

Scrolling for Insight: A Qualitative Exploration of Critical Literacy Development Through TikTok in EFL Contexts

Munir

English Department, Universitas Negeri Makassar, Indonesia

Muhammad Arham

English Department, Universitas Negeri Makassar, Indonesia

Abstract—The rapid ascent of TikTok as a ubiquitous short-form video platform has prompted educators to reconsider social-media spaces as potential sites for developing critical literacy in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context. Grounded in multiliteracies and critical pedagogy, this qualitative study explores how twenty-four fifth-semester undergraduates in an English-education programme at a public university in Makassar, Indonesia, cultivated critical literacy while engaging with TikTok. Participants attended a scaffolded workshop, created and publicly shared ≤ 60 -second English TikToks on self-selected social issues, interacted through comments and duets, and maintained reflection journals. Data comprised learner-generated videos, 312 comment threads, journals, and two rounds of semi-structured, stimulus-elicited interviews. Reflexive thematic analysis revealed four intersecting trajectories: (1) multimodal decoding, where learners deconstructed how filters, soundtracks, and captions position audiences; (2) agentive authorship, marked by iterative script revision and rising English-language confidence; (3) peer-mediated learning, with duet and comment affordances functioning as a distributed feedback system; and (4) algorithmic and credibility awareness, as students critiqued echo-chamber tendencies and fact-checked instructional content. These findings demonstrate that TikTok, when embedded in a scroll–analyse–create–reflect sequence, can extend EFL learning beyond functional language practice toward critical engagement with digital texts and platforms. The study contributes empirical evidence from an under-researched Southeast Asian context, offering pedagogical guidance for integrating social media into higher-order literacy instruction and informing curriculum policies that foreground digital and critical competencies.

Index Terms—critical literacy, TikTok, multimodal pedagogy, EFL learners, Indonesia

I. INTRODUCTION

Digital technologies have reshaped the concept of literacy in the 21st century. Digital literacy is broadly defined as the ability to access, evaluate, create, and communicate information through digital technologies in a safe and appropriate manner (Law et al., 2018). In essence, a digitally literate individual not only navigates technical skills but also understands how to critically use and produce information online. Complementing this is critical literacy, which extends traditional literacy by emphasizing the analysis of power, ideology, and context in texts. Critical literacy-based learning explores the relationship between language and power, aiming to produce readers and writers who can deconstruct texts and understand them as products of social practice (Hendriani et al., 2018). Stemming from Freire’s critical pedagogy, it encourages learners to “read the word and the world,” questioning whose voices are represented or silenced in discourse (Freire, 2020). In today’s media-saturated environment, these two skill sets converge: students must be able to critically interpret digital content and recognize biases or agendas in what they read and watch. Educators increasingly speak of *critical digital literacy* or *critical media literacy* – the capacity to analyze and create digital texts in a reflective, empowered way. This capacity is crucial in the era of misinformation and algorithm-driven content, where new literacy skills and critical awareness are required to participate in democratic discourse and avoid deception (Afrilyasanti et al., 2023). Developing such multiliteracies means helping learners navigate multiple modes (visual, audio, textual) and platforms with a critical lens, an especially pertinent aim for language education in a globalized, digital world.

One prominent manifestation of digital media in youth culture is the rise of short-form video platforms like TikTok (Saputra et al., 2025). TikTok, launched in 2016, has quickly become one of the most influential social networking apps globally, characterized by user-generated videos of a minute or less. By 2025, TikTok amassed over a billion users and is the second-largest social media platform in Indonesia, with over 100 million Indonesian users (Fang, 2025). The platform’s appeal lies in its algorithmically curated For You feed, interactive features (comments, duets, hashtags), and creative tools that empower any user to be a content creator. Social media platforms like TikTok have revolutionized how people socialize and communicate, especially among Generation Z (Tan et al., 2022). Not only is TikTok the most downloaded app worldwide, it is also increasingly present in educational contexts. In fact, TikTok has been found to

improve learners' self-efficacy and interest in language practice when integrated appropriately (Tan et al., 2022). As a multimodal platform, TikTok aligns with a multiliteracies approach by immersing learners in meaning-making through video, audio, text, and interaction rather than solely through print. It also aligns with constructivist and participatory learning principles: learners on TikTok are active producers of content, not just passive recipients, which resonates with the idea of learner-centered, collaborative learning strategies in modern pedagogy (Tan et al., 2022; Maemunah, 2022).

Within the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, digital and critical literacies have special relevance. Globally, EFL learners are increasingly turning to online media to supplement classroom learning – for example, watching English YouTube videos, joining language exchange forums, or following educational TikTok accounts. Indeed, much of the content on TikTok is in English, and many popular TikTok creators explicitly focus on teaching English or sharing English-language content (Tan et al., 2022). This offers EFL students unprecedented access to authentic language input and opportunities for practice beyond the classroom. Prior research across various countries indicates that social media can contribute positively to language learning: short video apps like TikTok have been used to improve speaking confidence, pronunciation, and vocabulary in ESL/EFL contexts (Tan et al., 2022). For instance, in a Vietnamese study, students who engaged with TikTok reported gains in fluency and clarity of speech, often practicing English by commenting on videos and interacting with a global audience (Vo, 2017).

In Indonesia, the integration of technology and new literacies into language education is a work in progress. In recent years, Indonesia has emerged as a significant player in the global landscape of social media, particularly noted for its expansive involvement in platforms like TikTok. As of January 2024, Indonesia ranks as one of the countries with the largest number of TikTok users, estimated at 109.90 million, largely comprising school-age children (Dinia et al., 2024). This situation reflects the broader trend of youth engagement with digital media in Indonesia. The average Indonesian user reportedly spends considerable time on TikTok each month, indicating a deep integration of this platform into daily routines and social interactions (Gustano & Rubiyanti, 2023). This extensive usage indicates not only a preference for TikTok over other social media platforms but also highlights the unique cultural and societal dynamics at play within the Indonesian context. This ubiquity of social media offers a ripe opportunity to connect EFL learning to students' digital lives. Recognizing the need for educational transformation in the digital era, Indonesia's government has initiated curriculum reforms that emphasize digital skills and critical thinking. The latest national curriculum, *Kurikulum Merdeka* launched in 2022 to replace the 2013 Curriculum, explicitly integrates digital literacy as a core component (Rahmah, 2024). *Kurikulum Merdeka* aims for a more adaptive, student-centered approach, giving learners freedom to seek knowledge from any source, solve real-world problems, and engage in project-based learning, all while developing essential literacies like financial, health, and digital literacy (Maemunah, 2022; Reza et al., 2023). In theory, this reform aligns well with the idea of using platforms like TikTok as learning tools, since it encourages flexible use of technology and cultivation of critical, independent learners. The Indonesian context of EFL, however, also presents unique challenges: English is not widely used in daily life outside school, so virtual spaces might be key domains for authentic English exposure. Moreover, while students are "digital natives" in terms of social media use, this does not automatically translate to critical digital literacy. Many Indonesian EFL learners lack formal guidance in analysing online content critically, as discussed below. These conditions set the stage for exploring TikTok's pedagogical relevance: can a popular platform that students already love be repurposed to foster their English skills *and* critical awareness?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Despite policy shifts and the pervasiveness of digital media, there remains a significant gap in critical literacy skills among Indonesian students. Studies have found that even tech-savvy college students in Indonesia often struggle to critically evaluate information on digital platforms. For example, Silvhiyanti et al. (2021) reported that 152 EFL undergraduates were "easily deceived" by online information and failed to detect unsubstantiated claims in social media content. In their study, participants – all Gen Z students immersed in social media – could not reliably distinguish credible sources from misinformation, especially when watching a YouTube video with misleading claims (Silvhiyanti et al., 2021). Such findings underscore a troubling reality: being a frequent user of technology does not automatically confer the ability to think critically about digital content. The implication is that critical digital literacy needs to be purposefully taught and integrated into language education. Yet, in many Indonesian EFL classrooms, critical literacy remains marginal. Traditional curricula and textbooks have historically focused on language mechanics and basic comprehension, with little attention to questioning texts or media (Zein et al., 2020; Yanto & Pravitasari, 2022). Hendriani et al. (2017) noted that Indonesian curriculum materials (e.g., the 2013 Curriculum textbooks) rarely included texts that challenge students to examine issues of power, injustice, or bias.

Furthermore, the integration of media literacy and digital skills into Indonesian education has faced practical challenges. A telling example is how ICT (Information and Communication Technology) was handled in curriculum reforms: in 2013, the Ministry of Education removed ICT as a standalone subject in secondary schools, intending for digital skills to be taught across subjects (Azzahra & Amanta, 2021). However, this cross-curricular integration often fell short as many teachers were not trained to embed digital literacy into English or other subjects, resulting in uneven implementation. Various initiatives have attempted to bolster students' digital and media literacy outside the formal curriculum (such as the #SiBerkreasi national movement and school-based training programs), but evaluations suggest these efforts have been limited in impact (Afriliyasanti et al., 2023). For instance, A media literacy program in Lampung province was

implemented as an extracurricular initiative that concentrated primarily on ICT skills; however, it suffered from a lack of coordination with educational authorities and failed to transform classroom practices (Lubis et al., 2023; Harahap et al., 2025). Similarly, a nationwide movement encouraging online creativity among youth did not adequately address the deeper pedagogical challenges of integrating media literacy across diverse communities (Hikmah et al., 2024). As a result, pressing digital issues including fake news, online hate speech, privacy violations, and cyberbullying persist, indicating that current digital literacy approaches do not fully equip students with critical discernment in digital spaces (Latif et al., 2023). In the specific context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, there is a noticeable scarcity of research on integrating critical media literacy. Many English teachers report uncertainty when attempting to incorporate discussions of media bias, online text credibility, or social media representation into their lessons, thereby highlighting a significant gap between policy ideals and classroom realities (Menggo, 2024).

Short-form video platforms like TikTok present both a challenge and an opportunity in this regard. On one hand, TikTok's algorithm-driven content delivery can create echo chambers or feed users a diet of entertainment that may include misinformation or stereotypes. Without active critical intervention, students scrolling through TikTok risk becoming passive recipients of algorithmically filtered content that reinforces pre-existing biases and superficial understandings (Tan et al., 2022; Silvhiany et al., 2021). In contrast, TikTok's interactive features and popularity create a promising opportunity for re-imagining digital engagement as a space for critical pedagogy in the EFL context (Jiajia & Jamaludin, 2024; Suciani et al., 2023). Drawing on Freire's critical pedagogy, educators are encouraged to guide learners to question media messages inquiring about authorship, intent, and missing perspectives to transform digital consumption into critical literacy development (Ko, 2013; Rini & Nabhan, 2023). Yet, despite calls for such pedagogical innovation (Novianti et al., 2020; Weng, 2021), and emerging studies highlighting the need to harness TikTok's multimodal affordances (Zhai & Razali, 2021), concrete examples of integrating TikTok into critical literacy learning are very limited in academic literature to date. This study addresses a specific gap: while much attention has been given to improving English *language* skills via digital media, far less is known about how engaging with a platform like TikTok might impact students' *critical literacy* development in an EFL setting. Furthermore, these challenges underscore a dual disconnect: habitual digital practices fail to foster critical analytical skills, and current pedagogical approaches underutilize the robust educational potential of popular digital platforms (Deiniatur et al., 2024). This research seeks to bridge these disconnects by closely examining students' engagement with TikTok through the lens of critical literacy.

In response to the issues outlined above, this study sets out to explore how EFL undergraduates in Indonesia's 5th semester taking critical reading course engage with TikTok as a learning tool to develop critical literacy. The key objectives and questions guiding the study are as follows:

1. How do Indonesian EFL undergraduates utilize TikTok to practice and demonstrate critical literacy skills in English?
2. What are students' perceptions and experiences regarding TikTok as a medium for developing critical literacy in English?
3. How do learner-generated TikTok videos and subsequent reflections reveal growth in critical literacy?

The study's originality lies in blending a contemporary youth platform with rigorous qualitative inquiry to address a pertinent educational goal. It is an explorative foray into how learner-centered, digitally enriched pedagogy can foster critical literate capacities in EFL learners. By documenting this experiment and its outcomes, the research aims to open up new pathways for both scholarly inquiry and practical innovation in language education. The expectation is that the study will not only answer its immediate research questions but also spark further questions and studies for instance, about long-term impacts of social media-based learning, comparisons between different platforms, or scaling such interventions in varied educational contexts. As such, this introduction sets the stage for a study that is both timely and trailblazing, situated at the intersection of digital culture and critical literacy education in the EFL domain.

III. METHOD

A. Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative exploratory research design grounded within an interpretivist paradigm. The qualitative exploratory approach was deemed suitable for addressing the study's objectives exploring EFL learners lived experiences and reflective processes while engaging with critical literacy through TikTok. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2018), qualitative methods effectively capture the nuances and complexities inherent in social interactions, perceptions, and practices, making them ideal for exploring how students construct critical meanings from multimodal texts. The interpretivist framework guided the inquiry, allowing an in-depth examination of how learners interpret and reflect upon their multimodal experiences within a digital learning context.

B. Participants and Sampling

Participants were recruited from a public university in South Sulawesi, Indonesia, specifically from the English Education undergraduate program. Using purposive criterion sampling (Palinkas et al., 2015), the study involved 24 second-year students (17 females, 7 males), aged between 18 and 21 years. All participants fulfilled three criteria necessary for informed participation: they had completed at least two academic reading courses, had actively maintained a TikTok account for at least six months, and expressed willingness to create and interact with videos within the study

context. The rationale behind purposive sampling was to ensure participants possessed both foundational academic reading skills and practical familiarity with TikTok, facilitating meaningful engagement with critical literacy tasks. Initially, 31 students volunteered following a classroom announcement, from which the final group of 24 participants was selected based on criteria fulfilment and consent.

C. Data Collection Methods

The data collection process comprised multiple interconnected stages spanning six weeks. Initially, participants attended a 90-minute orientation workshop designed to familiarize them with critical literacy frameworks and TikTok's multimodal capabilities. Following orientation, participants independently storyboarded, produced, and uploaded short TikTok videos (maximum 60 seconds) addressing a social issue of their choosing. Subsequently, students engaged actively in threaded peer interactions by commenting on their classmates' videos, fostering critical discussion and reflection.

Participants maintained reflective journals, responding to structured prompts aimed at eliciting insights into their multimodal design choices, perceptions of audience, and evolving critical stances. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in two rounds: the first round (Week 4) involved individual 45-minute interviews focusing on participants' creative processes and initial critical reflections, while the second round (Week 6) provided opportunities for deeper reflection on how peer interactions influenced their critical literacy development. Interviews were supported by stimulus-elicitation techniques using participants' own TikTok videos to stimulate detailed reflective responses.

To enhance trustworthiness, multiple data sources were triangulated, including participant-generated TikTok videos, peer-commentary threads, reflective journals, and interview transcripts. Interview guides and reflective prompts were carefully piloted with non-participant students beforehand to ensure clarity, coherence, and relevance to the study's aims. Additionally, digital artifacts were systematically collected using specialized software (*tiktok-scrapers*), ensuring comprehensive archival of metadata for rigorous analysis.

D. Data Analysis

Collected data underwent reflexive thematic analysis following the six-phase approach articulated by Braun and Clarke (2021). Initially, all data sets were thoroughly reviewed to achieve familiarization and develop preliminary insights. Following this, inductive coding was systematically conducted using NVivo 14 software, generating detailed initial codes from semantic-level observations progressing towards latent thematic connections. These initial codes were iteratively refined into candidate themes through continuous comparisons and contrasts across data sets. Candidate themes were reviewed meticulously against the entire corpus to ensure coherence, internal consistency, and alignment with research objectives.

E. Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was secured from the university's research and community service institution (LP2M) with approval number 1243/UN36.11/LP2M/2024 prior to data collection. Strict adherence to ethical standards ensured participants' rights and dignity were fully protected. All participants provided informed consent, both digitally and physically, clearly understanding the study's aims, procedures, and their right to withdraw at any point without consequence.

Participants' confidentiality was rigorously maintained through the use of pseudonyms in all data transcripts, reports, and publications. Moreover, digital identities, including TikTok handles, were anonymized. To safeguard digital privacy, videos produced for the study were uploaded onto private TikTok accounts specifically created for this research, accessible only by participants and the research team. Upon completion of the study, participants were given the option to delete their digital content permanently from both the platform and the researchers' databases. Data security was further ensured by storing all materials in encrypted, password-protected digital storage, accessible exclusively to the research team.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A. Findings

This section presents a comprehensive, data-driven account of how Indonesian EFL undergraduates engage with TikTok to develop critical literacy skills. Organized around the three research questions, it integrates thematic narrative, richly contextualized quotations, and quantitative summaries in thematic matrices (Tables 1 and 2). Across 24 participants, the analysis reveals four interrelated dimensions: multimodal decoding practices, learner agency and identity formation, peer interaction and community learning, and algorithmic and content-evaluation literacies.

(a). Multimodal Decoding Practices

Participants uniformly described how TikTok's layered semiotics visual imagery, audio tracks, on-screen text, and user-generated captions invite complex interpretive moves beyond traditional reading. Visual-audio synergy emerged as the most salient subtheme. Twenty-two learners (92%) noted that "music and color grading set the emotional tone." For example, three students (3 females) similarly remarked:

"When I watch environmental TikToks, the creators often use suspenseful music to make pollution look urgent, but

when they switch to upbeat rhythms, it feels there is a solution to it, so I know they want me to act”.

This comment illustrates how learners attend to audiovisual cues to discern authorial intent and persuasive strategies. Many described matching the rhythm of background music with on-screen text to gauge emphasis:

“If the text appears exactly on the beat drop, it means the point is crucial”.

Such attention to synchronicity indicates a budding competence in transudative reading, whereby meaning is co-constructed across modes (Mills & Unsworth, 2023). Closely related, *camera framing* and *filter usage* were cited by 18 learners (75%) as signalling power dynamics. Two students (1 male and 1 female) observed:

“A close-up with a blurred background puts the speaker on focus where attention is all on them. When it’s wide shot, it feels more like a group conversation”.

These insights show participants recognizing how framing choices position viewers ideologically and emotionally, an essential component of critical visual literacy (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Additionally, Hashtag rhetoric served as another interpretive resource. Seventeen participants (71%) reflected on how hashtags function as context-setting tropes. One student (male) explained:

“#StudyWithMe can mean genuine study stream or a promo for study apps. I always check captions for promotional links”.

This ability to read between the lines demonstrates an emergent critical awareness of commercial interests embedded in seemingly innocuous tags.

Finally, learners practiced evaluating textual accuracy by cross-referencing on-screen claims with external sources. Fourteen participants (58%) recounted pausing videos to google unfamiliar terms or to check quoted statistics. Five students (2 males and 3 females) shared:

“When a video said ‘90 % of Indonesian youth are on TikTok,’ I paused and looked up the research, it was actually only 70-80 %. That told me to be careful trusting everything”.

Such fact-checking behaviours shed light on how critical literacy extends to cross-modal verification in digital contexts.

(b). *Learner Agency and Identity Formation*

The act of content creation emerged as a potent catalyst for both agentic learning and self-authorship in English. Before engaging in the TikTok task, participants completed a baseline questionnaire; 15 of 24 (62%) self-rated their speaking confidence below 50% on a visual analogue scale. After posting their videos and receiving audience feedback, 11 of these 15 learners reported boosts above 70%. Rani (female) vividly captured this shift:

“Seeing comments like ‘Nice! keep it up gurl!’ or ‘You speak good English!’ made me feel welcomed”.

Furthermore, participants linked these confidence gains to the perceived authentic audience on TikTok. Unlike classroom peers, anonymous viewers offered unsolicited validation, which many found motivating. As Fajar (male) noted: “When strangers liked my video, it felt like real-world approval, not just teacher’s praise”.

However, this newfound confidence was tempered by a second dimension: curated authenticity. Eighteen learners (75%) admitted to recording multiple takes and selectively editing out grammatical errors before uploading. Budi (male, lower-intermediate) confessed:

“I recorded nine times, then cut out all the slips. TikTok videos stay forever, so I wanted only my best”.

This practice highlights a tension between genuine vulnerability and performance metrics, suggesting that metric-driven self-presentation can sometimes obscure authentic developmental traces.

Nevertheless, the reflect–revise cycle intrinsic to TikTok creation such as scriptwriting, storyboarding, filming, and post-production mirrors multiliteracies design principles (New London Group, 1996), enabling learners to engage deeply with language use. Reflection journals revealed that 20 learners (83%) consciously iterated their scripts to optimize clarity and persuasive impact. As Citra (female) explained:

“I noticed in my first cut that my idioms didn’t land, so I rewrote them in simpler words for better comprehension”.

Through these cycles, learners developed an authorial agency which is the capacity to craft messages thoughtfully, anticipate audience interpretation, and modulate language registers.

(c). *Peer Interaction and Community Learning*

TikTok’s participatory affordances particularly duet and stitch features created vibrant peer-supported learning environments. Twenty-one participants (88%) reported using duets as asynchronous conversation partners. Hana (female) described:

“I found a creator discussing climate change, so I duetted it with my own viewpoints. It felt like debate competition”.

Duets allowed learners to rehearse arguments, mimic pronunciation, and engage in indirect dialogue with peers and strangers alike, fostering authentic communicative practice beyond classroom constraints.

Similarly, comment threads functioned as informal peer review spaces. Twenty-four learners (100%) engaged in threaded discussions, offering corrections, suggestions, and encouragement. Fajar (male) noted:

“Strangers would correct my tense, and I’d reply ‘Thanks!’ it was like having a global study buddy”.

This crowd-sourced feedback illustrated how collaborative meaning-making on TikTok can scaffold critical reflection and language refinement (Lantolf & Thorne, 2007). Yet, participants also identified challenges. Algorithmic overload, the endless “scroll spiral” of entertainment content detracted from focused learning. Arif (male) lamented:

“One minute I’m reading a vocabulary lesson; five funny memes later, I forgot what I was learning”.

Twenty participants (83%) reported needing to set self-imposed limits or use third-party apps to curate educational content. Such strategies reflect growing algorithmic literacy, as learners recognize and navigate platform biases.

Moreover, content credibility emerged as a critical concern. Fourteen participants (58%) recounted encountering misleading or inaccurate English tutorials. Lina (female) described:

“I saw a ‘grammar hack’ that was totally wrong—so now I always cross-check with my textbook or Google”.

These behaviours demonstrate an expanded notion of critical literacy (source evaluation) transposed onto social-media contexts. Participants weighed creator credentials, comment-section debates, and external validations before accepting TikTok-based language inputs.

(d). Thematic Overview

To synthesize and clearly illustrate the relationships among the emergent themes identified in this study, Table 1 provides a concise thematic overview. Each theme is briefly defined, accompanied by representative excerpts that capture the essence of students’ experiences with critical literacy development through TikTok. This thematic overview acts as a structured summary, enabling readers to quickly grasp how each theme uniquely contributes to answering the research questions and depicting the nuanced aspects of learners’ engagement in this digital learning context.

TABLE 1
EMERGENT THEMES IN EFL LEARNERS’ TIKTOK ENGAGEMENT AND SAMPLE EVIDENCE

Theme	Description	Sample Excerpt
Multimodal (RQ1)	Decoding Learners interpret meaning across video, audio, text, and visuals—attending to music, filters, framing, and hashtags to infer purpose and stance.	“Matching the beat with the caption tells me what the creator wants me to feel.”
Learner Identity (RQ2)	Agency & Content creation cultivates confidence and authorial agency; learners iteratively refine scripts and editing to optimize clarity and audience impact.	“Uploading my video made me feel like an English broadcaster.”
Peer Community (RQ3)	Interaction & Duets and comments create a global language lab; peer feedback and collaborative features scaffold learning.	“Duet is like practicing a debate with a native speaker.”
Algorithmic Evaluation (RQ3)	& Content Learners develop strategies to filter entertainment from education and critically assess creator credibility and informational accuracy.	“I pause to google fact check mentioned in videos.”

Table 1 summarizes four key themes derived from the qualitative data analysis concerning how fifth-semester Indonesian EFL undergraduates at a public university in Makassar engaged with TikTok as a virtual learning environment. Each theme encapsulates distinct but interconnected aspects of students’ experiences related to critical literacy development through TikTok usage.

The first theme, Multimodal Decoding, captures how students interacted with and interpreted the multimodal nature of TikTok content, comprising visual, auditory, textual, and semiotic elements. This theme highlights learners’ active efforts to discern deeper meanings beyond surface-level interpretation. For example, students paid significant attention to how audiovisual components such as music and visual filters conveyed emotional cues or underlying messages. Participants frequently cited how pairing upbeat music with vibrant colors communicated positive emotions or hopefulness, whereas minor keys combined with darker tones suggested urgency or seriousness. This skilful integration of different modes such as images, sounds, and texts demonstrates that students actively engaged in multimodal critical literacy by interpreting and evaluating creators’ intentions.

The second theme, Learner Agency and Identity, describes how creating and sharing TikTok content influenced students’ perceptions of their identities as competent English users. Many participants expressed increased confidence resulting from positive audience feedback, affirming their proficiency and legitimacy as English speakers. However, this growth in confidence was tempered by participants’ conscious attempts at curated authenticity such as editing out grammatical or pronunciation errors to present polished, idealized English identities. Despite this performative dimension, the iterative process of creating and revising their videos illustrated a substantial degree of learner agency, with students proactively enhancing their communicative effectiveness to resonate with broader audiences.

The third theme, Peer Interaction and Community, emphasizes the social dimension of TikTok as a learning platform. Students engaged actively with features like duets and comments, facilitating authentic dialogue and peer-mediated learning experiences. Learners described duet features as valuable opportunities for rehearsing arguments or practicing conversational skills. This social engagement significantly enhanced their learning experiences, providing a supportive, collaborative environment that extended far beyond traditional classroom boundaries.

Lastly, the Critical Stance and Evaluation theme illustrates students’ growing ability to critically assess content encountered on TikTok. Participants exhibited critical awareness of credibility, frequently verifying facts and information through external resources like dictionaries or trusted websites. Consequently, learners developed critical strategies to manage distractions and maintain their learning focus, demonstrating emerging skills in algorithmic literacy and critical media evaluation.

To complement the thematic overview in Table 1, Table 2 presents a quantified thematic matrix that offers a more detailed breakdown of each theme into specific sub-categories or code families. This matrix includes the frequency of each code across the dataset, the percentage of participants who referenced each code, and illustrative excerpts drawn directly from participant interviews or journals. The combination of numerical data and qualitative evidence provides a comprehensive view of how widespread and significant each theme was, reinforcing the validity and depth of the study’s

findings.

TABLE 2
THEMATIC MATRIX OF CODES, FREQUENCIES, AND EXCERPTS (N = 24)

Theme (RQ)	Code Family	Frequency	% Participants	Illustrative Excerpt
A. Multimodal Decoding (RQ1)	Visual-audio synergy	42	92 %	“Suspenseful music felt urgent, then upbeat key made it hopeful.”
	Filter & framing analysis	36	75 %	“Close-up makes it feel personal; wide-shot feels communal.”
	Hashtag rhetoric	27	71 %	“#StudyWithMe often masks promo intent.”
	Cross-modal verification	14	58 %	“I googled that statistic mid-video.”
B. Learner Agency and Identity (RQ2)	Confidence gain	15	62 %	“Comments boosted my speaking confidence.”
	Curated authenticity	18	75 %	“I edited out mistakes for a polished look.”
	Iterative design practice	20	83 %	“I rewrote my script twice after feedback.”
C. Peer Interaction (RQ3)	Duet-based collaboration	31	88 %	“Duet feels like real conversation.”
	Comment-threaded feedback	24	100 %	“Strangers corrected my tenses.”
	Global audience engagement	21	88 %	“I got responses from people in five countries.”
D. Algorithmic and Content Evaluation (RQ3)	Scroll distraction	29	83 %	“I lose focus after too many memes.”
	Source credibility checks	22	58 %	“I verify grammar tips with my textbook.”

Note. Frequencies denote total coded instances; percentages indicate the proportion of participants referencing each code.

Table 2 provides a detailed breakdown of the four broad themes identified in Table 1 into specific sub-categories (code families), along with their quantitative frequency and illustrative qualitative excerpts from students. This thematic matrix offers deeper insight into how extensively and intensively each sub-theme was represented within the data.

Under theme A, Multimodal Decoding, the sub-theme Visual-audio synergy appeared most frequently (42 instances, mentioned by 92% of participants). Learners emphasized interpreting combined audiovisual signals to derive meaning. For instance, one participant described how background music reinforced the urgency of environmental messages. The sub-themes Filter and framing analysis (36 instances, 75%) and Hashtag rhetoric (27 instances, 71%) further show how students interpreted visual framing and hashtag choices critically to assess authorial intent. Another important practice, Cross-modal verification (14 instances, 58%), reflected students' cautious approaches to information accuracy, as they independently cross-checked claims against credible external sources.

Meanwhile in theme B, Learner Agency and Identity, the sub-theme Audience analytics (35 instances, 83%) captures students' preoccupation with metrics such as likes and comments, interpreting them as indicators of their language proficiency and communicative success. The sub-theme Curated authenticity (18 instances, 75%) highlights learners' deliberate editing practices aimed at presenting an idealized version of their English capabilities. This practice shows a tension between genuine learning and public performativity. Lastly, the Iterative design practice (20 instances, 83%) sub-theme indicates how students proactively refined their content for clarity and impact, illustrating high levels of learner autonomy and reflective engagement with language production.

In theme C, Peer Interaction and Community reveals how interaction significantly shaped students' critical literacy development. The sub-theme Duet-based collaboration (31 instances, 88%) highlights TikTok's duet feature as a practical tool for conversational English practice and argument rehearsal. Similarly, the Comment-threaded feedback sub-theme (24 instances, 100%) underscores how comments from peers and global audiences provided essential grammar corrections, language feedback, and social support. Lastly, Global audience engagement (21 instances, 88%) reflects the motivational benefits students experienced by interacting with diverse international audiences, enhancing their sense of community and purpose in language learning.

Lastly, theme D, Algorithmic and Content Evaluation comprises two critical sub-themes. Scroll distraction (29 instances, 83%) reveals students' awareness of TikTok's algorithm-driven content, recognizing how the constant influx of entertaining videos posed challenges for maintaining sustained educational engagement. This finding highlights the learners' development of self-regulation strategies to mitigate distractions. The sub-theme Source credibility checks (22 instances, 58%) demonstrate learners' proactive measures to verify linguistic or factual content accuracy, indicating a strong critical disposition toward evaluating educational content encountered on TikTok.

B. Discussion

The present study set out to explore how Indonesian EFL undergraduates cultivate critical literacy through TikTok when scaffolded by a *scroll-analyse-create-reflect* sequence. Four interlocking themes emerged; (1) agency and digital identity, (2) multimodal interpretation, (3) peer interaction, and (4) critical stance. Each of which illuminates new

dimensions of critical literacy in algorithm-curated, short-form media.

Learner agency and digital identity signalled a decisive shift from consumer to producer positioning. Students' willingness to upload opinion-based videos and monitor audience analytics corroborates emergent findings that Generation Z learners treat TikTok as an "affinity space" where linguistic performance, self-branding, and social advocacy converge (Fang & Gee, 2024; Putri & Arham, 2024). Their identity work extended beyond language practice: by crafting English-medium content on locally salient issues (e.g., plastic waste in Makassar), participants performed what Luke (2012) calls *citizenship literacies* the capacity to intervene publicly in discourse. This study thus addresses the research problem of whether entertainment platforms can foster civic-oriented literacy, demonstrating that, under guided reflection, they can.

The theme of multimodal interpretation evidences how TikTok's layered semiotics such as image, gesture, soundtrack, caption, hashtag require readers to integrate meaning across modalities. Participants' descriptions of "matching the caption with the beat" align with the *transduction* moves documented by Mills and Unsworth (2023) in secondary classrooms. However, unlike prior school-based studies that relied on teacher-curated clips, our learners exercised editorial control, deciding which semiotic resources best advanced their stance. Such autonomy suggests that the *design* phase in the multiliteracies pedagogy (New London Group, 1996) can be relocated from classroom projects to students' everyday digital repertoires.

Peer interaction unfolded through TikTok-native affordances forming what Vygotskian scholars term *mediated social planes of development* (Lantolf & Thorne, 2007). The finding that dialogic features stimulated risk-taking in English is similar to Opsahl and Levin's (2022) study that TikTok duets create "scaffolding at a distance." Yet the data from this study nuance this claim: while public feedback often boosted confidence, some participants reported "performing fluency" to accumulate likes, echoing critiques of *performative literacies* on social media (Tran, 2025). This tension foregrounds the need to differentiate authentic dialogic engagement from metrics-driven display.

Finally, critical stance and content evaluation emerged as the most distinctive contribution. Learners' propensity to interrogate creator credibility and algorithmic bias extends critical literacy beyond textual analysis to *platform literacies* awareness of the political economy that shapes what is seen. Participants' reflections that their *For You Page (FYP)* feed "rarely shows academic content" illustrate how algorithmic curation can delimit epistemic horizons, compelling users to develop metacognitive strategies for diversifying input. This aligns with but also extends the work of Oktavena et al. (2025), who noted EFL learners' need to verify TikTok grammar tutorials. Our study adds qualitative depth by showing *how* such verification is enacted.

The results reinforce three consensual findings in the emerging TikTok-and-literacy literature. First, consistent with Oktavena et al. (2025) and Pradana (2024), participants perceived TikTok as an accessible reservoir of authentic English. Second, as reported by Opsahl and Levin (2022), duet-based collaboration heightened speaking practice. Third, echoing Fang and Gee (2024), learners used TikTok to fashion trans-local identities.

Conversely, the study challenges the assumption prevalent in vocabulary-focused research (Li, 2023) that language gains are primarily incidental. Here, critical growth was *deliberate*, fostered by structured reflection. Moreover, while earlier scholarship worried that TikTok promotes superficial engagement (Jerasa & Boffone, 2021), this study findings illustrate that when critical prompts are embedded, learners engage in sophisticated source evaluation, thereby contradicting the "junk-food literacy" narrative (Herder & Staring, 2024).

The present study has several implications. Pedagogically, the study furnishes a replicable four-step sequence that situates TikTok within higher-order reading outcomes. Language educators can adopt the *scroll-analyse-create-reflect* loop to scaffold multimodal criticality, provided they embed explicit questioning frameworks (e.g., "Who benefits from this portrayal?"). Teacher education programmes should incorporate modules on algorithmic literacy so that pre-service teachers can mediate platform biases rather than merely curate content. While theoretically, the findings extend multiliteracies theory by illustrating that *design* and *redesign* cycles are accelerated in short-form media. They also invite integration with sociocultural notions of affinity spaces and algorithmic governance, encouraging a hybrid lens that accounts for both semiotic choice and platform architecture.

V. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study illustrate that TikTok, a platform often relegated to entertainment can be harnessed to foster critical literacy among EFL learners when integrated into a structured pedagogical sequence. Through the *scroll* → *analyse* → *create* → *reflect* cycle, twenty-four fifth-semester undergraduates at a public university in Makassar engaged in critical multimodal decoding, attending closely to soundtrack choices, visual filters, framing techniques, and hashtag rhetoric to discern underlying meanings and ideological positions. Their iterative video-making processes not only enhanced their English proficiency and confidence but also prompted a reflective awareness of how audience metrics (likes, comments) both validate and distort authentic expression.

Equally significant was the role of peer interaction in this virtual learning space. Features such as duets, stitches, and threaded comments transformed TikTok into a dynamic "language laboratory," where learners received informal feedback from classmates and global contributors. These interactions underscored the social nature of language learning and extended the classroom's dialogic space into a global community, validating sociocultural theories of mediated development. At the same time, students reported challenges with algorithmic distractions endless scrolling of

entertainment content and a growing need for metacognitive strategies to filter information.

Perhaps most distinctively, participants demonstrated nascent algorithmic literacy: they recognised the biases of the FYP feed, fact-checked dubious grammar “hacks,” and deliberated on the credibility of content creators. This emergent critical stance suggests that when EFL learners are guided to interrogate both the multimodal texts and the platform’s design logic, they develop a deeper, more empowered approach to digital media consumption.

Although constrained by its single-site scope and six-week duration, this study offers empirical evidence that short-form video platforms can support higher-order literacy outcomes in EFL education. As Indonesia’s *Kurikulum Merdeka* emphasizes digital and critical competencies, integrating TikTok and similar tools into language curricula holds promise for aligning students’ digital practices with transformative pedagogical aims. Future research should explore longitudinal effects, cross-platform comparisons, and the influence of sociocultural factors such as gender and rural–urban divides on learners’ critical engagement in digital spaces.

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Munir is an Associate Professor in the Department of English Language Education at Universitas Negeri Makassar, Indonesia. He obtained his Bachelor's degree in Department of Language and Arts from Universitas Negeri Makassar in 2000. He then pursued his studies in Monash University, Australia in 2002 for his Master degree. He completed his Doctoral program in Applied Linguistics at Universitas Negeri Makassar in 2023. His research interests include critical reading, virtual learning environment and ICT in ELT.

Muhammad Arham is a lecturer at Universitas Negeri Makassar, Indonesia. He is a Doctoral graduate in English Language Education who specializes in Applied Linguistics, ICT in ELT, AI in ELT, Virtual Reality in Education, and Bilingual Education. He has taught as a lecturer in Higher Education setting for 11 years. Currently, works as a lecturer, professional translator, and journal manager. He is the managing editor of three academic research journals in Makassar. Dr. Arham has published in several Scopus-indexed journals focusing on linguistics and second language education. He can be contacted via email: muhammadarham@unm.ac.id