

# Integrating Visual Rhetoric Theory into Digital Media Education: Advancing Students' Critical Understanding of Persuasive Advertising and Social Media Content

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## ABSTRACT

The fast expansion of digital advertising and social media has highlighted the importance of visual persuasion in altering audience perceptions, behaviours, and decision-making processes. Within this changing context, digital media education is crucial in providing students with the skills required to critically understand and ethically develop persuasive material. This study looks at how incorporating visual rhetoric theory into digital media education improves students' critical understanding of persuasive messages in advertising and social media settings. The analysis is based on a methodical synthesis of thirty Scopus-indexed journal articles and is organised into three interconnected themes: visual persuasion, critical literacy, and ethical awareness. Visual Persuasion looks at how visual rhetoric theory improves students capacity to assess and generate persuasive communications using imagery, symbolism, multimodality, and narrative framing. According to the findings, structured engagement with rhetorical principles such as visual metaphor, emotional appeal, and compositional strategies significantly improves students' persuasive communication skills as well as their ability to create effective digital advertising content for modern platforms. Critical Literacy emphasises students interpretative and evaluative skills when dealing with digital advertising and social media content. The synthesis demonstrates that visual rhetoric instruction promotes deeper analytical thinking by teaching students to recognise persuasive purpose, recognise manipulation strategies, and critically evaluate algorithmically curated and customised communications. This subject emphasises the importance of visual rhetoric as a teaching tool for improving media literacy and fostering reflective interaction in increasingly saturated digital contexts. Ethical Awareness focusses on the moral and societal dimensions of digital persuasion. The analysed research show that using visual rhetoric theory raises students' knowledge of ethical duties related to transparency, representation, data-driven persuasion, and audience vulnerability. Students become more sensitive to ethical communication practices, particularly those involving misleading visuals, algorithmic bias, and the broader societal impact of persuasive media. Overall, this study contributes to digital media education by illustrating the importance of visual rhetoric theory in fostering persuasive skill, critical literacy, and ethical awareness, with significant implications for curriculum design and pedagogical practice in current digital contexts.

**Keywords:** Visual rhetoric, Digital media education, Critical literacy, Ethical awareness

## INTRODUCTION

The modern digital media landscape is increasingly dominated by visually appealing advertising and social media content designed to influence audiences through sophisticated persuasive methods. Images, videos, animations, and multimodal compositions are now important to how brands, institutions, and individuals communicate meaning and influence perceptions in digital spaces. As advertising and social media platforms evolve through algorithmic curation, personalisation, and data-driven targeting, the persuasive power of visual communication grows, creating significant educational, cognitive, and ethical implications. In this environment, digital media education faces the growing issue of teaching students to not only create compelling content but also critically understand and morally evaluate the visual messages they see on a daily basis (Birnbaum et al., 2024). Visual rhetoric theory provides a useful conceptual framework for tackling these issues. Visual rhetoric, based on classical rhetorical traditions and updated for current visual culture, offers techniques for assessing how meaning,

emotion, and persuasion are produced through visual form, symbolism, composition, and narrative structure. Persuasive communications in digital advertising and social media are rarely neutral; rather, they are carefully tailored to elicit emotional responses, guide interpretation, and influence behaviour. However Sutherland & Morris (2025), despite the growing importance of visual persuasion in digital communication, educational systems frequently stress technical production skills above critical interpretation and ethical evaluation. This imbalance risks generating graduates who are skilled content providers but are ill-equipped to investigate persuasive purpose, manipulation methods, or the larger societal ramifications of digital media practices (Jain & Rao, 2024).

Allouzi et al., 2025; Makhmudov et al., 2026 mentioned that the critical literacy has so become increasingly important in digital media education. Students are continuously bombarded with algorithmically tailored commercial and customised social media content, which blurs the distinction between information, enjoyment, and persuasion. Without defined pedagogical frameworks, pupils may struggle to recognise persuasive intent, believability, and visual and rhetorical manipulation. Visual rhetoric theory offers the ability to improve critical literacy by teaching students to deconstruct persuasive methods, question visual meanings, and comprehend how power, ideology, and commercial interests are incorporated in digital messaging. However Ballesteros et al., (2025); Kumar & Maswood, (2025) present educational research is fragmented, with little synthesis on how to systematically integrate visual rhetoric into digital media courses to improve students' analytical and interpretative skills. In parallel, the ethical dimension of digital persuasion has received more attention. Issues such as misleading visual representations, data-driven targeting, algorithmic bias, and audience vulnerability have prompted questions regarding digital communicators' social responsibilities. Ethical awareness among students is no longer optional, but rather required for ethical involvement in modern media ecosystems. While ethical norms are frequently mentioned in professional activity, they are not always effectively integrated into educational approaches to teaching persuasion. Visual rhetoric theory offers a lens through which ethical concerns can be explored alongside persuasive effectiveness, enabling students to consider transparency, representation, and the repercussions of visual impact. However Odaro & Lim (2024) had agreed there is a lack of scholarly consensus on how visual rhetoric instruction in digital media education promotes ethical awareness.

Despite increased interest in areas such as media studies, advertising, education, and communication, the literature is fragmented among empirical, conceptual, and pedagogical research. There is no clear synthesis that connects Visual Persuasion, Critical Literacy, and Ethical Awareness as outcomes of incorporating visual rhetoric theory into digital media education. This fragmentation stifles theoretical advancement and prevents the creation of coherent, evidence-based curricular frameworks (Shi et al., 2024).

In response to this gap, the current study will conduct a systematic review and synthesis of Scopus-indexed research to investigate how visual rhetoric theory has been applied in digital media education and how it affects students' persuasive communication skills, critical literacy, and ethical awareness. This systematic literature review, guided by the research question, "How does the integration of visual rhetoric theory into digital media education enhance students' persuasive communication skills, critical literacy, and ethical awareness in contemporary digital contexts?" aims to consolidate existing knowledge, identify pedagogical implications, and propose directions for future research. In conclusion, this chapter demonstrates the need for a comprehensive and integrative assessment of visual rhetoric in digital media education. By emphasising the linked functions of Visual Persuasion, Critical Literacy, and Ethical Awareness, it emphasises the importance of going beyond skill-based training and towards an educational approach that is critically informed and morally grounded. The next chapter describes the methodological framework used for this systematic literature review, including the search strategy, selection criteria, and analytical processes that support the synthesis of current research. Together, these measures lay a solid foundation for furthering digital media education in response to the changing dynamics of persuasive communication in modern digital environments.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarly interest in incorporating visual rhetoric theory into digital media education has grown as visual communication takes over as the primary means of persuasion in social media and advertising contexts. Scholars from a variety of fields, including media studies, advertising, communication, and education, generally agree that modern digital persuasion depends more on visual symbolism, emotional appeal, and multimodal

composition than on textual reasoning. Despite this common understanding, the literature shows significant differences in the conceptualisation, operationalisation, and pedagogical application of visual rhetoric, leading to fragmented insights into its educational value for fostering ethical awareness, critical literacy, and persuasive competence.

Theoretical approaches to visual rhetoric in digital contexts often draw from classical rhetorical frameworks particularly ethos, pathos, and logos while adapting them to visual and multimodal forms. Some scholars conceptualise visual rhetoric primarily as a design-oriented skillset, emphasising compositional techniques, narrative framing, and aesthetic effectiveness in digital advertising and social media production. These studies tend to foreground persuasive outcomes, such as audience engagement or message effectiveness, but frequently under-theorise the interpretative and ethical dimensions of visual persuasion. In contrast, critical media scholars frame visual rhetoric as a socio-cultural practice embedded in power relations, ideology, and commercial interests. From this perspective Wan (2024), emphasized that visual persuasion is not merely a creative technique but a mechanism through which meanings are normalised and behaviours influenced. While this body of work provides valuable critical insight, it often remains detached from pedagogical contexts, offering limited guidance on how such theoretical perspectives can be systematically integrated into digital media education.

Methodologically, the literature demonstrates a clear divide between production-focused and analysis-focused studies. Empirical research in advertising and digital media education frequently employs project-based learning, experimental design tasks, or skills assessment to evaluate students' persuasive communication abilities (McNamara & Guinan, 2025). These studies commonly report improvements in creativity, technical proficiency, and message clarity following exposure to visual rhetoric principles. However, they rarely examine whether such improvements are accompanied by deeper critical understanding or ethical reflection. Conversely, studies grounded in media literacy and critical pedagogy often rely on qualitative methods such as discourse analysis, classroom observation, or reflective writing to explore students' interpretative skills. While these approaches offer rich insights into students' critical engagement with persuasive content, they seldom connect critical analysis to the practical production of persuasive media, reinforcing a persistent theory practice divide ((Bigea et al., 2024; Mitchell, 2025).

Another drawback of present research is Birnbaum et al., (2024); García-Rosales, (2024) the treatment of critical literacy. Although critical literacy is widely recognised as important in digital media education, it is typically defined in narrow terms, such as the capacity to recognise advertisements or identify persuasive purpose. Few research have looked into how visual rhetoric instruction enables students to investigate more complex phenomena such as algorithmic personalisation, platform-driven visibility, and the subtle visual cues that determine emotional reaction and behavioural nudging. This divide is especially noticeable in research on social media contexts, where persuasive messages are intertwined with entertainment, peer interaction, and influencer culture. As a result Adalı et al., (2025); Jain & Rao, (2024), previous research frequently underestimates the cognitive difficulties placed on pupils navigating modern digital persuasion. Ethical awareness indicates an even more significant gap in the literature. While ethical concerns such as misleading images, data-driven targeting, and algorithmic prejudice are becoming more prominent in professional and regulatory discourse, they remain marginal in educational studies of visual rhetoric. When ethics are discussed, they are frequently viewed as external issues rather than integral components of convincing design and analysis. Few studies by Dağcı et al., (2025) have investigated how visual rhetoric theory might serve as an ethical lens, allowing students to assess not just how persuasion works, but also whether and to what degree it should be employed. Furthermore, empirical research rarely investigates students' ethical reasoning as a learning result, preferring to focus on attitudes or general awareness over sustained ethical judgement.

Contextually Sutherland & Morris (2025) and Wang et al. (2025) much of the existing research is based on Western higher education settings and traditional advertising curricula, which limits its application to varied cultural and digital situations. Rapidly developing platforms, short-form video content, influencer marketing, and AI-driven personalisation have all received little attention in pedagogical studies of visual rhetoric. This temporal and contextual lag limits the applicability of current findings to contemporary digital media education. Taken together, the literature suggests a fragmented study landscape in which visual persuasion, critical literacy, and ethical awareness are studied separately rather than as interrelated educational outcomes. There is a distinct absence of integrative synthesis that investigates how visual rhetoric theory fosters persuasive skill development,

critical interpretation, and ethical reflection in digital media education. Addressing this gap is critical for furthering both theory and practice. The current systematic literature review addresses this need by synthesising Scopus-indexed research from various disciplines to provide a coherent, theoretically grounded understanding of how visual rhetoric theory can be pedagogically integrated to improve students' critical engagement with persuasive advertising and social media content in modern digital contexts.

### Literature Review Survey Method

A systematic and structured strategy was used to perform a thorough literature assessment on the function of visual rhetoric theory on digital media education in understanding of persuasive advertising and social media content. The Scopus database, which is known for its academic reliability and extensive coverage, was used to conduct the initial search. The review focused on peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2021 and 2026 to ensure that the most recent innovations and scholarly conversation were included in this ever-changing field. A total of 650 pages were initially obtained using the search string: TITLE-ABS-KEY ("Education" AND 'Advertising' AND " Social Media") with a filter used to limit results to English language journals. This initial pool was then narrowed down to 90 articles related to the scope based on keyword presence and abstract alignment. The second part of the process includes a thorough review of titles, abstracts, and, where applicable, full-text content. Publications that did not directly relate to the use of visual rhetoric in creative educational environments, or which focused on other digital education and social media uses, were rigorously eliminated. The screening procedure stressed each article's alignment with the three major themes specified in the study framework: visual rhetoric, digital media education, critical literacy and ethical awareness. Following this rigorous screening process, a final collection of 26 articles was chosen for in-depth qualitative analysis. These publications offered a well-balanced cross-section of empirical research, conceptual frameworks, and case studies that collectively demonstrate the academic debate surrounding visual rhetoric in education media theory and social media persuasion content. This methodological approach guarantees high relevance and academic rigour. It uses a focused database (Scopus), well-defined search parameters, and a multi-stage filtration system to select the most relevant literature. The revised dataset of 26 papers provides a solid platform for investigating how visual rhetoric theory on digital education toward the social media content persuasion.

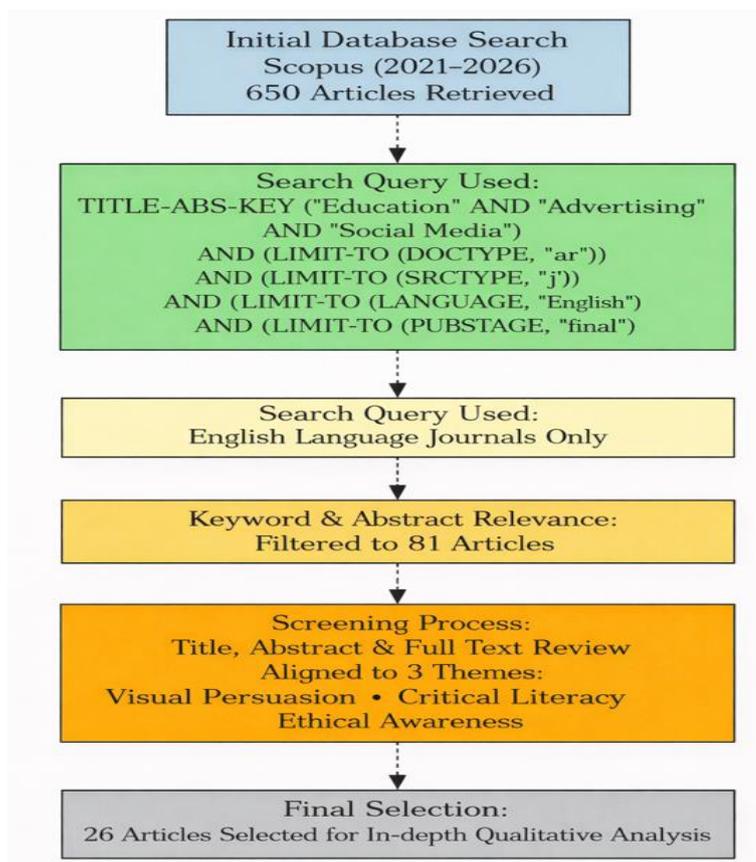


Figure 1. Flow diagram for Literature Survey Method

## Synthesis Analysis

The synthesis study demonstrates that including visual rhetoric theory into digital media education alters how students interact with persuasive advertising and social media content across three interconnected dimensions: visual persuasion, critical literacy, and ethical awareness. According to the research, visual rhetoric improves students' persuasive communication skills by teaching them how to strategically use imagery, symbolism, multimodality, and narrative framing in digital environments. At the same time, it improves critical literacy by providing learners with analytical frameworks for decoding persuasive purpose, identifying visual manipulation, and critically evaluating algorithmically selected content. Beyond skills and interpretation, the use of visual rhetoric promotes ethical awareness by stimulating contemplation on problems such as transparency, representation, data-driven targeting, and audience vulnerability. Collectively, these themes indicate that visual rhetoric theory offers a comprehensive teaching approach that promotes not only technical skill but also critical and ethical engagement with contemporary digital persuasion.

## Visual Persuasion In Education Engagement

Visual persuasion in digital advertising and social media is generally understood using rhetorical, behavioural, and platform-centric frameworks. Classical and modern rhetoric study emphasises how visual elements such as imagery, colour, composition, animation, and narrative framing act as persuasive processes to affect emotional involvement, interpretation, and meaning-making. Empirical evidence from advertising and social media studies repeatedly shows that visually appealing and contextually relevant material increases engagement, recall, and persuasive power (Shi et al., 2024; Wan, 2024). However, these studies primarily operationalise persuasion using outcome-based indicators such as click-through rates, attitudes, or behavioural intention, reducing visual persuasion to performance metrics rather than acknowledging it as a cognitive and interpretative learning process. Quantitative research using surveys, regression models, and structural equation modelling typically use marketing funnel models and behavioural theories to explain persuasive performance (Eum, 2025; Kumar & Maswood, 2025). While these approaches are statistically robust, they provide little insight into how students develop the ability to critically design, assess, and decode persuasive pictures in educational settings. In contrast, experimental research on multimedia and animation provides significant cognitive support for visual persuasion. Zhao & Zhang, (2025) for example in figure 2, show through empirical testing in online physics courses that multimedia animation elements significantly improve knowledge mastery and information memory, implying that motion, sequencing, and multimodal integration improve information transmission and convincing clarity. Despite these findings, such studies rarely present animation and visual dynamics as rhetorical choices with persuasive aim, resulting in a conceptual gap between cognitive efficacy and rhetorical awareness.

Qualitative evaluations of social media posts muddle the picture even more. Studies on TikTok and Instagram videos reveal a persistent tension between visual popularity and informational quality, with high engagement content frequently relying on emotionally charged visuals and rhetorical appeal while remaining educationally shallow or misleading (Richlak et al., 2025; Snyder et al., 2025). This discrepancy reveals a key flaw in current scholarship: visual persuasion is mostly studied as a media impact rather than a teachable rhetorical competency. Furthermore, platform-specific analyses limit comprehension by emphasising computational affordances over transferable rhetorical principles. Few studies explicitly incorporate visual rhetoric theory into pedagogical frameworks linking design practice, cognitive processing, and critical interpretation. As a result, the literature lacks a consistent educational model that explains how students build persuasive ability through rhetorical awareness rather than imitation of current visual trends. This study fills this gap by defining visual persuasion as an educational construct based on visual rhetoric theory, combining insights from advertising, multimedia cognition, and media education to advance a deeper understanding of persuasive skill development beyond surface-level visual effectiveness.

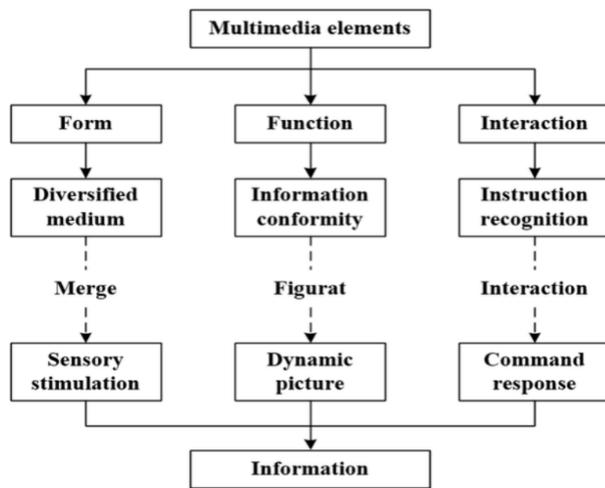


Figure 2: Research on Multimedia Animation Elements in Information Transmission Under Internet Environment (Zhao & Zhang, 2025)

### Critical Literacy in Visual Rhetoric Lens

Critical literacy arises in the literature as an important but inconsistently theorised outcome of digital media and advertising education. Many studies define critical literacy as the ability to discern persuasive intent, identify advertising styles, and distinguish between informative and promotional content. Empirical research with students repeatedly shows deficiencies in detecting native advertising, algorithmic targeting, and embedded persuasion, even among advertising or media majors (Wan, 2024). These findings imply that exposure to digital media does not convert into critical comprehension, emphasising the importance of systematic pedagogical intervention. Theoretical paradigms that guide critical literacy research differ greatly. Media literacy and advertising literacy models are dominant, with an emphasis on awareness and resistance to persuasion (Balaskas et al., 2025). Quantitative research with surveys and experimental designs frequently measure literacy using attitudinal scales or recognition tests, providing breadth but limited depth in understanding interpretative processes. In contrast, qualitative research that use thematic analysis and interviews provide broader insights into how young audiences interpret and negotiate persuasive content, especially in algorithmically curated contexts (Fuller et al., 2025; Lim et al., 2025; Odaro & Lim, 2024). These studies show that incidental exposure to social media advertising changes views quietly, frequently without conscious critical appraisal.

Despite these contributions, a significant restriction is the separation of critical analysis and creative expression. Critical literacy is usually seen in educational research as a defensive talent, focused on resisting influence, rather than a constructive competence that informs ethical and strategic message development. Furthermore, critical literacy is rarely clearly linked to visual rhetoric theory, resulting in fragmented pedagogical approaches that do not integrate visual form, meaning-making, and power dynamics. Contextual gaps are also obvious, with much of the studies focussing on teens or general audiences rather than university students studying digital media or advertising (Parveen et al., 2025). This limits the application to higher education curriculum. Furthermore, algorithmic personalisation and platform governance are frequently considered as exterior influences rather than as essential components of rhetorical analysis. This work makes a contribution by synthesising critical literacy research through a visual rhetoric lens, emphasising the connection between critical interpretation and persuasive design. By doing so, it bridges the conceptual gap between analysis and production, providing a more integrated form of critical literacy appropriate for modern digital media education.

### Ethical Awareness in Digital Media Education

Ethical awareness is the least developed but most important issue in the literature on digital advertising and social media education. While ethical concerns such as misleading images, data exploitation, algorithmic prejudice, and audience susceptibility are well recognised, they are frequently investigated using legal, regulatory, or policy-oriented frameworks rather than pedagogical ones (Allouzi et al., 2025; Sáez-Linero & Jiménez-Morales, 2025). Legal and doctrinal studies concentrate on compliance, transparency, and consumer

protection, but they offer little insight into how ethical reasoning is developed among students who create and consume persuasive media. Empirical analysis of social media advertising exposure reveals ethical issues between engagement-driven design and social responsibility. According to researcher of Sáez-Linero & Jiménez-Morales (2025) on algorithmic advertising, vulnerable populations are disproportionately targeted through personalised persuasive methods, promoting inequality and exploitation. However, these studies generally use sociological or critical political economy approaches, with little emphasis on educational reform. Similarly, studies on health-related advertising show that visually appealing content frequently achieves great reach despite poor veracity, raising ethical concerns regarding disinformation and trust (Parveen et al., 2025; Snyder et al., 2025)

Methodologically, ethical awareness is rarely implemented as a learning result. Quantitative studies rarely test ethical reasoning directly, whereas qualitative studies describe ethical concerns without tying them to educational procedures. This methodological gap hinders our understanding of how ethical awareness emerges through schooling rather than external regulation or personal experience. In theory, the absence of visual rhetoric in ethical discourse is noticeable. Ethical debates sometimes focus on content repercussions while ignoring how rhetorical choices like framing, symbolism, and emotional appeal influence ethical impact. As a result, ethics remains separate from persuasive practice in educational settings (McNamara & Guinan, 2025).

This study tackles these constraints by emphasising ethical awareness as a key component of visual rhetoric teaching. By combining research from advertising, media ethics, and education, it demonstrates how rhetorical analysis may encourage both ethical thought and persuasive competence. In doing so, the study makes a unique addition by including ethical considerations into the pedagogical integration of visual rhetoric theory in digital media education.

### Visual Conceptual Model of Integrated Visual Rhetoric Pedagogy

The synthesis findings have been further conceptualized into a visual model to enhance analytical clarity. This model summarizes how persuasion, literacy, and ethics function as interdependent dimensions within digital media education. It is based on recurring thematic patterns identified across 26 selected studies and serves as an integrative interpretation rather than a prescriptive framework.

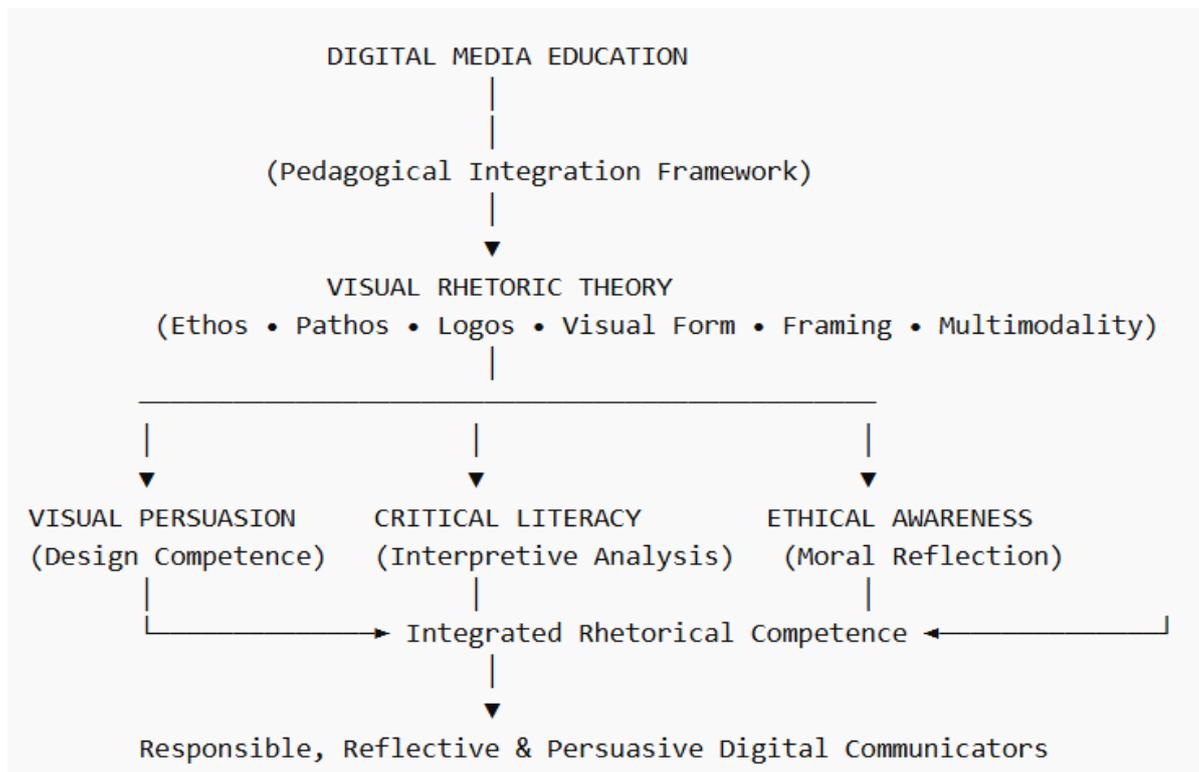


Figure 3: Visual Conceptual Model of Integrated Visual Rhetoric Pedagogy

The paradigm defines Digital Media Education as the institutional and instructional setting in which visual rhetoric operates. Rather than treating persuasion, literacy, and ethics as distinct stages, the model views them as parallel and mutually reinforcing characteristics created by rhetorical pedagogy. Visual Rhetoric Theory serves as the mediating framework. It uses rhetorical concepts like ethos (credibility), pathos (emotion), logos (logic), visual symbolism, composition, and multimodal framing to provide analytical tools that connect creative creation with interpretative reasoning. The synthesis suggests that when rhetorical awareness is integrated into teaching practice, visual design evolves into a deliberate and purposeful act rather than a solely aesthetic or engagement-driven activity.

The first component, Visual Persuasion, refers to pupils' capacity to purposefully build persuasive messages using rhetorical choices. This component goes beyond technical proficiency to emphasise strategic intent, audience placement, and narrative coherence. The second dimension, Critical Literacy, reflects pupils' ability to decipher persuasive purpose, recognise visual manipulation, and assess algorithmically selected content. The summary demonstrates that when analysis is integrated into creative work rather than viewed as a separate evaluation task, literacy improves significantly.

The third component, Ethical Awareness, comes when students consider the societal implications of persuasive methods such as transparency, representation, data-driven targeting, and audience vulnerability. Ethical reasoning is thus included into rhetorical decision-making rather than enforced as an external requirement. The convergence of these three aspects yields Integrated Rhetorical Competence, the overarching goal outlined in the synthesis. This competency demonstrates the capacity to design persuasively, interpret critically, and act ethically in modern digital communication ecosystems. The model clarifies the study's contribution by presenting persuasion, literacy, and ethics as structurally interconnected: visual rhetoric theory serves not only as a design tool, but also as a comprehensive pedagogical framework that aligns creative practice with critical and moral responsibility in digital media education.

## DISCUSSION ON SYNTHESIS ANALYSIS

The results of this comprehensive review show that incorporating visual rhetoric theory into digital media education has conceptual implications beyond boosting technical design skills. Conceptually, the findings indicate that visual persuasion, critical literacy, and ethical awareness should be viewed as interrelated learning outcomes rather than separate skills. Visual rhetoric serves not just as a persuasive arsenal, but also as a cognitive and interpretive framework that allows students to examine how meaning, emotion, and influence are formed in digital advertising and social media settings. This reframe is significant in a larger research environment, where visual persuasion is frequently viewed as an outcome-driven phenomenon measured by engagement or recollection rather than a teachable rhetorical process (Shi et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2025). When combined with previous research, the findings both accord with and enhance existing knowledge. Visual features such as graphics, animation, and narrative framing have been demonstrated to improve engagement and comprehension, in line with behavioural and advertising research (Zhao & Zhang, 2025) However, unlike cognitively orientated multimedia research that focus on information transmission, the synthesis shows that rhetorical awareness influences how such visual efficacy is received and ethically assessed. This explains why highly engaging information can be both convincing and misleading, as demonstrated in qualitative evaluations of social media platforms (Richlak et al., 2025; Snyder et al., 2025) Differences between studies appear to arise from theoretical orientation (marketing versus rhetorical or critical frameworks) and methodological decisions that prioritise performance metrics or interpretative depth.

Theoretically, this study enhances visual rhetoric theory by presenting it as a pedagogical paradigm that connects persuasion, critical literacy, and ethics. Rather than confirming current advertising literacy models emphasising resistance by Balaskas et al., (2025); Bigea et al., (2024) that the findings provide a constructive paradigm in which critical interpretation informs persuasive design decisions. This viewpoint questions the separation of analysis and production that characterises most of the previous literature, and it proposes ethical awareness as an inherent component of rhetorical ability. Practically, the findings suggest that digital media curriculum should explicitly incorporate visual rhetoric into design studios, content development courses, and platform-based initiatives. Educators and designers are encouraged to teach animation, multimodality, and visual storytelling alongside rhetorical analysis and ethical inquiry, rather than as separate technical abilities. Policymakers and

business stakeholders may benefit from acknowledging rhetorical literacy as a type of digital responsibility, especially in algorithmically controlled situations (Dağcı et al., 2025; Pattun & Kumar, 2025)

Some found difficulties, such as the continuation of high engagement despite poor informational quality, should not be seen as flaws, but rather as evidence of the complex dynamics of digital persuasion. These paradoxes emphasise the importance of rhetorical and ethical instruction in circumstances where platform incentives prioritise attention over accuracy. The study is limited by its use of Scopus-indexed literature and concentration on higher education contexts, which may limit cultural and institutional generalisability. Future research should empirically examine how visual rhetoric instruction influences ethical reasoning over time, compare pedagogical models across cultural contexts, and look into how emerging technologies like generative AI complicate visual persuasion, literacy, and ethics in digital media education.

Table 1: Thematic Discussion of Visual Rhetoric Integration in Digital Media Education

Theme	Key Interpretations	Relationship to Prior Literature
Visual Persuasion	Visual persuasion functions as a cognitive and rhetorical process rather than merely an outcome of visual appeal or engagement. Persuasive effectiveness is shaped by rhetorical awareness, multimodality, and narrative intent.	Extends advertising and multimedia studies that prioritise engagement and recall by reframing persuasion as a teachable rhetorical competence. Challenges outcome-driven perspectives.
Critical Literacy	Critical literacy emerges through the ability to decode persuasive intent, recognise visual manipulation, and interpret algorithmically mediated content.	Aligns with media literacy research but extends it by integrating analysis with visual production practices.
Ethical Awareness	Ethical awareness develops when students critically examine the social consequences of visual persuasion, including transparency, representation, and audience vulnerability.	Complements ethical and policy-oriented research while addressing its pedagogical limitations.

The results show that, rather than being distinct learning objectives, Visual Persuasion, Critical Literacy, and Ethical Awareness operate as interdependent dimensions within visual rhetoric based digital media education, as presented in Table 1: Thematic Discussion of Visual Rhetoric Integration in Digital Media Education. When presented rhetorically, visual persuasion functions as a cognitive and interpretive process based on meaning-making and deliberate design, going beyond surface-level engagement metrics. By redefining persuasion as a teachable and reflective skill, this viewpoint challenges popular advertising and multimedia strategies that place a premium on performance metrics like engagement or memory (Shi et al., 2024; Wan, 2024). When visual rhetoric theory connects creative creation with analytical interpretation, critical literacy is increased. The synthesis shows that rhetorical awareness allows students to critically create and decipher persuasive messages at the same time, rather than framing critical literacy only as resistance to persuasion. By addressing the ongoing division between analysis and production noted in earlier studies by Fuller et al., (2025); Odaro & Lim, (2024) this finding expands media and advertising literacy models that mainly concentrate on recognition and awareness (Balaskas et al., 2025; Ballesteros et al., 2025)

When rhetorical decisions are analysed in conjunction with their social and moral ramifications, ethical awareness becomes most evident. Visual rhetoric theory incorporates ethical consideration into persuasive technique itself, rather than seeing ethics as an external regulatory problem. This addresses issues brought up in research on algorithmic targeting and visual manipulation by Sáez-Linero & Jiménez-Morales, (2025; Snyder et al., (2025) which are providing a pedagogical route for the development of moral judgement as opposed to following procedures. When taken as a whole, the synthesis presents visual rhetoric as a cohesive framework for responsible and critical instruction in digital media.

## CONCLUSION

The goal of this study was to see how incorporating visual rhetoric theory into digital media education improves students' understanding of persuasive advertising and social media content by fostering the development of persuasive communication skills, critical literacy, and ethical awareness. Rather than treating these abilities as distinct learning objectives, this systematic literature review sought to determine whether visual rhetoric serves as a unifying pedagogical paradigm capable of enabling a more holistic approach to digital media education. The synthesis of the analysed studies shows that visual rhetoric theory is most effective when used as an integrative educational lens. Visual rhetoric has been shown in a variety of educational contexts to integrate persuasive design methods with critical interpretation and ethical reflection, allowing students to go beyond surface-level visual effectiveness and engage with meaning, intent, and consequence. According to the reviewed literature, students who are taught to rhetorical concepts are better prepared to assess persuasive methods, recognise manipulation, and consider the broader social consequences of visual communication. Importantly, these results emerge not from isolated analytical exercises, but from pedagogical approaches that incorporate rhetorical critique into creative production processes.

From a theoretical standpoint, this research advances visual rhetoric studies by situating it at the crossroads of persuasion, literacy, and ethics. In doing so, it challenges conventional conceptions that segregate media creation from critical analysis or view critical literacy just as oppositional resistance. Instead, the findings support a conception of visual rhetoric as a creative and reflective practice, allowing students to comprehend persuasion as a situated, value-laden process influenced by cultural, technological, and ethical factors. This integrative approach expands on current theory by demonstrating that rhetorical competence includes not just the ability to convince, but also the ability to determine when, how, and to whom persuasion should be directed. Practically speaking, the findings have important implications for digital media, advertising, and communication education. They emphasise the importance of courses that clearly incorporate rhetorical analysis and ethical reasoning into design and content development workflows, rather than treating ethics as a separate or supplemental concern. Such an approach promotes the creation of graduates who are not just technically adept, but also critical thinkers and ethical communicators. Beyond schooling, these findings are important for designers, industry practitioners, and policymakers who want to address the social impact of compelling visual information in algorithmically mediated contexts.

Future study should build on visual rhetoric scholarship by conducting systematic cross-cultural comparisons to investigate how different socio-cultural circumstances shape persuasive communication, critical literacy, and ethical awareness. Visual persuasion is not culturally neutral; the symbolic meanings, emotional appeals, aesthetic traditions, and ethical bounds differ between countries. What is convincing or ethically acceptable in one setting may be regarded as manipulative or unsuitable in another. Differences in media legislation, platform governance, educational traditions, and digital access all influence how rhetorical competency is developed and utilised. Comparative research across cultural regions, particularly in non-Western contexts and rising digital marketplaces, would reveal if integrated rhetorical competence is a universal educational outcome or a culturally mediated construct. Such research could disclose how students interpret visual symbols, respond to algorithmic mediation, and negotiate ethical boundaries across different communication traditions, preventing Western-centric models of persuasive literacy from being overly generalised. Furthermore, the rapid growth of generative artificial intelligence adds new difficulties to visual rhetoric teaching. AI-assisted picture generation, automated content production, and customised persuasive messaging call into question long-held notions about authorship, authenticity, and ethical accountability. As machine learning algorithms increasingly co-produce persuasive visuals, rhetorical evaluation must address issues of bias reproduction, representational justice, transparency, and responsibility. Future study should look into how rhetorical frameworks adapt to AI-mediated design settings, such as how students critically analyse machine-generated graphics, negotiate synthetic persuasion, and maintain ethical reasoning when persuasive methods are partially automated. Longitudinal studies may investigate whether AI technologies improve strategic rhetorical contemplation or encourage engagement-driven optimisation techniques. Exploring these technical advancements will be vital to ensure that visual rhetoric education remains responsive to emerging algorithmic infrastructures and capable of teaching students to traverse increasingly AI-augmented digital communication landscapes.

This study has limitations. Its emphasis on peer-reviewed academic research may overlook informal, industry-driven, or culturally particular learning methods in which visual persuasion is shaped and disputed. Nonetheless, by bringing together known scholarly viewpoints, the review provides a sound conceptual foundation for understanding the instructional significance of visual rhetoric in formal educational settings. Looking ahead, this discovery opens up various avenues for future research. More research is needed to investigate the long-term impact of visual rhetoric-based pedagogy on ethical reasoning, how rhetorical frameworks adapt to emerging technologies like generative AI, and how culturally situated models of persuasive literacy operate in diverse digital contexts. Addressing these directions will help digital media education evolve into a discipline that is critically informed, morally grounded, and socially sensitive.

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