

Semiotics of Vocational Education: Analyzing Symbols and Cultural Narratives in Philippine Technical and Vocational Training

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.903SEDU0122>

Received: 19 February 2025; Accepted: 23 February 2025; Published: 28 March 2025

ABSTRACT

This study will therefore examine the semiotic analysis of symbols in Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) within the Philippine context focusing on how the visual signs could influence perceptions of vocational education through cultural meanings attached to them. A qualitative design is adopted with a study looking at various kinds of TVET symbols such as logos, billboards, and advertisement materials of all institutions in the Philippines. Applying a semiotic framework will help the study identify how such visual elements-the use of typography, colors, and imagery-actually reflect and strengthen societal views regarding vocational professions. The findings also show that while technical fields carry professional, modern symbols, manual trades are represented using simpler, utilitarian visuals. The study highlights cultural importance, since symbols for TVET convey not only a trade but also its identity in terms of nationality and the socioeconomic status. Discussion of the role of visual literacy in influencing learner engagement leads to suggestions that enhanced visual literacy within the TVET curricula improves outcomes. It will contribute to a better understanding of the semiotic dimensions of vocational education and to recommendations that result in more inclusive, culturally responsive symbol designs.

Keywords: Semiotics, Vocational Education, Philippine TVET, Visual Literacy, Cultural Representation

INTRODUCTION

Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) is essential in molding the workforce and developing skills for sustainable development, especially for the Philippines. This type of education framework provides students with the hands-on skills in different technical fields and helps bridge them to employment and economic growth. In the context of the Philippines, where a significant portion of the population depends on labor-intensive industries, TVET offers a pathway for social mobility and poverty alleviation (Edralin, D., & Pastrana, R. 2023). Understanding the symbols and visual representations associated with TVET is thus imperative, as they shape public perceptions and influence educational outcomes.

This involves the study of signs and symbols, which semiotics provides. It is very effective to consider how TVET is represented and interpreted through this view. According to (Chandler, 2022), "semiotics gives greater depth to cultural and social meaning in visual elements, such as logos, icons, and instructional materials.". Symbolisms in branding the educational offerings are used, hence in educational branding, signage, and in promotional materials which convey both implicit and explicit value messages in regard to the significance of vocational training. They unconsciously could modify the learners' perception and how to view the vocational education in comparison to others by changing their general perception.

Recent studies have emphasized the increasing role of visual literacy in educational settings, especially in technical fields where practical skills are emphasized (Hashim, S. 2024). In the Philippines, where diverse languages and cultural backgrounds intersect, the use of universally recognizable symbols can enhance communication and facilitate learning. However, the role of these symbols in shaping the meaning and image of TVET remains underexplored. By doing a semiotic analysis of these images, this paper aims to unravel the latent meaning they carry and understand how such images reflect the overall values of the society about TVET.

Findings from this study may help better comprehend how semiotics affects educational policies and public views of TVET in the Philippines. As the country continues to face challenges in aligning its education system with industry demands, the semiotic dimensions of vocational symbols can be explored to gain insight into improving the effectiveness and appeal of TVET programs. In this regard, it is possible to understand how these symbols are interpreted to better address the gap between education and the labor market, making vocational training a viable and respected option for students.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design, using a semiotic analysis to decode the symbols associated with Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) in the Philippine context. The semiotic approach is particularly effective for understanding how signs, symbols, and visual representations create meaning within educational settings (Chandler, 2022). The choice of this methodology was based on its ability to interpret the meanings that are cultural and social to the visual elements associated with vocational education. Thus, by taking an analytical view of symbols including logos, instructional materials, promotional posters, and signage at the institutions involved in TVET, this research is able to unveil the message that lies beneath as well as influencing public perception regarding the status of vocational education in the Philippines.

For the collection of data, this study utilized both primary and secondary sources. Primary data were sourced from a sample of TVET institutions in the various regions of the Philippines. This means that selection of institutions is diversified, where selected institutions reflect diversity in various kinds of trades or vocational education in areas like construction, information technology, and hospitality. These institutions were purposively sampled with the aim of having a wide representation of the TVET programs that are widely recognized and accessible to Filipino students (Pastera, 2022).

The primary data were gathered by examining the visual materials available at these institutions, such as signage, course brochures, websites, and other forms of promotional materials. Observations were conducted at selected TVET campuses to understand how these visual symbols are integrated into the physical and learning environments. Interviews were conducted with educators, administrators, and students to gain insights into the significance and impact of the symbols used in the TVET context. The interviews explored how these symbols are perceived by the stakeholders in vocational education, focusing on their interpretations and the meanings they attach to various signs and images.

Besides primary data, secondary data were sourced from academic articles, policy documents, and reports on TVET in the Philippines. Such sources were broader sources to put things in the light regarding how vocational education features within the nation, the historic, and the cultural forces in its development of use and representation through symbols within education settings. Research by (Edralin, D., & Pastrana, R. 2023). was highly beneficial in providing background on the present state of TVET in the Philippines, while studies by (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020) and (Khalizah & Harahap, S. 2022) provided a basis for the theoretical framework in the semiotic analysis of educational symbols.

The core analytical approach applied in this study is semiotic analysis, which focuses on identifying and interpreting the signs and symbols present in the visual materials collected. According to (Jones, C. W. 2024), semiotic analysis involves examining the denotative (literal) and connotative (cultural) meanings of signs. In the context of TVET symbols, the denotative level calls for the immediate and direct meaning of the symbol, for example, an image of a tool or occupation. In contrast, the connotative level retracts into the deeper, often culturally charged relationships and implications that the symbol evokes, such as social status, professionalism, or gender roles. Following the structured coding process of semiotic theory, all the visual elements found in the materials were first identified and then categorized according to their content and form, such as logos, images, and typography. Each symbol was then analyzed within its cultural and social context in the Philippines. This analysis was driven by the semiotic frameworks of (Turbanti, G. 2023) and (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020) in understanding how these symbols are reflective of or challenge the values of society in vocational education. For instance, a logo of a skilled trade school might convey a formal institution while connoting respectability and professionalism in the eyes of potential students. Moreover, this research has incorporated the idea of intertextuality, which is the manner in which signs and symbols interact with each other across different contexts

(Bula, 2022). By examining how TVET symbols align with or differ from other visual representations in the broader educational and societal landscape, the study highlights the ways in which vocational education is framed within a wider cultural discourse. For instance, using colors, shapes, and type of fonts on the branding of TVET could easily be perceived as nationalistic pride or high technology, and such may influence perception on the institution and the whole profession of vocational education.

Data collected underwent thematic analysis to find recurring patterns and themes from the data collected. According to (Braun & Clarke, 2021), thematic analysis is one way through which reoccurrence can be identified. This study applied thematic analysis to the visual symbols as well as interview responses, identifying recurring ideas and perceptions about the cultural and social roles of TVET. Main themes included status in vocational education, the cultural value of certain symbols, and how visual literacy influenced student engagement. Some symbols supported professionalism and technical expertise, while others spoke of more practical or grass-roots values associated with particular trades.

The study also took a comparative approach to differences in symbolism between different regions and types of TVET institution. Such a comparison would allow the reader to see how regional culture and context shape the construction and interpretation of vocational symbols. For instance, symbols pertaining to agriculture and rural skills tend to be more traditional Filipino elements, while those in urban-based technical programs contain more modern and globalized images. These results point out that the visual construction of vocational education has a dynamic interaction between local identity and global trends. Finally, inferences about broader implications of symbols of TVET in the Philippines were drawn, integrating findings of semiotic and thematic analyses. The study involved how these influence students' perceptions on vocational education and how they manifest cultural values with the potential impact on societal prejudices against technical careers. This holistic methodology allowed for a nuanced understanding of the semiotic landscape of TVET in the Philippines, offering insights into the ways that symbols shape educational practices and perceptions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This paper discusses the findings on the semiotics of Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) in the Philippines as they pertain to a greater understanding of the subject of vocational education. This research was anchored on the semiotics of visual symbols gathered from multiple TVET institutions distributed across the nation. It combined interviews with faculty members, school administrators, and students with semiotic analysis of selected visual symbols from these institutions such as logos, promotional materials, and signage. The key themes derived from the data are the status of vocational education, the cultural significance of certain symbols, and the visual literacy effect on engaging the students.

Status of Vocational Education through Visual Symbols

The study revealed that the success of the TVET system in the Philippines should be significantly related to the formation of TVET symbols. Semiotic analysis found that symbols for prestigious and technical fields, such as engineering, information technology, and healthcare, were often designed to be formal and professional. Logos and other visual elements often used strong, bold typography and clean, modern designs to indicate authority and competence. Symbols that relate to more traditional, artisanal kind of trades, like carpentry, welding, and agriculture, were more utilitarian in design. They often used rustic or straightforward visual elements such as tools or construction icons.

This is all reflective of social bias toward professions. The more formal, professional imagery used for certain fields associates these occupations with higher social prestige and economic opportunity, while the simpler, more utilitarian designs of other trades can be seen as reinforcing the lower status of manual labor (Mendoza et al., 2022). These findings align with previous research indicating that visual symbols in educational settings play a significant role in shaping public perceptions and influencing how students choose educational pathways (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020). The use of professional, globalized symbols for certain trades may help increase recognition of vocational education in high-tech industries, whereas the less dynamic representation of manual trades may sustain the historical stigma against vocational training.

Cultural Significance of Symbols in TVET

The cultural significance of TVET symbols also became a major theme in the study. The visual elements supporting vocational education in the Philippines have been interwoven with the country's cultural and national identity. For example, where agricultural skills were emphasized, logos contained flora and fauna species or those associated with local customs. These are not mere adornments; rather, they establish connections for the students to their heritage and to the community-based nature of the occupations that they are preparing to enter (Lin, et.al. 2021). Conversely, in urban-based TVET institutions where information technology and hospitality fields predominated, symbols frequently called out to a more cosmopolitan visual identity, involving elements that are sleek and modern to the more modernized job markets that speak to the more internationalized sensibilities of contemporary tastes.

These differences show the interplay between local and global cultural influences in the design of vocational symbols. According to (Khalizah & Harahap, S. 2022) symbols operate within a specific cultural context that imbues them with meaning beyond their immediate, literal representation. The use of local symbols in agricultural and rural trades indicates a strong agrarian heritage in the Philippines, whereas the adoption of international-style symbols for technical fields indicates an aspiration toward global competitiveness and modernity. This divergence points to the broader trend of how cultural identity and economic aspirations shape the imagery used in educational materials (Jones, C. W. 2024).

Moreover, some symbols were found to reflect gendered and class-based representations. For instance, in sectors traditionally characterized by women, such as caregiving and hospitality, symbols frequently featured softer, more feminine imagery that could perpetuate gender stereotypes in vocational education (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020). Likewise, the prevalence of symbols associated with manual labor for professions like plumbing and construction could help reinforce the notion that these occupations are more accessible to those from more modest socio-economic backgrounds. This only affirms the broader social attitude in identifying higher education as upward mobility and prestige, and that vocational education remains closely tied to more manual and low-waged labor (Lamorinas, et.al. (2024)

Effects of Visual Literacy on Students' Involvement in TVET

The findings of this research further show that visual literacy highly affects students' involvement in materials used for TVET. Many of the students interviewed stated that the symbols and visual elements related to their selected vocational programs assisted them in understanding and relating to the field of study. For instance, students in the electrical engineering field indicated that the use of clear, schematic representations of circuits and electrical tools helped them understand complex technical concepts more easily. Students in the hospitality industry noted logos and images in terms of a cleanliness, professional, and level of customer services standard which reflected their actual operation (Malechwanz, J. M. 2020).

The functionality of the mentioned symbols, which engaged the attention of the student, differed for them as if they were different from the familiar experience of visual literacy. Those that were stronger than the rest for visual literacy enhanced the understanding in their interpretation and could apply it easily. On the other hand, students who have less-developed visual literacy skills have had to grapple to understand and relate to the visuals because sometimes they are confused or even disengage from the learning materials altogether (Hashim, S. 2024). These findings suggest that there is a fundamental need for supporting students in attaining the forms of visual literacy required to be able to understand and make optimal use of visual materials in facilitating access to technology. This underscores a pedagogical approach that interweaves both visual and textual information, so students of all backgrounds could engage with learning materials regardless of their prior experience with visual literacy.

The role of digital media to enhance visual literacy also emerged as a significant consideration. With the increasing use of digital technologies including virtual and augmented reality, TVET institutions continue to inject more digital tools into their training operations. As will be observed, such tools heavily rely on visual symbols to create interactive and immersive learning environments, as proposed by (Edralin, D., & Pastrana, R. 2023). The students in the study reported that VR simulations, which used 3D models and dynamic symbols,

helped them visualize complex tasks and procedures that would be difficult to replicate in a traditional classroom setting. This further opens up the potential of digital technologies to enhance the role of visual literacy in TVET and bridge the gap between theory and practice.

Implications for TVET Policy and Practice

This study's findings are highly relevant for both policy and practice in the Philippine TVET sector. On the one hand, there is an urgent need for TVET institutions to rethink their design of visual materials so as to give the public the impression that all trades deserve respect and professionalism, not only high-tech fields. With visual symbols being central to the conception of vocational education on the minds of students, perhaps a more comprehensive and balanced approach in designing these symbols could shed light on the dignity of manual trades and help to reduce stigma around vocational education (Yasak, Z., & Alias, M. 2020)

Moreover, the curriculum should be reinforced with the practice of visual literacy. This would help students navigate the growing presence of visual elements in their learning environment and enable them to engage more deeply with the material. Given the increasing role of digital technologies in vocational training, fostering visual literacy will be essential for preparing students to succeed in industries that rely on complex, visual forms of communication (Irawan, et.al. 2021). It is, therefore, an important reminder of the importance of culturally responsive design in TVET symbols, indicating that visual materials should be locally sensitive yet at the same time reflective of global aspirations.

CONCLUSIONS

This study probed the semiotic dimensions of Technical Vocational Education and Training symbols in the context of the Philippines, providing insights regarding how visual signs and symbols build perceptions of vocational education. Thus, through its detailed semiotic analysis, the study demonstrated the critical role in which the designs of TVET symbols influence status and cultural connotations attached to different technical areas. There are also broader societally-based biases reflected in symbolic representations of different trades, where the professionalized and modern imagery ascribed to certain professions is accompanied by the persistence of manual-labor connotations for others, through simpler and more utilitarian designs.

This study has demonstrated the deep cultural significance of vocational symbols, in terms of the ways in which they reflect and perpetuate local and national identities. The intersection of globalized and localized visual elements within TVET branding indicates that the complex relationship is woven between national heritage, cultural aspirations, and economic modernization. Further, the research has underlined the impingement of the visual literacy on student engagement; students' ability to decode and interpret symbols will influence their commitment to the educational material as well as their overall learning experience.

The findings indicate that TVET institutions need to review the design and use of visual symbols to ensure that they communicate professionalism but also enhance inclusivity and the perceived value of all vocational fields. Educators and policymakers should consider integrating visual literacy into curricula, fostering students' ability to navigate the increasingly visual nature of modern vocational training. As the country develops its sector on TVET, it is important for symbols to take into account socio-cultural diversity that is characteristic of the country but also global aspirations of its working class. After all, the paper contributes towards the better understanding of the role of semiotics in education, while calling on the more thoughtful and intentional designing of TVET materials to lift the status and recognition of vocational education in the Philippines.

Suggestion

This study recommended that TVET institutions in the Philippines adopt a more inclusive and strategic approach to the designing of their visual symbols and materials. All efforts should be made to ensure that all trades are represented with symbols that convey professionalism, value, and cultural relevance regardless of their perceived status. This encompasses the integration of elements that reflect local identities while aligning with global standards to enhance both community pride and international competitiveness. In addition, policymakers and educators should focus on the inclusion of visual literacy in TVET curricula, equipping students with the skills

to interpret and engage with symbolic representations in their fields effectively. In addition, investments in digital tools, such as augmented and virtual reality, which can increase the accessibility and interactivity of vocational training, are recommended. Finally, future research should focus on how semiotic elements affect enrollment patterns and career choices and, therefore, contribute to a more holistic understanding of the role of TVET in societal development.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to extend my sincere appreciation to all participants from different institutions of Philippine TVET, and my family who have been really supportive. Insights, experiences, and encouragement from them have been of great importance for the completion of this research.

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