

Austrian EFL Learners' Affective Engagement with Mass Media Texts

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ABSTRACT

This study sets out to explore German-speaking adolescents' emotional engagement with mass media products and to determine the impact (if any) produced by the practice of watching films and series in English on Austrian English as a foreign language (EFL) adolescents' perceptions of second language (L2) proficiency. To this end, a survey investigating the levels of affective involvement with online streaming products was developed. The survey targets 630 high-school students from Austrian Vorarlberg, many of whom demonstrate high levels of affective engagement with English-language mass media products. These individuals report higher levels of L2 English proficiency in comparison to their peers consuming similar content in German. The multiple linear regression reveals emotional engagement, frequency of exposure to mass media products, and English-language viewing practices as three important factors shaping learners' perceived proficiency in English. The implications of the study are discussed within the framework of socio-psychological organismic integration theory (Ryan & Deci, 2007, 2008) and against the backdrop offered by the construct of integrative orientation (Gardner, 1985, 2010).

Keywords: EFL adolescents, affective/emotional engagement, integrative orientation, mass media, organismic integration theory, self-reported L2 proficiency

INTRODUCTION

Encounters with English in out-of-school digital environments have become a ubiquitous language appropriating practice for the youngest generation of learners. A growing number of researchers recognise growing exposure to English through new digital technologies, particularly social media (Vandergriff, 2016) and online streaming services (Lee & Sylvén, 2021), and the need to evaluate the impact that such new digital media practices might have on acquisitionist outcomes. This is because “online environments afford learning opportunities beyond what was possible before” (Vandergriff, 2016, p. 23). Existing research indicates that out-of-class exposure to English through digital technologies improves cognitive performance (better academic achievement) and psychological well-being (enhanced enjoyment and grit), while also leading to augmented language learning outcomes (see discussion in Lee & Sylvén, 2021, p. 1282).

What might explain such a successful contribution that digital mass media makes to young individuals’ education? Studies in social psychology and personality research argue that it is through *active engagement*, active involvement in the task at hand, that best learning outcomes are attained (Reeve, 2015). Grounded in the psychological constructs of intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985) and the organismic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2007, 2008), engagement has been shown to augment levels of effort in pursuit of one’s goals and foster resilience in the face of challenge or absence of positive feedback (see discussion in Reeve, 2015, p. 132). Moreover, engagement also helps learners in recruiting their attentional resources through, for instance, noticing (Schmidt, 1990, 2001), a major prerequisite to learning (Hardre & Reeve, 2003) and language development, that is turning input into intake (Baralt et al., 2016, p. 211). In sum, “when highly [absorbed in a task], people show behavioural engagement (on-task attention, effort, persistence), emotional engagement (interest, enjoyment), cognitive engagement (strategic thinking, sophisticated learning strategies), and agentic engagement (constructive contributions into the flow of the activity)” (Reeve, 2015, p. 178). It is for that reason that second language acquisition scholars have started to recognize the importance of affective and social (in addition to purely cognitive) factors during learners’ exposure to and interactions with the target language (Svalberg, 2009,

2012). The present study builds on this finding and, in so doing, investigates the impact of adolescents’ affective engagement with mass media on their self-reported proficiency in second language (L2) English. The *affective/emotional engagement* is conceptualised here as “the presence of positive emotions during task involvement” (Reeve, 2015, p. 13).

Popular mass media texts (films, series, etc.) appeal to the younger audiences as they allow them to build parasocial relations with characters, while also engaging adolescent viewers in the plot of the narration. Given adolescents’ pervasive and constant exposure to engagement-inducing contents in the digital world, it is a plausible inference that young individuals who engage with their favourite mass media texts in English must also ultimately experience gains in their L2 proficiency. Moreover, given what we know about the general benefits presented by engagement, it is reasonable to surmise that individuals involved with the English-language digital products may also transfer their patterns of engagement from the digital world into the real world of classroom practice and academic achievement.

Exploring the link between engaged mass media practices and language learning is thus an academically useful exercise insofar as it informs our understanding about the degree to which involvement with specific extracurricular activities might influence scholarly success on the one hand and language learning outcomes on the other (see also Rød & Calafato, 2023). With this said, the study reported here seeks to address the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1: a) To what extent do adolescents from Vorarlberg relate to the characters and plots of the films and series that they watch, and

RQ1: b) does the fact of watching series in English increase their emotional engagement with mass media?

RQ2: a) What are the levels of self-reported English proficiency among the digital natives?

RQ2: b) Is there a link between watching films and series in English and self-reported L2 English proficiency?

RQ3: a) Does emotional engagement with English-language television series and films impact on young adults’ levels of proficiency in English, and

RQ3: b) how does this impact compare to other variables previously shown to influence learners' L2 proficiency, that is, frequency of exposure to mass media texts, stay-abroad exposure, and learners' linguistic identities?

Adolescents are an appropriate target group to address the questions listed above because mass media plays an important role in adolescents' lives and is a significant source of socialisation for young individuals. Ferris and Stein (2018, p.111) say that, "by the time young people graduate from high school, they will have spent far more time with the media than in the classroom." This observation is aligned with the findings reported in Pacheco et al. (2017). Pacheco and colleagues studied mass media consumption patterns of adolescents and young adults in Western Europe, coming to the conclusion that mass media, comprising the Internet and television, are omnipresent in the daily lives of very young individuals (aged 14 to 18), who use it for obtaining information about the world, entertainment, and social bonding. Engagement with mass media is thus a vital practice for adolescents. It interacts with and, in so doing, affects not only their daily routines, beliefs, and values but also, more importantly, their (patterns of) language acquisition and language use.

Vorarlberg has been chosen as an appropriate sociolinguistic setting for this study because it is located in the heart of central Europe, and this westernmost Austrian province is part and parcel of the Western civilisation enjoying a nearly full-scale implementation of the most recent digital technologies. The number of households with internet access in Austria has grown from 70% in 2009 to 93% in 2022 (Eurostat, 2024). In Vorarlberg, this percentage reached a full 92% in 2020 (Statistics Austria, 2021). English is the main foreign language and there is preliminary evidence that English may have been developing into an additional linguistic resource employed by adolescents in Vorarlberg (Sailer, 2021). Although no exact English speaker numbers are known for Vorarlberg, Education First's English Proficiency Index placed Austria in third place (after the Netherlands and Singapore) in 2023, thereby attributing a very high level of proficiency to the country's population (Education First, 2023). Given these facts, it is perhaps not entirely surprising that the locals from Vorarlberg harbour extremely positive attitudes towards English, both in terms of social attractiveness and social status they assign to this language (Davydova & Ilg, 2023).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Linguists have accrued a substantial amount of evidence pinpointing a clear association between learners' exposure to English in out-of-class settings, notably through television (films, series, documentaries) viewing, and subsequent gains in L2 proficiency. Listed below are several studies substantiating this claim.

Recruiting logistic regression analyses, Schwarz (2020) reports a statistically significant link between Viennese teenagers' extramural exposure to English and their receptive vocabulary. Sundqvist (2011, 2019) reveals a positive correlation between out-of-class exposure to English and productive vocabulary learning amongst adolescents from Sweden. Lee and Sylvén (2021) demonstrate that the amount of exposure to English via digital media platforms increases English as a foreign language (EFL) students' willingness to communicate in the target language. Crucially, studies also single out television viewing as a factor fostering L2 proficiency to an extent that is greater than any other types of informal encounters with English (Linden & Muñoz, 2013).

To that end, Kuppens (2010), Rogers (2013), Webb (2015), Ashcroft et al. (2018), Peters and Web (2018), Rogers and Webb (2020) report (extensive) television viewing as contributing small but meaningful gains in the incidental L2 acquisition of single vocabulary items. Puimège and Peters (2020) found that watching subtitled audiovisual material in English may also improve EFL learners' knowledge of formulaic language. Pujadas and Muñoz (2020) pinpoint the relevance of TV series subtitling to the development of EFL adolescents' comprehension skills, while also highlighting the role of previous vocabulary knowledge in their understanding of captioned TV material.

Most of the studies cited above explore the relationship between out-of-class exposure, in particular TV and film viewing, and lexis learning. This is because vocabulary has been shown to be instrumental to both L2 English acquisition (Nation, 2015) and academic achievement (Skjælde & Coxhead, 2020). However, extensive film and television viewing has been shown to influence not only learners' vocabulary. Davydova (2019b) shows how high levels of exposure to English-language films and series mediates acquisition of the variable use of quotative *be like* (as in, e.g., "*And I am like* (making a face), '*Oh, my God!*'")

by adult learners from Germany and India. Çakır (2020, p. 403) argues for a positive association between TV/film viewing and enhanced intercultural communicative competences.

All of the studies reported above investigate the link between mechanistic exposure to video input and language-related gains. There are, to date, no studies explicitly addressing the impact of emotional engagement with mass media products on learners' (self-reported) proficiency. This is a clear gap in existing research that the current study is seeking to address.

Moreover, sociolinguistic studies have pinpointed a link between the amount of stay-abroad exposure and L2 acquisition of vernacular variability. Davydova and Buchstaller (2015) present evidence indicating that more prolonged sojourns in first language (L1) English countries increase the general amount of quotative instances that L2 learners use in their speech, while also resulting in higher rates of use of quotative *be like*. Remarkably, individuals with extensive exposure to L1 English in naturalistic settings managed to replicate a range of intra- and extralinguistic constraints consistent with the patterns of use reported for L1 speakers. These findings are consistent with research into second language acquisition exploring the effects of long-term residence abroad (Howard, 2019).

Finally, Davydova (2022) pinpoints an important role of learners' linguistic identities (American, British, mixed, etc.) in the acquisition of quotative *be like*. Following the lead articulated in Auer and Hinskens (2005), she argues that it is a strong sociopsychological orientation toward an L1 speaker group (in this case, speakers of American English), not a mechanistic amount and frequency of interaction, that underlies the adoption of the vernacular variant *be like*. Though an important sociolinguistic construct, the concept of learners' linguistic identities has so far received little attention from quantitatively minded sociolinguists. It is this limitation that the current study aims to overcome.

Furthermore, the paper seeks to understand whether extensive viewing habits might influence learners' self-reported overall proficiency, not merely the learning of vocabulary (see also Rød & Calafato, 2023). What is at issue here is how the impact exerted by 'film viewing' compares to that of other variables reported to have a positive effect on various aspects of language learning. In

sum, this study sets out to explore the simultaneous impact of EFL learners' emotional engagement with mass media texts, frequency of encounters with mass media products, stays abroad, and linguistic identities on their overall proficiency and vocabulary knowledge.

Though focusing mainly on vocabulary and L2 acquisition of formulaic language, many of the previously mentioned studies emphasise the positive role that repeated exposure or frequency plays in the acquisition of vocabulary and subsequently L2 English proficiency (see also Schmitt & Schmitt, 2020). However, Rød and Calafato (2023) show that mere mechanical exposure to the target language via mass media channels will not automatically lead to increments in language learning, arguing that learners have to pay attention throughout their out-of-class encounters with the target language. This can arguably be achieved when learners *engage emotionally* with the target language. Online series offer a unique opportunity for such prolonged affective involvement with English because of their instant and permanent availability and the sheer amount of choice.

METHODS

Sociolinguistic Setting

Austria is a country of the Expanding Circle, where English plays an important role as a foreign language taught throughout primary and secondary education. More recent studies indicate that English has been undergoing an expansion of functional domains making inroads as a language of peer interaction amongst the youngest (age 14 to 18) generation of learners (Davydova, 2024; Sailer, 2021). In contrast to countries such as Belgium, Finland, the Netherlands, or Sweden, Austria belongs to so-called 'dubbing countries' (Schurz & Sundqvist, 2022) replacing original film soundtracks with soundtracks in the national language. Dominated by monolingual language ideologies and language policies, Austria has experienced a rise in the out-of-class exposure to English relatively recently, with teenagers at the forefront of this sociolinguistic change (see also Schwarz, 2020). This is in large part because Austrian teenagers have been demonstrated to be avid consumers of digital mass media products (Quenzel et al., 2021). In this study, 380 surveyed adolescents reported a preference for watching films and series in English, in contrast to 63 individuals who confessed to doing so in German.

The Study and its Participants

Given the importance of the youngest population segment as a force driving the sociolinguistic transformation of English in a foreign language environment, this cross-sectional study targeted 630 adolescents aged 14 to 18 from the Austrian province of Vorarlberg. A pen-and-paper survey was distributed among students enrolled in high school programmes offering preparatory tracks for university-level careers. Referred to as *Gymnasien* or grammar schools, these academic institutions are located in various parts of the region including Bludenz, Bregenz, Dornbirn, and Feldkirch. The individuals studied here are expected to demonstrate B2+ knowledge of English upon taking a school-leaving exam (Council of Europe, 2020). Examining these individuals from a sociolinguistic angle, one also cannot help but notice that these high school students generally stem from families with high levels of socioeconomic aspirations. These kids know that their social environment expects them to succeed in life and many of them are doing their best to prove them right. The individuals studied here reported having spent 3.5 ($SD = 21$) weeks on average in a naturalistic English-speaking setting. The data collection took place in winter 2021–2022. The participants were contacted via school administration and teaching staff. Before the data collection, a permission for carrying out a survey was obtained from the education board of Vorarlberg (*Bildungsdirektion Vorarlberg*).

Methodological Tools and Scoring Procedure

The levels of emotional engagement with (English-language) mass media products, self-reported proficiency in English, the amount of exposure to English in naturalistic settings and students' linguistic identities were elicited through a pen-and-paper survey, which was distributed amongst five high schools. The survey contained clauses informing participants that (a) the information obtained through the questionnaire was intended to be used for academic purposes, (b) their participation was voluntary, and, crucially, (c) the personal data was treated in a strictly confidential and would not be disclosed to a third party. Once the task was completed, the surveys were then collected and processed electronically.

The survey consisted of 40 items in total and is an extended version of the survey reported in Davydova

(2020). This paper reports on the items that elicited (a) adolescents' levels of emotional engagement with globally available mass media products (6 statements); (b) self-reported proficiency (7 statements); (c) the amount of exposure to L1 English in naturalistic settings during stays abroad (measured in weeks and subsequently placed on a logarithmic scale); (d) learners' linguistic identities; (e) learners' frequency of exposure to mass media products (measured as a scale 'never,' 'less than once a week,' 'once a week,' 'two or three times a week,' 'every day'). All the statements were placed on 1 to 6 Likert scales. Measures (a) and (b) were developed as part of the Austrian Science Fund project, Vernacular variation in mass media, and broadly draw on the ideas enshrined in Reeve (2015), Steinberg (2017) for emotional engagement, and on Surkamp and Viebrock (2018) for self-reported proficiency. In this study, learners' proficiency is being elicited through self-reports, which is a clear limitation. Measures (c), (d), and (e) were adopted from Davydova (2019a).

The measure 'learners' linguistic identities' was obtained through an open-ended question, 'Which form of English, in your opinion, do you speak?' The answers were then classified into one of the categories, including 'American,' 'British,' 'mixed (American and British),' 'mixed 2 (L1 English and EFL),' 'Austrian English,' and 'no clear linguistic identity.'

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics are recruited in order to ascertain adolescents' levels of emotional engagement with their favourite mass media products (RQ1a) and their self-proclaimed proficiency in English (RQ2a). Because the data was not normally distributed, a Mann–Whitney U test was run in order to determine if there are differences in the mass media engagement levels (statements 1 through 6, Table 2) between the informant group who reportedly watch their favourite series in English and those who did not (RQ1b). Similarly, a Mann–Whitney U test was implemented (for statements 1 through 7 in Table 4) in order to determine if the fact of consuming favourite series in English had any impact on self-reported L2 proficiency (RQ2b).

A multiple linear regression was administered in order to explore the simultaneous impact of emotional engagement with mass media, English-language viewing practices, stay-

abroad exposure and linguistic identity on self-reported L2 English proficiency (RQ3). The resulting model consisted of one continuous dependent measure (proficiency) and five independent factors, three of which are measuring EFL adolescents' experience with mass media texts:

- 1) level of engagement (continuous variable),
- 2) English-language viewing practices (nominal variable with two levels),
- 3) frequency of exposure to English-language mass media products (continuous variable).

Other variables include:

- 4) stay-abroad exposure (continuous variable) and
- 5) linguistic identity (nominal variable with seven levels).

The construct 'learners' proficiency' was elicited through seven questionnaire items (listed in Table 3), all of which demonstrated high levels of internal consistency, as determined by a Cronbach's alpha of 0.874. Given this result, a mean proficiency value was calculated for each informant, which was subsequently used as a continuous dependent variable in the final analysis. Levels of emotional engagement with mass media products is a continuous measure elicited through three questionnaire items ("Whenever I watch a series or a film and I like it, it becomes part of my emotional experience," "Whenever I watch a series or a film and I like it, I start actively engaging with the characters," "Whenever I watch a series or a film and I like it, I start actively engaging with the story"). The construct 'emotional engagement' showed a high level of internal consistency, as indicated by a Cronbach's alpha of 0.798. Given this finding, a mean engagement value was calculated for each informant and subsequently introduced as a continuous independent measure as part of the final model.

English-language viewing practices were elicited through the question, 'Did you watch your favourite English-speaking series in English?' to which respondents had to provide a yes/no-answer. 'Stay-abroad exposure' is a continuous measure elicited as the number of weeks spent in an English-speaking environment. Finally, the construct 'linguistic identity' was elicited through the open-end question, 'Which form of English do you think you speak?' Responses obtained were classified as 'American (English identity),' 'British (English identity),' 'mixed (two or more

L1 Englishes),' 'mixed2 (L1 English plus a learner English),' 'Austrian (English identity),' and 'no linguistic identity.' Having been controlled for the linearity of relationship between the dependent and all independent variables, homoscedasticity of residuals (equal error variances), multi-collinearity of independent factors, extreme outliers and normal distribution of residuals, the data could be subjected to the multiple linear regression procedure (Osborne & Waters 2002).

All statistical procedures were executed in SPSS Version 19. The multiple linear regression was performed through a script created in the software environment R, using the *lm* function of the *stats* package.

RESULTS

Reporting levels of general engagement, Table 1 informs us that adolescents overwhelmingly enjoy watching series and films online (item 1), actively engaging with the characters (item 3) and the story (item 4). They are also certain that their favourite films are a vital part of their human experience (item 2). On the whole, the targeted teenagers are less inclined to start adopting fashion styles they have seen in the film (item 5) or using the language they have heard from the characters (item 6). I note here, though, that Table 1 reports the average values for both English-watching and German-watching adolescents. In order to determine if adolescents who watch their favourite series in English show different levels of engagement, I carry out the contrastive comparisons between the two groups presented in Table 2.

Table 2 shows that adolescents enjoy watching series and films online (item 1)—while also absorbing these encounters as part of their human experience (item 2)—irrespective of the language in which they consume these mass media products. At the same time, adolescents who watch their favorite series in English report higher levels of emotional engagement with the characters (item 3) and with the story (item 4). English-watching teenagers are also more likely to adopt fashion styles created by filmmakers (item 5). Most importantly, when compared against the German-watching peer group, Anglophone individuals demonstrate a better likelihood of adoption of the language used in the series (item 6).

Table 1. Levels of Emotional Engagement With Globally Available Products of Mass Media

Statement	<i>N</i> ^a	<i>M</i> Scale (1 to 6)	<i>SD</i>
1. I very much enjoy watching series and films online.	620	5.2	1.1
2. Whenever I watch a series or a film and I like it, it becomes an essential part of my experience.	617	4.2	1.2
3. Whenever I watch a series or a film and I like it, I start actively engaging with the characters.	616	4.0	1.4
4. Whenever I watch a series or a film and I like it, I start actively engaging with the story.	618	4.3	1.4
5. Whenever I watch a series or a film and I like it, I start adopting the fashion styles created in the film.	622	2.5	1.4
6. Whenever I watch a series or a film and I like it, I start adopting the language used by the characters.	621	3.2	1.5

Note. ^aHere and everywhere else, *N* indicates the number of responses out of the overall total 630 obtained for an individual question. The mode of data collection, that is, a pen-and-paper survey, produced a substantial number of missing data points for individual questions. These are not reported throughout tables.

Table 2. Levels of Emotional Engagement With Mass Media Products Between Adolescents who Watch or do not Watch Their Favorite Series in English

Statement	Mean rank / Mdn		<i>U</i>	<i>z</i>	<i>p</i> -value
	Yes	No			
1. I very much enjoy watching series and films online.	239.21 / 6	223.59 / 6	14499	1.005	.315
2. Whenever I watch a series or a film and I like it, it becomes an essential part of my experience.	241.15 / 4	211.86 / 4	15285	1.678	.093
3. Whenever I watch a series or a film and I like it, I start actively engaging with the characters.	243.50 / 4	190.78 / 4	16563	3.012	.003
4. Whenever I watch a series or a film and I like it, I start actively engaging with the story.	244.26 / 5	186.21 / 4	16870	3.332	<.001
5. Whenever I watch a series or a film and I like it, I start adopting the fashion styles created in the film.	244.71 / 2	187.78 / 2	17052	3.287	.001
6. Whenever I watch a series or a film and I like it, I start adopting the language used by the characters.	245.71 / 4	178.46 / 2.5	17615	3.833	<.001

Note. *N* of obtained responses: 471–473.

Turning to self-reported L2 English proficiency (see Table 3), digital natives contend that overall, they can speak English fluently (item 1) and also understand colloquial English (extremely) well (item 4). They also claim that they often use the language they heard from native speakers (item 3) or on English-speaking shows

(item 6). Simultaneously, they are less certain about their language production and vocabulary skills (item 2 and item 5 respectively), assigning them somewhat lower values. On average, they assess their overall knowledge of English at 3.94 (item 7), which is a moderately high value.

Table 3. *Descriptors of Self-Reported Proficiency*

Statement	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i> Scale (1 to 6)	<i>SD</i>
1. I can speak English fluently.	437	4.28	1.1
2. My English sounds very natural to English speakers.	438	3.36	1.3
3. I often use English that I heard from native speakers.	439	4.08	1.5
4. I understand colloquial English extremely well.	438	4.29	1.3
5. My knowledge of colloquial English (phrasal verbs, idioms, etc.) is excellent.	436	3.60	1.2
6. When I speak English, I often use language that I heard on English-speaking shows and films.	436	4.17	1.3
7. My overall knowledge of English is excellent.	430	3.94	1.1

Note. *N* of obtained responses: 430–439.

As a next step, the study seeks to determine if adolescents who watch their favorite series in English also report higher levels of L2 English proficiency. Table 4 informs us that English-watching adolescents report better fluency in English when compared against their German-

speaking peers (item 1). Similarly, they believe that their English sounds more natural to native speakers (item 2) and that they use English they heard from native speakers more often (item 3).

Table 4. *Self-Reported Proficiency Between Adolescents who Watch and do not Watch Their Favorite Series in English*

Statement	Mean rank / Mdn		<i>U</i>	<i>z</i>	<i>p</i> -value
	Yes	No			
1. I can speak English fluently.	225.41 / 4	180.20 / 4	14030	2.720	.007
2. My English sounds very natural to native speakers.	228.89 / 3	162.53 / 3	15188	3.919	<.001
3. I often use English that I heard from native speakers.	228.40 / 4	168.90 / 3.5	14855	3.489	<.001
4. I understand colloquial English extremely well.	229.31 / 5	159.98 / 4	15348	4.093	<.001
5. My knowledge of colloquial English (phrasal verbs, idioms, etc.) is excellent.	228.14 / 4	170.48 / 3	14757	3.419	<.001
6. When I speak English, I often use language that I heard on English-speaking shows and films.	226.37 / 4	169.18 / 4	14239	3.348	<.001
7. My overall knowledge of English is excellent.	226.76 / 4	166.73 / 3.5	14386	3.560	<.001

Note. *N* of obtained responses: 436–439.

Moreover, English-watching adolescents report higher scores when asked if they understand colloquial English well (item 4). Unsurprisingly and in accordance with prior research, individuals who consume English-language mass media products report better mastery of English vocabulary as reflected by their knowledge of idioms, phrasal verbs (item 5) and the language they encountered on English-speaking shows (item 6). Finally, high school students habitually watching films and shows in English are also more likely to report better proficiency in English overall (item 7).

Finally, the study aims to ascertain whether higher EFL proficiency can be predicted from the simultaneous impact of emotional engagement with and frequency of exposure to mass media products, language of the viewing practices, amount of L1 exposure through visits to English-speaking countries and EFL speakers' linguistic identities (see Table 5). The multiple regression analysis returns emotional engagement with and frequency of exposure to mass media texts as highly significant predictors ($p < 0.0001$) of self-reported proficiency. English-language viewing practices also affect learners' feelings about their L2 English

knowledge and skill in a statistically significant way ($p < 0.05$). Furthermore, learners' stay-abroad experiences with naturalistic L1 English augment confidence in their

command of English, and this effect is highly significant ($p < 0.0001$).

Table 5. Linear Multiple Regression for Self-Reported Proficiency¹

	<i>B</i>	95% CI for <i>B</i>		<i>SE B</i>
		<i>LL</i>	<i>UL</i>	
Model: $R^2 = 0.26$; adjusted $R^2 = 0.24$				
Constant	2.545***	2.164	2.924	0.193
<i>Mass media variables</i>				
Emotional engagement	0.156***	0.082	0.230	0.038
Viewing practice (in English)	0.229	-0.018	0.477	0.126
Frequency of exposure	0.199***	0.125	0.272	0.037
<i>Other variables</i>				
Stays abroad	0.165***	0.073	0.256	0.047
Linguistic identity				
American	(reference level)			
British	-0.208*	-0.413	-0.003	0.104
Other L1 English ²	0.809	-0.851	2.470	0.844
Mixed (American and/or British)	0.286*	0.064	0.508	0.112
Mixed2 (L1 English + Learner English)	-0.024	-0.627	0.729	0.383
Austrian English	-0.717	-1.464	0.029	0.380
No identity	-0.374**	-0.627	-0.121	0.129

Note. ¹*N* of obtained responses: 436. ²One informant in this study claimed he spoke a variety of South African English. Model = *lm* function in R; *B* = unstandardised regression coefficient; CI = confidence interval; *LL* = lower limit; *UL* = upper limit; *SE B* = standardised error of the coefficient; R^2 = coefficient of determination. Significance codes: 0 = '***'; 0.001 = '**'; 0.01 = '*'; 0.05 = '.'.

Turning to adolescents' self-professed identities, we also notice an unequivocal association between reported learning success and specific identity profiles. This line of investigation reveals that students identifying with American or American / British (mixed) English are likely to report a better proficiency in their target language when compared to students who report a strictly British identity. This might be due to the fact that the latter group of students have generally less exposure to American English inputs via mass media limiting their contact with English to the classroom setting, an environment through which British English is being still widely propagated in Austria. Conversely, adolescents reporting an Austrian English identity and those identifying with no particular form of English are the groups less certain about their English language skills, generally reporting lower proficiency levels ($p < 0.05$ for Austrian English and $p < 0.001$ for no identity).

DISCUSSION

The present investigation has sought to determine the levels of emotional engagement experienced by EFL adolescents watching series on online streaming platforms (RQ1), while also exploring the relationship between their affective commitment to mass media products on the one hand and perceived proficiency in English on the other (RQ3). The study has also inquired into the levels of adolescents' self-reported proficiency in English, seeking to determine if the fact of watching English films and series in English enhances EFL learners' confidence regards their knowledge of English (RQ2).

The study has pinpointed a generally positive outlook with regards to online viewing practices (RQ1a). An informative finding is that younger individuals who watch their favorite series in English tend to demonstrate better emotional engagement during the activity of viewing,

showing a greater involvement with the story plot and the characters (RQ1b). The study also demonstrated sufficiently high levels of self-reported proficiency in English, which was expected given the sociolinguistic profiles of the study's participants (RQ2a). Moreover, emotional engagement with mass media products emerges as a high-impact factor enhancing self-reported proficiency in adolescents consuming their favorite mass media products in English (RQ2b). Crucially, the effect of emotional engagement is just as strong as those exerted by the frequency of exposure to mass media texts and the length of exposure to naturalistic L1 English through stays abroad (RQ3). The latter finding has been documented in previous work (Davydova & Buchstaller 2015; Howard 2019) and the current study confirms what we already know about the contributing role of continued exposure to the acquisition of the target language in naturalistic settings. That self-reported proficiency correlates with how often learners consume English-language media texts in their everyday life is an interesting but expected finding aligned, for instance, with the usage-based theories arguing that frequency is a major force driving both language change and language learning (Ellis, 2002, 2016).

Of interest is the finding that emotional engagement with mass media products affects learners' beliefs about their L2 knowledge. The finding highlights the relevance of the organismic integration theory (Ryan & Deci, 2007, 2008) to the processes governing L2 development. In the field of social psychology, the theory has been implemented to explain motivation and subsequent behaviour in sports and athletic endeavors. This study seeks to explain how this theory informs our understanding of emotional engagement during out-of-class language learning practices and subsequent confidence in one's L2 English skills.

The theory postulates that being fundamentally proactive, human beings come into this world in order to discover their interests and talents and to learn new skills so that they are ultimately capable of becoming the best possible version of themselves. Yet this is only possible if an individual's organismic psychological needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness are satisfied. The need for autonomy manifests itself as a desire to experience self-agency in the initiation and regulation of one's course of actions. When experiencing autonomy, individuals perceive the locus of causality within themselves, which allows them to make free choices and act of their own

accord. The second condition allowing human beings to thrive in their social environment is the fulfillment of the psychological need called competence. The organismic theory asserts that we all seek to face optimal challenges and overcome these through the exertion of constant effort. It is this activity that makes us realise that we are making progress along the way; we experience the activity we are involved in as meaningful and thus feel enjoyment. Finally, relatedness refers to our need to experience belonging and deep meaningful relationships with other individuals. Fundamentally social in their nature, human beings strive to find and build relationships in which they feel honestly understood, loved, and being taken care of. There is also evidence suggesting that the need for relatedness can be satisfied through parasocial interactions because "users of media offerings respond to media people [and characters] similarly to how they feel, think and behave in real-life encounters" (Klimmt et al., 2006, p. 292). When satisfied, psychological needs act as nutrients promoting positive emotions and life-enhancing patterns of being. They encourage further exploration and challenge seeking what ultimately results in personal growth (Reeve, 2015). The organismic integration theory proposes that whereas the need for the support of autonomy, competence and relatedness is universal, that is, culture-independent, the actual satisfaction of these needs is domain- and/or culture-specific. This means that these basic needs may be satisfied in some domains of life and social environments but not in others (Ryan & Deci, 2007).

Let us now explore how the organismic theory contributes to our understanding of affective engagement in the development of L2 self-confidence. Students deciding to watch their favorite online series in English do so out of sincere and unpressured willingness, not because they are being coerced into the activity by their educators or parents. It is their free time after all, during which decision-making process is being governed by their wholehearted personal endorsement. This may be in contrast to a situation in the classroom, where the course of action is often dictated by peers and supervisors. This is the reason why students experience generally high levels of engagement while receiving their favorite mass media offerings on Netflix and similar platforms.

Furthermore, those EFL learners who decide to watch an online streaming product in the target language, which is English, feel undeniably competent. Following their own

sense of self-agency, they engage in a language learning activity that they feel they can cope with well. This is because the task of series viewing is perhaps best described as moderately difficult one. Research on L2 acquisition of vocabulary demonstrates that extensive film viewing promotes the learning of mid-range frequency vocabulary. When exposed to an input of 70 video sequences, learners come in contact with about half of all 4,000 words at least five times (Webb, 2010). Five is a sufficient number of repetitions allowing for turning input into intake (Schmitt & Schmitt, 2020). While watching their favorite series online, EFL adolescents arguably encounter vocabulary items they are already familiar with and consolidate their knowledge of these familiar words.

The task of series watching is thus a moderately difficult one. This inference is important because psychological research shows that it is from moderately difficult tasks, such as tasks showing just enough challenge, that learners derive the most pleasure (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Consequently, they assign more cognitive resources to this kind of tasks and learn better as a result (see discussion in Reeve, 2015). With this said, English-language watching adolescents feel competent because they are involved with a linguistic task (out of their own volition) that is just enough difficult for them to be able to enjoy it as well. It is arguably for this reason that they feel more confident with regard to their L2 English skills when compared against the German-language watching cohort.

Relatedness is the final theoretical component assumed to feed intrinsic motivation and affective engagement during L1 English viewing activities. Individuals deciding to watch their favorite show in English do so because they apparently already feel a special connection to the plot, the characters, and the fictional world of the series. Watching the series in the target language is arguably motivated by their willingness to live the authentic experience and while pursuing the story in the language of the original, to deepen the parasocial relationship they have developed with the characters, making it more elaborate and, by that token, more meaningful to them.

It follows then that higher levels of experienced internal causality, competence and, finally, relatedness nurture inner motivational resources and foster active engagement in learners who watch online series in English. The positive feelings of vitality experienced during this out-of-class

activity are then translated into higher levels of self-perceived competence in the target language. In turn, EFL learners' confidence in their L2 English abilities can be understood as their self-efficacy beliefs, such as beliefs that they have what it takes to cope with a particular language learning task in a given context. Psychological research informs us that "people with high self-efficacy generally learn to cope, perform, and achieve better than do people with low self-efficacy" (Reeve, 2015, p. 301). Translated into the language of language learning theory, more confident L2 learners are more likely to persist with a language learning task when faced with a challenge and ultimately win the game called mastering another tongue.

Linguistic identity emerges as another important variable underpinning learners' perceptions of their own proficiency in English. This finding is consistent with that reported in Davydova (2022), a study pinpointing American English and American / other (mixed) identity as two pivotal constraints governing acquisition of vernacular variation by foreign language learners (see also Davydova & Buchstaller, 2015). In this study, the adolescents identifying with L1 English(es) demonstrate a similar tendency of showing more confidence with regard to English. Put together, these findings allow for an inference that there are, indeed, essential and non-trivial links between learners' identification with sociopolitical groups on the one hand and their knowledge of the target language, whether actual and assumed, on the other. This conclusion is consistent with previous research that has accrued a substantial amount of empirical evidence that "developing competence in (...) a nonnative language [is] intricately linked to the self and identity (...) in the learning process" (Noels & Giles, 2009, p. 647). The concept of learners' linguistic identity ties in nicely with 'integrative orientation', a notion that individuals embark on the study of a second/foreign language because they identify with the community speaking another language and, while finding it attractive, seek out opportunities for sociolinguistic interactions (Gardner, 1985, 2010). Developed in the sociopolitical climate produced by the English-French bilingualism in Canada, the model attracted a non-negligible amount of criticism. Its opponents argued that the theory overemphasised speakers' integrative motivations, while also ignoring other factors (such as in-class dynamics) important in foreign-language learning contexts. Although classroom- and learner-related variables are important in situations where immediate contact with

target language speakers is largely non-existent, integrativeness is still applicable to scenarios involving foreign language learners, especially of a globally available language. In this study, adolescents admiring the target L1 English speech communities and thus identifying with those speech communities turn out to be more confident with regard to their English-language skills. What is, however, interesting is that their interactions with L1 English speakers do not involve face-to-face contact but is rather organised around affective parasocial engagement with favorite story plots and characters. It is through these parasocial encounters that many of these individuals are being introduced to naturalistic L1 English so that the process of internalisation of the linguistic input as well as the confidence in one's own L2 skills can begin to unfold. What it then means is that the construct of integrativeness and integrative orientation (see Noels & Giles, 2009) — including the concept of linguistic identity contained within it — do not need to be restricted to sociolinguistic settings involving naturalistic intergroup contact but may well be extended to comprise scenarios where language learners, while identifying with and aspiring to belong to a specific sociolinguistic culture, seek out opportunities for communication that includes platforms other than those offered by naturalistic exposure and interpersonal contact. To put it slightly differently, the innovative technologies of the globally changing world make it imperative that we rethink the ways in which intergroup contact may manifest itself in a given acquisitionist scenario.

In a related vein, Dörnyei (2005) argued that in the context of English as a global language, integrative motivation should be understood as learners' willingness to become part of an imagined language community made of individuals sharing cosmopolitan views and defining themselves through their belonging to the global culture (see also Lamb, 2004; Yashima, 2002). While acknowledging the argument as indisputably legitimate and convincing, this study also points out that at least in some foreign language settings, learners demonstrate exonormative mindsets gravitating toward specific L1

English norms and speaker groups associated with those norms (Davydova, 2019b, 2020, 2024). In line with previous research just mentioned, this study shows that many adolescents in Vorarlberg pledge their allegiance to specific forms of L1 English, be it British, American or both. Notice that none proclaimed themselves to be speakers of World or European English (see also discussion in Mohr et al., 2021). Their orientation toward native speaker norms is being reinforced through consistent and regular consumption of favorite mass media products, all of which are in L1 English, mostly American. Against this backdrop, a valid interpretation of integrative motivation (and learners' linguistic identity inextricably linked to it) is the idea that learners imagine themselves as becoming members of a virtual language community striving to approximate the linguistic patterns laid out by L1 English speech norms.

CONCLUSION

English-watching as a language learning practice in the out-of-class EFL context has been evidenced to influence positively students' confidence in their English-language skills and abilities. Moreover, more intense emotional engagement during extramural activities is positively correlated with perceived language competencies. This finding is informative insofar as it suggests that educators may want to capitalise on the extramural exposure to English by highlighting the benefits of watching favorite entertainment shows in English. The organismic integration theory explains what these benefits are: satisfaction of universal psychological needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness. Given that many learners have been consistently shown to identify with a socio-political group of L1 (American English) speakers in an EFL environment, it has been argued here that it is preferable to expand integrative orientation in the EFL settings beyond the notion of the 'global culture' and recognise that at least for some learners this notion bears unequivocal associations with American English and the people who speak it.

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Authors' Contributions

Julia Davydova designed this study, collected all the data, analyzed the data, interpreted the results, and wrote up the paper. The data coding was performed by Ercan Gerster, Janik Stocker, and Julianna Brunner.

Declaration of GenAI and AI-Assisted Technologies

The author confirms that neither GenAI nor AI-Assisted Technologies have been used while creating this work.

Ethics Approval & Consent to Participate

The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards for academic research. Ethical approval was received from the Bildungsdirektion Vorarlberg (Austria). Participants were fully informed about the study and its major goals. They were furthermore instructed that participation was voluntary and anonymous.

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