

The Pressure to Use Perfect English on Social Media: A Mixed-Method Study Among Gen Z in Vietnam

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Abstract: *The evolution of social media and the internet has transformed our daily lives and caused a major shift in the way we think about learning, especially in the case of informal foreign language learning. Alongside its many benefits, there are also notable drawbacks. Specifically, foreign language anxiety and evaluative stress have moved from traditional classroom settings to online environments. The current research investigates perceived peer pressure, foreign language anxiety, and language self-censorship, and how these factors interact among Vietnamese Generation Z EFL learners. An explanatory sequential mixed-methods approach was used. Quantitative data from 100 non-English major undergraduates were collected first, followed by semi-structured qualitative interviews with 8 purposively selected participants. The quantitative results revealed that perceived peer pressure is relatively high and strongly correlates with both anxiety (≈ 0.719) and self-censorship behaviors (≈ 0.735). Qualitative findings illustrated an online culture of anonymous “grammar police” and linguistic shaming, which led to self-censorship (e.g., deletions, edits) and defensive behaviors of spatial segregation. This research demonstrates the complex role of social media in language learning and highlights the great need for safe social media spaces where learners can use and practice foreign languages without fear.*

Keywords: *Foreign language anxiety, language self-censorship, perceived public pressure, social media, grammar police, mixed method.*

1. Introduction

The latest developments in technology have completely altered the practice of teaching and learning. They have created new ways of reaching learning materials and new learning communities beyond the walls of the classroom. Social media, in this context, represents an important value-added informal learning environment for teaching and learning foreign languages. It offers learners opportunities to experience authentic English, see how English is used in everyday situations, and participate in learning by posting, commenting, and engaging with other learners (Dashti & Abdulsalam, 2015; Zhao et al., 2022). Social media platforms like Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube enable learners to engage in both the reception and production of English content, and numerous studies have shown that social media used as an instructional material has a positive impact on learners' vocabulary, receptive language skills, and attitudes towards learning English (Manca, 2025; Anjarwati & Sa'adah, 2023; Tri et al., 2023). The social media environment is highly social, informal, and public. It is a space where language is used and criticism is always a possibility (He, 2024; Luo & Wang, 2026). Users can have their grammar, pronunciation, and word choice scrutinised by a dispassionate audience that can include complete strangers.

The studies conducted regarding grammatical errors and language ideologies online have documented that nonstandard forms are problematized, and ‘grammar policing’ or ‘English shaming’ have become commonplace in instances where users ridicule or criticise the way someone uses English, even when the targets are relatively skilled English users in the case of a well-known person (Bacalla et al., 2025; Sihotang et al., 2021; Abeysena, 2020; Buletin AITuras, 2025). These actions are nested in a wider culture of linguistic shaming, which involves shaming someone for not using the language as a native speaker despite the fact that the language may still be considered ‘correct’.

The target audience of learning English as a foreign language who are young may be repeatedly exposed to instances of public shaming which may influence the way they assess their English language proficiency and their feelings about using the English language on the Internet safely.

Previous studies on foreign language anxiety have shown that significant amounts of learners are sensitive to others' evaluations (Aydın, 2008; Tania et al., 2025). For example, in Vietnamese and other Asian contexts, it has been shown that students may be very self-conscious of others' evaluations and may be reluctant to speak or write in English (Ho Dinh Phuong Khanh & Truong Thi Nhu Ngoc, 2022; Phuc, 2024). Evidence seems to show that with the widespread use of social media and the perceived risk of social evaluations, these tendencies are exacerbated (He, 2024; Luo & Wang, 2026).

Research has shown that online and technology-based FLA is linked to a lack of self-confidence, unwillingness to communicate, and avoidance (He, 2024; Lin et al., 2025). Furthermore, post deletion, excessive post editing, and message simplification to avoid social criticism have been documented in social media studies (Malinen et al., 2020; Calhoun & Fawcett, 2023). Combined, these studies show that social media poses a risk of evoking social evaluation, foreign language anxiety, and self-censorship among active users from Generation Z.

In this context, the current research examines the perspective of Generation Z on social media as a formative evaluative space on the use of English. This study attempts to accomplish the following objectives: (1) understand the level of perceived social pressure that Gen Z feels when using English on social media and when witnessing others being critiqued for English errors, (2) assess the relationship of perceived pressure to their online foreign language anxiety, and (3) understand the extent of limiting English posts, editing, message simplification, or language switching, and self-censorship behaviors. The framework comprises self-censorship, foreign language anxiety, and the phenomenon of negative evaluation. The author posits that the phenomenon of perceived public pressure on social media can amplify foreign language anxiety, which may subsequently elicit the phenomenon of avoidance and self-censorship in the use of English in social media (Aydın, 2008; He, 2024; Luo & Wang, 2026; Malinen et al., 2020; Calhoun & Fawcett, 2023).

Guided by this purpose, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do Gen Z users perceive social pressure when they use English on social media and when they witness others being criticised for English mistakes online?
2. How is perceived social pressure on social media related to Gen Z's foreign language anxiety when using English in online settings?
3. How is foreign language anxiety related to Gen Z's avoidance or self-censorship behaviours (e.g., limiting English posts, excessive editing, simplifying messages, switching to the first language) when they use English on social media?

2. Literature review

2.1. Perceived Public Pressure on Social Media

Classroom-centered studies indicate that students may feel pressure when using English because the peer and teacher audience may listen, monitor and grade, or correct them. Class participants tend to feel the highest levels of anxiety when they have to talk and report anxiety when facing an oral exam, delivering a presentation, or **being** judged negatively (Aydın, 2008; Ho Dinh Phuong Khanh & Truong Thi Nhu Ngoc, 2022; Phuc, 2024). In Vietnam, students feel disappointed because they think that they have an English proficiency that is not good enough, and even less than the expected standards of the audience (Ho Dinh Phuong Khanh & Truong Thi Nhu Ngoc, 2022).

Digital advancements have now shifted the learner's pressure points beyond the walls of the classroom. Users of social networking sites (SNSs) have the opportunity to engage with the English language in a less formal manner and to develop an understanding of the real-world applications of the language (Dashti & Abdulsalam, 2015; Tri et al., 2023). However, the social networking sites (SNSs) have the characteristics of being public, permanent, and interactive, and that may cause users to employ the English language in a more defensive manner (He, 2024; Luo & Wang, 2026; Zeng & Zhu, 2021). Users may engage in English communication to post, comment, or create an English online identity, and they may feel the need to perform in front of an unknown audience, who can give feedback to the posts in as little as a few seconds.

According to Zeng and Zhu (2021), social networking sites (SNSs) with mentioned characteristics such as visibility, traceability, and storage of content create an awareness of judgment. Thus, social media acts as an evaluative public space, where the users' language and choice of words can be subjected to public scrutiny, criticism, and comparison.

This phenomenon has been studied in both English Shaming and Language Shaming; Abeysena (2020) illustrates that those who experience linguistic shaming exhibit negative feelings and possess an anxiety and inferiority complex associated with being judged for their English language usage.

The study of English shaming in TikTok reveals that users with a positive attitude towards English tend to mock others who are viewed as "not good enough" and this ultimately creates a hostile environment (Buletin AITuras, 2025). Regarding Vietnam, Nguyen (2019) demonstrates that in the case of YouTube, the members of online communities who are critical users spot English language errors as a form of critique against the others.

This illustrates a widening of the anxiety that was previously directed primarily towards teachers and classmates to potentially anyone, as social media provides less predictable and more numerous audiences. The potential for public criticism about the usage of English on social media places a high social risk on those who wish to communicate in English. In this light, perceived public pressure (PPP) will be treated as a clear construct of this study. It involves the learners' feelings that they are under surveillance and judgment while using the English language on the web (He, 2024; Nguyen, 2019; Zeng & Zhu, 2021).

2.2. Foreign Language Anxiety

The focus of the current research is on Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA). Horwitz et al. (1986) describe this type of anxiety as situationally bound; that is, learners are anxious about their potential errors, are **worried** (*sua từ worries*) about their inability to perform to their utmost, and are anxious about the possibility of receiving negative feedback about their language skills. FLA is distinct from the more generic concept of anxiety in that the focus is on the apprehension associated with speaking a second (or foreign) language. FLA may include apprehension, tension, nervousness, and self-esteem deficiency as well as a fear of ridicule and a desire to avoid speaking (Horwitz et al., 1986; Ho Dinh Phuong Khanh & Truong Thi Nhu Ngoc, 2022; Attia & Algazo, 2025). Numerous scholars have documented the effect of FLA on learners' fluency, willingness to speak in class, and the average frequency of verbal communication of the learners (Lin et al., 2025; Tania et al., 2025). Aydın (2008) notes that FLA is a significant issue for EFL learners and negative evaluation apprehension is the most significant factor.

Recent research identifies fear of being judged as an obstacle to adequate language use in diverse situations (Luo & Wang, 2026; Tania et al., 2025). In Vietnam, Ho Dinh Phuong Khanh and Truong Thi Nhu Ngoc (2022) studied non-English major students and found a notable rate of anxiety, particularly concerning speaking in public. Communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of being evaluated negatively combine to create a greater degree of risk aversion in using the English language.

Recent research shows that the anxiety associated with foreign language use persists, even in online situations. He (2024) discovered that students experienced a great deal of anxiety when social media English content writing was involved, and this anxiety level was even greater when the content was required to be published.

The effect of social media on language use fear is twofold. It can be a tool for learning and motivating users to learn. On the other hand, social media can cause students' perfectionism and related anxiety, for they constantly need to evaluate and self-correct their English. Learning to use a foreign language eloquently, particularly English, as a second language adds to the emotional challenge of communication. For Gen Z, English communication on social media is a utilitarian tool and a performance stage. (Aydın, 2008; He, 2024; Luo & Wang, 2026).

2.3. Fear of Negative Evaluation in Online Contexts

Fear of Negative Evaluation (FNE) is the fear of receiving negative feedback or criticism from others, which may include the perception of someone being incompetent or "not good enough" (Aydın, 2008). FNE is crucial in second language acquisition (SLA) as participants in an SLA audience perceive engagement as watching, comparing, and correcting. Picture the situation where a second language learner is about to make an utterance. At this point, this learner faces a situation where the learner fears the audience making a negative judgment that is below expectations. Most people think that this includes the fear of making a grammatical error or not uttering the sentence at all, but in reality, it includes the fear of social ridicule and damage to the learner's social standing (Aydın, 2008; Tania, et al., 2025).

Multiple studies have shown that FNE is a key component of FLA. For example, Aydın (2008) explained FNE in relation to the anxiety of language learners. In Aydın's framework, FNE is an almost exclusive cause of Language Anxiety. Then, studies in other locations, especially in Vietnam, reported learners feeling very FNE, and this high sensitivity was a described cause of the reluctance to speak the target foreign language (Ho Dinh Phuong Khanh & Truong Thi Nhu Ngoc, 2022; Phuc, 2024).

FNE is also a key factor with regard to online communication. WeChat users are fearful of FNE and therefore do not express their opinions fully. Due to the visibility and permanence of the information, FNE is justified. FNE is the social phenomenon that captures the essence of social judgment and the social anxiety inherent in using English.

The relevance of FNE in this research study is clear, as participants likely feel no shame or fear about their use of English in the given context. The study showed participants the extreme verbal attacks on some English speakers. Such incidents may show an observer the risk of being attacked, and even the target. In this context, the phenomenon of FNE is well described by Adeyemi (2025), where risk and risk-related adaptive behavioral changes are observed, and targets actively adjust their behavior to avoid being attacked. This explains FNE as the strongest social media and public behavior correlating to the FLA dilemma.

2.4. Self-Censorship of Language and Situated Avoidance

The phenomenon of extreme FNE can be the driver of an emotional reaction coupled with behavioral changes and, eventually, emotional reactions and behavioral changes. The term "self-censorship" is used to describe individuals' decisions to restrict, change, or completely forego, certain, expressive behaviours in order to mitigate social backlash (Adeyemi, 2025). This can include things like deleting a social media post or using an overly edited version of an image. These behaviours can also include less self-disclosing or more low-risk deleting, truncating, or verbally substituting particular ideas (Feshbach, 2023; Zeng & Zhu, 2021). In a somewhat related manner, avoidance can also refer to individuals' decisions to withdraw or lessen their participation in activities perceived to be more risk' (Malinen et al., 2020).

Such behaviors have already been documented on social media. Malinen et al. (2020) mention users called "protective," who attempt to sidestep social media threads and posts to avert social disapproval and interpersonal disputes. Feshbach (2023) contends that social media and commenting norms lead to self-censorship, resulting in the removal or alteration of the posts. Calhoun and Fawcett (2023) note that TikTok users often try to avoid being called out or confronted by using coded or intentionally misspelled words. Regarding language learning, Lin et al. (2025) state that learners who fear negative evaluation the most communicate the least, and when the anxiety is very high, learners are virtually absent in the online class (Bárkányi & Brash, 2025).

From these analyses, it can be inferred that social media users are likely to avoid and practice self-censorship, especially when the use of English on social media is perceived as risky. In this study, self-censorship and avoidance are conceived as the negation or restriction of English posts, over-editing, the use of English that is less sophisticated than one is capable, and code-switching to Vietnamese. Therefore, it is imperative to analyze these behaviors to understand the extent of social media English usage among Generation Z, given the context of mental pressure.

2.5. Empirical links and research gap

The model maps the literature that is the gap empirically for each component of this study up to the conclusion. First, earlier works concerning Social Media, Language Shaming, and English Shaming, have determined the evaluative digital contexts and the social pressure for English use and the degree to which the focus is on mistakes or linguistic errors and the extent to which this is at the fingertips to comment (Abeyseena, 2020; Abeyseena, 2020; Buletin AITuras, 2025; Nguyen, 2019). Second, the works on FLA state that FNE is the predominant reason for anxiety in the offline and online classrooms (Aydın, 2008; Luo & Wang, 2026; Tania et al., 2025).

Third, evaluative fears have been shown to reduce online interaction, especially in critically sensitive situations, in the studies of self-disclosure, self-censorship, and self-avoidance (Adeyemi, 2025; Malinen et al., 2020; Zeng & Zhu, 2021). Nevertheless, some gaps remain.

Increasingly prevalent use of social media for communication and self-presentation in English among Gen Z conflicts with the majority of the existing research for FLA, which predominantly focuses on research in formal classrooms (He, 2024; Luo & Wang, 2026). Research exploring the psychological impact of being on the receiving end of public criticism for English inaccuracies remains virtually nonexistent (Adeyemi, 2025; Nguyen, 2019). While the phenomenon of self-censorship has been widely studied, in social and political contexts, the phenomenon of self-censorship in the posts made in English on social media, particularly among the youth, is a largely understudied area in the second language acquisition research (Adeyemi, 2025; Zeng & Zhu, 2021).

This study intends to develop a model in which the social media perception of the general public and social media public perception of the social media users is hypothesized to generate FLA which, in turn, leads to self-censorship and language avoidance, and in this case, the language is English, the focus being on the Vietnamese Gen Z population. This triadic model is the primary focus of the study and will largely shape the questions relating to the perceived social pressure and self-censorship to the use of English language in social media.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

This study adopted an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) that began with a quantitative phase and was followed by a qualitative phase to explain and deepen the quantitative findings. The study focused on perceived public pressure, foreign language anxiety, and self-censorship, which include patterns that are both observable and experiential. While the survey data provide a basis for theory and generalizations, they do not explain how the pressure is felt in daily communicative events online. Follow-up interviews were conducted with participants to help interpret the statistical data and the rest of the survey, and to provide context for the statistical findings.

3.2. Participants and Sampling

The study was conducted among undergraduate non-English major students in Hanoi, Vietnam. This target group was selected due to their active engagement with social media, while also learning the English language in an informal setting. They were thus deemed appropriate for investigating how online evaluative pressure may lead to English language anxiety and self-censorship.

A two-stage sampling method was used. In the quantitative component, a convenience sample was used to collect responses from an online questionnaire. This method yielded 100 valid responses. In the qualitative component, a purposive sample was used to select 8 participants for the follow-up interviews. Selection was based on response patterns that were captured in the survey, particularly those that exhibited profiles such as “Paralyzed by Pressure” and “Immune/Confident.” This technique permitted the qualitative component to focus on the majority of trends and the notable deviations in the data set.

3.3. Instruments

3.3.1. Quantitative survey

Using a Likert scale of 1 to 5 (1 = Strongly Disagree and 5 = Strongly Agree), the questionnaire items were either revised from previous works or designed specifically for this study to suit the context of the use of the English language on social media. The instrument evaluated three constructs.

- Five items were used to measure Perceived Public Pressure (PPP). These items concentrated on participants' feelings of being viewed, judged, or potentially corrected when using English in online settings. This construct captures language learners' perception of their English being critiqued by a broad audience including online friends, acquaintances, and strangers.
- Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) was assessed using 6 items taken from a previous FLA scale and adapted to fit the context of public digital interaction.
- Language Self-Censorship (LSC) was assessed using 6 items designed based on previous research on online avoidance behavior. These behaviors included over-editing, deleting drafts, simplifying messages, and reverting to the first language.

In the FLA and LSC sections, to minimize the effects of acquiescence bias, some items were negatively framed, and during the coding process, they were reverse-coded. Prior to the primary survey, the first draft of the instrument was piloted with 20 students to enhance the clarity of the instrument and eliminate vague or ambiguous wording. Using Cronbach's alpha, we calculated the internal consistency for the three subscales. The results demonstrated acceptable to good reliability for early-stage testing (PPP = 0.67, FLA = 0.77, LSC = 0.83).

3.3.2. Qualitative Interviews

An interview guide was created to examine the survey results in greater detail. The interview questions were grouped into four themes: online ‘grammar police’ encounters, contrasts between classroom and online anxiety, evaluative anxiety triggers, and self-censorship in English.

3.4. Data Collection Procedures and Ethical Considerations

Data collection was conducted in two phases. The first phase involved the administration of the online questionnaire, which was shared in student networking groups. The participants were presented with a digital consent form detailing the voluntary nature of participation, the option to withdraw at any time, and the anonymity of their identities.

After data collection, responses were analyzed to eliminate surveys with any missing answer choices and to identify any straight-lining response bias. Based on the data, 102 total responses were confirmed as usable for analysis. In the next stage, eight participants were recruited for individual interview sessions. Each interview was conducted in Vietnamese to facilitate deeper recollections of their lived experiences and lasted about 30 to 45 minutes. With the participants' consent, the interviews were recorded, and transcripts were made as close to verbatim as possible.

3.5. Data Analysis and Integration

The quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS. First, descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were calculated to identify the general levels of PPP, FLA, and LSC. Second, Cronbach's alpha coefficients were computed to assess the internal consistency of the three subscales. Third, Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationships among the three variables. Because the study aimed to explore associations rather than make causal claims, correlation analysis was considered sufficient for the present stage of the research. A similar correlation-first strategy had also been discussed earlier as the most appropriate level of analysis for this study design.

In addition, an exploratory pattern-profiling approach was applied using a cutoff score of 3.5 to group participants into broad behavioural profiles. These profiles were used only as interpretive categories rather than as formal cluster classifications. This profile-based reading of the data was also consistent with the earlier way the study's quantitative results were framed, including groups such as "Immune/Confident" and "Paralyzed by Pressure."

The qualitative data were analysed through inductive content analysis. Interview transcripts were coded manually using open coding, and recurring patterns were then grouped into broader themes. This process made it possible to identify how participants understood and managed evaluative pressure in online English use.

Integration occurred at two points in the study. First, the survey results informed the selection of interview participants. Second, the qualitative findings were incorporated into the Discussion section to explain and extend the quantitative patterns. This form of integration is important in explanatory sequential mixed-methods studies because it shows not only that two datasets were collected, but also how they were connected analytically and interpretively.

4. Results

4.1. Quantitative results

4.1.1. Descriptive statistics

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for PPP, FLA, and LSC. Overall, PPP showed the highest mean ($M = 3.55$, $SD = 0.859$), followed by FLA ($M = 3.08$, $SD = 0.861$) and LSC ($M = 2.98$, $SD = 0.864$) on the 5-point scale, indicating relatively strong perceived pressure but only moderate anxiety and self-censorship. The observed ranges (PPP: 1.40–5.00; FLA: 1.17–4.33; LSC: 1.17–4.67) suggest substantial individual variability across all three constructs.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for main constructs (N = 100)

Construct	Symbol	Mean	Std. Deviation	Min	Max
Perceived Peer Pressure	PPP	3.55	0.859	1.40	5.00
Foreign Language Anxiety	FLA	3.08	0.861	1.17	4.33
Language Self-Censorship	LSC	2.98	0.864	1.17	4.67

4.1.2. Reliability Analysis (Cronbach's Alpha)

Cronbach's alpha coefficients indicated good internal consistency for FLA ($\alpha = 0.804$) and LSC ($\alpha = 0.803$), and acceptable-to-good reliability for PPP ($\alpha = 0.732$). These values support the use of all three scales as reliable composite measures in subsequent analyses.

Table 2. Reliability of the main scales

Scale	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha (α)	Internal Consistency
FLA (Foreign Language Anxiety)	6	0.804	Good
LSC (Language Self-Censorship)	6	0.803	Good
PPP (Perceived Peer Pressure)	5	0.732	Acceptable / Good

4.1.3. Pearson Correlation Matrix

As shown in Table 3, all three constructs were strongly and positively correlated. FLA correlated highly with LSC ($r = 0.735$) and PPP ($r = 0.719$), while PPP was also positively associated with LSC ($r = 0.601$). These results indicate that higher perceived peer pressure tends to co-occur with higher anxiety and stronger self-censorship in online English use.

Table 3. Pearson correlation matrix

	FLA (Anxiety)	LSC (Self-Censorship)	PPP (Pressure)
FLA (Anxiety)	1.000	0.735	0.719
LSC (Self-Censorship)	0.735	1.000	0.601
PPP (Pressure)	0.719	0.601	1.000

4.1.4. Pattern Analysis (Behavioral Profiling)

Using a cutoff of ≥ 3.5 to indicate high levels on each construct, participants were assigned to distinct behavioral profiles (Table 4). The largest profile was the “Immune/Confident” group (low PPP, low FLA, low LSC; $n = 36, 36\%$), followed by the “Paralyzed by Pressure” group (high on all three; $n = 23, 23\%$). Two further major profiles emerged: the “Anxious but Resilient” group (high PPP and FLA, low LSC; $n = 18, 18\%$) and the “Pressured but Unafraid” group (high PPP, low FLA and LSC; $n = 13, 13\%$), with the remaining 11 participants ($\sim 10\%$) falling into other minor combinations.

Table 4. The patterns of behavioral profiling

Behavioral Profile	PPP (Pressure)	FLA (Anxiety)	LSC (Self-Censorship)	Count (n)	Percentage (%)
The "Immune/Confident" Group	Low	Low	Low	36	36%
The "Paralyzed by Pressure" Group	High	High	High	23	23%
The "Anxious but Resilient" Group	High	High	Low	18	18%
The "Pressured but Unafraid" Group	High	Low	Low	13	13%
Other minor combinations	-	-	-	10	$\sim 10\%$

4.2. Qualitative results

Table 5. Main themes, codes, and illustrative quotes

Main Themes	Categories / Codes	Illustrative Quotes
Theme 1: The “Grammar Police” Phenomenon	Toxic digital environment; Fear of unsolicited correction; Face-saving culture	“Once you put something on social media, someone will definitely judge you...” (Participant 1)
Theme 2: Self-Censorship as a Defense Mechanism	Total avoidance; Language attrition via simplification; Cost–benefit analysis of posting	“Instead of simplifying to post, I choose not to post at all...” (Participant 3)
Theme 3: Spatial Segregation of Language Use	Platform-specific anxiety; Safe space seeking; Identity masking	“I choose to use Vietnamese on my main account and leave English for ‘safer’ spaces...” (Participant 5)
Theme 4: The Paralysis Effect	Demotivation; Loss of authentic expression; Toxic community impact	“The more I see, the less I want to appear using English in that space...” (Participant 8)

THEME 1: The “Grammar Police” Phenomenon and Linguistic Shaming

The first theme clarifies how students experience public performance pressure (PPP) on social media as a toxic evaluative space where English mistakes are publicly policed and shamed. Participants described a constant expectation of being judged, closely tied to a face-saving culture, and fear of unsolicited correction.

As one participant stated:

"Nhưng bây giờ tôi hạn chế đăng lại vì có thời gian một số bình luận của tôi bị người ta sửa lung hơi nhiều... bị người khác bình luận bắt lỗi thì hơi xấu hổ." ("But now I limit my posting because there was a time when my comments were corrected by others quite often... being picked on by others is a bit embarrassing.")

Or

"Bản chất của mạng xã hội là nơi người ta xem và đánh giá mà... Một khi bạn đã đưa cái gì đó lên mạng xã hội thì chắc chắn sẽ có người đánh giá bạn... nhưng tôi gặp khía cạnh tiêu cực nhiều hơn." ("The nature of social media is a place where people watch and judge... Once you put something on social media, someone will definitely judge you... but I encounter the negative aspect more.")

THEME 2: Self-Censorship as a Defense Mechanism

This theme explains students' experiences utilizing social media as an evaluative space where they are patrolled and shamed by social media users for making mistakes in English. Participants reported that social media users publicly shame and judge people, which may be attributed to the culture of face-saving, and the fear of having someone correct them.

"Minh có xu hướng đơn giản hóa điều muốn nói, dùng câu ngắn, từ quen để hạn chế lỗi. Điều này khiến mình cảm giác khó thể hiện hết suy nghĩ và sắc thái, nhưng ít ra nó giảm nguy cơ bị bắt lỗi." ("I tend to simplify what I want to say, using short sentences and familiar words to limit mistakes. This makes it hard to fully express my thoughts and nuances, but at least it reduces the risk of being caught making errors.")

Another was more radical:

"Trên mạng xã hội thì mình còn cực đoan hơn: thay vì đơn giản hóa để đăng, mình chọn không đăng luôn cho xong." ("On social media, I am even more extreme: instead of simplifying to post, I choose not to post at all just to be done with it.")

THEME 3: Spatial Segregation of Language Use

Instead of completely giving up English, students move it to more private and less risky environments. This behavior displays anxiety for the social media platform they are using, as well as an effort to manage their identity. English is used less frequently in social media accounts that are highly visible and used more in accounts that are anonymous or are less visible and are part of a supportive group. As one student explained:

"Minh chọn dùng tiếng Việt trên nick chính và để tiếng Anh ở những chỗ 'an toàn' hơn, hoặc không dùng luôn trên mạng xã hội." ("I choose to use Vietnamese on my main account and leave English for 'safer' spaces or not use it at all on social media.")

THEME 4: The Paralysis Effect and Lack of Authentic Expression

Finally, this theme captures the long-term paralysis caused by repeated exposure to a hostile evaluative climate: anxiety does not motivate better learning but erodes willingness to express oneself authentically in English. One participant observed:

"Tự kiểm duyệt và né tránh thì tăng lên rõ, nhất là từ khi thấy mạng xã hội ngày càng toxic với chuyện bắt lỗi tiếng Anh. Càng xem nhiều, mình càng ít muốn xuất hiện bằng tiếng Anh trên không gian đó." ("Self-censorship and avoidance have clearly increased, especially since seeing social media become increasingly toxic regarding English error-spotting. The more I see, the less I want to appear using English in that space.")

Another concluded:

"Rất thực tế, hiện tại mình thấy lợi ích không đủ bù cho phiền phức, nên mình vẫn chọn dùng tiếng Việt." ("Very practically, currently I feel the benefits are not enough to compensate for the trouble, so I still choose to use Vietnamese.")

4.3. Integration of quantitative and qualitative findings

The mixed-methods approach allows for an integrated analysis of the qualitative themes together with the PPP-FLA-LSC profiles. At the group level, PPP seemed as the most influential factor, being in a strong positive relationship with anxiety and self-censorship. The first theme that was constructed on grammar policing and shaming linguistics illustrates how this pressure is internalized and manifested in daily online interactions.

The "Paralyzed by Pressure" group (high PPP-FLA-LSC) fits well with Themes 1, 2, and 4. These students describe a toxic environment, expect correction, strongly self-censor, and feel blocked in expressing themselves. In contrast, the "Immune/Confident" group (low PPP-FLA-LSC) is reflected in accounts of learners who downplay online judgement or see errors as acceptable, which helps explain why some remain relatively unaffected.

The two mixed profiles are also clarified by the interviews. "Anxious but Resilient" students acknowledge high pressure and anxiety but use self-censorship selectively and stay active in valued spaces, such as fan communities. "Pressured but Unafraid" students report high PPP but low FLA and LSC and describe English as a tool that they move to "safer" spaces rather than abandoning it. Overall, triangulation shows that similar levels of perceived pressure can lead to different ways of acting online, and that survey patterns are more meaningful when interpreted together with learners' own stories about where and how they choose to use English.

5. Discussion

This study sought to understand the interaction among perceived public pressure (PPP), foreign language anxiety (FLA), and language self-censorship (LSC) among Vietnamese EFL learners when using the English language to construct their posts and comments on social media, and the ways in which these constructs are experienced and negotiated within the context of daily online communication. Quantitatively, PPP was the highest among the variables and strongly correlated with anxiety and self-censorship. Qualitatively, participants' experiences of a digitally vigilant, corrective, and exposé setting, where using English and its commentary are often evaluatively marked, invoked an emotionally and socially fraught digital environment in which anxiety is exacerbated. By reaffirming previous studies suggesting that an evaluatively negative environment instigates language anxiety (Aydm, 2008; Rafek et al., 2014; Esfandiari et al., 2013), this study shows that the fear extends further than the classroom to the seemingly endless, cloud-based, privileged, and evaluatively negative environments of contemporary social networks.

A more expansive context for these findings is the increasing prominence of social media as a space for the manifestations of anxieties surrounding communicative competence. What participants described was not only single instances of correction, but rather a communicative environment that captures the linguistic performance of others, repeatedly. Participants' references to public correction, and the embarrassment that comes with it, indicating that PPP, is influenced by factors beyond the interpersonal sensitivity of the instance. There is a hierarchy that is more far-reaching, where the norm of being correct is seen as valuable, and where deviance is more visible. This creates a web where language is associated with social legitimacy and value. In this way, the findings reflect

the English shaming TikTok phenomenon and the Vietnamese YouTube phenomenon, where the English-speaking norm is used as a form of social ridicule, boundary constructions, and symbolic violence (Vesya & Muslim, 2025; Nguyen, 2019). The data reflects the pressure and the existence of the phenomenon, but it also shows the phenomenon's uneven internalization. For some, the pressure of public scrutiny coalesces into self-doubt and anticipatory anxiety. For others, public scrutiny is acknowledged, but the pressure is resisted, redefined, or managed strategically.

There is an added complexity that is captured in the unevenness of this pressure, anxiety, and silence. A significant relation between FLA and LSC implies that anxiety fuels an enduring situation of withdrawal, hesitation, and self-editing. This correlates with socio-affective frameworks of language behavior and previous studies concerning the fear of negative evaluation in both physical and virtual classrooms (Esfandiari et al., 2013; Phuc, 2024). Qualitative self-censorship findings suggest a deficit-based interpretation – that self-censorship stems solely from a low perceived competence or a high perceived fragility of the self. Rather, it often assumes the shape of social calibration: adjusting one's linguistic visibility in a judgement-rich environment. Framing it this way, deciding not to post, dumbing down one's English, or switching to the first language, may be viewed more as an active decision not to participate than an act of self-censorship. Online participation, the public use of English, and the need to take emotional risks all represent an awareness of the situation's affective risks and the required emotional resources. Such self-censorship as an act of self-preservation is well understood and describes the response to evaluative judgement, normative pressure, and the fear of being humiliated, excluded, or in a conflict situation (Brock, 2025; Feshbach, 2023; Calhoun & Fawcett, 2023).

The “Paralyzed by Pressure,” “Anxious but Resilient,” and “Pressured but Unafraid” profiles therefore indicate that digital evaluative pressure is felt in a diverse, non-uniform way. Instead, it gets filtered through students' various abilities to absorb, resist, reinterpret, or redirect that pressure. Such an approach reinforces existing research on the willingness to communicate, which explains the influence anxiety has, but more so the role it plays in other variables, such as self-efficacy, social support, and academic flotation (Lin et al., 2025; Hocevar et al., 2014). Some of the most clear evidence comes from the “Anxious but Resilient” group, who also seem to occupy a kind of threshold space - not without the awareness of evaluative judgement and still feeling its weight, but participating in the evaluative judgement where the fruitful interaction provides some balancing feeling of being part of a group, being recognised, or having a personally meaningful role in the interaction. Some of the “Anxious but Resilient” experiences are similar to findings that some students perceive certain online environments as less psychologically risky than face-to-face interaction, particularly where psychologically safe environments are provided (Angelini & Gini, 2023; Le et al., 2018). In comparison, the “Pressured but Unafraid” category suggests some form of pressure, but a different construction of that pressure. These students seem to understand the danger of being evaluated in a negative way, but the evaluative framework does not command or limit their speech. Far from avoiding engagement, they direct their communicative contributions to a more selective audience, a smaller evaluative audience, or an easier communicative context.

Online visibility and social economy involve a spectrum of adaptive social positioning rather than a binary dichotomy of social positioning. There is a social media reconsideration as a language-learning platform. Most literature argues the affordances of social media as a language-learning tool, such as authentic engagement, opportunities in participation, and anxiety reduction in interaction within supportive communities (Dashti & Abdulsalam, 2025; Zhao et al., 2022; Alhourani et al., 2025). This study is in line with this perception but emphasizes that such affordances cannot be divorced from the social conditions surrounding the context. Informal learning spaces are also areas of linguistic perfectionism, comparison, and surveillance. Thus, social media is a tool of pedagogy and is also an ambivalent environment that both encourages expression and disciplines of discourse. This emphasizes the ambivalence of social media concerning anxiety in language and adds a nuanced illustration of how social media embodies a pedagogy of anxiety (Luo & Wang, 2026).

Learning in situations of particular platforms results in losses and gains, but in both cases, students make their own choices and devise their own means to balance both their involvement and their self-dignity.

What the research most clearly shows is that expressing one's English publicly online is more than exercising one's language skills. It is also about positioning oneself within an environment where one can be easily observed. For many learners, writing in English on social media is entering a zone that combines language, identity and social evaluation. This is what makes the PPP situation significant but also makes clear what is otherwise overlooked about the discomfort. It is most disconcerting that it reshapes the participation threshold. In effect, that means what is felt to be claimable, what is perceived to be risky, and what is decided to be withheld before it is even actionable. This is why self-censorship, in most cases, is not just a result of worries and fears, but part of a complex interplay between what is reflected, what is exposed, what is expressed, what is held back, what is protected, and what is socially present. This is most clearly the case in a social media situation where the apparent contradiction exists most bluntly.

6. Limitations and future directions

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the sample was restricted to non - English major students at a single Vietnamese university, which limits the generalizability of the findings to other disciplines, age groups, or cultural contexts.

Second, the quantitative measures relied on self-report scales, which may be influenced by social desirability and do not capture actual online behaviour; future work could combine surveys with trace data or discourse analysis of real posts.

Third, the behavioral profiles were constructed using heuristic cutoffs rather than formal latent profile or cluster modelling, so the four groups should be interpreted as illustrative patterns rather than fixed categories.

Finally, the qualitative sample was relatively small and focused on prototypical cases from each profile; future studies could broaden the range of voices, include teachers and “grammar police” themselves, and test interventions that explicitly aim to reduce linguistic shaming and create safer online spaces for L2 use.

7. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that social media is understood and perceived as evaluative, where English use is monitored and/or “watched” among peers, and that perceived pressure is linked with anxiety and self-censorship among Vietnamese non-English major students. Four profiles were identified by the survey, with the most notable being students who are “paralyzed by pressure” as opposed to those who appear to be more “confident” or “resilient” despite being observed and/or judged. Interviews explained the ways in which the culture of “grammar policing”, the fear of being corrected in public, and the struggle to find a “safe” space influence posting behavior, often stifling authentic expression and limiting posts altogether. These findings highlight the duality of social media’s influence on language acquisition. While social media has the ability to foster the acquisition of English if there is a supportive community, it can also hinder learning when self-imposed censorship is present.

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