rate. Similarly, within a Project-Based Learning framework, Ristianti et al. (2025) validates how iterative cyclical nature of video production-involving the process of repeatedly recording, reviewing, and redoing video takes- reduce hesitation, resulting in fluid verbal delivery.

In addition to Fluency, vocabulary acquisition emerged as another area of communication skills improvement reported by various studies. Lexical items and idiomatic expressions were acquired through watching short-form videos, especially through on-screen subtitles and contextual language use. Moreover, consistent exposure to informal expressions, slang and everyday conversational English significantly contributed to learners' vocabulary development (Benghalem & Kamińska, 2025). These findings align with Ristianti et al. (2025) who found that preparing video scripts exposed learners to new words and expressions, thus expanding their vocabulary and

improving their communication. Echoing these findings, Kaviani's (2022) study demonstrated that Instagram reels have a significant positive impact on learners' vocabulary development. Through the experimental findings, the repeated exposure to vocabulary in visually rich and authentic media develops recall and word retention, and motivated learners for self-directed practice outside the classroom. Furthermore, Agustin and Ayu (2021) supported this view by showing that the majority of learners, 95%, believed that the repeated exposure to posts, interactive content and captions significantly improved their vocabulary, through learning and retaining new vocabulary and exposing to authentic language input. Furthermore, Syarfi (2025) found that the use of Instagram Reels is highly useful in improving word retention, learning new idioms, and boosting their speaking confidence.

Beyond vocabulary development, studies have shown the positive impacts of using Instagram reels on receptive language acquisition, particularly listening skills. This is supported by study conducted by Agustin and Ayu (2021) who concluded that regular exposure to Instagram reels directly improve learners improve listening skills and comprehension.

Social Media Reels and Students' Awareness

This section aligns with the second objective of the study, which aims to examine the role of social media Reels in building up students' intercultural awareness. Given the growing importance of awareness in contemporary higher education, it is essential to examine its conceptual foundations, educational significance, and potential contribution to students' communication development. Therefore, this section is organized into three subsections. The first subsection provides an overview of the concept of awareness and its various dimensions. The second discusses the importance of enhancing students' awareness in higher education. The third examines the relationship between awareness and communication skills, highlighting how increased awareness can

contribute to more effective communication and participation in academic and social contexts.

The Concept of Awareness: An Overview

Before we proceed to review the relevant literature, it is important to clarify the concept of awareness. In EFL contexts, Byram (2012) described awareness as an individual's conscious recognition of language and culture, accompanied by active engagement with both. At a deeper level, Schmidt (1995) viewed awareness as a form of consciousness that enables individuals to perceive, notice, and understand information. He argued that conscious attention to linguistic features is a necessary condition for language learning. The discussion that follows outlines the most important types of awareness students need to meet the requirements of the modern world and the workplace.

Global awareness has become a common trend in EFL education, focusing on understanding diverse global issues across social, cultural, economic, and environmental domains. In this respect, Aljarf (2022) points out that understanding global awareness helps students understand a variety of topics and themes such as "global peace, global diversity, life experience, family situations, age, gender, cognitive ability, ethnicity, race, culture, and religion" (p. 31). Similarly, Al-Khalidi & Khouni (2025) conducted a survey study to investigate the integration of ecolinguistics in EFL curriculum pointing out that "ecolinguistics must be introduced to the curriculum to raise students' awareness of preserving natural resources and connecting them with the environment where they live...More specifically, ecolinguistics uses the language as a strategy or tool that contributes to raising student awareness of ecology" (p. 57).

Pragmatic competence or awareness is defined as "the ability to understand and use language meaningfully and appropriately in various social contexts" (Humayrah et al., 2024, p.58). Pragmatic competence plays an important role in enhancing EFL students' communication skills through engaging meaningfully in real-world and social interactions in English (Wang 2022).

In short, exposure to authentic materials, interactive activities, and digital media can increase students' awareness of language use, cultural diversity, and real-world communication practices. Accordingly, many educators and researchers emphasize the need to incorporate innovative teaching approaches and technologies that enhance learners' awareness and encourage meaningful participation in the classroom.

The Importance of Enhancing Awareness in Higher Education

In the context of 21st-century education, higher education institutions are expected to prepare students to become active, informed, and responsible members of society. Furthermore, according to UNESCO's global education (UNESCO, 2024), students must be prepared to develop skills such as "global interconnectedness", "cultural diversity", "intercultural competence", and "global citizenship". Besides, effective communication skills have become the central goal in the workplace across all fields (Al-Khalidi et al., 2023a, 2023b).

In alignment with global education, there has been a growing trend that language learning shouldn't be restricted on linguistic skills and aspects, but it should also include Intercultural Communicative Competence (Byram, 2012). According to Byram's framework (1997), successful language learners must possess five components, attitudes of openness and curiosity, knowledge of other cultures, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery, and interaction, and critical cultural awareness. To meet this goal, social media, with its continuous intercultural and real-life content and reels, is considered one of the most effective platforms for developing these competencies (Al-Khalidi & Khouni, 2021; Al-Khalidi, 2021b).

The objectives stated earlier require enhancing students' awareness across all life dimensions, including technology, environmental sustainability, health, culture, and personal and professional responsibilities. Fortunately, online platforms such as social media play a significant role in increasing local and global awareness,

developing linguistic proficiency, and fostering cross-cultural communication (Pardede 2020; Abdullateef 2021; Devkota et al. 2017; Prykhodko et al. 2019). Increased awareness provides learners with richer content knowledge, a wider vocabulary, and greater confidence to participate effectively in spoken communication.

The Effects of Awareness on Communicative Skills

Previous research has shown the positive links between social media, language development, and intercultural awareness (Al-Khalidi & Khouni, 2021; Thanh Van & Thanh Mai, 2024; Al-Jarf, 2022; Siregar et al., 2024). It was also revealed that awareness has proven to be an important factor in boosting language learning, while a lack of awareness or knowledge will obscure EFL students' competence and communication skills (Wang, 2018). For example, Al-Jarf (2022) reported positive opinions regarding integrating global issues such as "poverty, wars, environmental destruction, climate change, pandemic, gender inequality, hunger, and oppression" into language education (p. 32). The rationale for this integration is that such serious issues stimulate students' motivation and engagement (Al-Khalidi & Khouni, 2025), which, in turn, positively impacts language-learning proficiency (Al-Khalidi & Khouni, 2021, Al-Khalidi, 2021b). In addition, such integration equips students with knowledge, communication skills, and language proficiency that would help them become socially aware of global issues (Bayraktar Balkir, 2021). Similarly, in a Chinese context, Zhang et al. (2021) revealed a positive link between language proficiency and multicultural awareness. It is worth mentioning that multicultural awareness measurements not only contributed to EFL skills in the short term but also in the long term (Al-Jarf, 2022).

Al-Jarf (2022), in a quantitative study in an EFL Saudi context, focused on integrating global themes into EFL courses to increase students' global awareness. Her study proposed developing a model to help EFL students learn about the ideologies, cultures, and customs of other countries, address current global problems,

compare the similarities and differences that the people of the world share, and focus on the interrelatedness of human beings...” (p.31).

Instagram Reels appear to play a genuine role in building EFL students' communication skills and overall competence. Whether used in the classroom or picked up informally outside it, Reels have shown real value, a value that can be understood through three key theoretical lenses (Kouser & Majid, 2021; Özpınar, 2020). What makes social media useful here is that it doesn't just offer entertainment; platforms like these give learners access to reels, podcasts, and games that expose them to language in structured, meaningful, and grounded real-world audiovisual contexts.

Theoretical background

Theoretically, learning through social media reels is shaped by and guided by key educational theories and frameworks. This section outlines the theories that justify integrating social media reels into education. Before proceeding to the next discussion, it is worth mentioning that all supporting theories of social media view the language learning process not solely as a cognitive activity, but rather as a combination of cognitive, constructive, social, and cultural activities. English language proficiency is shaped by formal and informal learning.

Within the context of EFL learning, Krashen's Input Hypothesis proposes that language learning becomes more effective if it goes beyond linguistic capacity. This means that EFL learners need exposure to more authentic materials and sources, and this aligns with social media that provide authentic and meaningful situations and scenarios.

The Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1999) is another theoretical foundation supporting the digital media reels in EFL contexts. The Cognitive Social Theory postulates that learning occurs through observation and social interaction. These principles also align with social media reels, where learners engage in authentic language use and interactive situations. Several empirical studies confirmed this principle (Al-Khalidi & Khouni, 2021; Al-Khalidi, 2021b; Li et

al., 2022; Al-Rahmi & Zeki, 2017; Balakrishnan & Gan, 2016). Similarly, the Cognitive Theory holds that language learning is developed through memory retention and active mental processing. Accordingly, social media reels serve as digital tools that facilitate cognitive processing through their multimedia content (Mayer, 2005; Sugrue, 2020; Al-Khalidi, 2020; Al-Khalidi et al, 2022). This theory was supported by several studies (e.g., Stefancik and Stradiotová, 2020) examining the role of podcasts in the EFL classroom and concluding that frequent exposure to audio-based materials enhances auditory processing and retention. These findings also support Mayer's Multimedia Theory (2005), suggesting that multimedia engagement fosters deep cognitive processing and memory consolidation during second-language learning.

From the perspective of the Theory of Constructivism by Vygotsky (cited in Amineh & Asl, 2015) which proposes that learning occurs through the construction of meaning and understanding of the world through social interactions, community engagement, dialogue, and group work (Saqr et al., 2018; Gul, 2016). Social media activities such as reels and short podcasts can provide all the previously mentioned activities by exposing learners to others' narratives, idioms, practices, and viewpoints, enabling them to develop language skills and intercultural competencies simultaneously.

In summary, implementing social media reels in formal and informal education go in line with all principles of the above theories. Instagram reels with its multimedia combination such as texts, audios, images, and a variety of scenarios help learners to acquire a more diverse contextually appropriate range of vocabulary and idioms. Additionally reels help learners develop their English language proficiency and communication skills.

Research methodology

This research study aims to explore students' perceptions and attitudes toward integrating social media Reels into academic courses as an informal mode of learning to enhance their

communication skills and awareness. To address these goals, a mixed-methods study was used to collect rich, informative data (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). This section presents the elements of research design, including the methods of data collection, the sample, and the methods of data analysis.

Data Collection

For the quantitative data, a questionnaire survey was used drawing on the research objectives and questions. According to Creswell & Creswell (2018) a questionnaire survey is an important technique used to describe a population's attitude, opinions, behaviours, experiences, or other characteristics. The Likert scale with the five options ranking from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree was employed. The questionnaire consisted of three sections. The first section gathered background information about the participants, including their age, gender, academic level, and prior experience with social media platforms. This section aimed to provide a demographic profile of the respondents and to contextualize their responses in the subsequent sections of the questionnaire. The second section includes eight items related to the first objective of the study aiming at collecting data on the relationship between social media Reels and students' communication skills. The third section, on the other hand, includes eight items designed in line with the third objective of the study concerned with exploring the integration of social media Reels higher education as an informal resource. The second source of data collection for this study was the semi-structured interviews with a group of students from the Post-Foundation Program to understand their opinion regarding the integration of social media reels in their EFL academic courses (Kvale, 2006). The researchers adopted a professional protocol, including procedures of "thematizing" and "designing" the questions to be asked based on the main research questions and purpose of study (Dörnyei, (2007).

Ethical considerations were addressed in accordance with the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018) guidelines. Prior to

sharing the online questionnaire with the students, the researchers explained the purpose and scope of the study in the classroom, clarified what participation involved, and highlighted the value of the students' contributions. Participants were then provided with an information sheet outlining the research title, objectives, and what participation involved. Following their agreement to participate, participants completed an informed consent form before taking part in the study. Participation was voluntary, and participants were assured that their responses would be treated confidentially and anonymously and that their academic grades would not be affected if they chose to withdraw from the study at any point.

Sample

For the quantitative phase, the study involved a sample of 96 students enrolled in the Post-Foundation Program at the University of Technology and Applied Sciences (UTAS). This sample was purposively selected because it represents the study's target population and belongs to Generation Z, often referred to as "digital natives" for their familiarity with digital technologies and social media (Brown & Lee, 2015). For the qualitative phase, 25 students participated in semi-structured focus group interviews to provide in-depth insights into their experiences and perceptions. Collecting both quantitative and qualitative data from this population enabled a comprehensive exploration of students' perceptions of integrating social media Reels into formal education, providing valuable implications for TESOL in higher education.

Data analysis

The quantitative data were collected through a questionnaire survey consisting of Likert-scale items ranging from *Strongly Disagree (1)* to *Strongly Agree (5)*. After data collection, the responses were coded and entered into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for analysis. Descriptive statistics, including

frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were used to summarize and interpret the participants' responses. The mean scores were calculated to determine the extent to which students agreed or disagreed with each statement, while standard deviations were used to assess the variability of responses. The findings were subsequently presented in tables and figures to facilitate interpretation and discussion of the results in relation to the study objectives and research questions.

The qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis. First, the interview responses were transcribed and carefully reviewed several times to gain familiarity with the data. The researchers then identified recurring ideas, patterns, and meaningful statements related to the study objectives. Similar responses were grouped into categories and subsequently organized into broader themes. These themes were interpreted and supported with representative excerpts from the participants' responses to provide deeper insights into their perceptions and experiences regarding the use of social media reels for EFL learning.

Findings

This section presents the findings from the data analysis, organized into two parts based on the

two types of data collected: quantitative and qualitative. The first part reports the quantitative findings and the second part reports the qualitative findings.

Findings of Quantitative Data Analysis

Cronbach's Alpha was used to assess the questionnaire's reliability. The results indicated relatively high levels of internal consistency for the two sections of the questionnaire: Part 1 (Effectiveness of social media Reels in developing EFL students' communication skills) achieved ($\alpha = 0.940$), and Part 2 (social media Reels as an informal platform in higher education) achieved ($\alpha = 0.940$). Both parts of the questionnaire exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70, indicating excellent reliability.

Part one of the questionnaire examines participants' frequency of watching social media Reels for language learning. Figure 1 shows that the majority of participants reported watching Instagram Reels daily ($n = 83$), followed by several times a week ($n = 7$). A smaller number of participants indicated watching Reels once a week ($n=2$) and rarely watching ($n=2$). Only one participant reported never watching them for educational purposes.

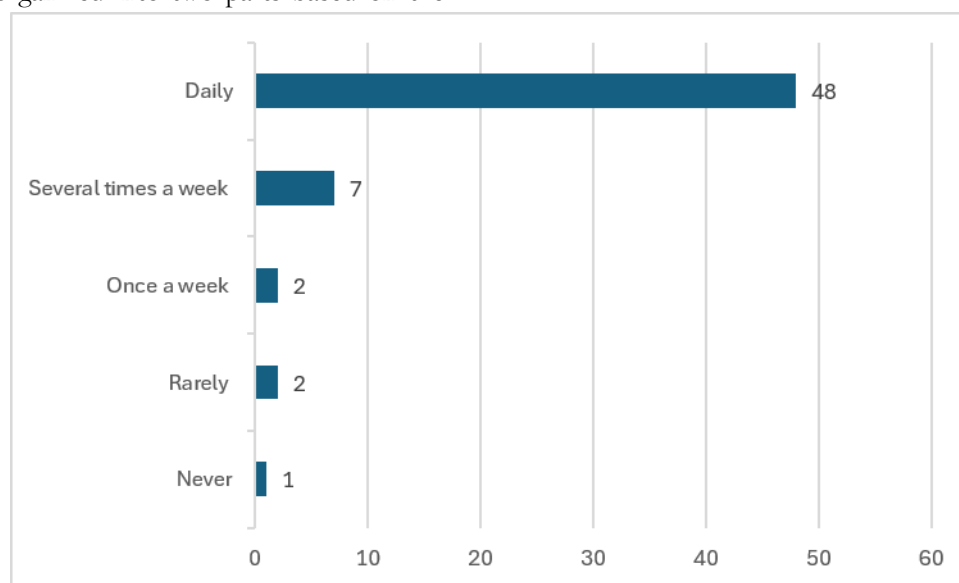


Figure 1. Frequency of Using Social Media Reels Among Participants

Table 1 offers the number of respondents' selections of social media Reels content

categories. In this question, participants were asked to select multiple answers. Overall, food /

cooking and travel ($n = 57$ each) were the most selected categories, followed by entertainment / comedy ($n = 53$). sports / fitness ($n = 46$), Lifestyle / fashion / beauty ($n = 40$), and News / social issues ($n = 40$) fall under the moderate rates of selection. Regarding lower selection levels, participants chose language-learning/English tips ($n = 36$), gaming ($n = 35$), and educational content ($n = 31$). Likewise,

Public speaking/communication skills were the lowest-rated selection ($n = 21$). Minimal participants offered additional categories in the “other” response option ($n = 1$) for each subcategory: art & drawing, watch all, Movies (on vacation), cars, and Technology-related videos.

Table 1: Types of Instagram Reels Watched by Participants

Category	Number of participants
Entertainment / comedy	53
Music / dance	33
Educational content	31
Language learning / English tips	36
Public speaking / communication skills	21
Lifestyle / fashion / beauty	40
Food / cooking	57
Travel	57
Sports / fitness	46
Gaming	35
Motivational / self-development	27
News / social issues	40
Other: Art & drawing	1
Other: Watch all	1
Other: Movies (on vacation)	1
Other: Cars	1
Other: Technology-related videos	1

Table 2 presents the frequency with which participants reported that Instagram Reels is a useful informal platform for supporting various English language skills, as reflected in Part Two of the questionnaire. Frequency counts show that the majority of respondents selected "Agree" or "Strongly Agree," indicating that Omani EFL students view social media Reels as a useful tool for English language learning.

Respondents reported high levels of vocabulary acquisition (item 3.2; $M = 4.01$, $SD = 0.989$), with 80.21% strongly agreeing or agreeing that social media Reels help them learn new English vocabulary. Similarly, 71 respondents (item 3.3; $M = 3.81$, $SD = 0.886$) strongly agreed or agreed that social media Reels help them understand word meanings from the context. Regarding pronunciation, 64 respondents (item 3.4; $M =$

3.74, $SD = 0.976$) agreed that social media Reels improve their ability to recognize correct English pronunciation. Moreover, 68 participants (item 3.10; $M = 3.83$, $SD = 0.970$) reported that Instagram Reels helps them understand different speaking styles and accents. The results further revealed that social media Reels are a beneficial platform for developing communication-related Participants' speaking development is another positive effect of using social media Reels as an informal learning platform. Participants' responses range from strongly agree to moderate perceptions. More than half of the respondents (56) reported that the Reels help them develop their English fluency (item 3.5; $M = 3.52$, $SD = 0.917$); on the other hand, 60 of them agreed that watching Reels improves their confidence while communicating in English (item 3.8; $M = 3.57$, $SD = 1.023$). Similarly, 54 of the respondents (item 3.9; $M = 3.58$, $SD = 0.937$) believe that social media Reels help them express their ideas more clearly in English. Despite the positive responses, there is a relatively higher proportion

skills. Approximately 62 respondents (item 3.6; $M = 3.63$, $SD = 0.921$) reported that Instagram Reels exposes them to real-life English conversations and helps them learn useful expressions for daily communication.

of neutral responses on these items, suggesting that Omani EFL learners might perceive more benefits in receptive skills such as pronunciation, listening, and vocabulary than in productive skills such as speaking and self-expression.

In addition, 57 of the participants (item 3.11; $M = 3.60$, $SD = 0.934$) reported that social media Reels encourage them to participate more in English discussions. Likewise, 72 of the respondents (item 3.1; $M = 3.82$, $SD = 0.918$) believe that Instagram Reels help them improve their English communication skills.

Table 2: Social Media Reels effectiveness in developing EFL students' communication skill

Item	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mean	SD
3.1 Instagram Reels help me improve my English communication skills.	18 (18.75%)	54 (56.25%)	17 (17.71)	3 (3.13%)	4 (4.07%)	3.82	.918
3.2 Instagram Reels help me learn new English vocabulary	32 (33.33%)	45 (46.88%)	10 (10.42%)	6 (6.25%)	3 (3.13%)	4.01	.989
3.3 Reels help me understand the meaning of words through context	17 (17.71%)	54 (56.25%)	18 (18.75%)	4 (4.17%)	3 (3.13%)	3.81	.886
3.4 Reels improve my ability to recognize correct English pronunciation	20 (20.83%)	44 (45.83%)	22 (22.92%)	7 (7.29%)	3 (3.13%)	3.74	.976
3.5 Reels improve my English fluency	9 (9.38%)	47 (48.96%)	29 (30.21%)	7 (7.29%)	4 (4.17%)	3.52	.917

3.6 Reels expose me to real-life English conversations	12 (12.50%)	50 (52.08%)	23 (23.96%)	8 (8.33%)	3 (3.13%)	3.63	.921
3.7 Reels help me learn useful expressions for daily communication	12 (12.50%)	50 (52.08%)	23 (23.96%)	9 (9.38%)	2 (2.08%)	3.64	.896
3.8 Watching Reels improves my confidence in communicating in English	15 (15.63%)	45 (46.88%)	19 (19.79%)	14 (14.58%)	3 (3.13%)	3.57	1.023
3.9 Reels help me express my ideas more clearly in English	15 (15.63%)	39 (40.63%)	31 (32.29%)	9 (9.38%)	2 (2.08%)	3.58	.937
3.10 Reels help me understand different speaking styles and accents	24 (25.00%)	44 (45.83%)	18 (18.75%)	8 (8.33%)	2 (2.08%)	3.83	.970
3.11 Reels encourage me to participate more in English discussions	14 (14.58%)	43 (44.79%)	29 (30.21%)	7 (7.29%)	3 (3.13%)	3.60	.934

The final part of the questionnaire was about students' perceptions of social media Reels as an informal learning resource (Table 3). All mean scores were above the scale midpoint (3.00), ranging from 3.56 to 3.95. This suggests that Omani EFL learners perceived social media Reels as a beneficial resource for self-directed language learning and for enhancing their awareness of various socio-cultural and educational issues. "Instagram Reels help me learn English outside the classroom" (item 4.2; $M = 3.95$, $SD = 0.922$) was the highest-rated item, in which 73 participants (76.05%) either agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. Similarly, 69 students reported positive perceptions of vocabulary and expression acquisition through informal learning (item 4.6; $M = 3.78$, $SD = 0.920$). Likewise, 64 participants recognized social media Reels as a valuable resource for autonomous language-learning opportunities (item 4.8; $M = 3.76$, $SD = 0.949$). 63 of the respondents also indicated that (item 4.5; $M = 3.71$, $SD = 0.928$) Reels contribute to integrating English learning into their everyday routine.

Furthermore, 58 students indicated that exposure to Reels may stimulate their curiosity and encourage independent exploration of English content (item 4.7; $M = 3.68$, $SD = 0.888$). 60 students further reported that language learning occurs naturally when they engage with entertaining content (item 4.1; $M = 3.67$, $SD = 0.854$). In addition, 67 of the respondents (item 4.4; $M = 3.83$, $SD = 0.937$) reported that Instagram Reels makes English learning more enjoyable and less stressful. Finally, although the level of agreement was the lowest for "I watch English Reels voluntarily to improve my language skills" (item 4.3; $M = 3.56$, $SD = 0.892$), more than half of the participants (55) still agreed or strongly agreed. This indicates that many students intentionally engage with English-language Reels for educational purposes. On the other hand, the relatively high percentage of neutral responses (33.33%) suggests that not all learners view language development as their main motivation for watching Reels.

Table 3: Instagram Reels as an informal learning resource

Item	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mean	SD
4.1 I learn English informally while watching Instagram Reels	13 (13.54%)	47 (48.96%)	29 (30.21%)	5 (5.21%)	2 (2.08%)	3.67	.854
4.2 Instagram Reels help me learn English outside the classroom	27 (28.13%)	46 (47.92%)	16 (16.67%)	5 (5.21%)	2 (2.08%)	3.95	.922
4.3 I watch English Reels voluntarily to improve my language skills	11 (11.46%)	44 (45.83%)	32 (33.33%)	6 (6.25%)	3 (3.13%)	3.56	.892
4.4 Reels make English learning enjoyable and less stressful	23 (23.96%)	44 (45.83%)	21 (21.88%)	6 (6.25%)	2 (2.08%)	3.83	.937
4.5 Reels help me learn English as part of my daily routine	17 (17.71%)	46 (47.92%)	23 (23.96%)	8 (8.33%)	2 (2.08%)	3.71	.928
4.6 I learn new words and expressions from Reels without formal instruction	18 (18.75%)	51 (53.13%)	17 (17.71%)	8 (8.33%)	2 (2.08%)	3.78	.920
4.7 Reels encourage me to search for more information about topics I watch	16 (16.67%)	42 (43.75%)	31 (32.29%)	5 (5.21%)	2 (2.08%)	3.68	.888
4.8 Instagram Reels support my independent English learning	20 (20.83%)	44 (45.83%)	24 (25.00%)	5 (5.21%)	3 (3.13%)	3.76	.949

In summary, the current study's findings show that Omani EFL learners perceive social media Reels as a beneficial tool for English language learning, especially for vocabulary development, contextual understanding, pronunciation awareness, and exposure to authentic language use. The high percentages of agreement across the questionnaire items show that learners recognize the potential of such an educational approach to short-form social media content,

regardless of its primary function, which is entertainment.

Findings of Qualitative Data Analysis

This section reports the findings derived from the qualitative analysis of the interview data. Using thematic analysis, participants' responses were coded and categorized to identify recurring patterns and themes. The resulting themes provide a deeper understanding of students' perceptions of how social media reels enhance

their communication skills and awareness. The findings are presented thematically and supported by direct quotations from the participants.

Communication Skills Development

The qualitative analysis indicated that generally the participants were in favour of social media reels “because the videos are short, entertaining, and easy to understand” (Participant 3). Participants also reported that frequent exposure to them contributes positively to enhancing their communication skills. Their focus was on four components of the communication skills, vocabulary, pronunciation, listening comprehension, and speaking confidence. For qualitative purposes, these components are categorized in terms of sub-themes. Below, are certain excerpts picked up from the raw data to be used as illustrative examples.

Excerpt 1: I think all of us will feel more comfortable and confident with speaking English now, because the reels make learning more enjoyable and less stressful. (Participant 1)

Vocabulary building is the most prominent sub-theme captured the attention of the researchers since it had been frequently reported by the participants. They reported that social media reels help them learn new words and idioms “in a simple and practical way that can be that are authentically used in real life situations (Participant 4). Furthermore, Participant 1 said that hearing words repeatedly in different contexts made them easier to remember and use in daily conversations. Participant 3 said “*English Reels helped me learn new vocabulary and the pronunciation of words. This was very important because I have a cousin who doesn't speak Arabic, and the Reels helped me communicate with my cousin.*” (Participant 3). Another participant said that “These responses suggest that Instagram Reels provide learners with authentic opportunities to expand their lexical knowledge in meaningful contexts.

Listening comprehension is another sub-theme that was considered a main benefit of social media. The participants reported that overall “overall, it is difficult for us to understand from native speakers because they speak too fast and

use slang language” (Participant 3). However, others indicated that regular exposure to a variety of authentic communication contexts, would help them understand the situations more effectively. One participant said, “Now I can understand English better and I feel more confident when I speak,” while another participant noted that understanding spoken English had become easier than before after regularly watching English reels. These findings indicate that social media Reels may provide valuable listening practice through continuous exposure to authentic spoken language.

Pronunciation is the third important sub-theme that was highly focused on by the participants reflecting their accent awareness or English varieties. Most of them reported that exposure to social media reels helped them understand different pronunciation patterns and their understanding of British and American accents. This finding suggests that social media reels can serve as accessible and effective platforms for improving EFL learners’ pronunciation. The following excerpt clearly illustrates the role of Instagram Reels in enhancing pronunciation, speaking skills, and accent comprehension

Excerpt 2: Listening to native speakers from different countries on Instagram Reels helps me understand different accents. When I repeat what they say, I improve both my pronunciation and speaking.” (Participant 2)

Speaking confidence is perhaps the most interesting finding since it is directly related to the focus of this study and the statement of the problem. Most of the participants reported that regular exposure to real and authentic reels would encourage them to use English inside and outside classroom, and also helped them overcome their anxiety while speaking English. One participant stated that watching English reels helped me feel “more comfortable and confident speaking English,” while another explained that they had become more confident interacting with classmates and other English speakers. These findings indicate that social reels provide meaningful language input that is important for students’ communication in English.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that social reels support multiple aspects of communication skills development. Through exposure to authentic language, participants reported improvements in vocabulary knowledge, listening comprehension, pronunciation, accent awareness, and speaking confidence, highlighting the potential of social media reels as an informal language-learning resource.

Awareness Development

The second main theme, Awareness Development, directly corresponds to the second objective of this study. It is worth noting that the qualitative data showed participants repeatedly mentioned terms related to awareness, including social issues, cultural issues, lifestyles, global perspectives, traditions, and health. Overall, participants confirmed that social media Reels present diverse scenarios and content, reflecting a range of perspectives. They also appreciated the free access to a wide range of information from diverse sources worldwide, which contributed to a broader understanding of various topics and cultures.

Excerpt 3: Social media reels helped learn about mental health, environmental problems, cultural traditions, political topics, current events. (Participant 4)

Cultural awareness is one of the prominent sub-themes in the awareness category. The participants reported that social media reels help them learn about lifestyles, traditions, customs, and beliefs from different countries. This exposure, in turn, helps them expand their cultural background and gain insights about different cultures. For example, one participant stated, “Social media allows me to see different lifestyles, cultures and ways of thinking from people around the world.” Another participant explained that reels helped them learn about different cultures because people share their daily lives, traditions, and experiences online. Similarly, participants mentioned learning about Korean, American, Iraqi, Palestinian, Syrian, and other cultures through social media content.

Educational awareness emerged as the second prominent sub-theme among participants. Several participants noted that social media reels

contributed to their educational development by providing access to content from educational creators. For example, one participant reported acquiring knowledge about self-development and strategies to improve self-esteem, while others described obtaining information related to academic learning and personal growth. These findings suggest that Reels serve as an informal educational resource that facilitates lifelong learning outside formal classroom environments.

Social and global awareness emerged as the third significant sub-theme, with several participants indicating a willingness to learn about diverse global issues, including environmental problems, mental health, political events, current affairs, and humanitarian concerns through reels. Some students mentioned learning about global news and ongoing conflicts, while others reported increased awareness of the social challenges individuals face across various regions.

One participant noted that reels exposed them to “mental health, environmental problems, cultural traditions, and current events.” Another participant explained that viewing content from different individuals helped them understand that people experience problems and challenges differently, which broadened their perspectives on social issues. These findings suggest that social media reels foster global awareness by providing learners with immediate access to information and perspectives from around the world.

Understanding different perspectives emerged as a significant sub-theme, reflecting participants’ recognition of the importance of considering multiple viewpoints. Students indicated that viewing content produced by individuals from diverse backgrounds encouraged them to consider alternative opinions and approaches to thinking. For example, one participant stated that reels facilitated understanding of “different opinions and ideas,” while another explained that exposure to experiences shared by various individuals altered their perception of certain issues. Participants further noted that comments associated with reels frequently introduced them to d, enrichments, thereby enriching their understanding of contemporary topics. The

following excerpt illustrates how Instagram reels contribute to understanding different perspectives:

Excerpt 4: Instagram Reels expose me to different perspectives and educate me about cultures around the world. By reading the comments and seeing people share different opinions, I can learn from their perspectives." (Participant 4)

Overall, the findings indicate that Instagram Reels contribute significantly to awareness development by enhancing students' cultural understanding, educational knowledge, social awareness, and appreciation of diverse perspectives. Through continuous exposure to authentic and globally connected content, participants reported becoming more informed about the world around them and more open to different viewpoints.

Challenges and Limitations

While participants generally reported positive perceptions of social media Reels as a tool for English language learning, the qualitative data revealed several challenges and limitations. The primary issues identified relate to language comprehension difficulties and the inherently distracting features of social media platforms.

Fast Speech and Difficult Vocabulary- One of the most frequently reported challenges was the speed at which speakers communicated in some reels. Participants indicated that native speakers often spoke too quickly, making it difficult to understand the content. As a result, some learners reported skipping videos when they were unable to follow the speaker's message.

In addition, several participants reported encountering unfamiliar vocabulary, slang, and idiomatic expressions that hindered comprehension. One participant explained that some creators use difficult words that are hard to understand and remember. These findings suggest that although authentic content can support language development, excessive linguistic complexity may create barriers for some learners, particularly those with lower levels of English proficiency.

Accent-Related Difficulties – Participants reported challenges in understanding various English accents. Although exposure to diverse accents was generally considered beneficial for language acquisition, certain accents were difficult to comprehend, particularly when accompanied by rapid speech. This sometimes-hindered students' comprehension of the material and constrained their overall learning experience.

Distraction and Excessive Use- A prominent concern identified was the distracting nature of social media platforms. Participants recognized that while reels may offer educational benefits, they can also divert attention from learning objectives. One participant observed that students often spend considerable time scrolling through entertaining content instead of engaging with educational materials. This finding underscores a limitation of social media as a learning resource, since educational content is frequently embedded within an environment primarily designed for entertainment and sustained user engagement.

Avoidance of Challenging Content- Several participants reported a tendency to skip reels that were difficult to comprehend. When encountering unfamiliar vocabulary, rapid speech, or complex explanations, learners frequently proceeded to another video rather than attempting to process the material. Although this behavior may reduce immediate frustration, it may also restrict opportunities for language development and deeper learning.

Overall, the findings indicate that although social media Reels provide notable educational benefits, learners may face challenges related to language complexity, accent variation, and platform-specific distractions. These limitations should be considered when integrating social media into educational contexts.

Discussion of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

This section is concerned with discussing the findings obtained from both quantitative and qualitative analysis in association with the three objectives of the study.

According to Objective One, which examines the impact of social media Reels on EFL students' communication skills, both quantitative and qualitative findings highlight the role of Reels in supporting various aspects of English language communication. The most recognized benefit of Reels was vocabulary building, followed by understanding word meanings in real contexts, and then pronunciation and accent. This finding implies that, unlike a traditional classroom, social media Reels can expose students to authentic speech and situations across a wide variety of real-life contexts. Such exposure enables learners to become familiar with natural pronunciation patterns, connected speech, intonation, and accent variation, as well as other communication-related skills such as argument, self-confidence, conversational routines, and pragmatic language use.

Theoretically, this finding aligns with Mayer's (2009) Multimedia theory, which posits that learning is enhanced when images, voices, and scenes are used simultaneously. The finding also aligns with the Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1999), which posits that learning occurs through observing others' behavior and interactions. Accordingly, the finding implies that social media Reels must be considered as effective tools in TESOL contexts. By watching Instagram Reels, for example, students are exposed to authentic conversations and real-life situations, naturally leading them to imitate vocabulary, pronunciation, and communicative features. This finding also aligns with previous studies in the TESOL context (Al-Khalidi, 2021b; Al-Khalidi et al., 2022; Mayer, 2024; Wang et al., 2025; Cromley & Chen, 2025) that highlight the considerable role of multimedia materials in supporting learners' communication skills.

Objective Two examines the impact of social media Reels on enhancing EFL students' awareness of educational, cultural, and real-world topics. Qualitative findings indicate broad participant agreement regarding the value of Reels. Thematic analysis identified educational awareness, social and cultural awareness, and global issues as key areas in which participants perceive Reels as a valuable educational resource

extending beyond entertainment. Participants frequently reported acquiring knowledge of Korean, American, Iraqi, Palestinian, and Syrian cultures, among others, through casual engagement with Reels. Recent literature indicates that social media contributes to the development of students' cultural awareness and cross-cultural communication (Pardede, 2020; Mahmood et al., 2024; Fan et al., 2025). Mekheimer (2025) also notes that participation in digital learning communities enhances learners' understanding of culture and identity by facilitating interaction with diverse perspectives. Additionally, Zhou et al. (2024) highlight the significant role of digital technologies in fostering intercultural competence and awareness, both of which are essential for English language learning.

Educational awareness emerged as an important finding, showing a different perspective. Most participants reported that features such as self-esteem, study strategies, and educational creators can be derived from engaging in informal activities with fewer barriers. This finding aligns with the concept of connected learning, which learning takes place through contextual contexts and personal interests more than the formal curriculum which is more structured and academic.

Social and global awareness appeared as a key sub-theme when participants stated that Instagram Reels may potentially expose them to a wide array of global and contemporary issues, such as political events, environmental issues, mental health, humanitarian concerns, and cultural traditions. Participants also reported that this exposure helps them understand all previous issues. Such exposure also motivates them to understand and value different perspectives of individuals from different societies and cultures. This finding aligns with previous studies highlighting the role of digital tools and materials in enhancing learners' communication skills and critical thinking (Prykhodko et al., 2019; Aljarf, 2022; Abdullateef, 2021).

Objective Three explores students' perceptions of using Reels on social media as an informal learning resource to boost their communication

skills and raise their intellectual awareness. The findings from both quantitative and qualitative data indicated students' agreement with the proposal to integrate social media Reels in higher education. Participants highly perceive the educational value of social media reels, which serve as a complementary resource alongside classroom learning. This finding also supports the increasing recognition of informal learning integration as an essential complement to formal education, particularly in EFL digital contexts where learning occurs naturally through everyday interactions with online content (Al-Khalidi & Khouni, 2021). Al-Khalidi (2021b) highlighted the importance of integrating social media in the EFL context, reporting that:

Within the field of TESOL, in addition to the characteristics of the net generation and digital technology innovation, language learning itself has become increasingly demanding, requiring learners to engage in frequent practice to achieve language proficiency. (p. 106)

Furthermore, this finding indicates that social media Reels support flipped learning, emphasizing the adaptation of digital tools and technologies to foster student-centered learning (Weimer, 2013; Lee & Brown, 2015; Ambrose, 2025). Integrating social media Reels in higher education as an informal resource also aligns with Al-Khalidi's (2020) previous study on flipped

learning, which recommends digital learning to improve students' communication skills and increase motivation and engagement. Furthermore, learner autonomy, or self-directed learning, is promoted by providing students with opportunities to explore a variety of topics and English content aligned with their personal interests (Al-Khalidi, 2020; Rahmasari, 2025; Noori, 2025).

Even with all the benefits of bringing social media Reels into higher education, the qualitative findings pointed to a number of challenges that could limit how effective they really are as an informal learning tool. Participants noted that the fast speech of native speakers on social media Reels is somehow difficult for them to follow and interpret. Also, the use of slang terms, idioms, unfamiliar vocabulary, and the like are challenging for them, particularly for learners with lower English proficiency. Participants also reported that the entertaining nature of Reels may cause distraction and excessive scrolling, and this may negatively affect their ability to maintain focused learning. These findings imply that, while Instagram Reels provide valuable opportunities for authentic language exposure and informal learning, their educational effectiveness may depend on learners' language proficiency, self-regulation skills, and the careful selection of appropriate content. Figure 2 below outlines the main themes emerging from Students' Perceptions of social media exposure

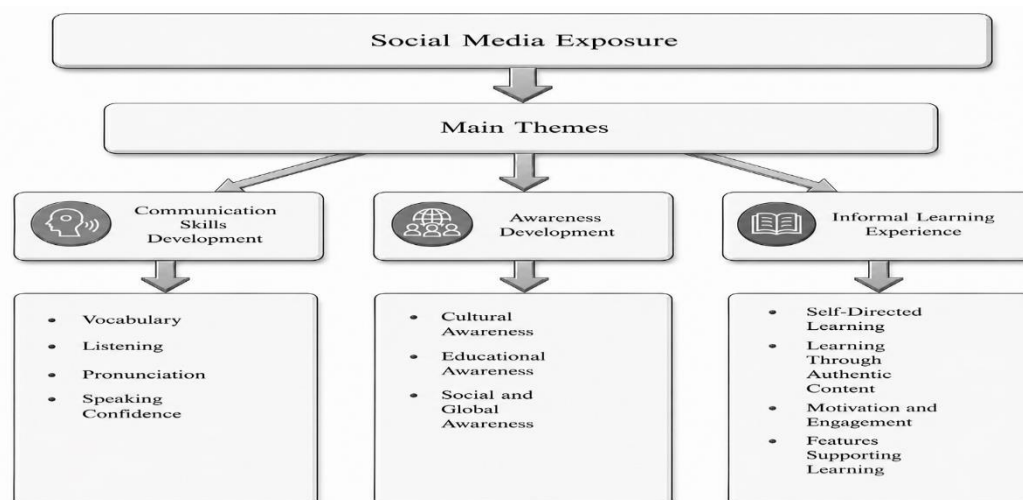


Figure 2: Main Themes Emerging from Students' Perceptions of Social Media Exposure

Conclusion

This study investigated three key aspects of English language learning in higher education: communication skills, awareness, and the integration of social media Reels into formal education. To address these objectives, both secondary and primary data sources were utilized. Secondary sources included relevant theories and prior research, while primary data were collected through a mixed-methods approach that combined quantitative and qualitative data from a representative sample of EFL students in higher education.

The findings showed a good deal of consistency between the theoretical literature and the empirical evidence when it came to the educational value of using social media Reels alongside classroom instruction. Both quantitative and qualitative data revealed participants' positive perceptions of social media reels as an effective resource of promoting their communication skills, cultural awareness, and as an effective mode of learning along with the formal curriculum. Nevertheless, certain limitations were identified such as pronunciation,

unfamiliar words and idioms, and distractions that lead to difficulty in retaining new vocabulary. These results reveal that, while social media Reels possess significant educational potential, their effective integration into formal education necessitates careful planning and structured guidance to optimize learning outcomes and minimize distractions.

This study has several limitations, including a relatively small sample size and a limited scope regarding the dimensions of communication skills and awareness. Future research should expand these dimensions and investigate the effectiveness of social media Reels across diverse educational contexts and learner populations.

Conflict of interest statement

The authors have no potential conflict of interest.

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