

Social Media Advertising as a Vehicle for Developing EFL Students' Critical Language Awareness: A Critical Discourse Analysis Study in Language and Advertisement Class

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Abstract

Social media advertising is an ideologically dense multimodal discourse that EFL students encounter routinely, yet digital familiarity does not necessarily entail critical awareness. This study examined qualitative changes in students' interpretations of Instagram advertising and how an integrated critical discourse analysis (CDA) and visual-grammar scaffold supported Critical Language Awareness (CLA) in a Semester VI Language and Advertisement course. A qualitative classroom-based design involved 35 English Literature students at Universitas Khairun Ternate. Data comprised pre-analysis and post-analysis tasks, audio-recorded guided discussions, and written reflections. Analysis integrated Fairclough's text-discursive practice-social practice framework with Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar; a four-dimensional rubric (textual analysis, discursive practice, social practice, and critical reflexivity) served only as a descriptive index of qualitative coding. Across sources, students moved from surface description toward supported interpretations of interpersonal address, visual framing, production and algorithmic distribution, identity construction, consumption values, and power asymmetries. The largest descriptive shifts occurred in social practice and critical reflexivity, although development remained uneven and eight students did not demonstrate the targeted form of discursive-practice awareness in post-analysis texts. The study contributes a classroom-based analytical pathway linking authentic social media discourse, multimodal analysis, and reflexive CLA without making causal claims. It positions advertising as a practical resource for critical digital literacy in Indonesian EFL higher education.

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Introduction

University EFL students encounter social media advertising as part of everyday digital participation, but frequent exposure does not necessarily produce the ability to question how advertisements position viewers, normalise values, or construct desirable identities. In Indonesian higher education, social media is well established as a resource for language exposure, interaction, and engagement (Malik & Asnur, 2019; Hidayat et al., 2022; Syafi'i et al., 2024; Apoko & Waluyo, 2025). The empirical problem addressed here is therefore not students' access to digital texts but the gap between platform familiarity and critical interpretation of the multimodal persuasion embedded in those texts.

Critical Language Awareness (CLA) offers a pedagogical and analytical response to this problem because it links linguistic choice to ideology, identity, and power (Fairclough, 1992; Janks, 2013). Critical approaches to EFL ask learners to move beyond functional comprehension and examine whose perspectives are privileged, which assumptions are normalised, and how readers are

positioned (Cots, 2006; Shepard-Carey & Gopalakrishnan, 2023; Hidayat et al., 2025). This orientation is particularly important in digitally mediated contexts, where technical fluency can coexist with limited scrutiny of persuasive and ideological organisation (Shehab, 2026).

The present study operationalises CLA through an integrated analytical pathway. Fairclough's (2013) three-dimensional model moves from textual choices to discursive practice and social practice, while Kress and van Leeuwen's (2020) visual grammar provides concepts for representational, interactive, and compositional meaning. For advertising, this combination is necessary because interpersonal address, modality, gaze, social distance, salience, and composition work together in constructing persuasive relations between brands and audiences (Hidarto, 2021; Machin & Mayr, 2023). The CLA component adds a reflexive question: how does the analyst recognise and reconsider his or her own positioning by the text?

Three limitations in prior work sharpen the research gap. Methodologically, Indonesian EFL studies of social media have largely examined use, perception, engagement, or language-learning outcomes rather than changes in students' discourse analysis across a structured classroom sequence (Malik & Asnur, 2019; Hidayat et al., 2022; Syafi'i et al., 2024; Apoko & Waluyo, 2025). Contextually, evidence on critical reading of commercial social media discourse in Indonesian higher education remains limited, especially outside major western Indonesian settings. Theoretically, critical-literacy studies have shown the value of guided instruction (Hidayat et al., 2025), but less is known about how linguistic, visual, platform-distribution, social-practice, and reflexive dimensions can be examined as one connected process of CLA development.

Research on advertising and digital texts provides the semiotic basis for such classroom work. Instagram influencer advertising and online advertising studies show how colloquial address, engagement markers, image design, and visual-verbal interaction contribute to credibility and persuasion (Hidarto, 2021; Al-Subhi, 2022), while multimodal campaign research demonstrates that persuasive meanings emerge through coordinated verbal and visual choices (Schubert, 2021). These studies explain how advertising works as discourse, but they do not directly examine how EFL students learn to move from identifying those features to interpreting production, circulation, ideology, power, and their own reader positioning.

The gap is therefore both pedagogical and analytical: classroom evidence is needed on whether students' interpretations become more textually grounded, contextually aware, ideologically explicit, and reflexive after structured engagement with authentic social media advertising. The present study addresses that gap through multiple qualitative data sources rather than relying on a single post-course perception measure. It also treats uneven or absent development as analytically important evidence, not as noise around an assumed instructional effect.

The scholarly contribution lies in treating Fairclough's CDA, visual grammar, and CLA not as parallel frameworks but as linked analytical levels that make students' interpretive movement observable. Textual and visual features provide evidence; discursive practice situates that evidence in production and platform circulation; social practice connects it to identity, consumption, and power; and critical reflexivity examines the student's own positioning. This integration provides a transferable analytic model for studying developing CLA across pre-analysis work, post-analysis work, classroom discussion, and reflection, while adding evidence from an eastern Indonesian university context that is underrepresented in the critical EFL literature.

Accordingly, the study addresses three questions: (1) What qualitative changes characterise students’ analyses of social media advertising before and after CDA-oriented instruction? (2) How do students use the integrated CDA–visual-grammar scaffold to connect textual and visual evidence with discursive practice, social practice, and critical reflexivity? and (3) Which recurring advertising features most consistently trigger ideological and reflexive interpretations among the participating students?

Method

This study employed a qualitative classroom-based research design within critical applied linguistics. Its purpose was to examine changes in the substance, evidential grounding, and depth of students’ interpretations in an authentic pedagogical setting rather than to estimate an intervention effect or produce statistical generalisation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The four-level rubric was applied after qualitative coding as an indexing device that summarised the distribution of interpretive levels across the cohort. Rubric means were therefore subordinate to qualitative interpretation: they were not subjected to inferential testing, did not constitute a separate quantitative strand, and were used only when corroborated by student texts, classroom discussion, and written reflection. The study was conducted in the Semester VI Language and Advertisement course during the 2025/2026 Academic Year in the Department of English Literature, Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Universitas Khairun Ternate.

The participants comprised all 35 students enrolled in the course, so total sampling was used to represent the full range of analytical performance in the class. All had completed at least five semesters of English Literature study. Within the unit examined here, the instructional objective was to enable students to interpret persuasive language and multimodal design in relation to audience positioning and social context. Students entered the unit with varying prior exposure to advertising and general discourse-analysis concepts, but no standardised pre-course CDA measure was available. Course-placement records indicated an overall intermediate to upper-intermediate English proficiency range; because no standardised proficiency test was administered for the study, proficiency was treated only as contextual information and no gender-based proficiency interpretation was made.

Table 1. Participant Profile and Course Context (N = 35)

Characteristic	Description
Participants	35 Semester VI English Literature students
Sex composition	30 female; 5 male
Academic standing	At least five semesters completed
Course context	Language and Advertisement, 2025/2026
Proficiency evidence	Course-placement records indicated an overall intermediate to upper-intermediate range; no standardised proficiency test was administered for this study
Prior analytical exposure	Varied exposure to advertising and general discourse-analysis concepts; no standardised pre-course CDA measure was available

Note. Proficiency information derives from course-placement records only; no standardised proficiency test or pre-course CDA measure was administered for this study.

All 35 students provided written informed consent before participating. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained through coded identifiers (S-01 to S-35). Participant data and excerpts were used with consent and under the ethical clearance issued by the Research Ethics Committee of Universitas Khairun Ternate (No. 012/UN44.2/ET/2026).

Four data sources were used for triangulation. First, students independently analysed three social media advertisements before explicit CDA instruction. Second, they completed a parallel post-analysis task using three different advertisements from the same 25-post corpus. Each three-item set was selected to balance broad advertising category, approximate linguistic density, bilingual or informal language use, and visual complexity, including gaze, framing, salience, and compositional arrangement. The same number of items and the same analytical prompt structure were retained across the two tasks. Because the advertisements were not identical and no formal equivalence test was conducted, genre familiarity or item-specific complexity may have influenced performance; pre-post differences are therefore interpreted only in conjunction with the discussion and reflection evidence and not as proof of a treatment effect.

Third, guided classroom discussions were audio-recorded with written consent and transcribed to capture students' in-process reasoning, peer negotiation, and emerging critical interpretations. Fourth, all students completed individual written reflections on the relationships among language, visual design, ideology, and their own reading practices. These sources were analysed together so that claims about developing CLA did not depend on rubric values alone.

Instructional materials were drawn from a purposively selected corpus of 25 publicly accessible Instagram posts representing product, lifestyle, public-service, and political/government advertising. The corpus included formal and informal registers, Indonesian-English bilingual expressions, emoji-rich discourse, demand and offer images, varied framing distances, and different compositional arrangements. The diversity of the corpus was intended to expose students to multiple linguistic and visual strategies rather than to represent the population of Instagram advertising statistically. Materials were used only for non-commercial educational analysis.

The CDA and multimodal instruction was organised into five scaffolded stages following progressive instructional support (Vygotsky, 1978). Stage 1 introduced discourse as social practice and the purposes of CDA. Stage 2 modelled Fairclough's text, discursive-practice, and social-practice dimensions with advertising examples. Stage 3 introduced visual grammar, including representational, interactive, and compositional meanings. Stage 4 used guided collaborative analysis of selected corpus posts, and Stage 5 required independent application in the post-analysis task and written reflection. The stages were implemented sequentially during regular course sessions. The source records retained for this study document the pedagogical sequence but not the exact total instructional hours or the number and duration of separate meetings; this limits replication at the level of instructional dosage and is acknowledged as a reporting limitation.

Pre- and post-analysis texts were coded with a four-dimensional theory-derived rubric: textual analysis, discursive practice, social practice, and critical reflexivity. The first three dimensions were adapted from Fairclough (2013), while critical reflexivity represented the CLA objective of examining one's own positioning and assumptions. Scores functioned as qualitative level descriptors rather than psychometric measurements. Table 2 summarises the analytical focus, score progression, and illustrative evidence for each dimension. The rubric was designed for this classroom study and

was not separately validated as a standardised instrument; the resulting values are consequently interpreted as descriptive indices of coded evidence.

Table 2. Four-Dimensional Qualitative Coding Rubric

Dimension	Analytical focus	Score progression (0–3)	Illustrative evidence
Textual analysis	Linguistic and visual choices in the advertisement	0: no relevant evidence; 1: isolated feature named; 2: feature linked to meaning; 3: multiple features integrated with evidence	Pronouns, imperatives, modality, evaluative lexis, gaze, framing, salience
Discursive practice	Production, circulation, targeting, and reception	0: absent; 1: context/platform mentioned; 2: production or distribution linked to interpretation; 3: platform affordances, targeting, and reception integrated	Hashtags, sponsorship, algorithmic targeting, Stories/Reels, influencer partnerships
Social practice	Ideology, identity, consumption, and power	0: absent; 1: general social claim; 2: supported link to ideology/power; 3: textual and discursive evidence integrated with broader social relations	Normalised consumption, idealised identities, exclusion, manufactured intimacy, power asymmetry
Critical reflexivity	Awareness of one's own reading position and assumptions	0: absent; 1: personal reaction only; 2: change in reading stance explained; 3: own response critically related to persuasive/ideological positioning	Reflection on prior enjoyment, susceptibility, discomfort, or changed reading habits

Both researchers independently coded the pre- and post-analysis texts. Before discussion, raw inter-rater agreement was 88.6% overall, with 91.4% for textual analysis, 85.7% for discursive practice, and 88.6% for both social practice and critical reflexivity. Disagreements were resolved by returning to the relevant student text and the rubric descriptor, and the rationale for the consensus decision was retained within the existing analytical audit trail. Weighted Cohen's kappa is not reported because the preserved records contain dimension-level agreement summaries rather than the complete paired coder-by-item rating matrix required for a valid chance-corrected coefficient. Percentage agreement therefore provides only a limited reliability indicator and should not be read as equivalent to kappa. Discussion transcripts and written reflections were analysed thematically for recurring patterns, conceptual breakthroughs, ideological awareness, and persistent difficulty.

Trustworthiness was supported through source triangulation across pre-analysis texts, post-analysis texts, discussions, and reflections; theoretical triangulation across CDA and visual grammar; member checking with six randomly selected participants; an audit trail of instructional and analytical decisions; and verbatim excerpts identified by participant code. The instructor-researcher role created a power asymmetry that may have encouraged students to reproduce classroom terminology or provide socially desirable reflections. To limit overinterpretation, claims were required to recur across more than one data source where possible, individual written work was given greater evidential weight than agreement expressed only in whole-class discussion, and negative or weaker cases were retained in the analysis. The audit trail documented interpretive

decisions, but the retained records do not contain a separately structured reflexive-memo corpus; positionality is therefore acknowledged as a limitation rather than treated as an independently analysed source.

Result and Discussion

RQ1: Qualitative Shifts in Students' Advertising Analysis

Answering RQ1, the qualitative record shows a shift from predominantly surface description toward more explicitly evidenced multimodal and critical interpretation. Table 3 reports dimension-level rubric means only as descriptive summaries of that coding. The values index the direction of change across the 35 students; they are not treated as interval-scale or inferential statistics. Because the retained records contain dimension-level summaries rather than the complete participant-by-dimension matrix, medians, modes, and full score-frequency distributions cannot be reconstructed retrospectively.

Table 3. *Descriptive Rubric Means (0–3 Scale) by Dimension: Pre-analysis vs. Post-analysis (N = 35)*

Analytical Dimension	Pre-analysis Mean	Post-analysis Mean	Descriptive Change
Textual Analysis	0.74	2.31	+1.57
Discursive Practice	0.40	2.03	+1.63
Social Practice	0.23	1.91	+1.68
Critical Reflexivity	0.11	1.77	+1.66
Overall Mean	0.37	2.01	+1.64

The descriptive means increased in all four dimensions, with the largest changes in social practice (+1.68) and critical reflexivity (+1.66). These values are meaningful only alongside the categorical patterns and excerpts. At pre-analysis, 31 of 35 students (88.6%) were at levels 0–1 for textual analysis. Attention to production or algorithmic distribution, absent from the pre-analysis texts, appeared in 27 of 35 (77.1%) post-analysis texts, while eight students still did not show this feature. Post-analysis means remained below the maximum level in every dimension, with critical reflexivity lowest at 1.77; the cohort therefore displayed uneven development rather than uniform proficiency.

Prior to explicit CDA instruction, students' analyses were predominantly descriptive. They typically named visible elements such as brand names, product images, and colour palettes without explaining how linguistic or visual choices positioned audiences. A representative pre-analysis response by S-12 on an Instagram cosmetic advertisement read:

"This advertisement uses a picture of a beautiful woman and the text says the product will make you glow. The colours are bright and attractive. The advertisement is trying to sell the product by showing how good it looks." (S-12, Pretest, Post #3 – Beauty Skincare)

S-12 accurately identifies what is visible but does not use the visible evidence to infer a relationship between advertiser and viewer. Textually, modality and address form are not examined; visually, gaze, social distance, and composition remain unnamed; and no claim is made about production, identity, or ideology. The response therefore remains at the descriptive end of the rubric rather than moving from textual evidence to discursive or social interpretation. This pattern characterised most pre-analysis texts (31 of 35 students at levels 0–1 for textual analysis).

Following the instructional sequence, post-analysis texts more often named specific linguistic or visual choices and interpreted their positioning effects. In analysing a lifestyle product advertisement (Post #5 – Fitness Influencer), S-07 wrote:

"The caption always use 'you' to make the reader feel like a friend. The imperative 'push your limits' is put the reader as someone who is not yet enough, like the product can complete them. The adjectives 'stronger', 'better', 'unstoppable' they construct a standard of person that is idealised and can be reached if buy the product." (S-07, Posttest, Post #5 – Fitness Influencer)

S-07 moves beyond naming language by connecting second-person address, imperative mood, and evaluative lexis to an implied deficiency in the reader and to the construction of an idealised consumer self. This links textual evidence to a broader social meaning rather than stopping at vocabulary identification. In the visual dimension, S-19 similarly used demand image and social distance to explain how direct gaze and close framing create an interpersonal relation between represented participant and viewer.

Taken together, the S-07 and S-19 cases illustrate the central answer to RQ1: post-analysis work more often progressed from feature recognition to supported interpretation across modes. The grammatical limitations of students' English remain visible, but analytical quality was judged by how evidence was used, not by grammatical accuracy. The pattern indicates developing multimodal analytical competence rather than uniform mastery.

RQ2: Connecting Multimodal Evidence with Discursive and Social Practice

Answering RQ2, the clearest change was not simply the acquisition of new terminology but the use of the integrated scaffold to connect textual and visual evidence with production, distribution, and wider social relations. Before instruction, students rarely considered that advertisements are professionally produced for commercial purposes, algorithmically distributed to profiled audiences, and received within platform environments that shape visibility and interpretation. Post-analysis work more often treated those conditions as part of the meaning-making process.

Class discussion data provided particularly rich evidence of developing discursive practice awareness. During Session 3 (Post #11 – Political/Government), S-28 observed: "If we know that Instagram algorithm sending this post only to people who already follow the government account or interested in politics, then when the caption say 'us' and 'our community' it is not really open to all people. The 'us' is already selected by the algorithm." (S-28, Class Discussion Transcript, Session 3)

S-28's reasoning demonstrates movement across analytical levels: the inclusive pronouns 'us' and 'our' are first noticed as textual choices; algorithmic targeting is then introduced as a discursive-practice condition; finally, the apparently inclusive 'community' is reinterpreted as a selectively constituted audience. The excerpt therefore shows how platform distribution can change the ideological reading of a linguistic form. Comparable attention to production or distribution appeared in 27 of 35 (77.1%) post-analysis texts, while eight students still produced analyses without this dimension. Hashtags, Stories and Reels, and influencer partnerships were likewise interpreted as features that can shape circulation, urgency, and the boundary between personal recommendation and paid promotion.

The same scaffold also supported movement from discursive practice to social practice. Three themes recurred most consistently across post-analysis texts, discussions, and reflections: the normalisation of consumption and lifestyle aspiration, the construction of socially marked identities, and the power asymmetry concealed by an apparently friendly advertising voice.

Students increasingly treated consumption as an ideological rather than merely commercial theme. Beauty, fashion, and technology advertisements were read as pairing aspirational language

with idealised social actors to make a purchasable lifestyle appear natural and desirable. S-03 captured this shift in a written reflection:

“Before this class I think the advertisement just want to sell something. Now I realise it also selling me identity and vision of who I should want to become. The product is almost secondary from this identity they construct.” (S-03, Written Reflection)

S-03’s reflection moves from a commercial reading (‘sell something’) to a social-practice reading in which advertising also ‘sells’ an identity and a normative future self. The interpretive shift is important because the product is no longer treated as the sole object of persuasion; the student recognises identity construction as part of the advertisement’s ideological work.

A second theme concerned identity construction. Students increasingly interpreted gendered, aged, classed, and culturally positioned representations as selective ideological choices rather than neutral reflections. Beauty and fashion advertisements were linked to narrow physical ideals, while advertisements targeting young men were associated with technology, achievement, and particular forms of masculinity. S-22 noted:

“This advertisement says it for everyone but the image only shows one type of person. That is a choice and the choice have ideological consequence because it makes one type of body or person look like the normal one.” (S-22, Posttest, Post #2 – Fashion Brand)

S-22 connects a visual representational choice to a social claim: the contrast between universalising language (‘for everyone’) and a narrow depicted body type becomes evidence of normalisation and exclusion. This is a movement from visual description to a supported ideological interpretation of who is made to appear ‘normal’.

A third theme was the asymmetry between advertisers and audiences. Students identified how conversational address can simulate equality and intimacy while the advertiser retains greater knowledge about persuasive design, audience profiling, and commercial objectives. They described this tension as ‘hidden power’ or ‘manufactured intimacy’. S-31 articulated:

“The brand write like they are my friend: ‘we care about you’, ‘you deserve this’. But actually they design this sentence after research about what words make people want to buy. This friendly tone is strategy not real friendship. I think this is power that is hidden inside the language.” (S-31, Posttest, Post #22 – Personal Care FMCG)

S-31 links the textual form of friendly second-person address to the production logic of persuasive design and then to a social-practice claim about unequal power. The excerpt therefore integrates three levels of the scaffold: linguistic evidence, discursive production, and the ideological interpretation of intimacy as commercially manufactured.

RQ3: Features Triggering Ideological and Reflexive Interpretation

Answering RQ3, the features that most consistently triggered ideological and reflexive interpretation were not isolated visual or linguistic devices but features that made relational positioning visible: second-person and inclusive address, demand/offer framing, algorithmic targeting, idealised social actors, manufactured intimacy, and evaluative or modalised claims. Written reflections showed that these features sometimes prompted students to reconsider their own reading habits and relationship to familiar advertising discourse. Such reflections were treated as evidence of developing reflexivity in some participants, not as proof of identical change across the cohort.

"I used to like this advertisement and not think about it. Now I still like it in some ways but I also see what it is doing and that changes how I relate to it. I feel like I cannot be fully tricked anymore even if I still enjoy the content." (S-09, Written Reflection)

S-17 observed: "This class made me uncomfortable with some advertisements that I used to enjoy, but I think this discomfort is good. It means I am reading more carefully now" (S-17, Written Reflection). Together with S-09's account, this demonstrates a reflexive shift from judging an advertisement only by personal preference to recognising how enjoyment can coexist with ideological and persuasive positioning. The student does not reject the advertisement; instead, the reading stance becomes more self-aware. Table 4 summarises the recurring features most consistently associated with such ideological and reflexive interpretation across the qualitative data.

Table 4. Advertising Features Most Consistently Associated with Ideological and Reflexive Interpretation

Advertising Feature	Analytical Level	Interpretive Development Observed
Interpersonal address (you, we, imperative)	Textual	Awareness of constructed brand–audience relationship; interrogation of apparent solidarity
Demand vs. offer visual framing	Textual (Visual)	Ability to interpret gaze and social distance as ideological choices
Hashtag ecology and algorithmic targeting	Discursive Practice	Understanding of distribution as an ideological and commercial act
Idealised social actor representation	Social Practice	Recognition of identity normalisation; challenge to advertising's universalist claims
Manufactured intimacy / hidden power	Social Practice	Articulation of power asymmetry underlying the 'friendly' advertising voice
Evaluative lexis and modalised claims	Textual	Ability to identify how language choices construct value hierarchies and consumer desire

Discussion

The present study demonstrates three interrelated developments in EFL students' critical engagement with social media advertising. First, students' analyses shifted from predominantly descriptive identification of visible and linguistic features toward more evidentially grounded interpretations of multimodal persuasion. Descriptively, the mean indices increased from 0.74 to 2.31 for textual analysis, 0.40 to 2.03 for discursive practice, 0.23 to 1.91 for social practice, and 0.11 to 1.77 for critical reflexivity, with the largest changes occurring in social practice and reflexivity. Second, students increasingly connected linguistic and visual choices with production, algorithmic circulation, audience targeting, identity construction, consumption, and power. Third, second-person and inclusive address, demand/offer images, idealised social actors, evaluative language, algorithmic targeting, and manufactured intimacy became particularly productive triggers for ideological and reflexive interpretation. Nevertheless, these shifts were uneven: eight students still did not demonstrate the targeted form of discursive-practice awareness. Accordingly, the findings are better interpreted as evidence of developing Critical Language Awareness (CLA) within one classroom context than as proof of a uniform or causal instructional effect.

At the global level, this movement from description toward evidence-based critical interpretation is consistent with research positioning critical literacy and CLA as forms of language learning that require students to connect textual choices with social relations rather than merely comprehend propositional content. Britton and Leonard (2020), for example, demonstrate the value

of combining CLA with critical reflection in L2 education, while Shepard-Carey and Gopalakrishnan (2023) emphasise structured opportunities for learners to interrogate language ideologies. More recent work on critical digital literacy similarly suggests that explicit analytical procedures are necessary for identifying implicit and potentially manipulative meanings in digital discourse (Brocca et al., 2026). The present findings also intersect with research on digital multimodal composing, which has shown that multimodal pedagogy can expand learners' attention beyond linguistic form to the coordinated meaning potential of images, design, and digital affordances (Hafner, 2020; Jiang et al., 2020; Kohnke et al., 2021; Tour & Barnes, 2022; Xu, 2023). Zhang (2023) further demonstrates that critical-literacy practices are shaped by pedagogical and sociocultural configurations rather than by a universally transferable instructional formula. However, the current study extends this literature in an important direction. Whereas much multimodal EFL research concentrates on students as producers of digital compositions, the present study positions students as critical readers of already circulating commercial discourse. Visual grammar therefore operates not simply as a multimodal-production resource but as an evidential bridge through which gaze, framing, salience, social distance, and verbal choices can be connected to ideological interpretation (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020; Machin & Mayr, 2023).

The students' increasing recognition of manufactured intimacy, persuasive address, and concealed commercial power also resonates strongly with contemporary advertising-literacy research. Studies of Instagram and influencer advertising show that recognition of sponsorship does not automatically produce resistance to persuasion; rather, responses depend on disclosure, source credibility, identification, social presence, and existing persuasion knowledge (Boerman, 2020; De Jans et al., 2020; Eisend et al., 2020; van Reijmersdal & van Dam, 2020; Weismueller et al., 2020). Research further indicates that the boundary between personal recommendation and commercial communication may remain difficult for users to identify, particularly when advertising draws upon perceived authenticity and interpersonal closeness (Boerman & Müller, 2022; Hudders et al., 2021). This is highly relevant to the present students' characterisation of friendly brand language as "manufactured intimacy." Social presence and parasocial interaction can make influencer messages appear less overtly promotional (Kim, 2022), while identification and perceived credibility help explain the persuasive value of influencers relative to conventional celebrity endorsers (Schouten et al., 2020). Similarly, teenagers may possess general scepticism toward influencer marketing while remaining favourably disposed toward content from personally valued influencers (Sweeney et al., 2022), and inspiration and parasocial relationships can contribute to persuasive effectiveness (Beckert & Naderer, 2023). These findings help explain why critical reflexivity remained comparatively difficult in the present study: knowing that advertising is persuasive is conceptually different from recognising how one's own enjoyment, aspiration, trust, and identity investments may participate in that persuasion. Moreover, research on targeted advertising demonstrates that awareness of commercial data practices is itself uneven (Zarouali et al., 2020), supporting the inclusion of platform targeting within advertising literacy rather than treating advertising solely as a visible text.

A particularly important contribution concerns students' emerging attention to algorithmic distribution. Traditional textual criticism can identify pronouns such as *we*, *us*, and *you*, but it cannot by itself explain how a platform preselects the audience to whom those apparently inclusive forms are displayed. Swart (2021) shows that young people develop differing forms of awareness of

algorithmic selection through everyday platform experiences, while Koenig (2020) demonstrates pedagogically that students can develop more explicit algorithmic awareness when they systematically reflect on their encounters with algorithm-driven environments. Likewise, Cho et al.'s (2024) social media literacy framework conceptualises the user, messages, networks, and platform architecture as dynamically interconnected. The present findings therefore extend CDA-oriented EFL work by incorporating algorithmic circulation into Fairclough's discursive-practice dimension. In this formulation, asking *what does this advertisement mean?* is insufficient; CLA also requires asking *how was it produced, why was it delivered to this audience, under what commercial conditions, and how does platform selection alter the apparent social relationship constructed by the text?* This emphasis complements Shehab's (2026) argument for critical engagement with agency and identity in multimodal digital environments.

Within Indonesia, the findings both corroborate and extend an emerging critical-digital-literacy literature. Novianti et al. (2020) argue that critical literacy in EFL requires meaningful text selection, learners' social experiences, local issues, and explicit movement between "word" and "world." Silvhiyany et al. (2021) similarly found that Indonesian EFL learners who routinely used digital media could nevertheless struggle to evaluate online claims, sponsored content, visual information, and Instagram material critically. Rini and Nabhan (2023) report that Indonesian university EFL teachers regard multimodal texts, online information evaluation, and identity construction as important components of critical digital literacy. These findings reinforce the present distinction between digital familiarity and critical digital competence. Existing Indonesian studies have also demonstrated the educational value of social media for language exposure and learning (Hidayat et al., 2022; Apoko & Waluyo, 2025; Syafi'i et al., 2024), while Hidarto (2021) specifically shows how linguistic and visual resources construct persuasion in Instagram influencer advertising. Recent Indonesian scholarship further identifies multimodality and critical text interpretation as central to language-literacy education (Dewi Quraisyin et al., 2026), and analyses of Indonesian Instagram discourse confirm that persuasive effects are constructed through coordinated rhetorical and multimodal choices (Sari et al., 2026; Wilson & Lubis, 2026). Research involving Sufian also provides contextual evidence that culturally situated and audiovisual materials can support language-learning engagement in Indonesian classrooms (Koderi et al., 2023; Rokmana et al., 2025), although those studies address language learning rather than CLA and therefore should not be treated as direct evidence of critical-literacy development. Similarly, recent work in *Digital Learning, Social Science, and Life-course Studies* advocates movement from protection-oriented media education toward models combining critical reflection and multimodal participation (Rakhmatillayevna & Khabibjonovna, 2025), while Sharma and Gera (2025) illustrate how digital interaction and parasocial relationships can intersect with emotional expression and identity. Against this background, the present study adds evidence from Ternate, eastern Indonesia, a geographical context still comparatively underrepresented in Indonesian critical EFL research.

Theoretical, pedagogical, and policy implications. Theoretically, the findings refine the integration of Fairclough's CDA, visual grammar, and CLA by suggesting a connected interpretive pathway—*semiotic evidence* → *discursive production and circulation* → *social practice* → *critical self-positioning*. In particular, algorithmic distribution can be incorporated within discursive practice because circulation is not merely a neutral channel but part of how audiences and meanings are constituted. Pedagogically, this suggests that educators should avoid asking students merely whether

an advertisement is “biased” or “persuasive”; learners should be required to identify the precise pronoun, imperative, modality, gaze, framing, salience, disclosure, hashtag, or platform feature that warrants the interpretation. Authentic advertisements can therefore function as objects of language study through repeated cycles of analysis, peer discussion, comparison, and reflexive writing (Brocca et al., 2026; Novianti et al., 2020). Attention to emotional responses is also pedagogically valuable: students can be encouraged to examine how aspiration, discomfort, enjoyment, social comparison, or parasocial attachment affect their interpretations without assuming that critical literacy requires rejection of all advertising. Because this study did not measure mental-health outcomes, however, it cannot establish that CDA instruction improves psychological well-being. At the policy level, the findings more cautiously support integrating advertising literacy, sponsorship recognition, data-targeting awareness, and algorithmic literacy into university digital-literacy curricula. Disclosure research further suggests the value of clear commercial-content labelling (Boerman & Müller, 2022; Eisend et al., 2020), while targeted-advertising research points to the importance of privacy and data-literacy education (Zarouali et al., 2020). Such policies should complement—not substitute for—professional mental-health support where social-media experiences become associated with psychological distress.

The principal novelty of this study lies not in applying CDA or visual grammar independently, but in operationalising Fairclough’s textual, discursive-practice, and social-practice dimensions together with visual grammar and an explicit reflexive CLA dimension across pre-analysis texts, post-analysis texts, classroom discussions, and written reflections. It consequently makes visible a progression from naming semiotic features to interpreting platform circulation, ideological positioning, and the reader’s own implication in persuasion. The inclusion of algorithmic targeting as part of discursive practice is especially significant because it moves classroom CDA beyond the bounded advertisement toward the infrastructure governing visibility. Methodologically, the use of multiple qualitative sources and retention of weaker or negative cases prevents the descriptive rubric from being mistaken for proof of treatment effectiveness. Contextually, the study contributes evidence from an eastern Indonesian university while treating social-media advertising as an **object** of EFL critical inquiry rather than merely a digital medium for language delivery.

These contributions remain bounded by several limitations. The study involved only 35 students in one course and one institution, lacked a comparison condition, used pre- and post-analysis advertisements that were balanced but not formally equivalent, and documented short-term performance rather than sustained transfer. Instructor–researcher involvement may also have encouraged students to reproduce classroom terminology, while the theory-derived rubric was not psychometrically validated; only percentage agreement can be reported because complete coder-by-item matrices were not retained. In addition, the exact instructional dosage was not documented, and platform algorithms themselves were discussed analytically rather than investigated through behavioural or platform-trace data. Future studies should therefore preserve complete coding matrices, establish task equivalence, validate the analytical rubric, specify instructional duration, and conduct delayed-transfer assessments using unfamiliar advertisements. Multi-institutional research across proficiency levels and Indonesian regions could examine the transferability of the scaffold, while comparative work across Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and emerging platforms could establish whether different affordances elicit different forms of CLA. Longitudinal research may also investigate relationships among critical advertising literacy, identity negotiation, parasocial

engagement, and well-being, but such outcomes should be measured directly rather than inferred from students' critical reflections.

Conclusion

This study answers RQ1 by showing a qualitative shift from surface description toward more evidenced multimodal interpretation: students increasingly connected linguistic and visual choices with audience positioning, identity, consumption, and power, although performance remained uneven. In answer to RQ2, the integrated Fairclough–visual-grammar–CLA scaffold functioned as a linked analytical pathway from textual and visual evidence to production and circulation, wider social practice, and reflection on the reader's own positioning. The descriptive rubric means organise this pattern but do not constitute causal evidence.

For RQ3, interpersonal address, demand/offer framing, algorithmic targeting, idealised social actors, manufactured intimacy, and evaluative or modalised claims were the features most consistently associated with ideological and reflexive interpretation. Pedagogically, this supports using authentic advertising as an object—not merely a medium—of EFL learning to develop critical digital literacy. The contribution remains bounded by one institution, short-term evidence, non-equivalent task items, instructor-researcher influence, a non-validated rubric, and limited reliability records. Future studies should document instructional dosage, preserve coder-level matrices, use delayed and cross-context tasks, and test the scaffold across institutions and learner profiles.

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