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Identity, Ideology, And Capital in Adult EFL Learning Investment: Applying Darvin and Norton's Model

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ABSTRACT: This study empirically investigates how adult EFL learners' imagined identity, language ideology, and capital influence their actual learning investment within a distance higher education context, drawing upon Darvin and Norton's (2015) model of investment in language learning. A survey consisting of 24 Likert-scale items was administered to 61 adult learners enrolled at a cyber university in South Korea. Descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation analysis, multiple linear regression, and bootstrapping-based mediation analyses were conducted.

The findings are as follows: First, learners demonstrated high levels of imagined identity (M = 4.08) and societal ideological awareness regarding English as symbolic capital (M = 3.99). However, their perceived capital (M = 3.64) and actual learning investment (M = 3.54, with the lowest item mean at M = 3.16 for time management) were substantially lower, highlighting a structural tension between aspiration and daily practice. Second, identity, ideology, capital, and investment displayed strong, positive inter-correlations ($r = .616–.804$, $p < .001$). Third, multiple regression analysis revealed that learning capital was the sole statistically significant predictor of learning investment ($\beta = .553$, $p < .001$), accounting for 59.4% of the variance ($R2 = .594$), while the direct effects of identity and ideology were statistically non-significant. Fourth, mediation analyses confirmed that capital fully mediated the pathways from both identity and ideology to investment.

These results indicate that in adult distance education, having a vivid future self-image or recognizing the socioeconomic necessity of English does not automatically translate into sustained learning commitment. Rather, cognitive visions and beliefs must be operationalized through concrete capital—such as digital/AI literacies, strategic knowledge, and the integration of prior vocational expertise. Pedagogical implications and systemic interventions for online adult EFL curricula are discussed.

KEYWORDS: Adult EFL Learners, Cyber University, Language Learning Investment, Imagined Identity, Capital, Ideology, Darvin & Norton Model

I. INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary knowledge-based society and global digital ecosystem, English functions not merely as a medium of communication, but as a decisive form of "symbolic capital" that attests to an individual's socioeconomic status, professional competence, and cultural sophistication (Bourdieu, 1991; Shin & Lee, 2019; Smith, 2024). Within this social context, the enrollment of adult English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners seeking to major in or re-learn English at distance lifelong education institutions—particularly cyber universities in South Korea—has increased markedly in recent years (Kim, 2024; E. Lee, 2019). Unlike traditional school-age students, adult learners pursue higher education while simultaneously fulfilling double or triple "multiple roles," such as active workplace responsibilities, housework, childcare, and broader social obligations (Ha, 2024; Kim et al., 2026). Consequently, English learning among adults transcends purely cognitive and linguistic acquisition, assuming the character of an intense sociocultural practice aimed at expanding occupational expertise and constructing new identities during biographical transitions (Norton, 1995; Darvin & Norton, 2021, Kim. 20192023).

In traditional second language acquisition (SLA) research, learner motivation has predominantly been explained through psychologistic and internal constructs, such as Gardner's (1985) dichotomy of integrative and instrumental motivation or Dörnyei's (2005, 2009) L2 Motivational Self System. However, scholars have pointed out that such decontextualized psychologistic models fall short of capturing the dynamic ways in which unequal social structures, power relations, and disparities in material and social resources shape actual language learning practices (Norton, 2000, 2013). To address these limitations, Norton (1995) introduced sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction into applied linguistics and proposed the innovative construct of "investment." The concept of investment posits that when learners commit time and effort to learning a language, they do so not simply out of psychological interest, but from a socioeconomic and sociocultural orientation toward acquiring greater symbolic and material capital in return.

Building upon this foundation, Darvin and Norton (2015) formulated a tripartite Model of Investment reflecting 21st-century digitalization, globalization, and fluid multicultural environments. This model stipulates that learner investment is formed and negotiated at the intersection of

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three core axes: *identity*, *capital*, and *ideology*. That is, learner's imagined future selves (identity), the economic, cultural, and digital resources they can mobilize (capital), and the societal belief systems that confer legitimacy and power upon a given language (ideology) interact organically to determine actual learning practice and commitment (investment).

Nevertheless, existing domestic studies on adult learners have largely focused on describing psychological learning motivation, academic satisfaction, or dropout factors in isolation (Kim, 2019; Kim et al., 2026; Park & Han, 2026; Shim, 2026; Song, 2024), while empirical studies analyzing adult distance learners' learning behaviors multidimensionally through Darvin and Norton's (2015) theoretical framework remain scarce. In particular, adult learners at cyber universities enter degree programs with high ideals and strong academic aspirations, yet they continually confront structural barriers including severe time constraints arising from work and family obligations as well as isolated online learning environments (Ahn, 2021; Kim et al., 2026; Chung & Kim, 2018). Do their imagined future selves (identity) and their belief that English guarantees social competitiveness (ideology) directly translate into actual learning behavior (investment) amid busy daily schedules? Or is concrete "learning capital"—such as digital and AI literacy, strategic learning knowledge, and integration with prior occupational experience—indispensably required to enable this translation?

Grounded in these research questions, the present study rigorously analyzes quantitative survey data collected from 61 adult learners enrolled at a cyber university in South Korea to investigate the following three research questions:

- **Research Question 1:** What are the general tendencies and levels of imagined identity, learning capital, societal ideology, and learning investment among adult cyber university EFL learners?
- **Research Question 2:** How do adult learners' identity, capital, and ideology influence their actual learning investment and practice, and what is their relative predictive power?
- **Research Question 3:** What mediating effect does learning capital exert on the relationships between adult learners' imagined identity and societal ideology and their actual learning investment?

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Darvin and Norton's (2015) Model of Investment in Language Learning

Challenging traditional SLA motivation theories that viewed learners as decontextualized individuals with fixed, invariant traits, Norton (1995, 2000) redefined language learners as social agents who negotiate fluid and often contradictory subjectivities across power relations and social spaces. According to Norton, "investing" in language learning is a multifaceted act in which learners commit resources so that their evolving identities are recognized and they can acquire cultural and symbolic capital to secure future material rewards and self-expansion.

In response to the rapid technological advancements and transnational mobility of the 21st-century learning landscape, Darvin and Norton (2015) refined the original theory into an expanded Model of Investment comprising three core axes (see Figure 1):

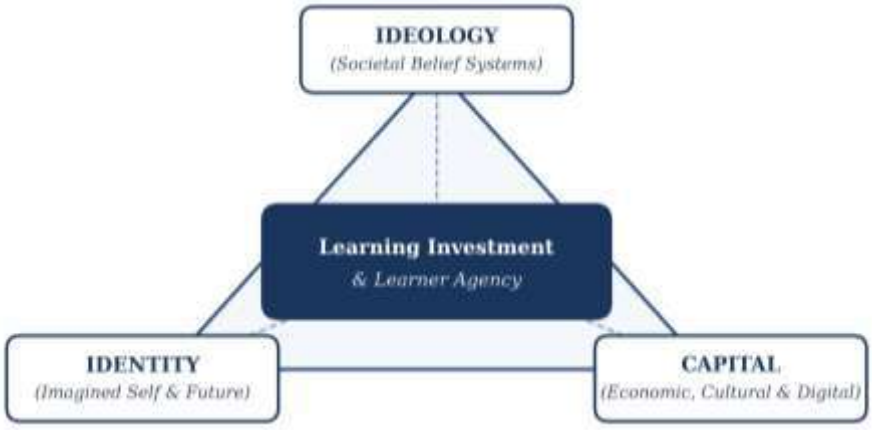

Figure 1. Darvin and Norton's (2015) Model of Investment in Language Learning

- **Identity:** Identity concerns how learners understand their relationship to the social world and how that relationship is constructed across time and space. In particular, the concepts of "imagined communities" and "imagined identities" developed by Kanno and Norton (2003) emphasize that learners transcend their immediate physical classrooms by envisioning future linguistic communities to which they aspire to belong and projecting themselves as competent English users, thereby generating sustained learning momentum.
- **Capital:** Rooted in Bourdieu's (1986) theory of capital, capital encompasses economic capital (financial resources and ability to purchase learning materials), cultural capital (academic knowledge, linguistic proficiency, and credentials), and social capital (interpersonal networks, mentors, and learning peers). In contemporary information and communication environments, "digital capital" as well as information-seeking and strategic learning capabilities constitute essential forms of learning capital (Ragnedda, 2018; Warschauer et al., 2004; Chen & Liu, 2025).
- **Ideology:** Ideology refers to structured belief systems and mechanisms of power that designate specific languages, accents, or linguistic competencies as possessing social superiority and legitimacy (Bourdieu, 1991). In South Korean society, the phenomenon of "English hegemony," wherein English is perceived as an obligatory gateway to employment, promotion, and upward social mobility, exemplifies a dominant language ideology (Choi, 2021; C. Lee, 2019, 2021; E. Lee, 2019; K. Lee, 2018; Park, 2011).

These three axes do not operate independently; rather, ideology determines the value attributed to specific forms of capital, identity is expanded or constrained depending on the possession of capital, and the dynamic interplay among these three dimensions yields learners' actual commitment of time and effort (investment).

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2. Imagined Identity and the L2 Self

Dörnyei's (2009) Ideal L2 Self and Norton's (2000, 2013) imagined identity demonstrate that the "future self-image" to which a language learner aspires serves as one of the most potent internal drivers of current learning behavior. Kanno and Norton (2003) stressed that imagination is by no means an idle fantasy, but a concrete and proactive cognitive process through which learners transcend spatiotemporal constraints, construct alternative worlds, and organize their present actions to become full members of those imagined communities.

Unlike school-age students, adult learners already possess established occupations or academic backgrounds; hence, their imagined identities tend to be highly pragmatic and career-oriented (Darvin & Norton, 2015). Rather than merely imagining themselves speaking with native-like pronunciation, adult learners vividly envision integrating English with their existing occupational expertise to lead international tasks or advance into higher professional positions. However, translating such elevated imagined identities into sustained daily study requires actionable resources and concrete learning strategies (Fan et al., 2025; Guo & Kim, 2021; Pavlenko & Norton, 2007motivation).

3. Learning Capital and Integration with Digital and AI Environments

Capital denotes all tangible and intangible resources that an individual can mobilize to occupy an advantageous position within a social field (Bourdieu, 1986). For adult learners at cyber universities, capital manifests not only as financial capacity, but also as digital competence in navigating online learning management systems and external digital platforms (Ragnedda, 2018; Ragnedda et al., 2020; Kim & Choi, 2020).

In particular, the recent emergence of generative artificial intelligence (AI) and diverse edtech tools has rapidly reshaped the nature of language learning capital (Godwin-Jones, 2024; Lee & Kim, 2023). For working adult learners who lack the physical time to attend offline language institutes or private tutoring, AI tutors, machine translation tools, digital vocabulary applications, and YouTube resources function as powerful "compensatory cultural capital" that overcomes spatiotemporal limitations (Zhang, 2026). Darvin and Norton (2016) noted that technology diversifies learners' pathways to acquiring capital, offering opportunities to bypass traditional structural barriers. Accordingly, the quantity and quality of digital and strategic capital possessed by learners serve as a decisive mechanism governing academic persistence and engagement.

4. Relationship between Language Ideology and Learning Investment

In South Korean society, English has been internalized beyond a mere foreign language as a symbol of meritocracy and socioeconomic status attainment (Park, 2011; Choi, 2024). Through their professional and social experiences, adult learners directly encounter the prevailing social ideology that English proficiency expands employment opportunities, facilitates promotion, and yields tangible economic returns (Choi, 2024; Rabbidge & Hallayeva, 2026).

However, the impact of societal ideology on individual learners is complex. While endorsing the dominant ideology that English is indispensable can provide strong initial motivation, it can simultaneously provoke psychological anxiety or "linguistic inferiority" when limited English proficiency is attributed to personal incompetence (Bourdieu, 1991). Moreover, adult learners who initiate study solely out of perceived social obligation are prone to burnout or academic attrition when confronted with time scarcity and physical fatigue in daily life (Chung & Kim, 2018; Ko, 2023). Therefore, a theoretical hypothesis emerges that for societal ideology to translate into sustained learning practice (investment), learners must convert ideological beliefs into self-directed competencies and actionable resources (capital).

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

1. Participants and Research Context

This study was conducted with 61 adult learners enrolled at a four-year cyber university in South Korea. Participants consisted of working adults balancing employment and higher education (work–study balance) as well as adult learners entering distance higher education to design a second career. All participants voluntarily took part in the "Reflecting on My English Learning" diagnostic and self-reflection activity integrated into the university's Learning Management System (LMS) and Google Forms during the academic semester.

2. Survey Instrument

To measure the three core constructs of Darvin and Norton's (2015) Model of Investment (identity, capital, and ideology) alongside the outcome construct of learning investment (practice), a 24-item questionnaire was developed. All items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *Strongly disagree* to 5 = *Strongly agree*), structured into four subscales of six items each:

- **Part 1: Future Self-Image and Self-Perception (Imagined Identity, Q1–Q6):** Measures concrete imagination of using English confidently in the future, demonstrating expertise in one's major or profession, achieving personal goals, communicating globally, self-actualization, and enhanced learning motivation (6 items).
- **Part 2: Learning Resources and Competence (Learning Capital, Q7–Q12):** Measures willingness to make financial investments, perceived synergy between existing academic/occupational expertise and English, active use of digital tools and AI technologies, utilization of external resources (apps, YouTube), perception of English as capital for social status, and awareness of learning strategies and resources (6 items).
- **Part 3: Societal Perceptions of English Learning (Societal Ideology, Q13–Q18):** Measures beliefs regarding expanded job opportunities, English as a prerequisite for career success, upward social mobility, long-term economic returns (promotion, job transition), agreement with the social view of English as an influential communication tool, and securing social competitiveness (6 items).
- **Part 4: Learning Effort and Practice (Learning Investment, Q19–Q24):** Measures prioritizing study time amid busy schedules, efforts to overcome time and physical constraints, adherence to scheduled lectures, attempts to apply learned content to work and daily conversation, active participation in assignments and online discussions, and overall immersion toward achieving learning goals (6 items).

3. Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using Python-based statistical libraries (Pandas, SciPy, and Statsmodels) through the following four procedures:

- **Reliability and Descriptive Statistics:** Internal consistency coefficients (Cronbach's α) were calculated for each subscale to verify measurement reliability, and means (*M*) and standard deviations (*SD*) were computed at both the item and construct levels.

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- **Correlation Analysis:** Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients (r) were computed to examine bivariate associations among the four core constructs.
- **Multiple Linear Regression Analysis:** Simultaneous multiple regression (Enter method) was performed with imagined identity, learning capital, and societal ideology as independent variables and learning investment as the dependent variable to evaluate model fit (R^2, F), standardized regression coefficients (β), and variance inflation factors (VIF) for multicollinearity diagnostics.
- **Mediation Analysis:** To test the mediating role of learning capital in the pathways from identity and ideology to learning investment, Baron and Kenny's (1986) stepwise regression procedure was combined with non-parametric bootstrapping (5,000 resamples) to estimate direct effects, indirect effects, and 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals.

IV. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

1. Descriptive Statistics and Reliability Verification

Reliability analysis of the 24-item instrument yielded an overall Cronbach's α of .963, demonstrating high internal consistency. Subscale reliability coefficients were also well above the conventional .80 benchmark: .950 for identity, .844 for capital, .929 for ideology, and .899 for learning investment.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Reliability Analysis by Subscale (N = 61)

Construct	Items	No. of Items	*M*	*SD*	Min	Max	Cronbach's *α*
Identity	Q1–Q6	6	4.08	0.96	1.00	5.00	.950
Capital	Q7–Q12	6	3.64	0.83	1.50	5.00	.844
Ideology	Q13–Q18	6	3.99	0.96	1.00	5.00	.929
Investment	Q19–Q24	6	3.54	0.86	1.00	5.00	.899

As shown in Table 1, adult learners exhibited high mean scores exceeding 4.00 on **imagined identity** (M = 4.08, SD = 0.96) and **societal ideology** (M = 3.99, SD = 0.96). In contrast, scores for **learning capital** (M = 3.64, SD = 0.83) and actual **learning investment** (M = 3.54, SD = 0.86) were comparatively lower.

Item-level descriptive statistics (Table 2) illuminate the practical realities faced by adult learners even more clearly. The highest-rated items were Q18 ("Improving English proficiency is an important choice for gaining social competitiveness," M = 4.25) and Q17 ("Agreement with the social perception that English is an influential communication tool," M = 4.16) in the ideology domain, alongside Q4 ("Imagining myself communicating with people from other countries," M = 4.21) and Q6 ("Feeling motivated when imagining speaking English fluently," M = 4.20) in the identity domain. Conversely, the lowest-rated items were Q19 ("Prioritizing time for English study despite busy work or personal schedules," M = 3.16) in the investment domain, and Q12 ("Knowing diverse learning information and strategies to improve English," M = 3.31) and Q7 ("Not sparing financial investment in paid courses or textbooks," M = 3.33) in the capital domain. These findings empirically demonstrate that although adult learners hold strong aspirations regarding the social value of English and their ideal future selves, they encounter practical constraints in daily life due to time allocation difficulties and insufficient strategic resources.

Table 2. Means and Standard Deviations for Individual Survey Items (N = 61)

Item	Item Content Summary	*M*	*SD*
Q1	Concretely imagining myself using English confidently in the future	4.00	1.08
Q2	Imagining demonstrating expertise in my major or profession using English	3.89	1.13
Q3	Imagining achieving my personal goals through the use of English	4.00	1.10
Q4	Imagining myself communicating with people from other countries	4.21	1.07
Q5	Viewing English learning as self-improvement beyond mere knowledge acquisition	4.18	0.99
Q6	Feeling motivated to study when envisioning myself speaking English fluently	4.20	1.05
Q7	Willingly making financial investments in paid courses or study materials	3.33	1.09
Q8	Believing existing major knowledge/work experience creates greater value with English	3.93	1.09
Q9	Actively utilizing digital tools or AI technologies for efficient learning	3.80	1.14
Q10	Utilizing external resources (English apps, YouTube, etc.) outside class	3.77	1.13
Q11	Believing English proficiency is an important means of attaining social status	3.72	1.14

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Item	Item Content Summary	*M*	*SD*
Q12	Knowing diverse learning information and strategies to improve English skills	3.31	1.06
Q13	Recognizing English ability as a key factor expanding job opportunities	4.10	1.12
Q14	Viewing English proficiency as an essential requirement for career success	3.69	1.19
Q15	Believing fluency in English will elevate my social value or standing	3.74	1.14
Q16	Being confident that learning English yields long-term economic gains (promotion, etc.)	4.03	1.15
Q17	Agreeing that English is an influential communication tool in modern society	4.16	1.05
Q18	Viewing English improvement as an important choice for social competitiveness	4.25	1.06
Q19	Prioritizing time for English study despite busy work or personal schedules	3.16	1.07
Q20	Striving to overcome obstacles such as time shortage and physical fatigue	3.44	1.12
Q21	Diligently attending lectures according to the scheduled academic calendar	3.82	1.07
Q22	Attempting to apply class content to real workplace or daily conversations	3.52	1.12
Q23	Participating proactively in course assignments and online discussions	3.64	0.93
Q24	Immersing myself in English study to the best of my ability to achieve goals	3.67	1.04

2. Correlation Analysis among Major Variables

Pearson product-moment correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationships among the four constructs, and the results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Pearson Correlation Matrix among Constructs (N = 61)

Variable	1. Identity	2. Capital	3. Ideology	4. Investment
1. Identity	1.000			
2. Capital	.804***	1.000		
3. Ideology	.753***	.692***	1.000	
4. Investment	.684***	.756***	.616***	1.000

Note. *** p < .001.

Strong, statistically significant positive correlations were observed across all pairs of constructs. Specifically, learning investment correlated most strongly with learning capital (r = .756, p < .001), followed by imagined identity (r = .684, p < .001) and societal ideology (r = .616, p < .001). Furthermore, strong inter-correlations were found between identity and capital (r = .804, p < .001) as well as between identity and ideology (r = .753, p < .001).

3. Multiple Regression Analysis on Learning Investment

To determine the relative predictive power of imagined identity, learning capital, and societal ideology on actual learning effort and practice (investment), a multiple linear regression analysis was conducted. Multicollinearity diagnostics indicated that variance inflation factors (VIF) were 3.59 for identity, 2.98 for capital, and 2.43 for ideology—all well below the threshold of 10 (and the conservative cutoff of 5)—confirming the absence of multicollinearity concerns. The regression results are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4. Multiple Linear Regression Results Predicting Learning Investment (N = 61)

Predictor	*B*	*SE*	*β*	*t*	*p*	VIF
Constant	0.467	0.350	-	1.334	.187	-
Identity	0.132	0.145	.146	0.912	.366	3.590
Capital	0.575	0.151	**.553**	3.793	**<.001*** **	2.978
Ideology	0.111	0.118	.124	0.944	.349	2.428

Note. R = .771, R^2 = .594, Adjusted R^2 = .572, F = 27.78 (p < .001), *** p < .001.

The overall regression model accounted for 59.4% of the variance in learning investment (R^2 = .594, Adjusted R^2 = .572) and was statistically significant (F = 27.78, p < .001). Notably, however, when all predictors were entered simultaneously, neither imagined identity (β = .146, t = 0.912, p = .366) nor societal ideology (β = .124, t = 0.944, p = .349) exerted a statistically significant direct effect on learning investment.

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Only **learning capital** emerged as a statistically significant positive predictor of learning investment (β = .553, t = 3.793, p < .001). This finding strongly suggests that adult learners' future self-images or beliefs regarding the socioeconomic utility of English do not directly generate behavioral investment on their own, but instead operate through concrete learning capital.

4. Mediation Analysis of Learning Capital

To further examine the structural mechanism revealed by the multiple regression analysis, mediation analyses with 5,000 bootstrap resamples were conducted with learning capital specified as the mediator in the pathways from identity to investment and from ideology to investment.

Table 5. Mediation Analysis and Bootstrapping Verification of Learning Capital (N = 61)

Model / Pathway	Effect Path	*B*	*SE*	*t*	*p*	Bootstrap 95% CI	Mediation Type
Path 1: Identity Model (Identity → Capital → Investment)	Total effect (*c*)	0.618	0.086	7.185	<.001	-	-
	Direct effect (*c′*)	0.195	0.128	1.514	.135 (n.s.)	-	**Full Mediation**
	Indirect effect (*a*×*b*)	0.422	0.114	-	-	**[0.2065, 0.6532]**	(Complete)
Path 2: Ideology Model (Ideology → Capital → Investment)	Total effect (*c*)	0.553	0.092	5.986	<.001	-	-
	Direct effect (*c′*)	0.161	0.105	1.535	.130 (n.s.)	-	**Full Mediation**
	Indirect effect (*a*×*b*)	0.392	0.094	-	-	**[0.2171, 0.5881]**	(Complete)

Note. Bootstrap resamples = 5,000. An indirect effect is statistically significant when the 95% confidence interval (CI) does not include zero.

As shown in Table 5, the mediation analyses establish two critical structural pathways:

- **Identity → Capital → Investment Pathway:** While the total effect of imagined identity on learning investment was statistically significant (B = 0.618, p < .001), its direct effect became non-significant once learning capital was introduced into the model (B = 0.195, p = .135). Conversely, the indirect effect through capital was 0.422, with a 95% bootstrap confidence interval of [0.2065, 0.6532] excluding zero. Thus, learning capital **fully mediated** the relationship between imagined identity and learning investment.
- **Ideology → Capital → Investment Pathway:** Similarly, societal ideology exerted a significant total effect on learning investment (B = 0.553, p < .001), but its direct effect became statistically non-significant after controlling for capital (B = 0.161, p = .130). The indirect effect via capital was 0.392, and the 95% bootstrap confidence interval of [0.2171, 0.5881] excluded zero, confirming that societal ideology also influenced learning investment exclusively through a **full mediation** pathway via learning capital.

V. DISCUSSION

Applying Darvin and Norton's (2015) Model of Investment to the distinct sociocultural context of adult distance higher education in South Korea yields three major theoretical and empirical insights.

1. Structural Discrepancy between Desire and Practical Execution

Adult learners shared remarkably strong imagined identities as future English users (M = 4.08) and high awareness of the hegemonic value of English in South Korean society (M = 3.99). However, their actual level of learning investment (M = 3.54) lagged behind these aspirations, with the item assessing the ability to prioritize study time amid busy daily schedules (Q19, M = 3.16) recording the lowest score across the entire survey.

This pattern reflects the acute "time poverty" experienced by adult learners (Han & Kim, 2021). Adult students enrolled at cyber universities must carve out fragmented study periods while managing full-time employment and family responsibilities. Although their "imagination" of advancing professionally through English fluency is vivid, a tangible structural fissure exists between aspirational desire and the concrete "practice" of organizing physical time for daily study.

2. Decisive Mediating Mechanism of Learning Capital: No Action without Resource Mobilization

The central finding of this study is the exclusive predictive power and full mediating role of learning capital demonstrated through multiple regression and bootstrapping analyses. Many conventional SLA studies have assumed that heightened motivation or a vivid Ideal L2 Self naturally leads to increased learning effort (Dörnyei, 2009). However, the present findings caution that such psychologistic assumptions do not automatically hold in the lived reality of adult distance learners.

No matter how clearly adult learners envision a successful English-speaking future self (identity) or how deeply they recognize the socioeconomic necessity of English for employment and promotion (ideology), these cognitive and social orientations fail to materialize into actual behavioral investment unless learners possess **concrete learning capital**—namely, metacognitive learning strategies (Q12), the capacity to integrate English with prior occupational expertise (Q8), and proficiency in leveraging digital and AI tools (Q9, Q10). In other words, capital operates as a "transformer" and practical bridge that translates abstract cognitive visions and ideological beliefs into enacted learner agency. Only learners equipped with strategic and technological resources can effectively structure their scarce time, overcome fatigue, and sustain active engagement.

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3. Integration of Digital/AI Learning Capital with Adult Learners' Prior Occupational Expertise

Within the capital subscale, relatively high ratings were observed for Q8 ("Integrating existing major knowledge or work experience with English creates greater value," $M = 3.93$) and Q9 ("Actively utilizing digital tools or AI technologies for efficient learning," $M = 3.80$). These results underscore the distinctive profile of cultural capital that differentiates adult learners from traditional undergraduate cohorts.

For adult learners, English is not an isolated subject learned from a blank slate; rather, they acutely recognize that symbolic value multiplies when English is combined with their accumulated domain expertise. Furthermore, for distance learners unable to attend physical classrooms, digital tools and generative AI technologies serve as indispensable instrumental capital that offsets spatiotemporal barriers (Godwin-Jones, 2021). AI-powered conversational tutors, translation tools, and YouTube-based English content provide low-cost, high-efficiency, personalized learning environments for adults who previously lacked access to expensive private instruction, thereby democratizing and expanding their learning capital. Consequently, strengthening such digital and strategic capital serves as the decisive lever for sustaining adult distance learners' academic commitment.

VI. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

1. Conclusion

Drawing upon Darvin and Norton's (2015) Model of Investment, this study analyzed survey data from 61 adult EFL learners at a cyber university in South Korea to elucidate the structural relationships among identity, ideology, capital, and investment. The primary conclusions are threefold: First, while adult distance learners possess strong imagined identities and firm ideological awareness regarding English, their actual learning investment remains constrained by temporal limitations. Second, multiple regression analysis demonstrated that learning capital was the sole statistically significant predictor of learning investment ($\beta = .553$, $p < .001$), with the overall model explaining 59.4% of the variance. Third, learning capital fully mediated the effects of both imagined identity and societal ideology on learning investment. These findings offer significant scholarly value by empirically demonstrating that motivation and vision alone are insufficient for adult learners; concrete instrumental and strategic capital must be secured for aspirational desires to translate into sustained learning practice.

2. Pedagogical Implications

The findings suggest four actionable recommendations for cyber universities, distance higher education institutions, and adult EFL practitioners:

- **Instructional Design Centered on Building Learning Capital:** Moving beyond conventional motivational lectures, distance institutions should integrate structured "learning capital workshops" into the formal curriculum to equip learners with concrete study skills. Specifically, to address the vulnerability identified in Q12 (awareness of learning strategies, $M = 3.31$), explicit training in online reading and listening metacognitive strategies is urgently needed.
- **Strengthening Generative AI and Digital Literacy Training:** Institutions should provide practical guidelines and training programs on "AI-assisted English learning" so that adult learners can effectively convert AI tutors, speech-recognition tools, and digital text analyzers into learning resources (Q9, Q10). Such digital literacy serves as the most potent compensatory capital for overcoming adult learners' time constraints.
- **Time Management Support and Introduction of Micro-learning:** Given that securing study time is the primary bottleneck for adult learners (Q19, $M = 3.16$), cyber universities should transition away from lengthy 50-minute video lectures toward 10- to 15-minute mobile "micro-learning" modules that can be completed during commutes or brief daily breaks, supported by online coaching systems that help learners monitor weekly study plans.
- **Developing Integrated Curricula Combining Prior Occupational Experience (ESP):** To leverage adult learners' strongest existing asset—their academic and professional experience (Q8, $M = 3.93$)—curricula should shift from generic English for General Purposes (EGP) toward English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and workplace communication courses directly connected to learners' professional fields.

3. Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Because this study sampled 61 students enrolled in a Practical English department at a single cyber university, caution is warranted when generalizing the findings to the broader population of adult distance learners. Future research should expand the sample size and conduct longitudinal investigations encompassing adult learners across diverse academic disciplines and age groups. Moreover, combining quantitative surveys with qualitative and behavioral data—such as in-depth interviews and LMS learning log data—in a mixed-methods design would provide a richer, multidimensional understanding of adult learners' ongoing identity negotiation and capital conversion processes.

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