

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter provides a comprehensive review of the theoretical and empirical foundations of the study. It focuses on social visual semiotics and its application to educational posters, particularly in understanding the challenges and solutions experienced by students. The chapter is divided into two main sections: the theoretical framework and the study of relevant research.

A. Theoretical Framework

This section outlines the key concepts, theories, and models relevant to social visual semiotics. These theories form the foundation for analysing educational posters and understanding the challenges students face.

a. Visual Social Semiotic

Visual social semiotics, initially developed through the works of Barthes (1977), explores how visual elements such as images, layout, symbols, and colors construct and communicate meaning within social and cultural contexts. This approach differs from purely linguistic or aesthetic analyses by emphasizing how viewers interpret visuals based on their social positioning and cultural knowledge. Barthes distinguished between the literal (denotative) and cultural (connotative) meanings of visual signs, arguing that images carry layered meanings beyond what is immediately visible. In his view, every image is a "message without a code" at the surface level, but once placed in a cultural setting, it becomes deeply coded and ideological.

Visual social semiotics recognizes that meaning is not inherent in images themselves; rather, meaning is created through an interaction between the visual text and the viewer. This interaction is shaped by social practices, cultural beliefs, and contextual experience. According to Jewitt and Oyama (2011), visual semiotics analyzes how social values and ideologies are embedded in and reproduced through visual forms. Thus, the same image may be interpreted differently by viewers from distinct social or cultural backgrounds depending on their interpretative frameworks.

Umberto Eco (1976) contributed significantly to the development of

semiotics by emphasizing the importance of cultural codes, conventional symbols and practices shared within a community that guide both the encoding (production) and decoding (interpretation) of signs. For instance, in an educational poster, the use of a graduation cap might universally signify education or academic success; however, the emotional or symbolic value attached to it can vary across cultural contexts. Eco's theory of "open texts" also suggests that visual texts allow for multiple interpretations depending on the socio-cultural lens of the reader.

In the domain of educational posters, visual social semiotics is particularly useful for analysing how posters aim to influence behavior, convey educational messages, and connect with specific target audiences. According to Lim (2021), posters in educational contexts often employ carefully curated images and graphic elements that rely heavily on cultural familiarity to be effective. The semiotic choices made in such posters such as color schemes, layout organization, and image placement are not merely aesthetic but are designed to evoke specific responses, attitudes, or interpretations from the audience.

One prominent model used in visual social semiotic analysis is the visual grammar framework introduced by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006). Their framework draws parallels between language and visual design, offering a structured way to interpret how meaning is made visually. The model includes elements such as representational meaning (what is depicted), interactive meaning (how the image engages the viewer), and compositional meaning (how elements are arranged to produce coherence and emphasis). These components are especially relevant for analysing educational posters, which often blend informative content with persuasive visual techniques.

Recent research has highlighted how students often struggle with interpreting visual materials due to unfamiliarity with these semiotic structures. In a study conducted by Putri (2020), it was found that learners tend to focus on the literal content of images while overlooking the ideological or symbolic messages embedded within. Similarly, Az-Zahra (2023) found that Indonesian students analysing public posters often missed nuanced meanings due to a lack of exposure to semiotic conventions and insufficient guidance in visual literacy.

Therefore, understanding visual social semiotics is crucial for both the creators and the interpreters of visual texts. For educators and curriculum developers, this perspective offers a lens through which instructional materials can be designed to be more inclusive and effective. For students, especially those analysing educational posters, semiotic awareness enhances their ability to decode and critically reflect on the meanings conveyed through visuals. This not only improves academic analytical skills but also empowers them as more informed consumers of media in general.

b. Denotation and Connotation

In the field of visual semiotics, the concepts of denotation and connotation are essential for understanding how meaning is constructed in visual communication. Originally introduced by Barthes (1977), these terms differentiate between the direct and implied meanings of signs. Denotation refers to the immediate, literal, and widely recognizable meaning of a visual element. It is the basic level of meaning that does not require interpretation beyond what is visibly present. For instance, in an educational poster about first aid, a red cross symbol typically denotes medical help or health services. This meaning is straightforward and generally understood across many contexts regardless of linguistic or cultural background.

On the other hand, connotation refers to the secondary, culturally or emotionally informed meanings that a visual sign carries. Unlike denotation, connotation is shaped by context, cultural background, individual experience, and social values. The same red cross, for example, may connote safety, urgency, compassion, or even militarism depending on the context in which it appears and the cultural assumptions of the viewer (Barthes, 1977; Chandler, 2017). These layered interpretations are often what give visual messages their persuasive power, particularly in educational posters that seek to influence attitudes or behaviors through subtle cues.

Understanding the distinction between denotation and connotation is particularly important for students learning to analyze visual materials. Research shows that students often identify denotative meanings with relative ease but

struggle to articulate connotative meanings, especially when cultural or symbolic knowledge is required (Lim, 2019). This can result in surface-level interpretations that overlook the deeper messages embedded in visual media. For example, in a poster promoting environmental awareness, an image of a tree may denote "a plant" but also connote life, sustainability, or the consequences of deforestation depending on the symbolic associations the viewer brings to the image. Students who lack familiarity with such environmental discourse or cultural references may miss the poster's intended message.

This difficulty is further compounded in multicultural educational settings, where connotative meanings vary significantly between cultures. According to Zhao (2020), the interpretation of visual elements like colors, shapes, and symbols can differ widely based on regional and societal norms. A white color in Western educational posters might connote purity or cleanliness, while in some Asian cultures, it might be associated with mourning or death. Therefore, when students analyze visual texts without sufficient cultural background or semiotic training, their interpretations may deviate significantly from the intended meaning of the designer.

The dual nature of meaning denotative and connotative also influences the way educational posters are designed. Designers must carefully balance visual clarity and cultural nuance to ensure that their messages are accessible but also impactful. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) emphasize that visual design is not just about aesthetics but about meaning-making through semiotic choices. Elements like font type, image placement, color contrast, and icon selection contribute not only to what a poster shows but how it makes the viewer feel and think. Educational posters often rely on connotative elements to inspire action or change behavior, especially in areas like health education, social campaigns, or environmental advocacy.

To better support student understanding, some scholars advocate for explicit instruction in identifying both denotative and connotative meanings in classroom settings. Nugroho and Widiatmojo (2024) emphasize that visual literacy should be intentionally cultivated by guiding students to move beyond surface-level

observation toward deeper interpretation of visual texts. They suggest that structured classroom activities such as using guided questions that prompt students to analyze what they see (denotation) and what it implies or suggests (connotation) can help learners become more critical viewers and more effective interpreters of visual information. This approach is particularly relevant in contexts like Indonesia, where educational posters and textbook visuals play a major role in communicating public and academic messages.

On the other hand, connotation refers to the deeper, more subjective meanings that emerge from an image. These meanings are shaped by cultural, social, and historical contexts. For instance, a red cross may not only signify healthcare in one culture but may also be associated with humanitarian aid, war zones, or even international organizations like the Red Cross, depending on the viewer's experiences and background. The challenge for students lies in understanding these connotative layers, especially when posters use symbols or colors that have varying meanings across different contexts.

This distinction between denotation and connotation is critical because while denotation provides the basic, surface-level meaning, connotation brings depth to the interpretation, which is often where students face difficulties. When an educational poster relies heavily on connotative meanings, students without the appropriate cultural or contextual knowledge may miss key interpretations, affecting their understanding of the poster's message.

c. Cultural Codes and Their Role in Interpretation

Cultural codes are a vital element in the study of visual social semiotics, particularly when analysing how visual messages are constructed and understood within specific social and cultural contexts. These codes refer to shared systems of meaning that are developed and maintained through cultural practices, traditions, and discourse. They encompass color symbolism, iconography, spatial arrangements, metaphors, and visual conventions that help individuals interpret visual texts. As Chandler (2017) explains, cultural codes guide not only what is shown in a visual image but also how it is perceived by different audiences. These codes are not fixed or universal; rather, they vary significantly across cultural,

national, and regional lines.

In the context of educational posters, cultural codes play a central role in shaping the meaning that viewers derive from visual content. Educational posters often aim to convey persuasive messages or instructions efficiently, relying heavily on visual symbols and conventions that are presumed to be understood by the target audience. However, these presumed understandings are not always shared. Students from diverse cultural backgrounds may interpret a poster's symbols differently or fail to recognize their intended meanings. For example, a color such as red may be intended to indicate danger or prohibition in a public health poster, but students who associate red with joy or celebration due to their cultural upbringing may interpret the message differently (Zhao, 2020).

Eco (1976) emphasizes that visual signs cannot be separated from their cultural contexts; their meaning is shaped by the viewer's prior knowledge and cultural literacy. This insight remains relevant in contemporary visual education research, which shows that many students experience difficulties in interpreting posters that use culturally embedded imagery (Lim, 2019). For instance, a poster warning against smoking might use a skull or a black background to signal danger and death. These signs are meant to trigger fear or urgency, but their effect depends on whether the student associates these images with the intended concepts. If such imagery is unfamiliar or does not carry the same connotation within a student's culture, the message may be lost or diluted.

Moreover, cultural codes influence not only the interpretation but also the production of visual materials. Designers often choose elements such as color schemes, gestures, or background images based on what they believe will resonate with their audience's cultural expectations. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), these design choices reflect an ideological positioning and serve to align viewers with specific social values or perspectives. In Indonesian educational posters, for instance, national symbols like the Garuda emblem or red-and-white color schemes may be used to evoke patriotism and moral responsibility. However, students who lack familiarity with these symbols or who do not relate to them may struggle to extract the intended meaning from such visuals.

Recent studies also suggest that students' limited exposure to visual and semiotic analysis contributes to their difficulties in interpreting culturally coded visuals. For example, Nugroho and Widiatmojo (2024) found that visual elements in Indonesian English textbooks significantly influence students' comprehension and meaning-making, yet many learners focus only on surface-level features rather than deeper symbolic or contextual meanings. This indicates that without explicit training in interpreting visual codes, students may develop only a superficial understanding of materials designed to promote reflection or behavioral change.

To address these challenges, researchers recommend increasing students' awareness of visual semiotics and cultural symbolism through classroom instruction. Incorporating activities that compare how different cultures use visual signs, or encouraging students to reflect on how their own backgrounds affect interpretation, can help bridge these gaps (Nugroho and Widiatmojo, 2024). When students are taught how cultural codes function to shape meaning, they become more capable of critically analysing posters and other visual materials to uncover their underlying messages.

B. Analytical Framework for Educational Posters

An analytical framework is essential to apply social visual semiotics to educational posters. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) provide an analytical model that focuses on the Semiotic aspects of visual texts, such as how text, images, and colors work together to create meaning. Their framework offers a comprehensive tool for understanding the structural and communicative elements of educational posters. Key concepts in this framework include:

- 1) **Composition:** This refers to how the various elements of the poster text, images, and graphics are arranged to create a coherent visual message. The arrangement of elements is not just for aesthetic purposes but serves a functional role in guiding the viewer's interpretation of the poster. For instance, the placement of the title at the top of the poster often signals its primary importance, while supporting information might be placed at the bottom or on the periphery.
- 2) **Saliency:** Saliency refers to the prominence of certain visual elements,

which are designed to capture the viewer's attention. This can be achieved through the use of bold colors, larger fonts, or dynamic images that stand out in the composition. Salient elements are typically the most important messages or concepts the poster aims to communicate, and they guide the viewer's focus. A poster with a large, bright image of a smiling student, for example, would immediately draw the viewer's attention and create a positive, welcoming impression.

- 3) **Framing and Connection:** Framing refers to how visual elements are bounded or grouped together. This could involve borders, lines, or even the use of spatial relationships between images and text. The connections formed between these elements help create meaning by establishing relationships between them. For instance, the use of framing to isolate a certain image (e.g., a teacher in a classroom) can signal its importance and draw attention to the key subject of the poster.
- 4) **Interpersonal Meaning:** Interpersonal meaning examines how the visual elements engage with the viewer. This includes the gaze of individuals in the image (whether they are looking directly at the viewer or elsewhere), the posture of characters, and the positioning of the viewer relative to the visual text. Educational posters often use interpersonal meaning to create a sense of engagement, such as showing a teacher looking directly at the viewer to invite participation or focusing on an image of students working together to promote a sense of community.

Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) use these elements to offer a structured way to deconstruct and understand educational posters. Their framework highlights the importance of visual communication, especially in educational settings, and can help identify specific areas where students may struggle, such as understanding the symbolic use of colors or deciphering the relationships between images and text.

C. Challenges in analysing Educational Posters

While analysing educational posters through the lens of social visual semiotics provides valuable insights into how meaning is conveyed, students often encounter several challenges in interpreting the complex visual elements embedded

in these materials. These difficulties arise from multiple factors, including the intricate nature of semiotic systems, cultural variations in symbolism, and a lack of visual literacy. The following sections examine these challenges in depth, highlighting how they impact students' ability to decode educational posters effectively.

a. Complex Semiotic Systems

Educational posters, by design, rely on a combination of text, images, colors, and layout to convey a message. Understanding the relationship between these different semiotic elements can be overwhelming for students, especially when interpreting how they interact to produce meaning. One of the key challenges students face is distinguishing between denotation and connotation, two fundamental aspects of visual semiotics.

Denotation refers to the literal or surface-level meaning of an image, the immediate and universally recognizable interpretation. For example, a red apple in an educational poster may simply represent the fruit, a symbol of healthy eating or nature. In contrast, connotation refers to the deeper, cultural, or emotional meanings associated with an image, which can vary greatly across different contexts. For instance, the red apple could also symbolize knowledge (as it is traditionally associated with teachers and education in some Western cultures), health, or even temptation (in a Biblical sense). Barthes (1977) famously differentiated between these two layers of meaning, suggesting that while denotation is relatively straightforward, connotation is far more complex and elusive.

Students often struggle with this distinction, especially when the connotative meaning is not immediately apparent or culturally familiar. For instance, an educational poster promoting environmental conservation might feature a tree or a river. While the denotative meaning is easy to identify, the connotative meaning could involve a cultural understanding of nature as sacred or fragile, or a political statement about sustainability. The challenge lies in recognizing these embedded meanings, which requires a deep understanding of cultural codes and the contextual layers of visual communication.

b. Cultural Context

One of the most significant challenges students face when interpreting educational posters is understanding the cultural context in which the visual elements are embedded. As Eco (1976) points out, meaning in visuals is not universal; it is shaped by the cultural codes of the society producing the visuals. Educational posters often rely heavily on culturally specific symbols, colors, and images that may not be universally understood.

For example, in many Western cultures, a red cross symbol is immediately associated with healthcare or emergency medical services. However, this symbol may not carry the same meaning in other parts of the world, where different cultural or religious associations might alter its interpretation. Similarly, colors often have varying meanings across cultures. In some cultures, red is a color of celebration and prosperity, while in others, it symbolizes danger or warning. For Indonesian students, local cultural symbols such as batik patterns, specific colors like green for Islam, or iconic imagery associated with local myths and traditions may influence how they interpret a poster. However, posters designed for a global or Western audience may rely on symbols that are unfamiliar or carry different connotations, making interpretation difficult.

This cultural specificity can lead to significant challenges in decoding the intended message of educational posters. When posters incorporate global symbols but are designed for a broader, multicultural audience, students from non-Western cultures might misinterpret or overlook important visual cues. Furthermore, students who are unfamiliar with global trends or specific cultural practices may find it difficult to grasp the full meaning behind posters that rely on those references.

c. Visual Literacy

Another critical challenge is the development of visual literacy. Visual literacy is the ability to interpret, evaluate, and create visual messages, an essential skill in the modern, image-dominated world. However, as Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) argue, visual literacy is often not explicitly taught in traditional education systems. Most students are taught to focus on verbal communication skills, while the visual aspects of communication receive far less attention. As a result, students

may not develop the skills required to decode the visual structures and semiotic elements present in educational posters.

In educational contexts, this lack of visual literacy becomes particularly apparent when students are tasked with interpreting posters that rely on complex visual language. While text-based elements of a poster may be easier for students to understand, especially if they are familiar with the language used, the visual elements (such as images, colors, and layouts) often require more sophisticated interpretive skills. Posters that use abstract symbols, unconventional layouts, or non-traditional visual structures may present additional challenges.

For example, in a health education poster, the use of a figure with a neutral expression might be meant to represent a general, relatable figure, yet students might misinterpret this as a lack of engagement or even as an unclear message. Similarly, posters that rely heavily on color symbolism like using dark tones to indicate danger or urgency can be difficult for students who have not been trained to recognize and decode these visual cues. As Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) emphasize, understanding the semiotic nature of these texts (where text, image, and color come together to create meaning) requires visual literacy skills that go beyond the basic comprehension of individual components.

d. Lack of Interdisciplinary Understanding

Analysing educational posters also requires an interdisciplinary approach, combining knowledge from various fields such as visual arts, semiotics, cultural studies, and communication theory. However, many students lack the interdisciplinary background necessary to fully grasp how the various visual components of a poster work together to construct meaning. As Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) argue, understanding visual texts requires not only a grasp of semiotic principles but also an awareness of how visual elements interact with cultural, social, and historical contexts.

Students who have not been trained in these interdisciplinary fields may struggle to break down the semiotic aspects of posters. For instance, the interplay between text and image is not always straightforward. The image may not merely complement the text, but instead may be designed to challenge, subvert, or enhance

the textual message. For example, a poster promoting environmental conservation might use a powerful image of a polluted landscape, alongside text advocating for change. The visual element can evoke strong emotional responses, which may not always align with the factual, logical nature of the text. Understanding how these elements interact, how visuals can evoke emotion and how text can provide reasoned argument requires an interdisciplinary understanding of communication, visual arts, and semiotic theory.

Furthermore, without the necessary training in semiotics or visual communication, students may miss how these various elements combine to create a more complex or nuanced message. This lack of understanding can hinder their ability to fully analyze educational posters, particularly those that use abstract or non-conventional visual strategies.

D. Study of the Relevant Research

This section reviews prior studies related to social visual semiotics and educational posters, identifying challenges and solutions relevant to students.

a. Previous Research

Research in social visual semiotics has explored various aspects of visual communication in education. Barthes (1977) explored the role of cultural context in interpreting images, emphasizing the distinction between denotation and connotation in visual communication. This is particularly relevant for understanding how students might struggle with interpreting deeper, culturally informed meanings in educational posters. Eco (1976) investigated the interpretation of cultural codes and their impact on understanding visual texts, which relates to the challenges students face in decoding culturally specific symbols. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) provided a framework for analysing visual grammar, focusing on composition, salience, and framing, which supports the analytical methods employed in this research to understand students' approaches to poster analysis. These studies collectively inform the current research by highlighting both the theoretical tools available and the gaps in addressing practical, student-centered challenges in analysing educational posters. Several Indonesian

studies have explored how students and viewers interact with posters as visual texts, offering insight into the real-world application of semiotic theory.

b. Music Concert Posters

Mano and Hikmaharyanti (2024) analyzed Bali music concert posters and found that while there are verbal signs (text, logos), much of the deeper meaning comes from non-verbal visual images, color, indigenous or local symbolic designs. These visual cues often carry cultural nuance that students less trained in semiotics might miss. When educational materials (or posters) rely heavily on symbolic visuals without sufficient explanatory text or guided interpretation, students can end up with superficial or even misdirected analyses.

c. Public Service Posters

Patriansah (2020) examined a public service poster titled *Stop Domestic Violence* using Saussure's semiotic model. The study showed that while emotional and symbolic visuals could effectively raise awareness, many viewers including students focused only on the literal imagery, failing to grasp deeper societal messages. This highlights students' difficulty in moving beyond denotation to connotation, a skill crucial in semiotic interpretation.

d. Cultural and Symbolic Posters

Putri and Putri (2022) analyzed the *Rewind Indonesia 2021* video poster using Saussure's semiotic framework. Their study examined how visual illustrations and signs (verbal and nonverbal) carry meaning beyond literal appearance. While the study focused on the poster's semiotic structure rather than learner interpretation, it highlights that posters often embed cultural or symbolic elements that may be overlooked by viewers lacking contextual or cultural awareness.

e. Environmental and Social Campaign Posters

Marlina (2022) from UIN Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung applied Peirce's model (icon, index, symbol) to analyze environmental and social campaign posters. The findings showed that students had difficulty distinguishing between the types of signs and interpreting their symbolic significance. Many relied on literal interpretations, underscoring a need for structured guidance in applying semiotic

categories.

E. Positioning the Current Study

While existing research provides valuable insights into the application of semiotic theory to visual texts, there remains a noticeable gap in understanding how participants particularly in Indonesian educational contexts interpret and respond to semiotic images in educational posters. Most prior studies focus either on theoretical frameworks (e.g., Barthes (2017), Kress and van Leeuwen (2021)) or on how posters communicate messages, but rarely on how students themselves experience challenges in interpretation, especially from a cultural and pedagogical perspective.

This study addresses these gaps by centering on the lived experiences of Indonesian university students engaging with the visual and semiotic elements of educational posters. Drawing from rich qualitative data, it examines both the challenges participants face such as cultural misreading, confusion in applying visual grammar, and lack of prior exposure and the solutions they develop or receive, including cultural contextualization, peer discussions, reflective questioning, and simplified frameworks.

In doing so, this research aims to bridge the gap between semiotic theory and classroom practice, contributing to academic discourse on visual literacy and practical strategies that can inform teaching methods in non-Western educational settings. The findings provide insight into how theory is internalized (or misunderstood) by learners, and how instruction can better scaffold students' development in interpreting complex semiotic posters.