

## Creative Skills for Economic Growth: Visual Arts Education and Youth Empowerment in Niger state, Nigeria.

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19339420>

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### Abstract

*The study interrogates visual arts education as a catalytic instrument for youth empowerment and national economic development in Nigeria. The study explores how visual arts education can equip youths with practical, creative, and entrepreneurial skills capable of reducing unemployment, alleviating poverty, and enhancing economic productivity. Adopting a qualitative framework and historical analytical method, the study draws evidence from existing literature, field observations, and selected local government areas in Niger State. The findings reveal that visual arts education provides viable opportunities for self-reliance through diverse art-related practices such as brass works, textile design, pottery, graphic design, and craft production. These activities not only generate income for youths but also contribute to internally generated revenue, cultural preservation, and social stability. The study further establishes that the neglect of visual arts education in policy formulation has limited its potential impact on economic development. The paper concludes that effective integration of visual arts education into youth empowerment programmes can foster sustainable economic growth and democratic stability. It therefore recommends supportive policies, improved training of art educators, and the establishment of functional art and craft centres to maximise the economic benefits of visual arts education in Niger State and Nigeria at large.*

**Keywords:** Visual Arts Education; Youth Empowerment; Economic Development; Skills Acquisition; Poverty Alleviation.

## **Introduction**

Visual arts education is a fundamental aspect of human existence and is evident across cultures and historical periods. It plays a vital role in shaping creativity, skill acquisition, and socio-economic development. According to Ado and Sani (2022), visual arts education is a discipline that equips individuals with practical skills involving hand manipulation, guided by elements and principles of design such as line, shape, colour, texture, and space, to mention just a few, to achieve specific visual and emotional effects. In another view, Sani (2019) described arts education as one of the highest forms of human expression, and also helps individuals to integrate meaningfully into society by contributing to the growth of their community through commercial and industrial activities.

Visual arts education is also regarded as a structured process through which learners acquire basic skills in handiwork and creative production (Sani, 2023). As a core component of the educational curriculum, it encompasses diverse areas such as drawing, painting, ceramics, graphic design, textile design, sculpture, art history, and basic crafts. These fields provide viable opportunities for training youths to become self-reliant entrepreneurs. When properly harnessed, visual arts education can contribute to increased internally generated revenue (IGR) through taxation of self-employed and established practitioners, thereby supporting economic growth at both state and national levels.

Furthermore, visual arts education promotes creative thinking and problem-solving skills that are essential for addressing socio-economic challenges such as poverty and unemployment. Despite several poverty alleviation programmes introduced by governments at various levels, many have failed to yield sustainable outcomes. Recent economic challenges, including fuel subsidy removal, have further strained the national economy and intensified youth unemployment. These challenges necessitate urgent and innovative solutions, particularly in states like Niger State, where youth restiveness and economic hardship threaten democratic stability.

This study, therefore, focuses on the potential of visual arts education as a strategic tool for youth empowerment, economic recovery, and sustainable development. Engaging youths in productive visual arts-related trades can reduce unemployment, curb hooliganism, and promote democratic stability. Visual arts education thus remains a viable pathway for transforming youths into productive citizens and nation builders.

## **Statement of the Problem**

Despite its economic and social relevance, visual arts education has been largely neglected by the Niger State Government as a tool for youth empowerment and economic recovery. This neglect has contributed to rising youth unemployment, poverty, and social unrest. Existing studies have not sufficiently explored the entrepreneurial potential of visual arts education in areas such as brass works, textile design, ceramics, and related crafts. This study, therefore, seeks to address this gap by examining how visual arts education can be utilised to engage youths in productive economic activities for national development. The research justifies into two folds: firstly, the findings of this study are expected to contribute to academic knowledge in art education and economic development. Secondly, it will also provide practical insights for policymakers, educators, and curriculum planners on how visual arts education can be effectively utilised.

## **Research Objectives**

The objectives of the study are to:

1. Examine the importance of visual arts education in promoting youth self-reliance.
2. Assess the role of visual arts education in reducing youth hooliganism and political unrest in Niger State.
3. Determine how visual arts education can enhance the economic status of youths in Niger State.

## **Research Questions**

The study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What ways can the importance of visual arts education be examined in promoting youth self-reliance?
2. How to assess the role of visual arts education in reducing youth hooliganism and political unrest in Niger State?
3. In what ways can visual arts education determine the economic status of youths in Niger State?

## **Methodology**

The study adopted qualitative and historical research designs. Qualitative research was used to describe social phenomena as they occur within specific cultural contexts (Sani, 2024; Ado, & Sani, 2022). The historical method enabled the collection of first-hand information from selected local government

areas: Chanchaga, Bida, and Suleja, to provide an in-depth understanding of how visual arts education can empower youths and foster nation-building.

### **Research Scope and Limitations**

The scope of this study is limited to three selected local government areas in Niger state where traditional arts crafts. The local governments are Bida for brass works, Suleja for tie and dye on fabric (textile) production and potteries making in Chanchaga, Minna. It focuses on traditional crafts and conventional arts production. The study also covers some part of Paikoro local government and some private creative enterprises or informal training institutions.

The study is subject to limitations such as respondents' subjectivity and possible response bias. Time and resource constraints may also limit the sample size and institutional coverage. However, these limitations are mitigated through careful sampling, triangulation of data sources, and rigorous analysis procedures.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual frame work for this study is the eclectic approach, the eclectic approach of investigation as propounded by Jari, as cited in Sani (2019), was adopted. This approach emphasises the production of visual art products through innovative packaging, recycling, and creative manipulation by talented individuals. The eclectic framework allows for the integration of multiple ideas, methods, and perspectives in understanding visual arts education as a tool for youth empowerment and economic development.

According to Vaughan (as cited in Sani, 2022), a conceptual framework is a written or visual presentation that explains a study either graphically, narratively, or through a combination of both. Jari (as cited in Sani, 2019) further noted that in recent times, several scholars have published textbooks focusing on visual research and related approaches to inquiry. Based on this premise, the eclectic conceptual framework was considered most appropriate for this study, as it provides flexibility in examining visual arts education from creative, economic, and entrepreneurial perspectives.

The review of related literature includes works from scholars such as Pollitt (2000), Eleanor (2012), Salami (2013), and Sani (2022), among others. The study examines various traditional arts crafts and contemporary modern arts and their benefits to human capacity building and nation development, with a focus on the economic development. This research identifies some scholars who have written on a different area. Such as Ado & Sani (2022), Gardiner & Edwards-Groves (2022), Farahie & Sihes (2025) to mention just a few.

### **Research Findings**

Research Question I: What ways can the importance of visual arts education can be examined in promoting youth self-reliance in Niger state?

The research discovered that globally the issue of unemployment has remains one of the biggest challenges dabbling the globe, and Nigeria is no exception. The Niger state government has one time or the other tried to tackle the issue without avail. These challenges (joblessness) facing Niger state and Nigeria at large is a global trending. Nigeria is endowed with abundant human and material resources, prolonged neglect and inconsistent policies have resulted in their underutilisation, thereby limiting economic growth. In another development, the researchers observed that the high rate of unemployment has posed serious security threats that required urgent attention from all stakeholders. In addition, the paper argued that for any nation to overcome insecurity, it must significantly reduce the unemployment.

In the context of Niger State, there is a need to encourage youths to identify their skills and be nurtured, and also to take the advantage of available opportunities. Unemployment develops gradually as global markets fail to absorb growing populations due to industrial and bureaucratic constraints. Again, unemployment has negative and social consequences, including threats to democratic stability and economic development. These challenges manifest in social exclusion, cultural isolation, and vulnerability to corruption, as well as engagement in criminal activities such as religious extremism, drug abuse, armed robbery and other social vices.

However, youths with entrepreneurial skills have been able to earn meaningful livelihoods within the informal sector as artisans, printers, graphic designers, artists, craftsmen, and craft vendors, among

others. This suggests that skills acquisition through visual arts education can serve as a viable solution to state and national buildings.

Research Question II: How to assess the role of visual arts education in reducing youth hooliganism and political unrest in Niger State?

Many countries rely heavily on their youth populations for economic growth and social stability. Youths are the backbone of nation-building and must be actively involved in developmental processes at all levels. If youths receive adequate education, guidance, and skill training in visual arts and crafts, their contributions to economic activities increases through improvement labour output, income generation, and entrepreneurship. This, in turn, reduces idleness, poverty, hooliganism and political unrest in Niger state and Nigeria at large.

There are different areas of interest in which the youths can be engaged themselves in traditional craft arts practices, Such as Adire production, traditional casting, fabric embroidery, raffia weaving, and wood and stone carving. Accordingly, such engagement will minimises or curbs the youth restiveness to enhance productivity. Nigeria' s multi-ethnic and cultural diverse society places a high value on visual arts education, which includes Ivory carving, Grass weaving, and Plaster of Paris (POP). Others are Leather works, Calabash decorations, Pottery, Painting, Cloth weaving, Glass works, and Metal works.

Based on the findings, some specific areas of opportunity for youths' empowerment (trade centres) in Niger state are:

1. Brass Works in Bida: The art of brass works in Bida has developed over a long period and remains a significant cultural heritage of the Nupe populaces. These products can be further modernised to meet contemporary standards and global markets. In an interview, Nma (2024) appealed to the government to support artisans by transforming them and their brass works centre into a tourist attraction and entrepreneurship hub for youth training in Niger state.
2. Textile Design in Suleja: Suleja Local Government Area is notable for textile production. Textile design as an integral cultural craft involving resist-dye techniques used to produce fabrics such as Adire and Kampala for local and international markets. According to Mal. Musa (personal interview,

2024) many youths acquired these skills informal way through personal interest rather than formal education. This sector offers an opportunity for the Niger State government to engage unemployed youths for productively.

3. In the area of pottery (ceramic) and Other Crafts: Yahaya in 2024, a well-known potter at Abdulkadir Kure market in Minna, Chanchaga local government area, was interviewed and reported that although he had no formal education, he trains younger people who build potteries of different sizes and styles, they have been earning and managing their economic growth for sustainable livelihoods through potteries. Supporting the above statement, this paper also have that some youths in Tatiko, a town in Paikoro local government of Niger State, are engaged in producing different types of pots and fabric weaving of Gbagyi designer clothing materials. In a related development, there are youths in Chanchaga local government area who engaged in productions of some minimalist artworks, such as wooden and plastic key holders to mention just a few. They also engaged in the production of picture frames, small paintings that sell, and on fashion design; embroidery on babbar– riga (gowns) and different types of cap making is on the high patronage. Other areas are the shoe cobbling, raffia designs (local hand fans and hats), wall decoration and good-looking mat weaving. Some of these activities highlighted above are parts of the economic relevance of visual arts education that develop individuals, and by extension, Niger state and Nigeria at large.

Research Question III: In what ways can visual arts education determine the economic status of youths in Niger State?

The visual arts education can determine the upgrade of one' s economic status by extension, the nation building. Visual arts education encompasses areas such as basic crafts, sculptures, beads making, pottery productions, mat weavings, commercial graphics, and home decoration to mention just a few. The current global economic hardship underscores the importance of introducing entrepreneurial skills at all level of educations. Visual arts education serves as a job-creation platform that engages youths in productive ventures, transforming them into nation builders rather than job seekers.

This can be asserted that visual arts education integrates cognitive and manual skills to enhance creativity and reduce poverty. Furthermore, the training in visual arts equips graduates for self-employment across various fields of specialisations. Similarly, the visual arts disciplines are divided

into numerous specialised units, making it easier for graduates to secure self-employment in areas such as ceramics, sculpture, drama, graphics, metal design, painting, and drawing. Consequently, graduates of visual arts programmes possess versatile skills that enable them to find employment or establish enterprises across various sectors.

The above points indicate that youths have the opportunity to choose suitable trades to learn in order to acquire relevant vocational and entrepreneurial skills. The paper also emphasises that learning a trade enables young people to develop practical abilities that enhance self-reliance and reduce dependence on paid employment. Furthermore, acquiring a suitable trade to equips youths with the capacity to create job opportunities for themselves and others, thereby contributing to poverty reduction and economic growth. In addition, trade learning promotes personal development, increases productivity, and supports national development by fostering a skilled and innovative workforce.

## **Conclusion**

This study examined the role of visual arts education as a viable tool for youth empowerment, poverty alleviation, and national economic development, with particular reference to Niger State, Nigeria. The findings revealed that youth unemployment remains a major socio-economic challenge in the state, contributing to poverty, insecurity, and social instability. Despite the abundance of human and cultural resources, inadequate attention has been given to visual arts education as a sustainable avenue for economic recovery and youth engagement.

The study established that visual arts education equips youths with practical and entrepreneurial skills that promote self-reliance, job creation, and active participation in economic activities. Traditional and contemporary art practices, such as brass works, textile design, pottery, graphic design, and craft production, were identified as viable means through which youths can earn sustainable livelihoods. Visual arts education also plays a crucial role in reducing youth restiveness and hooliganism by productively engaging young people in creative enterprises that contribute to democratic stability and national development.

Based on these findings, the study concludes that visual arts education is not merely an academic discipline but a strategic instrument for economic revitalisation, cultural preservation, and sustainable development in Niger State and Nigeria at large.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

- 1, Policy Integration: Government at state and national levels should integrate visual arts education into economic empowerment and poverty alleviation policies as a strategic tool for youth development.
2. Curriculum Enhancement: The curriculum of visual arts education at all levels should be strengthened to emphasis entrepreneurship, innovation, recycling, and modern production techniques that meet local and global market demands.
3. Establishment of Art and Craft Centres: Functional art and craft centres should be established in key areas such as Bida, Suleja, and Minna to serve as training hubs for brass works, textile designs, pottery, and other visual arts-related trades.
4. Capacity Building for Teachers and Trainers: Regular training, workshops, and professional development programmes should be organised for visual arts teachers and instructors to promote participatory, practical, and skill-based teaching methods.
5. Youth Support and Funding: Financial support in the form of grants, soft loans, and start-up kits should be provided to trained youths to enable them to establish small-scale art-based enterprises.
6. Public Private Partnerships (PPP): Collaboration between government, private organisations, NGOs, and cultural institutions should be encouraged to promote visual arts products, create markets, and attract tourism.
7. Awareness and Advocacy: Public awareness campaigns should be conducted to change negative perceptions of visual arts education and highlight its economic relevance as a respectable and profitable career path.

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