

Visual Literacy in Nigerian Media Education: Curriculum Gaps and Implications for Graduate Employability in the Creative Economy

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of visual literacy competencies in strengthening graduate employability within Nigeria's rapidly expanding creative economy. Despite the increasingly image-driven media space that requires communication professionals to possess competencies in visual storytelling, media education in Nigeria remains largely anchored in text-based communication models. Using content analysis, the study evaluates the integration of visual literacy within the Core Curriculum and Minimum Academic Standards (CCMAS) for Communication and Media Studies in Nigeria, alongside findings from previous empirical studies and comparative insights from a graphic communication curriculum. The analysis revealed that visual literacy is unevenly represented across Nigerian media programmes, with significant deficiencies in design training, imaging skills, visual ethics, colour theory, and multimedia production. Findings further indicate a mismatch between curriculum content and labour market expectations, despite the need for competencies in digital visualization, creative software, multimedia production, and visual communication. This dominance of theoretical and verbal communication modules weakens graduates' readiness for the digital creative economy. Thus, strengthening visual literacy competencies in media education is essential for enhancing graduate employability, fostering innovation, and positioning Nigeria competitively within the global creative economy. The integration of foundational visual communication courses, interdisciplinary visual media studies specializations, and industry-oriented practical training into Nigerian media education is recommended.

Keywords: Visual literacy; Media education; Graduate employability; Creative economy; Digital communication

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Introduction

The world of mass communication today is saturated with mediated images, with visual images gaining prominence in books, newspapers, magazines, posters, films, Internet, household utensils, clothes (Stöckl et al., 2020). While written culture has widely been a part of the mass media, written culture has either been matched in pace or even superseded by a visual culture. As Parsa (2004) affirms, the inventions of photographs, cinema and television have spurred the creation of images. This brings forth the need for visual literacy, as established by Dyak et al. (2022), Sidiropoulou and Papailia (2023), and Thomson and Uddin (2023).

Since the media is a crucial component of human existence, media literacy has received a fair share of attention. Baran (2002) highlights literacy as vital in today's mass-mediated society. In the traditional sense, literacy refers to the ability to effectively and efficiently comprehend and use written symbols (Baran 2002). Back in the early human civilization, literacy, in the form of reading and writing, promoted the exchange of views and ideas, thereby fostering democracy. Literacy took a step further with the emergence of mass communication. However, the development of non-print media, Baran (2002:50) argues, has made it necessary that the definition of literacy be expanded to encompass the □ ability to effectively and efficiently comprehend and utilize any form of communication. In the context of participation in media and communication, this is referred to as media literacy.

The flood of visual images in today's media links with the credibility of digital visuals, and how much truth associated with them. Gunthert (2014) argues that the shift to digital photography marked the decline of our faith in images. Not that photos ever offered absolute truth. Traditional film photography also allowed manipulation, though it required specialized dark-room skills and was far less widespread. Today, anyone with basic software or AI tools can easily alter images, multiplying visual fabrications. Detecting these falsifications is difficult, and the consequences for media credibility are serious. This makes it important for communicators to possess a high level of visual literacy, which helps to produce visuals that communicate effectively, without disseminating misinformation (Jeong, 2023; Wankhede, 2024; Zhu & Lim, 2024).

While media literacy is often touted as enabling content creators to uphold ethical standards, the mass communication programs in Nigeria remain

heavily focused on verbal literacy, largely neglecting visual literacy. In a media world dominated by images, this gap raises concerns about the preparedness of Nigerian media graduates for employment. Arising from this gap, this study assesses visual literacy and media training in the digital age among the institutions of higher learning in Nigeria. It examines the issues of creating better career prospects or opportunities for graduates of mass communication. Specifically, the study seeks to;

- (1) Assess the level of attention given to visual literacy in the current curriculum of media training institutions in Nigeria.
- (2) Identify strategies that can strengthen visual media education for employability in Nigeria.

Deriving from the above, the research questions guiding this study are:

- (1) What level of attention is given to visual literacy in the current curricula of media training institutions in Nigeria?
- (2) What strategies can strengthen visual media education for graduate employability in Nigeria?

The Imperative of Visual Literacy for Employability

Visual literacy is the ability to both read and write(create) visual information; the ability to learn visually, to think and solve problems in the visual domain (Messari & Moriarty, 2005). This definition has gained profound new significance as today's world is permeated with visual images. From TikTok videos and Instagram stories to data visualizations and UX/UI design, the language of contemporary digital communication is visual (Belimova & Miklyaeva, 2024).

The World Economic Forum (2025), in *The Future of Jobs Report 2025*, underscores this shift, identifying creative thinking, visual storytelling, and AI-powered design as core skills on the rise. This establishes that visual literacy has moved from being a complementary skill to a foundational literacy. However, visual literacy has been largely associated with arts classrooms (González-Zamar et al., 2023) at a time when it has become essential in other disciplines, including media and communications. Now, it has become imperative for mass communication students to be visually literate

(Azmi, 2014). Since visual images are created with a purpose, learning to "read" or analyze these images has become an important part of media training (Aljalabneh, 2024).

Historically, the general direction for mass communication training in Nigeria was provided by the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) (Odiegwu-Enwerem et al., 2021). This model viewed mass communication through the lens of journalism, with previous studies indicating that the template is not sufficient for training mass communication graduates for employability in the post-pandemic economy. Arowa et al.'s (2025) study of the employability of Nigerian-trained mass communication graduates expressed some scepticism about graduates' preparedness for advertising agency practice. Graduates were perceived as deficient in applied, industry-specific competencies. In the current digital media-led advertising landscape, visual literacy competence is one of the essential skills for advertising practice (Fayvishenko et al., 2024).

Theoretical Framework on Competencies and Employability

This study is guided by the Self-efficacy Theory and the Complex Systems Theory of Interdisciplinary Study. The Self-efficacy Theory, proposed by Albert Bandura, is critical to the study of academic achievement, motivation and learning. The theory establishes the role of visual literacy competencies of mass communication students in enhancing employability (Artino, 2012). In a competitive job market, graduates with high self-efficacy in visual creation and critique are more likely to pursue and secure roles in the expanding digital and creative sectors.

The Complex Systems Theory of Interdisciplinary Study (Newell, 2001) argues that an interdisciplinary approach is imperative when complexities are involved. The contemporary media landscape is the epitome of a complex system, where success requires a synthesis of technology, aesthetics, psychology, and strategy. Generating meaning from signs and visual codes is quite a challenge. Images are read using visual language largely influenced by connotations in the context of cultural and mythic factors. This creates a complex sign system that would largely benefit from an interdisciplinary approach (such as integrating visual studies into mass communication), which, no doubt, is an integration that has become a matter of economic necessity.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative documentary content analysis. It combines: (i) an original analysis of the NUC Core Curriculum and Minimum Academic Standards (CCMAS) for Communication and Media Studies (2023) and (ii) a comparative curriculum analysis of the Bachelor of Science in Graphic Communication programme at Moi University, Kenya. Documentary content analysis was considered appropriate because it enables the systematic examination of curriculum documents to identify patterns, emphases, and gaps in visual literacy provision.

The analysis focused on the eight communication and media programmes contained in the CCMAS. The unit of analysis comprised individual course titles and descriptions, which were coded as either visual literacy-oriented or non-visual based on their primary learning emphasis. Courses were coded as *visual literacy-oriented* where their primary stated learning emphasis involved the creation, interpretation, analysis, design, or application of visual/multimodal media, including graphic design, photography, visual communication, illustration, animation, digital imaging, multimedia production, and related competencies. Courses were coded as *non-visual* where their primary emphasis was communication theory, writing, journalism, research, law, management, or other predominantly verbal, conceptual, or administrative competencies.

Borderline courses containing both visual and non-visual components were classified according to their dominant stated learning emphasis. Where visual competencies constituted a substantive and identifiable component of the stated course content, the course was classified as visual literacy-oriented; where visual elements were incidental to broader theoretical, textual, or conceptual objectives, the course was classified as non-visual. The frequency and percentage of visual literacy-oriented courses were subsequently calculated for each programme to facilitate cross-programme comparison.

The Moi University curriculum served as a comparative benchmark for identifying curriculum sequencing, practical orientation, and instructional strategies that could strengthen visual literacy and graduate employability in Nigerian media education. Findings were interpreted alongside relevant empirical literature on visual literacy, media education, and employability.

As an exploratory documentary study, this research does not directly measure graduate employability or employer perceptions. Rather, it identifies curriculum patterns and competency gaps that may have implications for graduate preparedness within Nigeria's creative economy.

Findings

1. Under Representation of Visual Literacy in Nigerian Media Education

The NUC CCMAS (2023) framework includes eight B.Sc. programmes: Advertising, Broadcasting, Development Communication, Film & Multimedia, Information & Media Studies, Journalism & Media Studies, Public Relations, and Strategic Communication. Analysis shows that visual literacy integration varies considerably across these programmes, as presented in Table 1. Film & Multimedia demonstrates the strongest emphasis on visual skills, with 79.6% visual course content. Broadcasting (42.6%), Development Communication (35.4%), Information & Media Studies (34.0%), Journalism & Media Studies (29.0%), and Strategic Communication (27.3%) show moderate integration, reflecting their links to content creation and audiovisual communication. In contrast, Advertising (16.3%) and Public Relations (18.4%) record low visual content, suggesting a mismatch between curriculum offerings and the visual communication demands of industry practice.

Except for Film & Multimedia Studies, most programmes lack the following visual literacy components: formal design training, technical imaging skills, visual ethics and copyright application in digital visuals, and colour theory, layout systems, and visual composition. This gap indicates a major competency gap in professional visual communication education.

Table 1: Percentage of Visual Course Content Across CCMAS Programmes

Rank	Programme	% of Visual Course Content
1	Film & Multimedia	79.6%
2	Broadcasting	42.6%
3	Development Communication	35.4%
4	Information & Media Studies	34.0%
5	Journalism & Media Studies	29.0%
6	Strategic Communication	27.3%
7	Public Relations	18.4%
8	Advertising	16.3%

Analysis (based on Table 1) shows that the CCMAS framework is heavily skewed toward communication theory, writing, research, and verbal communication. The bias highlights the weak link in the media education

framework, reducing the employability of graduates in Nigeria's increasingly visual and digital creative economy. In essence, the CCMAS does not adequately address emerging industry demands, exhibiting limited responsiveness to new media industry needs such as digital creative technologies, visual storytelling, graphic communication, and digital publishing.

2. Strengthening Visual Media Education in Nigeria through Graphic Communication

An analysis of the Moi University BSc Graphic Communication curriculum (Table 2) reveals a structured and practice-oriented approach to visual literacy development. Visual communication courses are introduced from the first year and progressively deepened through advanced modules such as Techniques in Graphic Design, Digital Photography, Multimedia and Hypermedia, and Digital Animation. This early exposure and reinforcement contribute to stronger visual competence at graduation.

The curriculum also emphasizes hands-on production skills and industry readiness through courses in commercial production, internet publishing, field attachment, and communication aesthetics. These practical experiences enable students to develop robust professional portfolios aligned with the needs of digital media industries.

Additionally, the integration of cultural and communicative perspectives, seen in courses like Communication Images in Africa and Communication Aesthetics, ensures that visual creation is contextually grounded and audience-focused.

Table 2: Semester-by-Semester Course Structure for BSc Graphic Communication at Moi University

Year	Semester	Course Codes and Titles
1	Semester I	Introduction to Communication; History of Communication in Kenya; Introduction to Information Technology; Communication Skills I; Quantitative Skills I; Development Concepts & Applications; French for Beginners I
	Semester II	Listening & Critical Thinking; Communication Research I; Introduction to Media Studies; Communication & Culture; Introduction to Graphic Communication; Communication Images in Africa; Communication & HIV/AIDS; Communication Skills II; Quantitative Skills II
2	Semester I	Introduction to Mass Communication; Management of Information Technology; Introduction to Public Relations; Functional Writing; Public Speaking; News Writing; English for Journalists; Introduction to Advertising
	Semester II	Visual, Audiovisual & Nonverbal Communication; Organisational Behaviour I; Introduction to Radio; Introduction to Cinema & Radio; Digital Images & Reprographics; Art & Communication; State, Society & Development; Electives: Communicating Science & Technology; Communication for Rural Development; English for Journalists
3	Semester I	Communication Ethics; Communication & Law; Gender & Communication; Editing & Publishing; Photojournalism I; Techniques in Graphic Design; Introduction to Animation; Elective: Sign Language
	Semester II	Communication Research Methods II; Field Attachment; Organisational Communication I; Entrepreneurship Skills; Advertising & Copy Writing; Photojournalism II; Commercials Production; Electives: Public Relations & Advertising; Organisational Behaviour II; Feature Writing; Writing & Producing for Children
4	Semester I	International Relations & Diplomacy; Introduction to Human Resource Management; Communication Aesthetics; Digital Interactive & Direct Advertising; Digital Photography; Development Communication; Internet & Electronic Publishing
	Semester II	International Communication; Psychology of Communication; Comparative Communication & Political Systems; Advanced Graphic Communication; Multimedia & Hypermedia; Digital Animation; Advertising Layout & Production; Electives: Development Project Appraisal; Television Production; Film Directing

As Table 3 shows, the visual literacy instruction at Moi University increases progressively each year, peaking in the final year where more than half of all courses are visually oriented. Visual courses represent only 12.5 per cent of the first-year curriculum, but this rises steadily to 31.3 per cent in the second year and 35.7 per cent in the third year before peaking at 57.1 per cent in the final year. Overall, one-third (33.3 per cent) of the entire programme comprises visually oriented courses, reflecting a strong commitment to developing advanced visual communication competencies.

The structured escalation highlighted in Table 3 ensures that students first acquire foundational exposure to visual media and then build increasingly specialized skills in graphic design, digital imaging, animation, photography, and multimedia production. By embedding visual literacy as a core rather than peripheral component, the Moi University model demonstrates curriculum practices that could substantially strengthen graduate preparedness and employability if adopted within Nigerian communication and media education programmes.

In essence, the Moi University model demonstrates how combining foundational visual literacy, progressive specialization pathways, digital media proficiency, and structured field experience can significantly enhance graduate employability. These elements offer valuable strategic direction for improving visual media education within Nigerian communication programmes.

Table 3: Percentage Breakdown of Visual vs Non-Visual Courses by Year (Moi University BSc Graphic Communication)

Year	Total Courses	Visual Courses	Non-Visual Courses	% Visual	% Non-Visual
Year 1	16	2	14	12.5%	87.5%
Year 2	16	5	11	31.3%	68.7%
Year 3	14	5	9	35.7%	64.3%
Year 4	14	8	6	57.1%	42.9%
Overall	60	20	40	33.3%	66.7%

Discussion

Given the dominance of images in contemporary media, this study examined the place of visual literacy in Nigerian media education and its implications for graduate employability. Findings indicate that while media programmes provide a strong theoretical foundation, they inadequately address visual

literacy, design, and multimedia production. This creates a mismatch between graduate competencies and the demands of the digital creative economy.

The study reveals weak visual literacy integration across most CCMAS programmes. This situation contrasts with Ebigbagha's (2016) standpoint that visual literacy is essential for effective storytelling and communication, particularly in marketing environments where campaign success increasingly depends on the ability to communicate through images. Similarly, it contrasts with the findings of Dziobczenski (2021) that employers in contemporary creative industries require competencies in design thinking. This reflects the evolution of graphic designers into strategic communicators operating within digitally driven economies.

The interdisciplinary nature of visual communication further reinforces this need. According to Adekoya and Shidi (2022), visual arts constitute a significant source of employment and entrepreneurship, with graphic design integrating visual arts, advertising, psychology, and information technology. Graphic design is fundamentally a communication discipline used to create brand identity and influence audiences (Gunay, 2021; Chakraborty, 2024). Its contemporary manifestations include visual branding, motion design, UI/UX design, digital illustration, and creative strategy (Rosyida et al., 2025; Traci, 2024). As Barnard (2013) notes, communication remains the core function of graphic design.

The above findings, interpreted through the lens of Bandura's Self-Efficacy Theory, suggest that individuals develop confidence in their ability to perform tasks through repeated learning experiences and mastery opportunities. The limited exposure to visual communication, design production, and multimedia creation within most CCMAS programmes may therefore restrict students' confidence in undertaking visual communication tasks. Consequently, graduates may enter the labour market with lower levels of perceived competence in design, digital storytelling, and multimedia production, reducing their willingness to pursue opportunities in emerging sectors of the creative economy.

Similarly, the findings also support the assumptions of Complex Systems Theory, highlighting the contemporary communication industries as interconnected systems in which visual design, technology, content strategy, audience psychology, and digital platforms interact simultaneously. The continued separation of visual communication from mainstream media

education reflects a fragmented approach to curriculum design that does not adequately reflect the integrated nature of professional media practice. Consequently, graduates may possess knowledge of communication theories while lacking the competencies required to function effectively within contemporary media ecosystems.

The Missing Link in Advertising and Media Education in Nigeria

Although Olatunji (2022) concludes that the CCMAS Advertising curriculum meets global standards and aligns with national development goals, the programme records only 16.3% visual course content. This suggests a need to strengthen visual competencies, particularly given evidence that programme content is positively associated with employability outcomes (Backiaraj & Arivazhagan, 2025).

Support for this position is provided by Nwamara and Anyanwu (2020), whose study identifies advertising production, photography and photo-processing, and graphic arts and design as major professional and self-employment opportunities within Nigeria's advertising sector. These domains require competencies in typography, layout design, colour management, imaging workflows, photography, image editing, digital illustration, and print production. Their findings demonstrate the close relationship between advertising practice, visual communication, and the printing and graphic arts industry.

Consequently, extending the B.Sc. Advertising programme to include structured modules in graphic communication, prepress technology, printing processes, and digital publishing would strengthen graduate employability while responding to industry needs. Such an extension would build on an existing curricular foundation rather than depart from the programme's mandate.

This recommendation is further supported by Ayozie (2020), whose analysis of the APCON Diploma in Advertising highlights Advertising Copy and Layout, as well as Advertising Production Techniques, as central professional competencies. These areas encompass typography, page composition, colour management, prepress processes, and reproduction standards. These skills overlap significantly with contemporary graphic communication practice. Given the increasing convergence of advertising, visual communication, and

media production, adapting the Advertising degree to accommodate graphic media and communication specialization would be both feasible and strategically aligned with industry expectations.

Limitations of the Study

Given the exploratory nature of the study, the analysis was designed to identify broad patterns and generate preliminary insights rather than provide definitive generalisations. The researcher-led coding of documentary data may introduce some classification subjectivity. Although predefined coding criteria and subsequent review of coding decisions were employed, independent inter-rater reliability was not established. The findings should therefore be interpreted as preliminary evidence warranting further investigation.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The current template for media training in Nigeria appears lopsided in favour of a legacy model of journalism and mass communication. The position of this study is that a communication studies approach that embraces visual communication competencies will offer more flexibility that enhances the employability of mass communication graduates. Paying a higher premium on visual literacy competencies will help provide students with the full range of competencies that would enhance their employability in the 21st century work environment.

Furtherance to the above, the following are recommendations for strengthening media education for employability in Nigeria at both the University and Polytechnic levels.

- i) ***Introduction of Foundational Visual Communication Courses:*** It is recommended that all Mass Communication and related programmes at both university and polytechnic levels introduce a compulsory first-year course in *Introduction to Visual Communication*. This course should establish visual literacy as a core competence alongside verbal literacy. The curriculum should be updated to include contemporary industry-relevant content such as digital storytelling for social media platforms, foundational training in AI-assisted design tools, and critical engagement with the ethics of digital imagery. This reform is essential for aligning

graduates with current communication practices in the digital economy.

ii) ***Development of a Dedicated Graphic Media Studies Specialisation:***

Institutions should establish a structured specialisation in *Graphic Media Studies* as a strategic response to evolving industry demands. This programme should be interdisciplinary, integrating visual arts, media studies, digital technologies, and entrepreneurship. Its focus should extend beyond traditional vocational training to innovation-driven learning that prepares students for emerging fields such as animation, game design, UX design, motion graphics, and immersive media production. The goal is to produce graduates who are not only employable but also capable of creating employment and leading innovation within Nigeria' s creative industries.

iii) ***Curriculum Reorientation Toward Digital and Creative Industry Competencies:***

Media education curricula at all levels should be restructured to reflect the realities of the contemporary digital economy. Emphasis should shift from predominantly theoretical instruction to applied, practice-based learning that integrates design thinking, multimedia production, and platform-based communication strategies. This will help bridge the gap between academic training and industry expectations, particularly in advertising, publishing, broadcasting, and digital media sectors.

iv) ***Agenda for Further research:*** Lastly, Future studies could extend the exploratory findings through broader comparative analyses involving additional programmes, institutions, and curriculum documents. Such studies may also incorporate independent coding and additional validation procedures to further strengthen the consistency and replicability of the classification of visual course content. This would provide a useful basis for confirming and refining the patterns identified in the present study and for developing a more comprehensive understanding of the place of visual content within contemporary communication and media curricula.

Overall, addressing the visual literacy gap through these reforms is critical to repositioning Nigerian media education for the demands of the 21st-century knowledge and creative economy.

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